



# **NO REWARD FOR DEAD BIRD**

**a short story by Janet Ference**

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the author wishes to offer deep thanks to  
her dear friend, the incredible photographer Lynn Park

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An orb weaver spider had built an exquisite web that stretched from Evelyn's petunias to her snap pea poles. The air of late had been dry and still, and this elegantly spiny creature had had the long sun of an early August day to weave an intricate web that seemed implausibly large. It completely blocked the path to the garden.

It was high time to water everything. Evelyn had let it go for nearly a week, and in this August heat, it was showing her neglect. She had not been feeling well. At 87, Evelyn had been somewhat disappointed when her young doctor found no cause. While Evelyn had no wish to die a harsh death, she would have been glad to know of heart trouble. She was ready for something easy. She had been ready for over a year.

It wouldn't do for Evelyn to sit on one of her dilapidated white wicker chairs by the entrance to the garden for too long. The hundred-degree Florida panhandle heat during this drought was sure to leave her feeling faint. She'd be no good to herself making supper.

Sitting down, all the same, she thought perhaps she'd make no meal and just eat toast and some of the preserved peaches she'd put up over ten years ago and had since kept in the root cellar. Her daughters, both of them city girls, were convinced the carefully prepared delicacies in the cellar ought to be discarded as they were surely past their shelf life. The girls had insisted, and she had ignored them. Of course, this caused no end of grief.

Since her husband's accident, since she'd found herself alone again, twice now a widow, things had gotten worse with the girls. Her grown daughters considered it their inconvenient duty to treat their mother like a child in need of direction. It was annoying as all hell.

Evelyn made up her mind to eat those peach preserves, and to let her daughters be damned.

In the meantime, she figured she'd sit herself down here long enough to figure out what to do about the spider's web crossing her path. It would fairly crush her soul to destroy it. She felt sure she'd cry into her toast about it and find it hard to eat.

She knew she had to eat. She was down to a hundred pounds on her five-foot-six frame. She'd been warned that another ten pounds and she'd be weak as a newborn and need 24-hour care. That was a terrifying threat.

Evelyn couldn't imagine leaving this cabin where she'd lived and grown old these last 25 years. She had no plan for her next move. Her daughters had schemes, of course. Evelyn knew they did. But they'd never yet dared to speak of them with her. Still, Evelyn knew the time would come one day, some awful day, when she would be forced to do something about her situation.

It would be so much easier if she'd just get on with it and have a heart attack. The volunteer fire department and the ER folks at the small hospital in town had her DNR papers. She'd seen to that a year ago.

Evelyn drove such thoughts out of her mind. The business at hand was to decide whether or not to unmoor that web. She needed to get to the hose snaking beneath it. The peas and tomatoes were purely wilting without a drink. It was a weighty matter. While Evelyn's garden was somewhat puny this year, she did have color in the petunia patch and some fine tomatoes and a decent batch of snap peas coming along in a week or two.

She'd hate to see her garden suffer so that a spider could thrive. She knew the spider would recover its aplomb and build a new web, probably right there in the garden again, but not likely as downright perfect. Evelyn had seen the work of disappointed spiders. They built haphazard webs. They danced crazily over the tangled weave.

This year Evelyn's closest neighbor, who lived down the road a mile or so, had come up the hill to plant her garden for her. The forty-year-old son of a local, Bill was a good man who had never left this small town. He did the gardening for her at his mother's direction. Evelyn had noted the turned-around way this worked and envied Bill's widowed mother her authority in the relationship. The boy just plain respected her, she'd told Evelyn time and again. It was no particular marvel. What's more, the man took no offense at being called a boy by his elders. Evelyn thought it was more than a marvel. She thought it was a miracle and the man should be sainted.

Before the accident, every spring, Evelyn's husband had carefully laid the plots and rows and beds. Derek always did it just as she wished, to her great satisfaction.

Derek, a fine art photographer, had had a precise eye. He'd also had a profoundly listening heart. His loss was still a calamity for Evelyn, though it had been more than a year now.

Fifteen years her junior, it was understood that he would outlive her. Evelyn had planned her life with Derek around this implicit presumption. She'd never have let herself fall in love again, after losing her first partner, if she'd even considered the concept that she might lose another devoted companion. It was unthinkable, and consequently she'd never thought of it.

