

MORE MIRACLE THAN BIRD

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MIRACLE
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BIRD
ALICE MILLER



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for Peter Miller and Sue Oakley

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*

—W. B. YEATS, “Sailing to Byzantium”

ONE

WINTER 1916

Georgie was waiting outside in the empty hallway, aware that she was early, but at the sound of a scream she pushed the heavy door open.

She stopped in the doorway and did not cover her ears.

She had entered an enormous room with a high ceiling and long scarlet curtains, and a parquet floor lined with white beds filled with men. One of the men was sitting up, his eyes shut, mouth wide.

No one else in the room seemed to hear him. One man was reading a newspaper, one sipping a glass of water. They had not noticed her come in, either. She could not say how long she stood in the doorway, but at some point the screaming stopped. The man reading the newspaper flipped over to the next page. For a moment, the silence was worse. She moved out of the doorway.

“You’ll get used to it,” someone said near her. A low voice, from the bed nearest the door, where a young man was watching her. His feet were exposed below the sheet, and his toes were purple and red, rotted open, raw. All his toenails black. She tried not to stare. He noticed and smiled.

“Trench foot. You’ll get used to that too.”

Georgie looked away. Other men in the room were noticing her now, and she could feel their eyes on her.

The young man was reaching forward to drape the sheet over his raw feet, wincing as the cotton brushed his toes.

“The matron’ll be along any moment. She’s a good sort.”

Georgie concentrated on keeping her face entirely neutral. The truth was, she’d walked here in a haze of self-congratulations. She thought she’d come up with a masterful plan: by getting a job at the hospital, she’d escaped her mother; she had her own—yes, modest, but her *own*—room provided for her; and she was in London where Dorothy Shakespear and Willy Yeats were, where she could see them as often as she wished. Not only that, but—this was always somewhat of an afterthought—she would be helping with the war. She didn’t believe in the war, but it wasn’t the soldiers’ fault that they’d been gulped down by it.

But how was it that during those weeks of training, of making beds and mopping floors, she hadn’t imagined that the ward would be like this—these lines of anonymous white-sheeted beds filled with half-oblivious, damaged creatures? One of the best small hospitals, they had said. For officers only. Not a single death. Had she expected the men not to scream, not to have grotesque, rotting feet? Had she expected them to nod to her as she dutifully changed their pillowcases?

“Hyde-Lees. You’re early.” Stated without emotion. The matron, Mrs. Thwaite, had arrived on the ward. She had the sort of gaze that took everything in at once—travelling, assessing, judging. Her eyes swept over Georgie.

“We are very protective of our officers,” she said, as she started to walk down the centre of the room to the far end, with the expectation that Georgie would follow. The matron demonstrated the sort of posture that made you question your own.

“I’ve heard very good things,” Georgie managed to say.

“Of course. Our officers are first priority and last priority. If you neglect them in any way, we cannot be expected to keep you on.”

Georgie nervously eyed the men. Willy had not been impressed to hear she was working at a war hospital. “You’re giving up all that time?” he’d said. She had responded stiffly that she preferred to think of it as *giving* time, rather than *giving up* time, but he was not convinced. Never mind. In time he would figure out why she was really here.

“Colonel Fraser,” the matron was saying, walking down the line of beds, gesturing sharply to each man as they went past. This man was sleeping with his lips turned inwards, as though he were trying to suck his face in through his mouth. “Captain Christie” had curled his hand over the stained yellow bandage that covered his eye. “Captain Emery-May” was covered from head to toe with a blanket. “Lieutenant Gray,” staring at the wall, his face pale orange with dry scales, was the young man who had been screaming. They kept on towards the door. “Second Lieutenant Pike” was the man with the rotting feet, and on the other side of the room, an older man, “Major Hammond.” Although this last man was asleep, the matron pinched the edge of the white bedsheet, gently lifting it, to reveal the wound down the major’s side.

It was a test for Georgie. The wound resembled a crude dotted map of Norway, long, lumpy, filled with blood, tissue, and ooze, and interspersed with fine white stitches, where, the matron reported, the doctor had extracted the shrapnel. It was clear to Georgie that these words were fictions; *extract* was far too clean a word when you were talking of meat and bone. As Georgie looked down, the major shifted in his sleep, and his wound winced—a sac of mustard-coloured pus drooped, threatened to fall on the sheet. Georgie did not take her eyes from it, clenching her fist hard against her hip.

