

April 15, 2020 · Fiction

Empty Nest by Bill Merklee

Charlene and I had known each other for so long that by the time we were in

high school, our attempts at being a couple seemed incestuous. But we promised each other if we were still single at forty, we would get married. We had assumed we'd both make forty easily.

to dwell on what might have been, but to have her with me now. Then I go

back to the house, crank our favorite Zeppelin album, and have too much

I think of her when I hike the canyon alone, which is to say every time. Not

bourbon.

There was a condor egg in the brush on this latest hike. Charlene would have been like a kid finding a kitten. It was impossible to see where it had dropped from, so I smuggled it out of the canyon in my backpack.

My house in the desert was a perfect place to improvise an incubator. He was

the cutest fuzzball when he hatched. I named him Charlie. I spent a ridiculous amount of time tossing vile things in a blender and pouring the slurry down his throat. Everything now revolved around Charlie. He grew like a weed. I didn't cage him, didn't tether him. I knew he would not be able to resist the

land on my head. Then one morning he was gone.

lure of the open sky. I think we sensed the day coming when he got too big to

carrion. He'd place it at my feet and spread those enormous wings as if to

hug me and the whole desert at once. I had raised him to have manners. The day after Charlie's last visit, a new job opportunity came up at a design firm in Los Angeles. Steadier work, more money, but in an office. I said I

with sage. The sky seemed spangled with new stars. I was peaceful but

needed to think about it. That night, the air was cooler than usual, perfumed

Charlie returned from time to time, always with some relatively fresh

restless, a heady mix from being lost before possibilities. The feeling Charlene and I had had in high school. The one Robert Plant gets when he looks to the west. Maybe Charlene was telling me something. I took the job. I wrote a note to Charlie and sent it fluttering into the canyon,

an attempt at closure. I explained why I had to leave, and I wished Charlie

well. We both needed to heed the open sky.

home to this?

Months later I'm awakened by a short, sharp knock at my apartment door. It's Charlie. He's going through a rough patch and can he stay a few days to sort it out. Of course, I say. It'll be great to catch up.

A few days turn into a few weeks. Molted feathers everywhere. His roadkill is

putting me off my takeout. Dating is hard enough. How can I bring anyone

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I suggest Charlie try to get a job down at the beach, scaring aggressive seagulls away from the tourists and their salty fast food. I'd read how falcons were having great success with this. He just ends up frightening everyone.

Charlie sleeps in the living room. Things really go south when I come home

to a shredded sofa molded into a nest. For the first time, I notice how condors look like undertakers on the skids. I stare at Charlie's hatchling photo on my nightstand, wonder where I went wrong, if there was anything I could have done differently.

When his buddies start staying over, it's the last straw. Waddaya gonna do about it? they say. We're a protected species. This time I'm not leaving a forwarding address.

Chic, Ghost Parachute, Gravel, Columbia Journal, New Jersey Monthly, and

Bill Merklee loves short stories, short films, and very short songs. His work

has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bending Genres*, *X-R-A-Y*, *Anti-Heroin*

the HIV Here & Now project. He lives in New Jersey. Occasional tweets

Biography

<u>@bmerklee</u>. Image: <u>unsplash.com</u> 379 views

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