When some murderously reckless drunk driver had come flying down the sharp curves of the narrow road that led to town, straightening his path right down the middle of that road, ignoring the admittedly weathered yellow line, Derek was as unprepared for the blow as Evelyn was for the outcome. Derek was left all jagged bones and blood, a literally broken man who could not survive even a day with the massive injuries he'd sustained in this head-on collision. Evelyn was left as broken as he, her spirit all ragged pith and pity.

She'd kicked herself out of bed, though, within a week, even at 86, not to be undone by it, not daring to lose her home by becoming feeble, and she'd gradually resumed living. Her sharp, dark eye of pity for all who die, and all who will die,

mellowed into a kind of lowered lid that she hoped passed for compassion. Her pith remained exposed only to herself, or so she supposed. She was nakedly, tenuously living a thread of a life, but in the eyes of her neighbors whom she very occasionally saw, she was fine, she believed, just fine.

The spider moved, startling her. Evelyn had been still and unseeing, vaguely aware of the tomatoes not growing before her. She'd forgotten her dilemma, the reason she'd been lingering there.

She was getting more sun than she should. She wasn't dressed for a day outside. Her sensitive skin required long light-weight sleeves and billowing cotton pants. She was wearing a wide-brimmed turquoise sun hat, one of Derek's favorites, but that was all she'd done to protect herself. She was out there in the sleeveless knee-length nightgown she'd been wearing inside all day. For some time now, she'd seen no reason to dress, unless she knew someone was coming.

Evelyn took a long look at the silky weave before her. It was a beauty. She knew Derek would never have disturbed it. He prized all things created with instinctive, intuitive or intended clarity of vision so striking as to capture a deeply seeing eye.

Derek had been a lovely man, 47 when they met, and she already 62 and collecting social security and a teacher's pension. From the start, his graceful, unpretentious good looks had intrigued Evelyn. It was his eyes, though, that cleaved

her clear to her heart. Derek's eyes had been restful, but direct, and deliciously inviting, even into his early 70s.

His photographs were stunning. Derek's work was her second love in this, her second love affair. Once she'd seen him working, once she'd been privileged to see the breadth of his work in all its diversely challenging iterations of unique beauty, she was determined to make a home for him.

At 62, Evelyn was not at all inclined to believe she was herself attractive, but she was confident that she made Derek a very good offer. She told him she was prepared to support him and give him a good, though simple, life. She thought he accepted her proposal merely as a form of patronage.

It was only much later, as they grew old together, living in this cabin 25 years, and they talked of their meeting and courtship, such as it was, that Evelyn came to understand that Derek had truly loved her and appreciated her own fine eye.

Evelyn shook herself. There was something she was supposed to be doing. She settled down again. It would come to her in time.

Meeting Derek had been so unexpected. Five years a widow at the time, Evelyn's first lover of 30 years had died of a heart attack when Evelyn was just 57 and Vivian, 59. Their two girls, born of Evelyn by way of Vivian's brother, had been grown already, young women pursuing passions both romantic and professional. This left Evelyn a lonely, withdrawn and somewhat bitter woman.



She and Vivian lived in Atlanta, always had, and back in 1980, most of their neighbors had spurned the couple, even shunning the girls. Evelyn was closeted at work, closeted as a mother wherever possible, and closeted with all casual acquaintances. She had no friends. In the long years she mourned Vivian, Evelyn refused the paltry sympathy that did happen to come her way, preferring to be in pain. Pain felt soothingly right when the world felt so casually alien. Evelyn went through her days working, eating when she must, sleeping, and sleeping some more.

She was ashamed in later life that she'd spent so much time and energy giving sway to self-indulgent grief.

The one thing of beauty Evelyn continued to appreciate during those five years of widowhood was the cockatoo that Vivian had given her as a surprise on the occasion of her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Alexander, the great squawker, as he was affectionately known, was a noisy and lively companion. He conversed in elementary English, recognizable only to Evelyn, and he had words of note to impart, like 'good morning,' when it surely was not going to be one, and 'good night,' when sleep was not coming and would not come for hours. He was a very good bird, not a pet, but an individual in his own right.

