



PROMPT: You had developed a habit of sleepwalking. But you weren't alone now — it seemed like the whole town had started sleepwalking at night, too.

The Flight of the Zebra Finch

by Owen May

The ropes had felt like a desperate solution, because they were. And still, The Stranger knows in his heart that they won't work. As he gets off the bus, hamburger in hand, mayonnaise dripping down the front of his shirt, he reflects on his year in this apartment. It had been the year of sleeping pills and weighted blankets and sleep therapy and, despite all of these measures, The Stranger still often wakes up in the park, self-consciously hiding his pajamaed shame from the neighborhood.

As he vaults the difficult steps (the fast food places weighed you while you waited in line, so it was important to stay in shape), The Stranger thinks of how the ropes must make him look. Perhaps his next door neighbor, who he passes on the stairwell, would see him and wonder if he was a serial murderer desperate to be found out as he ascended the steps with the length of rope in hand.

"Hey there." The neighbor says.

"Hey there."

They've forgotten each other's names so many times that they now have a mutual agreement to not address each other by anything specific. Still, though, they hi-five if they see each other in the morning, and The Stranger would hold the door for his neighbor if they both happened to be using the elevator. The Stranger's neighbor would always, without fail, apologize to The Stranger for taking so long to reach the elevator (he's missing a leg).

Once The Stranger turns the corner into his hallway, he sees the girl, Madelyn or Margaret or something like that, smashing a wooden sculpture of a horse to bits in the hallway.

Upon seeing The Stranger, she looks down, and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“*The Life Changing Magic of Destruction?*” The Stranger asks, but he’s met with no response. Maybe she hasn’t read it, and she’d learned the book’s most important takeaway (at times of difficult transition, destroy and replace everything in your home) from a friend or relative. She looks bemused and embarrassed to be caught in such an emotional display by a total stranger, so he feels it’s the natural thing to do to bend over and pick up the statue’s disembodied ear and turn it over in his hand quizzically. He makes sure to contort the muscles of his face just so, so that his inquisitive gaze would be perceived as curious, but not judgmental.

The Stranger wonders why he puts so much care into how he presents himself around Madelyn or Margaret and he realizes it’s because he’s deeply in love with her.

He nods in acknowledgement and goes inside.

The Stranger finishes his burger and tosses the wrapper out the window. He leans out for a second and listened to the highway, where loudspeakers stationed over the traffic lights blare an optimistic and triumphant version of Mussorgsky’s “The Oxen” to calm the road rage of the drivers in the rush hour traffic.

He closes the window only to find himself dissatisfied with the silence, so he turns on the TV. It’s a nature documentary about zebra finches, and he listens to it with mild interest as he sets up the knots with which he’ll tie himself to the bed.

“Upon studying the sleep patterns of the zebra finch,” David Attenborough recounted, “scientists discovered that the zebra finch hatchling’s vocal chords vibrate silently while the bird sleeps. While it rests, the bird is rehearsing its unique mating call.”

The Stranger turns off the TV. At his last apartment, he’d left the TV on overnight and woken up to the sound of police sirens blaring Wagner’s “Die Walkure” right outside his apartment building. An old woman had made a noise complaint and called the police. The walls were thinner there than they are here, but it’s better to err on the side of caution.

Caution, The Stranger thinks as he takes his sleeping pills and binds his right arm to the bedpost, *It’s always good to be cautious.*

Sitting in the dark, the stranger thinks about how that bird recites its mating call in its sleep. He thinks, well I don't have any talent when it comes to women, *so maybe I should adapt that strategy in my own life.*

As the pills begin to drag him into the undertow of his unconscious mind, The Stranger says, voice silent, lips moving, throat vibrating,

"Madelyn, I love you."

And just for good measure,

"Margaret, I love you."

...

In the dark, the hands find themselves imprisoned. They would cry out to their ruler, if they had mouths, if he could hear them as fast asleep as he was. So instead, they schemed. They probed with their thick, hairy fingers around in the dark. Like fleshy, five-legged spiders they crept around their enclosures, searching for a knot to untie. With houdini-esque theatricality, they freed themselves from their imprisonment: truly a triumph of the body over the tyranny of the mind.

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Under an azure sky sits a dry Australian grassland. In that grassland sits an anthill like a red pimple on the light brown skin of the earth. It bustles with activity, little worker ants moving back and forth, the departing ants determined to find food, the returning ants determined to feed that food into their queen's gaping mouth.

