

Bea and Her Bird Brother by Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe reports that his new Latro novel, Soldier of Sidon, should be out in the fall. He's also working with artist Lisa Snellings-Clark on a chapbook, the title of which will probably be Strange Birds. Word is that the chapbook will probably be published in early June. His latest tale is short but potent.

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"You just missed your brother," the nurse said.

Bea glanced at her watch. "He can't have stayed long." It was six; visiting hours were six to eight.

"He wasn't supposed to be in there," the nurse said. "I didn't see him until he left."

Bea signed the screen and went to the elevator. It was smooth and silent--remarkably so, she thought, for a hospital built in the nineteen-twenties.

The corridor looked clean, though she knew the boy-high dark green and the tousled-hair-to-ceiling light green had been chosen to hide dirt. Before she was born these walls had been white and immaculately clean and these halls had smelled of disinfectant instead of room deodorant.

Things didn't always get better. Sometimes they got worse. Dad would go. Soon. Very soon. Go, and never come back to her.

"Hello, Dad." She gave the old man in the bed her best and brightest. "How are you feeling today?"

"Light." His voice was thin but melodious, as if some tiny person in his throat were playing a flute. Old men were not supposed to have voices like that. For the first time it occurred to her that no one enforced such things.

"Sit down, Bea. I can't see you."

She sat, the hospital chair so low, and the hospital bed so high, that their faces were nearly at a level. "Did Benjy come? One of the nurses said he had."

"Him?" The fluting little voice was not contemptuous, only tired. "He won't come. Never."

His eyes turned toward her, moving more slowly than other eyes. Their whites were yellow. "You're sitting. That's good. I've got to tell you about the bird people."

Bird watchers, she thought.

"The Big Folks didn't like us, Bea. Spread poison to wipe us out. Me and Annie, we run. Maybe others run, too. I don't know. Only there wasn't any with us. It was just me and Annie for ... I don't know. It seems long sometimes, when I think back. Only...."

"Who was Annie, Dad?"

"Maybe it was only a day or two. Maybe three before they got her. After I buried her, I just kept going deeper in to get away from them, Bea. Oh, I knew where a gate was. I just didn't want to go back. Back to what? That was the question. That was always it. Ugly buildings on ugly streets and work I hated. That was what it was to me, and I knew it and didn't want it."

"But, Dad...."

"You won't ever understand why I stayed, because you won't ever see it. Flowers bigger than I am, and

smell so sweet it got you drunk. Cold springs to drink of, and hot springs. Some so hot you had to walk a mile down to wash. Trees up to the sky, and people with wings living in them."

"Bird people, Dad? Is that what you meant?"

"I could climb those trees, Bea, or some of them. The ones with rough bark, you know. Climb way high up. Only I didn't have wings. I'd watch, every day. At night, when I'd found a little hollow or something way high up, I'd dream about it--how I'd wake up with wings and go flying from tree to tree and sometimes way up to the tops of the tallest, up where the air was thin and cold. I'd wake up, and for a minute or two I'd think it was real and feel for my wings and try to move 'em." The old man in the bed chuckled, a ringing of wooden chimes very far away. "I'd cry then, sometimes, Bea. Bawl like a baby. You'd have been shamed of me."

"I'd never be ashamed of you, Dad."

"I said the day would never come when I decided to go back, only I was wrong. I got to missing certain things and forgetting certain others, and decided I'd had enough. I'd learned the language, you see, or bits of it, only I'd never be one of them. And I knew it. I told myself they weren't my kind--which was the truth--and it would be better for me to get back to my own people. Which wasn't."

"Are we so bad?"

"Not you, Bea. Off I went. It was slow, you see. If I'd had wings, I could have done it in an hour. Only I didn't, and that was the whole trouble. I had to walk, and ground was the most dangerous place. The higher you got, the safer you were. How it always was there. So I'd go from limb to limb when I could. Sometimes they touched, and I could step over. Sometimes I had to jump, and that was risky. Sometimes there was nothing close enough. I'd have to go down to the ground, a long climb down and a long climb back up. Scared, too. Scared every minute I was on the ground, and every minute when I was just down low."

Bea smoothed her skirt over her knees, as she always did when she was thoughtful. "There are things ... certain things I recall from childhood, Dad. The dog that mauled Benjy when we were little.... You were never scared, never scared of anything or anybody, and everybody knew it. All the kids. All the neighbors."