It was stupid of Evelyn to lose him. His wings had never been clipped. The two women found the idea repulsive. So Alexander could fly. He often flew about the house freely. The windows were screened. Evelyn would keep an eye on him. There

was no harm in it. He would watch Evelyn cook, knowing tidbits would come his way, tossed into the air. Before Vivian had died, he would watch her undress, whistling at her as Evelyn had taught him to do. He would watch out the parlor window, perhaps longing for escape, but Evelyn had preferred to believe he was simply watching the cherry tree change through the seasons, as she herself loved to do. She'd had the pleasure of Alexander's friendship for twelve years when he left her.

Evelyn came home from teaching one day, tired of teenagers contesting wills from hour to hour, one class, then another, and again the same thing, conflict. She opened Alexander's cage to greet him and let him fly free while she made supper. This was customary, but that night she was distracted and shouldn't have done it. She discovered, making salad, that she'd left the fresh vegetables in the car. She'd stopped at the farmer's market on the way home, and she'd found beautiful heirloom tomatoes.

It was a very hot day. Evelyn knew the tomatoes would be baking out there in the closed car parked in the driveway. She flew out the door, leaving it open, thinking only of her vegetables, and Alexander flew out behind her, into the cherry tree. At first, Evelyn didn't notice. She retrieved her sack from the car, went back to the house, closed the door, and ran to the kitchen to run cold water over her prize tomatoes. It was only when she began to slice them and to whistle as she did it, that she noticed Alexander was not there to join in the song.

She knew at once that he'd flown outside. If he was inside, he would be with her in the kitchen. She held the knife in the air and pictured the open front door and realized she was an abject ass. She ran back outside, terrified and trying hard to be hopeful. Evelyn spotted him, a tropical wonder, beautifully unlikely in the green of that Georgia cherry tree, stretching his magnificently uncut wings. She called to him. She sang to him, embarrassed to be singing in the yard, but doing her best to choke her way through *Amazing Grace*.

Alexander gave her one eye, as birds will do, a steady eye, and in that dark singular eye, Evelyn saw a wild bird. Something had become of him out there. He was already gone.

In the next moment, he flew out of the tree and across the street and then over a roof and out of eyesight.

Evelyn didn't cry about it. Her children were grown and gone. Her lover was dead five years. Now Alexander had left her. She wasn't sure it wasn't his right to be truly free of her for the first time in his life.

She did worry for him, though. It was her responsibility to care for him. He'd been a gift. Alexander was unprepared for the dangers he faced in the world beyond her reach.

She did what people do. She posted flyers. She made beautiful flyers. They featured a full-color picture of Alexander eating a bit of apple from her hand. Vivian

had taken that snapshot. She offered a \$500 reward for his return. Being a practical woman, Evelyn noted in a bold print banner across the bottom of the flyer, “NO REWARD FOR DEAD BIRD.”

It was five days before she got the call. It was Derek, the then anonymous Derek, asking to see her, saying only that he’d spotted the bird. She’d pressed him to tell her what he knew over the phone, but he gently said it was best they meet.

Evelyn met him in the parking lot at school. She waited by the car. He was late. He arrived on a bicycle. He had a full messenger bag. She said nothing.

He didn’t speak either.

She searched his eyes for confirmation of what she already knew. He was silently plain spoken.

She flashed hard eyes in reply, eyes that quoted her poster.

Derek met her gaze without the flinch of a stranger or a person affronted. He let his own eyes fall guilelessly open. He showed his pained heart to her through kaleidoscopic flecks of color in those grey-green eyes of his.

After a very long time, once she’d blinked and not cried, Derek turned slowly from her, as quietly as a person asleep, and he opened his bag. He took a very deep breath, slipped his arm into the darkness, then lifted out a bundle wrapped and draped in a white silk pillow case. He cradled it in his arm, and he offered it to Evelyn, looking not at the dead bird and not at Evelyn’s limp hands, but at her eyes again.

She didn't take the bird, but she sank into the compassion. She rested there in his clear eyes where she could see his very heartbeat, and she forgot that she was too old for all of this.

She allowed herself perhaps ten minutes of this beguilement. Then she grasped her Alexander and shut her eyes to this Derek person. She placed her bird in the front seat of the car, and went to the driver's side, got in and drove away from that strange man.

