

## IN THE TIME OF THE BIRDS

"That vulture! That rotten scavenger!" Freddie shouted through the kitchen window after Josh called from his "GETAWAY" in the Florida Keys. He sure had his nerve. Goes out and gets himself infected and then wants to wing his way back into Freddie's life with, "Freddie, you don't know how much I need you right now."

Well, he wasn't going to get one bit of sympathy from this wise old owl, Freddie announced, before dropping to his knees in a swamp of tears and snot.

Oh that time, just two springs ago, had begun so well, he wailed, such high hopes dashed on the sharp rocks of infidelity!

The outrageous excitement of it then! The first thing they did after closing on the bungalow, moving out of the apartment on Royal Street and unpacking their clothes was to shop at a store called As The Crow Flies. Their dream come true. A house of their own and a refuge for the birds.

Only a few months before, they found their first feeder at the store and hung it outside the sliding glass door of the balcony of their second story apartment. It was a finch feeder and they filled it with thistle. Goldfinches finally did come but so did sparrows. The sparrows fought like roosters over a hen, knocking one another off the wooden perches and scaring the songbirds away. Freddie wanted redbirds, bluebirds, thrushes, meadowlarks, titmouse and hummingbirds, birds he'd seen in books and dreamed about having in a yard with trees. He was tired of looking out over parking lots. He longed for a house away from the city in a heavily wooded area like Aunt Sara's, the aunt who raised him after mom and dad died in the car wreck. But a place in the country cost too damned much so they settled on their brick bungalow on Prairie Lane, an older development with fifty-year old trees and full grown shrubs where not every house looked the same.

The house was Josh's great act of atonement. He had strayed and broken Freddie's heart. He wooed him and then wowed him with the revelation of a long held secret. A trust. Enough money in it to pay cash for a house. Freddie still wept over that "stunt" when he listened alone to soft love songs and bossa nova. But as a further consequence of Josh's undying love, he insisted that Josh title it in Freddie's name and his name only. Josh could never renege on that deal. With that, Freddie finally had Josh all to himself -- away from that sleazy crowd of tattooed bikers and bar flies Josh hung out with when they first met. How it hurt to see him slow dancing with them. That louse.

The love birds were never happier than they were when shopping at As The Crow Flies. The store had everything a bird would want for brunch: oily sunflower seeds, sunflower chips, peanut butter suet, corncobs, thistle, peanuts for Woody, hummingbird juice and mix up. The Carters, the older couple who owned the place, could have written the book about birds and they were a perfect ornithological pair to seek out for advice.

Mr. Carter wore wire rimmed glasses, had robin egg blue eyes, a knowing grandfatherly smile and a solid grip. Mrs. Carter was a short woman with a brown/gray do, who reminded Freddie of one of those straw weaving, basket making nesters who twisted straw into contented hens and quilted during winter nights. She favored thick

sweaters, checkered skirts, shawls, floral perfume and kicked about the store in penny loafers or moccasins and woolen stockings with checkered markings. Freddie treasured rummaging through the aisles and displays of the store listening to her chatter about the mating and breeding habits, the habitats and nesting grounds of her beloved fowl.

Squirrels were the main problem in the Midwest and she urged dealing with them firmly but kindly with baffles, noisemakers and trick bird feeder perches that slammed shut when they crawled and hung upside down to deprive the birds of their due. Okay, let them have the crumbs that landed on the ground for all she cared.

But just attracting the birds in the first place caused Freddie plenty of anxiety though that was to be expected of virgin birders, Mrs. Carter counseled. Just remain calm and patient: the birds will come. As evidence of the wisdom of their learned advise, the Carters hung one of each type of feeder outside the back of their store near a stand of oaks and maples. Birds congregated there and gave each customer high hopes. The Carters had been the ones who suggested that if they really, really wanted to court the birds they would need to move someplace likely to invite them in. So Freddie and Josh relied on the Carters because their suggestions always seemed to work.

Most of the time.

Freddie would never forget that first day in the store after they'd moved into the bungalow. Between them they still had a nice savings and, what the hay!, they weren't house poor yet so they could afford a few small luxuries for their little buddies. They bought a bit of everything. They wanted their little bird sanctuary to be "the best on the block." They bought a pole feeder and a baffle that looked like a New England cottage. They added two bird baths, a squirrel proof, steel reinforced hanging bird feeder, a suet basket, a peanut feeder, two kinds of hummingbird feeders and a martin house. They added two birdbaths with heaters because the Carters said sometimes, especially in winter, it was more important to have water for the birds than to feed them.

"They forage very well on their own, thank you very much," she said.

To keep the sunflower seeds from being gnawed on by roaches and mice, they needed two seed holders to hang on the garage wall. All they had to do was hold a little plastic bucket under the container, pull down the handle to open the shoot and the seeds poured into the bucket until they lifted the handle again.

Pretty nifty, Freddie thought, and couldn't stop chirping about it.

For a special treat, they bought a doormat woven with redbirds and green leaves that announced, "Welcome To Our Home." The Carters told them redbirds mated for life. That's what Freddie wanted: a mate for life. Love and joi de vivre in the mix.

They spent the entire afternoon assembling and hanging the feeders. The martin house had to be mounted on a tall, sturdy post and Josh decided that was a project for another day. Freddie felt like a merry critter in a Walt Disney movie.

