The Ornithologist and the Fool

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Minnie had just settled down with her tea and last month’s nature magazine, a routine so familiar to her she could have done it in her sleep, when a knock jarred her out of the article about the latest migration patterns.

Her feet slipped across her kitchen floor, one shoved in a gray slipper — formerly white, the other a lime green sock. Haste to reach the steaming teakettle earlier had stopped her from finding the missing slipper. Her cropped white hair was still caught up in pink plastic curlers, giving her the appearance of a Pastel Porcupine. She wasn’t really dressed for company, but she’d stopped caring about her appearance sometime after she turned fifty. “Can I help you?”

“Um, hello,” a thin man in his late twenties stood at her door. The man’s eyes seemed to bug out at the sight of her. She wondered if it was the slipper or the curlers throwing him off. Clutched tight in his hands were numerous folders and paperwork shoved together. “My name’s Conner. I live in 6B, and I seem to have misplaced my keys. Could you possibly call the superintendent for me? I can’t seem to find my cell. I’m always misplacing the thing.”

“Sure doll, I remember you, we’ve met in the halls before. Why don’t you just come in and wait.” She waved him in, “you like tea? I just made some. I’m Minnie, if you didn’t remember.”

He swallowed hard followed her inside, “Sure ma’am.” His eyes darted back towards the hallway as she shut the door.

“Cream or sugar?”

“Just sugar, please.”

He settled onto the dark brown sofa, carefully avoiding the reading glasses spread out on one cushion. Magazines were scattered all over across the room, along with small neon post-it notes. The one on the table was a reminder to send Phil a $1250 check for rent. The one stuck to the mirror on the wall was a reminder that she needed more peanut butter. Peanut butter of all things.

It reminded him of his late grandmother’s house, where his parents used to drop him off there on the weekends when they wanted to go on their mini-vacations. His grandma used to collect cow figurines despite the fact that she’d didn’t own a cow and never even stepped foot on a farm during her eighty-one years. Each one had it’s own name. She’d coo over them, carefully dusting them every afternoon.

She shuffled in before he could read any more and offered him a cup of tea, “I called Phil, he’ll be up soon. That’s sure a lot of paperwork you have
there. So what exactly is it you do?” She sat down next to him, and he barely rescued the glasses.

“I’m an ornithologist.”

“How fancy,” she chuckled, “I love birds,” she waved her hand at the numerous bird figurines, artwork, and patterns scattered across the living room. Even her robe had chickadees printed on them, faint from numerous washings.

“Yes, I see this, do you know a lot about birds?” His lips twitched up, not fully firming into a smile.

“I keep up,” she blew on her tea.

“I’m sure you do.”

She opened her mouth, but there was a pounding at the door. “Hey, Minnie, you called?” Phil’s muffled voice sounded from the other side of the door.

“Sure doll, have fun at your party,” Minnie took his tea. “Oh, before you go I have a book you might enjoy.”

Phil pounded on the door. “Minnie? I don’t have all day.”

“Here,” Minnie walked in holding some bound papers, “It’s not a finished copy, but I think you’ll like it.”

His eyes widened when he skimmed the title. “This is the latest anthology by Mrs. Southfield, this isn’t even supposed to be published for another month. How’d you get this?”

Her eyes twinkled, “They always give authors advanced copies of the things they publish.”

Phil pounded on the door. “Minnie? I don’t have all day.”

“You better go. Don’t want to be late for your party,” She gently prodded a stuttering Conner towards out the door, shutting it behind his face frozen in surprise. Quietly she finished her tea and magazine, before washed down the kitchen, and putting the thin china cups decorated in barn swallows away, a smile never leaving her face. A leaflet was stuck to her fridge, and she took it down. Maybe she’d go to speak at the convention after all.