

KIND OF LIKE BIRDS —for G.

by Mairead Case



MARY HAD A BOYFRIEND named Charlie. They went to college in a small town, lived together and walked to class together, past yards full of geraniums, windsocks, and plastic geese wearing hats and flowers and aprons. Evenings, Mary and Charlie would go by the convenience store to buy macaroni and cheese for a dollar, a meal the color of butter, were butter made of wax. Sometimes Mary doctored it with salsa and hamburger.

After dinner, they would go to the library or the laundromat or their friend Danny's porch to listen to punk records. Danny baked bread and knew the Lord and hated football because didn't it always look like the quarterback was trying to bone the center? He'd never get that close to a dude. Danny said that at least twice, every time they came over, so Mary wondered whether he was gay or just a jerk.

Then, Mary and Charlie came home and drank two glasses of water from one cup, flopped naked onto the bed. They didn't sleep together because Mary didn't want to, yet, and Charlie said that was OK as long as she knew sex was supposed to be a fun thing you do with people you love. Mary said she knew, she was, she really did, but not. Not now. Charlie said that was OK and so she believed him.

The other thing Mary did besides class and macaroni and sleeping next to Charlie, curled like one hand cracking the other's knuckles, was teach writing at the local juvie. She'd never taught before, had no experience beyond babysitting and watching TV specials about dangerous urban high schools, but the gig was working out OK. She did it for an hour every Sunday. Rode the bus an hour each way.

The warden had an Irish name, soft hands, and a paunch. In frames behind his desk sat silver dollars,

an inspirational poster with quotes and clouds, and a photo of his family at Christmastime. Self, dog, pregnant wife. There were three stockings on the mantel, and one of them said, "Willie." Maybe the baby's? Maybe the dog's.

"You gotta be careful with these kids," the warden told Mary. "Don't talk about sex, don't talk about drugs or therapy or suicide. They're learning to forget that stuff." Mary thought about this and told Charlie and he snorted over it. "How the hell do teenagers forget about sex?" Charlie asked. "Doesn't that require drugs?" She laughed and put her head on his shoulder. It was as sharp as the blade of a fan.

The only rule Mary made, for the kids, was that you had to do something. Somehow. Reading or writing. Don't just moon at the ceiling. Each time she taught, Mary lugged two shoeboxes full of old zines and used books on the bus with her. Once they'd held cookies from her mom, so soon all the pages smelled like chocolate and orange peels. She'd sit with the boxes in her lap and look out the window, craving sweets and milk.

Staples were illegal, so Mary de-spined her library with help from Carlos, her neighbor's fiancé. The neighbor, Jennifer, was studying in Chile, and Carlos followed her home. They still slept together—loudly, bangs and smashing—but everyone knew the wed-

ding was off. Now Carlos spent days crashed on Mary's couch, days smoking cigarettes and reading

astronomy textbooks. She got used to him there, like he was a lamp or a throw. Carlos liked Mary's zines because they had slang and weren't about stars. Sometimes the staples skewed and pierced their fingers, leaving bloody Xs on the Xeroxes. Lewd ads got clipped out, too.

Of course there were some rules at the jail already, so Mary thought she'd let the kids write some of their own, too. Justin couldn't really tell rules from taste, but he wrote a list anyway, and in caps

1. I DON'T LIKE STORIES THAT AREN'T REALISTIC.
2. I DON'T LIKE STORIES THAT ARE OLD OR FROM BACK IN THE DAY.
3. I DON'T LIKE READING OR WRITING BIG WORDS IN BOOKS.

Everyone's clothes were color-coded: blue for good behavior, white for suicide attempt, orange for "random violence." They all wore the same crappy plastic shoes with basket-weave molding on the tops, and when the girls acted up or out their warden made them go naked under a blanket. That seemed wrong to Mary, but she didn't know what to do about it. There were waves of room checks, of women urging pills in Dixie cups, Gideon bibles or abstinence. The only natural light came through a triangular-shaped hole in the ceiling, and pretty much everybody had lice. Mary learned to say "piss" or "Christ" at least once in the first four minutes so she wasn't too obviously Miss Susie Creamcheese. Tried to get obviously

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angry every once in a while, too, although she wasn't very good at that.

On the first day, Mary was nervous so she wore a grommited bracelet and asked people to make lists.

One list: What tattoo would you get, and why?

