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This Must Be The Place

Erin Landry

Matthew was allowed to go home, finally, but there were conditions. No houseplants, no pets, no minor visitors until his white blood cell count was normal. And his mother, Nancy, augmented the rule about visitors. “Germs don’t discriminate against people over the age of 18,” she’d said to Matthew while spraying disinfectant on his bedroom doorknob. “And it’s flu season.”

It didn’t make much of a difference, anyway. Matthew had missed so much school over the past two years that he was practically a stranger there. And he had only a tiny smattering of relatives living nearby.

Pete, the beagle, was exiled to Matthew’s grandmother’s house, along with the African violets, the begonia, the philodendrons, and the ficus tree. The house smelled like Lysol and Clorox, rubbing alcohol and latex gloves, apple-scented hand soap and chicken broth.

Matthew’s fingers were too clumsy for video games, his eyes were too tired for television and books, and his mouth was too sore for solid foods. But upon his return home, Nancy gave her son a gift, wrapped in pale blue paisley-patterned paper and thin silver ribbon. Matthew unwrapped the present slowly, trying not to tear the paper. He knew his mother liked to save gift wrap, and this looked special. His weak fingers worked carefully, peeling tape until he could slide the gifts out from the intact paper – a chestnut-colored leather case and a black leather-bound book. “Open it,” Nancy said, touching the leather case.

Matthew opened the case’s clasp and found his grandfather’s vintage binoculars inside. They were heavy, black and brass, and Matthew recognized them immediately. His grandpa had always kept them in his living room, his bird watching room, alongside the bird guide. He opened the book and saw his grandfather’s painstakingly neat notes next to colored renderings of loons and hawks and chickadees and goldfinches.

“I was waiting for a special occasion to give these to you, a big birthday, like your 16th. But this is a sort of birthday, isn’t it?” Nancy placed her hand atop Matthew’s hairless head.

“Thank you, Mom,” Matthew whispered in his new, tremulous voice that still sounded foreign to him. “I remember these.” He smiled at his mother and lifted the book to his lips.

Nancy hung a gazebo-shaped cedar bird feeder on the magnolia tree outside Matthew’s bedroom. And every time she looked in on her son, he had the binoculars to his face, his frail, trembling hands, almost translucent in the sun, clutched around them. And she was touched.

But Matthew wasn’t watching birds. He was watching the Murphys.

The Murphys lived across the street in an oversized Victorian with a wraparound porch and a three-car garage. Matthew knew the Murphy family lived there, but he’d never spoken to them, and neither had Nancy. The two families

were sometimes forced to exchange quick, awkward waves from across the street, looking down or away as soon as politely possible. But that was the extent of their neighborly relationship. The Murphys had two children, a son and a daughter, much younger than Matthew. And the disparity between their ages eased the awkwardness of never having spoken, because they really didn't have much reason to, then, did they? The boy was probably seven, and the girl, perhaps five. They had strawberry blonde hair and, Matthew had recently noticed, lots of rosy color in their cheeks and lips. Through the binoculars, they always looked like they'd just climbed a flight of stairs, or like they had secrets they were dying to tell.

Often, the Murphys were away, and when they were, Matthew focused on the house. The house was yellow, a creamy buttercup yellow. It was the color of Matthew's favorite treat, the lemon gelato from the Italian deli, the color of his baby blanket that his mother had slept with every night she couldn't spend with him in the hospital. From his bedroom, Matthew could see, but only partially, only in meaningless fragments, the kitchen, the dining room, the boy's bedroom, and an office on the top storey. He had a very clear view, though, of the deck off the kitchen, the verdant backyard, the red brick driveway, and the immaculate three-car garage. The deck, large and whitewashed, was replete with a huge stainless steel grill, a round, glass-topped table, and chairs with cushions that matched the mango-striped table umbrella. The backyard was enclosed by a white picket fence and perfectly-pruned boxwood shrubs. The house's red brick chimney, extending high into the sky, was like a candle on top of a birthday cake.

Matthew's house was a tiny fraction of the size of the Murphy's. It was a two-bedroom ranch, its grey paint peeling and chipped. Something was always broken or busted or leaking. The hedges in the front yard were in bad need of trimming. The basketball hoop on the garage was lopsided. The concrete front stoop was crumbling in places. But Nancy did her best, her very best, to keep the place looking decent. She was an expert housekeeper, and even though the appliances didn't always work, they always glistened.

