

Gazpacho

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1

A squeak to the right shows Nonny McGuinness that the sound that brought her back in wasn't a door hinge, but her boyfriend's parrot. His eyes are shut, his eyelids whiter than she remembers and more creped, his feathers puffed. She wonders what's wrong with him—is he sick?

The first time she was ever up here the bird had laughed—had bobbed in its cage as it tried different registers in order, apparently, to find a certain musical note. It made a human throat-clearing sound, then started in on an old song from the radio, “April Love” by Pat Boone. It leaned right and left, crouched and straightened, vocalizing all the while. Nonny'd been nervous about talking to Kendall's mother, and the entertainment had meant she didn't have to so soon.

She releases the cage door's spring closure mechanism and puts her hand in like Kendall does and knuckles his cheek. One eye opens, closes. When she touches his chest he steps onto her hand. He trembles, he moans, possibly still asleep and dreaming. She wishes he'd let off a screech. Kendall would come in then, surely. She knows he's around because his mother said so when she answered the doorbell.

Nonny wants to confront him about something. She awakened this morning remembering walking home on the sidewalk above Hansen's Break, the football game just ended at the school, headlights gliding slowly toward her through the salt mist, boys in cars saying things as they rumbled by, earnest, blatant, funny, smart, really quite vulgar things. She'd looked back and seen Kendall bending to the window of a stopped pickup and then throwing his arms wide and dancing in a circle. It was not the expression of gladness over the result of the game as she'd tried to make herself believe it was. He'd boasted—perhaps not revealing her name, but his eye was fixed on her and for certain she'd come under the inspection of the ones she couldn't see in that truck. Oh, things had fallen in place, all right. Bunny Bencher suddenly choosing her for a friend. Older boys acknowledging her when all they'd do before was look past.

Lady's Guide to the Modern Gentleman, slipped from

the Robertses' entertainment hutch, says that even after a woman allows her concord to be known it remains imperative her man be made to continue to believe himself in pursuit. Nonny wishes she'd found this out earlier, her resistance having been perfunctory, her capitulation instantaneous. Nor has she done anything since to cause him to think doubt exists over its continuance. She believes this must be why instead of making an effort to keep her talking on the telephone as he used to he will now say he's got homework, that his dad needs him to wash the car or feed the bird, that his mother has his dinner on. When he looks at her lately his eyes don't penetrate, but drift away. All in all it's a change she's very tired of, and she is not going to go on holding a creature who hasn't even bothered to untuck his head for her. He's got claws though, this bird—she'll have red marks from them across the base of her thumb tonight. He's starting to weigh more too, but when she tries to convince him back onto his perch he sidesteps up her forearm. In the end she has no choice but to put him on top of the cage. Only he won't get off there either. She transfers him to her other hand. She can feel the tightening of the muscles in the front of her ears and down the sides of her face. “Speak,” she tells him.

He scratches his head. Preens his feathers and opens his eyes. Now his wings are beating. They're clipped, so if he keeps on he could fall. She doesn't want to injure him just because she's mad at his owner. It would serve Kendall right though, making her wait like this when she has things she really needs to say to him.

2

Kendall's asking whether there's anything he can do to help. It's afternoon, it's Saturday, they're in the McGuinnesses' back yard.

“He could set the table,” Nonny's sister Crystal suggests.

“That's your job,” Mother tells her. “Honey, are you all right?”

Nonny's sunk to the walkway. She's got her back

against the garage and is sitting with her legs pulled up. “She’s as white as a *ghost!*” Crystal exclaims.

Mother shoves Crystal toward the house for the napkins, then steps down the lawn and feels Nonny’s forehead. Kendall helps pull her to her feet. He eases his arm around her waist glancing at Father, who is raising the coals in the barbecue and announcing he’s browning off now. She’s led up to the picnic table. When everyone’s finally seated Father passes the platter to Mother and inquires about the parrot, understanding some of these to be quite rare.

“Yes sir, with the habitat disappearing they’re sure getting to be,” the boy answers. “He’s an African Gray. There used to be billions of them. He only cost us nine hundred dollars, but that was when I was young. Plus, he talks now. Anymore, we couldn’t afford one of his quality.”

For a second his mouth flattens into a line. “Something recently happened to him,” he says. “He’s missing now. It’s unfortunate, but luckily we have insurance.”

Nonny’s head whirs. She tries the corn.

“What then, was he stolen?” Father asks. “Did they take anything else?”

She can tell by how he stares at his plate and the way his eyes water that Mother’s kicked him. “He must be like family to you,” Mother says.

“I’m sure you’ll get him back,” Father manages. “People will want to help you.”

Crystal, posture straighter than normal and her stomach pulled in, removes her gaze from Kendall and shoves Nonny the platter. “Save that steak,” she says. “Daddy didn’t get any. Have the chicken. You like drumsticks, don’t you? Here, have this one.”

The meat is grill-striped. Nonny pokes at it with her knife. It’s juicy, the center striated and perfect. “The bird’s name was Oscar,” she rasps.

“Is,” her mother corrects.

