

Crazy Bird

I raked gravel by the rock wall. A young starling flew down and landed on the wall two feet from me. I said, "Hey, bird, aren't you afraid of me?" I reached out and touched the bird. The starling didn't show fear nor move away from me. I looked at it for a moment, then raked gravel again.

The bird flew up onto the cement mixer. I reached over and pushed my hand against its breast, with my forefinger extended, and the bird climbed onto my finger. The bird stayed on my hand as I moved it around. I raised my hand high and fast and launched the bird, who flew through the trees down the hill.

When I walked up to the house to see about lunch, Laura walked out onto the front deck. The bird flew from behind the house and landed on the rail in front of her. Then it flew from the rail onto her shoulder. She said, "Look at this bird. It isn't afraid of me." It regurgitated a bug onto her shoulder, and she said, "It must be sick."

"I think it brought you a little something. I think it's sharing the bounty with you."

"Oh ug. Eat a bug. Take it back."

It did re-eat the bug. Then it flew to a limb of the big pine just off the end of the deck. Lena went into the house and told our daughters about the bird, and they came out. The bird flew down onto Amanda's shoulder and regurgitated a bug. Amanda said, "Why did

it do that? What's the matter with it?"

I said, "It's offering to share its food with you. It wants to be your mother, even though it's too young to be a mother." When Amanda didn't eat the bug, the bird ate it again.

Juniper said, "Will it come to me?"

"If you push your hand against its breast, it'll step up onto your hand."

Juniper picked it up, and the starling sat on her hand and studied her. Then it regurgitated the bug onto her wrist. Juniper said, "Thank you very much, bird, but I just finished lunch. Would you take the bug back, please?" and the bird did.

Amanda said, "Why is it so friendly? I've never seen a bird like this before."

I said, "I think maybe somebody raised it and then turned it loose. It isn't afraid of people."

Juniper said, "Maybe it isn't afraid of anything. Maybe something's the matter with it. What kind of bird is it?"

"It's a starling. A young starling."

"Gee. I wonder if it can survive. Something is bound to get it, if it isn't afraid."

"Maybe it knows enough to be afraid of animals."

"I hope it's afraid of cats. Elm Oak is such a good hunter, he'll get it as soon as he sees it if it doesn't know enough to stay away from him."

"What about Thorn? He's a hunter too. I wonder if it's afraid of dogs." As if he knew we were talking about him, Thorn came around the side of the house and up the steps onto the front deck. He cocked his head and looked at the bird on Juniper's hand. The bird flew down onto the middle rail, and Thorn reached for

it.

I said, "No," and the dog stopped. He looked up at me and then started to reach for the bird again, and I said, "No. Leave it alone." The dog lay down on the deck. He studied the bird, then closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Juniper said, "Well, that answers one question. The bird isn't afraid of dogs. Whoever raised it must have had dogs, or a dog, and it must have been the bird's friend, too."

Amanda said, "I hope they didn't have cats, because if it isn't any more afraid of cats than it is of people and dogs, Elm Oak will eat it for lunch about two seconds after he sees it. You can't tell a cat no the way you can a dog and expect it to mind you."

"Maybe it's smart enough to avoid cats."

"Maybe."

The next day, I went down and cleaned the Forest Service restrooms. When I walked down the hill, a man and a woman stood in the parking lot, amazed by the bird. The man turned to me and said, "Look at this bird. It's really friendly."

The woman said. "It landed right on my shoulder. Look at that. What kind of bird is it?"

"It's a young starling."

"Did you raise it here?"

"No. It just showed up. It's been here since yesterday. Yesterday was the first time I saw it, anyway."

The man said, "Well, maybe it remembers this place from other years. Maybe it lived here a long time ago and people were real friendly to it, so it remembered that and ..."

"It's a fledgling."

"But maybe--- Oh, you mean it's a young bird."

"This year's hatch. It probably isn't over three or four months old."

"Oh, well, how could it be so friendly?"

"I think somebody raised it and then brought it up here and let it go."

"Fed it someplace else, and---"

The woman said, "Somebody kept it as a pet and then brought it up here and left it."

