THE CONFUSION OF LAUREL GDAHAM

ADRIENNE KISNER



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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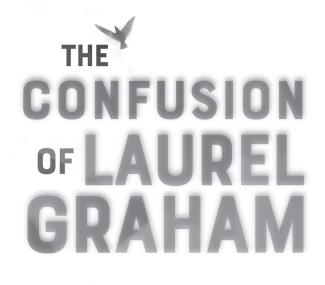
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To Mom & Jeanne: At least there is less swearing in this one?





I heard a bird sing In the dark of December. A magical thing And sweet to remember.

"We are nearer to Spring Than we were in September," I heard a bird sing In the dark of December.

-OLIVER HERFORD





FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY APRIL 29 NOTABLE LOCATION: SARIG POND LIFE LIST ENTRY 3,284: WHITE-WINGED TERN

Never let them see you sweat.

That's not the Birdscout motto. But it fucking well should be.

"Who can tell me three of the feathered friends we might find on our walk today?" I said.

Sixteen pairs of eyes stared back at me, wide and unblinking.

Homeschoolers. Unschoolers. Some kind of schoolers that meant they weren't in the overcrowded gray-and-red brick elementary building seven blocks away and were instead standing at the entrance of the Sarig Pond and Jenkins Wood Nature Sanctuary with me. I thought home-non-unschooling would make them wild, free nature lovers . . . but no. Most of them were looking at their smartwatches, secretly texting one another.

"Okay, who can tell me *one* creature we might find today?" I tried again.

"Um," a tiny girl with cat-eye glasses said. "A squirrel?"

I sighed. Unfortunately she was right. Squirrels were the bane of birders everywhere. (Well. Except maybe in places where there were no squirrels, which were sadly limited.)

"Good guess!" I said.

She grinned. It's best to encourage the little ones. They were prone to unpredictable sudden movements that could veer off the path and ruin your day. Best to keep them on your side. "Can anyone guess a creature *with wings*?"

"Robins?" another boy tried in a bored voice.

"Yes!" My fist shot into the air. "Sweetest of songbirds! Harbingers of spring! Portents of luck and fortune!" Those last two were debatable at best, but sometimes you needed to finesse bird symbolism in order to win a tough audience. A few heads swiveled my way at that, so I felt I'd made the right choice for the greater good.

"Really?" the bored boy asked.

"You bet. Birds bring messages of all sorts to humans. But there are way more interesting things about them than *that*. They have their own language to communicate. They can fly hundreds of miles and never get lost. They fight for what's theirs. They are warriors."

"Cool," the boy said. "Do you think we'll see some of those smart ones?"

I smiled to myself. It only takes one to turn a crowd. "Why, yes," I said, peering at the nametag slapped on his fuzzy lapel, "Isaac. I do. Follow me."

Six cardinals (two female, four males), two nuthatches, sixteen (give or take) common grackles, three red-bellied

woodpeckers, and one red-tailed hawk later, I delivered the kids back to their adults.

"Feel free to take some pamphlets on your way out," I called. "Nature story time starts on May 30!"

I retreated into the tiny, cramped office of the Birdscout Nature Center and sunk into a chair. Birding with the unenthusiastic could fucking wipe a girl out.

"Oh. Hey," said a voice. I looked up to see a familiar shock of dyed hair shaved into a crest peeking through the door. "If it isn't the Birdscout-in-chief. Is Jerry in?"

"Out sick today," I said. "Risa. Your hair . . . ," I started.

"What about it?" she said. I could hear a warning in her voice.

"It reminds me of a wire-crested thorntail."

Risa's face broke into a grin. "You got it! *Of course* you are the only one who noticed. I love them."

"They are exquisite," I agreed.

Risa and I looked at each other for a moment. It was odd that we were having this conversation, since it wouldn't be precisely accurate to call us friends. We were more . . . what?

Enemies.

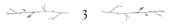
Ah. Yes.

We were one hundred percent enemies.

But sometimes, even enemies had great hair.

I watched Risa's expression change as she seemingly remembered our actual affiliation at the same time I did. "Okay, well, if you see him sometime soon, tell him I need him to sign my co-op hours sheet."

"Okay. Will do."



She paused, like she almost wasn't going to speak but then changed her mind. "Have you finalized your entry yet? For the photo contest?"

"No. You?" I said.

"No. I tried to get a picture of the heron but then I tripped on a root," she said.

"That sucks."

"Right? Such a rookie mistake. But I bet everyone around here is going to turn in a fucking heron anyway. Or, god help us all, warblers."

Heat crept up my back. I had no fewer than twenty-three shots of our four resident herons (male and female) that I was considering entering into *Fauna* magazine's annual Junior Nature Photographer competition. Not to mention several dozen shots of a Cape May and one of a male Swainson. That last one turned out blurry, fuck me, because of course the Swainson flitted out of the frame. This was my last shot to win the *Fauna* competition (since I'd be too old next year), and I wanted to conquer first place so badly I could practically taste it. The money would be nice, and my grandma (a former winner herself) would love the free lifetime subscription (added to the prize since her time).

But because *Fauna* was the biggest and best birding magazine in the US (possibly the world, save maybe *Le Bec* in France), the bragging rights alone were worth it.

Particularly if it meant I'd beaten Risa, who I was pretty certain sabotaged my entry last year.

"Yeah. Probably. But the summer birds will be here before you know it. And there are some impressive blooms in Jenkins Wood. There is already a patch of *Monotropa uniflora* at the



base of Elder Oak. It looks like a proper fungus graveyard. Bet it'd be epic in moonlight at the right angle."

"Are you going for that shot?"

"I tried. It just looks stupid. The flash washes it out and using moonlight through branches isn't exactly my forte."

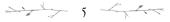
Risa snorted. "I hear you. Okay. Well. Good luck."

She almost sounded like she meant it. I stared at her absolutely rockin' hair as she left.

I tidied the desk and took a bunch of Ranger Jerry's old newspapers to the upcycling bin. The weekend craft people would have a field day Mod Podging on Saturday. I surveyed my work with satisfaction. I was once again reminded how grateful I was for my co-op assignment (even if Risa was there, too). I had always envied the juniors, who were allowed to avoid going to school for all but a few hours on Thursdays during spring term because of their work/volunteer co-ops in years past, but now it was my turn. It had been the best development of my life thus far. Most of my friends were out at the local newspaper or lawyer's or doctor's offices and made more money than me. Because my life goal was to be the world's best nature photographer and take my place aside my hero, master birder Brian Michael Warbley, spending April till August leading nature walks and birding tours was way more my speed. Even if the pay was technically shit.

Like, literally. Jerry gave me a bag of fertilizer for Gran's garden to compensate me. But it was the best stuff we'd seen and we needed it for her bird-attracting flowers, so I wasn't too salty about it.

I rounded the pond on trash removal detail, but my phone buzzed in my pocket. *Elder Oak. Sixty paces due east! Now!*



the text from Gran read. I was still technically on the clock, but Jenkins Wood was part of my work space and I could always pick up garbage along the trail to make seeing Gran official business if needed.

