

The Birdman of Birmingham

I don't know when I became aware of the Birdman of Birmingham. I suppose many cities have a character of this type, someone who feeds the birds or squirrels or other urban pests, who feeds them with such regularity and generosity that each feeding becomes an event. Particularly the feeding of the pigeons which can attract hundreds of the birds and drive the other humans from the area. Leaving only the Birdman (or in some cases, Birdwoman), alone among the swirling massive flock, like St. Francis.

Our Birdman, the Birdman of Birmingham, was a ragged fellow in his fifties, one of the scores of men who had constructed for themselves a village of cardboard and plywood boxes under the Interstate. He was not distinguishable from the rest, wearing the same thrift store handout clothes, standing in line at the Episcopal church or Jimmy Hale's Mission to get his small plastic grocery bag of canned peaches and peanut butter sandwich. He was somewhat taller than average, and gaunt, and his pales hair stuck out from his head like straw. He reminded me, oddly enough, of the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. What these men do hour after hour, day after day, is a mystery. I see some in Linn Park, smoking and talking among themselves. Some spend a part of the day panhandling. But when you have no job, no family, no home, the hours must seem long and empty.

Maybe that's why he became the Birdman, starting with a crust of bread thrown to a single pigeon. Then the next day two crusts and so on, until he took the leap from casual occasional bird feeder to full-fledged Birdman. I like to imagine that the event that marked the occasion was the first time he solicited stale bread for the birds, and nothing for himself.

He must have been spectacularly good at securing donations. I've seen him with two black plastic trash bags full of stale loaves, staggering down the alley from the weight (presumably) as he went from the back door of one restaurant to another. One morning in the diner I mentioned it to Harvey. He said:

'Yeah, we donate too. At least Sarah does.'

'Really?'

I don't know why this surprised me. There's nothing about Harvey to make me think he's not a generous man. But I just never pictured him giving anything to the street people.

'Oh yeah, she gives him whatever stale bread we got. I don't care, we have to pitch it anyway, so why not,' he said, looking out the window.

'Well, that's very generous, Harvey,' I said.

'Sure. And besides that, I think Sarah sneaks the son of a bitch breakfast when I'm not looking,' he said, which made me laugh.

'Well, that's even more generous, buddy,' I said. 'That's downright good-hearted.'

He said something under his breath and started talking about the Braves and how they should all be in prison for the way they were playing, and I didn't disagree.

Early on, the Birdman was a fairly small-time operation, but over the months he turned into something else. At first it was just a man sitting on a park bench feeding a couple of dozen pigeons. But it seemed that every day he had more bread and consequently more birds. Soon there were hundreds of birds, then thousands.

He had a schedule as regular as banker's hours. At about 9:30, if you were sitting on one of the stone walls surrounding the fountain, and were paying attention, you would notice that birds were starting to gather. They arrived in small flocks of three or four, in a flurry of wings and they alighted on the pavement and hopped or rolled along until they were mixed in the crowd, in the 'uber-flock' as one of the lunch time regulars called it. Not just pigeons. There were robins, sparrows and the occasional exotic - like the flock of escaped parakeets, all yellow and green, and looking like party-favor sparrows.

The arrivals increased by the minute until the pavement of the plaza was full of birds, milling and squabbling, and they started roosting on the chairs and picnic tables, and in the trees. They ignored the humans, perching close by them on the back of the benches, simply perched and waiting. The commotion and unnerving proximity made the humans uneasy and drove them from the center of the park onto the grass, where they ringed the moiling crowd, the multitude, watching and murmuring quietly to one another. It was right out of Alfred Hitchcock, but somehow without the menace. The birds didn't pay attention to anyone but the Birdman.