"Oh, Josh," he trilled. "Thank you for all this. You make me so happy. I'm so lucky. Aren't we having such a fine time?"

"Svell. I'm loving it, man," Josh said in a voice that told Freddie he really meant it. For Josh was usually a quiet sort of guy. Strong, tall and silent. A John Wayne and more charm to boot with his slight Swedish accent.

Freddie was on the shorter side, slightly bald with a bit of a tummy, broad chested, squat as a partridge and a voice as high pitched as a whipporwill's. Josh was blond, slender, Scandanavian, blue eyed, a tanned standout in the slick light of a dark bar, the source of both pride and jealousy for poor Freddie. Freddie's boss, Bitchy Brenda, who owned the specialty travel agency where Freddie worked, told him he was a real sucker for sticking around after what Josh had done to him. But what did she know? That young, old bag, spoiled daughter of a real estate hot shot. She was just trying to keep Freddie from bawling his eyes out at the office so he could get his work done and dream up expensive vacations for her newly married college friends.

Josh had more muscles than Mr. America, Freddie liked to say. Having sexual fantasies of Josh on a good day, Freddie jaunted around the small office with a constant grin on his face, especially after one of those sudden, diving down you-know-what kind of nooners at lunch time. Low in calories, he told Brenda, much to her disgust.

He and Josh had a perfect deal going.

Freddie did all the cooking and Josh the handyman stuff. They were a real team with the housekeeping and yard work. Freddie was good at orderliness. He liked feathering the nest. Josh was a carpenter by trade but, more than that, a craftsman at woodworking, a lover of trees and natural finishes. He never lacked for work.

Contractors called from all over to have Josh leave a final touch on remodeling projects. He could do plumbing, electrical, boutique interior painting and airconditioning if he had to. Freddie couldn't dig up enough adjectives to highlight his skills. Josh was wiry and firm as an oak, and in the winter, he smelled of wood fires and fresh snow.

The afternoon they hung and filled the feeders was a cool, overcast April day. They worked all afternoon without stopping but about six or so Freddie crapped out on one of their new chaise longues on the concrete slab patio and said, "Josh, I'm tasting T-bones. A couple of strong Scotches, and then chop chop chop. A little romaine, tomatoes, olives, ranch. You get the picture."

"Better than bird seed, honey," Josh said from his perch in the crook of the large maple tree. He was in the middle of hanging one of the last feeders and from below Freddie couldn't but help admire him in his muscle shirt, tight jeans and maximum bulge. He seemed to belong in the tree, barefoot, holding himself in place with the toes of both feet. Freddie

was as happy as a red-winged blackbird in mating season. Inside, he stood at the kitchen counter looking out at Josh in the treetop and chop away on his new, not yet scratched, wooden chopping board. He finished preparing the salad and turned the steaks he had been marinating in the fridge. The potatoes were still as hard as dinosaur eggs so he cranked up the temperature in his new gas oven. Then he loaded two cocktail glasses with with tons of ice and poured the Scotch just short of the brim. A thin twist of lemon completed his order and he placed the drinks on round cork coasters that displayed two robins ostensibly in the process of working up to a mating joust. He carried them outside and sat them on the granite tables Josh had given him for their anniversary.

"Toddy time!" Freddie sang out, forming his hands around his mouth

in a beak.

"Almost done," John answered from above. He scrambled down the tree and lifted his arms like wings for a sniff. "Need a shower, Freddie."

"Oh, hurry, handsome. Your drink will be all melty. Take it with you. Your getting dressed drink."

"Ahhh," Josh exhaled, taking his first slip and letting it slide down. "I'm off."

"Now don't get lost in a bathroom rhapsody. Just a run around in the rain will do. We can always take a dip in the hot tub in just our feathers."

As Josh moved inside for his shower, Freddie plopped down on the chaise, took a deep long breath and looked up into the canopy sheltering their deep square lawn. The house was small, Freddie thought, a "peach," the real estate lady called it, but the grounds were rich. He sipped his Scotch and felt happier than he'd ever been. At last he felt free. The past didn't mean as much. All that crap they got from Ma-and-Pa Religious Righters, his grouchy macho uncle and churlish weirdo cousins was as distant as a fading migration. He had Josh and this lovely little Victorian with fireplace and double car garage, central air, three bedrooms, two and a half baths and the birds.

Josh smelled sweet after his shower. He bent over Freddie and kissed him deeply.

"Such a wonderful mouth too," Freddie cooed, smiling up at him. Josh stretched out on the chaise next to him and together they sipped their Scotches, savoring the cool evening and listening to the final clamor of the birds, tree frogs and crickets. Two Scotches later, Freddie grilled their steaks to a T and, as Josh mumbled as he snorted himself to sleep, it had been a perfect day. Oh, as Freddie would later lament, the first of many perfect days.

One by one the birds came. First, Freddie spotted a redbird in a blooming pear tree. The bird snapped its head side to side "about a million times," before flying straight to the feeder to peck and split an oily sunflower seed. Oh, what a delight! Freddie beamed. The redbird, seen close up, was the most beautiful creature he had even seen except for the first time he'd seen Josh buck naked in bright sunlight on a Maui lanai. The redbird seemed surreal, something an artist had painted out of imagination, a bird on a feeder, with its deep black markings, its daring pointed plume. And it was alive. It moved. Freddie ran right inside to get Josh and once outside they hugged each other in vernal bliss. In the following days they spotted orioles, cooing doves, a tiny flicker with a red splash on the back of its head, sparrows and, much to his disappointment, a tribe of starlings.