Be right there. Don't leave! I texted back. You know I'll always wait for you, Laurel.

I grabbed my camera, locked the Birdscout Center door, and jogged as lightly as I could around the wooden decks surrounding the pond to the woodland paths. I nodded to Elder Oak, the oldest tree and guardian of the entrance to Jenkins Wood, and tried to make my way as quietly as possible sixty paces east through a rough path covered in dew-wet leaves. I picked up a few discarded wrappers along the way, darkly noting that they probably came from the awful Birdie Bros (a group of dude birders who had terrible nature manners matched only by their preternatural ability to get rare warbler shots).

I finally found Gran half-hidden in fern fronds about halfway up a hill. I crouched in the grass, rocks crackling underneath my boots.

"Shhh," whispered Gran.

"I didn't even say anything," I whispered back.

Gran glared at me as something rustled in a shrub a few feet away. A beak poked out of glistening leaves, then a head, then downy feathers on spindly legs. Gran gave a tiny yawp, and pointed her high-powered binoculars in the bird's direction. I pulled out my camera and my shutter clicked like an automatic weapon.

"Did you get it?" said Gran without looking at me. She

stared at the bird, and the bird stared back at her. I stared at both of them, wondering at how quickly the feeling had left my crouching legs.

Note: Do more crunches. Strengthen core and calves. A girl does not become Brian Michael Warbley, the King of Birders, with numb appendages.

Then something even worse happened.

I sneezed.

This spooked Gran's avian friend and he took flight into the trees.

"Seriously, Laurel?" Gran said.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. Fucking pollen. You know that. I couldn't help it."

"Language," Gran said. "Do you know what that was? That was a white-winged tern. A new addition to our life list. I never expected to see one out here, on a random day of all things. But there it was. You'd think I'd have learned by now—birds always surprise you." She leaned back and looked at her camera. "I heard a rumor there was one around here yesterday, but to actually see it . . ." She trailed off as she pulled out her phone to alert her other bird people.

"His black-and-white head." I marveled at it. "It was gorgeous." I tipped toward Gran and stretched out my legs. I held my tiny digital screen out to her. "See him—I got a pretty clear shot. Most of them are blurry from him getting spooked by my seasonal curse. But a few are good."

None were really good enough to help me be crowned *Fauna*'s Junior Nature Photographer national champion, fuck it all. But, even so. A new bird for the life list was something.

my 7 total

As Brian Michael Warbley says, "A bird that you've seen is worth ten in a book."

"He is stunning." She slipped her phone back into the pocket of her vest and reached over and gave me a shove. "I'm glad I got to see him with you. I gotta say, he is in the top ten on my life list with the snowy owl and king eider I saw in Greenland. Sisimiut also had the northern lights! Superb. One day, kid. Just you wait. We'll go and the aurora will knock your socks off. No winter allergies in Greenland." She grinned. "Want to go to Eat N' Park?" she said.

"I'm at work."

"But Jerry isn't here." Gran grinned.

"How do you know that?" I said.

"I have my ways. Come on. You know you do way more hours here than you are required anyway. What's thirty mere minutes with your old grandma?"

"I guess I could go for a cinnamon bun."

"That's my girl," Gran said.

Gran's house sat conveniently at the edge of Jenkins Wood. We slipped into Gran's tiny hybrid and she drove us to the diner. Since we'd spotted a new life list bird, Gran talked me into fancy chocolate waffles with fruit and let me have *bacon* to celebrate. Gran was a vegetarian verging on vegan, but she was weak in the face of breakfast.

"How goes school?" she asked.

"Fine," I said. "I'm hardly there this semester. Academic classes were stacked in the fall and winter, so these last few weeks I'm mostly Birdscouting for co-op."

"Get any good shots for the contest?" she said.

"Yeah, I guess." I shifted in my seat. "I had some herons, but . . ." I trailed off.

"Herons are good luck. Messenger birds. They bring good omens."

"You say that about all birds."

"Not cormorants. They work for the devil."

"Stop it." I laughed.

Gran shrugged. "Tradition. What can I say?"

"Everyone is going to submit herons or warblers," I said, thinking of Risa. "I need something *different*. Something *extraordinary*."

"All birds are extraordinary. Like people. You know that. You know what a group of warblers is called? A confusion. A confusion of warblers. Isn't that remarkable?"

I grunted. I had several memory cards and two extra hard drives full of photographic evidence that some confusions were pretty fucking boring. At least when *I* tried to capture their image.

Gran paid our bill and drove me back to co-op. She dropped me off with barely a goodbye, because her birder friends had caught wind of her find, and they were meeting up again to try to see the elusive white-winged tern.

"Good luck," I said. "Remember what Warbley says. 'Birds come not just to those who watch, but those who wait.'"

"Yes, yes. I think I've heard you quote him a time or forty. Make great art. You have a *Fauna* family legacy to protect," Gran said, holding my camera out of the window of her car. "And text me if you see the tern again." She sped off, practically leaving me in the dust. I grinned to myself,

looking at my pictures. None were entry-worthy, but the appearance of something rare made me feel that the perfect shot was just around the corner.

FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY APRIL 30

"You know, Brian Michael Warbley won first place in the *Fauna* contest when he was a high school junior," I said to Sophie, who hadn't cared about Brian Michael Warbley since we'd become best friends in second grade.

"Uh-huh," she said, rinsing her brushes in the basement sink.

I swung my legs against the counter where I sat waiting for her. I watched the glitter in her halter dress glisten in the slanting sunlight through the small window.

"His new book, *Warbley's Birding Bests*, highlights some of his early work. It's terrible. Allegedly this is a picture of a Kirtland's warbler"—I held up the book to the back of her head—"but it's so grainy you can't tell."

"Yup," she said, banging the bottom of a can.

"Here is the only shot of a phoenix rising from its own ashes, naked and without its flaming feathers. This really started his career," I said, closing the book.

"I would imagine. One could say it elevated him to mythic status." She turned around and grinned.

"So you were listening."

"I always listen, bird nerd. Come outside."

I followed Soph up her basements steps and out into the yard. She needed to draw me for her portfolio. There were a



lot of sketches of me throughout the years. I still had one that won third prize in the fourth-grade art show. That was back in the day when she could still convince me to match her signature look, involving dresses and braids.

"Why can't we do this indoors?" I said. I swatted at a mosquito. It was early for them, and this concerned me for my summer in the woods.

"Better light out here," she said. "Early light is best."

"Truth," I said.

Sophie sketched me in silence for a few minutes. I fiddled with my camera settings. I was allowed to move when being sketched, but not much.

"Does Ms. Rizzo ever wonder why you draw the same person over and over?" I asked.

"No, a lot of people have go-to models for their assignments. I change your hair occasionally to make it seem more legit."

"Oh, you should sketch Risa from co-op," I said. "Her hair is always amazing."

Sophie looked up at me. "Risa? You mean Risa Risa? Person who allegedly ruined your setup last year and caused a ruinous *Fauna* debacle that made you cry?"

