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Flying Lessons

Richard Bader

Noah took great care with the cage, as Mrs. Talbot had instructed. It was heavy and his nine-year-old arms were exhausted, so he stopped every block or so to set it down. He carried it out in front of him like she said, not in one arm by his side where it would bang against his hip. "Don't jostle it," she said. "That would be bad for the bird."

Noah did not want to do anything bad for the bird, which was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Except possibly for Annabel Talbot, who gave it to him. Or maybe Annabel's giving it to him elevated her to most-beautiful-thing status, that more than her freckles and auburn hair that smelled like apples, because no one, ever, had given him anything like this bird, a live thing, a thing that now depended on him for food, for water, for changing the paper in the bottom of the cage. That was about as far as he'd thought through the dependence part. His friends with dogs were supposed to walk them, and he envied them this task, but he was aware of no bird corollary to dog walking, so for now he was pretty much content to stick with food, water, and cage paper: fundamental things, responsibilities he readily accepted. Greedily, even.

Mrs. Talbot had offered him a ride home after Annabel's birthday party, but Noah said no thanks. That was because while he liked Mrs. Talbot a lot, his mother did not, and if his mother knew that Mrs. Talbot had driven him home from a party she would not have let him go to in the first place, it might send her off into the zone. He hated the zone, especially when he did things that caused her to go there, like do something he knew would make her mad, which is what accepting Mrs. Talbot's ride offer almost certainly would have done. This was why Noah hadn't told his mother about the party, but had lied and said he was going to Jeremy's house.

He had bought Annabel a Make-Your-Own-Fashion-Headband kit, exhausting nearly everything he'd saved from his allowance. Annabel was crazy about headbands. Noah had noticed.

Annabel's party was the first party Noah had been to where a girl invited boys. (His friend Thomas had once invited Nina Myerson to a party after weeks of going around school saying he was going to marry her, but she wisely decided not to show.) Three boys came—Noah, Jeremy, and Brian—plus eight girls, nine counting Annabel. Noah didn't know what to expect from a girl's birthday party, but it turned out to be not all that different from boys' parties he'd been to. It was mid-April, cool but nice out, so they mostly stayed outside. There was a scavenger hunt, and then a three-legged race, for which Annabel enthusiastically volunteered to lash onto Noah, triggering an eruption of giggles from her girlfriends and a deep reddening of Noah's normally pale, thin face. They finished up with soccer, which Mrs. Talbot abruptly stopped when the ball got kicked into a bed full of yellow flowers, beheading several.

"That's where we buried Chelsea," Annabel explained to Noah. "She was like a hundred in dog years."

That year in school they had done evacuation drills where they instructed you to avoid a "zone"—the cafeteria, the library, a hallway—because that's where the pretend trouble was, the fire, or whatever. So Noah started calling the place his

mother went her zone. He never went there when he knew she was in it. At school they numbered them, but at Noah's house there was only the one.

Brian demolished the piñata on his second swing, and they all went inside to watch Annabel open gifts.

Noah had missed the message that Annabel loved birds. Her gifts included a bird book, a bird puzzle, and a pair of rubber boots with ducks on them. Lucy and Sarah each had even bought her an actual bird, and you could hear them *cheep-cheep-ing* under their dome-shaped cage covers on the Talbots' coffee table. Bird-as-present was a whole new concept for Noah, the closest comparison being the two neon tetras someone once bought Brian for his birthday, which met their end as sushi for his dour-looking Oscar fish.

“Oh!” Annabel gasped in amazement when she pulled off the first cover, then “Oh!” again with equal excitement after the second. Inside each cage was a parakeet: one pale blue and yellow and the other yellow and green. She hugged Lucy and then Sarah. The other girls clapped. Jeremy looked at Brian and rolled his eyes.

Noah suddenly felt very bad about the stupid headband kit, which Annabel, surrounded by bird paraphernalia, an impressive pile of bird-themed wrapping-paper, and two actual birds, picked up to open after the excitement of the parakeets died down. He looked at the headband Annabel was wearing at that very moment: lime green with smiling pink birds on it. His eyes dropped down to her feet and saw parrots on her socks where they came up out of her sneakers. Headbands, it seemed, were merely one of several media deployed to carry the bird message.

