SHORT STORY

The Love of Cobs

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"A Known Somewhere" by Mahmoud El Mardi

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The willow tree loomed over the spot I chose for nesting. I built it, straw by straw, despite having no one to share it with. At least not yet. Maybe I was building it out of stubbornness, or out of a faint hope it would impress *him*.

He was a season older than me. I remembered being curled under my father's wing, watching *him* land on the lake's surface with a loud splash. Females had swarmed around him, flashing their strong wings, their necks perfectly curled.

"That boy will be trouble, mark my words," Dad had quipped.

"A show-off," Papa agreed, nudging my siblings to swim faster. Then he turned to me, nibbling on my fluffy feathers. "Oh, darling. Are you tired again?"

"Of course he's tired," Dad crooned. "He swam to that dove-eyed human again."

"He had good grains," I mumbled, my beak resting on Dad's white feathers.

I still saw Dad and Papa occasionally, in the distance. They had a new nest of cygnets and wouldn't let me approach. New life needed to be guarded, they had taught me, at all costs.

I set the last straw, admiring my work of art. The nest was perfectly round, set in a quiet place, a perfect spot for our future cygnets. The view was great too — we'd see a predator approach from afar.

Gathering my courage, I took a step toward the lake's shoreline. My strides grew quicker, my feet flapping on the grass. Sliding onto the water's surface, I looked around, craning my neck.

There *he* was, right in the middle of the lake, surrounded by a flock of females. A shiver traveled through my body, dissolving only with a violent shaking of my tail.

Now or never.

I swam as fast as I could, the membranes of my feet kicking through the water's resistance. I'd gained enough speed that by the time I reached him, I had to brake with my wings to avoid bumping into his side.

"Watch out!" he said, but his posture seemed to carry interest rather than annoyance. "What's the hurry?"

"I'm sorry," I stuttered. Maybe I should just swim back and never look at him again. "I — um, I was wondering if you perhaps would like to see the nest I built."

The cob tilted his head, his beak snapping once. I backed away and braced for the bite. I was never good at taking off from water, the first few flaps of my wings too clumsy, too awkward, there was no chance I'd be able to evade his attack —

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But it never came. Instead, he shook his feathers and puffed out his chest. “Well, show me, pretty boy.”

I blinked, lost in my plans of quick escape. *Wait.* “Really? You… you want to come with me?”

He nodded, his cheek bumping into mine. “Lead the way. Has anyone told you how gorgeous your neck is?” His gaze slid over me to the nape of my neck. “You got a loose feather here. May I?”

“Yes.” I let him pluck the feather from a spot I could hardly reach. It landed on the water after he’d spat it out, creating a soft ripple on the surface.

We swam side by side, almost perfectly synchronized. When the tide hit my flank, our feathers touched briefly. He didn’t flinch. I pushed my chest forward and raised my wings.

His beady eyes sparkled as he mirrored my movements.

With my head high, I strode across the grass and led him to my nest. I turned to face him, anticipation vibrating through my hollow bones. He shook off the remaining water from his body and looked at me with a spark of curiosity.

“Why did you build it alone? We should’ve done it together.”

I shifted on the spot, tucking my left leg up. “I thought… it would impress you.”

“It is impressive, yes.” The tip of his bright orange beak bumped into mine. “But you could’ve asked me to join you first, silly.”

“I didn’t know…” Bowing my head low, I shivered. “I didn’t know if you’d have me.”

“So you didn’t notice how many times I tried to court you?” He huffed, stepping closer. “Never doubt yourself like that, pretty boy.”

His forehead gently bumped into mine, his neck snaking around mine. Instinct drove me forward to copy his motion, intertwining our bodies. His beak touched mine, and I knew I’d stay true to this swan until the end of my days.

Our first spring was cygnet-less. We’d gotten together at the peak of nesting season, and almost all females had laid eggs already. But I didn’t mind that much despite the insistent tugging on my mind to care for offspring. We roamed the skies side by side, enjoying the wind carrying us through the changing weather. When water fell from the sky, we found shelter under the willow tree and snuggled until the warm sunrays appeared again.

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Submerging for food by his side also became more joy than necessity. He had a sharp beak for finding the best patches of pondweed. He knew I liked the freshly sprouted ones. Whenever he'd find one, he'd bump me underwater, signalling to resurface. Then we shared the green string, yanking it playfully, acting like we were fighting for the bigger piece. He always let me have most of it.

