

“A Sparrow’s Fable”
by: Brooke Sandefur

Once, a lovely young sparrow found an old nest underneath an awning of red oak leaves. She and the nest fit perfectly together, as if she herself had built it from scratch. It was warm and bright, for though the rounded leaves of the tree blocked out the sun, the nest radiated its own warmth and light. It had a fluffy rug of soft grass and strong twigs, and it was nestled inside the biggest, toughest oak for a hundred miles. Her nest was home, and she fit wonderfully and entirely inside.

It was buried in the treetops where no other birds could find it. Her nest was her most prized secret, and she just knew if anyone saw it they would steal it away from her.

One night, a terrible storm raged and snarled outside the oak. A bluebird, seeking shelter from the downpour, fluttered her trembling wings inside the canopy of the big tree, right up next to the sparrow's nest. The bluebird thought to herself, “Surely this nest is abandoned, for no healthy bird would make their home in such a decrepit roost!”

Seeing the little sparrow quivering inside, the bluebird said, “Excuse me, but why do you choose to nest in the cold and dark?”

The sparrow was confused by the bluebird's words and frightened by the intrusion. Her nest was exquisite and she was quite sure that there wasn't another like it in the whole world. Fearful that the other bird would reveal her secret, the sparrow squawked and fussed and ran the bluebird off. The blue feathered creature didn't understand why her question upset the sparrow, but she did know that she was far more wary of the storm raging within the leaves of the tree than without.

Later that night, amidst the wind and rain, the mighty oak gave a great shudder, dislodging the sparrow's nest from its perch and scattering all the warm twigs and bright blades of grass that made it home. Heartbroken, she watched her nest disappear in a cascade of dripping leaves and angry branches.

The sparrow was at a loss. What would she do without her nest? Her burrow, her refuge, her safe, special den of misperception! How would she go to sleep without it there to caress her downy cheek? To make her feel loved and wanted and important? She could not even share her grief, for she had taken such pains to hide it from the world that no one else knew of its absence.

And so, in her immense hurt and sadness, she cried very softly for many days, perched on an empty branch, hidden in the heart of the bushy oak. She felt her insides start to rot, her only nourishment the salt of her tears.

The cardinal that lived in a nearby spruce heard the cries of the sparrow, but didn't want to intrude on her sadness. The notes of her grieving sorrow chipped at his heartstrings, night after night. If only he knew the reason for her tears! When the cardinal could no longer stomach the sound of the anguished weeping, he followed the noise and settled next to her in the oak.

Perched alongside the sparrow, the chip in his heart became a hole, for sitting beside him was not a bird, as he had previously thought. It was a wraith, a fractured glass shell of what might possibly have been, at some point in time, an enchanting young nestling. It blinked at him with watery eyes and a bleeding heart.

Looking down, he saw the guilty remains of the depraved nest. At once, he understood that this ghost beside him was carrying so much more than he had thought. He understood that though there were cracks in her shell, she needed the small degree of protection it offered. The reason for the sparrow's misery was now clear. "Excuse me, but would you like me to help you build a new nest?" the cardinal offered, "A better nest, one out in the open, closer to the sun so that you may warm your feathers and visit with your friends."

To which the sparrow responded, "I do not like the sun on my feathers and I have no need for visitors."

The cardinal cocked his red mulleted head and questioned, "But do you not get lonely and cold? I hear you weeping at night. Your beautiful feathers have lost their shine and your beak is rusty from disuse. I see now that you sleep in your tree with no shelter and it pains me."

But the sparrow was scared. She felt small without her nest, for the oak seemed bigger and the sun more stifling and the wind more biting. She had never before seen the birds she heard chirping outside her tree. In truth, she thought, maybe the cardinal meant well, but how was she supposed to trust someone that didn't understand her heart? How to explain to him that she felt like making a new nest would be a betrayal? And that the guilt and shame swirling inside of her speckled breast would not allow her to accept his help? For how could this stunning red bird with his warm, sunny nest ever truly comprehend her loss?

And a small, broken part of her felt that if she started a new nest, she would be forced to let go of her old one. Bits of grass and twig were cemented in her soul, and she knew that any attempt to remove the debris would break her entirely. The remnants embedded in her heart were painful, yes, but the hurt was the last link to her loss. She could not permit the Cardinal's words to sever that tie.

"No." she whispered, "A new nest simply won't do."

The cardinal could not, in good conscience, leave the young sparrow. She was withering away before his very eyes, and he could not abandon her to her sorrow. He nudged her wing and spoke:

"Be careful of the nest you choose to roost in, little one. Some appear strong in the dark of the undergrowth, but the light reveals their mischief. A nest does not define your spirit, and may even hinder your potential – and you have so much potential. An inclination and a breeze will take you wherever you wish to go. The right nest will stay waiting for you, unshakeable on its branch no matter how far you may fly or how long you may be gone. I can see the courage and strength in your breast, and little bird, it is beautiful. If you are gentle with your heart and unyielding in your character, you will find more comfort than any nest could ever provide. That is my wish for you."

The sparrow felt the old oak part its branches for her and for the first time in a long while, she felt the warmth of the dawn across her face and saw the life outside of the leaves. The chirping of kindred spirits became more than just noise. The tender touch of a light wind nuzzled her face, and she remembered how much she missed its embrace. Salty tears were once again leaking from her small feathered face, and abruptly she leapt from the oak branch and spiraled into the daybreak.

The cardinal slumped against the oak, so incredibly saddened by the loss of the young sparrow. He had done what he could, tried to bandage her hurt with his kind words and yet, it had not been enough.

A moment later, the sunrise peeked over the horizon and he saw the little sparrow fluttering back to him, carrying a sycamore twig in her beak. The breeze had dried her tears and though her eyes still held great sorrow, they also held the light of the new day. She resumed her perch by his side and dropped her offering next to their feet.

“That is my wish for me, too.”