***I'm with wings*

***I would like to get a big cross that fills up my back. To represent my dead sister*

***I only have one on my left middle finger, and it says "CH" for Charles*

***I am going to get a ghost. It is going to be my name over a city over a cross over a ghost*

Another list: Random people you know or read about.

***I have a friend who looks crazy*

***Someone who is beautiful, but when she smiles she has no teeth*

***50-cent, Michael Jackson, Alicia Keys, Mrs. Richerson* (After Mary read this to Charlie, he started to tuck his lips around his teeth when he smiled. Not all the time, just when they were washing dishes or folding sheets or waiting or something. Sometimes, when they weren't together, Mary would think about Charlie's no-teeth face and laugh. Once, on the bus, she did it so loudly one lady moved down a few seats.)

Caroline's last name was long, Polish, and tattooed down her forearm. Next to it was a cat that looked like a penis, so she'd covered it up with a flower and flames. "The best gift I ever received," Caroline wrote, "was my boyfriend at the time gave me a baby. The worst gift was a neon green fuzzy sweater." Caroline gained weight quitting coke, so ate just a few Tater Tots each day. A few tots with pickle relish plopped on top.

"I feel so lonely," wrote Donshay, who spent most classes re- and re- and re-reading the part where Phoebe goes round the carousel. Holden waves at her each time: here. Still here. Here still. Still. "I feel like no one knows where I'm coming from," she continued. "I keep all words and thoughts to myself, not to depress or stress myself, but to protect the feelings of others and myself. No matter how hard you try to stay to yourself or mind your own business, there is always someone trying to open your shell.

"This is not a poem. This is not a story. This is o, like you could be in love one day, and the next day

you're not. Makes no sense. Well, this is the end of Feelings of Emotion making no sense. No one knows how to love me like I do. This is my feelings, my emotions making sense only to me."

The staff liked Mary because she asked questions and brought orange creme wafers for the breakroom. One lady with a ponytail and a diamond pendant asked Mary when she was going to marry Charlie. "I don't know," said Mary, fishing in the fridge for the Cool-Whip she liked to put in her coffee. It was true. She didn't. Maybe never. That night she dreamed Charlie was building them a house with see-through floors and walls. She stood in the downstairs bedroom and looked up and waved at him. He waved back.

(Sometimes on Sundays, the bus was quick so Mary got home early, peeled an orange over the sink, one long spiral. Then she laced up her sneakers and went running. Mary saw mailboxes shaped like football helmets, terra cotta squirrels, trucks with yellow ribbons, juice bottles filled with urine, wind chimes, crucifixes, and dirt. She'd think about Italy, paintings, Halloween. How Lois looks in Superman's arms. What coke feels like. Not Charlie. Once home again, sweaty and still-panting and leaning against the kitchen cupboards, Mary would call her parents. From guilt and habit. One eye on the clock. Mom always asked what Mary was running from. Why she was so goddamn antsy. Mary'd say she wasn't or she didn't know.)

Once Mary dumpstered grocery store flowers, brought in so many daisies she couldn't get through the metal detectors without dropping petals. "My flower is so cool," wrote Lacey. "It looks like a sunflower without it being like that. It's canary on the outside, and in the middle it fades. My flower smells like love."

That gave Mary the idea to ask about the most beautiful thing people had ever seen. "The most beautiful thing I ever saw," wrote Jake, who wore orange and had handwriting like deflated balloons, "was on the fourth of July last year. My girl and I went on top of Navarre's roof to watch the fireworks. We brought three blunts and a fifth of E. We had a sleeping bag, and we laid down to watch fireworks. After we were done with the fifth, we smoked two of the blunts and fell asleep. We woke up around

nine AM.

"That is the weirdest thing either of us has ever done. But we had a great time and next morning we got down from the roof and lit up the third blunt and walked home while thinking what the hell our parents were going to think." Jake knew he couldn't read that aloud, so he slipped the paper into Mary's pocket. She came home and taped it to the kitchen wall.

Charlie watched her, said maybe they should try writing about the fireworks. That it's wrong to forget, or be told to forget, something that matters to you. No matter what it is. Maybe that makes it OK to be sneaky.