Mrs. Thwaite turned to Georgie and offered a cool smile.

“All right, Hyde-Lees?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “You can begin with the floors: start in the upstairs hallway, then the stairs, back through the kitchen. Upstairs there is one bed that needs to be stripped and made. Then mop the ward.” She pointed to a mop and an empty bucket with a rope handle, and headed out to the other room.

Georgie took the bucket and went straight to the basin. She tried not to picture the man’s skin, the bubbled texture where tissue and blood mixed. She took the bucket upstairs and mopped as if it were a noble pursuit, as if she herself were fighting a war.



When she returned after mopping the entire upstairs, there were no other hospital staff on the ward. She slid the mop along the floor, ignoring the new twinge in her back. She couldn’t imagine doing this again tomorrow. She was trying to concentrate only on the mop and not think of anything else. Still, she was wondering how she could manage to get out of this, how she could slink away

with no one noticing. But when she glanced at the clock, she saw her shift was almost over.

“First day’s the worst,” Second Lieutenant Pike called to her. She stopped beside his bed. Unlike the others, he was unshaven. From here she could see the individual hairs of his stubble. His skin stretched as he smiled. She held the mop in one hand.

“It’s not so bad,” she said.

“Come on, it’s horrid. Divine plan’s gone a bit awry, I reckon.”

“I’m not the best person to talk to about divine plans.”

“Why, you don’t believe in them? Me neither. Why make these feet just to mangle them?”

The matron had come back into the room. Georgie exhaled, glanced at the clock once more, and returned the mop to the bucket. The matron was coming towards her.

“Hyde-Lees,” she said, “what are you doing?”

“My shift is over, ma’am.”

“And I suppose that means you are free to prostrate yourself over the second lieutenant?”

Georgie took a step back. “I beg your pardon?”

“In my hospital, you may not *lean* over the men. You may not *dangle* over them.”

“I did nothing of the sort.”

Second Lieutenant Pike had overheard them. “It was my fault. I was chattering.”

Across the room, Major Hammond laughed.

“Oh come on, Matron. She’s sweet on our Tom! Plenty of rotten fish in the sea, but none—like—Pike.” Some of the men who had woken from the noise, or were already awake, were laughing. Someone gave a low whistle.

“Want to get under his bloody sheets?” another called. “Naught more attractive than a man who can’t run from your clutches.”

The second lieutenant was smiling a watery smile. Major Hammond was laughing with his mouth wide open, an overloud laugh that did not contain amusement. Georgie kept her back rigid and tried not to look at the faces of the men, either chuckling or comatose, as she walked between the beds towards the washroom.

“Not much to look at though, is she,” one of the men said as she passed.

“Well,” said another, “fine for wartime.” When she got to the washroom and shut the door, she could still hear one of the men: “We were called up, not to fight the Hun but to woo and screw the girls of England!” More laughter, and one of the men started to sing a song that Georgie didn’t know.

She heard Mrs. Thwaite yell above them, “All right, gentlemen!” and one man’s laugh rang out like a howl. Georgie scrubbed her hands—pressing them together to stop them shaking—changed her clothes, and headed out onto the street.

TWO

Outside, the air was a gift, crowding her face. It had nothing to do with decay. A last streak of sun was creaking down behind the buildings, and soon it would be dark. She started to walk towards the dormitory. Still, she could hear that jeering, see the major's bubbling wound, the matron's cut-glass stare. For a moment she thought of writing to her mother, of admitting she'd been wrong to come. Already she yearned for the silence and privacy of her bedroom, of the small library on the first floor of her mother's house.

But she wouldn't write. She would go back to her room and arrange the contents of her two leather suitcases on the few provided shelves and rest until her next shift at the hospital. Tomorrow she would write to Willy and to Dorothy and announce she was settled in London, and next week she would go to a meeting of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, without having to lie to her mother about where she was going.

She'd glimpsed this kind of freedom at the first soirée that her mother had taken her to, back before the war, in 1908 when she had turned sixteen. The soirée was what she would come to know as the usual affair at Olivia Shakespear's; in the large drawing room, clusters of people chatted and sipped, and Jelly d'Aranyi played Schumann on the violin, and a servant walked around refilling glasses of what Olivia whispered was rather middling claret that someone had gifted her and she was trying to get rid of. Discussions ranged from Schopenhauer to Schubert, tarot and Tattwa, to the most thrilling moments at recent séances. Olivia had attended a session only last month where an ancient Egyptian soul had spoken, declaring that the current age was nearly over and another was about to begin.