"Oh. Like ditching a dog or a cat."

She said, "Well, they probably figured it would go wild and live like a natural bird."

He said, "I wonder if it knows how to feed itself?"

I said, "It's been eating. It offered to give bugs to my wife and daughters."

"You mean it caught bugs and brought the bugs to them?"

"It regurgitated bugs on them."

She said, "Oh. Maybe it's a mother bird. Maybe she lost her babies."

"I think it's a fledgling."

"Oh. But that's how they feed their babies, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It landed on my shoulder several times, but it never gave me a bug."

The man said, "I wonder if it can survive up here?"

"It should be easy pickings through the summer. Lots of tourists come up here. It can scavenge left-overs. But it's been eating bugs too."

The man and woman had a dog with them, on a leash. The bird flew from the woman's shoulder to the ground

and passed close to the dog, who snapped at it, but the woman saw her dog's intention and pulled him back. His teeth snapped air several inches short of the bird. I said, "I'm afraid this bird might be missing some basic survival skills."

"Maybe it was raised around dogs, and the dogs were trained to leave it alone."

"What I'm really wondering about is my cat. He's a good hunter. It's hard to convince a cat to leave a bird alone."

The next afternoon, Nyla and Jean brought materials up for the park and restrooms. The bird flew around close while I helped them unload toilet paper and pamphlets about fire safety for campers. It circled once, then landed on Jean's shoulder. She said, "Well, bird." She seemed pleased by it.

I thought most people were going to have about the same reaction to the bird. At first, incredulity, a reaction like "Am I suddenly Saint Francis, forgiven for my humanness by the wild species?" soon followed by the realization that it was actually the bird who was out of the ordinary, then a need to know, how could a supposedly wild bird be this tame?

Given a little time, people concluded this had been a pet bird.

The bird flew toward Nyla's shoulder, as if to land there, as it had on Jean's shoulder. Nyla ducked away and raised her arm in front of her face. "Get away. Go on. Good God. It's like Alfred Hitchcock's movie about the birds."

The bird flew over and landed on the ground between two trees. Then it took to the air and flew back for another try at Nyla's shoulder.

Nyla backed away and ducked. The bird circled close and started to try again. Nyla swung the sack of pamphlets she had taken from the Forest Service pickup, hit the bird in mid-air, and knocked it to the ground.

Pamphlets, with a picture of Smoky Bear on the front of them, with his overalls and with his forest ranger's hat, with birds sitting on his shoulders and hat, scattered out over the gravel parking area.

A dead bird lay on the gravel. Thirty or forty campfire safety pamphlets lay on the gravel around and under the dead bird. Nyla, and Jean and I stood on three sides of the scattered pamphlets and the dead bird. Tall trees, pines, firs, and spruce, grew around us and surrounded the graveled parking area. The clear sky showed mountain blue high above the trees.

Nyla said, "That crazy bird. That bird was crazy. What was I supposed to do? It wouldn't leave me alone. I didn't mean to kill it. I just wanted it to get away from me. What kind of bird is it?"

"A starling. A young starling."

"Starlings shouldn't even be here anyway. They were brought in from England, and they crowd out native birds."

"I know."

"They're unecological. They shouldn't even be here."

"Okay."

A breeze came through the forest and stirred the campfire safety pamphlets. The breeze lifted and moved feathers on the dead bird. Nyla said, "This stuff's going to blow away." She knelt and picked up pamphlets. She didn't touch the bird, but she pulled pamphlets out from under it. "What should we do with the dead

bird?"

I said, "I think if we just leave it, something will eat it before morning."

"Oh. Don't you think we should bury it?"

"You can if you want to."

"I guess you're right. We can just leave it, and something will come along and eat it."

We didn't say anything more about the dead bird. Nyla and Jean gave me the rest of what they'd brought up. They got into the Forest Service pickup and drove back down the road.

I moved the dead bird off the gravel parking area onto the dirt and grass. Then I walked up to the house.

The next day, when I walked from the house down to the parking area, the bird was gone. There were no feathers there, nothing to testify it had ever been.