



Gently, Gently

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Gently, Gently

fiction from Helen Gildfind

Gently, you place them on the back seat. Soft rustles from inside. Dry scrape of claw. Papery flutter of feather. (Your insides, too, a tumble-turn of butterflies.) Low clucks, but not many. They're quiet. They're frightened, trying to find their feet in the slipping dark. This morning, you'd stabbed air holes into the box's sides with a kitchen knife. Now, you squint through the gouges, trying to see if anything can see you. A reptilian yellow eye stares back. Another scuffle. The lizard of look flashes away.

You both move to the front of the car. You insist on driving. No need, he says, walking to the driver's side. He is just trying to help. Without looking at him, you nudge him out of the way. Pulling back onto the dirt track you ignore his hurt and try to ignore the quiet distress pulsing from the back seat. (And again, that familiar flush of guilt. How can his hurt merely irritate you, as if it is nothing more than a mosquito bite, a stone in a shoe, a key jammed in a lock? How is it that those confused creatures on the back seat whip up a storm of compassion in you as it hits you, once again, that you will never, *never* be able to imagine their experience? It makes no sense: it's not like you can imagine his.)

You're back on the highway. You stare at the broken white lines on the strip of black *tick tick ticking* past and you ignore his talking. A woman in an old station wagon overtakes you. She's about the same age. In her back seat a toddler sits next to a grey plastic baby carriage. The boy is talking and watching the pale flashing stars of his tiny hands in the rearview mirror. Just a broken white line, *tick tick ticking* between you and you watch it unfold.

A mere flick of the wrist.

Your car nicks theirs.

They ricochet across the highway, slamming into a ton of roadside gum.

The rough embrace of steel.

But your mind's eye is not interested in this image (a clichéd scene from a B-grade movie). Instead, it is watching three escapee chickens belt themselves against your car's glass windows, a blizzard of feathers as they bat around and around and around a car that is spinning out to nowhere.

Your stagger of laughter.

He smiles at you, thinking you are laughing at something he's said.

* * *

You get home at lunch time. Together, you stand in your small backyard. The box sits between you on the grass. You have spent the past week knocking together a coop from old wire, wooden crates, and bare sawn branches. It's not beautiful, but it's sturdy. They have everything they need: roosts, nesting boxes, and a door and wire floor to keep out the nocturnal prowls of cat and fox. During the day, they'll roam the yard.

Again, you ask him if he's sure that the six-foot fence is high enough.

Again, he tells you everything will be fine. Trust me, he says, squatting down and lifting the cardboard flaps.

Inside, your three birds are plumped up in a fluff of defense. Their heads twitch at the sudden light.

Out you get, he says. His elbows rest on his knees as he peers over them. His sleeves are rolled up over his firm, dark forearms; the ropes of vein and sinew that make him up.

He starts making wet kissy noises.

You shake your head.

What? He squints up at you and the midday sun.

He tries to make clicking sounds, as you do with the dog. He sounds like he is choking on his tongue.

Stop that! you say. It's disgusting.

The birds just sit there, a little less round, a little more curious, their heads twisting left and right as they calculate the stupidities of their new situation.

You step forward and kick the box over onto its side.

Hey! He rocks back onto his heels and stands as the birds summersault and slide onto the grass, shrieking. Quickly, they right themselves and shake dignity back into their plumage. They begin to walk in circles, stopping now and again to stretch out their wings and legs, chicken-style yoga. They then set to work exploring the yard. They scuff up the grass and the soil, kicking about the gravel, pecking at the dirt. Occasionally they fly at the air, looking demented, and you wonder if they've been brain damaged somehow by the drive. You realize they are catching bugs.

After a while, feeling encouraged, you release the dog into the yard. He leaps out from the laundry, where he's been crying this whole time, and bounds after the chickens. Confused as to which one to chase, he inadequately chases them all. The birds squawk and jump, but they seem more affronted than afraid, as if wondering what this foolish creature is doing in *their* yard.

Soon enough, the dog flops into a pile of geriatric exhaustion at your feet. He cries under his breath, his grey-flecked chocolate snout *sniff sniff sniffing* the air as his eyes flick between each of the alien creatures. One of them struts up and scratches dirt across his splayed paws. The dog looks up at you, his dark eyes wet and mournful.