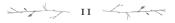
I looked back down at the camera. "Well, yes, technically. But she has this great new look."

"Hmm," she said. "Well, if you want to ask her for me, I would consider it."

"That's probably not going to happen."

"Yeah, I figured." She held up her sketch. "This is super rough."

"I'm usually sitting here for an hour or more. This is what



you can do in fifteen minutes?" It really looked like me. Better, actually. Less rumpled. "It's like I can actually see your progress. The last time you did this, my legs were strangely elongated."

"It's the same with your pictures, you know. They used to be all blurred Kirtland's warblers, and now they are more 'fledgling first flights' and all. With real live baby birds and everything."

"You are just saying that," I said.

"I am incapable of lying," she said.

That was true. Sophie was honest to a fault. It helped her portraiture. Maybe my cargo pants and recently laundered "Mother Flockers" shirt were more prim than I imagined.

"You at the art center today?" I asked.

"Nope. Elder care. It's art therapy day. I think we are going to make flowers out of recycled water bottles."

"Awesome," I said.

"And you are going to admire the hair of your nemesis," she said.

I shrugged. "I'm only human," I said. I put my camera in its case and shoved it next to Warbley's newest book. "You know, in the last chapter of *Birding Bests*, Warbley reminds us—"

"Oh, do save it for later. I like to spread out my Warbley wisdom so that my heart doesn't just overload."

I gave her my "to love me is to love Warbley, deal with it" face. She threw her "I seriously don't give a shit about the bird guy" back.

"Have fun at co-op," she said.

"It's for the birds. HA! Get it, because I said . . ."

"Seriously, shut up," she said.

I clapped her on the back and hopped onto my bike that waited for me on the side of her house. It was going to be a great day. I'd show Ranger Jerry the new Warbley book. At least he'd care.

Or pretend to, anyway.

Mom was crying in the kitchen.

Must be Thursday, I thought.

"Want some toast? It's crunchy and delicious!" I said out loud. Sometimes I could lift Mom out of a funk by the sheer force of relentless optimism.

Mom shook her head, two tears skiing down the hills of her cheeks until they collided on her chin.

Aaaaand sometimes I couldn't.

I pulled out the bread drawer from our ancient kitchen counter. I slid back the metal top and grabbed two pieces of wheat. With enough melted butter, Mom would eat the toast if I put it in front of her. Not even the Drama Queen could resist salted dairy products.

"Chad and I broke up last night," she said.

Further confirmation that it was, in fact, Wednesday. The breakups always seemed to come midweek.

"Sorry," I said. I patted her shoulder sympathetically. I could hardly keep Mom's boyfriends straight. Chad was a

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tool, that much I knew. He was skinny, bald, and obsessed with hunting. He wasn't mean to Mom or me. But even after months of seeing Mom, he had still called me Lauren instead of Laurel.

"I just thought he was the one," she said.

"Why?" I asked. Toast popped out of fiery little slots. I stabbed a knife through the charred tops and flicked breakfast onto a plate.

Mom sniffed. "He just made me feel good."

I stifled the urge to laugh or roll my eyes. She said that about all of the guys who trolled through the house.

Chet. Mark. Ethan? No-Edgar. Chad. Brad.

Dad.

That last one had walked me to my first day of kindergarten and kept on walking. He sends me cards on Christmas and my birthday and invites me to stay every summer. I've thought about going, but I knew it would be like a punch to Mom's throat.

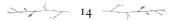
Many things were like that, though, on a long-enough timeline.

A punch to Mom's throat.

Sometimes changing the subject worked to cheer her up.

"I know you worked late last night, so I didn't get a chance to tell you! Gran and I saw a white-winged tern! It's pretty rare around here! I haven't had a new one on my life list in months! He was black and white and perfect all over!" *Feel the magic, Mom,* I thought at her. *Breathe in my exclamations of pure birdinduced joy.*

Mom blew her nose into a napkin. She inhaled sharply, a sure sign that clouds gathered and tears would soon rain again.



I sighed inwardly. There was no winning back her mood today.

I debated my options. Stay here, or use an acceptable excuse to break free of the kitchen soap opera.

I decided on option two. It was an extraordinary spring day, and I should live the fuck out of it. Maybe some of my positivity might filter through the air to Mom somehow.

"I want to check in with Gran before co-op. Hang in there. You are beautiful and I love you," I said to Mom. I backed out of the kitchen as fast as possible and grabbed my backpack. I biked to Gran's cottage on the edge of the woods. I found her in the little garden behind her house. Most of the fruits and vegetables were starting to sprout and bloom and peek out from their winter sleep.

"Laurel," said Gran. "To what do I owe the early morning visit?"

"Mom broke up with Chad."

"I thought his name was Brad."

"No, that was the last guy. I think. This one was definitely Chad."

"Ah, I see. Did we like this one?" she asked.

"Nope, not even a little," I said. "But she wasn't going to be cheered up, so I thought I'd come over here. Just to. Um. You know."

Just to go to the one place where I felt really at home. Gran smiled, as if she knew what I was thinking.

"See the tern again yesterday?" I asked.

"Nope. He left. Louise was so mad. She says it doesn't really count if I didn't see him where he lives, but whatever. I'm now fourteen birds ahead of her. Bitter birders are the worst." Gran chuckled. "Get any new shots?"

"Nope. The art left, too," I said.

"Hang in there, sweetheart. It'll come."

"Maybe I should branch out," I said. "I only ever do around here."

Gran considered this. "Maybe. There are a lot of state parks around here. But don't underestimate what's right under your nose. Your pictures of the pond at dusk and dawn are some of the best I've ever seen," Gran said.

I believed she felt that way. Twelve of my pond pictures hung around her small cabin. She said she paid less in heating bills because all my framed pictures served as insulation.

"But I've done it all! The trees! The water! The flowers! Your garden, even."

"Try more animals. Or the birds, then."

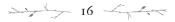
"Birds stay in one place for a second. All I get is a blurry mess," I said. "The movement of their wings is so freaking fast."

"True. But keep trying. These kinds of things are much about patience. And maybe a little luck or magic." Gran winked at me. She got up and dusted off her dirty jeans. "Help me bring my stuff to the storage bench."

"Maybe I could . . . ," I started, but was interrupted by a shrill call from one of Gran's trees. I looked up but couldn't see anything. "What was that?" I asked. The blank look on Gran's face seemed to show that she didn't know, either.

The call erupted again. Two short, high-pitched bursts and a longer, more melancholy song.

"I've never head that one before," I said, excitement blos-



soming in the tips of my toes. It spread like wildfire through my body. Two new birds in one week! I fucking love spring.

"Me either," Gran said. She looked like a kid on Christmas. "Laurel, we have to find him. Maybe it's a pet that got out. Or maybe it's a second rare find! Louise is going to *hate* me. Let me get my binos!"