“Oscar, that’s interesting, why Oscar?” Crystal asks.

Crystal’s acting like she’s never cleaned a fish or hiked a mountain—behaving like a silly girl. Kendall must look like an older man to her. Funny, because Nonny sees nothing but the boy in him now—though certainly she’s aware also of the carnal voicings, his—

“Cause he talks, ‘cause he’s like an actor?” Crystal goes on.

“Let’s let the young man start his lunch,” Mother says.

Kendall stresses a wing and bites in.

“We named him after my dad’s friend at work,” he says through his food. “He was Mexican. He had a stroke. He went like that.” The bone breaks. “Mm,” he says.

Nonny comes to her feet but reseats herself, unable to lift her leg over the bench. She rises again and floats above them all. There’s an ache behind her sternum; her stomach churns. When Kendall looks up his lips shine and she hears the screeching down the hill, the triumph of a parrot at his liberty. She screams herself, only nothing comes out. Then she’s in bed, Crystal’s melodic, childlike questioning in the background, and Kendall’s low, patient-sounding responses. Mother lays a cool washcloth across her forehead. “That was some swan dive,” she says. “We’re lucky you didn’t crack your coconut on the cement out there.”

Later Nonny faces the dark of the night outside her bedroom window, in her memory Oscar whapping the walls, knocking crooked the oil painting of a much younger Mrs. Roberts and whacking into a side chair. On the glass between the recreation room and the outdoors are the talc-like imprints of his body. She turns to keep him in front of her, says over and over again it’s all right Oscar, it’s okay.

Now he looks like Father’s ornithopter—mechanical, flight unlikely, but careering across the hillside just the same. The balcony railing—she’s back outside—takes repeated thumps from the heels of her hands as all through her runs a numb tingling electricity.

She blots her cheeks with the wrists of her nightgown. Her knees shake, her hips aren’t stable. Mother’s in again to guide her back to bed. The bedside lamp snaps on. The covers are pulled up. Mother keeps blinking, keeps sliding one hand through the other in her lap. Finally she says, “Honey, I have to ask you something. I hope you can tell me the answer, because I think I really need to know. Now you and your . . . Kendall. Are you beyond the . . . have you two gone farther than what you call the, ah . . .

Nonny turns her head away. When she looks back, Mother’s stopped frowning but the white lines on her forehead remain. Her skin looks dry. Her hair is frizzled. For a while her fingers run through the daughter’s hair. She takes a deep breath. Says, “Well first thing tomorrow we’d better get you in to Dr. Movius.”

She’s kissed. The light goes off. The door squeaks. Stops a second and clicks shut.

Kendall’s chest. She’s seen Father’s, of course—broader,

his areolas set out in protrusions something like a woman's, but harder, with hair. Father. Whose garden shears when she informed him only clacked more systematically through the ivy overgrowing the front retaining wall. Who has since become absurdly gentle. They'll walk together—speak of the neighborhood—of Mrs. Erickson's evident fondness for sparseness and subtle colors and textures, as evidenced by the lone malva permitted to bloom near her juniper; sometimes of the past. Did Nonny recall a walk with Mother, back before Crystal was born, when the spreading pine was so full of chattering sparrows she covered her ears and ran away squealing? They'll talk over almost anything.

When was the instant she'd forgotten the strangeness, the awkward hurtful anatomical shock of a first encounter on a blanket on the beach? How soon had it been clear she'd repeat it? Before that night her impression of Kendall had been of a juvenile who mostly irritated but could sometimes be made fun of. Then he'd gone off on a band trip and she'd missed him, she'd . . .

She could tell him she wants someone else—only she doesn't.

Could simply refuse contact. Pass him on. Give him to one of the girls at school—even to Crystal. Crystal's awareness of the dates and phone calls hasn't diminished Nonny's stature with her. But Mother! It's a mistake to get too serious about a first boyfriend, she said. Yet the more Mother discouraged, the more determined Nonny became, and the more determined, the less effect she seemed to have on Kendall. She wants never to have returned his gaze, never to have gone out with him that first time for pizza. Who'd've thought it could lead to this big mess?

Elope. That would untangle things. Be a trick to accomplish alone, though.

3

She comes out into the light-feeling space of the Robertses' rec room. The painting of the young, really not bad looking Mrs. Roberts is straight on the wall again. Gold and blue flames lick up in the fireplace. She can smell the smoke. The two little families gather round. When Mrs. Roberts's eyebrows rise Nonny feels the muscles straining in her cheeks. She's not going to say. After Kendall comes in from putting the car away they'll tell together. But Mother claps her hands and Father's pressing her with his forehead and apparently there's no waiting.

Nine days ago she was ushered to a sofa in the living room here, given coffee, and asked about her health. Mrs. Roberts wore a blue pinwale then. She had on a gold ring with a garnet in it, or a ruby. Her hair was so perfect Nonny'd wanted to touch it. Her legs prickled and her cheeks felt fuzzy. Behind her eyes the bird, blending in with the brush, hacked out across the hillside. A shadow passed overhead then, and her body went stiff. She'd marched up here to confront her boyfriend, and then Oscar . . . well she'd opened the sliding door, it was only a little, for the air, and . . .

