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Crazy Old Bird Lady

By Mary Kemp

I was scared I was going to become the crazy old bird lady who sat on the steps of St. Augustine's Cathedral.

St. Augustine's stood proudly across the street from the city park, a cluster of evergreen trees and brown barren elms that stretched like skeletons against the cold December sky.

I found myself there during my break from the coffee shop where I worked making americanos for the finance men and pretending I was in a simulation. During my breaks I liked to breathe the chilly city air and be near the cathedral. Maybe some of that holiness would seep into me. Like second-hand smoke.

The crazy old bird lady would sit there on the great stone steps outside of the church, with its sky-high spires and hundreds of panes of stained glass, and she'd crochet her little birds. Wrapped in her drapery layers and feathery hat, she resembled the very creatures she made.

Over the years, she had become somewhat of a local legend. That happens when you sit on the steps of a holy place day after day surrounded by little handmade birds scattered on the cold concrete ground. People talk.

The kids had stories and nursery rhymes about the crazy old bird lady. They said she ate the pigeons in the city park. They said she made her crocheted birds to replace all the birds she ate. They said she talked to them and was convinced she herself was a bird. They said worse things too.

The adults weren't any better, though. Most people avoided eye contact as they passed the cathedral. Mothers turned their kids' heads away from her, saying things like, "C'mon, baby, don't stare."

I even heard a rumor that some parents used her as a threat.

If you don't clean your room, I'm gonna tell the crazy old bird lady, and she's gonna get you!

It was well-known dogma that you fix your eyes on the concrete as you pass by St. Augustine's. Wouldn't want to catch the crazy.

Sometimes when I sat with my hot black coffee on the steps of the cathedral, I'd watch her nimble, ancient hands as they danced around the yard. I'd stare, transfixed, as a bird began to take form and come to life right before my eyes.

I would later come to learn that there were robins, crows, sparrows, and pigeons. Each had a distinct crochet pattern that she'd made up for them. They were anatomically correct too. Somehow her weathered, shaking hands could perfectly capture the swoop of each bird's wing, their stubby little dinosaur legs, the shape of their fluffy tummies. They were art and they were friends. And she would sit there surrounded by them – her little birds stitched out of yarn wearing hats and jackets and carrying little yarn umbrellas. Each had a distinct style, their own sense of moxie. They were quite extraordinary, actually.

People are so cruel.

The first time I talked to her, I was sitting on the great stone steps of St. Augustine's, nursing a lukewarm cup of coffee. The early December air was freezing, and I appreciated the warm paper cup in my hands.

I didn't subscribe to any sort of religion, but I appreciated the reverent stillness within a church. It made me feel like I was in outer space. Or an aquarium. It's a kind of serenity that is both confronting and comforting. I felt like my entire life was on display every time I stepped into St. Augustine's, but it was a type of being known that I craved.

I told everyone I didn't believe in love. What I meant was: I don't think I am capable of being loved.

But this – this quiet within and without the stone walls of the church. This silence that blocked out the city sounds and felt warm and still around me – this had to be love.

“How long have you been making them?”

She looked up, gentle surprise on her wrinkly skin. I sat down next to her. Up close, the birds were even more intricate and beautiful.

“Since my college days,” she said, continuing to work on a gray pigeon wearing a little yellow raincoat and holding a red umbrella. I liked him enormously. “Probably around your age, sweets.”

I was twenty-three and feeling like an irreparable void.

“I love them,” I said, staring at a crow wearing a purple witch's hat and holding a tiny, crocheted broom. “I wish I could make something like them.”

“Oh, it's not too hard to learn. You've just got to stick with it.”

“How did you learn?”

“I taught myself. Used to crochet through my professor's lectures. Drove them crazy,” she laughed, and I did too.

I sipped my coffee, and she crocheted, and people passed by us, staring at the concrete, and the bells of St. Augustine's started to ring.

“You know, you're the first person to stop and talk to me in weeks,” she said.

“Really?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Does it bother you that everyone makes fun of you? People think you're crazy. You talk to your birds... they say awful things about you.”

“Oh, I've long outgrown caring what people think of me. Look around – it's a beautiful day. Snow is coming, the kids are playing, Father Michael is ringing the bells. And it's a wonderful day to make a pigeon.”

She made it sound so simple.

“Lots to be joyful for.”

I wanted to hug this woman. Instead, I said, “Do you have a favorite?” still looking at the gathering of yarn avian.

She shook her head. “That'd be like picking a favorite child.”

There was a beat, then she leaned closer, as if conspiring.

“Although – between you and me – I've always had a soft spot for the imperfect ones. I like to keep those ones. They come home with me to my island of misfit toys.”

I smiled.

“I love the wonky ones.”

“Me too. I always pick the wonky ones,” she said. “Even in marriages. A piece of advice though: save your heart the trouble and don't fall in love with the misfits.”

“I don't know if I believe in love,” I told her.

“No? Don't you love?”

I wasn't expecting that question.

Do I love?

Do I love?

“I guess I love some things. I don't know. I don't really know the difference between like and love.”

There was a long, comfortable silence.

I stretched my legs out on the steps. I watched the dead, brown leaves from the elm trees dance in the cold breeze before settling on concrete. Most of them were beyond crushed, turned to powder that would blow in the breeze all over the city and eventually become something else.

“Have you ever been in love?” I asked her.

“Twice,” she smiled, watery eyes watching the real pigeons puttering around the park. “One of them I married for thirty-seven years. Until he decided he didn’t want to be married anymore.”

“And the other one?”

“He never loved me back. But I was smitten. He would’ve been the love of my life if he only wanted me.”

I smiled, but I felt like I was being stabbed a little bit.

“How do you...how do you deal with that?”

The bird lady shrugged happily.

“I make birds.”

I laughed at how absurd it all was, and she laughed too. And it felt like we really were in on some secret language that was only for us.

“If you don’t make birds, you should find something else that you love to do,” she told me.

“Like what?”

She thought for a moment. We listened to the pigeons cooing, dogs barking in the distance, squirrels chattering in the trees.

“Make squirrels?” she said, and we both dissolved into laughter all over again.

She reminded me a bit of the Old Maid from that card game. The one with the most absurd illustration of an ugly old woman surrounded by cats. I realized, sitting with the crazy old bird lady, that from my very genesis, I have been fed the lie that old women who love are crazy.

The truth was, I wanted very much to be a crazy old bird lady.

I smiled, and I walked down the street to make more americanos.

