

The birds swirled above her head, flickering, free, swift. Marietta gazed longingly at their dark silhouettes dancing against the blue sky. She envied them, their beauty, their swiftness, their freedom. Leaning against the gnarled tree, Marietta looked around herself at the small, clean-swept courtyard, her cage. She glanced at the low, white-washed and red-roofed inn her parents owned; at the high, cold stonewalls that enclosed the house and courtyard; at the wrought iron gate that kept unwanted people out, or certain people in. “This is your home where you belong,” her mother would say, “and this will be your home until you move to the house of your husband. Then that will be your home.” But it was not home to Marietta. To her mother and father and sister Rosetta, yes, but not to her.

She glanced up at the brilliant sun. It was halfway over the tree, filtering through the twisting, leafy branches, casting shadows on the hard-packed earth. A breath of summer breeze ruffled her hair, and at the end of it, she caught the strain of familiar singing. It grew stronger and she could soon hear without a doubt the lilting, flexible voice of the birdman, singing the song he always sung. She never listened to the words; it was the joyful melody that spoke to her, tearing at her heartstrings. It was a song that mocked--mocked all who were not as free as the birds. Aye, the birdman could be happy and free. He owned himself and the open road was his home. To be a bird woman, that was Marietta’s wish and only desire. But she would never be like this birdman who captured the birds and sold them into bondage. She would be there protector. Already they trusted her, lighting upon her hand, pulling her black, shining hair, singing to her. They came to her when they were injured; she often had a bandaged bird hidden beneath her bed. But her father, he said it was impossible for her to be a bird woman. Only women forced by poverty became bird women, not she, the daughter of a prosperous inn keeper.

The voice was very near now. She stood up, brushed the dust and leaves from her long skirts, and ran over to the iron gates. She swung them open and stepped out. Coming down the road over the lush hills walked the birdman. He was short, wiry-slender and strode with a cocky bounce to his tune. He had sparkling, mirthful eyes and smooth olive skin. She could never tell how old he was, forty perhaps, but maybe older, maybe as old as the hills. In each hand he carried two light, wicker cages filled with birds of every shape and color. On top of his black hair, he balanced a small bundle of cloth containing his few worldly possessions. He smiled his charming smile as he saw her waiting for him.

“Ah, as faithful as ever, my little one,” he said, stopping his song. “What shall it be this time? A lark? A swallow? A little yellow canary?”

She smiled as he set the cages of twittering birds to the ground. He came to Marietta’s town in the hills twice a year, and between his visits, she saved all her money to buy a bird. He sold, as well, dainty golden cages and collars sewn with tinkling bells, but she never bought any of those. She always let her bird free. Her mother was angered and baffled by this. “Why?” she would bluster, “Why do you buy something to get rid of it? Why do you not buy ribbons and candy like the other girls? Why do you waste your money on more birds to chatter around the house?” Even the birdman would give her a skeptical grin, but he never argued with a steady customer. Freeing the bird made Marietta happy though. To hold the frightened ball of feathers, to stroke it and caress it, and then to throw it into the air. To see it stretch wide its wings and fly away, free into the open skies. Sometimes the bird would stay and live in the tree with the others. One little finch even flew back every night to sleep on her windowsill before the winter’s chill drove it away.

Marietta stared intently down at all the birds: plump doves, golden sweet-voiced canaries, brown sparrows, bright finches, sleek martins. They whirled around the cages, landing here, lighting there, then flying up again. One bird caught her eye. It was the smallest of all and had shiny black feathers and streaks of green running down the wings. It flitted anxiously back and forth in the cage.

“That one, the one of coal and emeralds,” she said pointing.

“Ah, it is a good choice. All the way from the sea. It is the cost of a canary,” he smiled.

Marietta took the coins out of a little purse and placed them into his weathered palm. It was a fair price. She had no doubt that he swindled other people, but never her. She knew he had a soft spot for the funny little girl who freed the birds. He opened the cage door and gently plucked the tiny bird from the swirling mass of feathers. She took the bird as carefully as spun glass. She thanked the birdman then flew back to the courtyard, the warm, downy creature cupped in her hands. The birdman picked up his cages, shook his head, and started back on the road, his voice once again dancing with the wind.

Marietta stood beneath the tree, looking down at the bird still and stiff in her hands. She whispered to it in a language halfway between a mother’s caress and the twitter of the birds. The

black feathers stirred and relaxed. She carefully uncapped her hands and held them out towards the sky, but the little bird only shivered there, frightened and bewildered.

“Fly, my little jewel, you are free. Take to the skies where you belong,” Marietta murmured. The bird cocked its head perplexedly. Then, understanding dawned and it soared away to the top of the tree, its feathers iridescent in the sun. Marietta’s eyes followed rapturously after him. He sat on a branch bobbing his head and warbling his freedom to the world. To Marietta, it was like a piercingly happy dream.

A sharp cry shattered the spell. “Marietta, what are you standing there for?” a harsh voice scolded. “Where is that birdman? I know I heard him. Ah, I see you have wasted more money on some silly bird. Aye, if I ever catch you squandering your money on such things again-- Come, help your sister finish the dishes. She works while you day dream.” Her mother turned into the house muttering about useless daughters. Marietta reluctantly followed.

