

A Correspondence in Bird Watching

Leigh Kirkland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Kirkland, Leigh () "A Correspondence in Bird Watching," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol1/iss1/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

A Correspondence Course in Bird Watching

by Leigh Kirkland

A bird flew across the hood of my car as I drove to class on Thursday. Most likely a mockingbird, from the white on the undersides of the dark wings.

The school was in the basement of Lord & Taylor, which anchored one end of the deadest mall in Atlanta, with Saks Fifth Avenue at the other end. Mall management wasn't ever going to fix the lights on the Mint Parking level reserved for us. Georgia was here in a two-year drought while dark puddles on the Mint Level were breeding blind cave fish under the scum of algae on their surfaces.

The handle on the glass door into Hoffman Fashion College was broken, and the hinges were stiff. Students—girls, only four boys were enrolled this year—cuttled along the narrow hallways, vaguely off-balance.

When I got back from teaching my second class, there was a note on my desk from the Director of Education: Jane—Could you come by my office? Donna. I walked down the middle bar of the H-shaped arrangement of the school to Donna Stone's office.

The windows in the school faced into the hallways from the classrooms. Students were paged with notes taped to the glass. Once a week a black man with a squeegee cleaned and disinfected the windows.

Donna's secretary, Ann Broxton, was short and bug-eyed. At least once a week she cornered me as I struggled not to collapse a styrofoam cup of coffee in shaking hands, to tell me about her dog's exercise schedule. She sent me into Donna's office without a word.

Donna said, "Have a seat, Jane."

I said, "So what's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you." Her mustard-colored pantsuit matched her hair.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, since we're a career-oriented school, we have a little different dress code than you're probably used to."

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"So, I'd appreciate it if you'd dress a little more professionally."

"What kind of profession do you mean?" I said, forgetting that a semi-professional fascist like Donna wouldn't have a sense of humor. My joke fell into dead air.

"You mean more professionally than I'm dressed today?" I said finally, dumbfounded.

"Than the last couple of times I've seen you. I'd appreciate it if you'd dress a little less casually." Donna smiled warmly across the desk, her eyes wide and friendly as a basset hound's. "Everything else going okay? Girls behaving for you?"

Leigh Kirkland

"Sure," I said, and got up. The last *couple* of times? Apparently revealing vestiges of a personality constituted some sort of sartorial sin. So I was back to the outfits my mother sent, and hand-me-downs from my 80-year-old aunt.

"Let me know if you need anything," she said. "I'm always here."

"I know that," I said, and left. Why did they make it sound so personal—I'd appreciate it—as they tried to institutionalize me? And why did I never say that?

In every staff meeting (withholding the 'faculty' title was a deliberate indignity), Donna stressed that the use of performance-oriented grading criteria was helpful to our students.

"And it makes your job easier," she would say, "if you don't muddy the waters, you won't have girls questioning their grades." At one meeting she told us not to encourage students to apply to four-year colleges because it damaged Hoffman's placement record.

"We consider ourselves a terminal institution," she said firmly.

Pre-counted ballots for student elections were distributed by the Director of Student Activities to each teacher, to be passed out in the first class of election day, filled out by the students, taken up by the teacher, and handed back to the Director by the teacher, along with a list of any students who had been absent and who had therefore not voted—yet.

As I passed out the ballots in my 8:30 class, irritated, I commented that mandatory voting seemed odd, even in a student election.

In the back of the room, Kate Battersby raised her head. God, how did that child look like that at this hour? She must eat the flesh of unborn children. That shouldn't be hard to arrange in the Hoffman dorm. I had a hard enough time remembering to bring the lecture outline I prepared the night before, with the notes to remind me of anecdotes and one-liners to use. Kate, whose dark hair was always perfect, whose mascara never smudged, whose clothes were always pressed, made me feel like my slip was showing, and I was wearing pants. In the third grade, I got up every night after my mother turned off the lights, got dressed, and slept in my clothes to make sure I had enough time before the school bus came the next morning. I should do that now. I couldn't have been more rumpled then than I was now.

Another girl, Patti I think, said that people didn't care enough; hardly anyone would vote if voting were optional.

"That's the point," I said, "even student officers shouldn't be elected by people who don't care who wins."

From the back corner someone said, "They have to do what Mrs. Kramer tells them to anyhow." That was probably true.