Dry and remote, the chuckle returned. "After being there? No. No, I wasn't. I'd got away from things that would've eaten that little doggie for a snack. You hid, too, once. Remember that?"

"When I was little, Dad?" For the first time, Bea really saw the hospital room, all taupe and pastel green, save for the bouquet she had sent from the office. "Sure. Lots of times. Behind the couch, mostly. Under the dining room table. Even in the clothes hamper."

"Further back."

She smoothed her skirt again. "Well, it was--"

"Not that time. Go back further."

"You didn't even let me say it, Dad."

"You hadn't gone far enough. Your eyes told me. Further. The first time you ever hid. The very first."

"But--"

"Back. Go back now. I'm not going to be around much longer, Bea."

She shut her eyes, and something horrible stalked the dark, strewing its sharp stench on the sweet, moist air.

"There! That's it. Where are you?"

"In the leaves." She heard her own voice, and had no idea what it was talking about. "Big leaves, Dad... Her eyes opened. "They can't have been as big as that."

"You remembered." He was trying to smile, this though Death (invisible, ever-present) blew each flickering smile away. "Wanted to see if you could. I found your ma, Bea. Found her on the ground one day when I was trying to get back here. She'd hurt her wing. Hit a limb or something. She was never sure what. Not Elsie. This isn't Elsie."

"My real mother."

"That's right, Bea. Your real mother. I called her Ava, even if it wasn't her name. I couldn't sing the real one, so Ava's what I called her."

"You and Mom always said I was adopted." The flowers should have perfumed the room, but for some reason they did not. There was only odor of the spray.

"It was true in a way, Bea. Elsie adopted you, and when Benjy came she treated you--"

Bea shook her head. "She's gone, Dad. Don't get me started on how she treated me. The woman's name was Ava?"

"No ... not really. It was just what I called her. I couldn't sing her real name. Didn't I say? She'd hurt her wing, the one over on the right side. It wasn't cut off or anything, but she couldn't fold it right, and she couldn't fly. She used to lay it over us both when we slept."

Bea would have objected, but something inside seemed to be choking her.

"She's ready to die when I found her. She hadn't been getting a thing to eat. I climbed, and ate some myself, and carried some down to her." The old man's eyes closed.

"Dad?"

"Just remembering, Bea. I'm not ready to go yet, and I won't go till I am." He fell silent, breathing deeply.

She waited, and at last he said, "I had to beg her to eat. I put it in her mouth and begged her to chew. All sign language, you know. I couldn't sing it at all then, and I never did sing it well. Not half what they did. But I got her to eat, and she felt a little better afterward, a little stronger, and I got her to climb up a ways. Not far, but we were off the ground, and that was safer."

Bea nodded, wondering whether he had always been--like this. Was this what he had been hiding so long, this irrationality?

"Pretty soon we climbed way, way up, the two of us. We built a nest up there--a better one than the flying ones did, because I knew more about building. I had more patience, too. By then I knew she was going to lay. She'd told me, part by signs. But part by song, because I'd got to where I could understand a little, and even sing back a bit myself. It always made her laugh, but I didn't mind."

"Elsie used to laugh at you, too," Bea said. "That was the only time I felt sorry for you. You were so

good, so competent. But you'd try to explain baseball to her, and you never seemed to understand that she didn't want to know."

"I never did understand people who don't want to know, Bea." The distant flute was humble now, apologetic for a fault found only in the instruments of music. "Now, well, maybe you don't want to know this. About Ava and me. But it's about you, too, so you ought to."

"And it's been tearing you up for years, keeping it in." Bea sighed, and wondered whether her flowers were starting to droop, just as she was. "So go on. Please go on. I want to know." How long would the knowledge that her father had died insane tear her up?

"She laid, and it was two eggs like I knew it would be. When the women laid, it was always two. I asked about it one time and she showed me her breasts--one child for each nipple is what she said, and I still think it makes more sense than what we do."

For the rest of her life, probably.

"The eggs are pretty. Not just white or brown like hens' eggs. Big blue eggs with white and gold speckles. The way they usually do is for the woman to warm them while the man gets something to eat, and him to while she does. But I was better at finding food than Ava was, and a better climber, so I'd get enough for us both and bring it back to the nest, and we'd eat it there together."

Trying to be brave, Bea nodded. "That's nice."

"It was. It sure was. I think back, and...."

She did not know what to say.

