

The Bird



Jamie stood in a tight circle of his friends a few yards into the thick woods behind his house. If someone were to spy on them, he or she would only see the backs of four boys wearing jeans and sneakers, heads bowed to their chests. Jamie's mother, who went to church every week, might have thought the boys were praying. Jamie pursed his mouth to one side, and thought it would have been much easier if they had just been praying. A small bird lay on the forest floor, its soft-looking chest rising with heavy, labored breaths. Its right wing was twisted at an odd angle, away from its small round body. Jamie's best friend Mike had thrown a rock at it, as it tried to take flight only ten minutes earlier.

"Did he kill it?" asked Henry.

"No, look—it's breathing," said Jeremy, the leader of the group.

"It's really hurt though," Jamie said.

Jamie looked at Mike, who was silent. His long hair had fallen into his eyes, but he hadn't pushed it out of the way as he normally did. Jamie couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"I think we should take it inside and fix it," said Henry.

"You can't just fix it! It needs a vet or something," Jeremy said.

Mike grunted. They all looked at him. "Let's just kill it," he said.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jamie said.

"Well it's already in pain," said Mike, crossing his arms defiantly. He walked a few feet away and leaned against a tree. "It's the humane thing to do."

Jamie didn't understand what was going on. Mike had never exhibited any particularly strong feelings of violence. And then today as they all walked through the woods to the fence deep into the forest that marked the end of Jamie's family's property, Mike just picked up a small rock and flung it. None of them knew what had happened until Mike ran over to something lying on the floor and pointed at it.

"We're just going to leave it, okay?" Jeremy said.

"Good idea," said Henry. They started back on the path they had originally taken through the woods.

"What's going on?" Jamie asked Mike.

"Nothing, Jamie."

Mike followed Jeremy and Henry, and soon Jamie felt alone in the woods. He couldn't hear his friends' voices, just the soft sound of the wind rustling through the trees. He looked down at the little bird. Its eyes were bulging out a bit. It looked scared, and Jamie wanted to help it. He was angry with Mike for hurting the little bird.

Jamie knew that Mike's dog had gotten hit recently by a car speeding down their block. Mike had told Jamie all about how his dog's legs and chest had been crushed. He had seen the whole thing. Jamie bent down close to the bird and stroked the feathers on its back. He crouched on his heels, and watched as it moved slowly up and down with the strength of each breath. Its eyes still bulged out, but now it looked calmer. After a few more minutes, it stopped moving.

Jamie picked it up and placed it in a pile of leaves at the base of a tree. He began to dig a hole by the thick roots of the tree, and made it wide and deep enough to hold the dead bird. As he worked, sweat beaded on his forehead. Dirt was caked on his knees by the time he had put the bird in the hole, and filled it back up with leaves and other material from the forest floor. When he was done, he suddenly didn't feel like following his friends to the fence. Instead he walked back toward the backyard with the grass and old wooden swing set. He sat on one of the swings, and skimmed his toes in the unruly grass. His mother was always asking him to mow the lawn, but he never wanted to.

After a while, his friends emerged from the forest's shade and walked over to him.

"What happened to you?" Jeremy demanded. Henry and Mike stood a little behind Jeremy, Henry shifting from one foot to the other, and Mike looking away, toward the back of Jamie's house.

"Nothing. I just didn't want to go to the fence."

"The bird wasn't where we left it," Jeremy said. He sounded angry and annoyed, like he had been planning to do something with it.

"So?"

"Did you move it?" Jeremy looked back at Mike, as if he wanted Mike to back him up.

"Yeah," Jamie said, a little defiantly.

"You're a weird dude, Jamie," Jeremy said. He shook his head, and gestured for Mike and Henry to follow him around Jamie's house to the street, so they could walk home.

Jamie sat in the backyard for a while and watched the sun set. He wasn't sure what had happened, but he didn't regret burying the poor bird. Before he went inside for dinner, he resolved to offer to mow the lawn the next day.