

Brave Sparrow



for that true sparrow,
Jeremy Tidwell

Sparrow

How long have you felt it?

Your fingers filled with dull ache whenever you use them for too long, your shoulder-blades tickling with the sensation of phantom limbs, that sense that you're swimming in a body too big to make use of, the confusion of being.

You weren't meant to walk among humans.

Maybe you've just shrugged it off, assuring yourself that everyone feels this way sometimes. Maybe you've been going crazy for the answer. There is no easy way to doubt your body. There is no comfortable way to fall apart.

But the feeling is getting clearer. You dream about flying either all of the time or never at all. You hate depending on your legs for movement. You don't trust like you used to. You crave beauty like you'll die without it. You're ready to fly.

You're a sparrow, brave and terrified.

dedicated to Jeremy Tidwell

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A brief history

A long time ago, maybe, the world was wide open and it was free. Things changed when the war started. It's easy to blame the humans for the way the world is now, because they won. Because their world is all that survived. But all of us were responsible, even the sparrow.

Each creature brought its weapons forward, scattered and strange as those weapons were. The humans brought coercion and dominion. Others could kill, but the humans could take. They were winning, but one enemy stood out as a real and unrelenting threat. The sparrow had many weapons - flight, courage, grace, and the unwavering ability to bear witness to truth. These were not easy weapons to comprehend or out-manuever.

It was then that the sorcerer came forward. He had a spell, one that would strip a sparrow of its wings and imprison it in a human cage. He was wily and efficient, only taking the bravest and strongest from the sparrow legions, leaving behind an entire species - skittish, bewildered, leaderless.

To play

This is a game. It's also a short guide to escaping your human prison and taking to the skies, on re-feathering your wings and re-kindling your bravery.

Prior to playing, you will need to gather two items. The first is a little bag in which you can carry feathers. It should be a special bag reserved solely for this purpose, sleek but not ostentatious. The second item is a small pin that says *brave sparrow* on it, to be worn whenever you wish to form a host.

And finally, you will need to believe in these possibilities. That maybe you aren't human. That maybe you were always secretly a sparrow. That maybe you can regrow your wings. Doubt is healthy and reasonable, but you need to believe before proceeding.



Training and missions

Breathe deep. The next paragraph begins your induction into the sparrow underground.

You'll spend your time alternating between two phases of play. The first is *training*, and the second is *missions*. Training occurs in the margins of your human life. Some days you'll train a lot, and other days very little. Training will vary from idle thought to impulsive action. Everything you do from this point forward will either be training or something that gets in the way of training. There are three activities on which your training will focus: collecting feathers, witnessing quiet beauty, and acting with bravery.

Once you've collected three feathers, it's time to carry out a mission. You might prepare for it meticulously, or you might be struck by the perfect set of circumstances and think: yes, this, now. Missions depend upon all of your training efforts, and hopefully bring you one step closer to completing your wings. Missions are terrifying and powerful.

Collecting feathers

The first and simplest of the training activities is collecting feathers. When you see a feather on the ground, pause to appraise it. Imagine that feather being one of many that someday helps you fly. Assess whether you believe it to be strong and beautiful. If it seems right, pick up the feather and slip it into your little bag. You can carry up to three feathers at any time. If you already have three, you can exchange one for the new feather.

The reason you need to collect feathers is because your body has been tricked out of producing them. This is the result of human sorcery. You need to scrounge for feathers until you can convince your body to start making its own again.

Appraise feathers wherever you find them. Sometimes, you will begin to appraise a feather and then notice a great many more scattered about. It'll become clear that a bird died here, or was attacked here. This is a tragedy, and it is best to mourn the suffering of your comrade with a *feather vigil*. Take no feathers from this place. Instead, draw one from your little bag. Hold your feather in front of you, so that it might bear witness to the tragedy. Place it on the ground to mark what you have seen and felt. Leave it there.

When you have three feathers in your bag, it is time for a mission.



Witnessing quiet beauty

The second of your training activities is witnessing quiet beauty. As a sparrow, you are naturally adept at bearing witness and cultivating beauty. But your life as a human has likely stunted those capabilities, and so you will need to re-train them.

Begin by positioning yourself appropriately. If you can walk, walk. If you can ride a bicycle down a quiet street, do so. Put yourself as close to the world as you can. And once you are close to the world, open your eyes and flit them about. Look for alleyways and crooked trees and narrow ledges that have been treated as unremarkable by others. Look for decrepit barns and rusty fences that have been forgotten by time.