Kate and Jill Brown, whose hair was probably naturally that daisy yellow, looked at each other knowingly. They didn't agree. They'd heard about this kind of undermining of traditional values before they came to college.

"The United States is one of the few places in the world where voting is not required." I counted the row and the ballots before I went on. "And

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

one of the few places where it counts. Unless you believe in the Trilateral Commission."

None of them responded—but it was so early. Usually enough of them laughed at my jokes or looked up at provocative stories. My talking wouldn't teach them to write, but I might be able to make them more conscious of the world. Hoffman didn't encourage that; conscious students were more difficult to control. Of course, I'd been three weeks into the semester before I noticed that Sarah Bailey on the front row of Group 1 was eight months pregnant, so who knows what else I'd missed?

They filled out their ballots diligently and passed them back up the rows, and I wrote down the names of the absent students: two Michelles and a Shelly. I was glad this was over. The second class was always a little stale because my ad lib lines were not only scripted and rehearsed, but repeated. By the third class, I was walking through a maze, a comic whose routine never varies. I cringed to hear myself repeat major points, much less jokes, for the third time. The students were watching the window for news about jobs, dates, and rides home; I didn't blame them.

"Okay, today we're starting *The Great Gatsby*," I announced. "I hope you've all read it at least once."

Two blondes on the middle row opened their pink mouths and mascara-ed blue eyes in melodramatic but not altogether fake terror. One of them raised her hand, glancing at her cuticles before she did.

"When did you assign this?" she asked. She sounded serious.

I turned toward the blackboard, pretending to be sure she was talking to me. Something un-mockingbird-like about those wings crossing my windshield. But what? I looked back at her.

"It's on the outline. I've warned you for the last week."

"Well, I never heard it," she said.

"Oh, come on, Joanne," another girl said, "you heard it."

A dark-haired Jennifer raised her hand. "I mean, I read the book and all, but I don't understand why we have to read it."

"Why you have to read *Gatsby*, or why you have to read *any* fiction?" I asked.

"I mean, I mean, I just don't understand what we're supposed to get out of it," she said.

"You won't earn more money because of it, if that's what you're getting at," I said. "I think it'll enrich your lives and all that. But if you want a quantitative result, I can't tell you what it is." When I prepared for class, I would visualize the girls, try to anticipate questions, and write down appropriate answers. I had missed this one.

"So what's the point?" another girl asked. For some reason, all the African-American girls sat at the back and along the sides of the classroom, never in the middle.

"Here's one," I said. "You've got a 40-point paper on *Gatsby* due in two weeks, and if you don't do it, you'll drop a letter grade in this class. Does that make it seem more worthwhile?"

Apparently it did. Sammy, the only boy in this group, although I had one more in Group 3, shot up his hand and stuttered, "Miz Brandon, I've

Leigh Kirkland

been trying to read this I really have but I'm having big problems. Like I've never finished a whole book before in my life?"

I rolled my eyes and laughed. "This is going to be a first, then, isn't it?"

Sammy said, "I guess that's not very good is it?" He was a sweet-voiced kid; he watched me attentively throughout, but he never seemed to understand anything.

"Right," I said.

"Are there *Cliff Notes* on this?" the brown-haired Jennifer asked, leaning against the back wall.

I looked at the door. "Probably. Probably."

As I talked—droned on, even to my ears—about Nick Carraway's function as narrator, and point of view, it occurred to me that they weren't going to see the irony of it, even if I told them. They weren't going to believe it applied to them. Maybe they were too young. Most of them came to Atlanta from Ohio and Indiana, where evidently people believed they could set goals and control their own destinies. People are imported to Atlanta to develop real estate and such because we don't believe that in the south. And it's nothing—or at least not just—to do with the Civil War.

After class I took the ballots and the list and handed them all over to Maude Kramer, who received them suspiciously, as though I might have filled the ballots out myself. Maybe she didn't recognize me as a teacher. I was tired of apologizing for that.

♦ ♦ ♦
My best friend Jill says I'm the luckiest person she knows. Today she said it because our wacko English teacher (she's leftover from the sixties) assigned *another* paper and I did a paper on the same stupid book in high school. And I still have it, because my father taught me that saving stuff would keep me from having to do many things twice. But that's not luck. I deserve to have whatever I want. I have a gift. Otherwise I wouldn't look the way I do; I wouldn't have the mind that I do. My parents brought me up to choose what I want and go for it. That's why I'm at Hoffman. It doesn't hurt that I've been modeling since I could walk. If I was three inches taller, I could go to New York, but no one will be able to say I got where I'm going because of my looks.