"For we must love all thee birds," Mrs. Carter preached when they asked her how to chase off the starlings and their rivals, the sparrows.

"They are all God's creatures. Big, noisy, black, blue, songbird or vulture, one in the same. Think of them as counterpoints to thee redbird, thee oriole. Think of them as your own, as one of your flock," Mrs. Carter preached, for she always seemed to be on some kind of mission.

On the way home Freddie and Josh maintained a subliminal silence. Each was thinking of ways to do in the starlings and the sparrows. In the most brutal and heartless ways they could think of.

"Maybe I should buy a BB gun," Josh finally said. He knew Freddie was about to explode. But what he also knew was that Freddie would never let anyone know he was about to blow until he blew.

"Well, shit," Freddie bleeped at last. "Dammit, she's right. You can't go along killing every odd duck. Look at us, Josh. Where would that leave us?"

Josh didn't know what to say. He pulled the car onto the shoulder. Perhaps Freddie saw a tear. Sweet.

Freddie said, "Odd and happy as bluebirds."

That's the way May went. And first summer days. The humidity and mosquitoes didn't seem to bother. Freddie was vicious with the bug spray until Josh complained.

"Flies and mosquitoes have no value," Freddie said. "That's why they're called pests."

"All or nothing. That's my Freddie."

Along came the bluejays, red-winged blackbirds, juncos and goldfinches. The hummingbirds never did show. Maybe their migration paths just skipped Freddie and Josh's house. But it wasn't for lack of trying on their part. Fresh, sugary red juice every few days. New recipes as Mrs.

Carter prescribed. But the hummingbirds were a no show. The damned things missed the party. Only bees and butterflies feasted there.

"On our dime," Freddie said.

Even so, Freddie and Josh watched the commotion from their patio with proud parental grins and freshly rolled joints.

"The little turds," Freddie said of the hummingbirds. "Screw 'em. Let 'em suck dandelions. Let them wither up and blow away for all I care."

"Oh heck, Freddie. Give it time. They just go on instinct, honey. Just little bitty things, them."

Freddie crossed his arms.

"Maybe so. I still feel hurt."

"Freddie, you're a stinker. You just don't understand. The whole world doesn't love you. I do. Nature goes her own way. That's all there is to it."

"Why don't they love me? What's there not to love? Such a sweet little guy. Such a goddamn great all around human being."

"Of course you are, Freddie. But the world goes its own way. As with the birds."

"I guess I just don't understand the ways of the world."

Josh sucked deeply on his roach and held the sweet/sour cloud deep in his chest.

"So sensitive, Freddie. Such a strange bird, you. It's just life, Freddie. Win some, lose some. Don't you see?"

"No," Freddie stomped his foot. "I don't see."

"Blind as a bat."

Most nights Freddie and Josh came home from work and did something on the house. Painted a wall, stripped an antique. Cozied up.

Josh was such a handy guy. That artiste would set up two sawhorses and lay a piece of immaculate oak across them and prepare it for the next day, filing, sanding, rubbing softly. Freddie sat back and watched the shirtless Josh and marvel at the muscles rippling across his back, shoulders and arms, the bulge in his short

shorts and banged around the kitchen preparing dinner, maybe grilled fish, chicken, ribs or thick pork chops. Domesticated and glad about it.

Josh liked his meat with BBQ sauce best, especially a kebab done up right with chunks of beef, chicken or shrimp and red and green peppers, onions, mushrooms and new potatoes. Yumm. Freddie served the kebabs over buttery cappellini.

"For godsakes, Freddie," Josh garbled, "pour me a little more wine, honey. That would make it heaven. Heaven."

While Josh put his tools away, Freddie washed up the dishes and put on Glen Miller. He danced around the kitchen while he stacked the dishes on the shelf. "Oh, I'm so lucky," Freddie sang, "So goddamn lucky. 'I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love with a wonderful guy'."

On summer evenings when Josh came in from the yard they lounged in the hot tub they bought as a housewarming gift for themselves. Then, fresh and smooth, they would make love and fall asleep in each other's arms listening to the trees. They held each other in bed with the windows open to the rustling of the leaves of the trees. Sometimes they lay awake deep into the night just marveling at the wonder of it all. In the morning they woke still holding each other and listened to the jubilation of the birds.

When he wasn't tinkering in his shop or with Freddie, Josh tinkered in his small flower garden on the south side of the house. The fat teenager from down the street often gunned his trashy, dented, faded Trans-Am past their bungalow and shouted, "Faggots!" They fell laughing to their knees into the grass, hitting the ground with a fist.

"Mercy, mercy," Freddie said. "Tickles me. Rib buster."

"A barbarian. A groundhog in a demolition derby."

The neighbors on either side never bothered them. Mr. Witherspoon was an 82-year-old widower. Josh shoveled his snow, carried in his groceries, changed his light bulbs and carried over small containers of Freddie's famous soups. The neighbors to the north were a young couple with a bald baby boy of popping brown eyes. They sometimes waved a weak howdy-do but kept to themselves. Fine with Freddie.

Business had slowed down that year at the travel agency and Bichy Brenda Perdue, Freddie's boss, managed to muck it up even more by getting herself knocked up.

"Ewww," Freddie and Josh held their noses.

