



Birdcatchers

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I've been catching birds for nearly twenty years now. Twenty years of feathers in my face, of wriggling grey creatures frightened out of their simple minds. Some birds come easily, faithful like children, but others will fight like a cornered bear; all claws and flapping arms.

There is nothing quite like the peaceful cooing of a dove in your hands though. Releasing them is euphoric. Before they leave, there's that brief glitch in time when a bird hears the call home before they follow it. Those who taste imprisonment learn their lessons well. I'll never see them again.

Until about thirteen years ago I had loved my job through and through. But then, *he* found his way in. My very own big, blue whale. Well, except that it's a big, green bird. A feral rose-ringed parakeet that is just as much of a menace as Melville's beast. His unnatural warble taunts me through the tunnels. His demonic workings are evidenced by sections of damaged pipes and light fixtures. For years he has survived off the wastefulness of commuters and has hid in the many nooks of this maze. There are times where I don't see his savage form for weeks. I always end up wondering if he met his end in the face of a train he couldn't outrun. But then his chirps echo their way to me and my sick satisfaction is destroyed. An *ordinary* bird would have found their way out by now.

Mark my words well; one day his luck will run out.

A young man crosses my path too often for coincidence. Platform 2, it's always platform 2. In the thrilling youth of his twenties, he complains about the rising train fares and spends time with many 'lucky' girls. The girls are different almost every time and yet they are the same; intense eyes that teem with subtext and an all-round air of importance, no doubt created by the young man himself. He relishes the attention he gets from harvesting such high egos. Perhaps he feels he's won the prize no other man could hold, a prize he created himself. And yet, *he's* the one who cuts them loose. I've seen him cut at least three of them right here on the platform. He leaves their bright eyes dripping as he's carried further away on a train ride meant for two.

It's been a quiet week; zero calls to rescue the lost. I don't waste this time. The deepest part of the subway is mine to explore. He must have a permanent lair in which to gather his strength. My footsteps are masked by the distant rushing of trains and the dripping of unseen leaks. My flashlight finds a syringe on the ground as I shudder at the thought of desperation. Graffiti from the year before still shouts its significance.

What was that?

The flap of wings!

No other birds would venture in this deep; it's him. I ready my net and breathe deep, to steady myself. My teeth now clutch the torch as I move forward. Both hands on the net. Don't lose focus, not now.

He flaps again.

I'm close.

Don't trip. Don't let him know you are here.

My neck's craned forward uncomfortably as my eyes search the darkness. I must be right on top of him.

Flap

'Ow.'

Clunk

Leave the torch; just follow him while you can. I chase him back the way I came and stagger among the rubble. I regret the torch. Lose the torch, lose the beast. By the time I make it back to the main lights he's probably found a whole new hideout.

I'm not much of a smoker but I become two-packs-a-day addicted when it comes to him.

I look like a mad man. Doubled over like I can't breathe and yet I puff out cheap smoke. There are red smears on my face; deep claw marks. Children stare.

Son of a bitch.

I was so damn close.

I checked that tunnel many times after that, but he's too smart to return. I don't see him for as long as it takes for a scratch to become a scar. I've had to settle for small catches. But despite my rage, they were all gentle, every one. They coo my curses away and I can't help but smile again when they leave me.

Off I go down platform 2. Children are complaining about their feet and mothers are complaining about their children. Men stare into the distance, so lost in thought, their train may pass without them on it. And suddenly I'm shocked. It's the young man again and he's with a girl, nothing new there. But she seems different from the rest. She seems wholesome and at ease. She doesn't stand as if the platform owes her a 'thank you' for being there. Her body isn't pressed up against him in a ludicrous display of affection. They are simply holding hands and talking like old friends. He tries to put her on a pedestal, she smiles and changes the subject. She's not buying into his tricks. As their train pulls in, I silently pray he doesn't screw this one up. I don't know him, but I know she's the one he's been looking for.

