**Bluffing**

Diane Goodman

The truth about injury without blood is born in the tender second when a slap starts a pin-prick crack struggling toward the surface of the skull.

My mother was fighting with me in the kitchen when a large grey bird blew itself into our living room picture window, on a charm that couldn’t shatter the glass. My mother had just declared my silence sass and warned me not to talk back to her ever again, the sharp sting from the wet towel she had snapped still hot and pulsing on my cheek.

“Stop wincing,” she said. “It was a joke.”

A single whack had stopped that bird cold. We both heard the thud, and it provided an escape, drawing me to the window just in time to see the bird’s frantic life shivering away. My mother followed, but with less alarm. She came walking in still holding the towel, stood behind me and looked down through the window. Then she scolded our cat who lived outside but was nowhere in sight. She explained the thud away as the cat’s playful slap at the thing now laying there, seemingly unbroken. She swore soon it would come back to lazy life and bore him.

My mother had a gift. She could invent stories and then explain away their endings to her satisfaction no matter what image appeared in the tableau. Backtalk. A bird merely stunned. Dad merely away. No cat. It didn’t matter.

“The bird is not alive,” I said, forgetting the earlier admonition in the kitchen. But then our cat did show up, and he prowled around to inspect the damage. The bird did not move, confirming what I knew to be true, or maybe what was true was that the bird knew something else I knew, how to keep a breath too still to call out for help because there was no one there who could.

“What are you planning to do now?” my mother wanted to know, already bored.

“Nothing,” I said, which is what all us adolescent girls said in response to nearly every question about what we did or were doing or were going to do but this time I said it because it felt like it was the only thing I could do. If my father had been there, he would have said “Turn nothing into something” but he’d been gone three weeks by now and already his name in my head was starting to sound like some weak version of my trying to bring him back.

“What did I just tell you?” she said, as if that one word was backtalk and not truth. “You’ll find something productive to do, if you know what’s good for you,” she said, which I did. I knew how to play dead, to call on acts of nature that tricked you into stillness so you could stop the fracture from escaping and will your light from leaving to keep your head whole.

“Go,” my mother said, “there’s nothing else to see here. There isn’t even any blood.” My mother refused to believe in that lucky bird, dry and still as the patio stones, below our cat’s paw, now waving the air above it like a blessing.