"Abort!," they shouted. "Abort!"

"Poor bastard," Josh said. "Who'd she pay?"

Brenda's hysterical reaction to any crisis, big or small, was to download on Freddie whom in moments of distemper she called "you fucking swish" or "idiotic nelly," knowing she could dump on him because he would be a hard sell in the job market. "I mean who...really...Freddie...?" was her trump card.

"You're symbiotic, Freddie," Josh said. She's got you by the ying yang."

"Not a chance," Freddie sniffed. "Nobody gets to this old bird. I mean, except for you, sweetheart."

On the Friday night she blubbered the news, Freddie dragged through the front door exhausted and tearful. Josh undressed him and got him right into the hot tub. Then he smoothed him out on the living room carpet with a sofa pillow for a prop and massaged him, head first, applied plenty of lotion and molded Freddie's rubbery back with his powerful hands. Freddie

drifted into a deep sleep and ruefully snored.

When he awoke, he snapped to his side at the aroma of a combo pizza.

"Oh, you absolute darling," Freddie said.

They gobbled the doughy four cheese Fantastico pizza supremo extraordinaire -- Freddie's take on it -- quaffed two icy beers, all done in and crashed.

Early the next morning Freddie's eye mask fell off and the brighter than bright sunlight woke him with a start. "Shit," he cursed, "It's only six-thirty. Saturday morning. My day to sleep."

Well, shit on it, he figured, he was up, he'd only toss and turn, and ruminate. Git up, dork meister, was the message he kept hearing. So, he sang, "Get up, get up, you sleepy head, get up, get outta bed, cheer up, cheer up, the sun is..." and angrily shuffled off to the bathroom.

Breakfast! Yes! That's what he'd do. A swell morning for a tasty chicken, Swiss cheese and mushroom quiche, fruit salad with raspberries, grapes, cantaloupe chunks, sliced plums and stair fruit, and a glass of Champagne. All there in the fridge. Wasn't he an on-the-ball kinda guy?

He was standing by the kitchen counter spooning the cantaloupe with a melon spoon when he spotted THE CATASTROPHE by the pole feeder.

"Oh, no. For god sakes. Help! Help! Oh, Jesus, help me," he screamed, gripping his large forehead.

Freddie ran out the kitchen door. He stood there a long time, shocked. Feathers strewn everywhere. Mrs. Redbird lay beneath the oily sunflower seed feeder in total disarray, cruelly twisted, as though she had been speared. Freddie's first unbearable thought was that the oily sunflower seeds had gone rotten sitting in the garage and he'd killed her off with food poisoning.

Josh dashed into the yard behind him with his bed hair and naked as a newly hatched warbler. Freddie briefly admired.

"It wasn't the seed, honey. It wasn't us, Freddie. We didn't do anything wrong. We didn't cause this. Look, Freddie. Just look."

"I couldn't possibly -- look at her," he said, folding his arms, huffing, wagging his chins. "She's dead! She's got blood on her! It's a murder! It's a fucking CRYYYMMME scene!"

"Freddie, this is just life. Birds have blood in their veins. Just like we do. It's the bloody nature of things."

"I don't have to like it, much less touch it. I just don't. I won't. I can't."

"Let me show you. I will use this stick."

Josh turned Mrs. Redbird to one side.

"Lookee. See, here on the breast. A wound. It was a cat."

"A cat? But wouldn't a cat have eaten her. I mean, cats eat birds, right? Stuff like that. Such a sweet creature. Why just kill the poor thing and leave it crumpled in the grass?"

"Instinct," Josh said, almost too automatically for Freddie's liking. "Sometimes cats just kill for the fun of it. Just like people do."

Freddie continued to pout.

"I've always hated cats. Like those sneaky bastards Lisa and Tiny

keep around. You know, those disgusting cousins of mine. Litter boxes. House smells like cat shit all the time. Wait until I tell Mrs. Carter."

Freddie was quiet a minute.

"Let's poison the little bitch."

Freddie finally leaned over and looked at the wound, a single neat red gouge.

"My whole day is ROOOINNED. ROOOINNED!"

He slipped to the ground, sobbing.

Josh stood over him, his hand on Freddie's shoulder.

"Come on, Freddie. The whole day's ahead of us. We'll give Mrs. Redbird a proper burial. This is just nature, Freddie."

"Well, be that as it may, I don't have to like it." His mouth twisted with the certitude of revenge.

"Poison," he said. "No. Maybe a foot trap. Then, I'll beat the bitch to death."

He went inside and sat at the kitchen table feeling violated, worse than being stung by a bee or mosquito, worse than being slapped by his cranky old uncle. RAPE! That's what it was. RAPE! He hated cats. Slinking and slinking. Weasels masquerading in cheap fur coats, pretending to be loveable when they were not much better than giant HAIRY RATS.

He spent the rest of the weekend moping. Josh couldn't stand to sit around and flitted in and out of the house doing who knows what.

To top it off, on Monday morning Freddie hadn't even shut the office door before Bitchy Brenda hit him up with another CALAMITY. Over the weekend she had decided, strictly on her own and without consulting Freddie, with no prior notice, IPSO FACTO, NUNC PRO TUNC, that Freddie needed to hit the road again big time. She usually did the travel, enjoyed the prospecting perks and write offs, while Freddie was stuck in his chair on the phone trying to placate the clientele upset with all of her screw ups.

