

# THE BIRD IN THE CAGE

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Light dances across the floral encrusted wallpaper. It's peeling, there in the right corner. It started three days ago. I admit, I helped a little. Once I noticed the corner furling back I had reached up and pulled some of it down to reveal a thick patch of yellow glue. Beyond that was nothing more than the bare bones of the house.

I tried putting it back together. I wetted the paper, dabbed water over the yellow flowers and curling leaves. It helped very little in reapplying the paper. It is very old you see, I put it up when I was twenty. I thought it would liven up the room to have such ornamentation instead of the bland brown walls that hide behind it.

I decided on this particular pattern for its yellow petals, eccentric curls and loops in the shape of vines. The flowers were once framed with gold leaf, hand painted on a robin's egg background. The gold leaf started to flake a year ago. I'd been so upset when it happened. The scale of gold on the floor had quite nearly broken me. It was such a silly thing to be distressed over, but I cried for days about it.

My husband, Robert, and I built this home ourselves. This particular room had not been a part of the plan though. Truth be told, I don't know where it came from or who built it. I stumbled on the door by accident three years after the home was complete. When I asked Robert about it he was as oblivious to it as I was. At least he pretended as much.

This wilting room is a strange one. There is only one window. It is round and about twelve inches in diameter. It is a shame that there are no other windows to the east or the west. It is so well above my head that I can't see out of it except for the fading edges of morning and evening. It would be nice to wake up to a sunrise, or fall asleep to the burning colors of a sunset. I know that it faces the lake out back, though. I know it because I saw it once whenever I stood out by the water. That little glass face stared back at me, mocking me like it knew something I didn't.

I suppose it did have its secrets. I wish I had known about them then. Now I know everything the room keeps. The most disturbing thing I'd uncovered about the room was a bird cage. It is in the same shape of the house with two peaks for the east and west towers. It's made of black iron bars. They had been white once, but like the gold leaf it had chipped away to reveal orange rust. It's hideous. I suppose someone else might think it is pleasing, but the fact remains it is an exact replica of the house. It makes me uneasy.

This whole room makes me uneasy and yet I can't tear myself away from it's mystery.

The only thing that makes the cage beautiful lies within the iron walls. I'm not sure how the canary got into the coop. You see, it wasn't there when I first found the cage. It's like it just appeared overnight or out of thin air, just like the birdcage. Just like the room. I named her Charlotte, after my mother because she has a beautiful singing voice and red feathers as bright as her auburn hair. The bird's song is the only sound that can escape the room.

Charlotte and I have been friends for a long time. If she hadn't come I don't know what I would have done. Perhaps I would have died of loneliness. Robert spends time with me, but he does not look at me the way he used to. I love him so much, but I'm afraid he no longer feels the same as when we were first married. It only got worse when Charlotte appeared. He became more distant. He no longer came to the room whenever I visited with her.

He rarely comes to visit at all. It's been nearly two weeks since I've seen him. I miss him so much.

Charlotte has started to sing. It's a beautiful song that I've grown quite fond of. I hum along with her as I reach into the cage. She only sings like this when her wings have grown too long. I have to clip them.

She can't fly away, not when she is locked inside her little house, but I can't take any chances. What if she got out when the window was open? Or the door? I know it is selfish of me, but my heart would break if something happened to her. She's too special. Have you ever seen a red canary? I would think not, they're very rare. And not one bird, canary or any other, has as beautiful a singing voice as Charlotte.

Her song climbs higher as I stretch out her left wing. I pull the shears out that I keep in my pocket and clip one primary, and then another, and another. She sings louder. I hum with her in our old fashioned tune.

"What a lovely voice," someone says.

I turn slowly. Robert stands with hat in hand; his knuckles white as he grips the brim. There is a worry line between his brows that makes him appear older than the last time I saw him. Not only that, but gray hairs have started to come in just above his ears. Has it been longer than two weeks? He looked so fair the last time I saw him.

"What have you done to your hair?" he asks. He steps forward abruptly and snatches the shears out of my hand.

"I haven't done anything to it. I've only been clipping Charlotte's wings." I hold Charlotte against my chest whenever he takes the scissors from me. "Be careful with those! I've not finished her other wing."

"You have, it's all over the floor. Look!" He points the blades towards my bare feet.

I hold Charlotte a little closer as I peer down at my toes. Red curls decorate the floor in little circles and twists. I reach up to my head. My hair is much shorter. Just this morning it was to my waist and now it brushes the top of my shoulders.

"But Charlotte—" I start.

“You are Charlotte, my love,” he says.

I shake my head. He doesn’t know what he is talking about. He hasn’t for quite some time now. We go through this every time. Robert never listens to me anymore.

“She is here. Look!” I hold my hands out to him. Charlotte is gone. I look around, but she is not on the floor, neither is she back within her cage. She is hiding. I believe Robert must frighten her because she always disappears whenever he is in the room.

“My little bird, why do you torture yourself so?” Robert asks. His blue eyes glisten as he takes my hands. “You know how much it pains me to see you like this and yet you continue to do it. Why, Charlotte?”

I pull my hands away from him. “You never let me outside anymore,” I say.

“How can I when you remain unwell?” Robert steps closer to me again. He takes up my hands once more and brings them to his lips. “I just want you to be well again.”

“I’m fine! How can you think me otherwise? Is it because you can’t see the bird? You’ve heard her sing, so you *know* I’m not mad. I know you have, you have said as much.” I don’t protest whenever Robert wraps his arms around me. I want to hit his chest, but it feels so good when he holds me. He is so warm and strong and safe.

“I’m sorry, my bird. I didn’t mean to upset you,” he says. His hand smooths over the back of my head, and then stops whenever he reaches the new length. He pulls away all too soon. “I’ll come back again,” he promises. Robert kisses the top of my head before he leaves. How I’ve missed the touch of his lips on my skin.

“Tomorrow?” I ask hopefully.

Robert smiles. “I can’t tomorrow, but I’ll be back next week. Why don’t you work on a new song for me until then?”

“If you insist,” I say.

“I do love to hear you sing,” he says.

It was how we met, Robert and I. He heard me singing at a party once. He had asked me to marry him right there on the spot before the last word had left my mouth. I enjoy singing for him. I wish he could hear Charlotte and I sing together though. Just once. I know he’d love it.

I press my empty palm against my chest as he leaves. The iron gate creaks as he pulls it shut behind him. He turns the key in place. I listen to the sound of his footsteps retreat down the long spiral staircase.

It’s not a bad place, this room with the peeling wallpaper and great big bird cage. It can feel quite empty when it is not full with the sound of a song. But I know I won’t be alone for long. The red canary will come back, she always does.