

Susan Tepper

Girl With Birds

On a cold morning without snow, waking up slowly, I first saw the sun in the shape of an arrow bounce across my blue bedroom wall. I blinked, and there was Daddy standing in the doorway. Smiling at me. Or, maybe, it was just that he always smiled, that I knew he was there.

“What would the birthday girl like for her special breakfast?” he wanted to know. “Waffles with berries, or banana pancakes?”

Under my pink puff quilt I laid there thinking: waffles or pancakes, waffles or pancakes?

“You’re twelve, now,” said Daddy. “You should be able to figure out what you want.”

Waffles. And I started to say it, and felt them in there, the first time ever, fluttering in my mouth, tickling my throat — the little birds. Oh how they longed to escape!

Staying perfectly still I closed my eyes, squeezed my lips together. Even with the thick yellow rug I could hear Daddy come marching in. What did I want to eat? Over and over and over. I smelled coffee close to the bed. I wanted to scream: waffles waffles waffles — okay, okay? And the words were coming all right, flowing like water, collecting like puddles on the upside-down mugs when the dishwasher doesn’t dry properly. Water that’s no good for anything.

Her breath blows hot against my ear as we follow a white waddling nurse down a long green hall. Quack-quack, I’m thinking, when Mother sneezes — a whole series of soft *choo choo choos* that come out fake-sounding. Then she curses under her breath about it being April, how April kicks up her allergies. Throwing me a filthy look, she digs around in her beige designer purse and pulls out a tissue. “I swear to God.” She’s finished with the

whispering. She's flapping the tissue. "I can't take all this overload, can't take it," she says.

I'm starting to feel a little worried. Mother's popped out greenish eyes are bugged twice their normal size. What if she decides to stop right here and chew a hole in my face? Calm down, calm down, I'm telling her from inside my head, watching her wipe her nose with that tissue.

Mother is president of the Garden Club, their Daffodil Dance is right around the corner. Sometimes Daddy calls her *Madame el Presidente*, bowing low. I used to think *right around the corner* meant anything could be around any corner: our house, school, my best friend Sandra's house, the bakery, the Carvel Ice Cream store. Even GAP. It was nerve wracking. To piss off Mother, Daddy calls the Daffodil Dance *that freakin' frolic*. But lately Mother's been too freaked, herself, to care; as she drags me from doctor to doctor.

Today we're seeing a new one. Ahead of us the nurse keeps waddling. We keep following. At the end of the hall we turn down another hall. I pretend not to notice when Mother scrapes the wall with her long nails, saying *pea green* in a witch voice; then switching her beige designer purse to her other shoulder.

As usual she's got on all beige. Even her chunky beads are beige. The only other colors she allows herself are taupe, sometimes; and cream. Never white. I've got on my lucky red sweater. Lucky because red is my lucky color.

Also, a new pair of jeans. I shake my silver ID bracelet that I bought at a tag sale, and slide my pinky around the big carved initials: F.X.R. *Fixer* my best friend Sandra calls me whenever I wear it; which is almost always.

The nurse comes to a full-stop. I have to take a little backward hop to keep from running her down. Mother whirls on me. "Remember to talk slowly!"

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I nod, laughing to myself. As if talking slow will unlock *the chains*. Chains, she believes, have slipped around my throat.

The nurse pulls open a door. A sign on it says *Exam Room B*. B for what? I'm starting to feel nervous.

Gallons of spit fill up my mouth. I need to swallow, but if I do it all in one gulp I'll drown them. So I try doing it in small drips the way Mother waters her roses. Does the nurse *know*? Is that why she picked *Room B*? She's staring at me, waiting, holding the door open. I stare back. Her face is round like a little Buddha. A black mustache brushes her top lip like a silky feather. I'm dying to touch that mustache, even for a second. Her eyes, also black, don't blink. Not once.

I look at the door to Exam Room B and decide to stand tough. I make a puss. I stick my arm out in front of me shaking my ID bracelet hard. These links are solid steel. So don't even think about trying to push me around, my face is telling her.

Then I jerk my thumb over my shoulder a couple of times, toward Exam Room A. The nurse squints shaking her head *no*. I bang on the door to Exam Room C — across from B.

Mother slaps my hand. "Knock it off!"

"They're both occupied," says the nurse, her black mustache twitching.