Gran ran into the house to find her high-power binoculars. I dug my camera out of my bag and aimed it toward the tree, hoping to snap an image I could enlarge. I didn't have my best lenses, as they made my camera harder to transport, but I did what I could. Gran emerged from the house and shoved a pair of binoculars into my hands. "You are going to be late for co-op, so hurry. Go to the other side of the trees." I did as instructed and saw a few sparrows and a dove. The call echoed above my head, until it moved farther into the forest. Gran came up beside me and we stood for minutes in the silence.

"The one that got away," I said. The wildfire of excitement slid down my legs and slunk back into my feat, barely more than a spark now.

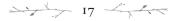
"Today." Gran nodded. "But there's always tomorrow."

"Yes!" I said. "And you need to text me if you hear it again. I'll play hooky for this one."

"You'll do no such thing." But she shot me a mischievous grin. "Of course I'll text you," she whispered.

Good ol' Gran. She knew my heart like no one else. Even if Dad had left and Mom seemed to barely remember she had a kid half the time, Gran was my constant in this world.

"Promise you won't try too hard to see it without me," I said. "I know how you feel about Louise's competition."



"Pfft. Please. Louise barely knows her binos from her butt. And you know I'll always wait for you, Laurel. Now go to co-op before Jerry tells the truancy office to cart me off to the pokey," she said.

"That's not even a thing."

She shooed me out of her yard toward my bike. "Don't argue with your elders," she said.

Hours later, the sky darkened and the rumble of an approaching storm kept distracting me from the unschoolers identifying different specifies of fungi. Soon the weather caught up with us, and within minutes, increasingly dramatic gray sheets of rain filtered through my shoes and socks until I decided enough was enough. I hustled my restless group of ponchoed children back to their parents.

Any word from the mystery bird? I texted Gran from inside the Nature Center.

Do you work, she replied.

That had to mean no.

I dropped into the Nature Center office after lunch.

"Don't drip on the new posters," said Jerry.

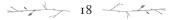
"Glad to see you are feeling better, boss," I said.

"I mean it. Dry off before you laminate them."

"Yes, sir. Oh, Risa asked you to sign her hours sheet. It's on your desk."

"Saw it. Go dry off." Jerry was all business, all of the time.

No one came for a bird walk and talk, or tree tour, or our afternoon Fungi with a Fun Guy program because of the weather. I sometimes wondered if that last one was because everyone knew Jerry was a grumpy mushroom expert at best,



and that our advertising threw off spores of lies. But the weather made the most sense.

"Maybe next week," I tried to console him.

Jerry grunted.

I stood on the small porch of the Nature Center watching the angry clouds. I glanced at my ride chained to the covered bike rack. But then my phone buzzed.

Car is in your lot. Dropped it off for you. Got a ride with neighbor Stella. You're welcome.

Okay, maybe Mom could be pretty cool.

I'm going out with Chad tonight for closure. Leftovers in fridge. Never mind.

I almost wished I had taken the bike path home anyway. The road back to my house from the pond snaked around the mountainside. I crept along at about twenty miles an hour, noting how there was really only a narrow silver guardrail between a precipitous drop and me. Or at least I was pretty sure the guardrail was still there. It was hard to see through the near-horizontal waves of drops assaulting Mom's vehicle.

Halfway home the dreary canopy parted a little, and sunlight peeked through. It was still raining and slick, though. I rounded the bend where the hillside hiking trail followed the highway a bit. I saw a familiar bright orange poncho on the gravel berm. I slowed down even further and rolled up to Gran. I beeped. She looked over and waved at me. I rolled down my window.

"Don't stop here, Laurel. Cars come around mighty fast."

"Yeah, no kidding. Maybe get off the road, then?"

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"I am off the road," she said. "Well, mostly." She moved over a few inches.

"Get in the car. I'll drive you home," I said.

"Nah." Gran pointed to something over the guardrail. "I have stuff to see."

"Mystery bird?"

"No. But I'm pretty sure a black-backed oriole was at one of my feeders until a squirrel scared it. I heard him call a few times and figured I might as well get my weekly hike in."

"It's awful out!" I said.

Gran shrugged. "Go on, now," she said. "Go home." "Promise me if you hear—"

"Yes, yes. Of course. I'll always wait for you. Go away."

I shook my head at her, but I rolled up my window and shifted into gear again. Gran often walked up the hill just to get some exercise, or to get a better view. There was a trail that led back to her house that joined the main path not far from here. She was in her bird zen mode, where she preferred to be alone. But it seemed like a bad idea for her to be out in this weather. I had barely spotted her by the side of the road, and I was practically walking the car around the bend.

Though. Gran was seventy-four. Obviously the woman could take care of herself.

FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY MAY 2 NOTABLE LOCATION: THE END OF THE WORLD

Even though I went to school for two hours every Thursday so they could make sure I was being a responsible co-op stu-



dent, I didn't mind because both of those hours were spent with Sophie in the Art and Media lab. The rain had stopped, so I joyfully locked my dry bike in the rack and nodded at a few of my classmates milling around on the sidewalk in front of Greater Shunksville High School. The "Greater" part of the school always struck me to have been a joke on the part of the builders, since only a few thousand people and mostly migrating birds called Shunksville home. Blink and you'd miss most of downtown entirely. I'd gone to school with the same kids for the better part of my life, until a few years ago, when a new manufacturing plant opened and new families started moving in. Since Mom was a teacher's aide at the dinky elementary school, she complained daily about the overfull classrooms and lack of space for the kids to play.

The familiar scent of turpentine and canvas greeted me as I swung the door open to the art room. Ms. Rizzo, the Art and Media lab teacher, smiled over at me.

"Thwatchingsirds?" a voice asked from under a table. "What?" I said.

"How's the bird watching?" Sophie said more clearly.

"Superb," I said.

"See anything good?"

"No. Heard a new call, though."

"That's good?" She got up and straightened her headband.

"Indeedy. What are you doing on the floor?"

"Finding my artistic muse. Also, my damn brush rolled into a crack and I had to bust it out. This one cost me three hours cleaning the garage."

"Understood," I said. I pulled my portfolio from the rack and spread out my (fucking unoriginal) heron pictures. Ms. Rizzo basically let the advanced juniors do what we wanted during our extended "A Block" days, so we could work on our co-op portfolios. I was living my best nature photographer life.

Still life was my forte, even though I wished it were birds. Trees. Rocks. The occasional wildflower. I'd tried to mix it up because Sophie was also a sculptor and had convinced me to try to branch out artistically freshman year. I tried 3-D stuff like clay (doves) and (raven) jewelry making to mix it up. After burning myself and setting fire to Soph's second-best sketchbook with my soldering iron, I'd decided (well, Ms. Rizzo vehemently suggested) that the camera was my true calling. I'd gotten a lot better at birds this year.

"These are all just herons," I said to my portfolio.

"I told you. Go shoot the steel mill or a mine or something. Post-industrial Gothic. Find weeds growing out of pipes and things. People will love that stuff," Sophie said. "Didn't your ex-girlfriend photograph that kind of stuff?"

"The lines of those places haunted me. You start noticing how everything is a square or a triangle and how many right angles add up to your life. Can't do it. Also you will recall that I was together with the ex you mentioned for about a week, probably not unrelated to her art." I shook my head for emphasis. "As the master Brian Michael Warbley says, 'Nature is my canvas.'"

