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## Nasty Bird

Jessica Marinaro  
*SUNY Geneseo*

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# Nasty Bird

A rain-streaked window was Helen's only entertainment as of late. She stared out of it when the cheap thrills of midday television started to slow the turning of her cogs just a little too much. You really can only watch so many fluorescent flashing episodes of *Wheel of Fortune* before starting to feel your brain leak out of your ears.

Helen despised that feeling. So, she took care of herself—she tried to walk everyday, continued to tend her garden even though she disliked it, and forced herself to engage in boring elderly activities such as online chess and puzzles. She did these things not because she had any real zest for life, but because she never wanted to become one of those old women who slowly melted into their couches day by day until they inevitably slopped onto the floor lifeless as soup. At the end of a long day of fighting the battle of time, Helen allowed herself the simple pleasure of staring out the window.

Some people say they find joy in their old age, but she knows they're full of shit. There's nothing good about getting old. Except maybe grandchildren.

"It's important they know their grandma," her daughter Grace had said the first time she dropped the kids off on her front porch, hovering awkwardly. "Regardless of where we stand."

Her grandkids—Jamie and Fiona—came over on the weekends, the best days of her life now. They marveled at her garden, even though it was not much to look at. They made messes in places that hadn't been touched in years. She loved it most when they stood at her elbow as she made simple meals, chattering and licking their lips.

The two came over routinely once or twice a month for a weekend at a time. Her daughter never called to let her know, but it didn't really matter. She was always home. It was during one of those special weekends when the bird's existence was made apparent to her.

“Look! Grandma!”

They were in Helen’s expansive backyard. She took care of this land without any help; the grass was a sharp healthy green, tickling her ankles as it was starting to get a little long. The newly planted hydrangeas in her garden were coming in nicely despite the pesky weeds. She didn’t believe in pesticides, at least not when it came to the delicate flowers. The chemicals were so aggressive. The smell of hyacinth carried through the three acres of yard all the way back to the trees that separated her property from wild forest. She was hunched over her garden wondering why she even bothered anymore, while Jamie waited impatiently for birds under the birdfeeder. Fiona, on the other hand, was lying in the grass with a book.

Helen didn’t turn around. She was engrossed in weeds. “What is it?”

“The birds! They’re so cool!” Jamie was excited. He was the younger grandchild, a quick little thing full of light. His exuberant nature never failed to charm—as well as annoy, in some cases—those around him.

“Oh yeah?” she tugged at a rather aggressive root. “What do they look like?”

“Reeeeed Robin,” he squealed. “Yum!”

She could hear him and his sister cracking up, and then a second later, he gasped.

Helen whipped her head around faster than she should have at her age. Luckily, her grandson was fine, but the birds in question were being pecked at by a large blue jay. The robins, which Helen noticed were actually cardinals, scattered away quickly. Jamie sulked.

Helen hobbled over. “Shoo!” she waved the blue jay off. It only sprung away from her touch, narrowly avoiding the swat. She came closer, and then it made its escape.

“Nasty bird!” Fiona said.

Helen halted. The world around her dulled. *Nasty Bird*. She took an unsteady step back, her body fuzzy at the edges.

His scurvy war pals used to call him many things—Dirty Bird, Old Eagle Eye, Crazy Bastard—but Nasty Bird was the most common. He wore that nickname like a badge of honor. His friends would laugh and jostle him in the way young men hardened by war do.

When the people who called him that were still around, she was young and beautiful, and he was striking. He had the kind of boyish charm that made other women fidgety around him, and Helen suspected that he liked the way she never succumbed to his power. She knew she was lucky to have married a man who admired her ability to stand on her own two feet. However, a war fought on foreign soil can have casualties at home.

Wives of soldiers often know suffering more intimately than people give them credit for. All you have to do is look into the eyes of a woman who has loved a man a world away, and you know what she carries. Helen knew people tended to feel grateful for men like her husband; men like him took on all the most intense rage and pain of the world for themselves. But where does all that rage and pain go? What happens when the angry man you love is not a world away, but sitting at the kitchen table?

They fought frequently after he came back. Her husband had left a light-hearted, progressive man who appreciated her for who she was; he came back another creature entirely.