I can't stop looking at it.

Hissing now, hurting my arm, Mother shoves me inside Exam Room B. "I'll kill you yet!" she says, then quickly changes to a pretty smile 'cause the doctor has arrived — Old Grizzly — with his plaid bow-tie and eyebrows like Shredded Wheat.

At least this time I get to sit up — in a green leather chair with a head-rest. Somewhere in back of me, mother has to stand. The nurse cranks the chair and *whoooosh* — my feet leave the floor (something I'm not happy about). Old Grizzly comes and stands in front of me. Our knees

touch.

I screw up my face, refuse to allow the wooden stick. “Don’t try and force her,” Mother says.

By now she knows better. Too many sticks bit in half, spit across the room. And what a junky room! Papers and crap everywhere. File cabinets on top of file cabinets, piled practically to the ceiling, surrounding us like brown mountains.

“Can this be safe?” Mother is asking.

He holds my chin steady. Peeping at me with his blue *Doctor Peeper* eyes. Without turning my head I swish my own eyes around trying to locate every single paper coffee cup with a heart that says *LUV*; there must be around a hundred. “Look this way,” he says holding up a finger.

So I look over his shoulder at the air conditioner. He pinches my chin — like that could force me! I look down concentrating on his stupid bow-tie: blue and yellow and black and white and green and red plaid. Except for circus clowns I’ve never seen anything like it. Will a daisy pop out and squirt water?

I notice a button almost hidden underneath. Then a whole line of buttons holding his white shirt together over his chubby belly. I start counting them to myself: one, two, three — wait! Three’s is sewed on with tan thread! Disgusting. I examine the rest: four’s thread is white, that’s okay; fives’ is white; okay, too. More buttons could possibly be hidden under his pants but I don’t want to think about *them*.

Silently I repeat: one, two, three, four, five. Is my throat made of glass? Can he see inside? One, two, three, four, five.

He puts both his hands on my neck. Warm and rubbery, they’re poking and pressing where they shouldn’t.

“Think of your vocal chords as a trapeze,” he says. And suddenly they begin moving — the whole flock of red-birds and starlings and jays and

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speckled brown sparrows; an oriole or two. Yard birds. Birds I've known my whole life, rush to one side of my throat — skittering

skittering — their little legs all nervous, bird-like; pushing, crowding, chattering, squeezing. Each one desperate to climb onto that trapeze and *swiiiiing!*

The doctor says to stop fidgeting, to tilt my head back. I twist around in the chair — where the hell is Mother? Afraid the birds might slip if I tilt my head too far back I ignore him. Calling me *Missy* in a loud voice he orders me to. And I'm thinking: no way. Imagining it like a rock slide in my throat, or an avalanche. Then Mother says *do it!* Or she'll wring my neck. Scared that she might, I squeeze the arms of the chair and move my head back slowly, till my ponytail bumps the headrest. Thank god. Thank god. Nothing terrible happened. I stare up, taking a few breaths in and out through my nose. Exam Room B stinks of ammonia bathroom cleaner. I notice some of the white ceiling squares sagging under a brown water stain.

In science we learned that rodents must have water to live. My best friend Sandra had rodents scratching between the walls of her house. At night they had to be sure and close the lids on the toilets. Did I see that brown bulge move? Squinting up at the ceiling, I can't be sure. That ammonia smell is practically making me gag. I'm wondering

if the birds can smell it too, when out of the corner of my eye I see him holding up a long silver needle. Colored sparks shooting off its powerful point.

"Cortisone," he says, "will restore the elasticity to her vocal chords."

Before I can do anything he slips it under my skin, into one side of my neck.

No! No! No! No! Murderer! Murderer!

Out of the chair I tumble. Out of the green leather chair with the cold metal arms with the needle still stuck in my neck.

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Vocal strain has become the official diagnosis.

What do you expect, Daddy said, dragging her to voice teachers all these years.

Don't accuse me of wrong-doing, Mother shot back.

Kid, why don't you give your mother a break and knock-off with the baby talk (this from one of my voice teachers right before the birds came).

What goddamn nerve, Mother said, when she heard. Singing will change your life, she promised me; again and again.

To *what?* I used to wonder.