"Yeah, 'cause that's normal for a photographer, to get stressed out by the fact that the world is made of shapes. I thought you moved past that after they stopped trying to get you to watch *Sesame Street* with us in Ms. LaPlaca's class." "Squares are everywhere. Lurking. Squares are brutal. Literally. Brutalist buildings . . ."

"Nature is shapes, Laurel. Mountains. Animals. *Birds*," she said.

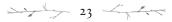
"Soft shapes. These are all circles and curves. Jagged rock faces freak me out. When have you seen a rectangular crow?" I said. "As Brian—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it. Loser," she said, but the bell drowned her out.

I smiled at my digitally manipulated herons. When I was in a bad mood or upset about the state of the world, I liked drawing little stick arms on them.

Sophie *was* right—I needed to do something new. Something exciting. Something that would move the judges to accept *me* over all the other Brian Michael Warbley wannabes in the world. But what was that?

I got out my laptop and scrolled through pictures of the rust belt, a dirty line that sliced up the eastern part of the United States, in which Shunksville sat firmly in the middle. It wasn't as rusty as it could have been, maybe. New jobs had brought a bunch of stores and stuff nearby, but to me, we still seemed like a place nature was taking back. The cracked seams of earth on a mountain once erased of green by mines had grass peeking out in many places again. Wildflowers (which purists might call "weeds") were persistent little shits and found ways to grow in soil where they had no earthly business surviving. Even the rocks that sat next to abandoned railroad tracks grew moss in shades of sage and juniper and parakeet.



Nature. Gotta hand it to her.

An hour passed and all I had managed to do was decide I hated both buildings and boulders.

"This is pointless," I said to Sophie.

Sophie looked up and turned her sketchbook toward me. "Would it help to know that I've been very productive?"

I cocked my head at Sophie's drawing of me. Paper me smiled at my computer, hunched over in thought. Lines fell in dark waves from my scalp to my shoulders.

"You made my hair look really good," I said.

"I made your hair look like it looks."

"No, you made it look better."

"Did not."

"Did, too."

"Making good use of undirected study, girls?" said Ms. Rizzo from her desk.

"One of us is," I said. "The other one would like to but can't."

Ms. Rizzo got up and glanced at Sophie's drawing. She threw her a thumbs-up.

"Why don't you try landscapes again? Go to that pond you like to shoot when the light is best. A starry, starry night. A time when you aren't usually there so that the world can be new." Ms. Rizzo squeezed my shoulder. "Take heart. You still have plenty of time. Entries aren't due until, what, end of July? You're in good shape." She wandered over to other tables.

"Easy for her to say," I mumbled. Ms. Rizzo specialized in graphic design. Photographing nature at night was not easy. Lighting was one thing, but the reemergence of mosquitos was also soon to be another.



"I think you are putting too much pressure on yourself. You always have a hard time thinking of things in competition season."

"Freaking Risa," I said. "She asked me about it, you know?"

"Ohhh," said Sophie. "What is she doing?"

"I don't know. Something inspired, probably."

Sophie shrugged. "You'll figure out what to submit. Photograph what inspires you. What brings you joy?"

"You." I grinned. "And Gran. And summer birds."

"Yeah, your gran brings me joy, too. Birds? Not so much."

I whacked her with her sketchbook. She'd spent a lot of time at Gran's house when we were little. I don't know how the birding hadn't rubbed off on her, even a little.

At the end of lab, I had produced nothing except herons with mustaches.

"Remember me fondly," I said to Sophie. "Remember the art of my youth, for that is all I will ever have to show."

"No," she said. "I've forgotten it already. See you later."

Once I got outside, I fished around in my backpack to find my phone. I had turned it off for Art and Media, but I needed my internet fix before committing back to nature. There were six voice mails from Mom and more than fifteen texts.

I dialed Mom's cell.

"Hello?" said a frantic voice. "Laurel, is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom, of course it's me. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, honey. Where were you? I called and called."

"I'm was at school, Mom."

"Yes but your phone!" Her voice rose an octave. "I called the office, but no one there answered, either." "Maybe they were in a meeting. I'm not supposed to have my phone on at school." I thought guiltily of all the times I'd kept it on for bird alerts.

"Honey. I have some bad news. There's been an accident."

"What? Who? I thought you took the car in for an oil change today," I said, confused.

"Grandma, baby. Grandma has been in an accident. She's downtown at Mercy Hospital. I had to take the bus here . . . but I'm with her. She's in surgery. I think you need to come down here. Just . . . in case."

"In case what, Mom?" Something wasn't sinking in. What Grandma? That's what I called Dad's mom. Wait, she couldn't mean *Gran*? I'd just seen *Gran* yesterday evening.

Actually. Gran usually called with a bird update by now. I'd been so distracted by lab and contest woes that it slipped my mind.

"Things don't look so good. Just—just get down here, okay?"

"Wait, something happened to Gran? Are you sure?" None of this was making any sense. Gran was unstoppable. Gran was a force of nature. *Gran was fine and looking for birds on the stupid mountain path yesterday.*

"Of course I'm sure! Listen—Laurel. Mercy emergency room. Okay?" Mom's voice just got more and more frantic. Emergencies weren't exactly her wheelhouse.

"Okay," I said. "Let me just text my co-op."

It wasn't until I sent Jerry a brief note about a family emergency that it started to sink in. Something had happened to Gran. Gran, my rock, had been unearthed and thrown who knows where. My hands shook as I gripped my handlebars, making my way the few miles to the hospital.

As the sliding doors let me into the emergency department, reality buzzed in my ears. A dad sat with a screaming little boy whose arm stuck out at a funny angle. A girl a little older than me rested her head against a pillar, her eyes halfmoons under drooping lids. Nurses, doctors, light, and sound swirled like fog over this antiseptic place. I wobbled over to a desk where a harried-looking woman answered calls with a gruff voice.

"Excuse me?" I said. I hated to interrupt her.

"Just a second, honey," she said. She barked into the phone, punched numbers, sighed at the ringing.

"Busy for a Thursday afternoon," she said, finally looking up at me. "Are you here for yourself?"

"No, ma'am," I said. I recognized her. I'd seen her at school plays and bake sales. She was the mom of a girl in my history class. "My gran was brought in . . ."

She shook her head, as if she, too, were stuck in the emergency room fog. "Fowler. Aurora Fowler. And you are Laurel, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just a second, sweetheart."

Mrs. Glenn. That was her name. Mrs. Glenn, mother of Tabitha, another Art and Media lab girl. Tabby, everyone called her. Mrs. Glenn, mom to Tabby, nice to people in front of her and hard as steel to the people demanding things on the phone. Good qualities to have in an emergency room receptionist, or nurse, or whatever she was. She wore scrubs, so it could go either way.



None of this mattered, these details. I should be thinking about Gran. Finding Gran. Not remembering a girl I didn't really talk to or knowing her mom's name or memorizing the patterns in the chipped paint in the wall behind her. But right now those normal things felt like a lifeline.