“You don’t know what it’s like out there!” he yelled.

She pinned him with her eyes. “You’re absolutely right. I don’t, but I know what it’s like here at home, and I worry—”

“I don’t need a silly housewife worrying after me. I survived a war, a battlefield—”

“*You*,” she stepped closer to him, “do not get to speak to me that way!”

“What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *you*?”

A spark, like a crack of lightning against her face.

At least now she finally had his attention. He scrambled, clearly upset, and fawned after her in the aftermath.

“I’m so sorry Helen.” He pressed a cool washcloth to her face.

“I don’t know what got into me.”

“It was a mistake.”

“It will never happen again.”

“I promise.”

Helen cared for her husband, but even when she was young, she was not naive. She knew how war had killed her friends’ husbands’ souls, and she knew at that moment that it wouldn’t be the last time.

“Grandma, are you okay?”

She blinked her eyes, clearing it all away. They had come back inside a few hours ago, lured by the promise of cold lemonade. As reality swam back into view, she noticed the blue jay from before was back at the feeder. The annoying little thing hopped around contentedly for a while then fell still. It gazed toward her reflection in the window, unmoving. Like it was challenging her. She turned away from the window, smiling at Fiona.

“I’m okay, baby,” she said.

“Okay.” Fiona smiled back. The girl was absolutely lovely; blonde and freckled like her mother. She had a quiet, observant disposition that her brother lacked. It made Helen worry.

“Why don’t we get dinner started? That way we have time for dessert before it gets too late.”

The children cheered in unison, and Helen felt her insides brighten.

After Helen prepared a dinner of her famous Kraft mac ‘n cheese—and more importantly to her grandkids, homemade chocolate chip cookies—everyone settled into the comfort of night. The children were sated by food and the soft drone of the boxy TV in Helen’s bedroom. She was almost asleep herself when she got a call. She got so few; she hovered for a moment in contemplation before answering.

“Hello,” she said tentatively. Best not to wake the kids.

Grace’s voice surprised her: “I assume they’re asleep?”

“They’re asleep,” Helen said.

Grace sighed and something about hearing her voice over the telephone made Helen imagine her as an old woman—her headstrong, corporate lawyer daughter as a graying, wrinkly lady with nothing to look forward to except her own grandkids. It made her sick.

“I’ll be there first thing tomorrow morning,” Grace said. “You know I hate leaving them overnight, but work’s a disaster and I can’t leave in good faith. Does nine o’clock sound okay?”

“They can stay as long as you want,” Helen said. After a moment she added, “and you should get some rest.” She tried to sound authoritative, but it came out weak.

Grace didn’t seem fazed. “I’m glad I could finally start leaving them with you,” she said. What Helen knew lingered beneath those words: *I’m glad he’s gone*. It hovered in her mind.

“I love having them here.”

This transparency surprised her, but maybe this night was one for honesty. Maybe with the shield of a cool blue evening they could make things better.

“Kay, I’ll be there in the morning.” Grace hung up.

Or maybe not. She could feel her daughter closing herself off before she even heard Grace’s words, and it stung. She laid in the bed for one more quiet moment staring at the chain that hung from her ceiling fan. It swung, and it swung, and it swung. She knew that in her kitchen the curtains swung too—the wind would make it so with its hollow moan. Helen imagined that blue jay might even sleep on a swinging branch. She felt nauseous, seasick from the sway of it all. She wondered if the swinging would ever stop.

The next morning, the very same bird woke her up with the sound of his screeching. In her post-dream state, it sounded like a blaring alarm. She

sprung from her spot on the loveseat only to find no emergency. The house was not burning to the ground, and there was no burglar; only a devious blue jay who seemed to cackle at her fear. Still, she needed to check on the kids. In her sudden and panicked awareness, the desire to see them was overwhelming.

She made her way to the bedroom. Although she had spent some time watching a movie with the kids there last night, it had recently become more of a spare room since she could no longer sleep on her back. Jamie slept deeply on the bed right where she left him, his mouth open and drool pooling on the pillow. Fiona was curled on the air mattress with her eyes open. She sat up quickly.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

Helen smoothed her graying hair and let loose a breath. She must look haggard. She despised her body for its inferior mechanisms. At least, she pondered, she’d gotten up at all. She’d trade fitful sleep for the ability to be alert any day.