So, he asks, hoping for a reprieve, back to work?

You nod.

Though neither of you want to leave them, there are things that need to be finished.

* * *

Last night, you'd finished painting the ceiling, the skirting, and the windows. All of the hard stuff is done. Now, all you need to do is fill in the blanks of the walls. You've chosen the color already: a deep, yolky yellow; a simple gesture towards health.

He is still annoyed at your insistence that this one room be painted. *Why?* he keeps asking, *This is stupid.* It'll just make the rest of the house look shitter.

Shitter? you repeat.

You each cover your brushes in glad wrap. It's time to check the chickens.

Yes, he says, Shitter. He comes up to you and grabs your backside. Now *that's* a shitter! he says, giving it a rough squeeze. *Mmmm-mmm.*

Get lost! You pull back, turning your smile away from him.

You haven't justified your need to paint the room beyond Just because, Just because. Perhaps, after all, there'll be no need to explain anything.

You both go outside to check if the chickens are in the coop. It is dusk, that time just after sunset where every color seems to glow with defiant intensity. The camellias are redder than red, the lavender more purple than purple, and the lemons, surreal luminous lamps, set deep into satins of green. For a second, the display stops you both at the door, disoriented. Then you remember the coop.

It is empty.

Your stomach clenches.

Standing still, you both look around the quiet garden.

At first, nothing.

And then, sweet relief! You spot one of the birds, wedged crooked in a low fork of the apple tree. Her head is wobbling: she is half asleep, half awake.

Hello girl! he yells, so that she suddenly rocks up, standing, ready to flap away.

Stop it! you whisper. You point across the yard, Look.

A second bird is roosting on the dowel of an old deck chair.

You search on and those first seconds of relief bowl sickeningly away as you realize what has happened. Idiots! you say. Idiots!

In a daze, you shush the two surviving birds into the shadowed coop. Somehow, they know what to do. With some sleepy clucks and half-hearted bullying they settle next to each other on the leaf-stripped branch that you have wired up for them.

He is standing by the back door, watching.

You can't meet his eye.

You push him aside as you try to go back into the house.

Watch it! he says, holding your arms, barring your way. We'll find her.

And suddenly, you are going for him. Hitting his chest. His gut. His face. *Why* do I listen to you? *Why* do I listen to you?

Don't! he shoves you clumsily back. Stop it!

There's a crack in his voice. You wonder if it's for you or the lost bird.

You can't get past him. You return to the coop. The two chickens are asleep now, their heads folded under their wings, their bodies snuggled close together for warmth. It's my fault, you say. At the sound of your voice, one of the birds pulls her head out and looks at you, clucking a little, as if telling you that she's not interested and please be quiet because can't you see that she's trying to get some shut-eye?

It's my fault, he says, behind you. He tries to pull you into a hug.

You shrug him off.

For hours, armed with a torch, you wander the streets alone, looking for her.

* * *

You give up at midnight.

It is cold and wet and you've returned with nothing other than a hundred gut-wrenching images of what might have happened to her; nothing but fury at your own stupidity and rage against a world that will laugh at you for caring. It's just a chicken, just a chicken, you tell yourself. It's just a fifteen dollar bloody chicken, but even as you try to convince yourself that it is just an it, you know that it is a she, and she has a name and, after all, he is just a man and you are just a woman and nothing, *nothing*, is ever just anything.

Your feet are burning. You wonder, vaguely, if all this upset, and all this walking, will fix that other problem for you. You remember reading of a woman who took flu tablets and walked twelve hours a day till she was free of hers. You couldn't understand it, then, how all the while that she walked and dosed herself stupid on quinine, she spent her nights knitting tiny sets of clothes. Now you think you get it. It was just in case, just in case. It was just in case nothing is ever just anything. It was just in case nothing turned out to be something after all.

When you come inside, you go straight through to the backyard to see if some strange animal instinct has brought her home. She's not there.

Back in the house, you find him in the half-painted room. He is sitting on the floor, propped against the wall. He is drunk and still drinking, listening to the radio and humming along to some rockified song about Jesus. The dog lies on the floor next to him, head heavy on his lap.

Close the door, he says. 'S cold.