Maybe I should text Sophie. She was good in a crisis. I just slipped the phone out of my hoodie and unlocked it when Mom burst out of another set of double doors past the desk with Mrs. Glenn.

"Laurel," she said. Her bloodshot eyes and puffy red face flashed a warning light that she'd been crying. Gran would always roll her eyes at Mom's constant waterworks, but still alarm bells accompanied her appearance in my head.

"Mom?" I said.

She threw her arms around me. "It's not good, baby. Not good. Come with me." Mom released her grip around my shoulders and grabbed my hand. She waved at Mrs. Glenn, who pushed a button at her desk. The doors swung open for us. I followed Mom down a white corridor. White walls, white tile, white machines. The only color came in a yellow line of the floor, and angry red and green and blue bursts from monitors. People lay in little rooms, some with their doors open, some not. It was silent except when it wasn't—cries or worried conversation or beeps broke the stillness. Mom rushed to a pod where Gran lay.

I gasped when I saw her—like an actual, audible gasp a cartoon character might make. She was Gran but she wasn't. Her eyes closed, her skin pale, wires and bags and those terrible machines attached to her.

"What ...," I started, but I closed my mouth. What

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would Mom say? Could her words fill Gran up and make her whole and well, so we could leave this place? Would they wake Gran up from her dream so we could leave? We'd drop Mom off at home so that Gran and I could go back to trying to beat Louise and Risa, respectively

"What happened?" I whispered.

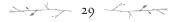
"I don't know." Mom shook her head. "She got hit by a car. It was raining all day and night and the oil on the roads . . . for some reason Grandma was out on the highway or something. Up on the mountainside, you know, that hiking trail. You can get onto the road in a break there. She was standing by the bend. A car took the turn too fast and hit her. She landed yards and yards away, down the hill. The driver stopped and was pretty torn up about it. But why was she even *out there*?" Mom looked at Gran. "Why, Mom? What could you possibly have been doing? How could you possibly think it was a good idea to be out there?"

Mom started howling. This wasn't her usual, OMG-BradChad-broke-up-with-me cry. This was soul-deep wailing. I had half a mind to shush Mom. There were other people, sick people, here after all. But then I looked at Gran. If anything was going to wake her up, surely this would.

Gran didn't move. None of the monitor thingies hooked up to her changed at all.

Just then, a woman in a long white coat came in with a man wearing scrubs. They looked at Mom; then they looked at me. Since I was not currently impersonating a wounded animal, the woman addressed me.

"What is your name?" she asked, loudly businesslike over the sound of Mom.



"Laurel," I said. "This is my gran. Um. And my mom." I pointed to them both, as if there could be some confusion.

The lady nodded. "Is she okay?" She gestured to Mom. "Oh. Well. My gran, you know?"

"Mommmmm," my own mother wailed.

She looked at me again. "Do you know what happened?" I nodded. "I kinda heard."

"We are going to keep her here in the intensive care unit. Your grandmother will need to have tests. We discussed this with . . ." She looked at Mom. ". . . your mother. But you might want to talk it out with her a little later. Is your dad around? Or another adult in the family?"

I shook my head, and Mom wailed.

Guy-in-scrubs gently shuffled Mom into a chair. He knelt and spoke softly to her. Eventually she calmed down.

"We can only give medicine if you are a patient here, too," he explained. "Since you are in distress, though, maybe . . ."

I sighed. "She'll be okay. Give her a few minutes. Right, Mom?"

Mom folded up into herself, like an origami swan creased with grief and pain. "Yes," she whispered.

The guy kept talking to her and she listened. Dude was like the Mom whisperer or something. God, I hoped it was unethical for him to date her.

The doctor leaned toward me. "Laurel," she said. "The first twenty-four or forty-eight hours are important. Hopefully we'll see signs of improvement. For now, it's a situation of wait and see. Given the circumstances"—she looked at Mom again—"maybe you want to go home. Get some rest. We have

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your contact info; we will call you if anything changes or if we move her. Okay?"

"Shouldn't we stay here?" I said. "Gran shouldn't be alone."

The woman smiled. "I know this is difficult. But we will take good care of her. I bet she would want you and your mom to take care of yourselves, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah," I said. That was true. When Gran woke up, she'd have a duck fit if Mom was freaking out. That's what she called it when anyone yelled—"a duck fit."

All birds, all the time with Gran.

"I've been here for hours," Mom sniffed. "We could come back in a little bit, Laurel."

"But . . . ," I said.

"A little bit," Mom said. I could hear her voice rise like it did before another duck fit.

"Okay," I said, defeated. "Okay."

We left through the double doors, past Mrs. Glenn, past the sleeping girl and the crying boy, still sitting there. Still sleeping. Still crying.

When we got home, Mom drank the tea that made her sleepy. She hadn't asked me if I needed anything or if I was okay. Maybe she assumed that I didn't. Or that I was. Or maybe she just didn't have anything to give regardless of what I'd say.

It was probably that last one.

I sat down on my bed, cradling the phone to my chest. A sneaky thought from earlier floated back into my consciousness, growing heavier and heavier until it sunk to into the base of my skull—I had seen Gran up there yesterday. I knew then it was dangerous but didn't make her come with me. *I could*

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have prevented this. I should have kept her from going up there in bad weather. That was *my* fault. If I had just stayed a little longer to talk her into coming with me, or turned around and dragged her, I would have pissed her off, but she would have been *fine*.

But she wasn't fine. She was awful. She was alone in the white room with only wires and tubes for company.

And

it

was

my

fault.

The phone buzzed me out of my spiral. I nearly dropped it, thinking it was the hospital. But it wasn't the ER or the ICU or wherever Gran was at the moment.

"Sophie," I answered.

She started talking before I could get any coherent thought together. "Oh my god, Laurel. Brett's dad heard on the CB that there was an accident and he called his buddy and is your gran okay? What happened?"

"I don't know too much right now. She was hit by a car. Um. In an accident. She was outside, and it was raining, and she was by that fucking trail by the road and you know how slippy it stays all the time . . ."

And if Gran died, it was all my fault, Sophie. Completely, and utterly my fault. Because I saw her there and left.

But I couldn't tell her that. I couldn't tell *anyone* that. Because if no one else knew, then it wasn't really true. Well, okay, I knew. So it was fact.

But no one could hate me for it, at least.

"Laurel, are you still there?" Soph said. She'd been talking that whole time.

"I don't know, Soph," I said. "I don't know where I am without Gran."

"Yeah," she said. She stayed on the other end of the phone, silent. "Do you want me to come over?"

"I don't deserve that," I said softly.

"What?" she said.

"I might have to go back to the hospital," I said. "They are going to call. If she needs us. If they move her. Gran. To another room. Because they said they might do that."

"Okay," she said. "Laurel?"

"Yeah?"

"Um. I'm here if you need me. Okay?"

"I know," I said.

"No, really. I am."

"Thanks, Soph. This just sucks, you know?"

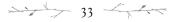
"Yes. Yes, it does."

