

The Life Bird

Melody drove. Jack sat beside her, polishing the lenses of his antique binoculars. He squinted while he did so, and when he had finished the lens, he felt around his seat for the cap. The binoculars smelled like dust and oiled leather.

“Dad,” she said after an uncomfortable silence. “I’m worried about you. I think it’s time you moved in with Doug and me.”

He said nothing.

“I just want what’s best for you,” she said.

After a moment, he said, “I can take care of myself.”

She sighed. “I know you can, Dad,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean you have to. We have the space. You can have your own bachelor pad.” She nudged him on the shoulder with her elbow.

He looked down at his binoculars. His gaze went to his left hand. He touched his gold wedding band with his thumb. “I’ll think about it,” he said.

“Fine,” she said. They were making progress. “What are you hoping to see today?”

Jack took a deep breath and exhaled. “A cerulean warbler,” he said, tapping the list in his shirt pocket.

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They got out of the car. Melody grabbed her messenger bag cooler and threw it over her shoulder. They made their way into the woods, the fresh scents of spring filling their senses. With each new birdcall, they spotted its maker: a towhee, a sparrow, a mourning dove, a titmouse. Jack looked, but never made a mark on his list. Melody was sure there were a few birds they found that he didn’t have on his list, but she didn’t press the issue.

After hiking and watching for a few hours, Melody declared: "It's time for lunch." She and Jack sat on a bench. She handed him a ham sandwich, took one for herself, and poured them each a glass of fresh lemonade.

For a while, they ate in silence, the ambient sounds of nature being the soundtrack to their meal.

"Grace would have loved this," Jack said, almost a whisper.

Melody nodded as she chewed her sandwich.

Jack reached to pick up his list from the bench, but accidentally knocked over the cup of lemonade. He swore and quickly raised the list away from the spreading deluge. Melody saw that he had spilled most of the drink across his lap. She pulled some paper towels from her bag and handed them to him.

"Dad," she said as he dabbed the lemonade from his lap. "If you want to call it a day, I understand." He looked at the list in his other hand, but before he could answer, they heard the distinctive "zee zee zee zizizizi eeet."

In a motion so quick and agile that it surprised Melody, Jack lifted his binoculars to his eyes. He scanned the trees wildly before he finally stopped. He took a quick inhale. "It's beautiful," he said, his voice shaky.

Melody used her own binoculars to follow her dad's gaze, but all she saw was a blue blur flying away from a disturbed maple tree branch. "Yeah," she said. "Beautiful."

He kept the binoculars to his eyes for a moment longer. Slowly, he removed them. His eyes were glistening. "I think we can call it a day now." He felt around with his hands for the lens caps. Melody handed them to him. She held him by the shoulder as they made their way back to the car.

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When they got back to his house, he stuck his binoculars on the console table by the front door. "I think I'm going to lie down for a bit," he said.

"Okay," said Melody.

He made his way to his room, feeling the walls of the hallway as he went. Once he had closed his door and began snoring, Melody looked at his list. She found the line for the cerulean warbler (*Setophaga cerulea*) and made a mark and put the date and location. Looking up and down the list, she saw that this was the last one. Her dad had completed his life list.

But then she noticed the name at the top of the list: not "Jack," but rather, "Grace."

"Oh, Dad," she said. Her eyes fell on an old black and white framed photograph of her parents, holding hands and smiling genuine smiles.