

THE HAPPINESS BIRD

Marilyn McMeen Miller

“Hefner,” I says. “Your own daughter lies dead still so still (not a breath of the autumn ruffles her lips) and you aimin’ to go on out huntin’ like a fool.”

Hefner turns from lacing his boots and tells me his confusion from beneath knit brows. I know he is ponderin’ what we do not say:

NO ONE KNOWS WHY SHE LIES SO STILL . . .
WATCHIN’ THAT BIRD WITH HER EYES CAST LIKE
IRON RINGS IN THE SIDE OF A TOMBSTONE. NO ONE
KNOWS WHY SHE DON’T SPEAK. IT’S BEEN TOO LONG,
AND NO ONE KNOWS, YET. BUT THE SUN KEEPS COMIN’
UP AND SPREADIN’ OUT ITS GLORY IN THE SOFT
SHADOWS ABOVE HER BED AND ROUND THE BIRD
CAGE AND THEN SETTIN’ AGAIN AT NIGHT, WILLOWY.

“It ain’t no use, Abby.” I can’t understand him because he muffles his words in the wool. “You say she ain’t dead, yet you carry on. . . Leastways, I’m not dead. . . ”

“You’re her father and you run out like a fool. If she should. . . Oh, Hefner.” No one knows my agony. Sometimes the cock crows

in my sleep and wakes me a shakin' to the scratch in his throat. Out past the trees and the hills the sun makes little lines in a clear dead sky.

"Hefner."

No one knows my agony.

"Leastways I can't help it and Carl Tulley and them folks down. . ."

It's already late. Grey is the color of everything. . . "Then go, then go, and I'll stand by her alone. You ain't done much noways." (She lost her arm after the snake bite.)

But maybe there ain't nothin' to do. Leastways, her lying in bed so still always and not lettin' anyone touch her but the bird. And Cheney sick to his heart. (We all learn someway. It weren't Cheney's fault yet if he'd a known how to fix a snake bite. . . and me wantin' to grab his arm and yank it off 'n him to give to her, to her, my baby, when the doctor says it must come off if she were to live and come off it did come off.) Oh, the agony is what no one, not even the angels knows. Not even angels in heaven knows for they can see what I cannot see and a human in agony was born to have it without knowing. . .

"And we ain't yet had breakfast, Hefner."

"Then wake up Cheney if you wants someone to breakfas' with. It ain't no use this time, Abby.

"You ain't done much of nothing anyways."

"Ain't I? Ain't I the one built that contraption you hangs on her shoulder with a glove on it. Ain't I done nothing? Oh, you."

I can't understand him much. He muffles his words in the wool. It seems he ain't got the nerve not to remember that one thing he done. I hate him for it, knowin' myself it killed her heart to see that limp stuffed glove.

Grey is the color of everything.

"Then go; then go. I'll stand by her alone."

"It ain't no use, Abby."

Cheney looks sour at the table as if he knowed something was coming up bad today like a thunderstorm or a dead calf, or like when he brought that bird to her and she sits up in bed and opens her eyes — slits — till he puts it in her one hand, the bird with the splint on its leg.

"Here you, Carie. God knows I didn't mean nothin' not 't all. It's for you, Carie."

DURNED, WISH SHE'D SPEAK. DEAR GOD. . .

“God knows I didn’t mean it, Ma.”

Oh, the agony I knows. His eyes once clear like clear springs. Now I never see what’s there . . . something knowing what I knows not. . .

“I knows, son. Cheney, I knows.” His shoulders are thin and trembling. He ain’t but a boy yet. He ain’t got best knowledge how to treat snake bite and them two off with the sheep. We all learns somehow . . . day. . .

“We’re lucky she’s alive, son.”

“Dad’s gone. Where’s he goin’?” Cheney looks sour like he knows about something. “Ain’t nothin’ but quail now. That bird’s beatin’ its wings on the cage now.”

“How you know, Cheney?”

“I heard it.”

“Won’t no good come of it. The bird keeps her alive. If the bird go, she go.”

“That bird’s well now.”

“No good come of it.”

“It’s a wild thing. Someday it go, Ma. It’s beatin’ its wings against the cage.”

No good come of it. Oh the agony I knows. It is not possible for no one to know the agony I knows.

“Give me them eggs, Ma. I’ll take ‘em.”