Georgie had been taught to call her parents by their first names—never “Mother” but always “Nelly”—and in this room she saw a different Nelly from the one she knew. Nelly had clearly spent many evenings in that drawing room, and Georgie was startled to watch her integrate herself so effortlessly, talk without self-consciousness, and laugh with an ease that Georgie had rarely heard at home. Nelly introduced her to the pianist Walter Rummel, whom Georgie had seen play at concerts, and the poet W. B. Yeats—known to all as W. B.—whose poems Georgie knew and admired, and with whom she had a brief conversation about the Renaissance philosopher and occultist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Georgie even shyly mentioned that she had started to translate the early works of Pico from Latin, and she could have sworn that W. B. had looked impressed.

But the person Nelly most wanted her to meet was Olivia's daughter, Dorothy. When Georgie saw Dorothy across the room, chatting assuredly to two young men, she was doubtful that they

would be friends. Dorothy was already twenty-three, and very pretty in an unreal way, like those drawings of jaunty women from Harrods advertisements. She wore a dark blue dress which, while not especially revealing, hung on her body and clung to every lovely angle of her, as if the dress itself had a kind of nonchalance. The guests around her, whether they faced her or not, all seemed aware of each dip of her head, each arching of her fine, white neck. Georgie was surprised to see her slide that neck to the side and fix her eyes right on her.

“Are you Georgie? Nelly said you were coming.” Dorothy was smiling at her with white, even teeth that made Georgie nervous. The young men reluctantly made room so she could join them in the circle.

“I suppose that makes you Nelly’s daughter,” one of the men said.

“I suppose it does, but thankfully I’m many other things besides.”

The man laughed but hardly managed to pry his eyes from Dorothy. He was handsome in a bland way and spoke with the hint of squeezed colonial vowels. He held an unlit cigar, but one of his fingers was twitching, and his laughter sounded as if he were on the verge of spitting, as if he were holding marbles in his mouth. Georgie waited for Dorothy to introduce them.

Instead, she said, “Excuse us. I need to show Georgie something.” Without another word, she was gone. Georgie hesitated a moment—meeting the bewildered eyes of the men—before following Dorothy as she slipped out of the drawing room and down the hall. At the end of the hall, Dorothy turned into another room, and once Georgie went in, Dorothy closed the door behind them.

She flicked a match and lit a thin white candle on the table, illuminating the library, with shelves full of books up to the ceiling

and a narrow ladder leaning beside the window. Georgie looked around and back at Dorothy.

“Alone at last,” Dorothy said.

“That man’s in love with you,” Georgie said, realizing it herself. “They both are.”

“They’re infatuated. It’s not the same.”

“How do you know?”

“Who cares. Freddie can’t stop telling me all about it. It’s horrendous.”

“I can imagine,” said Georgie, who couldn’t.

“Drink?” Dorothy pulled from a shelf a heavy cut-glass decanter of brandy and two tumblers, the kind Georgie’s father drank from. Georgie nodded. She was rather overwhelmed by Dorothy’s ease, and she tried to unstiffen her own body as she found herself a place in a large leather chair. She could still hear the blur of chatter in the drawing room.

Dorothy poured. “Do you paint?”

“Terribly,” Georgie said, “but cheerfully.”

“Good,” Dorothy said, who handed her a drink and, after offering a cigarette to Georgie, who declined, lit one for herself. Georgie took a cautious sip of the brandy. She knew she would have to go home for dinner—it was still only early evening—and she wondered what Nelly would say if she were visibly drunk.

“Are the parties always like this?” Georgie said, watching Dorothy sit on another armchair and draw her knees up to her chest like a girl. Georgie had recognised other people out in the drawing room—the painter Rothenstein, the actress Florence Farr.

“Always.” Dorothy glanced back towards the drawing room, as if the chatter were carrying on purely to irritate her. “Freddie,

whom you didn't quite meet, is on the road to being a typical Oxford man."

Georgie nodded. "I think I'd prefer to *be* an Oxford man than to marry one," she said, taking a larger sip this time. "I am a translator."