When my mother and I came to Atlanta to look at the school last spring, we ate lunch at Nava. I knew instantly this was where I'd meet the people I wanted to meet. You don't run into unsuccessful people at Nava. The crowd isn't there to party; they know what they're doing in the world, they're established, and they're already where I want to go. My mother's got an eye for those kinds of places. She helps me with self-marketing and sophistication. She suggested I change my name from Kathy to Kate when I moved to Atlanta. That's a lot for someone from pre-Disney World Orlando.

I met William the third weekend of fall quarter. He sent a bottle of Moët champagne over to the table where Jill and I were sitting. This was at Nava of course. Jill was totally freaked out. He'd been making eye contact with me from a table of gentlemen across the room. When Jill went

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

to the ladies' room, I stayed at the table and he came over. He introduced himself—I was glad he didn't call himself Bill—and gave me his business card. He's the president of his company. If Jill had been there, she would have said 'wow' or something like that. I'm working on her sophistication level. I told William I was Kate Battersby and gave him my phone number, and he wasn't shocked that it was my dorm number. Many men I'm attracted to don't realize at first that I'm a lot more mature than most 18 year olds. I'm mature enough to know that a difference in age doesn't mean anything when the people communicate on other planes. And boys my age don't know how to act; they get drunk and throw up, and I like men to act more dignified.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was scheduled to proctor Linda Mueller's retail math midterm. Twice during the test period I looked up to see Donna watching me through the window, her breath forming a light cloud on the glass.

That the bird wasn't gray at all; it was black and white. It wasn't a mockingbird, but I didn't know what it was.

The third time, Donna appeared in my face, standing toe on toe with me.

"Pay attention to them," she hissed, glaring with those hound-eyes. She left.

The students were smiling. There were no secrets here. I shrugged my shoulders and got on the treadmill up and down the aisles, stepping over books and purses. If they were cheating, I couldn't catch them at it. I wanted to stop the motion of that bird across my windshield so I could name it. No wonder they cheated, if they did.

In the narrow locked office where all the Fashion Merchandising instructors were housed in shaky cubicles, Janet Strong was adamant about the veracity of an official memo that said some of the seniors were complaining about the lax attitude of the freshmen towards the dress code (which I seriously doubted). Instructors and staff were to take more responsibility for enforcement.

"Those seniors are serious about the image of this school," Janet said. "They hate these kids looking like slob."

Amanda Crisp said, "Well, I know I've been appalled at what some of my students have been coming to class in, and it's only March. I can't believe it!"

Linda Mueller said, "Isn't it the truth. Kerry France came into math yesterday with half her stomach showing, and I sent her home."

Janet said, "Is she failing your class too?"

Linda said, "Yeah—I don't know where they get some of these girls."

"Well, midriff tops are definitely against the code," Amanda said, "but are we expected to mention to them that it's too early to wear spring clothes?"

"That's a good point, Amanda," Janet said. "You might bring that up to Dinah or Donna. I have no idea how the administration feels about that."

Leigh Kirkland

"But it's 85 degrees," I said. "What should they wear—wool suits?"

"Don't look at me," Janet said, "I'm from Ohio."

"What is the rule in Georgia?" Amanda asked. "I know in Virginia, the rule was you didn't wear white shoes or summer clothes until after Memorial Day."

"Absolutely, that was the rule in Ohio," Janet said. "You wouldn't dare go out in white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day."

"Well," Linda said, "I don't know how much it matters anymore."

"I don't either," Janet said. "I don't wear white shoes."

"Me either," Linda said. "They make my feet too obvious or something."

"It was Easter to Labor Day here," I said. "Of course, that's a variable, since Easter isn't the same day every year."

"It isn't?" Janet said.

"So how does that work?" Amanda asked.

"How does *Easter* work?" I asked as Dinah, the Fashion Merchandising Department chairman, who would be chipper commanding a firing squad, came in, all wide smile, pink cheeks, and cheer.

"What y'all talking about?" she asked, planting her plump elbows on the dividers on either side of the passageway.

"We were talking about this darn dress code memo," Janet said.

"They *are* getting a little out of hand, aren't they? Warm weather and all," Dinah said.