At home, she buried the cat-clawed bird. She could see that he'd been saved from a true mauling. She knew that Derek must have rescued him from that fate.

Sinking deeply into the bony wicker chair, Evelyn thought hard about the silent conversation she and Derek had shared that day. It was troubling. She had felt more intense longing for Derek than she had for Alexander. She'd been a faithless friend.

Derek didn't call for a month.

Two months later he moved into her home.

Six months after that, she bought him this cabin with its wildly forested property. They remodeled the house together. They bought second-hand treasures to furnish it. They cleared land for the garden. They planted fruit trees.

In 25 years, they'd made it their own, with the sheen of a patina left by their hands and a weathered homeliness cast by their settling eyes.

In the time since the accident, their home had begun to feel foreign. The garden was not quite right. The carrots were planted beside the corn. How had Bill gotten it so wrong? Nobody changed the sheets. Derek had always done that. Now they smelled only of her and too much of her. They stank. The pots were no longer where they should be. Somehow they'd wandered too low or too high for her to reach them. Derek would have seen to that. As it was, she could only use what was in the dish rack, so she used those dishes and that one skillet over and over again. The washing machine didn't seem to work any more, or she'd forgotten how to use it, so Evelyn washed out her things in the sink and hung them over the kitchen chairs to air dry. She was managing, but she was stumbling over her own furniture in the morning, as if it had been moved in the night.

A shiver of sudden breeze caught Evelyn as she was dozing. Flashing awake, she saw that it was already dusk. She checked the locket watch she wore around her neck. It was after seven. Holding the locket, she wished, as she often did, that she could open the clasp. Her fingers had long since lost that agility. She kept both Vivian and Derek in there, hanging close to her heart. Thinking of them, for a moment Evelyn felt not so alone.

Her eyes drifted shut. Her right hip ached from the ribs of the wicker. Her arms were prickly with heat rash. Her feet, bare from slipping out of her moccasins, were sharply chilled. Her stomach was churning with bitter hunger. Her neck,

unsupported by the chair, had a stiff crick to the left. Most disturbingly, there was an unfamiliar throbbing deep inside her skull. She'd never had a headache quite like this one.

Her eyes darted open. A slant of twilight shimmered on the spider's web, as though it were damp with dew. Evelyn wondered for a moment if this was morning, another day alone. It was not. The setting sun was in the west, as it should be.

In the next long moment, Derek was caressing Evelyn's ear as they lay naked in bed. Vivian came to water the garden. Evelyn could see her from the bedroom window. She was wearing a shapely white silk dress. It flowed around her feet like water. She and Vivian were swimming then. They were in the sea, past the surf. Evelyn had a fright at that, because she was a poor swimmer. Vivian could swim for hours, and she was ignoring Evelyn's plight. Derek rescued her, plucking her from the ocean directly into the sky. They began to soar in free flight. Alexander crossed their path. Then Evelyn was alone in Atlanta, in the suburban ranch house where she'd raised her children. She was standing over the kitchen sink, eating ripe tomatoes. Out that window was this garden. It was strange. The carrots were next to the corn. A spider was eyeing her.

Evelyn shook with what felt like it must be a seizure. Alert at once, she tried to stand. Her left leg gave way and she fell. She surprised herself by thinking clearly, 'I must be having a stroke.'

Evelyn was very angry. She wanted to stand, and she couldn't. She wanted help, and there was none. This was unacceptable. It was impossible. Someone would come. Bill would bring flowers. Why would he bring flowers when she needed milk? He always got things backwards. He was a thoroughly inept saint. Evelyn needed a real saint.

She tried to pray to someone, not knowing whom she was addressing. She'd been Catholic as a girl. In another moment, she knew who was calling to her. 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women,' she wanted to reply, but couldn't.

Evelyn did not want to spend the night twisted like this. She did not want to remain here until help did not come. She tried to straighten her legs in front of her. She couldn't do that. She could grab the chair with her right hand, though. She pulled it to her so forcefully it toppled onto her. Evelyn, who did not cry, began to cry. It was infuriating to feel the damp heat on her cheeks.

When another shocking stroke seized her, Evelyn slipped free of care. The last thing she saw was that exquisite web and the spider eyeing her die.