But there it was. Another pulled rug. Just like that.

"Tough shit, Freddie," she said when he complained. He'd just moved into a new house. It needed decorating. The yard needed work. The living room was crying out for a new color of paint.

"Freddie, the customer comes first."

("Bullshit," Freddie thought.)

"Time to get real. They need fresh meat. We can't just keep sending them to the same places. They need excitement. Entertainment. It's your turn. You'll have fun. I'm pregnant. I feel like shit."

The sad fact was that Brenda owned the business and she had the clients, good loyal clients with hefty credit card limits. Why they were loyal to her, god knows. Probably just the sorority sister connection. That's all he could figure out. Where else could she get the money to travel so far and so often. Did she ever make any money?

Yet Freddie had no choice. His opinion was shit in her book. Listen to another opinion? Nooo, not her, not Bitchy Brenda.

Except for his culinary side for which he admitted extravagance, Freddie was frugal. Josh called him miserly. Even with the trust, most of which they had invested in

the hacienda, they had limited funds, especially during what Freddie, always the activist, called HE-MAN REAGAN'S phony regime. On his own, he'd never be able to even think about traveling to Ireland, the Caribbean, Hawaii, the Mediterranean, those tacky places as she had described them to Freddie but sold to her clients as "wunderful, wunnnderful."

"Freddie, this is a compliment. You got the knack. You got an eye for the finer things. All you guys do. You can't deny it. That's why we make such a great team. It's only for a few months."

("And as for my share of the take?" Freddie thought.).

Freddie did have the touch. In his CORPORATE days at Exclusive Travel he was spotted early as a resource. He could walk into a hotel room and immediately spot if the amenities would do. The bathrooms were key for women and guys like himself. They had to be specious and well lighted, immaculate and equipped with a luxurious tub. The stars at Exclusive Travel treated him worse than Bitchy Brenda did. A lackey. Well...

How amazing though would it be if he could bring Josh along! She would never hear of it, no, not Bitchy Brenda. Josh was just another throwaway fag to her. Good enough to work on her nifty condo FOR FREE now and then but not much more than just another blob of birdshit on her balcony.

So, Freddie tearfully prepared his itineraries, neatly packed his suitcases and lifted off into the skies, leaving his house, his home, his Josh, to fend on his own.

He convinced Bitchy Brenda to curtail his travels to the U.S., the Caribbean, Mexico and Hawaii, the longest and most tiring jaunt. Even people with money were having a tough time -- relatively speaking. Lots of great spas these days. Think of Scottsdale, for instance.

The late Saturday night goodbye kisses brought tears. They fell asleep in each others arms to dreamy New Age sounds. Some even had bird sounds in the background. Early on Sunday mornings Freddie stood on the patio during a cup of coffee, threw a kiss to the birds at the feeders and crept quietly out of the front door so Josh could sleep through.

He slogged. That's all there was to say for it. Slogged. Pretended to be interested in the condos and hotels, listened patiently to the hype, kept a detailed diary. He couldn't help but be proud of his taste and judgment in finding the le place juste. He just imagined Josh and himself breakfasting in boutique hotels, strolling along the ocean, sharing sunsets.

The wait in airports though. The loneliness of hotel rooms. Fauning waiters and doormen. He so missed his evenings with Josh on the patio, decorated as it now was with pots planted with gorgeous flowers, tomatoes and special greens. So pretty out there with the breeze, the stars and the birds. Freddie spent his nights perched on the edge of the bed in a hotel room, clicking the remote, weepy and blue.

If he tried to phone Josh and there was no answer, he couldn't help but feel jealous. Josh had his hang outs. They had agreed to keep it special but no harm done to have other friends.

"Just don't stick it in, okay?" Freddie begged Josh when they agreed to move in together. "Kissy facey, a dance or two, a lunch, a dinner, a movie, fine." He feared pictured slow dancing with some HUNK at The Princess, their favorite bar. He tried not to think it. He could dance his Scandinavian heart away, kiss and peck as long as he didn't drag the HUNK into their elegant new bedroom and, well...

The first week away wasn't so bad because they had a joyful reunion that weekend and went to a dinner party at Roger's house in the burbs. Roger was one of Freddie's old boy friends who loved to cook TexMex and lavish his guests with a fantastically decorated table; never the same, always exciting. Josh and Freddie drank and made love and laughed. Saturday night it was just the two of them under a clear summer sky with the stars. The moon was nearly full.

On Sunday, Freddie caught the red eye to San Francisco. From there he was off to check out a new upscale condo/time share development on Kauai. Frugal Freddie, Josh called him. He knew how to put a pencil to it and negotiate a nice commission.

Bitchy Brenda was as bitchy as ever, more so. No appreciation for all of Freddie's good work. She was over the barfing stage but gaining weight like applesauce and knit picking every penny and coupon.

"Freddie, if the food's not free, if they don't pick up the check, it's McDonald's, Freddie. Get that. Taco Bell. Denny's."

No room service and keep the hotel movies down.

"Show 'em your business card. Act like a food critic for a travel magazine. You can get smorgasbord. I do."

("No kidding," Freddie thought). He worried about his waistline. Boredom and putting up with real estate floosies added to the temptations. Load up the platter and have an extra glass of wine. That was his only joi d'vivre on the road.

Bitchy Brenda hated the paperwork. Sure, it was tedious.

