

The Bird That Set Us Free

By Paul O’Kane

How did it all begin? When I say ‘all’ there wasn't much of it, just one of those episodes that stands-out, as something with a beginning, a middle, and an end, something that is as much a story as it is life. I'd lived in the top flat of that tall house for years, too long maybe, traveling the crooked path of a mid-life crisis, and always beyond my means. I spent those years trying to get to the bottom of this, that and the other, mostly alone, trying not to bother anybody with my problems, meanwhile keeping others from complicating the equation.

First I rid the flat of furnishings, then I rid myself of dependencies, until I started to believe I'd developed a clarified and enhanced vision. I knew it couldn't last forever. Once you travel in an ascetic direction you must come to a point at which you either leave the world completely or return wholeheartedly to it. But I prolonged that decision for as long as I could and every now and then a little event or tale would puncture my privacy and force me to think about others, and therefore of my own limitations.

One summer, a young French girl came to live in the ground floor flat. We exchanged a few words when passing at the door and I tried to make her feel welcome. She was a robust character I could tell, brave, but still a novice to the ways and means of this city.

As the season rolled-on I noticed her flat become busy with passing traffic, mostly a gang of local lads about her own age who gave the house a new, more relaxed image by

hanging out on the step and playing cool music through her opened windows. That was all fine, but occasionally there'd be a disturbance and then I'd see her alone again looking a bit down and sometimes even a little bruised. I'd ask if she was OK and she'd assure me there was no real problem. After a while, I figured that the lads were abusing her generosity and naivety. She'd arrived in the city and thrown herself into the first scene she could find but was too inexperienced to realise the importance of maintaining personal boundaries.

Things calmed down as late summer began to hint at the coming of fall and I didn't see her or the lads half as much. Then, one morning she came up and knocked on my door, asking for help, saying she was disturbed by a sound in her flat. When she showed me into her place I heard a scraping noise that put my teeth on edge. It seemed to come from the blocked-up chimney and its plaster vent but it was impossible to see inside the vent's narrow slats.

For a while we just sat quietly near the vent, waiting, listening, thinking, afraid to make any noise ourselves but making occasional gestures to each other; a dumb grin, or raised eyebrows. After a long while the shiny black tip of a hard black beak poked its way out through the matt white plaster slats. This confirmed that a bird was trapped in there, but the tip of the beak still told us nothing about what kind or what size the bird might be.

The sight of that beak made the French girl more agitated and disturbed and so I went up to my own flat and brought down a chisel and a light hammer and started to chip gently

away at the slats, as carefully and as quietly as I could because I didn't want to scare the bird to death, nor let it suddenly fly out at us. But also because I wanted to leave the landlord's vent in as smart a condition as I could.

All the time I chipped away I hoped the bird would turn out to be a Starling, or a Blackbird and that it wasn't something much bigger like a Rook, a Crow or a Magpie. You couldn't tell by only seeing the tip quite what was likely to follow. As the hole grew bigger, so did the tension in the room and at one point I stopped to open the curtains and windows wide so that the bird, when free, would have a clear run out and could avoid getting messed up in us and the room.

Once the hole was as big as I could make it without damaging the wall we both stood back and waited. And, after another while, the beak, then the head, and the shoulders of a plump Starling poked out, and after some nervous procrastination it flew, clumsily, out across the room, first into the soft furnishing of the sofa, then clear out of the window.

The relief was -as they say- 'palpable' and I felt a little wave of pride run over me because I'd found the right response to someone else's problem after being so wrapped up in my own world for so long. Next I found a little wood and plaster to repair and make the vent look smart again.

It wasn't long afterward that I heard the French girl was moving out. I don't recall saying goodbye but about a month later she sent a nice letter saying she wasn't far away but was

a lot happier in her new place in a different neighbourhood,

I never really worked out the significance of all this; either to me, to her, or what it might mean to you, but it always seemed like a real-life parable that somehow helped both of us come to a decision about where our lives were really at and what each of us would do next. So, when I think of it like that, it seems it was really the bird that set *us* free.