"Well, that was part of what we were talking about," Amanda said. "What are we supposed to do if a student is dressing too summery? Or does that matter?"

"Hmm, that's a good question," Dinah said. "Let me think on that one for a minute and get back to you."

"What is the rule on that in Georgia?" Amanda persisted. "In Virginia we couldn't wear white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day."

"Hmm," Dinah said. "In Birmingham, we could wear white shoes anytime after *Easter* but you're definitely on the right track with that Labor Day cutoff."

"Do you think anybody still pays attention to that?" I said. No one was anxious to accept my fashion advice.

"You know, I think it might *be* a good idea to *mention* it if you think somebody's dressing unseasonably," Dinah said. "Don't not let them into class, but you might take them aside after class or in the hall and kinda mention, 'Hey, this isn't the beach.'"

"That's a great idea," Janet said, "because if we don't do something quick, there's not going to be any reason to even *have* a dress code."

"Now, the stockings or socks requirement is definitely still in effect," Dinah said, "so be on the lookout for that."

"Isn't that the truth," Linda said. "The other day I gave Wyn Thorington a note to go and see Donna about—something, and she looked right at me and said, 'I can't, I'm not wearing hose.' So they haven't forgotten it, they're just not doing it."

I visualized myself as the students' only advocate against the admin-

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

istration, but that was flatly untrue. The system was just too good; there were too many students. It was likely my own failure, but I couldn't find a crack in it. I couldn't even remember the students' names. I couldn't keep my hair combed. Some days I wanted to lean my head on the podium and cry.

Caroline Taylor from Group 3 was standing in the hall when I came back from my next class. There was something architectural, or mountainous—something unmovable—about Caroline. I had never seen Caroline speak to another student, never seen her walk down a hall with anyone. She was close to six feet tall, and broad. Something about her was offhandedly rebellious, so she seemed to be doing something she shouldn't.

"Mrs. Brandon," she said in that low even voice. "I'd like to talk to you. If I wouldn't be bothering you."

"Sure, Caroline, come on back," I said, fumbling in my pockets for the key to the departmental network of cubicles.

"I've been thinking about Daisy and Myrtle," Caroline said as I tried two keys that weren't even shaped like the office key before picking the right one. "They're both named for flowers. Do you think there's any significance to that?"

"Wow," I said, finally opening the door. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I know what daisies mean in the language of flowers," she said, following me to my cubicle, "but do you know what myrtle looks like or what it symbolizes?"

"Um, no," I said. God, I finally got a question and I didn't even know what daisies represented.

"You see," Caroline said without transition. "I have this obsession." And stopped.

Yes, I thought, I bet you do.

Caroline smiled. "I have an obsession with the printed word."

I tried to look warm, and smile. "Yes," I said, "me too," but Caroline didn't wait.

"I have an obsession with the printed word in any form from great literature to comic books." She paused again, but this was for drama, not a response. "Most people don't realize what fine illustrators work for comic books."

My shoulder blades tensed and drew together as Caroline loomed across the divider.

I said, "Yes, I know, Frank Frazetta is . . ."

"Actually he's just one of the best-known," Caroline said. "There are others who are better." She seemed to have practiced this in front of a mirror.

"I have this poster over my bed. I think it makes my roommates nervous. It's the only thing on my wall. It's of a woman, in incredible, exquisite detail."

Caroline became taller and more shapely. Her hands became graceful as they moved to describe her poster. "She's got black almost blue-black

Leigh Kirkland

hair, long, flowing down her back. She's wearing a red bodysuit—strapless—that doesn't seem to be made of an earthly material, it seems—molded to her body. Long gloves over her elbows. Also red. Of the same material as the bodysuit. Black, over-the-knee boots. She's standing on a cliff, looking out. The sky is black—no stars. I think the location is not on earth. I can't tell if it's on another planet, or on the moon, or in another universe."

Caroline paused again. My rib cage bent against the handle of the desk drawer as she expanded before me. That voice was familiar: the flat, deliberately controlled tone and eyes like a loaded gun: the chance file tape catching the mass murderer just before—the muscles around my mouth stiffened like drying plaster.

"The background of the painting—you can't tell if it's what's really behind her or a dream—the lines move out of her hair or down from the sky or both, but you can—if you look carefully—you can almost feel the illusion—of wings. Her right hand is on her hip. Her left hand is held up"—Caroline raised her left arm above her head—"and she's holding up a broadsword."