His gift looked ridiculous in its baseball-themed wrapping paper, not a bird in sight.

“Who’s this from?” Annabel called out. Noah had forgotten to get a card.

“Me,” he said. “You can take it back if you don’t like it.”

When it came to opening gifts, Annabel was a shredder. She laid bare the headband kit in seconds.

It cost \$19.95. It said so right there on the label Noah forgot to take off. He had no idea what a bird and a birdcage cost, but correctly assumed it was magnitudes more.

A few excruciating seconds of silence passed, then, “Oh! Noah. It’s *wonderful!*” It wouldn’t be a stretch to say Annabel gushed. Noah blinked uncertainly, then beamed.

Not all of it had come from his allowance. Some he took from that place in the second drawer of his mother’s dresser, underneath her bras and things. A ten-dollar bill, to be exact, though he had replaced the ten with a one so as to create no net decrease in bill-wad thickness, so nine. His older brother Ben had shown him the drawer. Actually Noah caught Ben dipping into it, after which Ben promised to beat the living crap out of him if Noah said anything. So instead Noah began availing himself of this fortuitous fiscal opportunity, a couple of dollars here, a couple of dollars there. Nine was the most he’d taken at any one time. Sometimes there was no money to be found, and it felt creepy trying to

rearrange the bras to make it look like no one had rummaged through them. Once he found a bottle.

Noah felt bad about taking money, but told himself he hadn't taken any more than he would have had if she'd paid him his allowance every week like she was supposed to. In math Mrs. Stapleton had begun teaching them spreadsheets.

"I really do love the gift, Noah," Annabel said later, coming up to him after everyone had scattered with cake and ice cream. He beamed again. "You need to invite me to your birthday party so I can get you something just as good."

Noah stared at a place in the air between them. He had been to many birthday parties, not a huge number, maybe, by the standards of the more popular kids, but a reasonably healthy number. Had any of them been his? "I don't usually have birthday parties," he said.

Annabel looked confused. "Everybody has birthday parties," she said. Then she went off somewhere, leaving Noah to pick at the pink icing on his cake with a plastic fork.

Mothers had started retrieving children when Mrs. Talbot and Annabel approached Noah. Annabel held one of her new birdcages. The cover was on, so he couldn't tell which bird it was.

"Noah," Mrs. Talbot said, "Annabel and I agree that with all the pets we have, two birds is one bird too much." The Talbots had replaced Chelsea with a Yellow Lab named Bruno and they had a cat with white feet called Sox.

"We'd like you to have this one," Annabel said.

* * * *

The house was quiet when Noah got home. His mother was there, in her zone. He could tell. It was almost a smell—less a smell he could actually smell than one he intuited, faintly sour, back in her bedroom. He could just step in the house and know if it was there. Its presence at this moment wasn't exactly a good sign, but it bought Noah some time to get the bird settled.

He eased off the cover. The bird stood on its perch. It was the green one, with the pale green breast and yellow face and black and yellow wings and triangular dark-blue marks beneath its eyes. It took three little sideways steps to the left, then three steps back to the right. Noah wondered if it needed something. The water bottle was three-quarters full, and there were plenty of seeds in the food bowl, so things seemed OK. He thought about what to tell his mother when she surfaced.

That happened a half-hour later.

"What on earth is that?" Noah's mother said, the smell fully in the olfactory realm now, no intuiting required. She sat in her chair, took a pack of cigarettes from her

bathrobe, and lit one. The parakeet step-pivoted 180 degrees to watch.

"It's a bird, Mom!" Noah said, as chipperly as he could manage.

"I can see that, Noah." Her tone was icy. Noah could feel the prospect of bird ownership slipping away. "What I *mean* is what is it doing in our living room?"

"Jeremy gave it to me," he lied.

"And why is Jeremy giving away birds?"

"They have like nine pets," he said, starting to question the sturdiness of the limb of fabrication he'd begun inching out on. "His mother said they had to get rid of one."

"Well," his mother said, blowing out a thin stream of smoke. When she was in the mood, she blew rings that Noah would poke his fingers through. "Your mother feels the same way."

"Why?" Noah pleaded.

"Pets are too much trouble."

"But everybody has pets," he said.

The way she tilted her head suggested that this line of reasoning held promise.
"Who?"

