

The Birds: Before Flight

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Before Baba Oma was Baba Oma, third cousin to the witch Baba Yaga, she was a little Polish-German girl with birds for hands. Her left hand was a small bluebird, shy and reclusive, and her right hand was a handsome robin who pecked at the sleeve of her sweater, tugging at the loose thread.

On rainy afternoons, the little girl stood in her room and tried to fly, but she never made it more than an inch or two off the ground. It made her sad inside, but the girl understood she wasn't a real bird, and that she shouldn't try. Her own Oma, an ancient woman who'd wandered out of the woods one day and birthed a family like a litter of cats, had warned the girl not to become a creature of flight. Her Oma coughed a lot when she'd said it, which made her wrinkles, as thick as books, wiggle. The girl's Oma chewed pine bark and spit and cursed, and complained that the girl only wanted to fly because her father was a Pol, and she said it in a way that made the little girl feel heavy on the ground until her Oma wrapped her up in her thin arms and told the girl she loved her anyway even if she wanted stupid things. The little girl had wanted to touch her Oma's wiggly skin, but she didn't. She kept her hands to herself and listened, seating herself by the fire while the old woman coughed some more and repeated her warning about avoiding flight and not playing in the Black Forest where the branches kept away the light.

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But it was there, in the Black Forest, before flight, despite the warnings, that Baba Oma, or the little girl who later became her, pretended to fly, disappearing from her family, one summer afternoon. That day, when the woods seemed to speak and blackbirds watched from every branch, the little girl came upon a small pool of dirty water reflecting the moon. The water glowed, and the little girl twisted her neck, searching the branches for a crack in the canopy where some misguided light might have slipped through to cast the wrong time—but the little girl didn't find one—and although the girl knew it was strange, the water appeared soft, and she gave into temptation and dipped her hands into the illuminated pool.

When she left the woods that day, she emerged squawking, her hands an angry whirlwind of feathers and high pitched shrills.

Eventually, she arrived home, and the little girl tried to hide her hands. She stepped through the door, with the birds behind her back, but her Oma knew straight away, and told her she was a foolish shit who should've listened better. Her ancient Oma coughed and spat and sat by the fire muttering old curses with a thick ancient tongue, and then an horseshoe fell off the door and nearly smacked the girl on the head, but she fluttered to the right and it missed.

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Summer faded into fall, and eventually, the little girl was sent to school. Her Oma covered her hands in paper bags and told her not to be so obvious. But the children in class whispered low and stared a good deal. During silent reading, Sven, a little boy who sat near her, told Frau Warg he couldn't concentrate, that scratching sounds were coming from the little girl's paper bags. The teacher told him to hush, but the boy whispered to the other students that the little girl probably had rats in them, and that he'd heard her father was Polish. He said it in the kind of whisper everyone could hear, and the class grimaced and shuddered simultaneously, their eyes darting back and forth from the bags to the little girl's sad face. More whispers spread, and the class decided the rats were probably hungry, and with that, all of the students, one by one, moved away from the little girl until she sat alone in the back of the classroom.

The little girl put her head down on her desk, and began to whimper a little, but no one heard her above the sound of what they thought were scratching rats.

One day, when the little girl with birds for hands (or the future Baba Oma) sat alone at recess, she took off the brown paper bags. She did it carefully, using her small teeth to pull the first one off, freeing the robin underneath who unfurled its wings and pecked at the other bag until it snatched it off revealing the delicate bluebird hidden beneath. The bluebird lifted its head and sang into the spring air. It wasn't a big deal. By this point most of the kids had figured it out, but the birds, now in the open air, flapped their wings with great powerful bursts and cried out, squawking, and for a moment, the little girl lifted off the ground.

The other children gathered, and they told her the birds were beautiful. Sven asked whether or not she could fly some more, and if her mother or her Oma was the witch. Another student elbowed him, and asked the girl to try again. The little girl smiled, only managing to lift off the ground another inch or so, but the other children didn't seem to mind. The boy, Sven, even pulled out a ruler to mark the height.

The little girl was almost happy, and that night, in her bedroom, she tried to fly again, opening her curtains to let in the breeze so her birds might lift higher than before, but instead, the moonlight poured through her open window, soaking the little girl in its glow, and her hands began to lose their feathers until there was nothing left but two very normal pale, little girl hands.

The future Baba Oma collected the feathers, and pushed them hard onto her hands, but they only drew spots of blood before drifting to the floor in a slow somber descent. She even tried sneaking downstairs and filling a small washbasin with water, which she carried back to her room. She placed the basin on the floor where the moonlight spilled through her window, and she dropped the feathers into the water while speaking slow sounding words in a thick tongue like her Oma did when she thought no one was looking, but even then, when the girl submerged her hands, they only became brown finches for a minute or two.

For the rest of the night, the little girl kept her hands in the basin, but only once did they become something beautiful again, transforming momentarily into swimming fish with silver scales, but that didn't last either.

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At school, she hid her hands, but Sven and the other students stood around her. "They're normal," Sven said, pointing at the girl's fingers. "You're like all of us again." He paused. "Kind of."

"Kind of," the little girl agreed, tucking her hands away and nodding her head. She sighed and walked back to her desk, opening a book she'd stolen from her mother. The others students dispersed, disappearing to their desk, and the little girl read, hoping the book contained stories of unspoken things—anything that might make it so one day when the little girl, the future Baba Oma, flexed her tired hands, stretching her thin fingers into positions resembling delicate wings, that she might fly again, even if only for a few seconds or a few inches off the ground.



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