

APPROACH

Brent Taylor

Ava takes the injured dove out of a shoebox, holds it in one hand. With the other hand, she takes gauze pads from a first aid kit. A bag of popsicle sticks lies open on the kitchen counter. She pulls one out, positions it between two of the pads. The bird trembles in her hand, but the hand is firm, supportive from performing the actions countless times before.

“Approach is everything,” she tells you, probably for the thousandth time. “It’s important to be calm, deliberate. Stress can put her into shock.”

You come over to her apartment after you get off work at the restaurant, around 11 PM. You’re supposed to be meeting some friends at the Broad Street Tavern, but she’s sitting at her kitchen table wearing a tank top and jogging shorts.

She says: “If you're trying to pick one up in the wild, it's best to have a shoebox or something to guide her into. But that's not always realistic—so you can use a towel or something like that.”

Once she found a hurt bird while she was out jogging, and she used her shirt. She walked all the way home in her jogging bra and the next day got a nasty note from a neighbor whose preteen son had seen her. *Small town, small minds*, she had said. It was another thing she was fond of repeating—and always in reference to the town you grew up in, the town she would have left right after college if she hadn't met you. She puts the popsicle stick and gauze on the underside of the bird's wing, then tapes it. A couple more gauze pads, then she wraps the tape around the bird's body, taping the wing to the bird.

“It's important to leave as much mobility as possible,” she explains.

A while back, she had a wren with a wrapped wing fall over into its water dish and drown. She's done this so long now that everyone in town knows it, and barely a month goes by without someone bringing her a wounded bird of some kind.

When you were first together, it made your head buzz to listen to her every time she would work with a bird. After six months of dating, you would kid her about it, always saying the same things. Then, after a year, it became

one of those little things you ignore about someone you love. After two and a half years, you started to wonder if she thought you were stupid, even though you knew she always talked to herself when doing things around the house: cleaning up, homework, sometimes even making love. Now, going on three years, it hurts like someone poking at a scrape or cut that's trying to heal.

“You still want to go to the Tavern?” you ask, reminding her of the plan.

“A hurt bird should be kept in a warm, dark place,” she answers. “To keep her calm—and if you give her water too soon, she'll get pneumonia.”

She puts the bird back into the box and puts down the lid.

“If not,” you say. “I might go to the store.”

“It's all a vet would do,” she replies. “Try to make it immobile.”

You met her at the veterinarian where she worked all through her undergrad, the place your mom took her dog. Your mother's cocker spaniel had lymphoma and needed to be put down. You brought him in so your mom didn't have to, thinking you'd be fine: it wasn't your dog. But your voice broke up when you tried to talk, your eyes flooded as you waited for the vet to prepare the syringe. Ava took your hand in hers.

Lately, it's like you're not even there. Ever since that night she went to a movie with friends. When you finally made her tell you what was wrong, she

told you she had seen you through the window at the bar with your ex, leaving you to wonder what exactly she saw. Last night, you slept in Ava's bed, but it felt as if there were a line drawn down the center of it. A couple of times, you inched your hand across that line in the dark, but if you made contact, you'd pull back quickly like it was an accident.

"But more often than not, a broken wing won't heal," she says. "There's not much you can do for something so fragile... But no one wants to hear that, she says. So you try."

"You want anything if I go to the store?" You try to sound hopeful rather than skeptical, open rather than braced, wanting her to tell you to get that brand of cider she likes, or even that she will just drink some of what you're having.

She stands up, one hand underneath the shoebox, the other holding the top down. You come up behind her slowly, careful to leave space. Slow, deliberate, you reach your hand out and touch her bare arm, just slightly. She turns, looks up at you. Her eyes find yours for the first time in you don't know how long.

Then, she turns away.

The only humane thing to do at that point, she says, is to put her down.

And Ava's eyes are little cups, filled to the brim.

“Ava?” you say—but she's not going to cry.

“Would you want to walk around the rest of your life?” she asks, angry now. “If you used to be able to fly?”

“Ava...”

“Would you?”

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