

## Bird Cage

Margie Tubbs

Pete's cage in the dining room is set atop a hand-made china cabinet purchased used in the 1920s. I can't see him unless someone lowers the cage or I retrieve Mother's stepstool from the kitchen.

"Put him down here," I beg, jumping in the air for a glimpse of yellow-green feathers. Jacky, my older brother, lowers Pete to the table as I watch his bright swatch of chest feathers grow from the size of a nickel to a fifty-cent piece. When he is eye-level, Jacky reaches inside the cage and places a small plastic car on a narrow wooden slat. Pete tucks his head and gently nudges the car with his curved beak until it rolls off the end. "Come on back. Pete won't hurt you!" he repeats in his nasal voice until his car is repositioned for another roll down the ramp.

I laugh as if I have never seen the trick before. "Come on back. Pete won't hurt you!" I mimic. "Mama, why don't you teach Pete something new?" She sits on the couch studying a book of crochet patterns.

"I'm working on it. It will be a surprise," she says, slightly curving her lips into the knowing smile that usually substitutes for an answer.

"Gotta put him back now," Jacky says, lifting the cage to its spot about six feet off the floor. "You can see him again later." *As I had felt Pete's loneliness recede during the brief moments when that little car was under his control, I can feel it slowly returning now.*

"You're crying again," Jacky says.

"Just seems unfair to keep Pete locked up there all by himself." He wipes my face with the tail of the blue plaid shirt that Mother made him.

“When’s the last time you got out?”

“Out of where?”

“Here. When’s the last time you went anywhere?”

“Tent church every Sunday.”

“Is that all? Have you ever been to a drive-in movie?”

I give him a blank stare. “I don’t even know what one of those is.”

“Get your shoes on. We’re going.”

“Not with her.” Daddy has just left his shop and is standing inside the kitchen door.

He brushes his sweaty khaki shirt, and sawdust falls onto the floor. “She’s not leaving this house. You can go out whoring with your pretty boys, but she’s not going.” Daddy had cut off half his pointing finger in a saw, but he shakes what is left toward me.

On the couch, Mother vigorously crochets pineapples for a few seconds and then stops, looking over her glasses, her needles forming a V. She challenges Daddy with her stare.

“Just keep on wiggling that thread,” he shouts. “Or better still, slither over there and coil up in the corner.”

*It was just last week that he threatened to kill himself and took the 22 pistol into the woods.*

*“Why aren’t you stopping him?” I screamed to Mother.*

*“He won’t do anything.”*

*A few minutes later we heard the shot.*

*“Aren’t you going to see about him?” I asked her. She didn’t answer. “What are we going to do?”*

*“Nothing.”*

*It seemed like a year before he shuffled up the driveway kicking dust. "Ain't nobody here cares if I live or die," he said. "Nobody even came to see about me* Jacky stares at Mother until she looks his way and shakes his head slightly. His penny loafers stomp across the back porch and down the wooden steps. The car door slams and his old jalopy cranks up.

"What about me?" I run out the screen door, jump on his running board and hold on to the side of his car.

"Don't worry, he won't bother you. He only hates us boys." The light from the living room window plays hopscotch on his black, Brylcreamed hair, and his clear blue eyes are sad, but dry.

"Daddy scares the poop out of me. I never know what he's going to do."

He chuckles at my language. "I'll be back soon. I'm going out for tonight. If things get out of hand, run get Bobby. He won't let the old man hurt Mother." Our older brother lives with his family across the field on land Daddy had given him to keep him from leaving. "But try not to let Daddy scare you. Fear makes him worse."

He backs out of the driveway, and the anxiety associated with the smell of gasoline fumes set my bowels on edge. Mama always says that Jacky and I are alike, but we aren't. He is a wanderer who has been to exotic places like Miami and has even eaten pizza pie. Whatever that is. He left home for the first time when he was fourteen and I was one. But occasionally he blows in and stays a few weeks until all the molecules of air in the house begin to churn and pop because of the static. I guess Daddy resents Jacky because he is beautiful and vulnerable, but Jacky says that Mother is the one who pays. I don't know for what.

I squat to pet our big cur dog. Daddy comes to the porch to see what is going on. He has a crazed look in his eyes as he stares at the taillights of Jacky's car in the distance. "Promise me you'll never leave me," he says. "Promise."

"I promise," I say, putting my arm around his waist as far as it will go. "I'll never leave."

Right now I am violated. I feel like life is betraying me. Daddy has threatened to kill his crazy old self, but instead he's killing me. I know it, just like I know that Jacky isn't coming back.

I run back into the house with the cur dog right behind me. I get the step stool out of the kitchen and take Pete's cage down, opening the cage door and taking him out on my finger.

"Fly, Pete!" I say. "Fly!" I hold him as high as I can and wave my hand to shoo him off. He flaps his wings and barely clears my finger when he begins fluttering downward. "Pete's a pretty boy!" he screeches.

The cur dog sees him falling and stands with his mouth open. I try, but I can't stop what happens next. The bird's head hangs out of the dog's mouth.

Pete looks at me in desperation. "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" he calls to Mother.

"He did it!" she says with delight. She looks up from her crocheting just in time to see Pete swallowed whole.

I have never forgotten the piercing scream that Mother let out that night. I know now that it was that of a mother losing a child.

"I clipped his wings just yesterday! He wasn't able to fly!"

I sink to the floor, heavy with everybody's pain. The daughter they know has died tonight and born in her place is a little girl who remembers the cage and the clipped wings. Who hates the cage and will open its door a little at a time until she can fit through and slip away for pizza pie, whatever that might be.