Mary agreed so she found some pictures of kaleidoscopes, scammed copies at the library. Next week, each kid picked one to describe, and a few got what she was letting them do. Bob, who smiled slyly, quick like a stripe on a spinning toy top, grabbed one that looked like teeth. Blue and green. "It reminds me of a chameleon," Bob wrote, "but not a normal chameleon. In some parts, there's kind of like birds."

Eventually, Sammy, flipping through magazines, found a vibrator ad Mary and Carlos hadn't clipped out. It was rabbit-shaped, and Sammy tattled. The warden, raising his eyebrows like inchworms mid-inch, said next class would be Mary's last. That day, Sammy had a black eye and gave her a hug. Mary felt like she should feel like crying but didn't. Charlie wasn't home when she got there, so she put on a pair of his socks and fell asleep.

Finally it was warmer, and sometimes Mary wandered over to the pet store to watch the fish and the lizards and the kittens. Once she saw Caroline there, Caroline the lady with cat penis tattoo. She was pregnant. Mary wanted to wrap her in a blanket. Make her a sandwich. Her boyfriend was 45, Caroline said. He made movies.

Caroline was buying a snake cage because the one in their living room was too small, and she was afraid the boa would get out. End up in their bed. Bite the baby. Mary said she felt that. She knew what Caroline meant. Behind them the gerbils made noises like whuck whuck, whuck whuck. Mary and Caroline made noises back. Waved. Then they walked outside into the sun and never saw each other again.

END

ROBOBROTHER

by Lydia Ship

We programmed him. We propped him up and told him softly—yes, even when he was tinny-cooing and tiny-squeaking, shiny and metal-plump and baby-buzzing—we were firm: This is your standard, and these are the rules. He was like a cherished doll to me, and when I was allowed to give him his bottle, I sang him the rules that had been sung to me. Then, one by one, he broke the rules. No matter his six-foot-two stature at eighteen, his piercing human-like blue eyes, he grew into a robot nobody would take seriously, a robot outside of the rules. The general reaction to him went something like, That guy's one short of a—then the condescension, the brush-off—nobody listened to him. We didn't, either, and that's how he lied and was never caught. After high school he moved around,

stopping at Burning Man and communal living spots, arts festivals and drum circles and anywhere else long enough to have a place to sleep and eat, not long enough to be held responsible: he with stainless steel burnished to a hipster dinginess, he with pot-ravaged, yawning tone when he spoke, he with easy-going demeanor—my brother, the hippie robot. The kindness of strangers, that's what he took, wherever he went, but we didn't see it. We said, Oh, you're doing that now? And we didn't wonder what was so fascinating about these festivals and communes. Only, consider the scarcity of food or water or shelter or sanitation, the second-rate entertainment, if any. We didn't ask ourselves what could possibly be the appeal if it wasn't drugs, nor did we notice he went everywhere the druggies went. We forgot where he was going, where he'd been. I told him, Good job, RoboBrother, or,

Sounds cool, RoboBrother, no matter what he did, or I half-listened and gave him advice on the phone, glancing at my email or putting on makeup—his sister, the young professional, acquisitive and full of dead curiosity: Is the portfolio tucked in for the night? Better get off the phone or I'll miss *Survivor*. The last time I saw him in person, his long steel fingers tugged his shirt up to show me his tattoos, thick and thin sweeps and criss-crossings of Chinese characters, and of course now I can't remember what they mean. He changed his name to Robainbow. He always needed money, necessitating a flurry of baffled involvement on our parts. Then, glutted in over-involvement, all parted. Each time worse. First he needed money for bills and food (drugs, he later admitted, tearful, so we gave him money, this time for bills, really); then for a trip to the doctor (he'd become a glorified prostitute,

so we gave him money); for a move to the next new town that would make all his dreams come true; for a domestic situation... Each time, our memories glazed over and blurred and disintegrated from the careless indices of our hearts—how many truly want to remember the past? So we forgot, and we've always paid, and we keep paying. He always says he's changed. Speaking of which... we reach into our pockets. RoboBrother, such a beautiful machine, made to complete us, controls us, and we control him. I turn on the radio and listen to songs about love but I hear no songs about love that are songs about family.

Ship lives and writes in Atlanta. She'll be appearing as a featured reader at the first installment of the new Nashville, Tenn.-based Brick reading series, a coproduction of THE2NDHAND and Keyhole Press (keyholepress.com), 7 p.m. March 12, 2010, at Portland Brew East, 1921 Eastland Ave., Nashville 37206.