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**FREE  
BIRD**

**JON RAYMOND**



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*For my grandparents*

Death is the Wealth / Of the Poorest Bird

—EMILY DICKINSON

# 1

Two survivors walk into a room . . .

It could almost be a joke, Anne thought. They walk into a room, though, and then what? They see a duck? There was definitely a joke in there, she knew it, but where did it *go*? Where was that weird non sequitur that took it somewhere else? Somewhere hilarious?

It was possible the whole premise just wasn't that funny—two survivors, ha-ha. No, it wasn't, Anne thought. To witness her father, one of the two survivors in question—this troll-like barrel of a man, his Stalin mustache drooping, eyes bagged, balancing his tray of trout, Jell-O, and iceberg lettuce on the cannonball of his paunch—straining to hear whatever this shriveled old woman with the nimbus of white hair, survivor two, was saying, got her much more weepy than jolly. Maybe in Florida this kind of meeting happened all the time, maybe in certain neighborhoods in New York. In Israel, obviously. But what were the chances of two ancient Polish Jews, scarred refugees of the twentieth century, bumping into each other in a convalescent-home dining hall near a soft-serve dispenser in the outer reaches of the San Fernando Valley?

She watched the old woman pointing at her dad's chest, talking, talking. Her arthritic knuckles trembled with gaudy rings.

The old lady might be talking about the day's meat loaf, and she might be talking about the Eichmann trial—it was impossible to tell. As hard as Anne tried to pick out her voice amid the clamor of silverware, she could never quite catch its timbre.

Just don't freak him out, she thought straight into the woman's brain, and tonged a few more tomato wedges onto her plate. I love you, I feel for you, but don't go and fuck up all the work I've done by freaking him out with your blood-soaked memories. The old lady clearly had no idea how many favors Anne had pulled just to make this day possible. The sheer volume of groveling she'd done among city commissioners and nonprofit executives was practically insane. In the end she'd gone all the way to the lieutenant governor's wife to land a place on Fountainview's waiting list. The last thing she needed was the ghost of history dropping in and spooking her dad halfway through the tour.

It'd been hard enough just getting him to agree to the tour. For a guy who almost never left his house, he had a curiously high opinion of his own domestic abilities. After four falls, three ER visits, and what may well have been a minor stroke, he still held on tightly to the ideal of himself as the hale, middle-aged, Pacific Gas and Electric career man circa 1975, capable of scaling electrical towers with his linemen and riding his motorcycle home along winding foothill highways at night. The notion that he wasn't fit to live alone hadn't yet truly penetrated his skull. For this reason, the day's mission—triggering in him some recognition that the time had come to accept, nay, to welcome, organized help—was not to be derailed, no matter what.

Anne watched him navigate the obstacle course of wheelchairs and mobility scooters, pausing at the logjam near the muffin

baskets, narrowly avoiding the projectile of a speeding busboy. By the time he'd toppled into his chair, he was openly exhausted, his breath almost violent, his trembling fingers gripping the table's edge for support. His skin was the pallid color of old cheese and he couldn't seem to lift his head from his chest and somehow he'd spilled most of his ice water into his salad along the way. And yet, still, she knew, he'd argue that getting up on a ladder to prune the neighbor's cypress hedge was a great idea. Unbelievable.

"I think she likes you," Anne said once the wheezing had abated.

"What?"

"That woman," Anne said. "The one you were talking to. I think she likes you."

Her dad grunted, either uninterested or uncomprehending, she wasn't sure.

"You guys must've talked for, like, five minutes," Anne said. "What did she say?"

"She loves to talk," he said, leaning over his plate to start extracting the small bones from his fish. "She thinks her daughter's the only one who ever studied the law."

"So. You didn't talk about anything . . . else?"

"Why would we?"

Anne smoothed the linen onto her lap and exhaled with some relief. If the old survivor lady was already exiting her dad's mind, all the better. They could just leave that box of hobgoblins closed for now, thank God. Maybe someday they'd go back and ponder the meeting, maybe Anne would even coax her dad out with some leading questions, but there was no need for that today, and maybe never. In the end, what was the point, anyway? The childhood horrors her dad and the old woman shared were

either so obvious as to be not worth mentioning or so incomprehensible as to defy explanation, so why scrape off the old scabs? Especially when there were so many other, more pressing matters to worry about, like low-sodium meal plans and the men's book club selections, for instance.