Even though the evasiveness of the green beast makes my blood boil, there's something worse.

Dead birds.

The ones I couldn't save.

Finding their limp bodies among my hallowed playground is a failure. It's my job to guide them home. I'm Davy Jones. The doves are the worst to find; their purity marred by the grime of the underworld. How can something so free die such an enclosed death? It's sick.

I've dreamt of the day I'd find a green parakeet this way. In all honesty, it's a nightmare actually. Only he would have the gall to die silently.

After everything he's put me through, I *need* to catch him. But, right now, the tunnels have no green. Only grey.

People are staring, but they hardly care.

'You know, you haven't changed. Even when we were young, you made it impossible for anyone to give a damn about you,' she yells, her eyes not leaving his face.

Oh, you fool, what have you done?

'Our past has nothing to do with this,' he retorts, 'this is about now. I just don't think this is working.'

'Not working? Are you kidding? A few hours ago I was in utter bliss with you. Am I completely oblivious? Did I miss something?'

She tries to come close but he withdraws.

'Just don't make this difficult. You're right, we have some great memories. Why can't we just be content with that?'

You fool.

'What are you afraid of?' she asks with narrowed eyes. Unspoken words.

'You want me to beg? Fine. Please, please, please don't do this again,' she pleads, as she reaches for his hands.

'I know you. And I know you feel the same as I do. Don't do this.' He pushes her hands away and shakes the emotion from his face.

'This just isn't working out,' he says, as if he was brushing off a stranger. Tears spring in her eyes, as they have in so many of the others.

'You know, I think I owe you a thank you,' she says backing away.

'You always made it *so* easy to walk away.'

The words hit like ice shards as she turns to climb the stairs.

King of the fools.

Some are worth letting go. Not this one.

They call me into the office. The smell of coffee gets caught in my nose.

There's all the pageantry about how appreciated I am and how they value my contribution.

How their hands are tied. How there's no money. No money to give a damn about a few useless birds.

One more week. Good luck.

The tunnels morphed from a gloomy black into a warm charcoal shade of acceptance. Who would see the graffiti? Who would fix the gnawed light fixtures? Most of all, who would free the birds?

My final week of 'work' was enough to say goodbye to the sprawling paths I knew. I venture down one of my favorites. It was one of the oldest and about to be 'revamped'. Unnecessarily, I thought. It was beautiful. All brick, and roomier than the others. Why can't they leave well enough alone? My torch scans the walls that had seen history and I call them my friends. I use the old tracks as stepping stones, my torch lighting the way. But there is something up ahead.

Green.

I pause and instinctively brace for action. I don't have my net with me but doing this 'mano a mano' seems almost fitting.

He stares deep into the torch light and doesn't move a muscle.

I jolt forward a step to see him react but he merely moves his head to one side. 'What?' I shout.

'Here to rub it in?'

'You won. Well at least you think you did. No one is gonna give a damn about your existence now. Does that sound like winning?'

'You'll die down here and no one will ever know, you lucky bastard.' A sob escapes before I can stop it.

After a second, he chirps.

We look at each other and see how old we've become.

One step at a time I make my way over to him. With a sigh I close my hands over his wings and bring him up to my chest. No fighting. No scratching. For a second I wonder if it's a different bird. It couldn't be, I know this monster. I could pick him out of a line-up if I was blind.

As I make my way out and up the stairs, he breathes steadily in my arms. A madman once again; a weeping man holding a bright green parrot. Children stare. Squinting into the sunlight, I ready my arms for release. 'Thank you little monster,' I whisper.

I open my hands to let him go but he just turns to stare at me. The past warns me that he might do something crazy, like bite my nose or scratch the other side of my face. But he just stares for a moment and then prepares to jump. Up and away he goes, until the green of his wings become the green of the trees. The breeze cools my face and I feel peace in knowing he will die free.

Some are worth letting go.