"Ah," I said. "Wow."

Caroline re-formed—transmogrified—her face blankening and broadening, the thick glasses distorting her eyes into a language I didn't know.

"I'm sorry I took up so much of your time," she said. She bumped her head as she gathered her notebook.

I laid my face on my desk and covered the back of my neck with my hands, protecting the base of my brain like they taught us to do in grade school in case of atomic attack.

As I graded Gatsby papers, an odd similarity of tone surfaced; one ended mid-sentence at 500 words, the assigned minimum.

Taking the escalator through Lord & Taylor's makeup department and onto the carpeted mall to the bookstore amplified the feeling that life had been decimated by nuclear war without causing the concrete in our cellar classrooms to quiver. Five or ten other people were wandering past the stores, dazed, their arms hanging by their sides, not buying, not really looking. The school and the mall had a quality of an unpleasant dream, a reminder that any failure of the synapse between acts and words and reality was a personal failure.

Waldenbooks had two copies of the *Cliff Notes* for *The Great Gatsby* left. As I paid for it, the clerk, trying to be jovial—he probably hadn't seen another soul all day—said, "We've sold a lot of those lately."

"So I've gathered," I said grimly, folding the bag into my purse.

Nine papers had been copied directly from the *Cliff Notes*. I marked them with big red null marks and wrote, *I have the Cliff Notes*, on each one. Caroline's seemed to be the tenth. I couldn't understand why she'd cheat, but I'd read the paper before. The passage wasn't in the bumblebee-striped booklet. I went through graded papers, trying to remember if Caroline had any friends. She made me nervous. I did have to look twice at her every day to be sure she wasn't wearing jeans. Sammy's paper

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

matched. Hers was better than his, but it was without a doubt the same paper. I changed Sammy's B to a zero, gave Caroline a zero, and wrote 'Did you or Sammy/Caroline write this?' on both of them.

When I gave the papers back in Group 3, Caroline said in a shivering voice that she couldn't take a zero, that Sammy must have copied her paper, but she didn't know how he could have. But she'd written the paper. I believed that, but she could be good at this.

The next day I handed the papers back in Sammy's class. He wasn't smart enough to lie well, and he couldn't grasp why I didn't return his paper. As we walked desperately back to my office after Group 2, he didn't seem to understand what I was saying and it was not my intention to yell with the halls full of girls. Caroline hadn't told him they'd been busted.

♦ ♦ ♦

On our third date, William and I wanted to hang out all day Saturday in blue jeans and tennis shoes, not put on any kind of front. I bought a big white shirt at Banana Republic to wear with my jeans, put my hair up in a high ponytail and just wore mascara and no lipstick.

He picked me up at 10:30. He looked great in dark jeans and a denim shirt and Reeboks. He doesn't worry about labels because he's the kind of guy who doesn't have anything to prove to anybody. He says people who judge you by labels don't know quality unless you put a sign on it; they wouldn't know a nice restaurant if there wasn't a fresh bottle of cat-sup on the table. And real quality costs more than designer labels anyway.

I told him I wanted to go to the zoo; I knew anything I wanted would be fine. We ate popcorn and snow-cones and cotton candy and ran and giggled-like children. William liked the monkey house best because he liked to think of how close man might be to the big apes—yet so far away. He said I should think about that. About how little makes the difference between being in control and being in a cage.

I liked the birds, not just because they were in the newest part, which is what William said (he was kidding). I'd never seen a hawk that close and I didn't know that the female birds of prey (I thought that was spelled with an A) are larger than the males. But it was incredible, I was staring at this hawk and she was looking right at me. You could tell she'd have no problem ripping into some poor rabbit—but for a few minutes I completely forgot about William, until he started tickling me, and we ran holding hands to see the flamingoes with their heads in the water and the swans, sliding across the lake.

This other thing happened that really flipped me out. I'd gone to Lindbergh Plaza to Binder's to get supplies for a visual merchandising project the first time I saw the man in his old red Datsun hatchback. As soon as he drove into the parking lot, a bunch of pigeons came down off the phone lines by the street, swirled around, and surrounded his car. He had to practically wade through birds to open the trunk. The trunk was full of broken-up hot dog and hamburger buns that he threw out in handfuls and the iridescent gray birds moved around him like waves on the ocean, grabbing for the bread, flying into swells as he circled wider and

Leigh Kirkland

wider across the asphalt with the birds.