The winter came, gray and damp. Marietta was no longer allowed to watch the birds outside; she had once caught cold sitting out on the icy ground. She had to be content watching them through the frosted windows. Sometimes her father would see her sitting and staring into space and asked her what she was thinking. She would answer in a distant voice, “I dream about birds and when I will be a bird woman.” Her father’s fleshy face would flush a deep red and he would say furiously, “You will not be a bird woman; you will marry a respectable man and be a responsible wife.” Often she grew careless when in her dreams and would burn the bread or neglect the customers. She rarely helped serve though; too often she had spilled steaming bowls of stew down a guest’s shirt. So she worked in the kitchen while her sister did the serving. Rosetta was the responsible daughter, the beautiful daughter, the ordinary daughter. Her mother always said Rosetta should have been the older child.

When spring returned, Marietta spent all her spare time sitting beneath the tree and embroidering as she watched the birds. She earned money for the birdman by embroidering. She could sew almost anything, but she usually embroidered birds; her birds seemed to flicker on the cloth. She sold her work to a merchant in the next town. Part of the money went towards cloth and thread, most of the rest went to her parents, but a tiny portion was hers, and it always went into the pouch for the birdman.

The seasons changed and past. Marietta grew up, but did not change. She watched the birds and perfected her secret language. She could now call almost every bird to her hand; some

would even sing for her. And twice a year the birdman came, and twice a year Marietta stood at the gate with her heart in her eyes, and twice a year a fretful bird was cupped in tender hands before suddenly finding itself free.

One year in April, Marietta turned seventeen. From her family, she received an ornately carved wooden hairpin to put her hair up. She knew her parents were searching for a suitable husband. Marietta remained silent, knowing it was useless to protest, and knowing that even for her family she could never marry the person her parents would choose for her.

One day her mother excitedly announced that a man had been found, a respected business man in a neighboring village. Marietta met the news without a word. Her family took no notice. That year all Marietta's embroidery money went toward a wedding dress and a dowry. That year she kept none for herself. And that year when the birdman came, she hung her head as she stood at the gate and heard his mocking song float up the road. Before the song had scorned the whole world, but now it mocked her.

The birdman appeared on the road with his bundle and his twittering cages. He saw her sad face and asked, "Ah, what greeting is this for your birdman? Why does my bird girl's face hang sad and depressed?"

She explained that she had no money for she was soon to be married.

He simply laughed and said, "But of course you shall have a bird. What friend would I be if I didn't give my favorite girl a wedding gift? Pick any one."

She was silent, but her grateful smile was enough. This time she chose a large finch with a rusty breast. She bid the birdman farewell.

"Why so grave faced? I will come to your husband's house and sell you birds," he said.

Marietta smiled and shook her sadly, then said one last goodbye before disappearing into the courtyard.

All too soon, it was the day before the wedding. The house bustled with excited relatives, helping with the cooking and preparations. Only Marietta looked calm, neither happy nor nervous nor sad.

The pastries and the wedding dress and the dowry gifts were all carefully laid out in the front room for the morrow's journey to the house of the groom. After everything was prepared, her relatives feasted and talked late into the night. Slowly, one by one, they drifted off to their bedrooms until the inn was silent. Marietta lay in her bed, listening to the wind in the tree for the

last time, before rising and quickly dressing in the darkness. She picked up a bulky bag already packed and stole on silent feet into her parents' room and, on a chair in the corner, left a piece of cloth. It was delicately embroidered with a picture of herself surrounded by birds.

She ran softly down the stairs and looked for a moment at the presents and dress prepared for the wedding that would never happen, then she slipped out into balmy night. The courtyard was bathed in a pearly bath of moonlight and alive with the whispering of the breeze and the hum of insects. She walked over to the dark tree and swiftly climbed up it onto the longest branch. From there, she leapt onto the top of courtyard wall. Since the gate was locked and the key around her mother's neck, this was the only way out. She sat a moment on top of the wall looking at all she was leaving behind: the cold stonewalls, the low white-washed inn, the old tree, the round, huddled forms of sleeping birds. In her language, she bid goodbye to her birds and then leapt off the wall into the darkness. She landed lightly on the grass outside. A feeling of lightness and freedom overcame her, the feeling the birds had when she released them into the sky. Then she slipped away into the night, free at last, released from her cage.

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If you walk for many hours in a certain forest high in the hills, you may stumble upon a small thatched cottage, poor yet snug. At the side grows a lush and tangled vegetable garden and a plot of bright flowers. In front of the cottage, in a wooden chair, sits an old, white-haired woman. Her dark eyes glitter in her weathered face and around her fly birds of every shape and color. They peck at the earth, sing their sweet songs, and flutter in the treetops. They are not afraid of the little woman. If you would go close enough, you could see she is embroidering the most exquisite images of birds, birds that fly off the cloth at you. A magpie jumps up and boldly pecks at her needle. She smiles and brushes him away. At her side is a small nest with a thrush whose wing is wrapped in a splint. The woman looks worn by work and age, and she seems to be all alone in the woods, yet her quiet face is contented. You leave the strange scene and continue your walk until you come upon a small village. Here, you ask the villagers about the old woman.

They look surprised at your ignorance and reply, "Why, that is Marietta, the bird woman."