

The Christmas Finch

By Diane R. Jones

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My dear friend, Steph, had passed away several years earlier. I often found myself missing the close connection we shared, but on this December day in 2018, I was uncharacteristically melancholy.

I had known Steph for years through mutual friends. When we saw each other at gatherings, the conversation was easy, and it often ended with a promise to get together. But, as it usually does, life got in the way and prevented us from connecting. That is, until she was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. Steph chose to live until she died, and I decided to help her.

My choice to join her on this journey of hopeful healing and celebrating life was unexpected. Up until this point in my life, I had gone to great lengths to avoid anything related to illness or death. My fears drove me to skip funerals and visiting loved ones in the hospital. I couldn't even force myself to see my grandmother in the last days of her life.

I traced these fears back to when I was four years old, and my father's mother tragically passed away. Despite being urged to go to the doctor, she insisted that whatever she had would pass. She didn't know that the "whatever" was spinal meningitis, and her condition would worsen rapidly.

In the days and weeks following her death, my four-year-old self didn't understand what was going on. My parents' bedroom door was often closed, and my mother was frequently on the phone. Perhaps it was the tone and emotion in her voice that conveyed the severity of what had happened, or maybe I overheard the words "vomit, illness, and death," and my brain connected them.

But here I was now, opting to forge a bond with someone I didn't know well at the most sensitive transient time in her life. Steph and I shared four joyous and gut-wrenching years as best friends—talking nearly every day and getting together on most weekends.

She had never traveled, but now it was a priority. Our first trip was to Belize, the second to Costa Rica, and the third to Puerto Rico. Then, she wanted to compete in a triathlon, so I trained and raced with her. I stood at the finish line, watching her stride powerfully toward her goal. She smiled broadly, and I beamed with pride.

We enjoyed drinking and dancing to disco songs like "Brick House" and "Super Freak." Steph always amused me with her attempts at twerking, and we often dissolved into laughter over her antics.

Our summers were spent at Newfound Lake in New Hampshire, where we loved to sit in a boat's bow for top-speed runs on the lake. The warm breezes caressed our faces and stripped the worry from our minds as we skipped along the water. Steph loved everything about the lake: sunning, swimming, boating, and the distraction from her reality. It was our happy place.

A good day was one we spent outside. Steph adored birds and a list of the species she had seen in her yard tacked to her wall. Both of us were fond of the Baltimore Oriel.

As we spent her last Christmas together, she was not in a good place. The changes in her body were taking a toll. She told me through tears that she didn't recognize herself. After Steph passed, Baltimore Oriels frequented her yard the days after her death. I wondered if the Oriels were Steph's spirit telling us she was okay. It made sense to me that she would choose birds to communicate with us.

On a December night, I mindlessly flung the front door open, and in flew a bird. Panic-stricken and late for an evening out, I tried in vain to guide the purple finch out the door. When my efforts failed, I shut the doors in the house, covered the furniture with sheets, and hoped for the best.

I should have canceled my plans because I spent the evening fretting over the bird. I envisioned it bouncing off the walls as it tried to free itself. At the first opportunity, I excused myself and raced home. Tentatively entering my house, I glanced around. The finch was nowhere in sight. After a long search, I found it perched at the top of the Christmas tree. I moved gingerly to not startle it.

I weighed my options. Do I try to shoo it out of the house or leave it be? My presence woke the bird, but it did not startle. It looked at me sleepily, and I decided it could stay. I took a moment to appreciate the finch's beauty. It was a male with beautiful red feathers. I snapped a picture and a short video before retiring to my bedroom.

Lying in bed, I imagined the disaster I would wake up to, bird poop everywhere! Or, I might find the bird injured or dead from trying to escape. I sighed and hoped for the best. I slept oddly well that night. To my surprise, it was light when I woke. I peered out of the bedroom and down the hall and saw the finch sitting at the top of the tree in nearly the exact location it was when I went to bed.

I walked down the hall, scanning for evidence that it had been flying around the house as I slumbered. I saw nothing, not so much as a single poop! As I devised a plan for guiding the bird out of the house, the finch stirred and preened its feathers. It seemed utterly comfortable, and not the slightest bit interested in leaving.

Brilliant red cardinals adorned my tree, and the finch sat on a branch next to one. Did the decorations help the bird feel comfortable? I decided it was time for my beautiful, well-mannered guest to leave. I opened the front door and pattered around the kitchen. I expected the bird to see the outdoors and take flight. It did not.

It became a game of cat and mouse for my feathered friend and me. The finch avoided my efforts to guide it to freedom. It flew around the living room and kitchen, perching on various objects. It landed on a piece of pottery less than two feet from the open door and returned to the tree multiple times. It was especially fond of the star on the top.

I thought I won our game when it landed on the wreath on the open door. I crept toward the door with an outstretched arm, intent on nudging it closed. I pushed the door, but the finch flew back into the house. Between its flights, it looked at me as if to say, "Why are you chasing me away?"

I thanked it for visiting and lifting my spirits. As I admired it, the bird suddenly flew out the door and was gone. I scoured the house, convinced I needed to clean up from my guest, but no trace was left. The finch's playful antics, quiet demeanor, and tidiness meant only one thing—Steph had visited me.