You shut the frosted glass behind you, blocking the draft, and edge across the paint-spattered sheeting to the window.

Thanks for your help, you say. Too busy doing nothing?

He doesn't look up. He just keeps patting the dog, his long slow strokes pulling up the dark brown lids of the animal's soft, half-closed eyes. The dog grumbles in his sleep: half a growl, half a purr.

Why aren't you painting?

Gently, he moves the dog's head off his lap and onto the floor. He stands up, one hand pressed hard against the plaster-patched wall. He spends a moment flicking the dog hair off his jeans as if it is for this, and not his drunkenness, that he needs to steady himself. Because, he says, finally standing up and looking at you, I couldn't be *fucked*.

He comes across to you and pokes a finger sharply into your shoulder.

If he knew, you think, he wouldn't do that. You correct yourself: I don't know what he'd do, if he knew.

Again, you ask him why he hasn't finished the room. He's looking for a fight, and so are you. You thump his shoulder with the palm of your hand. You thump him where he broke his collar bone not so long ago. You thump him there on purpose.

He stumbles backwards. Carefully, in slow motion, he finds his feet.

You have never seen him so drunk. He looks like he's about to throw up and when he leans in to you again, you can smell the sour hours he's been sitting in here alone.

Everything, he says, is not always, *always* my fault.

He swings away from you then, but he turns too sharply.

He trips.

His hand flies out to steady him.

For a second, you can see exactly what is about to happen. Some quick part of you grabs the dog's collar and jerks him back, away from the door.

The crash of glass.

The whine and snap of wood.

Barking.

His voice, high-pitched with drink and fear, swearing. Fucking idiot, he's saying, *Fucking* idiot.

He is tripping away down the hall.

You stand right where you are, staring at the shattered door. Knife-edged stretches of glass lean out from the wooden frame, precarious. There's glass on the carpet. There's blood on the glass. There's blood on the door, blood on the floor.

Barking, barking, the dog is straining away from you, yearning to help.

Your body continues to take control.

Your free hand is opening the window. You are squatting down and putting your arms under the frantic dog's belly and you are heaving him up. He stops barking. His legs hang limply (he knows when he's beat). Clumsily, for he is too heavy, you tip him gently out the window onto the overgrown dark of the lawn. He begins to bark again. You stare at your bare feet, and watch as they climb you out of the window too. You wander to the coop and look in on the sleeping birds. They're fine and you could stare at them for hours but the dog won't let you. You think of the neighbors. You lock him in the laundry. You scatter dry dog food on the concrete floor, to distract him. You hear the tap running in the bathroom. You hear mumbling. You realize he is crying and suddenly you are running down the hall.

His hand is under the gushing tap. He is looking at the wall. He is shaking all over. He does not look at you. He simply holds his hand out towards you, his face turned away.

His hand and wrist are covered in blood, pink where it mixes with the water, red where it comes, and keeps coming, fresh from his wounds.

There are swerves of blood on the floor.

There's a smudge of red on the light switch.

It's ok, you say, it's ok. Gently, you take his hand in yours. Where one of his knuckles used to be it is now hard and white, like the ball of an eye.

Is it bad? he asks.

You shush him to be quiet. Around the edges of the wound you can see the depth of his skin, a miniature cliff-face, weeping red. You tell him to bend his finger. He winces, but he bends it. Your fingers feel warm and slippery in his clutch. You turn his hand over. A deep gash runs the length of his palm. It severs his heart and life and head lines. You smile at the poetry of it. You recoil. It's not an idea, you tell yourself. He is not an idea. He's hurt.

How is it? His voice is slow, thick from the drink or the shock. What've I done?

You'll be ok. You reach for a face cloth and, with one hand (for you cannot let go of his), you fold it into a narrow strip. You wrap one end tightly around his finger. You get another towel and bunch it into his palm. You firm his unhurt fingers around the bulge of fabric and drape the rest of the towel over everything. Blood immediately begins to blotch through the material, spreading, spreading. You place his hand up on his shoulder, so he cannot see it. It's ok, you say. It's ok, but you have to go to hospital.

He nods.

I can't leave the dog here, with the glass. He'll keep barking if I keep him locked out.

Again, he nods stupidly, lost in the shock of what's happened.

I'll call you a taxi.