When you find quiet beauty, bear witness to it. In each case, you will need to discover what it means to bear witness. Sometimes you will need only stand there, eyes wide, smiling. Sometimes you will need to take a seat and spend an hour really looking. Sometimes you will need to record the scene in sketch or verse, other times you will need to climb up a fire-escape staircase to stand on a rooftop, wind so strong you start to wince, but it's worth it, because the horizon is wider the higher up you get. Sometimes you will need to stain the beauty with felt or aerosol, for some reason, and you will feel terrified because you aren't used to being a criminal.

Acting with bravery

The third training activity is acting with bravery. In order to regain your wings, you must cultivate a keen bravery. In order to do this, there must be some clarity on what the word means. Bravery is the willingness to act, even and especially when you are terrified. It is action and intent carried out in the name of hope. Bravery is unable to oppress, though it is able to hurt. Bravery always liberates - first oneself, and often others. Bravery will sometimes make you vulnerable to the world, and it will always make you vulnerable to yourself.

Train yourself to act with bravery.

Speak out against injustice. Risk embarrassment. Get a song in your heart and then sing it. Sing poorly and loudly. Accept criticism and thank people for it. Forgive often and without caveat. Refuse to obey rules that cause harm. Knock down walls. Don't treat this list as a set of cute sentiments, but as necessary components to escaping a very real and tangible prison.

Conducting missions

Each round of training culminates in a mission. Once you've accumulated three feathers in your little bag and your heart is ready, it is time to carry one out. A mission is a risky, symbolic endeavor. It requires you to act with bravery to reach a place of quiet beauty. While in that place, you must complete a *feather test*.

Missions are risky.

The risk might be physical (like climbing a towering tree), legal (like sneaking into a building after midnight), emotional (like exposing yourself to ridicule), or something else entirely.

Missions are symbolic endeavors.

Your mission should reflect the training you have undertaken, your aspirations, and the secret sentiments of your heart. Your mission should not feel isolated, but rather as a brilliant expression of something bigger.

Missions involve acting with bravery to reach a place of quiet beauty.

The place should ideally be somewhere that you've never been before. Place typically refers to a physical location, but other interpretations are possible.

Your mission could be breaking into an art gallery to hang your own work. It could be climbing a mountain to sleep under a wide oak tree. It could involve running naked through a field, fairly certain no one will see you.

Once you've reached your place of quiet beauty, it is time for the feather test.

Feather tests

When you are in your place of quiet beauty, you complete your mission with a *feather test*. Take out your little bag, which should currently contain three feathers. The feathers may have become unshapen or bent in the bag; this is of no concern. Take out the first feather, and hold it skyward. Contemplate the particular magic and faults of this feather. Spend at least fifteen seconds contemplating the feather. Ask yourself where on your wingspan it might belong. Hold it there for at least ten seconds, while believing in the power of magic. Breathe deeply, and let go. If your body is ready and the feather is meant for you, it will fuse to your flesh and become a part of you. If not, it will fall on the ground. Either way, repeat the feather test for all three of your feathers.

If all three feathers fall to the ground, don't fret or despair. You have done so well already. You are becoming observant and thoughtful and brave. This transformation will likely take years to complete, and there will be much training and many missions in that time. And even when your body is ready to accept feathers and grow wings, it's difficult to find the right feathers. The ones that fuse properly and permanently. Each time you hold a feather to your arm, believe. Believe against all odds and reason. Some day you will have wings again.

Once you've completed your feather test, take stock. You may retrieve up to one of your feathers, if some have fallen to the ground. Place it back in your little bag, and carry it forward to your next mission. Do this only if you have a good feeling about that one particular feather, despite it not working out this time. Leave any others where they have fallen. Your mission is complete, so depart quickly.