From age seven I had lots of different teachers to change my life: tap-dance teachers, karate teachers, piano teachers, ballet teachers, gymnastics teachers, acting teachers, baton twirling teachers. Once, an herbal nutritionist. Then I developed my *vocal strain* and it all seemed kind of stupid so it stopped.

Panic panic panic. Mother's blonde hair is coming in frizzy gray! Every few weeks she has to run to Antoine's to get it frosted. *Overkill* Daddy said, when clumps of it fell out clogging the shower drain and he had to call a plumber. In private he laughed, saying: Your mother's head is raining hair.

Since the needle scare she's been keeping a closer watch. Which is, and isn't good. For one thing, Daddy, who doesn't scare easily, has backed off. No more buying me stuff — stuff to try on while Mother is busy at the Garden Club — Daddy sprawled on my bed with his heavy head squashing my lacy heart pillow. The one he bought one

Valentine's Day that spells out in pink satin rosebuds: *My Heart Belongs to Daddy.*

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"What else belongs to Daddy?" he'd say.

Always after I'd tried on whatever skirt or pants or shirt he bought me, then took it off, standing shivery in my underwear, anxious to put on my after-school clothes.

"Turn around, Lovely," he'd always say. "Let's see how you're growing."

Lovely being their pet-name for me though I prefer Miranda.

And slowly, slowly I'd turn, the whole time searching out pieces of colored lint that get stuck in the yellow rug.

"Good girl." Daddy said that every time too; patting the bed. "Now come over here."

Supper's the worst. Breakfast is easy because Daddy's in a hurry and Mother's too tired to pay attention to whether or not I'm eating. Lunch doesn't count; except weekends. But supper they're busy watching me, and I'm busy making sure the birds stay calm. Usually I'm hungry but it's too dangerous.

Tonight the birds are quiet. I've managed to get a little salad down, mostly the round slippery things like cherry tomatoes and kidney beans. Also a few oily garbanzos from the bottom of the wooden bowl — stuff I can swallow fast without chewing.

The phone is ringing. Mother says, "It's Friday night, don't people have a social life?"

Throwing down his napkin Daddy pushes back from the dining room table. "Well I've had my fill."

He ate like a hog. Two wings from the Oven-Stuffer-Roaster and a clump of cold mashed potatoes and some celery are all that's left. The phone is still ringing.

"Get that, would you," Mother says.

But he's already disappeared into the family room. Cursing under her breath, she walks over and answers the wall phone hanging near the kitchen doorway.

I'm leaning on my elbow knocking this last tomato around my plate when I hear her say *Mrs. Berlin*. I look up. Mother fixes me with a vicious stare. Mrs. Berlin is the school guidance counselor; I can pretty much figure out why she's phoned.

Mother telling her, "Easter vacation is right around the corner, my daughter just needs a little break from all the pressures of school, that's all."

Pretending she couldn't care less if I ever said another single word, Mother pops a piece of celery in her mouth. Chewing and talking, chewing and talking; which I find extremely rude. Celery being so crunchy and all. Then she tells Mrs. Berlin that I'm going through *one of those teenage phases!*

I decide to make war between the chicken wings, one chasing the other around the platter. Holding the loser high over the potatoes, I drop it into the bowl. Mother has finished all the celery. She's looking tense. With the phone jammed between her ear and shoulder she plucks a hard-candy out of a dish on the sideboard. Peeling off its crinkly wrapper. Popping the hard-candy into her mouth. Making these loud sucking noises.

Now she's messing around with her lizard belt, sliding it out of the gold lion-head buckle, pulling her beige cashmere sweater out of her pants, snapping the belt outside the sweater. After a second she changes her mind. Tucks the sweater back in her pants, sliding the belt back through the belt loops. Then she pulls the sweater back out. So hard that I expect to see it tear into pieces!

She chucks the belt. The metal lion-head buckle clanks against one of the

dining room chairs. "Check that out," she orders me in a loud whisper. I jump up and run around the table and rub my hand over the pale glossy wood; then give her the thumbs-up sign. Finally she hangs up the phone. And without first clearing away the mess, Mother heads straight for the family room. I can hear her telling Daddy that that guidance counselor bitch is looking to stir some pot. And it better not be ours.

I hear Daddy tell her, "You're one tough lady." Then he lets out a big yawn. "The fire's dying, could you give it a poke," he says.

