

The Quail

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The quail came just before the lilacs bloomed in the green time of their first spring married. The morning was the first warm morning with no frost, only dew. Feeling sun on the bed, she rose earlier than usual. When she saw the quail in the backyard she woke him. He saw eight birds scratching earth and pecking in the landlord's garden.

He told her they were California Quail. The hens were like dowager women, plump and impeccably arrayed in brown and grey. They were escorted by three portly males with grey vested chests and feathered black ascots. Each bird had one black plume bobbing on the forehead. They wandered the garden like a tour group, stopping to pick at the ground, gliding, aimless and individual but coveyed together.

The couple dressed, whispering about the birds and watching them breakfast from the lawn. He made coffee, warmed rolls and they ate at the kitchen table where they could watch the covey. He opened the window so they could smell the morning dampness and apple blossoms. Sun came through the window; the rolls were sweet with raisins and they did not have to say anything to each other.

That evening, on his way home from work, he stopped at a feed store and bought cracked corn. He explained to her that the quail would stay as long as they were fed and well-treated. He scattered the corn near the kitchen window and at sunset the birds returned. They came very close to the window, picked at the grains, and took rolling dirt baths in the landlord's garden. She asked him if the birds would eat the landlord's seeds and plantings. He told her that the garden was in no danger as long as they were well fed.

After the birds came, they began to set the alarm clock early. At first it was to give them more time for coffee, rolls and watching the covey. When the lilacs bloomed and the tulips came out they set the alarm earlier still and made love before rising. She would bathe after and he would make breakfast, put out more feed for the birds.

It was best watching the covey just after sunrise, before the traffic noises, before the landlord let his poodle out. The landlord lived next door with a chicken wire fence dividing the two yards. When he let the poodle out, it would be crazy to get at the quail, charging the fence, yapping an insane little dog's bark. The covey would rise, flailing air, then settle in the apple tree's low branches waiting for the dog to calm himself so they could drop back to feed.

Before long he put corn on the windowsill and the quail would join them for breakfast. If they were quiet and ate without sudden movement, the birds would flutter to the windowsill a foot from the coffee pot and roll basket. The birds took the corn, eating one piece at a time. Their

beaks tapped the sill and their eyes gleamed. He removed the screen to see if they would come inside.

The four cocks were bold, sometimes walking onto the table, preening, ruffling feathers, shaking their plumes. For weeks she tried to feed them sweet roll crumbs from her fingers. The males looked at it but it was a hen who finally ran to the offered scrap, eyed it sideways with her plume like a hat feather cocked over one eye, took the crumb. There was the touch of the hen's beak on her fingers. She laughed aloud; the covey exploded from the windowsill. When a week passed and the birds finally began coming to the windowsill again, the hen always took one crumb.

Evenings they would sit in lawn chairs and watch the covey feed. When the early roses came out and the landlord's garden sprouted, they saw a hen mated. It was in the garden and they did not see the courtship, only the act when the cock, all grey and brown feathered with black throat feathers, twisted the hen's neck down with his bill. The hen writhed in the soil as the cock mounted her and beat her sides with his wings.

And the landlord's wife railed from inside the landlord's house, "Tom! They're in the garden again, TOM!" The landlord ran from his house, waving his arms, hissing, his neck wrinkled and old, his hair white stubble.

The birds rose flailing air.

His wife held the screen door open, leaned out screeching, "Tom you got to do something about them birds! We got to eat that damn garden this winter, now you want to eat this winter you do something!"

The screen door made a whacking slam and she was out, stooped, her poodle at her feet, her legs splayed, her dress a grey farm woman's dress with a tattered apron. She sounded like the poodle.

"Dammit, *Tom!* You going to do something about them birds?"

The tenant and his wife sat in the lawn chairs thinking. thinking *they* should do something. Tell the old woman, maybe, that the birds wouldn't bother the seedlings. But they thought she would fight with them, scream at them because she was angry and old. They thought it best to say something later when she calmed herself.

The next day the landlord said he liked the birds and said the garden had grown enough to be out of danger. He said he had always liked quail. Even when he was a boy he had thought them beautiful and fine eating, but there was his wife. The landlord said his wife would most likely be better in a day or two and the garden was always a sore spot with her because they canned for winter.

When the poppies bloomed and the sweet peas came in, three broods were hatched. The first chicks appeared at breakfast with the hen leading a weaving path to the corn and the cock running half-circles behind them keeping the chicks in line. They counted ten new birds in the

three families and they rose even earlier so they could linger over breakfast and smell the drying mustard weed behind the garden.

One hen led her chicks for evening strolls down the front sidewalk. She would promenade her family punctually at five thirty. The landlord and his wife sat on the front porch one night not believing the hen would show as the tenant had described. They all laughed when the hen strutted by on cue. The landlord and his wife drank beer and told them about the depression when there was drought and they had to save everything. The old woman said she still had those habits and also said she had been overly concerned about the garden. The tenant couple thought the landlord's wife would be just fine.

When it was autumn, they canned pie apples and apple sauce. The landlord took in his squash, carrots, tomatoes, beets. The landlord's wife traded canned cherries for their canned apples. The landlord cut back the garden and the tenant helped the old man put up storms, turn the garden and clean the garage. He bought a fifty pound bag of cracked corn and built a feeding trough of redwood. With the trough on the windowsill there was enough room for all eighteen quail even with the window closed.

The covey was in good shape for the winter. He told her the birds would have an easy winter and said they would stay near food. The chicks had grown. They were well fed, sleek with new adult plumage. The original eight were rotund, fattened by the summer's corn. He assured her the birds would be fine for the winter.

When the leaves turned and there was frost again, they closed the kitchen window. She could not feed the hen crumbs, but they could talk now without frightening the birds. They talked about the summer with the quail waking them early. He told her he had hoped all his life that it would someday be like it had been that summer.

When there was hard frost and cold mornings they lingered in bed, awake, warm next to each other, thinking of the quail, thinking of the warmth.

The morning after the first snowfall, the quail were gone. He brushed the snow out of the feeding trough and replaced the wet corn. The covey did not come back that night and the corn had not been touched the next morning. He told her the quail had probably gone to the hills outside town for winter. He told her there was better cover in the hills and that the hunting season was over, so they would be fine. He told her the birds would be back in the spring and it would be the same again.

The tenant and his wife slept late and hard through the winter. The winter was dry, bleak, and cold. There was talk of drought for summer; the landlord hoarded water for his garden by storing it in old oil drums.

The tenant changed the corn often, spreading some on the frozen ground. But the quail did not return and sparrows and jays ate it. His wife said she knew the quail would be back in the spring and it would be the same.

When the ground thawed and there was the mud and dirt smell outside, the tenant saw the landlord cleaning his garage and went to help. When he saw the plastic bag full of grey and brown feathers: down feathers, plume feathers, some with bits of dried skin— when he saw that sack and the large chicken wire trap that had not been in the garage before, he asked the landlord how he had managed to catch all the birds at once. The landlord said it had been his wife's idea. They had waited for the first winter storm and trapped the birds when they were huddled together. He said they had been fine eating.

The tenant did not tell his wife about the bag or trap, but it was as if she knew. After awhile, he quit putting out the corn and when the fifty pound bag began to rot, he threw it on the trash.