

## Tika's Dream

Now by the time Escolástica turned five (or perhaps seven, or even ten, her precise age is irrelevant), everyone forgot she was called Escolástica and called her Tiká instead. It was also at this time that she began dreaming a strange, recurring dream about a white bird trapped in a golden cage. The white bird stared out at the world with heavy, sad eyes, irrevocably sad on a sunny day with a bright blue sky, and seeming less sad when the world was plagued by the cold lethargy and gray cloudy skies of rainy days, though perhaps this was just a trick of the light, and every so often, the door to the cage was left open, and since the cage was hanging on a hook near a window, which was also sometimes left open, it was reasonable to imagine (or hope) that the tiny white bird might one day escape, but the bird just sat on its perch with its heavy, sad eyes gazing at the great beyond and did not move. So Tiká asked her father why the bird didn't fly out when the door was open, and her father said it was because he does not see past the bars, he cannot visualize a world without bars, so he might as well stay put.

In her dream Tiká did not see her father, she only heard his voice drifting out through the open window or down from the eaves of the verandah and swirling about her feet with a few fallen rose petals and dried leaves, and his voice seemed to her to possess the lilt of cut grass, which is another way of saying that if one could actually see sounds, which Tiká most assuredly could, her father's voice was a burnt yellow color, which was the color of cut grass in Logroño and the surrounding countryside, except sometimes during the hottest part of the summer when it seemed a burnt orange color.

Always the dream began with Tiká sitting in a wicker chair on the verandah of her father's house, always it was sunset and she was looking in through the window (usually closed at this point, but sometimes open) at the tiny white bird in the cage. The bird was filled with such despair that it rarely sang, though it sometimes made low, gurgling sounds, as if it were drowning. On some nights, the door to the cage was always open, and on other nights the maid (which maid? it was always someone Tiká had never seen before) came sweeping past with a broom and stopped and smiled out at Tiká looking in and closed the small golden door and locked it with a tiny golden key she kept in a pocket hidden behind the folds of her apron. And always the dream seemed to possess a haphazard disrespect for the generally accepted pattern of time, speeding up when it shouldn't, lingering a little longer at times just for spite, or perhaps to induce in the dreamer a feeling of melancholy, and often leaving out whole chunks of time altogether, which did not always bother Tiká, who assumed they were probably meaningless chunks anyway, as so much of time seemed to be whether one was dreaming or not.

In her dream Tiká would be sitting on the verandah, contemplating the existence (or perhaps simply the presence) of the bird, and then she would hear the sound of someone shouting down the street; or the old women with their heads covered with shawls chattering their strange foreign language of the fanatically devout as they hurried past her father's house in search of an open church door; or even a church bell ringing in the distance and the shadows of storks floating in the air, or many church bells and many more storks (which was not altogether unreasonable, for there were five churches within the city limits of Logroño, and several more within a mile of the ruins of the old stone wall that marked the original border of the town and had been there in one form or another since the time of the Romans); and every time Tiká looked back at the window and the caged bird, it always seemed to her that years had passed.

Oddly, she never grew any older in her dream, but she knew that many years had passed nevertheless because the tiny white bird looked so very much older, and then when she looked back to the street because of a new voice or the old women making a second or a third pass or another round of church bells and the storks flying off and then returning, she would notice that the weather had changed, the hot winds of summer had vanished and the world had become winter, and the next time the rain had given way to bright sunlight, and so forth. Each time she looked back at the window and the bird, the bird looked older and older, as old as a saint or one of the forgotten immortals. And each time she looked back to the street, the weather had changed, although this was not always so. While the bird always looked older, a feature of her dream that she could always count on, and which, during her waking hours and even years later, was a strange comfort like an unrelenting faith, the weather in her dream did not always change. Some nights in her dream there were no

rainstorms at all, it was an endless string of bright, sunny days, and at other times, the landscape of her dream was plagued by a relentless, eternal winter or a creeping, insolent autumn filled with the whirring sounds of flying insects. (All of which seems to suggest, though this intricate thought probably did not occur to Tiká, that the nature of reality is much more fluid than we realize, even when it is constrained by certain seemingly unbreachable parameters.) But in spite of these minor inconsistencies, always near the end of the dream Tiká would begin to worry about the bird and if it had perhaps gone blind, and always she would ask her father why the bird stayed in the cage when the door was open, and always she would hear her father's voice, which sounded like the color yellow, except when it sounded like the color orange.

Then one night, and it is worth noting that this was the last time Tiká dreamed of the tiny white bird in the golden cage, one night the ending of Tiká's dream was different. At that moment when normally she would notice how very old the white bird had become (in some versions the bird was decrepit beyond belief and could barely move or blink an eye), she saw instead that the door to the golden cage was locked but that the bird was gone. But instead of calling out to her father from the verandah (which is the reason she had only ever heard his voice in her dream), she raced inside and found him sitting at the dark mahogany roll top desk writing out long letters or perhaps adding up figures in his ledger.

He was working feverishly to finish his task, a smoky oil lamp perched precariously on one corner of the roll top, the dim light from the lamp barely penetrating the shadow he himself cast over the desk, so he almost didn't see his daughter as she came running into the room, shouting out her question with breathless anxiety.

'Papa, papa, the bird is gone. The bird has vanished.

Papa, where did it go?' she said in her dream.

And without even looking up from his work, her father had said 'It is gone, my little Tiká, because if it did not go it would have surely died sitting there on that perch. A bird cannot live long locked up in a cage like that, even if the cage is unlocked. Nothing can.'

Tiká was too stunned to reply, but later, after she woke up, and for many years afterwards, quite probably until she settled (eventually) in Puerto Rico, she wished she had said something, anything to spur her father into an explanation of the philosophical implications of the vanished bird, for as she grew older she spent many weary evenings wrestling inconclusively with the straightforward and yet exceedingly complex nature of her father's response as well as the multiple meanings and shifting realities of the dream itself. But during those last few moments of the last time she dreamed about the tiny white bird, she stood mute before her father's desk as if he were God himself, listening to the scratching of his pen as he worked at his figures or his letters until the oil lamp gave out and the world was plunged into darkness.