I'm thinking about going upstairs, to try phoning my best friend Sandra. *Hell hole* Sandra will answer instead of hello. Before the birds I used to answer back: *Fixer* — from the initials on my ID bracelet. Now I have to knock the phone three times against the night table to let her know it's me. Oh, it's just you, she'll say. Before the birds we used to talk every night after homework till ten. Just thinking about talking is a big mistake. The birds

are twitching their heads and ruffling their feathers — a definite sign of trouble.

Daddy fell asleep in front of the fireplace letting the log burn to ashes; staying there, without a blanket, all night. For spite Mother turned the heat down to fifty-five. Daddy complaining that he woke up blue.

Cold air coming down the fireplace has sprinkled soot on the pale marble hearth — sure to piss off Mother who hates dirt of any type. Now the heat's back up, but the house still feels chilly. Outside is off and on cloudy. When I got out of bed I scraped some frost from inside the bathroom window using my thumb nail. After that there's been nothing to do all morning but sit on the tan sectional in my pajamas, wrapped in the Mexican serape, watching TV.

I like dangling the red fringe over my forehead like long red bangs.

"Lunch!" Mother calls out.

Both of them coming to get me. Even though I hide under the serape,

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screw up my face, stab at my stomach to make them think it hurts too bad to eat. They insist. Each one taking a hand, dragging me like I'm a baby.

Forcing me to sit with them at the white table in the all-white kitchen.

All that white makes my eyes ache.

Keeping the serape over my head and shoulders, I slide down in the chair till my chin rests on the table. Clusters of broccoli that look fake bright-green, and rubbery red and yellow strips, and squiggly orange noodles fill a white platter. *Pasta primavera* Mother calls it; using some kind of weird accent. Except for the three of us, that pasta primavera is the only other color in the kitchen.

In science we learned that another name for termite is white ant. Every spring thousands of termites invade our house. Mother screams hysterically then leaves to go shopping for the whole day. Daddy sprays poison then vacuums up all the dead bodies.

Scooping some pasta primavera onto a plate Mother tries to bribe me with those diamond-pattern tights I like from GAP. Actually I'm quite hungry but it's too risky. Now she's clucking like some old hen. "Lovely is getting much too thin," she says.

I nod, and watch them start to eat. Careful not to mess up her bright pink lipstick Mother takes teensy mouthfuls. She even wears that lipstick to bed. Daddy chews loud and uses lots of pepper. He wants bread to soak up the juice but Mother says there isn't any that goes.

"How difficult can bread be?" he asks.

Carefully dabbing her lips with a napkin, she stands up and goes over to the counter and yanks open the bread tin. "Seeded rye is all I've got." She tosses the package onto the table, then her eyes land on me. "You," she says pointing one of her long pink daggers.

I sink down under the table. A chair is being scraped across the floor.

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There goes Mother's legs. Now the chair legs. All six of them stopping when they get to the bay window.

"I want you over here in the light so I can check your skin," she tells me.

That window has no curtain and no trees outside to cast shadows. I make an ugly face but she comes back and grabs me by my shoulders, lifting me, pushing me across the kitchen into the chair.

"Get rid of this." She yanks at my serape and drops it onto the floor, the bright stripes flattening against the white tiles.

"Mexican stand-off," Daddy says with a mouthful.

She swoops down on me. "Put your head back." Garlic on her breath actually does make me sick to my stomach. "Just as I suspected," Mother says, "You've got blackheads."

No way! Frantically I rub my cheeks.

"Not there." She taps my nose. "There." Turning away she heads toward the sink. "I'm going to extract them."

Two red-birds already on the trapeze get shoved to one side by a large sleek crow I hadn't noticed before. Squashed together, the red-birds start squawking, one turning on the other, biting it viciously on the neck.

The flock of starlings dive-bomb the crow who makes loud bitchy noises but refuses to give up his spot on the trapeze. Even the tough jays, hopping on and off, can't get a footing. With nowhere to land, the sparrows zoom in crazed circles.

Too much is happening. I begin choking on all the loose flying feathers. Mother reaches under the sink. She takes out a clear plastic bottle. To get her attention, I stamp my foot.

"It's only rubbing alcohol," she says. "Stop being a baby, this won't hurt."

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She's banging around in the junk drawer where the scissors and stapler and push-pins and pens are kept. Holding up something small and silver, she says, "I'm going to sterilize this so you don't get an infection."