I didn't know what else to say and neither did she, so we hung up. I watched her face fade from the phone screen. I held my thumb down and tapped into the picture icon. I opened shots of herons and watched them fade over and over.

Bills, feathers, darkness. Feathers, wings, darkness. It made me feel better.

I rolled over and hugged my knees to my chest. I tried to lie still like a log and take deep, even breaths, like a family therapist once taught Mom and me.

There, completely alone, the night closed in around me. It was too dark and too quiet, even if the hall light glowed in on my lime-green rug and my daisy clock ticked cheerfully



on my wall. Gran's heartbeat should be booming from her house, out and over the mile-and-a-half stretch to our driveway, and into the downstairs and the upstairs and through our attic and the rest of Shunksville right now. She was so alive; all of Pennsylvania couldn't contain her. The fact that right now she had shrunken into a damaged body in a tiny pod, left a silence so violent it attacked the ears. The clock ticked out of sync without her steady pulse to guide it.

I picked up my phone again. I willed it to ring. I willed the doctor or even the dude nurse who probably had a thing for Mom to call us. To tell us that Gran had woken up, that she'd be good as new in a few days.

Ring. Buzz. Something.

I made a resolution to myself, right then in the too-quiet, too-dark house. Gran was going to be okay. I would *will* her to be okay. If it took talking to her and learning physical therapy or whatever, I would do it. I would think of something that would be the miracle we needed.

FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY MAV 4

The day dawned bright and beautiful, not that I got to see much of it. Jerry said that I could miss co-op, and had to make up hours only if I wanted to. I was there enough just for fun with Gran that I had amassed way more than I probably needed anyway.

Gran. Lying there in the hospital bed, still as a river stone, as the chaos of the hospital washed over her.

Gran. Her syllable stung. What always seemed a soft,

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kind, feathered word now squeezed into the brain with tiny, crushing claws.

I'd seen her. I'd *seen* her. I knew it was unsafe. *Obviously* it was unsafe. But I'd just kept going. If Mom ever found out, she was going to disown me. Kick me out. And I'd have nowhere to go because I'd killed the one thing keeping Mom and I going.

No. Not killed, Laurel. She was only asleep. A coma wasn't forever. Her brain could be there.

Right?

Back at home after another day next to Gran, Mom went straight to her room, only stopping long enough to tell me to wake her if the hospital called with any news.

I went to my own room and collapsed onto my bed. I looked over at my *Fauna* issues from the last decade, neatly arranged on a tall shelf with my Warbley collection. *Warbley's Beginning Birding*, the first of my collection, given to me by Gran on my fourth birthday. *Warbley's Definitive Guide to North American Birds*, Warbley's memoirs, *One for the Life List*, and *Another One for the Life List*. A dozen more.

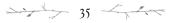
None of the magazines or books I'd always used as life guides really covered what to do when you accidentally caused one of the world's best birders to nearly die.

Nearly, Laurel. Gran wasn't dead.

Still the tiny claws dug deeper. I could feel this sting in my head. In my chest.

"This can be okay," I said to the *Fauna*s and Warbleys. "Nature persists. Life triumphs. Always."

Their prim rows stood sympathetically. If nature taught anything, it was that death came for us all.



"Not helpful," I said. "I choose to believe that Gran is the exception that goes against the rule." I nodded at them. Sometimes you just had to fake confidence until it became real. Guilt tried to worm its way back, but I'd just have to keep shoving it down.

"Like Warbley says . . . ," I said to myself, but couldn't come up with anything in the moment.

Maybe tomorrow. That was one thing. The birds would fly and sing again tomorrow.

I could depend on that. Even if the feelings I'd shoved to the back recesses of my brain pushed forward, making my temples hurt. Knowing I could hear a bird sing tomorrow, I would make that enough for now.

FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY MAY 5 NOTABLE LOCATION: THE NEW NORMAL?

The hospital never called overnight. Mom woke up pissed.

"Are you sure you didn't miss a call?" she said.

"Mom, it's a cell phone. If I did, you'd be able to see it," I said. "Would you like some oatmeal? A full stomach might help!" My plan of Everything Will Be All Right if We Will It to Be was in full effect.

"But you could have erased it. To cover up your mistake?" She ignored my offer of breakfast.

"Why would I do that?" I said. If Mom only knew my *real* mistake with Gran, what would she do?

"How would *I* know, Laurel?" Mom said.

"Should I stay home from the Nature Center today? I don't have to go in on the weekend," I said.

"Just tell me now if they called."

"Mom, of course they didn't call. I would have told you." I tried to hand her the phone. "Call them and see what's going on."

She looked like she wanted to throw the cell at something. Or someone. I slowly backed out of the kitchen before I said something to annoy her.

I texted Sophie.

I'm living in peak Mom meltdown mode over here. Laurel! OMG I was so worried! How is your grandma? Don't know. No word, I typed. Well, that's probably good, right?

I don't know. I think they would have let us know if she woke up? Maybe?

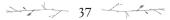
Sophie sent back a frowning face.

I texted, But they also would have called if she got worse. You know Gran. She's tough. She's going to make it.

Truth, she wrote back.

As Brian Michael Warbley once wrote, "Birds aren't born knowing how to fly, but the ability is still there within them. Make manifest what's inside you." That's what I could do for Gran. Make manifest her ability to wake up, and make Mom feel like everything was going to be okay.

On the other hand, I was the one responsible for Gran's condition in the first place. That might negate all the good energy I put out. That thought pecked on the thin veneer of my cheerful outlook. I shoved it as far from my mind as I could.



But I felt it there, guilt's sharp little beak.

"Laurel," Mom yelled from the kitchen. "Be ready to go in five."

Her words ricocheted against the exposed wooden beams, sending splinters flying in all directions that landed straight into my skin. I sighed. There was nothing else to do when she was like this but to listen.

Mom drove to the hospital, sometimes casting little glares over at me.

"What?" I finally said.

"They didn't call because they hadn't moved her. But she has a bed now. We can see doctors while they are on rounds. Or something."

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"You seem like it."

"I'm just under a lot of stress. My mother and all."

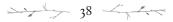
"My grandmother," I thought sadly. But I realized I had accidentally said it out loud.

Mom wilted a little. "I know, baby. I know. I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't understand how she ended up like this. I don't know what we'd do without . . ." She trailed off.

"It's okay, Mom," I said. "I know Gran. This is a setback, but if anyone can come back from something like this, it's her. She needs us to be in her corner!" I almost meant the confidence in my voice.

"Okay, sweetheart," she said.

When we got to the hospital, we were shuffled off to another floor. They had just moved Gran to another pod, with her own nurse. Her wires and monitors were all still



present and accounted for, but now she had these fancy socks that expanded and contracted, massaging her every few minutes. Her bed moved like ocean waves underneath her.

"Fancy," I said to her. "It's like a spa, but with drugs."

Gran's face didn't change.

Beep. Click. Whir.