When the bread was gone, he stood in the eye of the storm and the pigeons didn't fly away when he closed the lid. They spiraled slowly out from him with that beautiful rolling movement, as he watched and I watched.

When William called that night from Toronto, I couldn't explain it right on the phone.

He said, "Was it an Asian guy?"

I said yes, and he said, "He was probably trying to bag them to serve in a restaurant. They do that. So never order squab in an Oriental restaurant."

I told William the pigeons trusted the man, and from what I've read about Eastern culture, the guy wouldn't hurt the birds because they really respect life, but he said, "Pigeons are filthy. Really, Kate. They're nothing but rats with wings."

He didn't understand how this had made me feel, but I didn't explain it right. He told me he'd been thinking of me all day in the black dress I wore the Saturday before. He relaxes from being in meetings with high-powered business men by getting a clear picture of me in his head. So I know he loves me.

♦ ♦ ♦

Maybe it was Dinah's phrasing in the staff meeting, about the 'moral question' of whether a student could appeal her failure because of absences . . . but for some reason asking Dinah's advice about Caroline and Sammy seemed like a good idea. So I did.

"Oh, they'll have to be brought up before the board. No question. That can't be tolerated," she said, and I felt control slip from my outstretched palm.

"Well," I said, "I don't want . . ."

"Whatever happens will be up to the board," she said. "I'll tell Donna to call a meeting. They won't necessarily be kicked out of school, but we can't let this pass unpunished—it's worse than if they were doing it individually."

I steadily returned her competent smile. I was out of the process. Dinah was running to catch Donna to decide what happened next. Control, like an egg cracked whole into my open hand, was sliding away, the yolk falling round off the ends of my stiffening fingers like the cold yellow sun.

In a rare moment of camaraderie, all of the instructors were standing with our backs to our desks, eating Chic-Fil-A sandwiches that Janet had brought in. When we saw Donna's hairdo appear around the corner, every mouth tightened around bites of brittle chicken.

"Who was it you had the problem with, Jane?" she asked. "Sammy, and who else?"

"Caroline Taylor," I said through pickle and mayonnaise.

Her face warmed like an electric burner. "I'm not surprised."

"Well, I am. A little," Linda said.

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

"What is this, now?" Amanda asked.

"She's never fit in here," Donna said.

That egg yolk was lying whole on the floor. That Caroline had plagiarized a paper was just a convenient tool Donna was going to use against her.

"Well, I'll locate them. Ann will let you know when we're going to meet," Donna said. "You'll need to be there. And don't worry, you've done the right thing."

"I know that," I said. I was sure about punishing them for cheating, but I was sick.

Donna leaned officially across her desk, her big yellowish hairdo rigid as furniture. Caroline crossed her arms around her waist. She was pressing one scuffed loafer across the instep of her other foot, staring at her knees. Sammy was white, gripping the arm of his chair with one hand and biting the fingernails of the other.

"Well, you know why you're here. Don't you?" Donna said confidently. No one spoke. She shot a look at me where I sat, nauseous, like she'd expected this. She turned up the heat. "*Don't you?*"

"No ma'am," Sammy whispered into the recirculated air.

"Well, I think you do. You turned in the same paper for Ms. Brandon's English 112 class," Donna said. "Isn't that right? Do you want us to believe that happened by chance?"

"That would be nice," Caroline said under her breath, pushing her glasses up on her nose. She slumped slightly in the chair, making herself shorter than Donna.

"What was that, Caroline?" Donna barked. The air was vibrating. Caroline shook her head in contrition. Their defensiveness was resonant.

"I want to know which one of you wrote it." She was a fool; she expected an answer. "Well?" Her voice got shrill. "If I don't get some answers, I'll have no choice but to kick you both out of school. Is *that* what you want?"

"I wrote that paper," Sammy burst out hoarsely. "I *wrote* that paper."

Nothing in Caroline's face reacted.

"And you had no idea that Caroline had seen it?" Donna set her teeth in.

"No ma'am," he said. "She must of got it out of my apartment. She lives—we live in the same apartment complex."

Caroline shook her head. Nothing in this room could touch her. She was protected by transparent lacquer.

"And you wrote it?" Donna said.

"I wrote that paper," Sammy insisted.

"Do you think that's true, Ms. Brandon?" Donna said. It didn't feel like a question.