Alcohol splashes over it, and into the stainless steel sink.

Coming close, she presses it against my nose, pinching the skin, smothering me with garlic and alcohol fumes. Dizzy, I tumble out of that chair too.

Next thing I know I'm back in the chair with Daddy holding me up from behind. *Ouch!* I want to yell. His thick hairy arms are squashing my tittys. Which happen to feel sore all the time.

It's perfectly natural to feel sore when you start to develop, Mother told me.

Develop. I hate that word, *develop.* Whenever I think about her saying it, I want to throw-up. The day she first said it she kept staring at my chest in my red sweater. A

weird look on her face that made me feel funny. I wanted to hide my little bumps. Or chop them off. I don't really need them, I was thinking.

She's doing it again — staring — her eyes looking more bugged-out than ever; turned a shade more gray than green.

The shade — that's the clue. Cold dark gray like the blade of a steak knife and she's over the edge. Right now I can see that I'm still okay.

Without smiling she lets out a little laugh. "What are we going to do with you?" she says.

I shrug, and wiggle to get Daddy off. I dip my finger in and out of the sugar bowl. Even if I knew the answer, which I don't, it wouldn't be a good thing to open my mouth right now, with the birds on the move again, with all the commotion in my throat.

Mother chucks the instrument into the junk drawer and slams it. A big fight gets rolling. Daddy bangs on the refrigerator shouting that there are no blackheads, anyway, so what the hell is she doing tearing up my face with that torture device? Yelling right back, Mother says there's a filthy slew of them waiting right there under the surface of the skin, ready to erupt into pustules.

What else? I'm thinking, what else? To calm the birds I rub up and down my neck with both hands.

"Why are you doing that weird thing with your throat?" Mother wants to know. "Is it sore? Lovely, do you have a sore throat?"

Carefully I shake my head.

"Then stop it!" She flounces into a chair. Knocks a cigarette out of the pack tapping it on the edge of the kitchen table. "It's annoying," she says continuing to tap the cigarette. "It's like a nervous habit or something."

"Will you leave her alone, Anne." With his arms crossed Daddy is leaning against the counter. He's watching her. Usually he pays no attention. But now he's watching her, the same way I used to squat and watch ants carry crumbs across the patio. Mother catches him looking. A stupid smile skips across her face, and her eyes pop even more, and they turn more green than gray. In secret he calls her *Froggy*.

She sits up straighter and sticks out her breasts, sticks them out on purpose. She's got on her same beige cashmere sweater from last night. *Breasts* he calls hers. *Mine* he calls *tittys*. Smiling up at him she crosses her

legs in her tight, beige stretch-velvet jeans. Daddy thinks she's way too old for jeans, that they make her stomach look fat.

I watch him, he's looking sort of funny, his mouth hanging open; sort of thick. Like our old cat Luther used to look after he'd finished licking under his tail.

"If she pulls this crap now," Mother is saying, "by the time she's twenty she'll be full of nervous tics." She tilts her head the way she always lights her cigarettes. "Then who will want her?"

Daddy comes around behind my chair, sliding the tips of his fingers under the neck of my pajamas where the tiny colored mirrors are sewn on. Slowly he begins massaging my shoulders. "She won't have any trouble. Will you Lovely?"

Obedient, I wag my head. But carefully, so carefully.

Because the birds are on the move like crazy, the sparrows spinning nervous wrecks. The crow, pulling that bossy shit, is refusing to share the trapeze, to make space. The sparrows have to keep flying and flying and flying. How long before their little wings droop from exhaustion, and sparrows fall to the floor of my mouth?

A terrible shiver runs through me. With all those dead sparrows piling up, how will I ever open my mouth again? How will I eat, or brush my teeth, or even sip soda through a straw?

I jump to my feet and the chair crashes over. Flinging my head back, I'm breathing hard through my nose.

"Jesus!" Daddy laughs bending to straighten the chair.

"Why are you breathing like that?" yells Mother.

It freezes me. I'm watching her sitting there with her legs crossed, the cigarette dangling between her fingers. I'm staring at the bright pink ring her lipstick left on the cigarette and I hate it: the pink ring, the cigarette, the filthy smoke. The birds really hate it. Smoke upsets them. Fire in their nest.

