

FLASH NONFICTION

The Bird Incident

by Tired Cat



"Bird" by Vanesa Erjavec

I'll tell you what it feels like to trust your associative memory and then publicly humiliate yourself with it. Spoiler: it feels exactly as stupid as it sounds.

So. I'm switching shifts with a colleague earlier today. She hands me the basic facts about the next patient: surname Slaví?ek, pleasant man, ginger cat, needs an invoice and a trip to the doctor's office. I repeat the surname a few times in my head — Slaví?ek, Slaví?ek — just to lock it in. Just to pretend I'm functioning properly.

My brain, of course, decides to get creative, setting off a small associative chain.

Slavík means nightingale in Czech.

Slaví?ek is a little birdie.

A tiny nightingale.

A sweet, feathered creature.

Czech loves diminutives.

Great. Cute man, bird surname. Fine. I let it sit like that.

Then it's time to call him in. I step into the waiting room and say his name loudly — I like when things are unambiguous. But that's the exact moment my brain flips the wrong switch. Instead of Slaví?ek, I blurt out:

“Pan Ptá?ek, vstupte.”

Mister Little Birdie.

Mister Tweety.

In a medical setting, with witnesses.

The whole waiting room perks up like I've announced the winner of a raffle. I repeat it. The man is smiling, but not moving. I look at him. He looks at me. I smile back — thin, apologetic, already suspicious. I wave him over. And then, right when my brain is supposed to self-correct, it gives me something even better. Louder, aimed in his direction:

“Pan Pták, vstupte!”

It would've been fine, honestly, if “pták” in Czech meant only “bird.”

But no. Of course not. Ninety percent of the time, it means exactly what a five-year-old boy would giggle at.

So yes. I basically yell across a packed waiting room:

“Mister Dick, please come in.”

Clearly. Confidently. With the projection of a theater actress.

And the man — bless him — doesn’t even resist. Just follows me in, like this is his fate now.

Only in the exam room, when I finally check the computer, do I fully register what I’ve been calling him. And there’s this short, sharp wave of embarrassment, like a hot towel slapped over the face. I try to soften the horror with a compliment — because that always ends well — and what comes out of my mouth is:

“Oh... You have such an interesting last name.”

Brilliant.