I inhaled. I couldn't bring up the picture of that bird again. Sammy hadn't written that paper without help. He reconsidered. He'd probably looked at Caroline.

"Well, she said she would help—" he stuttered. "Because I hadn't done

Leigh Kirkland

good in English and I really needed a good grade—and Caroline's—Caroline's a real good writer so she said she'd check it for grammar and all that. But I didn't know she turned in the same paper. I swear to god I had no idea she did that."

"You did know she'd seen it. So you're not entirely innocent in this," Donna said. It didn't seem appropriate to say I didn't consider helping each other with grammar a punishable offence.

Sammy looked at Caroline and she glared coldly from behind her glasses.

"No ma'am," Sammy said.

"What do you say to that, Caroline?" Donna asked. Caroline shook her head, a refusal. "So what do you think I should do here? Should I kick you both out? That's the only solution you're leaving me."

"No ma'am," Sammy said.

"No," Caroline said, choking on her allotment of air. "I'll admit something. But Sammy's got to admit something too."

"Will you do that, Sammy?" Donna was radiant with the fuel of their pain. Her eyes were clear and frenzied. And happy.

"I don't know," he said, with some arrogance. Caroline looked at him in disgust. She understood this enemy and Sammy did not.

"You know what I'm talking about," she said.

He looked at the arm of his chair. "Okay."

"Well," she said, "we had this paper in English. And I had—we had—all these other projects due. And I've had a lot—a lot of things have been happening this quarter. I was up in Sammy and Vince's apartment and Sammy said he was working on his *Great Gatsby* paper. And I asked if I could see it. It looked like a pretty good paper but it had a lot of grammar-errors in it. And I told him I'd fix it for him if he'd let me base my paper on his."

Donna glared. "Is that true, Sammy?"

"Yes'm," he said, nearly gagging.

"Does that sound possible to you?" she said to me.

"Yeah," I said. "I knew—I had the feeling—that the paper started with Sammy." They were both looking at me. "Because—I'm sorry, Sammy—but if you'd written the paper, Caroline, it would have been a better paper."

"Well, why did you do this?" Donna asked. "Did you think we were so stupid we wouldn't catch on?"

Caroline looked like she was about to die from exhaustion; still, I watched the space behind her head for the illusion of wings in this airless room. "No ma'am, we didn't think that—I don't know."

"We know we done wrong and all," Sammy said, hoping for a quick out. Caroline was more familiar with the necessary self-abasement.

"We know now—we knew then—it was wrong, but—we just had—I don't have any excuse," Caroline said. I wanted to slap Donna for this.

"Well, I'm going to let your teacher, let Ms. Brandon decide what to do about your grade," Donna said. "But you're both on probation for the next quarter. If you do one thing, *anything*, you're out. Do you hear me?"

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

We will not tolerate this.”

They nodded and looked down again.

“And letters *will* go home.” The final stroke. They nodded again.

When they left, Donna looked at me. “Well. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes” seemed like the quickest exit line.

In the mangle between the makeup room and my office, Caroline caught up with me, wiping tears as they passed the frames of her glasses. “I’m so sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to let you down. I mean, I know I did, but—” This was a response she hadn’t practiced before. She’d never expected to need it.

“You didn’t let me down, Caroline, you just—you don’t have to cheat.” That sounded stupid, even to me.

“And I just think you should know,” she said, “Sammy didn’t write that paper either. He paid fifteen dollars for it and let me use it because I fixed it up for him.”

“Well, you should have written it and charged him for it,” I said.

“And—I didn’t mean for this to go this far,” motioning weakly towards Donna’s office. “I just didn’t know what to do.”

“I know,” she said.

I said, “I’m going to give you a zero on that one paper; I’m not going to fail you for the quarter. I’ve overheard enough to know y’all have had a hard time this quarter. At least y’all were trying to help each other.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. I didn’t believe that, but it made the moment easier.

Standing up in front of the classes had become painful, something I hadn’t anticipated. After the fiasco of *Gatsby*, I couldn’t summon energy to make notes, much less a class outline. It showed. It was embarrassing. I had no idea what was going to happen when I walked into a classroom. I didn’t even know who would be there. The time and room for each class changed with every period, a deliberate disorienting tactic.

