



Bird Songs and Conquering Thoughts

Written by

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pen it.

No. Not yet.

Dominic frowned at the sealed crimson letter on his desk. A small bird pecked at it incessantly, as if it held seeds within. *House sparrow*, he thought. Birds like those belonged among flocks of pigeons, picking out bits from the concrete. Instead it was here on a chilly January morning.

His small apartment was not a place for any animal. It was too cramped for anything living except for him. The bathroom and the kitchen counter faced each other, a wooden door leading to the outside wedged between them. A subtle odour of mould seeped through the flaxen-coloured walls. The only natural light came from a book-sized window over his desk, which faced the outside door. The light bleached the floorboards, and now a small window-shaped patch of bleached wood occupied the centre of the room.

He shooed the brown-marked bird away, and with a chirp, it took off. Its feathers, its feet, and its delicate beak turned to glass, and the bird struck the ground, shattering into small, glimmering pieces. A single glass feather rested on the bird's remains, which Dominic picked up and crushed in his hand. Warm red liquid bloomed like welts on his palm. He rose and cleaned his hand in the bathroom sink, grinning triumphantly as he picked out shards of glass sticking out of his skin.

His hand sang with stinging pain as he disinfected his wounds with yellow-stained cotton. It pulsed to the rhythm of his heart when he bandaged it. However, he paid no mind as he returned to his desk and stared at the unopened letter, imagining it burning under his gaze and disappearing forever.

He grabbed it and set it back down again when there was a knock on the door. He was about to ignore it when it knocked again — more persistently. It reverberated in his apartment and ears until he unlocked the door with a click, and it creaked open. He held the edge firmly and peeked.

His friend, Rich, stood there, about to knock again. The 20-year-old's skin looked horribly tanned. Rich, whose nose bridge was so low (almost in line with his cheekbones) that Dominic had to resist the urge to grab it and jerk it upwards. His face was in a distorted expression of dismay.

'You look horrible,' Rich said.

'What do you want, Swann?' he demanded, his voice as sharp as the edge of a knife.

'Relax, I come in peace. I just need to talk to you.' Rich scanned him from head to toe. 'Am I interrupting something?'

Dominic glanced at the unopened letter and then back at him. 'I'm busy.'

'You've been cooped up in there for days, man. You need to talk to someone.'

'What I need is some quiet.'



A songbird landed next to Rich's polished shoes. It pecked at the door. Rich dropped his gaze.

'Oh,' he said. A smile grew on his face, teeth shining like pearls. 'For how long?'

Dominic played with the doorknob absently. 'Since the beginning of the year, but it's become worse these past two days. Ever since I received that letter.'

A second songbird joined the first. It barely had a chance to ruffle its feathers before the first songbird began to peck its head, as if it was trying to crack its skull open.

'I remember when I received mine.' Rich chuckled at the memory. 'It was frogs for me. I opened it on the tenth morning I found frog eggs in the bathroom sink.'

'What happened after you opened it?'

'I can't tell you that,' he said playfully. 'I'm sorry, but you'll have to see for yourself. It's different for everyone.'

Dominic's grip tightened around the doorknob. 'Then you understand why I need to do this by myself.'

Rich hesitated. Something occupied his mind, as always. He would never let a wrong word slip, and if he did, he would ruminate for days — at least, from what Dominic remembered about his friend. The problem was, though, that he could never guess what words turned the cogs of his mind until he spoke them.

Finally, he said, 'Fine, but remember this: birds may learn to fly on their own, but first they need a nest to take off from.'

The words lingered in the air as he walked away, and the songbirds stopped pecking each other and flew out behind him, singing to themselves and, to his surprise, him too.

Five hours later, and the letter was still on the desk, but its colour had darkened to scarlet. Almost black, like the night outside the house was trying to consume it. Like the slight bite in the air, like the quiet that hung in his apartment. Like the bird that pecked at his letter. Everything wanted to consume everything.

The birds kept coming and coming. Two warblers appeared out of nowhere and played with his letter, tossing it to each other in mid-flight as he tried to grab it. A skylark sang on his bed, overcome with joy as if no worries existed in its world. One time, a nest of six little chicks had appeared on his kitchen counter, peeping for their mother bird. When their mother finally came (it was another house sparrow), she had earthworms in her beak. The chicks ate them, and after a few minutes, their eyes rolled up into their sockets, and they died. Dominic saw the mother nudging their dead bodies as if trying to bring them back.

In a fit of rage, he shoved the birds' nest off his desk, and it splattered into white dust that flew everywhere and anywhere, covering not just the floor, but his cupboards, his cabinets, the patch of bleached wood which seemed to be growing larger, and larger—

He sat down and stared at the letter. Something in him wanted to leap out and tear it apart. A part of him wanted Rich to stubbornly barge into his apartment and open his letter for him. To be done with it. He crossed his arms and slumped on his desk as if a weight landed on his back. The clock on his desk ticked. A child would have torn it open with excitement. An adult, with impatience. But Dominic was neither. How would *he* open the letter? What would he find?

It was different for everyone.

A bird landed on the kitchen counter and inched towards him cautiously. His head remained buried in his arms. He was done with these distractions. Done with these doubts, these questions, and no answers to any of them. All he wanted to do was lie down and stay still forever. All he wanted was—

A peck on his arm. One. Two. Three. Dominic looked up slowly. The bird. It hopped next to the letter and nudged it with its beak, nudged it towards him. He grabbed the letter and opened it. 