Our first winter together was mellow. The lake didn't freeze, but it grew cold enough my feet ached when we spent too much time swimming.

Fortunately, my featherless friend came to see us often. The orange stripes on his torso shone with reflected light. He sat at the shore, legs drawn to his chest, and watched us. I had known him since childhood. He might have been featherless, but he never hurt me. I'd been scared one time, when he'd grabbed me, pressed me to the grass and stretched my leg. But when he let me go, I had the pretty ring clasped above my foot, just like Dad and Papa had.

More importantly, I already knew the paper bag he sometimes carried around. The little grains were tasty and filling, exactly what we needed to survive.

At first, my love was wary and refused to approach him. I tried nudging him, persuading him, to no avail. So I shrugged and hopped on the grass, advancing towards my friend.

— *Oh, you have a partner now?* My friend froze, the bag hanging from his weirdly shaped wing. — *Wait. But that one's a male, isn't he? He's huge. I thought you were…*

I wobbled to him and pecked the paper bag. He let out a sound from his throat and shook his head.

— *Of course. I'm sorry, buddy. Here you go. But leave some for your boyfriend.*

I picked the scattered grains. Once my friend distanced himself, my love dared to approach too.

"These are good," he said, pecking the yellow bits. "He just gives them to you?"

"Yes. Sometimes these. Sometimes other grains. Or he comes with pieces of greens."

"Just like that?" my love said in a suspicious tone.

I shrugged, swallowing the grains.

When springtime came, we started talking about eggs. I wasn't keen on tricking a pen although my love seemed more at ease. He'd already started courting one. I knew she wasn't the one he had bonded with, but I missed him. While he was away, I kept our nest tidy,

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collecting new reeds to strengthen the structure.

He returned in a hurry, landing in our territory with a frantic flapping of his wings. “Darling! I — I found something.”

“Something?” My head perked up. I stretched my leg and whipped my tail. “What?”

“There’s a nest —”

“We have a nest.”

“I know, love, I know! But there are cygnets.”

“You want to steal someone’s offspring?” I asked, terror building inside my chest.

“No, of course not. We need to help the little ones. The parents won’t return.”

“How can you know that?”

“Just come with me?” he pleaded.

We flew together. He led me to another nesting place, a territory that had belonged to somebody else —

Oh no. A chill clenched my body. One swan lay on the shore motionless; a thin string wrapped too tightly around her neck. Her mate’s limp body floated on the water, caught between the reeds. And the cygnets cried desperately, their grey feathers clumped and limp, hunger and fear stirring all five of them.

“Hey.” I approached slowly, trying to stay calm. “Little ones. Don’t be afraid."

“Come with us,” my love said, his outstretched wing guiding them from the nest. “We’ll feed you. Nurture you. You’ll be safe.”

The chirps of protest faded when we led them to a patch of algae. They nipped at it, the soft stems sliding down their little throats.

I looked at my love and raked my beak through his feathers. “They’re ours now.”

“Ours.” He nodded and swam after one chick that had drifted too far away. He nudged it with his beak, encouraging it to hop onto his back.

“You’ll be Dad, then,” I said, herding our little flock. “And I’ll be Papa.”

Chaos reigned in our territory as the cygnets grew. They were still fluffy and grey, but every day, they found new ways to challenge our patience. One day, they all tried to climb on my

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love's back and slid back to water with a gleeful chirp. The next day, they plucked my feathers — even those that were not loose at all. I almost had a bald patch on my wing!

I took turns with my love for sleep. When one shut his eyes, the other remained vigilant, scanning for threats — mostly other couples eyeing our perfect territory.

When I heard footsteps approaching us, I didn't pay much attention. Maybe it was my friend with a fresh bag of grains. But this time, it was a flock of featherless, two-legged creatures. They were smaller than my friend. They sat on the shore, too close to our nest, carrying dark brown bottles. One of them popped off the round caps with a shiny blade. I had seen those caps before, scattered on the ground. They were not tasty, and they hurt my foot when I stepped on them.

— *Oh. Swans.* One of them pointed at us, a hiccup shaking his chest.