“Everything is fine, Grandma was just startled.”

“What scared you? Was it a nightmare?”

Her granddaughter’s eyes were wide and light, and though Helen searched for them, she could not see any shadows creeping in. It relaxed her to notice the lack of curve in her granddaughter’s back, the lightness of her shoulders. She was pure, clear joy.

“No, no sweetie. It was that bird again,” she said. “The one that bullied the cardinals away.”

“Oh,” Fiona said, standing up. “Can I help you make breakfast?”

Helen smiled. “Of course.”

They walked to the kitchen together, past the window and the lumpy loveseat where Helen slept. She maneuvered carefully over the tiles.

“Your mother called,” she said, pulling out a pan from a low cupboard, “She said she would be here to pick you kiddos up by 9:00 this morning, but...”

The clock read 10:42 a.m.

Helen squeezed Fiona’s shoulder. “I think work is holding her up.”

“It’s okay.” Without a word, Fiona started grabbing milk, eggs, and measuring cups. “I figured that’s what happened.”

They worked in silence as the morning light softened the hard edges of Helen’s home. Maybe she felt her edges soften a little too.

Of course there were good times, enough of them that Helen would often block out the horrors of her past in favor of focusing on the moments of tenderness. Sometimes, when she leaned uncomfortably into her chair-bed at

the end of the day, she'd grasp for these good memories pitifully—if only to find some tiny relief.

The day she returned to most frequently was an early date with her husband. He was all bright smiles and gentlemanly gestures in those days—he held the door for her and pulled out her chair. He took her for a nice dinner, and, like any young kids looking for trouble back then, they went dancing afterwards. His hands were gentle. This was before he was a military man, when he was less fit and more fun. When he laughed easily. When she fell in love with him.

By the end of that night they were sweaty and breathless. A slow song drifted between the crowd, which thinned out as single ladies and solo gents left to get drink refills or make a hasty retreat together. The two of them stayed, and while they danced Helen thought about love.

There were also those nights she spent sitting by his bedside towards the end. Those nights were an altogether different kind of good memory; a less wholesome kind. She remembered them well because she finally had the power. He was the one groveling at her feet for the first time. He was the one asking for forgiveness. She had never been religious but in those months—ones in which she had to feed him, and wash him, and help him stand up—she started to see how some of that Jesus-talk her mother used to spout was sort of true: maybe there was something to be said for loving your enemy. Maybe there was something to be said for turning the other cheek.

Still, she wasn't a saint. She didn't forgive him, and she'd never know if that was the right choice or not. An animal might be rotten if it bit the hand that fed it, and her husband was by all accounts a rotten animal; a nasty bird. But he was also human—and that was the reminder that always twisted the knife when she thought about how she denied him his peace in the end.

Helen flipped a pancake, admiring the smooth cooked side. Fiona filled cups with orange juice.

“Go wake up your brother,” she said.

Ever her mother's daughter, the little girl didn't object. Soon they were all sitting at the table munching happily; the juice was tangy, the pancakes were warm. Helen glanced out the window from time to time, checking on the bird feeder. The pest hadn't come back yet, but Helen was strangely paranoid he would. She was already planning ways to be rid of him.

A ring at the doorbell interrupted their peaceful eating.

The children sprang up from their seats. Fiona opened the door without looking through the peephole. They knew it was their mother because nobody else ever came here.

“Mom!” Jamie jumped and hugged her.

“Hey you,” Grace said.

Fiona greeted her mother with a calmer embrace. Grace kissed the top of the child’s head, and they grinned at each other. It struck Helen then that her daughter was a really great mother; that she had something inside her that Helen never did and never would. She wondered where she got that from.

“Go grab your stuff.” The kids scurried off at their mother’s gentle command.

Grace took a few steps into the house but didn’t sit down. “Mom.”

Helen didn’t respond, and the tension was like a third person in the room. She only shook her head. The short conversation last night hadn’t done anything; they would always be like this. Desperate to do anything other than sit like a decrepit old lady at her dining room table, she got up and started piling dishes in the sink.