Four years earlier, before either of them had heard of lymphoblastic lymphoma or autologous stem cell transplant or leukocytes or neutrophils, when Nancy and Matthew had looked at the little grey house with the realtor, it was vacant. Nancy had dashed through each room, the color in her cheeks rising as she went along, crying out about the six-panel doors and the breakfast nook and the brick fireplace. When they'd finished their tour, she twirled on the hardwood floors in the living room. "This must be the place," she said, taking Matthew's hands in hers. "We're home."

They moved in a month later, and Nancy scrubbed and scoured and polished the place until every surface gleamed. And then Matthew felt a lump in his armpit, and even though Nancy never stopped cleaning, everything stopped shining.

There was usually a flurry of activity in and around the yellow house. Helena's Housekeeping and Schmitt's Landscaping and Harvest Grocery Delivery and Dilly Lilly Florist frequented the Murphys, so there was always plenty to

watch. But Matthew liked watching the Murphys best of all.

Mr. Murphy was square-jawed and steely grey-eyed and salt-and-pepper-haired. He looked like a department store catalog model or a politician, and he was always outside, working in the driveway or the garage, often accompanied by his fair-haired, pink-cheeked children. Mrs. Murphy had wide hips and a thick mane of blonde hair. She wore big, oval sunglasses and shirts with bold-colored stripes. Mr. and Mrs. Murphy always looked as if they'd just returned from a Caribbean vacation; they were tan year-round.

Matthew was watching Mrs. Murphy unload shopping bags from her silver BMW SUV one afternoon when his mother knocked softly on his door.

"Time for a little walk, kiddo," Nancy said. "Hate to pull you away from the birds, but Dr. Myers said we have to try to do this everyday."

Matthew blushed through his skeletal pallor as he put the binoculars in their case and followed his mom to the study, where the monstrous treadmill took up most of the room.

"Have you seen anything interesting today?" she asked as she programmed the machine for a slow 15-minute walk.

"A couple cardinals earlier," Matthew lied. "And a red-winged blackbird."

"Not bad," Nancy crooned in a singsong voice, turning to Matthew and smiling broadly. "Grandpa would be proud."

Matthew had seen two cardinals yesterday and a red-winged blackbird the day before. At least he wasn't completely fabricating the sightings. But still, he couldn't meet his mother's eyes.

"Well, this thing's finally getting a little use," Nancy said as she helped Matthew onto the treadmill. Matthew wanted to tell his mother that she didn't need the treadmill, anyway, that she was thin, thinner than Mrs. Murphy across the street, but he was weak and he had to conserve every ounce of his energy for the 15-minute walk. Nancy stood beside the treadmill, looking down at the ground as Matthew focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Nancy was indeed thinner than Mrs. Murphy. But she never looked rested or tanned. Matthew had lost a terrible amount of weight. He'd lost hair, his eyebrows. But he didn't care, really. They'd come back. The weight would, too. He thought his mother looked much worse. She'd always had circles beneath her eyes, but now they were darker, and tinged with blue. Her dark brown hair was thinner, and its shine was gone. Her skin was dry and dull, and her once bright green eyes had dimmed. She'd always been stressed and overworked and alone. But she'd looked contentedly exhausted, and the little lines around her eyes crinkled when she smiled. Now she looked sad and old and weary, and those lines no longer crinkled.

Matthew finished his walk and dismounted the treadmill with Nancy's help. He felt lightheaded as she helped him back to bed. He was too tired even to watch the Murphys anymore that day. His mouth was a hotbed of horrible little sores, and the little food he could manage tasted like metal. His legs felt rubbery and his head throbbed, and he fell into a fitful sleep for the rest of the day, until Nancy knocked on his door again, ready to give him his nightly injections.

The next morning, a Saturday, Matthew woke feeling stronger. He propped himself up in bed and looked out on the Murphy's house. Mr. Murphy was crouching over his son's neon green bike in the driveway, adjusting the seat. The little girl, wearing pink sunglasses and a pink visor, zoomed up and down the Murphy's half of the sidewalk in a miniature pink Barbie Cadillac Escalade. It looked almost precisely like the family's Escalade, except that theirs was ivory. Mrs. Murphy sat on the deck, on one of the cushioned chairs, reading the newspaper, an iced coffee drink and a plate of fruit on the table in front of her.