— *You afraid of birds?* His flockmate bared his teeth and stepped toward our nest.

My love rose from his slumber immediately and spread his wings. "Go away," he hissed, charging toward the two-legged. With a mighty swipe of his wings, he fearlessly defended our territory.

— *Fuck*, the two-legged hissed too. He stumbled back and fell onto his back. His mate barked a laugh that died in his throat when my love bit his leg, his perfect beak catching on the loose blue layer on the creature's leg.

— *Let go, you stupid bird!*

The shimmer of a metal blade blinded me. The scream of my beloved burrowed into my feathers.

My love screeched, "Go! Swim! Take the kids!"

I obeyed, gathering our offspring and guiding them to safety. The bevy peeped frantically. Our biggest cygnet tried to swim back to the shore, chirping that Dad needed help. I steered him away, paddling as fast as I managed. Once we were far enough from the shore, my head snapped back.

"Love!" I called desperately, flapping my wings to attract his attention.

He stumbled into the water, his wing unnaturally extended. Blood dripped down the beautiful white feathers I'd groomed countless times.

I hurried to him, pecking at the wound. He shrieked and pulled away.

"I'll be fine," he snapped and swam to our cygnets.

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But he was so far away from being fine. In the next few days, his wing never folded properly. Instead, the wound started oozing a foul liquid. Whenever I tried to groom him, he pulled away with a quiet grunt and told me to leave him alone.

My friend appeared on the shore with his usual paper bag. Could I trust him? He was two-legged and featherless, just as those who'd wounded my family. But… he was my friend, wasn't he?

— *Hey, buddy! Come, I got your favourite oats*, he chirped.

I let out a desperate sound. How do I ask such a creature for help? And what would he even do with his completely flat and soft beak?

— *What's up with your sweetheart?* He extended his neck — barely, but apparently to his best abilities. His strange wing pointed at my love.

"Love… please, come and eat."

My love eyed me, tiredness seeped through each of his quills. "Fine."

He wobbled on the shore and feasted on the grains with me, swallowing them slowly. Each movement seemed to send a painful jolt through his body. And he felt warmer than usual.

— *Oh, damn.* My friend wiped the tips of his wings on his legs. He fished out a shiny rectangle and pressed it to the side of his head. — *Hello. Wounded swan in sector B. Seems like he has a cut on his wing?*

The world blurred when my love's feet slipped, and he fell on the ground, his neck falling into the grass. A membrane clouded his eyes. I nibbled his feathers, but he barely stirred.

My friend lowered himself, gently touching my love's head with his wing. He tilted his head and kept the rectangle stuck between his cheek and his shoulder.

—*Yeah, I think it's infected. Call the vet, please.*

Other two-legged creatures came, swarming us. They trapped me in a net while they snatched my love away. I cried, to no avail, shocked by the betrayal. I would never trust the two-legged again.

When they released me, my former friend was still there. I aimed all my rage at him, trumpeting and slapping him with my wings.

— *Ow!*

I bit his leg, enough to tear through the blue layer. My heart raced — what if he also had a blade? Who'd take care of our children?

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— I know, buddy, okay? I know! We'll bring him back, I promise, don't bite me…

What meaning did my life have when my beloved had been taken away? The cygnets kept asking for Dad. I had no answer, so I just guided them quietly toward the best grazing patch, hoping tasty food would silence their worries.

I stayed wary of the two-legged. No amount of paper bags could convince me to come closer. And definitely not the smelly, loud metal box that stopped dangerously close to our nest. I let out a low hiss and steered the cygnets away from the shore.

They pulled out a smaller box and opened one side. I watched them closely but couldn't anticipate their plan.

When the box revealed its contents, my heart skipped a beat.

"My love!" I shrieked and swam to the reeds near the border. I peeked through the straws and saw the love of my life, his beak and wings bound with thick tape. He squirmed and wiggled.

The tapes holding him snapped. The two-legged creature nodded and drew in a long breath.

— Okay, ready to release. One, two — dammit!

My love slipped out of the grip, running toward the water. He hissed all the way, spreading his beautiful wings.

"You came back!" I gasped, my tail twitching. "I thought —"

"I know." He swam to me and pressed our foreheads together. Our chests bumped too. "They did… strange things to me. But my wing works again. Wanna see?"

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