"You are? That's something, I suppose." Dorothy was still frowning as she balanced her cigarette between two slim fingers. "But all those Oxford types are the same; I plan to do things a little differently. I'm on the lookout for something"—she tapped her fingernail on the lip of her glass—"though to be honest I'm not sure what yet." She smiled. "Do you go in much for the occultish things, the séances and all that?"

"Do you?" Georgie had only read about séances. She liked the idea of speaking to the dead, but at the same time she found something embarrassing in the expectation they would answer.

"I've been to some, all dull. But I've heard about an occult order, a sort of society, one of those secrets everyone's talking about. Very exclusive. I'm trying to get an invitation. You could come with me, if it was of interest? It will probably be codswallop but maybe entertaining codswallop. I won't be asking Freddie or Herb to come, I know that much."

"I'd like that." Georgie watched Dorothy, who at the mention of Freddie and Herbert looked thoroughly bored—but the bored expression of long-gowned, glamorous Dorothy Shakespear was exquisite. At that moment Georgie had the feeling that if the dead would speak to anyone, it would be Dorothy Shakespear.

"I'll let you know," Dorothy said. "Also, some of us are going to Florence next month. A painting trip. Painting and rambling. And drinking. If you want to join."

Georgie felt a trickle of excitement, before she realised, of course, she couldn't do anything of the kind.

“I have to go back to school.”

“Surely Italy is a better education than St. James’s?”

“Of course,” Georgie said, putting her drink down on the table, “but . . .” The sentence that had been forming on her lips fell away, and she found herself staring at the lazy trail of smoke from Dorothy’s cigarette as it rose, weaving in and out of itself. There was no way that Nelly would let her quit school. But the longer Georgie sat drinking brandy with Dorothy, as their conversation ambled between the Futurists and Debussy and those new silk dresses which fell straight to your ankle, the more convinced she became that Dorothy’s approach was the right one. Surely Georgie’s life could also be different.

That night she’d gone back with her mother for dinner at Drayton Gardens. It was probably the brandy, but in the car she thought her pulse was so loud that her mother would hear it. When they got home there was a pause while Nelly went to talk to Georgie’s father upstairs, but when Georgie arrived at the dinner table, both her parents were already sitting in their places. Lucy brought in the soup, and both Nelly and Gilbert seemed to pay the soup more attention than usual. Were her parents responding to her? she wondered. Could they sense this change inside her, this determination? They each had a glass of wine, which Georgie pretended not to notice; the presence of alcohol in the house had become a source of anxiety, so that no one looked at or spoke about it. How timid this behaviour seemed to her, almost dishonest. Georgie was filled with bravery and brandy. She glanced over to see Lucy retreat to the other room. She raised her spoon above her bowl and paused.

“I have decided to leave St. James’s,” she said. “Dorothy and the others are going to the Continent, and I plan to go with them.”

Her mother held a crust of bread halfway between her lips and her plate. "Oh, darling. You can't leave." It had been Nelly's idea to commit Georgie to St. James's School for Girls in West Malvern.

"I spend all day learning nothing of use, and I have hardly any time when I come home to study *real things*." Her older brother, Harold, was in his last year at Eton, and he too disliked school, but at least he was studying history and theology. St. James's taught classes on sewing and cookery and deportment, to a horde of girls who seemed somehow satisfied with this as an education.

"Dorothy loved it there."

"Maybe so"—and if she had, she certainly hadn't mentioned it—"but *I don't*." It occurred to Georgie only now that Nelly would have much preferred a daughter like Dorothy: charming, easy, gifted at telling people what they wanted to hear.

Her father had taken a large spoonful of soup and now tore a chunk of bread in his fingers.

"Are you sure you want to leave?"

"I wish I liked it more," Georgie said, "but I can't stop criticising it."

He smiled. "You get that from me."

"You think she doesn't get it from me?" Nelly's smile was tight. "It's only another year to stay on. And the school is very well regarded."

"I don't see the point in staying," Georgie said. "What's the use? It would cost less to have me at home."

Nelly shook her head slowly. "There are different kinds of cost."

Gilbert reached forward for his glass and took a gulp of wine. "You would have done far better at Eton and Oxford than Harold or I will ever do." No one contradicted him. The greatest achievement

of Gilbert's education was being part of the winning team in the Oxford Fours boat race. He never took a degree. But no one would consider sending Georgie, a young woman, to Oxford.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Georgie said, gathering momentum, "I'm going to Italy with Dorothy. I've decided."