The boy appeared on the deck and stopped to pick from his mother's plate of fruit. He took every piece of watermelon and every grape before sprinting off to the driveway where his father worked on the bike. He sat beside his father and popped the pieces of fruit into his mouth, watching as his sister whizzed by, over and over, in her Escalade. Soon, Mr. Murphy had finished adjusting the seat, and the boy was riding alongside his sister, racing up and down the block. Mr. Murphy joined his wife on the deck, watching the children go by in a blur of pink and green. Mrs. Murphy occasionally reached for her iced coffee and took tiny sips through the straw, but she never raised her head from the paper. Matthew watched until Nancy knocked on his door with the breakfast that he wouldn't end up eating.

While Nancy escorted him to the treadmill for his daily walk the following afternoon, Matthew decided that cardinals and blackbirds were not all that exciting. He wanted to see his mother's eyes light up the way they used to, he wanted her to be happy, if only for a moment, so when she asked the question she now asked everyday at exercise time, Matthew had a new answer.

"I saw a hummingbird, actually," Matthew said, climbing atop the treadmill unassisted. "A broad-billed hummingbird. They're not that common here."

"Well, that's something!" Nancy said. And her eyes lit up the way they used to, and she was happy, for a moment. "You're really becoming an expert ornithologist." She gave Matthew's arm a gentle squeeze.

"Yeah, it's really helped," Matthew said, nodding solemnly. "I don't know what I'd do without it."

Matthew began his treadmill walk and didn't say anything else about the broad-billed hummingbird. Nancy stood beside him and swayed back and forth a little to music in her head.

A few days later, Nancy bought a hummingbird feeder and instant hummingbird nectar from the wild bird store in town. She mixed the nectar in the kitchen and installed the feeder in the same tree as the gazebo feeder. Matthew felt awful as he watched her work, even as she smiled and sang to herself, even as the circles beneath her eyes seemed suddenly smaller.

The next week, on a Sunday afternoon, Matthew watched the Murphys with stronger eyes. The binoculars didn't feel as heavy as they usually did, and Matthew's grip was sure and solid.

The ivory Escalade and its pink miniature were parked alongside each other in the driveway, and Mr. Murphy and the girl were busy washing their respective vehicles. She wore a polka-dotted turquoise bathing suit and she

laughed as her father sprayed her with the hose. The boy splashed around in the backyard in a pirate ship-shaped inflatable pool, outfitted with a slide, a black skull and crossbones flag, and a water-blasting cannon. He aimed the cannon at various backyard targets – squirrels and trees, the picnic table, the picket fence.

Mrs. Murphy emerged from the house, wearing an orange-striped two-piece bathing suit and carrying her iced coffee. She walked through the yard, taking high steps in her fluorescent flip flops, before settling on a chaise lounge chair. She lay on her stomach, her head turned to one side, the side Matthew couldn't see, and her bare shoulders and blonde hair glinted in the sun.

The boy, tired of squirrels and trees, aimed the pool's water cannon toward his lounging mother and sprayed her, laughing maniacally. The blast of water hit his mother with more force than Matthew imagined it could, and she leapt from the chair like an angry tabby cat. She dragged the boy inside by his elbow, her blonde ponytail now sagging and soaked. She'd taken her sunglasses off, and Matthew saw, perhaps for the first time, her eyes, blue and blazing.

Mr. Murphy turned off the hose and put his sponge into a bucket before taking the girl by the hand and leading her through the yard and into the house. The two Escalades were left soapy and dripping, Mrs. Murphy's iced coffee lay overturned in the grass, and the pirate ship pool leaned to one side, its black flag like a wilted flower.

Matthew looked at the magnolia tree, the two feeders side by side, swinging lazily in the breeze. And then, in a blue-green flash, there it was – a broad-billed hummingbird. He was sure of it, because he'd studied it in case Nancy had pressed him for information when he'd told the lie. It was a male, with a bright metallic blue throat and iridescent dark green feathers. It hovered like magic in front of the feeder, its wings an almost imperceptible charcoal blur, its airborne body perfectly still. It pressed its bright red-orange beak to the feeder, suspended in the air, a shock of teal and cyan. And it was gone.

Matthew opened his grandfather's bird guide to the hummingbird section, and in his neatest, most careful print, he recorded the date next to the picture and description of the broad-billed hummingbird. His grandfather had recorded one date there before him, twelve years earlier. Matthew closed the book and put the binoculars in their case. He got out of bed and went to find his mother, to tell her what he'd seen, to watch her eyes dance.

As he walked through the house, he felt a rush of love for his broken body, his burgeoning immune system, his tiny, fatherless family, his tired, beautiful mother. For a moment, his heart beat like the hummingbird's wings as he made his way to the kitchen, where his mother was making grilled cheese and tomato soup, just for him.