"That's called work," Freddie told her. "An honest day's work. Detail. Anybody can smooze and kiss ass. The true pro documents, triple checks, confirms, follows through, checks again. It takes more than a velvet voice and few pen scratches on a frilly note pad."

"Up yours, Freddie. And if you keep bitching about it, you're outta here, got it? We gotta do what we gotta do. I can't do it anymore so you gotta do it. See. That's life in the big city, Freddie. We're trying to run a travel agency here. Pay our fucking bills. You're the star, Freddie. You got the knack to find what these schmucks are looking for. Where else could you travel, pay your bills and end up sitting fat and pretty?"

("Speak for yourself," Freddie thought.)

Freddie half knew what Brenda said was true. For a short, overweight, balding twerp like him, gay on top of it, he was doing pretty well. Brenda's family and school connections would keep them in the pink as long as she could stand to flatter them. Hard to take sometimes, those people of leisure, the platinum crowd, powdered widows, heiress sluts, toupe' heads of the bitch and brag club. She was just waiting for her mother

to die and leave her the golden urn. But her mother looked young for her age. Good genes. And genes were all, weren't they?

Maybe this was as good as it gets. That's where Freddie was stuck. He remembered a young albino squatting on a pier in Sint Maarten: rust colored knitted hair, crummy looking face, obviously broke, brushing off flies, and as Freddie said of himself, gay on top of it.

The trouble was he missed Josh. The first week, Josh was home and eventually would answer the phone. One night, though, in late July Freddie called from Saint Lucia and Josh was clearly drunk. Freddie was due to return Friday night and they agreed to do ribs on the grill. For some reason he found hard to explain later, he went off on Josh: how he was worried about the two of them; Josh never seemed to be home. Josh came down on him like a chicken hawk on a ground squirrel.

"Goddammit, Freddie. I don't have to report to you. What I do on my own time is my business. Look at you. Flying to all those fabulous places, meeting rich guys, I bet, eating in fancy places, flirting with waiters, I bet, chefs and trying to charm the concierge. Sampling the world while I'm supposed to be waiting here like the good wife, roosting on my crack. What do you expect? Me to just dither about, plant more roses and gawk at the moon?"

Freddie smoothed himself from his head to his shoulders, breathed deeply and tried to be calm. He had no idea Josh would EXPLODE.

"No," he said. "But it would be nice to know where you are and who you are with. Also, be on notice. I am dating no one. That you can know for certain. I am hurt that you would even insinuate...knowing me as you know and love me. Not fair."

"You brought this up. How do I know what you're doing? Ven you vill call? Who you must be having dinner with."

"For godsakes, Josh. I'm sitting in a hotel room thousands of miles away, bawling my eyes out, missing you. I'm afraid, Josh, afraid of losing you, losing us, of losing what's we're making together. It's HORRIFYING not knowing what's going on with you. Who you are with and all. What you are doing."

Freddie and Josh held still. It already seemed like autumn in Freddie's thoughts. He could imagine the sounds of cicadas sawing their sad violas. In the end they agreed to kiss good night over the phone. Talk it over later, kinda thing.

The next morning Josh called early. He was crying and so sorry for his outburst. It's was Bitchy Brenda's fault. Screwed it all up. Freddie agreed to try to judge the times of his calls better and Josh promised to be more patient, to ride out the Bitchy Brenda debacle until they could work out something better in the money department. Maybe they could dip into Josh's trust -- against the advice of Josh's money guy -- and start a business where they could be together day and night. They cried together, cried so profusely they barely had the voices to say goodbye.

The week went as planned. Freddie wrapped up his appointments one day early and decided to surprise Josh with a walk-in bag of goodies. They could recreate their first feast of a short summer of feasts, bask in the glory of the trees and watch the birds coming and going from the feeders.

From the airport, Freddie drove straight to his favorite butcher.

He bought four plump veal chops, fresh asparagus, baby Yukons to simmer in a white wine parmesan sauce, two bottles of Asti Spumonti at the wine shop and whole grain rolls and peace cobbler at the bakery. His last stop was the flower shop. He'd called ahead and ordered a fine, full spray of flowers in bloom. His old friend, George -- George The Great, as he was known for his mythical organ -- was the most creative arranger in the city.

"Oh, what a fine time we'll have," Freddie cooed to himself. "Just Josh and me and the birds."

He just couldn't wait to get home. He brightened at the thought of what he had gathered for the feast and felt as excited and as greedy as a little sparrow when the feeder is full.

He pulled into the driveway past a red Porsche parked in front of Mr. Witherspoon's house. Odd, but... Rather than waste time unloading his purchases, he grabbed the Asti and the flowers for a grand entrance through the front door. It was just after 6 p.m. on Thursday night. He hoped, just hoped, Josh would be there. He turned the door handle with the bottle of Asti crooked under one arm, the flush bouquet of flowers of the season in his fist and holding the door ajar with his foot, sprung it open with a flourish.

"Ta-da! Surprise. I'm home," he sang, puffing out his chest, knowing how much Josh admired it. Not too hairy and no tits yet. Manly, he liked to think. He swung out the bouquet of flowers and Asti to sweep the room. "I'm home, sweetheart."

At no respondez, he tipped his ear. Alerted, he took a step forward. Thought he heard a rustling sound. A squirrel in the attic? But no, it was coming from the bedroom. He knew what it was. He knew. He slammed down the Asti and the flowers on the foyer table and tromped flatfooted right down the hall. He yanked open the door, his heart sped and he fainted.