And the smoke is clogging the kitchen, and the birds are screeching, and it's terrible, terrible, how they slam themselves against the walls of my throat: red wings tangled with gray and speckled brown and blue and

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slippery black. Making a *whoosh whoosh whoosh* sound. None of them giving a shit anymore about getting onto the trapeze — only about escaping from the smoke.

I rush to the window, shoving it open, sticking my head out, breathing hard through my nose. Some rain lands splat on my forehead. Cold. Scaring me. I jerk, bumping my head on the window edge. Then I crack open my lips a drop. But just a drop. Open too wide, and flight! Flight!

Fresh air seems to help. The birds seem to get calmer, quieter. Even the crow, tucking in his mighty wings, is minding his manners.

Straightening up I close the window. Too hard! One of Mother's hanging glass tulips falls to the floor.

"Great," she says, "you've managed to destroy this, too."

I squat down and pick up the pieces, placing them on the windowsill. Just more of your cheap crap, I feel like telling her. Instead I smile; but keeping my lips pressed together. I wave. To let them know I'm about to leave the kitchen.

"Yeah, all right, go." Mother waves back with her cigarette.

Daddy pouts pretending to look sad. "Bye-bye, Lovely."

South the crow is screaming as we enter the hall, and, really, it's his decision. Of them all he's the biggest, strongest, loudest; the most mean. The true leader. The others hate him but they know he's their leader. Now they all begin copying him, all of them shrieking: *south south south south south!*

Halfway up the stairs to the bedrooms I stop. Wait a second, I tell them, sitting down. I try wiggling one of the brass carpet rods that hold the runner in place but it's bolted tight; won't budge. Leaning back on my elbows I look down the flight of stairs, toward the sun-burst window over the front door. And I'm thinking how sweet my birds would look

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on a bright sunny day, winging past the shivery, old sun-burst glass:
shaped like a half-moon. Not to be mistaken for the real moon.

In science we learned that the moon has four phases, and never ever goes
away; just seems to.

Standing up, I tell them: South is where you go in winter. Birds come
back every spring. You dopes are all off your schedule. This is spring!
April. The Daffodil Dance. Easter's right around the corner.

So what, the sparrows say. And the red-birds echo *so what*. Same thing
from the jays, and the nosy, pesty starlings. Even the two orioles who are
the proudest say: *so what*. The crow, being the leader, keeps quiet; he lets
the others do the arguing.

I stand up sliding my hand along the dark wooden banister. *South* I
write in the powdery dust with my finger. South for the spring? I say.
Well — if that's what you all really want.

A trip south will take money. Daddy has piles of money. I know where
he keeps it hidden — in a metal box under the floor of the cedar closet.
Once, he showed me.

Cedar closets are supposed to smell great but ours has no smell except
the moth balls Mother chucks in there. Our cedar closet is dark. A
yellow bulb in the ceiling turns on by a long pull-chain. I never like
going in there — all that brownish-red wood makes me itch.

The day Daddy showed me the money, he knelt down and peeled back a
corner of the carpet. Huh! I was thinking. Surprised to see a carpet
could lift up so easy. And even more surprised to see a metal handle
attached to the wooden floor. Daddy pulled on it, saying *Presto* as a
square hunk

of floor separated from the rest. He waved the square in the air. Then
reaching down into the hole he lifted out the black box, and when he
opened it — stacks of money!

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I was still talking then, and I called it a *gangsters box*. Daddy had burst out laughing. He handed me a fifty dollar bill whispering: Don't tell your mother.

Even though we were alone in the house.

It happened on the very same day he rubbed me so hard that when I tried to pee it hurt so bad I cried.

There's a solution for every problem, he had told me. Being a scientist it's his job to find solutions. Then he filled up the bathtub with cool water and told me to squat in there. "Go ahead, pee," he said.

I stood looking down into the turquoise water knowing Mother would go crazy to have pee in her shiny clean bathtub.

What she doesn't know won't disturb her, he'd said.

So, me and the birds, we're ready. *South south south* they're screaming. Okay, okay, calm down, I say as we continue up the stairs to my room.

From my closet shelf I grab my backpack by the orange strap letting it fall to the rug. Then taking my navy-blue swimsuit out of my dresser, my best denim shorts, and four tee-shirts, I put my favorite red one on top of the pile on my bed. Twirling my ponytail I'm thinking: What else? Your toothbrush, you idiot! the crow shrieks.

