

Smack-dab. That's how Pete would characterize it at work later that day. How he had presented the news to Marie, when he had sauntered back into the house was: "Bad news. There's a bird in the middle of the porch."

"What do you mean? Is he --?"

Nodding, he led her out, cautiously, to show her. Solemnity was key, he remembered thinking. Later.

"I didn't want you to step on him," he explained.

"Well, I wouldn't have stepped on him. He's not really in the middle."

"Close enough."

Marie surveyed the porch and the bird: "A little to the left, maybe?"

Yes, even faced with a dying bird in the middle, thereabouts, of their porch, they were about to get into the semantics of it all. Pete preferred to think of the metaphor: Standing on their stoop. Just watching it die.

They stepped onto the porch and let the screen door swing shut behind them. Pete approached the finch and nudged it with his boot. Just to make sure that the chest's movement was breathing and not wind. It was. Breathing. Not wind.

Marie protested. "No, don't --"

Pete protested her protest.

"I'm just --" he motioned for her to keep quiet, that he had this under control. He nudged it again, jimmying his bootsole under the finch's breast setting it upright, upon which, it fluttered, sputtered, and fell on its side again, legs akimbo. If a bird's legs can be akimbo.

"Ohhh. What should we do?" Marie asked.

"Hmmm." Pete tried to think deeper than that, but nothing was coming. "Hm-mm-mm-mm." There, that was deeper. Or at least longer, more contemplative.

"What should we do?" Marie asked again.

"I don't think we should get a shovel," he said.

"What?"

"A shovel. I thought about it, and I don't think we should. To put him out of his misery. I mean, what if that's not what he needs?"

"Right. Yeah. No."

"Yeah, and I couldn't. I couldn't do that anyway."

So, after a few more Hmmmms, Pete suggested a shoebox, recalling hazily some memory from childhood in which he and his brother had resuscitated a bird with a broken wing that they found in the backyard by putting him in a box lined with a towel -- one their mother had approved, merely saying "Don't take one of the good ones" -- and putting the box in the garage for safe-keeping. And when his father came home, how all four had gone out to the garage to check in on the bird, who by then was chirping

Smack-dab

and eager, and happy, and, in his memory, thankful. And how they had all climbed the steps of the old deck – the one that they had replaced a few summers earlier, together, as a family, each with a hammer, side by side, and, oh, there was lemonade, and father winked at mother as Pete and his brother pounded in the final nails – and once at the top of the stairs, how they had released the bird back into the wild, with a real sense of accomplishment.

“But what if it recovers?” Marie asked.

“Then it’s safe in a box in the garage,” Pete said.

“But then it can’t get out. Wouldn’t we just be trapping it, smothering it?”

Pete’s mind drifted back to the metaphor, but he hadn’t the heart, or was it the where-withal, to bring it up.

“Well, we should leave it be. And if it recovers, it can fly away.”

“And if not?”

“It’ll die, like it would anyway.”

“But I don’t want a creature to get him,” Marie said.

“I think it’s either a shoebox or we leave him.”

“I don’t think a shoebox is a good idea.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine on the porch – no worse off,” Pete said.

Silence and agreeable nods. And then, off to catch the bus. With heavy headshakes and deeper breaths than normal. In case someone was watching. Had seen. But they had done what they could. They had discussed it. They had reasoned. They had concluded. A solid decision had been reached.

Marie spent her lunch break on the Internet, researching. Pete had spent it relaying how the damn thing was smack-dab in the middle of the porch, and how it had been horrible to be so helpless. To the bird, he said. To Marie, he thought.

“Turns out,” she said, when they met at the train station to head home, “shoebox was the way to go. But only for three or four hours. And then you’re supposed to check on them.”

“Ah.”

“But we were gone the whole day, so, we don’t really know, in this case, if that was the way to go. We couldn’t check in after four hours.”

“Exactly,” Pete assured her. “I wonder if he’s still there,” he said.

“I hope not.”

Why Pete did not stop himself from saying, “Well if he isn’t then we won’t really know if that means he recovered or if a creature got him,” he didn’t know. But he didn’t. Stop himself. From saying that.

As they rounded the corner onto their street, Pete asked Marie if she wanted him to walk ahead, and see if the bird was still there.

“Could you?” she said, relieved.

He scurried a few paces ahead, stopped at the curbscut, stood on his tiptoes, and craned his neck. And then lowered himself and turned back to her. He nodded. Remembering the solemnity.

She slumped. Shuffled up to him. And then they walked up the drive, and to the steps of the stoop, each surveying the lifeless body, in the exact same place and position as they had left it. Still fully intact, still with no blood anywhere. But now, pristine and still.

Unlocking the door, Marie turned to Pete. “Would you –” Thinking she had said what she needed to say, she let the almost-question hang in the air.

Pete beckoned a further query with a blank stare.

“—be the one—”

“to – ?”

“Yes.”

“To?” Pete lengthened the ‘o’ to draw the final portion of the query from her.

“Take care of it?”

“Of course.”

Pete went into the kitchen, grabbed a plastic bag from the recycling, and then another for safe measure. He stuffed one inside the other, grabbed the handles and shook them to inflate. The billowing reminded him of playing “mushroom/jellyfish” with the parachute in third-grade gym, or folding sheets with Marie in their first apartment on Halsted.

As he shuffled past her, slumped at the dining room table, they each imagined how exactly it had died. With its eyes open, beak agape. And there they were. Smack-dab in the middle of it all.