"All right, pup, we hear you," Gilbert said. "We can talk about it. But the thing is we have our own news, actually. Your mother is kicking me out of the house again."

"Gilbert."

"It's true. She's requested I leave for a few weeks. Leave her to her soirées and her lectures."

"That is *not* what we discussed," Nelly said. She put her spoon down and sat very still. The last time Nelly had sent him away, it was to a home for inebriates in Twickenham. It had taken months of Georgie's pleading before she had let him come back. They hadn't mentioned it afterwards.

"It is, really," Gilbert said cheerfully, finishing his glass and looking around casually to see if Lucy might refill it. Georgie delivered soup to her mouth, then spent some seconds coaxing herself to swallow. "But I love your mother, and I give her what she wants, insofar as in my awfully limited capacity I am able. I've decided to go down to Suffolk and catch up with an old military chum."

Georgie swallowed. She knew that there was a lot more to what was being said, but right now she didn't want to consider it. She tried to glide past these words, past the looks that her parents were exchanging, and said with confidence, "And I will leave St. James's."

Her mother glanced at the two of them, placed her spoon back down on the tablecloth, and, like a defeated ruler, rose from her chair.

"Very well," she said. "You both must do as you like."



Georgie heard a knock on her door a few hours later, when she was sitting on her bed reading her Latin primer. She was continuing with her translation of Pico della Mirandola; after she'd mentioned it at the soiree, it seemed more urgent than before. Wouldn't a project like this be worth leaving school for? Or would she find it too lonely? It could take years. The door pushed open, and her father leaned his long frame against the doorway before coming in and sitting beside her on the bed.

"Are you here to talk me out of it?"

He smoothed the bedcover with his thick fingers, and she could feel his breath, warm air, claret, smoke. "I'm here to make sure you're sure. I'm only concerned that, without school, you wouldn't have enough structure."

She put the primer face down beside her on the bed. It was easier to be honest with him than with her mother. "I'm not completely sure. But I think I'm sure. I want to go to Italy. I have some translation projects. That might be enough." She paused. There was the possibility, of course, that it wouldn't be. That perhaps she would struggle. "Do you think it's enough?"

"I'm sorry, pup. I don't know. And that indecision, I gave that to you too."

"It's not your fault."

"But I could have tried to cure myself, instead of just blindly passing it on," he said. "Other people just make up their mind and know."

"I think that I know," she said, wishing she could sound more certain, wishing for once she were more like Nelly, who always

seemed sure of the answers. "If I left school, I think I could use my time far better than I do now."

"I'll tell you one thing. The times when you really do know, it's heavenly." Gilbert was looking down at the bedspread, at his hands, which cupped one another. "It does happen, even to critical souls like us," he went on. "I knew when I married your mother that it was exactly what I wanted."

"You did?" She was surprised.

"Well, I had been smitten with someone else—Margaret was her name, an absolutely ripping girl, actually—but she was not the right sort, and we both knew it. And it was she who introduced me to your mother." He tilted his head. "I don't know why your mother gave in and married me. A moment of weakness, I suppose. She desperately wanted to upset her mother, and I was the perfect fix."

"You still think it was a good decision?"

"Well, some fellows doubt their marriages every day. I never did. I loved her. Still do."

Georgie was puzzled by this. "Maybe that has less to do with her and more to do with you."

"Maybe," he said, "but maybe it has something to do with both of us. Anyway. I say you should go ahead and leave school. We'll look out for you, make sure you don't get lost without it."

"I don't think I will be," she said quietly.



And she wouldn't have been lost without it, she thought now, as she walked along the edge of Berkeley Square Gardens towards the dormitory, avoiding the muddy straw put down to dampen the

noise of cars, her pace fast and deliberate through the dark streets. Gilbert would have helped her to adjust to life without school, and she would have had her own independence to study and translate as she wished. Still, it hadn't happened that way. Instead, in November 1909, after returning from one of her trips to Italy—from three weeks of reckless discussions and exploring ruins and painting, from laughing and dancing with Dorothy Shakespear, and watching clusters of artistic young men eyeing Dorothy adoringly—she had received a telegram to say that her father was dead.