Doctors came and went. They took Gran; they brought her back. Hours passed like this. There was no news to report, doctors said. Gran's brain was damaged, but it was too early to tell. She'd survived, and seemed to be fighting. That was good. But her response to stimuli was not.

It was dark when we left. Mom had fallen into a deep place of silence.

"Should we get takeout?" I said.

Nothing.

"I could make chicken. We should probably do Crock-Pot stuff for a while. I'll find the recipe file."

Silence.

"Did I tell you about the red-tailed hawk's nest we found? They usually like to be downtown, but they've moved to the burbs!" My chatter reached out again and again over the mile to our house, but it couldn't cross to where Mom was.

In a fortunate turn of events, however, I didn't end up needing to worry about food. Casserole dishes had shown up on our stoop like they did after Grandpa had died when I was ten. Gran was well known and word traveled fast around my town. The birders and the leaf peepers and the sewing circle represented in full fucking force.

I should probably stop making fun of Gran's terrible

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needlepoint. Those people made the best tuna noodle a girl could ever hope for.

I feel guilty eating chicken, I texted to Sophie later. Gran would have ten thousand duck fits.

Wouldn't they be chicken fits? she said.

Fair point.

Try to get out tomorrow. To the pond or woods. Take some pictures. I think it'd be good for your mental state.

Yeah, I said. I had brought my portfolio to the hospital, thinking that I could go through it again next to her. That that might wake her up, somehow. Or that I could borrow some of her winning *Fauna* photography powers. I had a bunch of rock and icicle ones from the past winter that might count as still life.

It struck me that Gran was now a still life.

The doctors had declared there had been swelling in her brain. Or bleeding. Or both, maybe. But she was breathing on her own, though. She was hanging on.

As Brian Michael Warbley said, "Even in the silence of still life, there is life, still."

Mom stayed in her silent weirdness. It was starting to freak me out. This had happened once before, after Dad left. Dishes went unwashed, bills unpaid, groceries unbought. Mom didn't have that much sick time. She could take off of work unpaid, but the whole *unpaid* situation would be pretty bad. Intervention had to come early this time.

"Mom, we can't live like this," I said that night.

"Mmm-hmm," she said.

"We have to make a plan," I said.

"Mmm-hmm," she repeated.



"Are you even listening?"

She stared at me. She blinked. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"What are we going to do?"

Mom sighed. "What we always do, Laurel. I'll go to work. You go to that bird place. We'll take turns visiting Mom. We'll figure it out somehow."

"Okay," I said.

"I'm going to bed. Night," she said abruptly.

"Night," I said. I slumped onto the couch. The whole system Mom and I had only worked if Gran was involved. She was the glue. Without her . . . what? I didn't even know. So there was only one possible solution. We needed Gran.

Something crashed from upstairs.

I jumped. I bolted up the steps.

In Mom's room I found her on the floor next to a shattered glass vase.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I got it out. To look at it. It was a wedding gift. From Grandma. I wondered . . ." Mom sat down on the floor, in the middle of all the shards.

"Don't do that!" I said. "I'll get a broom! Get on the bed, Mom!"

But she wouldn't budge. I swept as best as I could around her. I convinced her to go into the bathroom, where I watched her wash off her hands. I brushed her jeans off into the garbage can. I still wasn't sure I'd gotten it all.

"Don't walk in bare feet, Mom."

She nodded. But then she walked into her room and closed the door.



The whole "breaking" and "falling apart" nature of Mom's act was a little too on the nose. I went downstairs and cleaned up the last few days of cleaning neglect.

I was older this time than when Dad left. I could fill in as glue for Gran's temporary absence.

At least. I hoped I could.

I decided I had to try to go back to the Nature Center. Being at the hospital so much was beginning to get to me. Birding with toddlers served as a solid distraction. They were a lot like squirrels, but they were *also* enchanted with every blade of grass and snail and slug nature had to show off. So they weren't that bad.

When the Center quieted down, I went out onto the small back porch and sat on the ancient wooden swing. The leaves on the oak and spruce glowed vibrant in the afternoon light. Green peeked out of the forest floor corners and rows, curling the sunlight into warm brown rock. A robin flew up and landed on the banister. He twitched his head at me suspiciously.

"Feeding you would be terrible birder behavior," I said. He chirped.

"Yeah, I know. This hurts me more than you."

He hopped along the gray chipped paint. He called out and another robin answered him.

"Honestly, worms are a lot better for you."

His beady eyes gleamed a solid "piss off, apex predator" at me, and then he took flight to meet his robin buddy off in



another tree. Birds kind of had middle fingers in their wings. Or middle toes, at least. They were definitely experts in communicating their disgust with you.

I grinned. Maybe that's where we got "flipping someone the bird." I'd have to ask Gran.

Gran.

I thought about her garden and her plants and her mail. Was anyone bringing in her mail? No. Who would? Mom had barely been taking care of herself, let alone that kind of thing. I should do that. Get the mail, at least.

After co-op, I got on my bike and rode over to Gran's house. Sure enough, a packet of letters and catalogs for outdoor gear sat in the metal curls jutting from a packed mailbox. I pried it out and piled it neatly on her table inside the door. I checked her fridge and bagged a bunch of rotting fruit and vegetables. She would be so, so ticked off that all that food went to waste. I checked the basement. It only ever flooded in the early spring, but this gave me a sense of purpose. No windows had been left open, no faucets running, no burners heating. The house was fine, aside from the fridge and mail, which had been quickly addressed.

I took the garbage down the stone path through to the edge of the yard. They'd pick it up Wednesday or Thursday. I looked down the abandoned alley. Shards of broken glass sparkled like diamonds, mixing with the stones blacked by passing tires and oil-slick rainbows until the alley dead-ended into the Jenkins Wood's path. It was serene and sad and made me wish desperately that Gran were there with me, yelling at me to hurry up with the damn chores, already.

I turned back toward the house. Mom would soon show

up at the hospital and wonder why I wasn't there. I wondered if I should come over and mow the lawn on Saturday. It was getting frowsy, as Gran would say. I walked to the side of the porch to check if the weed whacker still lived under there. As I peered into the dusty shadows, I heard it.

Two short, high-pitched bursts. One long melancholy song.

The mystery bird.

I backed out of the porch hole and looked around wildly. It sounded again from Gran's spruce tree.

"Where are you?" I asked the sound. "Just hop down, would you? So I can get a look at you. Wait for me!" I grabbed my phone. Maybe if I could get a picture of it, I could get Gran to . . .

Maybe I could look it up in a field guide.

Again and again he called. He moved to a tree by the garbage. I followed. He moved three trees down, high on the uppermost branches, hidden from sight. Over and over he moved until the call was lost amid the woods.

I went back to my bike. My phone buzzed with a dozen texts at once.

Where are you? Are you okay? Why aren't you with Gran? Where are you, where are you, where are you?

I hit Mom's name in my favorites.

"You scared me to death, Laurel, not being where I thought you'd be," Mom started before even saying hello.

"I'm over at Gran's house. Thought I should get the mail," I mumbled.

Silence.

"Oh," Mom said. "Oh. That's a good idea."

