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## The One That Got Away

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## The One That Got Away

### **Author Bio**

Jeremiah became a science major because he wanted to gain superpowers in a lab accident. As a senior Biochemistry and Molecular Biology major, he has instead spent most of his time in lab breeding sea urchins, melanoma, fruit flies, bread mold, and the occasional carbon-carbon bond. In fact, the only science-related accident he has had was in the Animal Holding room of McCreary Hall: a Madagascar hissing cockroach once drew blood from his thumb with a well-placed, barbed cone of chitin. When he is not living in the Science Center, Jeremiah lives in Goose Creek, South Carolina, a land of salt marshes and giant mosquitoes where accidents, although rarely granting super-powers, generally involve fireworks—and scarred retinas.

# The One That Got Away

Jeremiah Johnston

Birds blink.

Let's face it—birds fly, and anyone who has strapped on the safety harness of a roller coaster knows what they know: wind dries out your eyes. So, a blink is the squeak of the windshield wipers after the hum of the wiper wash sprayer—but it's not only that. A blink is the speed of a bird in flight. A blink is the final action of a card shark before playing his ace. A blink is what loses a staring contest.

A blink is a half-second too late.

I clutched the top of my lab-tape-Swiffer-duster-pole-and-folded-cloth net and cursed. Up above, on the foam-wrapped, cold-water inlet pipe, set up in the maze of other tubes in the ceiling of the animal holding room, the male Zebra finch cocked his head at me and chirped. My eyes slanted. The bird blinked.

His mate perched on a stick in the rough wire cage on top of the refrigerator watching me, waiting. I knew what she thought. I wouldn't catch him like I caught her—filling the deep jar with bird seed, waiting until she jumped in, and slamming my green aquarium net over the top. As I struggled to hold her through the net, that's when I found out that birds were fireballs of down, warmed from the inside, just like people. And just like people, they have a certain dignity. I picked her up in my hand, and much like a political prisoner being pushed into a cop car, she neither cried nor screamed aloud as I locked her into the cage.

Earlier that morning, I came to work to feed the animals. I could hear the finches chirping through the door like always; we had them in the animal room for safe-keeping during their mating-call-response experiment for Animal Behavior. Whenever I worked in the room—refilling the water in the feeder of the goldfish tanks, cleaning the turtles' filter, looking for dead cockroaches in one of the five populations we kept alive (or keeping the crayfish from eating each other)—the birds always made an effort to be vocal when I looked at them, whether they jumped up in the bird cage, jumped over each other, or jumped down into the fresh tray of bird seed that I laid down. Each soft clang of the aluminum bars on the cage let me know that they were moving, an audible sign that they were alive and active in their metal home. Unlike the snakes, they didn't bite, and unlike everything else, they didn't smell. I used to sing them Jimmy Buffet songs, and they would whistle for an encore when I was done.

I opened the door and pushed it shut behind me, dropping my backpack, coat, hat, and laptop case on and around one of the room's rotating stools and gave a passing nod at the bird cage that always greeted me at the door. As I bent back to my appliances, I heard the chirping but no excited clanging on the grid-work bars. That was odd. I turned to face the cage, looking at it with more scrutiny. The birds weren't there. I walked around the cage—and then I saw it. The food tray, which had a replaceable bottom attached outside of the cage, had fallen out, spilling a thin pile of bird seed from its overturned mouth. I heard a chirp above my head. There the pair perched, choosing the hot water inlet pipe for the first time. I met both of their eyes. They cocked their heads to get a better look with one eye and blinked.

The first thing I did was pull out an old work log sheet—the kind with a blank back—and wrote a sign to post on the door: “CAUTION—FREE ZEBRA FINCHES—BE CAREFUL WHEN ENTERING.” The last thing I wanted was to be responsible for letting finches out in the Science Center; the first thing I wanted was to get them back into the cage.

That was the origin of the makeshift net, the bird seed bait, the spring-loaded slamming mechanisms on the bird cage, and the wide array of aquarium nets and stools placed within running and jumping distance in case I got a lucky shot. I herded them around the room with my Swiffer-net pole, trying to push them away from the pipes in the ceiling. Then, with a Scandinavian growl, I raised my net as high as I could to swipe, swing, and swish after the fluttering of wings that beat the air faster than my net could stir it. I would stalk off to a corner, pretending to do nothing while they chirped amongst themselves. Then, with a flash of my eyes, I would begin the chase again, darting around the trash cans, salt water mix, and stainless steel sinks—jumping up off of the stools for a few aerial shots. Every dash I took reminded me how slow and cumbersome I was—my 6500 grams to their six. Compared to us, cat and mouse was child's play. I wasn't going to give up; I was going to catch those blinking, chirping birds.

Several hours, one roommate assist, and an accidental release of the female later, I looked up at the finches, minding their own business. I sighed and placed my Swiffer-net pole down. If they wanted to be free—for just a night—it was the least I could do. I left some food out in a tray—water, too—and, the day being a Saturday, I sent an e-mail to my boss. I exited as fast as I could, making sure the birds didn't leave with me.

The next morning, my boss got back to me. She and the professor of the class were going to take care of it—they even had a brand-name Fischer net. I closed the screen of my laptop and looked out of the window in my room. “Good luck,” I whispered; to whom, I didn't know.

On Monday, I came back into the room. I heard the chirp and me-

tallic thumps from the cage. Success. The female's orange feet were perched on the plastic dowel and she chirped at me as I walked past. Even still, something wasn't right—I went back to look at the cage. The female was alone.

Maybe they had the male somewhere else. I looked up—nope, not there. With a short attention span, and a long list of homework on my mind, I grabbed a paper towel and went to the Channel catfish's tank to scrape some algae off the inside of the glass. I crumpled up the soggy paper towel and went to the trash can to drop it in. My head snapped back at what I saw. I had found the male.

He was in a plastic bag, damp on the inside with moisture. His plumage was drenched, and his beak was frozen open in a shriek. Worst of all, his eyelids were squeezed together, tighter than a vise clamp. I asked my boss what had happened—one of them grabbed him with the net, but in the struggle, he fell into an open fish tank. It's not a bird's fault that it can't hold its breath; inhaling or exhaling, air enters its lungs. Death wasn't unusual in the animal room, but even still—I blinked.

I looked back at his mate. She perched in the cage, alone, not making a sound. She hopped down to the food tray, looked around at something that wasn't there, and cocked her head back at me. I nodded.

I moved the stools and fish nets back to their proper places and grabbed my patched-together Swiffer net. I peeled the colored lab tape off of the rag I was using for the net's basket and stuck what I could salvage onto the stainless steel counter. I unscrewed the body of the net, folded the cloth, and placed it back onto the shelf. The mate watched me as I worked.

I went to the paper towel rack and grabbed three white sheets. I pulled the tape up from the counter and fastened the paper towels together. I took the makeshift shawl and laid it over the plastic-bag coffin in the trash can.

I went to the log sheet and pulled out my pen. "Female finch caught; male bird," I stopped writing.

"Escaped."

I looked back at his mate in the bird cage. She chirped, cocked her head, and blinked at the trash can.

I nodded my head.