

BIRD FOUND

Heather bit into the thin shell of her ice cream, felt it crack under her teeth like the bones of a tiny animal. She felt her temples shift under the pressure of her hat as she chewed. When she chewed, her whole head chewed. This thought disgusted her so deeply that she had to stop eating for a matter of minutes, during which time the ice cream coursed slimily down her wrist and onto the cinema seat, bright white against dull red.

‘What are you doing,’ Roger whispered. He had finished his Magnum halfway through the first trailer, long before the curtains had widened to admit the film’s bulk, and was gnawing on its wooden spine. Not a spine, Heather thought, a femur, and set her ice cream down in the cupholder where it pooled.

Roger had always gnawed at things: chicken bones, pencils, Heather’s ideas. ‘But in practice,’ he would say, fork tines glinting between his teeth; a wishbone hooked around the corner of his mouth. ‘In *practice*, Heather—’ And he would know, of course. Roger was highly experienced.

In practice, Heather had never really seen the world. She had seen the horizon, sure; had stared out at the asparagus fields from the passenger seat, all pointing heavenwards like keen little arrows; had stood in the snow globe of Gippsland’s vast agricultural mass as the cicadas shook the earth. Her callouses were from scrubbing the hard water build-up in the shower and dislodging the red earthy stains from where Roger’s feet rolled against their periwinkle sheets. It was a good question. What was she doing?

Roger’s hands knew sawblades and pistons. They steered the pulleys and gauges that made things happen. Like a Captain. He would indulge this idea sometimes, when Greg was on break, easing up the anchor on its salt-crusting chain and turning the wheel (was *wheel* the word, or was it something more specific? He would check), setting his faithful old vessel on course for

BIRD FOUND

the next port. There were no childish delusions involved in this reverie; no silly hat, no pet store parrot.

Though if he happened upon one, he would consider it. A parrot, that is; the hat was a definite no. A name would be required, something dignified but not up itself. Reginald. No, excessive. Arthur. Yes, the parrot would be called Arthur. If he came across one.

Heather and Roger's youngest son, Theo, was in the process of moving out, not flying the coop so much as hopping in and out of it. Hospitality jobs surfaced and dried up, flowing with the tide of tourists down from the city. Recently, at yet another loose end, Theo had been struck by the possibility of flight with the intensity of one who had invented it. And who was to say he hadn't? Teenagers invented everything.

With Roger's reluctant blessing, Heather arranged for Theo to learn how to fly. It couldn't be that hard—he had invented it, after all—but there were protocols, as well as the practicality of access to a plane. A lesson was booked and paid for.

Heather lay awake for weeks leading up to The Lesson, listening to Roger's feet roll on the sheets. Movie scenes exploded in her head. Amputated metal limbs falling in slow motion. Black smoke in the shape of a cauliflower. If only she were up there, she could stop it from happening.

But she could be there. She could stop it.

You can learn anything on YouTube, Roger had said once, and as usual he was right. She slid out of bed and booted up the computer. The screen stared back at her in the dark, sun of its own invisible solar system. Unseen planets spun on their axes. Heather learned to fly.

Roger had gone into the pet store just to look. He had never been in one before, and who knew, there might be something he needed. Perhaps birdseed was good for something other than

BIRD FOUND

feeding birds. Or hay might be cheaper here; he could tell Greg, who had finally given in to his kids' whining and bought a pony. Roger would never be that soft.

He could hear the birds from the doorway, chiming like the bell in the workshop when a customer opened the front door. 'Ro-ger,' they said. But of course they didn't. They said nothing, just sounded the sounds of instinct with the mechanical certainty of his machines. He walked deeper into the shop, towards where he imagined the hay would be kept. Or whatever you fed horses. He would check. He scanned the shelves and locked eyes with a cockatiel.

'Ro-ger,' it said.

The pet store owner looked up from where she was feeding an ornate red fish. 'Oh,' she grinned. 'She likes you.'

They wouldn't let her up in the plane with Theo so Heather steered it from the ground. She eased the little craft upwards, keeping the ascent measured but not too slow, then levelling out as it reached its required altitude. At this point it rocked slightly—Theo's interference, being only a beginner—then righted itself, cleaving a low-lying cloud in two with an easy violence.

'Beauty,' said a man beside her. He was regarding the plane in the male position: feet wide, arms crossed high over the chest. She had been concentrating too hard on flying to notice him. Theo could fly solo now the hard part was over, and she handed control back to him before turning to speak to the man.

'It's his first time.'

'Not bad.' His eyes followed the plane for a minute or so, still in Male Pose. He turned back to Heather. 'Fancy a go? Got a cancellation.'

'Now?' Heather asked, uneasy. She had planned to guide Theo through the descent. But perhaps she was being overly anxious. Roger would have said so. The man was still looking at her, brows raised.

BIRD FOUND

‘All right,’ Heather said.

He would tell Heather the cockatiel had flown into the workshop, Roger decided. But she would ask who it could have belonged to, would stick BIRD FOUND posters to telephone poles and the town hall noticeboard and, worst of all, the community Facebook page, of which the pet store owner was inevitably a member. No, it wouldn’t be enough for Heather that the cockatiel entered their lives at random. He would have to introduce the concept slowly, a beleaguered husband slowly acquiescing to his wife’s demand for the least practical of purchases: a pet.

Heather had spoken of wanting a dog, specifically of taking in a three-legged, flea-ridden mutt from the local shelter for the boys to play with. Well, not that they were boys now, or around all that much. Perhaps a few years had passed since that wish had been expressed. But hell. Heather had been desperate for an animal to pat on the head and clean up after. What was Gwendolyn if not that?

‘Gwendolyn?’ Greg said, raising his eyebrows.

‘Yeah. It’s, y’know. Dignified.’

‘Righto.’

‘How’s your pony going?’ Roger asked.

‘The kids’ pony,’ Greg countered. ‘Fine.’

‘Course. What’s its name again?’

There was a pause. ‘Daffodil.’

Flying a plane was easier when you could touch the controls. Male Pose (she hadn’t caught his name) watched Heather work the buttons and levers without a word, a calm sentinel in the passenger seat. This suited her just fine. She tried to imagine Roger sitting there, silent and gentle and smelling of eucalyptus and pepper, but it was impossible. Roger always drove.

BIRD FOUND

The asparagus fields looked different from up high, stippled and textured like an unripe peach. Heather looked down on the world and spun the planets on their axes.

She tried once more to imagine Roger in the passenger seat, and the vision came more easily this time. She imagined the agitated bark of his orders, teeth working at an apple core, fingers edging towards her, itching to take over the controls. Slowly, deliciously, she imagined overriding the safety, reaching over and unfastening his seatbelt, then his door. The apple core dropping from his mouth as it opened in shock. From this height, his sun-bleached bones would look tiny, like those of a small animal.