

Wings

by Katrina Dessavre

The trouble began in October, when Ava, an embittered receptionist who worked at a small museum housed in a five-story Westside brownstone, discovered that the floors were littered with enormous grey feathers. She first noticed them just before closing time, as she was going up the stairs to switch off the lights and usher out any remaining visitors. At first, she thought a pigeon had flown in, and felt a moment of panic at the thought of a bird loose in rooms full of priceless objects. She stood still, squinting in the dark, wood-paneled room crammed with Chinese vases, Classical busts, and a large fungus from the island of Sumatra, but could only hear the muffled tick of an antique clock. She picked up a few feathers and went downstairs to show them to Peter, who, at the age of eighty-nine, assured people that he was still too young to retire as director. But when she got to the first floor, and followed a narrow corridor to the staff kitchen, she forgot all about the enormous feathers she held in her fist. She was disconcerted, in part by the countertops cluttered with half-empty takeaway containers that reeked of days-old crabmeat, and in part by the piles of unsorted mail on the table, no doubt hiding important documents that she would have to fish out later.

She was more scandalized by Peter himself, an old threadbare man with a meekness that seemed pitiful to her, particularly now, as he was busy digging his hand into a bag of unshelled hazelnuts and placing fistfuls in the tray below the windowsill. She stood in silent disbelief, as a pair of squirrels started pounding their little fists on the glass, looking inside with their impudent eyes. They twisted and turned each nut in their paws, appraising its worth like jewelers inspect diamonds, before shelling it on the spot or throwing it on deck behind them.

“If you only set out a few, they won't throw so many away,” she said. When he wasn't looking she swept up the rejected nuts and put them back in the bag. She had tried to convince him that the organic

hazelnuts she had to order every few weeks were twice as expensive as the regular ones, that the squirrels didn't know the difference, and that the money could go to hiring someone to sweep the courtyard, for instance, but he didn't listen.

"Unbelievable. Unbelievable," she muttered to herself, and, remembering why she had come, said:

"I have to make a complaint."

"What's that?" he said in a soft, absentminded voice.

"A bird flew in from an open window," she said, handing him the feathers. "It's a miracle nothing's been damaged, as far as I can tell."

When he turned around, and examined her carefully, from the tufts of grey hair tucked behind her glasses, to her shoes the color of unpolished silver, it was as if he were seeing her for the first time. He took one of the dilapidated, half-plucked feathers and examined its halo of dust reflected in the afternoon light.

"It wasn't a bird, Ava. This is from the old man's enormous wings."

It was only then that she connected the feathers to the pair of wings located in a small alcove on the third floor, willed to the museum by a woman, now long gone, who used to keep them in a closet next to her opera coats. No one was sure exactly where the wings came from. Some thought they belonged to a decrepit angel who had survived shipwrecks and human imprisonment before giving them up for a mortal death; others thought he was skinned like an animal for its fur. Ava was used to reprimanding visitors who came to touch the feathers in hopes of absorbing their supposed healing powers. She evaded human rights groups bent on proving that the wings had a dark, unethical past. She even collected the residue of dried mud and lunar dust and packed it up in little pouches to sell in the gift shop.

That was in October, and never in the history of the museum had there been so many visitors. Rather than being alarmed by the feathers found floated on top of bookcases and balanced on thick gilt frames, most were amused to watch Ava pace through the galleries

with arms open and her bitter, cold face turned towards the intricate moulding of the ceiling. What really upset her, at least in the beginning, was that the wings on display seemed as thick as ever, and she began to think the fallen feathers were a conspiracy intended to undermine her authority. For the next few weeks, Ava was overcome by a mania of trying to contain the apocalyptic chaos she perceived had engulfed the museum. She was so busy straightening postcard stacks, sweeping up hazelnut shells, and opening windows to air the rooms of their musty smell that she barely noticed the wings getting thinner.

One morning, as she sat furiously typing emails to her invisible adversaries, she heard a quiet cough and gentle shuffle of feet in front of her desk.

“Admission is free but donations are accepted,” she said without looking up and nodded to a box on her desk.

“It's me, Ava,” Peter said, extending a handful of feathers so brittle they were crumbling in his hands. “I managed to rescue these before they were blown away.”