"Jeremy, Brian. Eric has a fish and a cat. Annabel has three pets."

"The Talbot girl."

A tactical error, bringing up Annabel. Noah changed the subject. "I'll take care of it all by myself. I'll buy food with my allowance."

A smoke cloud hovered around her face. When it dissipated, she said, "I don't want it downstairs."

He decided to call it Phoebe.

* * * *

There are limits to what you can do with a pet bird, and Noah did a pretty good job of surmounting them. He taught Phoebe to waddle to the side of the cage and take a sunflower seed from between his thumb and forefinger. At first, she would take it and waddle back to the safety of mid-cage, but with time she would stay, comfortable being near his hand. Once Noah tried to touch Phoebe's head with a finger of one hand while he fed her seeds with the other. To his utter astonishment and total joy, she let him, and soon even began to lean into his touch. When Noah entered the room, Phoebe would *cheep* excitedly and rock back and forth like a metronome set to a Sousa march.

One day Noah reached in the cage and extended his finger parallel to Phoebe's perch. She stepped in place for several seconds, and then tentatively stepped

out onto his finger. Noah's heart pounded so hard he thought it would frighten her. He slowly withdrew his arm, easing hand and bird out through the cage door. Phoebe looked around the room, her tiny yellow head pivoting from side to side.

"Do you want to fly, Phoebe?" Noah said softly. She turned her head to look at him.

"Go ahead," Noah said. "It'll be fun." But Phoebe wouldn't budge, so Noah put her back in her cage. She looked relieved.

Noah considered that Phoebe didn't know how to fly, so he decided to teach her. Day after day he would come home from school and hold his mother's iPad next to the cage and play YouTube videos of birds flying: hawks soaring, chickadees hovering around a backyard feeder, even huge majestic murmurations of starlings set to music, though Noah worried that these might intimidate her.

Then one day, she flew. Tentatively at first—just an eight-foot jaunt from Noah's finger to the top of his bookshelf and then back quickly to the safety of the cage. But with time she got more ambitious, flitting from desk to chair to lamp with increasing ease and confidence, or even doing great soaring laps around Noah's bedroom. Amazing, he thought, feeling prouder than he'd ever felt before. Annabel had to see this.

Annabel was enthralled. Compared to her own parakeet, which she had named Bluebell, who did nothing more exciting than eat seeds, this creature of Noah's was a veritable Cirque du Soleil of adventure, swooping and diving and hovering ever so gracefully, wings aflutter, before landing on Noah's extended finger. She half expected the bird to bow.

"Oh, Noah!" Annabel said, squealing with delight and clapping her hands.

"You try," Noah said. He sent Phoebe off around the room and instructed Annabel to extend her finger for her to land on. Phoebe surveyed the new target for a few laps and then zeroed in. Annabel flinched when the bird touched down, unused to the bony feel of the claws. Phoebe rose and hovered for a second, then settled back onto Annabel's finger. "Stay calm and hold your hand steady," Noah instructed, unused to being an expert about something but fully embracing the role.

Noah's bedroom door flew open; his mother stood in the doorway. "What is all the noise in here?" she said. Her bathrobe had cigarette-burn holes. Her hair was a mess. Phoebe rose up at the commotion and then settled back down on Annabel's finger. "Oh it's you," Noah's mother said, eyebrows arching impressively. "Why are you in my son's bedroom?"

"Mom, close the door. Phoebe'll get out."

"What is that bird doing out of its cage?"

"Close the door, *please*."

"Haven't I told you not to let that bird out of its cage?"

"No," Noah said angrily. "You said don't let her out of my room. And she won't

get out of my room if you *close the door!*"

"Don't raise your voice at me, young man!" she yelled back.

Phoebe *cheeped* and fluttered her wings, but stayed put. Annabel looked uncertainly at Noah, who took her hand and gently guided the finger with Phoebe on it back into the cage.

Noah fumed but said nothing.

"I think it's time for your little friend to go home."

* * * *

Noah felt great getting off the school bus, because Phoebe was close to mastering a new trick. He would cover her cage, hide seeds dipped in peanut butter around his room, and then let Phoebe fly around to find them. In a week she'd gone from finding three of ten to finding eight of ten. Today Noah had high hopes for a perfect score.