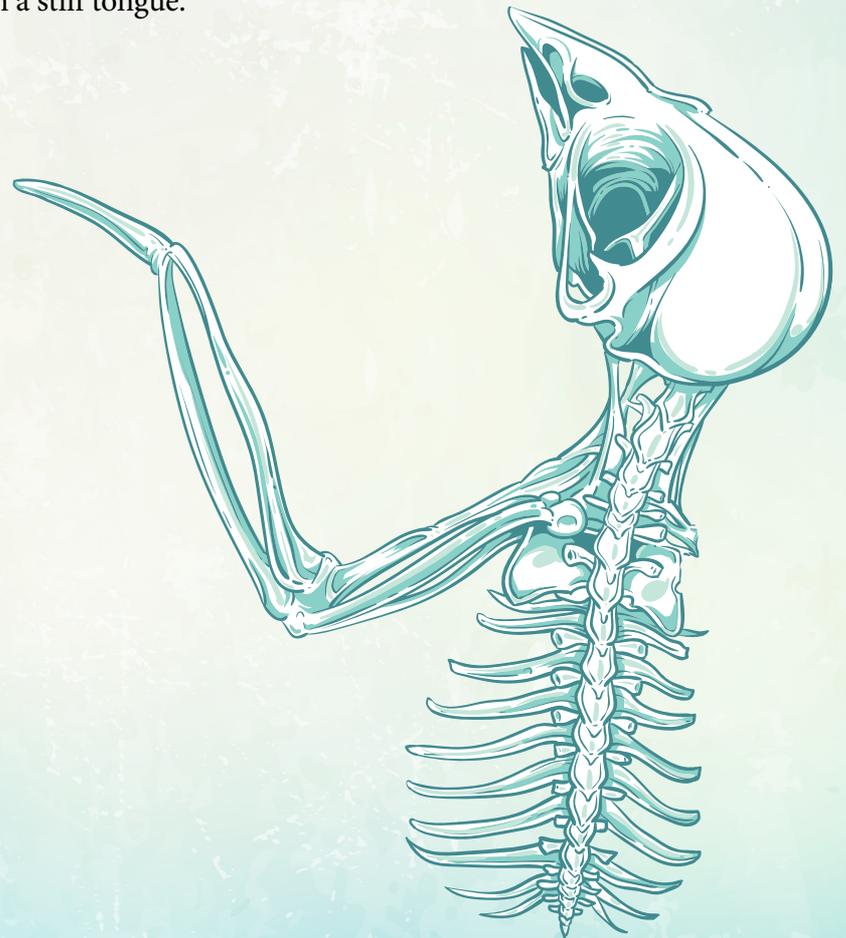
The preglossale defense

Sparrows have an extra bone in their tongue, a skeletal neo-morph known as the preglossale. Wild sparrows might have a different use for it, but you will use yours to keep yourself safe.

Humans crave control. They are terrified of the notion that their dominion might crumble at any moment. They have predator-guardians whose job it is to staunch dissent and ensure obedience. These people don't want you liberated, and they don't want you growing wings. Only a few know about sparrow entrapment, but many more are still a threat to you.

When questioned about your training, when caught in the midst of a mission, remember your preglossale defense. Maintain a stiff tongue.

Picture that bone: inflexible, unyielding.



Forming a host

When you want to form a host with other sparrow, wear your brave sparrow pin. Others in the sparrow underground may see it, and if they do, they might reach out to you. Sparrow are instinctively social birds, and these brief hosts are important for our spirits. However, it is also true that some humans would like to crush our spirits and destroy our underground. Be brave but careful. Be visible without being comprehensible. Form hosts in broad daylight, on busy subway cars, in dark alleyways, but always form them with the right people.

When you see someone with a brave sparrow pin, or someone who otherwise reveals themselves to be a sparrow, it is an opportunity to reach out and connect. Find a question that other sparrow will know how to answer. Are the feathers sticking Do you have time for a host? Humans are sly and insidious, which means that you should remain vigilant about whether you're really talking to a fellow sparrow.

In the wild, hosts have longevity. In occupied space, it is safest to keep your host spontaneous and fleeting. It also allows you to flit between hosts, should you encounter the right people in your travels.

Sometimes you'll encounter someone who seems oblivious to the sparrow underground, but who you sense belongs within it. A sparrow in waiting. A lost soul in a human body. Be careful with these instincts, and take the time to second-guess yourself before proceeding. If you remain sure of their candidacy, arm them with knowledge. The best course of action is to leave a copy of this book for them, secretly and silently. If that isn't possible, the next best course of action is to do whatever it is that you can do.

We never truly know

You might not be a sparrow. It is healthy to let your doubt linger, even as you believe with every ounce of your being, even as your conviction is hardened through action. You might not be destined for sky and wind. There is no shame in proving a theory wrong.

What is important is that you don't quit or give up. Continue believing and attempting, until you either complete your wings or you realize what non-sparrow creature you are. Either way, you will emerge observant and thoughtful and courageous.

I believe in you.