Idiot, he mutters. Useless fucking idiot.

You sit him on a chair by the front door and make the phone call and as you do all the What ifs surge through you. You can see the dog's soft paws pressing into the glass, the big shards slicing and the tiny splinters pressing right up and forever into the intricate webs of skin between his rough paw pads. What if, what if. You see him falling into the glass again, the weight of his body pushing his wrist right through this time, so that the cut on his palm tears up the inside of his arm. What if, what if. Again, you see him fall into the door face first, skull first. You see the two of you scuffling, and it's your arm, your face, your skull. And you are horrified, horrified that what you feel upon these thoughts is not shame at what you've become, but shame at the knowledge that such wounds need explaining, that such wounds open windows into the lives that you lead.

You put the phone in his pocket with his wallet and keys. You could have killed yourself, you say. You could have hurt the dog. You could have hurt *me*.

He looks like he is about to faint.

Do you understand?

Nothing.

* * *

You put slippers on and return to the half-painted room with a dust pan and vacuum cleaner. You squat down and begin to pick up the biggest pieces of glass. No matter how careful you are, you keep cutting the tips of your fingers, your blood mixing with his.

Once the largest shards are removed, you brush up the rubble and the splinters. You're sure a cloud of glass dust covers your skin. You're sure that you're breathing it all in, that it's settling into the soft wet sponges of your lungs, the wet lidded edges of your eyes.

Finally, you vacuum everything within the vacuum's reach: the plastic sheeting and the carpet underneath; the lino; even your slippers and jeans and the sleeves of your jumper.

With the floor cleared, you can no longer avoid the broken door. For a while you just stand there, staring at the web of cracks and the jag-edged sheets leering out from the old frame.

You go to the laundry to get a roll of masking tape. For some reason, the dog is fast asleep. You haven't heard a peep from him since you fed him and it's probably that second dinner that's knocked him out cold. You lean down and press your fingers against his freezing nose. His eyes open. Sleepily, he begins to lick the blood off your hands but you pull back, remembering the splinters. You wrap one arm around and under the floppy warmth of his neck, lifting his heavy head a little, hugging him as he licks the salt off your chin.

You return to the broken door. Slowly, you begin to ease the wobbling pieces of glass straight, rebalancing them in the broken frame. You aren't sure if you are doing the right thing, but you don't even want to try lifting the daggers of glass up and out of their casing. You'll cut up your hands. You'll drop them on the open tops of your feet. You'll trip on them as you carry them away and just where could you put them anyhow?

For hours, it seems, you keep on working, gently realigning the edges of the glass where they can be realigned, then covering up the cracks and filling in the gaps with tape.

When you are finished, the frosted glass door has transformed into a sheet of cream-colored, blood-smearred paper. Your fingers are stained, stinging with a thousand tiny cuts.

Again, you vacuum the plastic sheeting and the carpet and the lino, looking for anything that might have fallen as you worked. The more you vacuum, the more shards you seem to find. Every time you turn one way, a sparkle in the corner of your eye turns you back again. All you can do is run the vacuum again and again over the same spot knowing that, if you replace the carpet, or lay a new rug, or even if you move houses, you will always be standing in one spot, searching out the splinters.

* * *

He still isn't home from the hospital. Waiting for him, you couldn't sleep and so you got up and kept working on the room. Now, at four in the morning, you're finished.

You shower and change into your pajamas.

As you're about to get into bed, you hear it.

A metallic scratch.

A dry scuffle.

A thud and a rustle.

You wander around the quiet house, trying to pick where the sound is coming from. It's not inside. You go out into the backyard. Nothing. You walk around the edges of your house.

You walk out to the street. You scan your neighbors' dark gardens. You stand in the silence and the cold and the breath-held damp, waiting.

Nothing.

Then, again: a thud. You look towards the sound, and you see it, a patch of dark in the darkness. Something is moving in the moon-shadows of your neighbors' roof.

This bird that can't fly is perched high up in a clutch of night, right where the second-story roof meets the first. Below her, the corrugated iron slopes steeply to the eaves.

You watch her. Each time she slips, threatening to tumble to the gutters, she scuffles and flaps about, getting her grip. As you watch her, you realize that she keeps slipping because she keeps falling asleep.