"And I wish all over again that they'd never ended. Well, they did. Not because Ava died--she didn't, not then--but because her eggs hatched. It's just about always a boy and a girl. Have I said that?"

"No, Dad. Not till now."

"Not always, but nearly. That's what it was for us. The girl...."

"Oh, Dad!" She squeezed his hand.

"The boy had wings. At first I thought he wasn't mine. He was just a little bit of a thing. You both were. Premies, the doctors would've called you. You could nurse, though, and you got bigger every day. When he was bigger, I could see he was mine after all. It was the same face I'd had, the face I'd seen in pictures my mother took, and he had my eye color.

"Bright blue."

"That's right. Their eyes are dark, or Ava's were."

"Like mine, Dad?"

"That's right. Just like yours, because it was you, Bea. You were that girl. I know you don't remember, but you were, and you didn't have any more wings than I did. Ava pretended she was happy with it, when it tore her up something awful. I could see the hurt under the smiles, and it just broke my heart."

"Benjy doesn't have wings, Dad." She tried to make her voice and words as gentle as she could. "I've seen him with his shirt off, seen him like that a lot of times, and he doesn't."

"Course not, Bea." The old man in the bed sounded a trifle impatient. "Benjy's Elsie's. Elsie's and mine. This's your full brother."

"My full brother?" She almost felt that she and her father were conversing in a dream.

"What I just said." The old man's eyes shut, one and then--perhaps five seconds after it--the other. She took his hand, warming it between her own and listening to his rasping breaths. Half an hour later, when she had nerved herself to speak, there was no reply.

She was still holding that hand when Raeburn came in with little Megan. Raeburn said, "How is he, honey?"

She sighed, and Raeburn repeated his question a trifle more loudly, this time without honey.

"He's gone," Bea whispered.

Raeburn looked at Megan, then back to Bea.

She sighed again. "She has to learn, and this is the lesson time. Megan, do you remember the toad you found in our yard?"

"All stiff." Megan nodded, her guarantee of her own truthfulness.

"Well, what happened to that toad has happened to Granddad. Come take his hand. He won't hurt you."

"He never done." The old man's cold hand was three times the size of Megan's warm and chubby ones.

"That's right," Bea said. "He never has and he never will. He's with the angels, darling, where he can tell God what a good girl you are."

Megan nodded again.

That night Bea--younger than Megan again--hid among leaves once more. Something huge paced the limb; footfalls more silent than sighs thundered over her mother's screams. Soon, very soon, it would find her.

She woke.

Raeburn was getting out of bed and searching for his slippers when she said, "Mama's dead."

He hugged her, and his voice was as gentle as it ever became. "It's Ace, honey." And then, feeling she did not understand. "It's your dad, Bea. Asa's passed on."

* * * *

"And now," the funeral director intoned, "you may pass the coffin one by one to pay your final respects."

He was short and pudgy, with a bald head that looked like the old paint in the kitchen.

"One at a time, please, and we'll begin with the front row on this side."

She rose.

The thing in the coffin might have been a badly made waxwork of her father. My father, she wanted to say, was full of life. My father was a fighter, a man even Elsie's carping and dirt could not pull down.

A man who might have been telling the truth, even when Death stood beside his bed and his mind was

clearly gone. A man who might really have been my father, though God knows Elsie was never my mother.

She turned away to go back to her seat. Somebody sat alone in the last row of the room of repose. Benjy? He did not look like Benjy, and certainly that big black coat--buttoned up indoors on this mild autumn day--did not look like something Benjy would wear anyplace.

She walked toward him, Raeburn and Megan momentarily forgotten. He rose at once, and her soft, "Please?" did nothing to slow his retreat.

He was tall, and clearly vigorous. Though he did not run and she trotted, she was handicapped by three-inch heels and gained only slowly. She was still ten strides behind, still pleading with him, when he turned onto a nameless suburban street. By the time she reached it he was gone, though the black raincoat he had worn lay empty on the sidewalk, half covering a pair of black shoes.

Moved by a premonition akin to dread, she looked up.

A bird of condor size threshed the air with eight-foot wings. When a puff of wind shook the treetops, it rose like a kite, trailing a swallow tail that might...

That could have been legs.

* * * *

Someone saw Bea fall to her knees, watched her pound the concrete with futile fists as she wept and screamed, and called the police. Hours afterward, Raeburn was able to explain to a sympathetic sergeant that her father's funeral had been that day.