"It wasn't on purpose," she stammered. "I'd make up for it, Mrs. Roberts, if . . . if I . . ."

She felt the stinging behind her eyes and thought she might lose control of herself. But then something unprecedented, like a lifting fog, and all at once, without effort, she was in another landscape. Mrs. Roberts wasn't going to speak to her about Oscar, she was going to speak about her son. She hadn't called Mother, Mother'd called her. How they could not connect her with the disappearance of the bird was a question she was unable to answer. She'd left the house that day without seeing Kendall, run out almost unable to breathe, gesturing like a mad girl all the way home. There wasn't a way to undo what she'd allowed to happen. No, be honest—*caused* to happen. Yet what occurred to her now was that Kendall's mother hadn't gotten around to informing her son of her presence. The only possible explanation made her go hot inside all over again, but she couldn't tell if this was from being disrespected or from escaping blame.

How was she supposed to respond to a query about her intentions if Kendall was no longer serious? Last Wednesday when they'd arrived at the same moment for Algebra he'd scowled at her and stepped back and blown air between his lips and held his hand out for her in a way so sarcastic and annoyed she'd nearly had to drop him on the spot.

4

Kendall steps in now, the pupils of his eyes dilated as if he's stayed in the dark awhile on purpose. He kisses his parents and hugs her mother and sister and shakes hands with her father. He pecks his girlfriend—his *fiancée*, as Nonny must now say—on the chin. The two of them have come in from the Bowlero. She hasn't wanted to go there—if they were going to talk this over it should be somewhere quiet, special,

more serious. When she'd said so he'd tilted his head back and looked at her down his nose.

It was like solving for variables, she thought as she was watched from the bar by a man with pockmarked, too tan skin. Everyone not only had their expectations for her, their expectations were fluid. Her parents had switched positions totally, telling her—Crystal sent to the store for milk, Father cleaning his pipe, Mother pretending to sew—that she perhaps had to start imagining a future no one in the family had contemplated.

On the way back up to the Robertses', finished with their talk and with Kendall's billiards, Kendall had wanted to know why she was so mad. She wasn't mad, she told him, she was only watching the lights in the houses. Listening to the motor of his mother's car, recalling the cracks in the chapped skin around his lips as he'd spoken to her. Reflecting on the abrasive touch of his fingertips as the inappropriate sound of the bowling pins kept crashing in her head. Musing over the way he'd presumed.

*

Linen dresses a serving table accoutered with a blue tureen and a glass punch bowl. Mr. Roberts, who looks like a purple-lipped Clark Gable, is tapping with his spoon. His voice is hoarse. He elevates his glass. Crystal, next to him, peers into hers. Mother squeezes the nape of her neck. When Father toasts "To all of us," Nonny has to mentally back up the tape. What she's heard is, "God help us," and it has made her heart fall.

At the fireplace she and Kendall are relieved of their drinks and handed bowls. The contents must put a look on her face, because Mrs. Roberts announces it's gazpacho. "You lovebirds go ahead," she says. "The rest of us, wait now."

Flecks of green and white in the red. When Kendall starts to eat some his mother says, "No dear, feed *her!*"

The smell is like compost. Her knees are quivering, and close above are the feathered muscularity and reddish tail of the plummeting hawk. She strains to locate the smaller bird still fluttering down the hill below. Her throat constricts, her breath cuts off. The collision about three seconds later—actually she doesn't know whether this part is memory or a version her brain has created on its own—is like a sudden puff of smoke.

Her head is a weight her neck is unsuited to carry. Her knees quiver. Her stomach knots. Father looks blank. Crystal hands him her cup and leans like she's about to come over.

The spoon is cold and Nonny isn't ready for the pebbly texture or the strong taste of onion. But she's the center of attention and can lift the utensil to Kendall's lips now and dribble a little down his chin as she somehow knows she's supposed to.

Hurling out over the brush. A flash of light. When she gets her vision back, Mr. Roberts is peering down at his camera and Mother's blinking.

Mrs. Roberts snags her sleeve on the birdcage. She frowns at the torn material, latches shut the door, and puts on an LP of Perry Como. When Father and Crystal touch glasses Nonny's heart hollows out again.

No one can fail to observe the carriage, the maturing femininity of the young woman in the dotted Swiss and low navy heels. Tonight Crystal, coming in to lie with her, will whisper that Father said she looked so happy. Nonny won't understand how he could possibly believe it. She's seen him this last month and more. Seen and heard them all. Yet cheeks in the photos will blush and eyes seem fervently to approve. There will be no evidence to the contrary.

She will not tell anyone the real reason they're here. It's not just her condition. Other things being normal she might choose (as her mother has euphemistically prompted) to take care of that. But doing so wouldn't redress the loss she's caused. No, the life she carries will keep her with this young man standing beside her in his slim brown suit. She's been given an opportunity to prove herself, and she won't betray him again. She's going to watch over him. Keep him safe. Be his wife.