When he woke, Josh was kneeling beside him in CPR mode.

"Freddie! Freddie! Wake up, honey! Wake up!"

Freddie was awake but in no mood to show it. He wanted Josh to SUFFER. As far as Freddie was concerned, Josh could SUFFER as long as he could flutter, just as Mrs. Redbird had, but longer, much, much longer. Forever.

In the following moments, the following hours and days, Freddie cried. He sat in the easy chair by the fireplace, bare feet on the ottoman, in clear and present view, crying. Josh was not allowed to speak or touch him. Should he try, Freddie held up his hand, cringed. Flicked him away like the scumball, the fickle worm he was. Freddie could still see the face of the young man, an ordinary punk, with his long -- positively SILKEN-- blond hair over suntanned shoulders, laying spent beside an equally relaxed Josh, sucking a toke. He would see the young punk -- his endless blue eyes, an American flag tattooed on his shoulder, gold earring on his right ear, a smirk on his lips -- for the rest of his life. A dirty leg. IN HIS HOUSE!

From then on, his love nest contaminated, Freddie slept on the sofa. The first night he guzzled Scotch straight down the hatch, the whole quart, on the patio until he shivered from the dew. Didn't give a rat's ass whether he lived or died. Didn't matter. When he woke late the next morning he fixed some coffee and sat alone outside

watching the birds dine on the feeders. Josh crept out and sat opposite sipping from a cup, looking bad, very bad.

"Freddie," he said, but Freddie flipped his hand upright like a cop with a stop sign at a busy intersection during a blackout.

"Nope -- nope, nope, nope. Nay, nay, and more nay, nay now and forever, nay into infinity. Done. Through. Over. You fucked it up. Shit on my head. Just go inside and shave those ugly whiskers. Go get the scrub brush from the garage and scrub off all that nasty raunch. Slut."

Freddie cried. He cried so often and so hard his face grew lined with grief. I suppose, Freddie thought, that's how you get old.

When they decided to be sensible, they met at the kitchen table when Freddie returned on the following Friday and made a deal. Josh in the master bedroom; Freddie in the unblemished guest room. They worked at being friendly and agreed to cohabit in the bungalow until Josh could make new arrangements. A word here and there was all. Freddie was gone a lot so they only saw each other in the kitchen or in passing. One Friday Freddie returned home to find a brief note from Josh. He had been invited to join an old friend in a landscaping venture in Florida. No phone number or address. That was that.

By then, Freddie had cried himself out. Once Bitchy Brenda had her boy -- not a praying type, Freddie had prayed for a gay -- Freddie became the man of the place and hired an assistant, a young girl named Lorraine. Bitchy Brenda was of little use. She tried bringing the lad, a chubby fellow who reminded Freddie of Winston Churchill, to the office but spent most of her time boohooing and trying to squeeze milk from her DISGUSTING udders to little avail. Freddie got the kid on formula and Bitchy Brenda relaxed a bit, meekly accepting his suggestions, humbled after no longer being able to conceal that her beau had deserted her soon after learning she was with...well, child.

Dorkus was a restless bugger to hold, lots of snot, great kidneys and a small bladder, not to mention overactive bowels. Freddie kind of liked the little brat. He felt sympathetic. Gosh, to have Bitchy Brenda for a mother. What would that be like? Have her kissing you all the time and smothering you into her cleavage, her tears splashing on the top of your head.

Two summers passed before Josh's desperate call. Soon after he migrated south, as Freddie liked to say, Freddie allowed the yard to go to seed, the feeders to fade and crack, the bird baths to dry up and crust over with green mold. One Sunday afternoon he carried the lot inside: feeders, baffles and heaters. Just couldn't bear to set them on the curb with the trash. The bird feed containers hung empty on the walls. Sometimes he would just run his fingers over the detritus and think fondly of their excitement at As The Crow Flies. Mrs. Carter died soon after Josh left of some HORRIBLE cancer. Pancreatic, maybe; she went so fast. Probably from snacking on the bird seed, Freddie said to himself. Poor Mr. Carter, his kindly eyes. He put himself into an assisted living center. To do what? Freddie had no clue. Ha! Ha! Watch the stupid birds shit on the patio. Why hadn't the Carters told them that birds had no sphincter muscle and that's why they shit all over the place. And here he thought there was some purpose -- menace or a sense of humor -- about their droppings.

The tears still formed when Freddie thought he could smell the remainder of the bird feed wafting from the bottom of the bins, dung, the passage of time. Maybe all one got in this life was one perfect spring, a one perfect month of summer, a summer of T-bones and song birds. Even the fat teenager moved on. Perhaps to college. That stupid little shit, Freddie thought. Probably already flunked out or grossed out the other drunks in the dorm. Probably will grow up to be a Republican. Then again, maybe he would suffer a bit. His fraternity brothers might make fun of him. Maybe he would learn something about people, about being a real person.

And then the phone call. So, it was to be Freddie to whom Josh wanted to return when the purple streaks appeared on his inner thighs. Freddie offered some optimistic comments but he knew. The lab reports were conclusive. Josh had gotten nailed. No doubt about it.

In a sad but wondrous way, Freddie felt it was a gift. Josh made Freddie the beneficiary of his trust in exchange for Freddie's care and companionship in his final days. Freddie took great delight in calling Bitchy Brenda to announce, "I've had to kiss your fat ass often enough, you bitch. Now you can kiss MY ass goodbye. Hope you get herpes. Genital warts. TONGUE CANCER!"