At 10:00 am he arrived, tall and gaunt, nondescript but for the huge black plastic bag he carried slung over his shoulder, like a Santa from an alternative dimension where he was not so fat and jolly, but rather grimy and fanatical. He walked up the sidewalk and right into the crowd of birds without hesitating, and they scattered before him, a few flapping up backwards into the air and settling again. The noise subsided as he approached

the fountain. He set the bag on the ground and opened it. It was full of bread already taken from the wrapper and torn into small pieces, the biggest no more than an inch square. He started by flinging handfuls of bread as far as he could, trying without success to reach the back of the flock. Then he'd stroll casually through them, spreading the bread as if he were feeding grain to chickens. He went to the edge of the flock, and back again, without haste. The birds made way for him, unflustered, even peaceful, as peaceful as that many birds in one place can get. After fifteen or twenty minutes of this, reaching the bottom of his bag, he'd empty the last few bits out onto the ground, and stroll off through the hopping carpet of birds, off toward the interstate and home.

A newspaper article was written about him - a self-consciously whimsical essay by one of the regular columnists. The Birdman became something of a minor celebrity. Harvey read it and one afternoon, after the diner was closed, went with me to the park to witness the event.

Over the weeks the Birdman had expanded and embellished his performance, for that's what it had become - a performance. I don't know if he'd read the article himself and become engorged with pride, or maybe this was just the natural progression of anyone who is the object of such intense adoration - at least twice a day. But the simple, casual ritual had turned into a full-fledged ceremony. His stroll through the flock became a stately procession, and instead of flinging the bread on the ground he tossed it up into the air, raising a geyser of birds as they went up and after it. He'd finish the performance by taking the last few handfuls of bread and standing on the ledge of the fountain, his arms outstretched, bread in hand. The birds would rise up and flutter and flock in the air around him, talking the bread from his fingers. He did this three or four times, until the last of the bread was gone. Then, without fanfare, he'd climb down from the ledge, pick up his plastic bread bag and depart without a word to anyone or a look back.

The crowd loved it. And by now it was a pretty good-sized crowd, too. The park was lined with spectators, not just the annoyed regulars of the park, driven from their benches and lunch tables by the birds, but folks from all around downtown, and beyond. The windows of the high buildings around the park were full of silent spectators. It was quite an event.

"What do you think?" I asked Harvey, when the spectacle was over.

"I could have done without that thing at the end. He ain't St. Francis," he said.

"But other than that?"

"It can't go on. It's gotten too big."

And he was right. There was a complaint.

I was there the first day they roused him. The cops came and told him he couldn't feed them anymore, as it was a public nuisance and health hazard, what with all the bird residue. The last part tipped me off that it was probably the city Parks and Recreation ground crew guys who filed the complaint. They watched, a silent knot in the crowd, at every performance. They had to be tired of cleaning up twice a day.

The cops pulled him off for a few minutes and talked to him. He didn't say anything, just stood and listened and when the cops were done, he walked off, holding his empty black plastic bread sack.

The word about his ban got around, and the next morning the crowd was even bigger. I stopped by the diner on my way to the ten o'clock show, but Harvey declined my invitation to go and see what would happen.

"He'll show," he said. "It's all he's got"

I wasn't so sure, and said so, but he responded:

"He'll show up. He don't care if he's arrested, and I don't need to see that - I seen a man get arrested before."

I went on by myself, and right on schedule the birds started to gather and at the stroke of ten, by the church clock, The Birdman stepped into the park with his bag and his clodhopper walk and his hair sticking up and out. He gave a particularly inspired performance, both hands raised high in the air as the birds flew around him, taking the bread from his fingers, and finally roosting on his arms and shoulders.

He finished and disappeared from the park. The birds milled for a few moments then lifted en masse up past the tops of the trees, higher and higher, making a shadow across the park, then began to disperse in every direction, the fabric of the blanket come undone.

That afternoon, just before 4:00pm the cops were waiting for him at the edge of the park. Without fuss they took the bag of bread from him and led him to the back of a waiting patrol car, and he was gone.

But the birds were still waiting, the thousands of them amazingly quiet but for the occasional cooing and squawking. It was unsettling, but nothing happened. They milled around for a few minutes, then a few more, and then the crowd of them began to break apart. They scattered as gradually and uneventfully as they had gathered. By 4:30 the multitude was gone, leaving only the few birds that presumably called the park home. Or maybe

they were just the faithful, refusing to abandon their post.