Fiona and Jamie tumbled back out into the room with their overnight backpacks. They gave their grandmother quick hugs and said goodbye.

As soon as they shut the door behind them, the silence echoed. Helen felt it settle back into all the places that collected dust when the kids weren’t around. There was nothing worse than the dawning hush of a dead house. She felt enormously tired, but she started washing the dishes anyway.

The next day, she decided to get rid of that bird once and for all. It was tormenting her, and it had scared her grandson. It had to go. She had read in a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine that blue jays dislike the sound of windchimes, and that they don’t care for safflower seeds; these would be her weapons.

She took a quick ride to the hardware store to gather her arsenal. As usual, the teenager who worked the register took forever, and Helen did little to hide her impatience. As soon as she got home, she devised a plan. She would fill the top of her birdfeeder with all the safflower seeds it could hold and see if that deterred the beast. Though she detested the annoying clanging of chimes, she would put them up if the bird insisted on being a nuisance even after her change in seed. If it persisted after that...

She’d load the twelve-gauge collecting dust in the shed and shoot the damn thing.

Okay, maybe she wouldn’t do that. She wasn’t a very good shot, and she’d never actually had to use a shotgun. She tended to avoid the shed when she could. So many of his things were left there.

Shoving away the thoughts of shooting and killing, Helen gathered her materials and marched to the backyard. She stuck her nose up into the air in defiance and poured the safflower seed into the feeder with a heavy hand. She



then stood for a moment, hands on her hips, and looked around to see if any blue jays dared to face her.

They didn't. Or at least not yet. She suspected that stupid bird would be back soon, but she hoped a taste of that seed would send him away. In the meantime, Helen walked back through her garden and into the lonely house. There was nothing to do now but wait.

It had been three weeks of hoping the blue jay would leave, but the bird just kept coming back.

In the mornings when she usually spent reading or sitting on the back porch, he was there. During the midday when she would throw together a cup of tea and sandwich at her kitchen table, he was there—the bird feeder so glaringly visible from every angle. When she took naps she was snapped awake by his call; when she tried to focus on anything else, her attention was pulled back to him.

Helen supposed it could be karma from a past life; it could certainly be premature karma from this life, as she had done enough harm to warrant such a haunting. It was possible all of that bad juju she had succeeded in tallying up in her current body had filled up in her next life and boiled back over into the now, like a pot she left too long on the stove.

It was just as possible that the *Better Homes* article she read was straight bullshit.

It was morning. Helen was sitting on her back porch with a coffee and a crossword puzzle, trying not to sulk. The world was dreadful and quiet. She pretended to be engrossed in the puzzle for nobody except her and the wind, when in reality she found herself counting down the days until she'd likely be seeing Jamie and Fiona again. She wasn't fooling herself, and she doubted she could fool nature.

As she sat and sipped and sank deeper into the hazy yellow day, nature made itself known to her the way it had been for several weeks now: with the screech and chirps of cardinals being harassed by the blue jay.

She glanced up to take in the scene. Once again, two little cardinals innocently picked and prodded at the seed only to be interrupted by the torment of the blue jay. Her eyesight hadn't gone yet, as she could see from her porch the way the black markings on the bird's head streaked into a menacing hardened brow. His beak was curved just slightly in a grin as he ripped at the cardinals' feathers—a grin that only seemed to intensify as they let out their pierced cries for mercy.

That was enough. She curled the puzzle book in her hands, turning it into a viscous club. She pulled herself up from her wicker chair with a sudden ferocity and rushed down the porch steps towards the bird feeder.

The cardinals took flight in fear, but the blue jay held his ground. She saw red as she lunged toward him, harder and meaner than she ever would have if the kids were here. He flittered for a moment but annoyingly circled back to the feeder and let out a loud caw.

She swung.

She swung harder.

On her third attempt to nail the bird, she actually made contact. She whacked it pretty good, and the creature squawked in pain before making its hasty retreat. She then lowered herself to the ground, desperately trying to catch her breath in the wake of her attack. Once her breathing started to even out she noticed there was something tingly about her hands, possibly from clenching them harder than she ever had before. There was also a biting feeling in her lower stomach that threatened tears. She couldn't place it.