Sweet in a bittersweet way to have Josh back, Freddie thought. Against his better judgment -- for love has nothing to do with good judgment, Freddie reckoned -- he sold the house. It had already appreciated over twenty percent and it felt like a goddamn AUDITORIUM for a lonely old NELLY. Josh had poor health insurance but what with Freddie's savings, the balance of the trust -- Josh had blown a shit pile of it out CARROUSING around -- and the proceeds from the sale of the house, he figured they could get by, keep Josh out of the hospital until it was time for hospice.

Freddie cooked Josh all his favorite dinners, singing along with Johnny Mathis and Barbara Streisand as he chopped and grilled, chattered as he spoon fed Josh when it came to that. He helped him to the bath, rubbed him down with lotion to ease muscle cramps and combed his thinning droopy hair, parted in the middle, in the style he liked best. When Josh needed to cry, Freddie rocked him, sang lullabies and read to him from Grimm's Fairy Tales. After Josh REALLY began to lose weight, no longer able to walk, Freddie had to diaper him.

Josh often called out to him from the bedroom.

"Hey, Freddie, remember how Madam Cooing Dove made her nest in our gutter? Remember that, Freddie. She just made her nest big as you please and sat there cooing like she owned the place. Remember that, Freddie?"

Freddie did remember her. They decided, what the hay, let the gutter just clog up. Didn't matter. Time and health and love in this world of grief, hard work, Bitchy Brenda and pain, mattered most. They so much relished the moment when Madam Cooing Dove lifted her beak in a scolding fashion when they as much tapped the gutter. Remembering her little head poking about, Freddie bawled and bawled into the sofa pillows he brought from the house on Prairie Lane.

"Freddie? Is that you crying?" Josh would call out. "Is that you, Freddie."

"Yes. Yes, it is. What do you expect? A hootenanny?" Freddie yelled back, then added in a lower voice, "You dumb fuck. Well, okay then. Went out and got yourself infected, did you? Well...well...oh, damn you."

Josh fought hard. Freddie gave him that much. He took his medication, sucked on the shakes, tried to eat through the chemo, did his exercises as well as he could. Freddie feared he might spend the rest of the money on medications.

First, Josh went blind. It happened fast. He put Josh down to sleep one evening and when he awoke the next morning, he was plain, dark, blackout blind.

"Just like a light switch, Freddie," Josh yelled from the bedroom.

"Just like that. I can't see a shitting thing. Feel the sun. Just can't see it."

Then his left side went numb. Freddie bought him a special answering machine so he could hold a remote in his hand to answer calls when Freddie was busy running errands or doing chores. Sometimes, Josh's old boyfriends called and Freddie could hear Josh flirting with them and he'd feel the same old lump in his esophagus as he felt when he was on the road and suspected Josh of cheating again.

They were in the apartment a few days less than five months when Freddie had to call the ambulance and wait outside emergency for the doctor to bring him the bad news. Josh lasted two weeks with the tubes and oxygen. Freddie had never witnessed a death but when Josh began his death rattle Freddie found it to be a rather mundane transaction. He watched Josh flatline on the monitor. The two nurses jumped a bit when Freddie let go a final farewell whippoorwill call.

At his funeral, Freddie joined hands with Josh's boyfriends and they sang hymns and told stories about their favorite times together which wounded Freddie as much as anything.

"Phooey," Freddie thought. "They're all younger, taller, better built and BETTER LOOKING than me. Of course, I was the SWEETEST."

He said to himself out loud but in a quiet voice bent over the open grave:

"Josh, you loved me the best, didn't you, honey. Of course, you did. None of them knows a thing about our birds. Just us. Isn't that so, Josh?"

Standing hand in hand in the circle of the funeral guests at the uncovered grave, Freddie told about the first time they met. It was in a bar in San Francisco. Love at first sight. They fell in love at once sipping Marqueritas right there on the water, watching the pelicans, frigate birds, gulls and sandpipers that inhabited the sands along the bay. Josh immediately wanted to fly off to Miami for a vacation because he'd never been there before. Freddie talked him out of it in favor of spending a week with him in a condo in San Diego that they could use for free. They went on a sailing adventure, thanks to a coupon from Bitchy Brenda's travel agency.

Didn't really happen that way but Freddie enjoyed it when Josh's lovers bobbed their jealous precious heads. He actually met Josh waiting in line at the neighborhood cleaners near their first apartment. Josh had a leather jacket that needed a new zipper. He gave Freddie a wink and that's all it took to fall in love.

Freddie quietly left the cemetery while the rest of the flock laughed and mingled. Later that afternoon he drove back to the cemetery alone. It was spring again, raining on

and off, no hint of the smell of death. As Josh would have said, it smelled heavenly. During the internment Freddie had dropped clods of dirt on Josh's casket. What came to mind was what a tasteful and EXPENSIVE casket he had picked for Josh, one Josh might have picked, he hoped, for Freddie.

Freddie unloaded a black pole for the feeder and a sack of oily sunflower seeds from the trunk of his car. He pushed the pole into the soft earth by the grave and filled the feeder. After he blew Josh a kiss as a last farewell, he vowed never to return and walked away from the fresh grave site without looking back and prayed the birds would come.