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James' Fear of Birds

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I kept Epi through the weekend. It was my girlfriend's bird, a wretched thing. I watched it while she cheated on me with some dude in another town. She left every couple of weeks and I kept Epi during these times.

James came over a lot. Birds terrified him. He'd sit on the couch eyeing her, drinking this scotch that we both swore made us hallucinate.

"Why are you so scared of birds anyway?" I asked James once.
"This thing from my childhood," he said.
"What happened?"
"I don't want to talk about it just keep that fucking bird away from me."

This was easier said than done. I kept Epi on the floor. She walked up your feet though, trying to get to your shoulder. A cockatiel. A sorry specimen.

I like birds. I mean, I like the idea of being a guy who likes birds. Someone who might watch them as the main activity of a day. That's the kind of thing I like people thinking about me.

But in reality, I'm not so good with pets. Like when Epi shits on my shoulder, I crumble her up in my fist and throw her fast-pitch into the cushion. Then I immediately feel bad. I pick her up, lovingly this time, rubbing her head. I apologize. I pray that she will not die. I pray genuinely for her sake, and not for the sake of my own ass. Then I kind of forget about it. And she nips my earlobe or something, and I do the same thing all over.

James likes watching this. He hopes I'll kill her. That's how much he hates birds. He wishes they all were dead.

"I wish all birds were dead," he says.
"What the fuck, man?" I say. We're well into the scotch that makes us hallucinate.

The thing is James kind of looks like a bird. He has this huge nose. You can't help but think, beak.
About 3 a.m. I call my girlfriend’s apartment and some dude answers.

“Hello,” he says.
“Who the fuck is this?” I say.
“Who the fuck is this, man?” he says.
“I wish all birds were dead,” James says.
“Shhh,” I say. “Look, as far as I know you’re not supposed to be there.”
“Eff off. Mina said I should meet her here tonight. She gave me a key.”

“How do I know you’re not robbing the place.”
“Come on over,” he says. “I’ll kick your ass.”
“Naw,” I say.
“What are you? Her boyfriend?”
“She said she wasn’t coming in until tomorrow.”
“She’s meeting me here in the morning, man. Is that going to be okay with you?”
“Well, I still don’t know you’re not robbing the place.”
“Man, why would I pick up the phone if I was a robber?”
“Get him to tell you something only she would know,” James says.

“Tell me something only she would know,” I say. It’s kind of embarrassing to be doing this in front of James.

“If only she knows it, how am I gonna?”
“You know what I mean. There’s two of us, we’ll come over there. We’ll call the cops.”
“I said come on over. What do you want anyway? I met her last week in the tampon-aisle. Big Bear. We’ve been doing it ever since.”

“All right,” I say. It’s probably true anyway. True enough.
“Bye,” I say.
“Bye,” he says.

Epi shits on my shoulder during the call. I feel the spot of heat, but don’t thump her off. Instead I go for more scotch.

“Well. You already knew she was cheating on you,” James says.

“Yeah but.”
“Wait a second,” he says. “You knew he was there, didn’t you? Why’d you call anyway if you thought she was out of town?”

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“I don’t know. Answering machine. I wanted to talk into her answering machine.”

We sit for a while. Sit very still. Then Epi hops across the floor towards James’ feet—the James on-ramp. I intercept her.
   “We need to kill that bird,” he says.
   “We’re not killing the bird.”
   “We need to kill that bird.”
   “ Couldn’t I just spray paint ‘whore’ on her door or something?”
   “That’s doable, down the line. Not tonight though.”

I live in a pink house and not many people drive down my street. Epi hops off my finger and stands there like an idiot. In the street. She has no idea.
   “I’m not really into this,” I say.
   “It has to be done.”

I pull off my Birkenstock and half-heartedly wing it at her. She hops out of the way and stands there again, watching us. Then she hops toward us. She doesn’t want to waste any of her precious shit on the ground when she could drop it on one of us.
   “That’s not going to cut it,” James says.
   He removes a hammer from his back pocket.
   “Where’d you get that?”
   “Earlier,” he says.

Epi is almost upon him. He trembles slightly, then punts her back out into the street. He brings the hammer down on her square. Her body explodes. But James doesn’t stop there. He pounds again and again and again until she is a bloody nothing.
    He throws the hammer into the flowerbed and we sit down to smoke. We smoke.
    “This is not right,” I say.

We sit there a while not looking at the street. We’re heavily into the scotch by now and I’m getting the pangs of impending regret.
   “You want me to tell you why I’m scared of birds?” he says.
   “It’s a simple anecdote.”

Here, there is a pause.
   “A duck’s quack doesn’t echo,” he says.

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“Every sound echoes,” I say.
“Not a duck’s quack. We had one once at the Grand Canyon.”
“You brought a duck to the Grand Canyon?”
“We found one there. As you said, everything around echoed. Voices, our footsteps, whistling. But when that duck opened its beak, nothing. It bit too.”
Then Epi appears on his foot. He loses it. I mean he really goes out of control at this. I am shocked, but composed.
I reach down and she hops onto my finger. She sits there long enough for me to examine her. Clean. No damage. She scales my arm.
“Not again,” James repeats over and over.
“We better get inside,” I say.
And this is the weirdest thing. As soon as we step through the door, she flies. She flies, man. All around the room, seven, eight, ten times. This bird has never flown in its life.
So James and I, after this, are pretty confident we’re just sharing a vision. And we kind of get into it.
Epi flies these circles of varying width. A dropping appears on the top of my foot as if out of nowhere. I left the Birkenstock somewhere in the street and I don’t care. Then at the completion of one circle she goes right for James, lighting on his shoulder. He’d be freaked out normally, if just a normal hallucinatory bird landed on his shoulder. But this is a hallucinatory bird that he just hammered into the pavement, so he’s petrified.
And there, after a moment, Epi transmogrifies into my girlfriend.
My girlfriend sits there on his shoulder, and she watches me. But I can’t be sure we’re sharing the vision anymore, so, to calm him, I say, “Go with it. This is all a hallucination, man. That bird is dead in the street.”
“I know,” he says. “All of a sudden I just feel completely deflowered.”
Which is good, for him.