

## **Birds of a Feather**

by Andreia Rodrigues

The classroom walls blurred, shrank, and pressed my head from all sides. The teacher's voice became a rottweiler's bark. The air was sucked out of the room. I gasped, the skin on my face feverish. So humiliating. The sweat, the heavy breathing, the shivers. These stupid, stupid attacks had started months ago and showed no signs of abating. They followed me everywhere, invisible and relentless, like a shadow I couldn't shake.

I held on and trembled through the lecture, my notes forming uneven patterns on a white page. At the first break, I got the hell out of that airless classroom.

Midday found me sobbing in a park near the university. The shame had followed me to a bench covered by the falling leaves of a Tipuana tree. I sat down, brought my backpack close to my chest, and closed my eyes. Tears ran freely down my cheeks.

"Can I sit here with you?" A soft voice broke through the curtain of my exasperation. The request came from an old man, a familiar figure in the park, who, according to rumours, had renounced possessions to live voluntarily from charity. He spent most of his days at the park, meditating and talking to those who would converse. Other students I knew said he was crazy, but no one thought he was dangerous.

I wiped away my tears and moved over on the bench.

"I see you're sad." He wore a long, white robe. "Would you mind telling me why?" The serenity of his voice contrasted with the traffic noise of a not-so-distant road.

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I care."

"I'm tired of life. It's grey and frightening. It just sucks."

"I understand." The man nodded and rubbed his white beard. "But why do you think that?"

"I don't know, really. I think it all started when my father died seven years ago."

The man laid a hand on my shoulders, smooth as drops of light rain against a roof. The tenderness contouring his silence encouraged me to continue. "One day my *pai* was healthy and strong, the next he was gone. He left for work and never came back." I swallowed. "He was murdered. The victim of a terrible mistake."

The man lowered his gaze and sadness spread across his face. "I think some wounds never heal," I said.

"What was his name?" he asked.

"João."

"Beautiful name." A wide smile exposed his yellow teeth. "It's my name too."

A grin stretched my features.

"I'm sorry for you, dear. I've also lost someone I love. I know it's not easy, but the best we can do for them is to try to keep going."

"Who have you lost, João?"

"My girlfriend. The only woman I ever loved."

"Sorry about that." A mother was shouting to her child from a bench opposite. Traffic moved on the road.

João's face acquired luminosity. "It's okay. Luisa remains the best memory of my life." He paused. "She had a rare disease. At first, she started losing all the melanin on her skin. Her body became spotted like a little leopard, but instead of dark dots, they were white." João turned away. "Then the disease took over her eyes. She could not stand light. We spent months in complete darkness. Until the disease finally reached her heart. She died in my arms."

I tapped my chest. "I'm sorry, João."

"Thanks, dear. What's your name?"

"Andreia."

"I'm okay, dear Andreia. I'm glad I had her, and even gladder she had someone with her until the end. In a way, I know we'll always be together."

A group of pigeons fought for a bread crumb on the ground. I considered how to construct my words. “I don’t mean to be rude, but what do you mean by that? That you’ll always be together? Me, I don’t know if I believe in the afterlife.”

“Allow me to tell you something.” João bent forward. “You know, I practically live at this park. I spend my days observing nature. The trees, the grass, the birds. Especially the birds. Recently I’ve noticed something special about the birds that visit here.” A noisy, old motorcycle vroomed around the park. João waited until it passed. “Every morning, at 7:05 a.m. sharp, a group of little black birds comes right here in front of this bench. They eat insects over there.” He pointed to an area of grass surrounded by dandelions. “In the last few weeks, I noticed a new bird had joined the group. This new bird is different from the others. While all the other birds in the group are entirely black, this new one is covered by white dots, all over its feathers...” João fell into a solemn silence before he added, “It’s like it has melanin disease.”

João stared at the patch of grass. He seemed to be far away. Goosebumps covered my arms. “You think this bird...”

“I like to think so, yes. The most interesting thing is that this white-dotted bird is the only one who comes and sits with me every day, right here on this bench. All the others remain on the grass.”

A liquid warmth floated to my chest. “This is the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard.”

We remained silent for a while. I sat breathing in the story. The colours of the world intensified. I watched a boy fly a green and yellow kite. Half of his blue underwear was showing from his falling pants.

“You’re feeling better, Andreia?”

“I think so. Thank you for talking to me and sharing your story.”

“My pleasure. Thanks for listening to me.”

We smiled at each other.

“You know, João, I hear stories like yours, of people who experience contact with their lost ones. From a dream, a coincidence, a synchronicity. It’s beautiful. And I feel sad that I don’t have those experiences.”

“You’re sure you don’t?”

“I think so.”

“See, I’m not so sure. Think about that. You’re having a hard day. You come to a random bench and find someone with the same name as your father. Someone who cares about your tears. Someone who more or less understands your pain.”

I grinned.

“I’m here all the time, Andreia. Any time you need to talk, you can find me. And believe me. You are stronger than you think you are.”

My head collapsed on his shoulder. His arms supported my back. Tears wet the upper part of his robe.

The next day at 7:05, I scanned the park on my way to class. From a distance, I saw a little white-dotted bird pecking gently at João’s open hand—right there on the bench where, just a day before, I had sat, wept, and begun to rise.



**Andreia Rodrigues** is a Brazilian immigrant based in Europe. Alongside autobiographical stories, she has written essays, a memoir, and a romance novel. Her work has appeared in literary collectives such as *The Manifest Station*, *Feminine Collective*, and *Black Scat Books*. Through fiction and autobiographical narratives her writing is dedicated to helping women heal and transcend.