At night I flipped through *Peterson’s Guide to Eastern Birds*, trying to match those wings. This was ridiculous. It was just a damn bird. I’d seen it once, weeks ago, but my talent for seeing anything other than birds in front of my eyes was diminishing. I was pretty sure it was a woodpecker of some kind, but it hadn’t seemed big enough to be the pileated that I see a couple of times a season around the neighborhood, so the smaller red-headed was more likely. I hadn’t seen one of those since first grade where we colored paper cut-outs of indigenous birds, and glued them onto rustic scenes we’d crayoned of their natural habitats.

Dinah came back to my cubicle and said, “You know, I don’t expect you to dress like I do, but the outfit you’re wearing looks like leggings and a tee shirt.”

I lifted my head from the paper I was grading and looked at my bulletin board. “It does?” I said. I knew it did.

“Yes it does,” Dinah said, “and if we’re going to enforce the dress code for students, the instructors have to live up to it too.”

“Sorry,” I said. Dinah didn’t see me turn back to the paper. She was

Leigh Kirkland

halfway to the door.

The clock approaching the half hour, when class started, brought on a physical pain across the tops of my shoulders, and a weakness in my arms that made the roll book and whatever notes I had accidentally accumulated difficult to lift.

♦ ♦ ♦

William bought me a beautiful John James Audubon book after the last time we went to the zoo. Jill went upstairs to Waldenbooks and the guy told her it cost eighty-five dollars.

I've never seen most of the birds in this book. The part about the artist says he lived in Key West most of the time; maybe these birds only live there. I have seen a couple of them around Orlando. In Atlanta I only see big black birds that are scary and mockingbirds (they're gray anyway) and blue jays, and my pigeons at Lindbergh. They're not my pigeons; they don't come because of me. But I like to think the man feeds them so I can see them.

Sometimes I imagine that William has been paying the guy to feed the birds because he knew how much I'd like to see them, and that he said they were rats with wings to throw me off the track after he asked about the guy being Chinese, which might have given him away. But I don't believe that; I only think things like that when William's been busy closing deals. I understand how important his business is because I want to be a success too. Success takes concentration and single-mindedness; he's not ignoring me; he *should* be able to expect me to understand and I really do. I really do.

I never knew Audubon killed the birds before he painted them. But the ones that are extinct aren't extinct just because of him, are they? I couldn't believe Jill told everybody in the lounge how much that book cost. The girls couldn't believe it—of course, you have to consider that these girls didn't even know how much a dozen roses cost until I told them. Or that the book's not important because of what it cost, but because of what it means William noticed about me.

♦ ♦ ♦

As I left school with my tote bag of papers, Caroline was outside, sitting on the damp carpeted steps leading up to the Blueberry Level, her elbows balanced loosely on her knees, a cigarette casual in her hand. A new tattoo was still puffy, a string of yin-yang symbols around her upper arm. Well, I guess around here any statement you make to clarify your position, short of leaving, had better be permanent or they'll make you take it off. Caroline waved and dragged on the cigarette. Unbalanced by my bag, I waved back. I wouldn't have spoken to me, if I was her. I thought, What's the tattoo? An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace?

♦ ♦ ♦

I don't understand what's wrong with me. I should be so happy with William. I'm acting weird for no good reason. I've been driving to Lindbergh Plaza after classes get out two or three times a week to see the pigeons gather shoulder to shoulder on the phone wires and cluster

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

around the lamp posts waiting for that man. I park somewhere where there won't be a reflection on the inside of the windshield and lean on the steering wheel, waiting for him to get there with his trunk full of bread.

♦ ♦ ♦

Before I left Hoffman, Caroline came by to tell me she wouldn't be back either. She was transferring to Oakhaven College in her hometown in Pennsylvania. And she was changing her major.

"To English," she said.

I was supposed to respond in some way, and I did better than I'd done when she came to talk about *Gatsby*. But not all that much. Not all that much at all.

"Oakhaven is another girl's school," Caroline said. "The usual token guys, but it has an 88-acre campus with trees . . ."

I imagined her on the phone to her mother or father, wanting to come home because everyone thought she was weird, and everyone hated her, and I really hoped things would be different for her, but I'd bet it wouldn't be, except that she'd have a couple of friends, so she wouldn't walk the green campus alone.

This morning I saw the red-headed woodpecker clearly enough to make a positive identification. For what it's worth. He flew into a bank of pines and landed on a tree. Then he skittered around to the back of the tree. They are really quite shy; you have to understand how to look for them.

HP