The smell was there, but with competition. Something cleaner, cooler, floral, carried on a light breeze through the living room. Noah traced it to an open kitchen window. On the counter sat Phoebe's cage, empty, its little wire door hanging open. "NO!" Noah screamed.

He ran through the house yelling Phoebe's name, the panic in his voice ratcheting up after each empty room. He ran into the yard, looking up into tall trees and calling for her, birdseed in his open left palm and his right index finger extended as a landing pad. Two crows watched indifferently from the branches of a tulip poplar. Noah began to sob.

He pushed open the bedroom door and stood, arms straight at his side, fists clenched, jaw clenched, face scrunched, eyes swollen with tears, ninety-nine pounds of barely contained fury. "What happened to Phoebe?" he demanded. A head poked out from the covers. Two eyes in a wrinkled face struggled to focus. It reminded Noah of a turtle. She muttered something he couldn't hear.

"What did you do to Phoebe?"

"Go away, Noah." Following her words was like slipping on gravel. "Let me sleep."

Noah glared.

"I've told you not to come in here."

"What happened to my bird?" he said, pausing after each word.

"I cleaned her cage."

"With the window open!"

"I was doing you a favor."

“You let her go!”

“It’s a bird, Noah. My God.”

“My bird!”

“I’m sleeping.”

He left the bedroom, slamming the door with such force that Mrs. Weldon next door thought about calling the police, thinking she’d heard a gunshot.

* * * *

Noah didn’t especially like Richey Dell, who had a deserved reputation as a bully and who kept trying to enlist Noah in things he didn’t feel comfortable doing, like distracting a lunch lady so Richey could swipe a piece of pie, or once blowing up one of his—Richey’s—little sister’s dolls with a cherry bomb. But it was Richey Dell whom Noah sought on this Saturday morning for one reason: Richey Dell owned a pellet rifle. He and Richey were in Richey’s huge backyard shooting it.

The yard backed up to a woods, and in the corner near the trees sat an impressive shooting range with a wooden platform and thick padded canvas to stop the pellets. Richey had standard targets—paper bulls-eyes and human silhouettes like they used at shooting ranges—but these were uninspiring. Vastly preferred were various plastic toys that Richey had tired of. Old Transformers today, for instance, six of them lined up on a two-by-four at a distance of about fifteen yards.

The Transformers were easy to hit, and responded in satisfying ways, spinning off the board as chunks of plastic flew into the air. And they were surprisingly resilient, enduring, maimed but still prop-up-able, round after round. They were on their fourth round of alternating shots when Noah lay prone on the ground, steadied the rifle against his cheek, sighted down its long barrel, and fired. The targets didn’t flinch.

“You missed!” Richey said, delighted. “How in the world could you miss?”

Noah stood and walked in the direction of the targets but then past them, veering to the right to where the Dells had a birdbath near the tree line.

Richey ran up beside him, and the two boys looked down at the birdbath. A robin lay on its side in the water, a dark hole where its eye had been. “Holy shit!” Richey said, as the water turned red.

Noah picked up the bird, holding it gently with cupped hands, feeling the blood and water run through his fingers. He took a cloth from his jacket pocket and wrapped the bird with it.

“I have to go,” he said, and walked away. Richey stared in awe.

* * * *

It was dark when Noah lifted the birdcage from the top of his dresser. The dead bird lay on old newspapers in the bottom. When the bleeding had stopped—this hadn’t taken long—he had wrapped it in a clean cloth, a white hand-towel from

the bathroom. He left through the kitchen so he wouldn't wake anybody. The clock on the microwave said 1:09.

He opened the gate, entered the yard, and stopped, waiting to be sure Bruno wasn't outside. The night was quiet and moonless, cool, and very still. Noah walked across the yard and put the cage in the damp grass next to the bed where the daffodils had bloomed for Annabel's party. He took a garden trowel from his backpack and dug a small hole in the middle of the flowers, taking care not to disturb them. Then he removed the bird from the cage and laid it in the hole. He covered it back up with dirt, tamping it carefully until he felt certain no one would notice. He knelt there for a few minutes, then stood, picked up the cage, and walked home.

Richard Bader's fiction has been (or is about to be) published by the *Rkvry Quarterly Literary Journal*, the *Burningword Literary Journal*, and National Public Radio. He lives and writes in Towson, Maryland.

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