“You ain’t goin’ in that room yet, hear ya. I’ll take her breakfas’.”

“I got to take ‘em Ma. I heared the bird screamin’ in the night beatin’ its wings against the cage wantin’ free. Let me go, Ma.”

“No. No. No good come of it all, Cheney.” I holds his hands, but he wrenches ‘em. I could rip that hand from him. **YOU TAKES HER HAND AND YOU AIN’T GONNA TAKE HER BIRD.** I could say them things but my throat’s tight.

“Let me go, Cheney. Please, boy.”

“Then go, Ma. It still ain’t going to stop that bird from beating its wings against the cage, Ma.”

I’m always afraid of that door now, so blank. But I opens it slow. She never blinks an eye.

“I got eggs, girl. You want toast or cereal. Cheney’s eat them fried potatoes.”

But she’s quiet and everything is quiet and I notice the bird ain’t nowhere.

“Your bird. Where’s your bird, Carrie. Did the bird get out ‘n its cage?”

“I let the bird go, Mother.” I ain’t heard her voice, and it’s small and catches me. Her eyes catch me.

“I let the bird go, Ma.”

My own breath catches me.

“You done what, Carie?”

“I let the bird go, Ma.”

“You’re talkin’! Carie! Oh Dear God, she’s talkin’! Dear Carie. Give me your hand oh, Carie, you’re all right. . . you’re talkin’ you wanta talk to me, Carie?”

Hefner has got to know. He is out hunting like a fool. While his girl talks he is probably asking Carl Tulley for a stack ammunition:

SHE DON’T KNOW DIFFERENCE OF LIFE AND DEATH BUT I KNOW CARIE IS NOT LIVIN’. GIVE ME ANOTHER STACK AMMUNITION, CARL TULLEY. MINE’S WET BEEN OUT A USE SO LONG. GOT A GUN RUSTY AS A HOOF NAIL. TRY IT OUT ON THAT SPARROW . . . I THINK I’M RUSTY AS THE GUN . . . NO, GOT IT . . . GOT THAT SPARROW!

HEFNER. IT AIN’T NO SPARROW. THOUGHT THRUSHES WERE SOUTH ALREADY. LATE ONE. GOOD SHOT. YOU AIN’T AT ALL RUSTY . . . YOU’RE STILL ALIVE, HEFNER! ONCE HAD A BROKE LEG, THIS BIRD. GOOD SHOT, HEFNER. LET’S GET THEM LEFT-OVER PHEASANT. IF THERE IS A ONE. . .

AIN’T NOTHIN’ BUT QUAIL NOW.

“How’d you do, Pa?”

“Pa, there is somethin’ you has got to know . . . it’s about Carie. She . . . this morning . . . she spoke to me. Her eyes all dim lit up one speck. . .”

“Can I see your catch, Pa?”

“Out ‘n the porch, son . . . quail. . .”

“Carie talked to me! Don’t you care nothin’ about it, Pa. She spoke to me and give me her good hand volunteer. I seen it, Pa.”

Cheney comes in sour like he knows somethin’ no one knows but don’t say no word but “Good catch, Pa.”

“Carie lets her bird go, Pa, and then she says ‘I got to be free,

too, Ma. Like my bird I got to be let go and sing and forget.' And with tears in her eyes. I wept, too, Pa."

Hefner takes things light. "Get my pack, Cheney and we'll celebrate life again . . . we'll be a livin' again. Will she come out 'n the bedroom? That's it. Where's that sparrow. I had a sparrow. Did you, Cheney, see that sparrow?"

"I seen that bird, Pa . . . did you want . . . the dog . . . was pantin' . . . hungry . . . didn't think you'd want. . ."

"Yeah . . . okay . . . weren't no bigger with feathers than a size of a fist nohow . . . like I says, we got quail, Ma. See, Ma. **THE LORD GIVE 'N TAKE AND WE GOT QUAIL. THAT GIVE US A GOOD SUPPER 'N MAKE HER SMILE.**"

That minute she stood in the door, I thought the house would tremble.

"Carie." Hefner started like he seen a ghost.

Cheney shakes and then wants to run to her and hold her and say it's all okay, it's all all done okay . . . you're fine and well and it's all all done okay. . . But she wants to talk, and we pinch our eyes away from her limp sleeve and we lets her. She wants to talk and we lets her.

"Pa. Where's that contraption you made up with the glove on it?"