Silly girl! you whisper, then fear overrides relief as you realize that she's exhausted, and maybe she's hurt, and you have no idea how to help her.

As you stand in the cold, working out what to do, the street and the bird flash up, suddenly visible in a sweep of headlights.

He's home.

He gets out of the taxi, his hand enormous, bound like a mummy's in white gauze.

Ok?

He nods.

Look! You point up at the roof but the taxi and its lights are gone.

He can't see what you're looking at.

Look! You point at the darkest patch of dark.

She moves.

He sees her.

Together, you stare up at her, jumping each time she stumbles and scuffles.

You can't climb up there in the dark and the dew, and you can't wake your neighbors. If they're hearing any of this (how could they not?) you know that they'll just think she's Another Bloody Possum.

There is nothing to do except go to bed and hope that she will still be there in the morning.

* * *

Back in bed, he snores while you half dream and half speculate that you'll find her, in the morning, as a scatter of feathers on the nature strip, frozen solid, with broken bones and her eyes pecked out of her head.

At dawn, that same scuffling sound jerks you properly awake. Metallic scraping. Then there's a new kind of sound: *thup, thup, thup*, like a soft toy bouncing down steps.

You fall out of bed and run outside.

She's gone.

You scan the shadows of the roof. She's gone, she's gone. You damn yourself for not waiting with her.

A cluck. Her soft rolling song.

Half-hidden behind a tree-branch, she sits where the lowest gutters of the roof meet at the corner of the house. She looks snug, as if a great hand picked her up and gently tucked her in to the leaf litter.

You walk into your neighbors' yard so that you are standing underneath her.

She is wide awake. She cranes her head and looks down at you.

Stay Put, you say, a sharp finger pointed at her.

You return to your house and grab the step ladder from the repainted room. You come back and prop the ladder underneath her. She watches you climb up, unphased, as if she's wondering where you've been because don't you know she's got things she needs to do today?

Eye to eye, you study each other.

Stupid thing, you say.

She stares at you.

You offer her your hand.

She pecks lightly at your fingers.

Your skin is tight and dry and all scratched up.

You're not sure how to hold her. You've never held a chicken before. Birds have always seemed, to you, too fragile, too easy to break.

You span one hand over her tucked-in wings. You slip your other hand under her breast, your fingers sinking into the cold sludge of the gutter, searching out her legs. You lift her up and pull her towards you, hugging her close. Carefully, you step backwards down the ladder. She is so, so light. As you walk home she twists her head up and around, looking at you, and you are looking down at her, laughing. Girl, you whisper, My lovely idiot girl!

She is so, so warm. Stupid, to have thought she'd freeze, as if the intricate press of her feathers were for looks alone. You gently snuggle your fingers into the folds under her wings and you can feel the fine bones of her, bendy, as if she'd bounce back into shape if you tried to crush her.

You carry her through the sleeping house. You stand for a moment in your bedroom doorway. He is still asleep. For a second, you see yourself throwing her up and out into the room.

Why not frighten him awake with the news?

Instead, you carry her through the laundry, past the snoring curve of dog and out into the backyard. You plop her gently into the coop, next to her two sisters. They are awake with the morning. They peck her roughly as she tries to settle in next to them. Who'd have known a chicken could look sheepish?

Though you've spent the night losing her, and the morning finding her, you only hesitate for a second. Then, you open the coop's door again. Out the three of them tumble, strutting into the morning glitter of a new day.

* * *

Back inside, you go to your repainted room. Carefully, you open the taped-up door. You turn on the light and the newness of it hits you. It was right, to go to the trouble (Just in case, Just in case).

You get out of your dew-damp pajamas, and wash your hands and your face and your muddy bare feet. You climb back into bed.

Hey, you whisper, shaking him. She's ok.

But he is still sleeping off the drink and the hurt and the shock.

You turn onto your side, away from him. He rolls over to you, just as he always does. Though your hands and feet are freezing, he pulls you close, tucking you in to the warm crook of himself. He drapes a heavy arm over your waist and, gently, gently, you place his wounded, swaddled hand over the cool bare skin of your stomach. □

HELEN GILDFIND lives in Melbourne and has had book reviews, essays, short stories, and poetry published in Australia and overseas.