The next morning the Birdman did not appear, nor did he in the afternoon. But the birds did, gathering peacefully before and dispersing peacefully after the scheduled time. The crowd of them had not diminished, indeed seemed to be even greater. The small group of park workers looked on, and I imagined I could hear the gnashing of teeth over the tranquil busy sound of the birds

The following day I went to the diner early and heard from Harvey that the Birdman had been locked up for refusing to quit. I told him about the birds keeping their appointment. He shook his head.

"That's all over," he said. "They won't keep comin' back if they don't get fed."

But they did. I witnessed both ceremonies that day, and I swear that there were more each time.

On the morning of the third day, I stopped by and told Harvey about it.

"I guess I was wrong," he said. "There must be somethin' else going on."

As I was leaving to walk down to the park for the 10:00am show he took off the cooking apron, hung it on a hook on the wall, put on his Braves hat and joined me.

"I got to see this," he said.

"You will."

The birds gathered as they always did, and as the time grew closer to 10:00am the flock had become enormous, the biggest I'd seen. The hour passed and I expected them to break apart, as they had done every other day. But today it didn't happen. They stayed on the ground for fifteen, then twenty, then thirty minutes.

"What's this?" asked Harvey. "I thought they just flew off when he didn't show up."

"That's what they been doin'," I said.

"Well, that's not what they're doin' today."

And it wasn't. Another few minutes passed, then the birds grew absolutely silent, and for a moment, immobile. There was not a sound or movement in the park. It was unnerving. Then the moment passed, and the dark shifting blanket of birds lifted slowly from the ground, with a great rush of air and feather, but no chirps or squawks, just the rustle of flight, and we were in shadow. The blanket lifted higher above us, two, three stories up, and more, and, completely intact, began to move slowly away from the park following the corridor of buildings that made up 20th street, moving south, filling the spaces in

the air between the buildings and longer than a city block. The walkers on the sidewalks below lifted up their heads, looking up into the shifting almost solid pattern of the birds, awesome and overwhelming.

The cloud of birds moved slowly down twentieth street, passing through the skyscraper intersection at 5th Avenue North, on past street after street until they came to the underpass just beyond Morris Ave. Then it turned down 1st Avenue South and back up 21th Street, heading back to the center of town. We could see it coming back toward us 50 feet up in the air. It passed over us with the same eerie rustling silence and immense shadow, moving until it hit the interstate, then down 8th Avenue and onto 22nd Street. And so, it followed the grid of streets and avenues, crisscrossing the downtown, stately, deliberate, ominous. We watched it for 30 minutes, then 45. Harvey said:

"It's about hit every street in town at least once."

"So far," I said. "Look, here it comes."

We were still standing on the edge of the park, near the statue of the soldier, and could see the mass of birds moving toward us slowly up the street, past the courthouse and finally into the air above the park. The movement of the shadow above slowed and when it centered on the fountain it stopped, and the birds began to move in a great circle, like a the winds of a hurricane, until they were all flying in unison in a whirling spiral, and for the first time they began to squawk, shriek, caw, trill and make every sound a bird can make. The swirling screaming crowd lifted higher and higher, and for the first time I felt a chill of fear. But the massive spinning cloud rose even higher, and began to break apart at the edges, birds shooting away and flying outward across the city in every direction, at first a few, then more and more until the living beast in the air came apart at the center, and the parts of it spread, still shrieking and calling, away from the park, thinning, dissolving into small clusters, then smaller, until in a few minutes it was just birds flapping aimlessly through the air, and the sound died out with the dissipation of the flock. Broad daylight returned to the park. A few pigeons settled on the ground a few yards from us. We looked at them. They went about their business, the slightly comical rolling walk, as they looked for something to eat. It was done.

"So," I said, "it's gone."

"It ain't gone," Harvey replied. "It's just spread out so you can't see it."

A few weeks later I heard from someone, I can't recall exactly who, that the Birdman had been released from jail and

had left town that same day. He made no further excursions to Linn Park or anywhere else. If, during the brief hours before his departure, any of his flock spied him on the street, there was no great gathering or demonstration. It's my belief that the last great rising and dispersion of the shadow was the end of it, for the birds. What it meant for the Birdman, I can't say. Sometimes I think that he went to another city, maybe Nashville or Chattanooga, and started over with a crust of bread and one pigeon. At least I like to think so.