MERCY

Juliet Grotrian

The thing's gone and broken itself. That wing isn't supposed to be tented at that sort of angle, and I've seen enough of the darned animals to know. What with all the guano they plop all over my windows, you'd think my house was some sort of gull loo stop. No doubt this is one of those vermin. It's gone all quiet, which to be honest is a nice change from the squawking these things usually let out as they're trying to steal your sandwiches. This one's not going to be doing any sandwich-stealing today. 'Are you?' It turns its little black eye on me, and I swear it gives me a hard stare. *Well, I was GOING to. Stupid WIND got in the WAY*, it seems to say.

'Yeah, it's been a bit blustery out, hasn't it?' It must've been blown against the rocks in the storm last night. I've seen some pretty battered-looking seagulls in this little East Coast town, what with it being an old fishing port and prone to storms as well, but I've never seen a bird with its wing all bent out of shape like this one. The storms have been getting a lot worse, though. *You THINK?* It flaps its broken wing at me and clacks its beak as if to make the point. 'You don't need to get ratty with me. I'm not the weather god.' I wonder what it'd be like to be a god. Of course, I don't believe in them, but think of the power… You could make it sunny every day, or give yourself infinite food – pies, and sausages, and sardines fresh out the bay like in the days when this was a proper port.

Talking about food, it's nearly lunchtime. 'Got to get back, the cat'll be waiting.' Don't know why I need to tell it that. I turn around and walk back up along the path, away from the beach.

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I'm on my morning walk again. Walking along, whistling some jingle from one of those TV adverts… And then I see it. The same old bird, huddled up on the path right where I left it. Funny. I thought gulls just fixed themselves up. It turns its little black eye on me again and gives me an even harder stare, if that's possible for a little scrap like that. 'What's with all the staring? I haven't done anything.' In response, it buries its beak in the fold of its wing. 'Okay, okay, fine. Do you want some food or something?'

I think I've got a tin of sardines in my back pocket. Not as good as fresh, but I'm pretty sure they're about to expire anyway. The vermin can have them. I pull back the lid and throw out a couple onto the sand. The gull pulls its head out of its feathers and cocks its head at the sardines. Then the damn thing goes and tucks itself right back up. What an ungrateful rat. 'You could be a bit grateful, you know. Those cost me three dollars.' I used to thrive on three dollars. You could get two pints for that, and I needed them, what with working up at the freezing works all day. Closed down ages ago, right when the port did. That was a dark time, that was.

Meanwhile, no response from the bird. Wasted walk, wasted sardines. I trudge back up the path. 'Well, you aren't going to get anything better, you flying rat,' I holler behind me. It echoes off all the dunes, and I swear the couple walking along the shoreline give me the stink eye. I don't know why I even said it. I put my hands in my pockets and trek back to my house.

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Third day in a row now. Bit tragic, really. The bird's still there, and he hasn't taken one peck out of those sardines. It's surprising that one of those greenies hasn't picked him up and carted him off already. I'm sure not going to, not with all the germs they've got on them. Yvette used to say they were like 'virus factories, and didn't you know Sharon got sick off one just last year.'

I turn my attention to the bird. 'Hello. I see you still haven't got your gratefulness boots on today.'

The gull makes no response.

'Aw, come on. Okay, I'm sorry about yesterday. I guess you just aren't hungry.'

The wind lifts some of the feathers on his back. It's covered with dirty grains of sand and grass, and his feathers have gone a bit dull-coloured. Poor thing. Still a fish-stealer, though.

'Sure you don't want the sardines? They're going to go to waste.'

Still nothing.

Fine. If he's still here tomorrow, I'll take him to the vet. Then the greenies will all be happy. I'll probably get a medal or something.

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The bright light above the table sears into my eyes. I'm surprised the vet isn't wearing sunglasses or something, 'cause it's giving me a headache. Only other time I've had a headache was the night the All Blacks won back in '87 and I drank so much afterwards I nearly knocked myself out. So, if the light's giving *me* a headache, it must be a problem.

The vet silently combs through the gull's feathers. As she does, small tufts of down come loose and drift upwards, into the shaft of light pouring down from that blasted bare bulb. Next, she takes each of its wings, one at a time, and extends them out with her hands. Boy, that wing is broken. Compared to the other one, all sharp angles and clean lines, it looks like someone assembled the wing flatpack without looking at the instructions. Mind you, I remember putting up one of those discount Farmers nightstands for Yvette once, back when she was still around, and it looked almost as bad as this wing - only I *did* read the instructions.

The vet hasn't said much since I brought the bird in, apart from an abrupt 'hello' and 'how are you'. Would've been nice to get a bit of 'thanks for bringing in the bird, that's really thoughtful and kind' too. But now she lifts up her eyes and gives me a piercing look. *Is it possible for a person to look like a seagull,* I think, *because she does right now.*

'Listen, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I don't think we can do anything to save this bird. It's just too far gone. If it'd been brought in a few days ago, we probably could've fixed the wing up. But that's just not going to be possible at this point. I think the kindest thing to do would be to put him down.'

What. What what what what. 'Sorry, what did you say?'

'I said that I think we should put him to sleep. That would be the best thing for this bird right now. I know, it's difficult to hear. I'm sorry.'

'But look – look at his eyes – he'll get over it!'

The bird opens one bleary eyelid. It's covered with a yellowish-grayish film and is oddly dull. The rims are crusted with some sort of orange gunk. Agonisingly slowly, its black pupil turns towards me. The eye blinks, as if in slow-motion, and for that lengthened moment, neither of us humans in the consultation room blinks. Blinking privileges are reserved for that one bird, now seeming tiny and fragile on a sea of stainless steel.

'But surely there's still something we can do.'

'I'm really sorry. You can leave the room for this if you like. It won't feel a thing.'

'I – I think I will.'

As the vet assembles her intimidating-looking kit, I step outside the room and begin to walk towards the sliding doors. Faster, faster.

It wasn't me. I didn't do anything. I didn't do it.

It was always going to die.

I'm nearly running now. I can't get away fast enough from that damned, damned bird.

It didn't even WANT my help.

The sliding doors open and a rush of cold air sweeps into the building. I run into it, out into the freezing morning.

I didn't even want to help it.

I didn't want to help.

I run across the road, through the scrub, over the dunes, onto the beach. I can't go any further without starting to swim. I'm huffing and puffing like anything. These old lungs weren't designed for this kind of exercise.

The surf is wild and frothy today. Mountains and valleys of blue shift on the surface, like a landscape torn down and remoulded again and again. Above the peaks, small black shapes are drifting.

Seagulls.

Seagulls with perfect, perfect wings.