If they got lucky, Anne thought, shaking oil and vinegar onto her lettuce, watching her dad pull apart the shingles of his fish as if he were defusing a land mine, the old woman would stay out of sight for the rest of the visit and for any subsequent visits they made, and the vast, frigid silence that had enclosed her dad's life story for the entirety of her consciousness would remain as it always had, undisturbed. After they'd signed all the papers and paid their first month's deposit, then fine, she didn't care. Let the floodgates open. Her dad could walk around Fountainview with a golden Star of David stitched to his sweat suit, if that was what he wanted. Just so long as she knew he was safe.

After lunch, Anne and her dad met Cassie, the manager, and revisited the room in question one more time—the studio apartment, as the management called it. The space was clean and well proportioned, sporting fresh, not wholly ugly wall-to-wall carpeting and windows that looked out onto the gardens where Anne approvingly identified mimosa and angel's trumpet edging the trimmed lawns. The square footage was a lot smaller than he was accustomed to, but that didn't matter much. Years ago, his needs had shrunk down to precisely the dimensions of a soft chair and a medium-sized flat-screen TV.

She watched him looking out the window without expression and wondered if he might finally be coming around to the idea himself. Maybe after four decades in his ranch house in Sun

Valley, California, he was finally ready for a change. Of course, she could grasp how the prospect of facing his final years (God willing, years) in this place would seem off-putting. Who'd ever choose this geriatric cruise ship if they didn't have to? But she could also see how the new place could be all right. Squint your eyes and it was cozy, simple, decently lit. Plus all those opportunities it afforded. Her dad never had many close friends in day-to-day life—plenty of acquaintances, sure, but close friends, not really—and maybe this was the place those friendships would finally bloom. Maybe, perish the thought, even some romance.

Soon enough the tour was bringing them back to the starting point, Cassie's office, a small, glass tank off the main lobby. Cassie guided them to a sofa and offered to answer any more questions they might have, but by now Anne possessed all the information she needed, from the emergency response team specs to the timetables for weekly qigong lessons. The only question she could think of was, How many people had already died in room 282? How many corpses have you guys pulled out of there, anyway? Instead, she nudged her dad and asked if he had any questions, because if so, now was the time to speak up.

“How about it, Dad? Anything you want to know?”

Her dad, nestled deep in the recesses of the soft couch, was barely awake. His mustache held some minuscule particles from lunch, and his eyes were almost milky with fatigue. They'd pushed him well past his nap time, and all the walking had taken its toll, so it was surprising when he seemed to rouse and mutter that he did in fact have a question. First he had to clear his throat, however, a process that took almost a minute, with much hacking and hawking of phlegm, but afterward he wrestled himself to the edge of the couch and addressed himself directly to Cassie:

“How much?” he said. “I’d like to know how much all this costs, if I may.”

Cassie accepted the question, like everything, with great, buoyant optimism. “Well, Mr. Singer, that all depends,” she said. “Ninety percent of the entrance fee is refunded, you know, and, pricing average housing values, you can equate the equity in your home to the cost of entering Fountainview. Monthly service fees include utilities, weekly housekeeping, linen service, a dining plan, transportation, maintenance—”

“I know, I know, miss,” he interrupted. “But how much?” He was more stern this time. “What number do I write on the check every month? That’s what I want to know.” Even now, a faint Polish lisp clung to his voice.

Cassie held her smile in place and tilted her face in Anne’s direction, seeking cues on how to proceed.

“Dad,” Anne said, “I think what Cassie is saying is, it depends on a lot of factors.”

“I’d like a ballpark.”

Anne looked at Cassie, assenting to a round number.

“Seven thousand a month,” Cassie said. “That’s not an official quote. But maybe in that area.”

Anne’s dad pursed his lips and drew his chin toward his chest, exhaling loudly. Whether the figure struck him as offensively high or surprisingly low was hard to tell—he had strange ideas on the relative costs of things—but in any case he wasn’t going to reveal anything more in this room. The tour was now officially ended.

It wasn’t until they were bouncing over the speed bumps in the parking lot, blond Cassie receding in the rearview mirror, that Anne finally allowed herself to ask her dad outright

what he thought. She couldn't avoid it forever. His answer, unsurprisingly, was monosyllabic. "Nice."

"That's it?" she said. "Nice?"

"That's what I said," he said. "It's nice."

"Nice." Steering out of the parking lot to the side street and angling toward the roaring traffic of the main artery, she pondered the word. The word itself was meaningless, more a way of avoiding a conversation than an actual attempt to transmit significance. She could tell by the way his head retracted even deeper, his hunch becoming almost turtle-like, that he was withholding something, and whatever deeper opinions he harbored were going to have to be extracted by cunning or force.