In that sky, five strange birds are in flight. They are gorgeous creatures, with faces that resemble the amusing visages of clowns and jesters. They've got bright orange circles around their eyes, and bright orange beaks on their faces, which rest upon light brown bodies held aloft by light grey wings.

The zebra finch is not a solitary animal. It is rare to see it flying or eating alone. If it is not in a flock, it will usually be found in pairs or groups of three.

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The Stranger has become aware of the lightest of pains in his left foot. Every few moments, the pain goes sharper, deeper, as if the painful spot is being pressed against something.

Pressed against something. Pressed against the hardwood floor of his bedroom, against the cold tile of the apartment's hallway. The binds around The Stranger's wrists are gone.

He can hear footsteps, breaths, he moves to the right and feels a set of fingertips touch his own.

The Stranger thinks that there's something urgent he needs to take care of, but he can't will himself to wake up. That's the nature of the sleeping pills. It'll just have to wait.

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The main staple of the zebra finch diet is grass seed, supplemented occasionally by insects.

The five finches descend upon the sunbaked grassland. Eagerly, they begin to peck at the grass, uprooting individual blades, locating the seeds, husking them, and wolfing them down voraciously.

The zebra finch seldom dines alone.

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The Stranger's face is inches away from the floor. He finds himself stumbling around in the dark, his head bobbing up and down aptly. He steps forward, then collides with another body in the dark. The anonymous person chirps at The Stranger, then continues to stumble around.

The Stranger's foot simmers with pain. Pressing his foot into the ground, he can feel a gathering wetness on the inside of the bottom of his sock, a wetness that has begun to soak onto the outside, too.

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The finches, pecking about aimlessly, stumble upon the anthill. Two eager birds begin to peck at the hill, gobbling down ants. Soon, the rest follow suit.

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The Stranger finds himself in the dark on his hands and knees. He's bobbing his head up and down, up and down again and again. In the process of lowering and rising his head, he feels his scalp make contact with another's.

The pain in his foot has gotten stronger, too strong to ignore it seems like. The Stranger feels around the floor behind him and his fingers make contact with something thick and wet. He hovers his two fingers in front of his face and the smell is metallic.

The pain in his foot is pulling him slowly, ineptly, to the surface, but the sleeping pills dragging him into sleep are much stronger.

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Their appetites satiated, the zebra finches lift their heads skyward. On their way upward, the flock looks peaceful, content. These delicate creatures are made for the air.

As they make their way across the sky, the flock moves close together, then far apart, their wings brushing each other. No matter how far apart they get, however, the flock always stays together.

Soon, another flock merges with theirs. Now there are dozens of little birds all headed in the same direction against the setting Australia sun.

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The searing pain pushes The Stranger upward, upward, upward, shooting him far above the surface. He looks around. He is in a t-shirt and boxer shorts. He's got his arms spread out.

His sock is soaked through with blood.

All around him are dozens of his neighbors, all swerving around, eyes closed, arms flapping in the night air. The cars that congest the streets honk wildly as the flock-his next door neighbor, Madelyn or Margaret, fifty or so other faces he knows every detail of but could never put a name to-make their glorious way across the crosswalk. The traffic is hopeless against the sheer magnitude of the flock, against the sea of pajamaed and naked bodies making their way somewhere, anywhere.

The sirens blare, men curse out of their rolled-down car windows, "The Oxen" reaches its crescendo as if pleading for the drivers to remain calm, but all sound is drowned out by the flock, their voices crooning "oi! Oi! Oi!"

The Stranger breaks with the crowd, looking at the trail of blood he's left from the building's entrance to where he stands now. He takes the elevator upstairs, too bothered by the pain and the blood to care about taking the stairs.

Once he's in the safety of his own bathroom, the stranger washes the blood off his foot, then, upon seeing the splinter submerged underneath layers of semi-translucent skin, softens the skin under a stream of hot water.

He searches for a safety pin and a lighter in the kitchen. Returning to the bathroom, he cauterizes the sharp tip of the pin and digs cautiously into the skin of his foot, eventually digging out the thick splinter that had embedded itself into his sole.

He bandages his foot, then begins to clean the blood off of his floor. A realization hits him: he'd left a mess of blood all over the apartment building. Wobbling gingerly, The Stranger carries the paper towels and cleaning fluid into his hallway and scrubs the blood off the floor. When The Stranger reaches the end of the hallway, he gives up on his mission and returns to bed.

No one would know it was his blood on the floor, anyway.