There's no reason to turn nasty, I tell him. You're getting your own way. Going into the hall I pass my parent's room, painted lavender. It reeks of Mother's favorite perfume. Next door, is Daddy's den. Stopping there a second I peek inside. Brown wood paneling makes it look dark even in the daytime. After supper he usually goes there to work on his model ship. Mother complains it takes up all his spare time. She says the glue has ruined his mind. That ship, with its little white cloth sails, sits on display near the window. I'm about to touch the sails when the crow shrieks: *Get going!*

Quickly I move down the hall. Better use the bathroom, the crow

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reminds me, it could be a long trip. Bossy again, but he's probably right. I take his advice; then taking my toothbrush out of the holder, I return to my room where I shove everything in my backpack.

The birds are happy. Even the crow is happy. Everyone behaving nicely, sharing the trapeze; no biting or squabbling going on.

Kneeling on the yellow rug I zip my pack, then standing up I slide it onto my shoulders.

Is everyone ready?

Yes, Miranda, yes! South! South!

And I smile — it's the first time they've ever used my name!

Oh! I clap a hand against my mouth. Almost forgot. I almost forgot to bring the money.

Then the crow says: Who needs money? And the rest join in: Who needs money, who needs money? And they're all so sweet, no angry wings, no bickering. Just silky smooth and lovely, my birds.

Together we climb the stairs to the attic on the third floor. Narrow and steep, with no carpeting. *Dangerous*, Mother calls them. I like them. How you have to step extra high; also how the wood squeaks.

On the landing, specks of colored paint sprinkle the dark plank floor like the New Year's confetti Daddy throws at us. When I was little I used to scrape those colored

specks with my fingernails, trying hard to get them to come off. The attic always smells the same, like wet chalk. A plant with yellow leaves droops in a red plastic pot. Shivering in my pajamas I'm wondering what it's doing up here? Colder than downstairs, the attic hasn't got much light.

The crow calls out: Miranda! Go down the end and crank open that

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crummy old window.

I stand there tugging on my pajama sleeve. The attic is a dark tunnel.
Anything could hide.

Go on, Miranda, he says.

Ducking my head under the low, sloped ceiling I start to pick my way
around boxes. Crunchy bits of dirt sticking to the bottom of my feet. I
stop to brush them off; but as soon as I walk I get more dirt. Skis are
leaning against a bookcase stuffed with hammers and other tools.
Accidentally bumping it with my arm, the skis come crashing down.
And I want to run out of there, am about to, when the crow shouts: What
do we have here?

Four green lawn & leaf bags— stacked on top of Mother's old exercycle.
I poke them: they're soft. One by one I punch them off. Then squeezing
around the bike and other junk, I make it to the far end of the attic. Thick
cobwebs covering most of the window. Looking closer, I can see a crack;
long and jagged like a scar. Suddenly afraid, I shrink back.

Spiders, I tell the crow, there might be spiders.

The crow says: Miranda! It'll be fine. Crank it open and slide your
backpack onto the roof.

So I do like he tells me, grabbing onto the window crank. Cold metal and
stiff; hard to turn. The second I get it open, I let go. Scared of the
brownish streaks smeared on my palm.

Blood, I whisper.

Rust, you silly girl! says the crow.

Rust? Not sure, I sniff my palm.

And I'm looking around the attic for a rag when the crow says *C'mon*.

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So I push my pack onto the roof, where it's almost flat, where it hangs over the driveway.

Now it's your turn, says the crow with a loud caw.

Chirping, the other birds imitate the crow saying: Your turn, Miranda, your turn, Miranda.

How thrilling to hear them all calling me by my name!

Crouching, I stick one leg out the window, then the other leg, then I'm outside. It's chilly. Wind flapping my pajamas, blowing the tops of the trees. Some have leaves, some are just gray sticks that sway. Suddenly I remember that I forgot to put on a jacket, but the crow says: Forget it! Down south it's much too warm for a jacket.

I look around for Daddy's maroon convertible but it's nowhere on the driveway. Over the tops of the trees I can see as far as the soccer field on Belmont Street. It's empty. From somewhere, dogs keep barking.

Then the crow says: What are we waiting for? South! South!

And the birds are with the crow, one big happy family, everyone sweet and loving everyone else.

I'm ready, I tell them.