"It's kind of amazing, isn't it?" she said brightly. "Better than I thought it'd be. Cassie seems sweet."

"It's very nice," he said, this time with a mild nod for emphasis.

She gripped and regripped the wheel. The words couldn't be construed as enthusiastic, exactly, "very nice," but he'd said them vigorously enough that they caused a mild flutter of hope in her chest. He was reiterating himself, and that must mean something. "Very nice" was a notch above simply "nice." What had he ever called very nice before?

The traffic roared by in waves, and at the first opening she gunned out into the flow, batting away the positive thoughts she normally so scrupulously prohibited herself from thinking. If her dad decided to move into Fountainview, so many of her troubles would be resolved. No more nights lying awake, wondering if he'd fallen down in the kitchen or keeled over in the shower. No more nagging fear about his secret sugar

binges, his inadvisable driving, his stubborn stair climbing. It would cost them, but she didn't care. Who deserved this level of care more than her dad, who had endured so much? She'd find a way to cover Aaron's college, and as for her own dotage, well, that was a long way off. So many apocalypses were possible before that time came. He could think of Fountainview as a gift to her sanity if that made him feel better.

Jockeying her way into the left lane, she reminded herself that this was not the time to push her dad too hard. But, at the same time, she didn't want to lose any momentum. They had to make this decision quickly. If they could just agree in this moment that the visit had been a success, if they could bookmark his good impression, the following conversations would go all that much easier. If they could establish that Fountainview was in fact "very nice," that was a start.

They arrived at an intersection and slowed into the field of glinting glass and chrome, and in the relative quiet she could hear her dad mumbling, his words too low frequency to decipher.

"What?" she said.

He muttered again but still too quietly. She craned to hear. "What?"

"I said, it's very luxurious, that place," he said, suddenly loud.

And immediately, whatever blossoming hope she'd been nurturing wilted and burned.

"Luxurious." She could tell he'd been sitting on this word all morning, waiting to unleash it at the most opportune time. The word had probably entered his head back at the library, in the gym, at the cedar-lined sauna, and he'd been building his case

against Fountainview ever since. “Luxurious” was a word with no positive connotation in her father’s vocabulary, a synonym only for waste and self-indulgence. “Luxurious” was a mode of experience only for other people, never himself. And so, two minutes onto the road, the golden door to Fountainview was already closing and locking behind them, the darkness of the future regathering in thick folds.

When they got to his house, Anne dragged her dad out of the passenger seat, cradling his elbow as they staggered up the walkway. She helped him through the door, disabled the alarm, and installed him in his recliner, his soft, fitted shell facing the gray face of the TV. She placed his remote in his palm, and within moments he was watching *Ellen* at top volume.

She straightened the newspapers, organized the recycling, and made sure the refrigerator was stocked with the weekly cache of damp turkey sandwiches and cartons of egg whites. She inspected his pill collection, counting out the lozenges and pink dots and pale asterisks in each tray, then again as the minor chords of a crime show boomed through the house. “You doing all right, Dad?” she called, but there was no answer. He was fast asleep.

Outside, rush hour was congealing across the city, and she figured she’d wait it out. She discovered a warm Amstel Light in the kitchen cabinet and sat on the back patio to respond to her day’s calls, cursing the ineptitude of everyone in her professional and personal network, if not the whole ingrate army of society itself. *Three connections between L.A. and Denver? Sounds crazy. Anything better? Pretty sure the plastic cups are in the top cabinet. The VERY top.* Often she had to wonder if

the people she worked with were genuinely stupid or just so bored and frustrated, they fucked up on purpose simply to have someone to talk to. She wasn't sure she'd ever know.

In the end she was left to stare at the empty sky. Without Fountainview she had no great options. What was she going to do with her dad? Sipping her skunked beer, she found herself bewildered as to how life would proceed. How had this duty fallen to her? she wondered. She feared that the punishment for her own goodness was only beginning.

She stared at the clouds and tracked the movement of a quiet thought arcing like a shooting star through her brain. Maybe, she thought idly, just maybe, her dad should just die. That would sure solve everyone's problems, wouldn't it? The house would transform into college tuition. Her savings would become a nest egg. All her daily guilt would be lifted. How easy it would all be if he just gracefully bowed out and stopped breathing. And before the thought was even finished, before the glowing tail had faded from view, she was already scolding herself: Bad wish, Anne. Very bad. Don't ever think that. Never again.