After that, the bird never returned. Helen could sense the fear she was so used to carrying around slowly easing. Before, her life and past had swirled around her head daily; thoughts baiting thoughts, like vultures circling a bloody carcass. Now, she simply went about her life. Everyday it became a little easier.

Today was her anniversary. She had tried desperately to erase this day's importance in her memory through sheer force of will, but no amount of newfound serenity would ever allow her to forget. She knew she would have to get out of this house and away from the ghosts that loomed around every corner. She would run all of her errands today. Even if she couldn't really forget today's significance, the least she could do for herself was pretend.

When she got back to the house, Grace's car was parked in the driveway. She stared at it for one minute—nearly two—before getting out of the driver's side of her own car. Was this it? Had she actually lost her mind?

No, but maybe something bad had happened to her grandkids. Why else would the daughter who hated her be here today of all days? The thought had her rushing to the front door, her grocery laden hands shaky.

Inside Fiona and Jamie colored on her dining room table, perfectly content. She sagged with relief as their heads snapped up and they ran to her screaming, "Happy birthday Grandma!"

She hugged the children tightly. Probably too tightly, as her grandson squirmed and slipped away after only a moment. She let go and did a double take when she saw Grace there, actually sitting on the couch.

"I let it slip that it was your birthday," Grace said. She turned her attention back to the "The kids wouldn't stop begging me to let them come by."

Helen was at a loss for words for a moment. Her birthday wasn't for another two months, and her daughter was nothing if not attentive when it came to important dates. Was this some cruel prank?

She didn't want to upset the kids or worse—have to deal with the disappointment of losing their presence after being promised it, so she went along. After they ate cake and ice cream, and Fiona and Jamie sang the loveliest Happy Birthday tune Helen had ever heard, their mother corralled them into her car. As Helen sipped a coffee, preparing for the quiet of a childless house, Grace stepped back in.

Grace spoke first. "I slipped a \$50 in the card Jamie made for you," she started, sounding almost professional. "Although as you saw it might be a little sticky from the glitter glue, I told him not to use that crap—"

"It's not my birthday," Helen cut her off.

Grace looked bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"My birthday is in September." Helen took a deep breath. "Today is the day your father and I got married."

"Oh. Oh my god..."

Grace scrolled through her phone; a calendar app, Helen supposed, and raked her hand through her hair in disbelief. Time seemed frozen as Helen gazed at her lap, and Grace stared at her feet. A table, an ocean, a world between them.

After a moment, Grace collected herself. "Why did you let him stay, Mom?" The words seemed blurted, but Helen noticed how she refused to back down. "You were the strongest person in the world to me, but you let him—" She stopped abruptly. Helen imagined there were some things even her strength couldn't allow her to say.

"He hurt us," Helen said, letting the truth spill into the air between them.

Helen couldn't look at her daughter. She didn't want to have to face the shadows there, the curve of her back, or the heaviness that rested on her shoulders. Heaviness put there by her own mother. What had she done?

"I'm sorry." Helen said it without thinking. She knew from personal experience how little 'I'm sorry's' meant.

When she finally looked at her daughter, she noticed how strongly she stood. Immovable.

"I don't forgive you," Grace sniffed, hastily wiping a runaway tear. "But I do love you."

Once again, Helen recognized that biting sensation she had felt after she attacked the blue jay. She could place it now—it was the feeling you have after you've hurt somebody. The feeling you have after you've hurt yourself. She started to cry, and after years of silence it felt cathartic.

"I don't forgive me either," Helen said. She desperately wanted to embrace her daughter, but couldn't. Instead she wiped her own eyes, took a shuddering breath, and pushed all the broken pieces back into place. "I love you too," she whispered. She watched her daughter walk out her door.

She sat back down on her couch. Her coffee became cold as she stared out the window, searching for anything but mostly looking for the blue jay. She stayed there until morning light and thought about how gentleness is akin to roughness; how we are born not with wings, but with hands—and that maybe those hands are meant to both hurt and heal the very same.