

Red Icicles

by Jason Sturner

A rare ice storm hit East Tennessee this morning, shutting down schools and causing car wrecks. It was strikingly beautiful though: a landscape of silver coated trees against a slate gray sky in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Countless icicles hung from telephone wires and the eaves of houses and shacks. Many folks were out taking photos.

But the storm wasn't much of an inconvenience for me. I'm a writer, I work at home. And in that respect the morning was just like any other. That is, until around 9:30.

I was bunkered down in my writing room at the time, the location of all my books, movie posters and monster toys – action figures, I mean – working on a short story at my laptop desk. I was putting down a scene when a series of small bangs arose from the kitchen area of my prefab house.

“What the heck is *that*?” I said, glancing at the Wolf Man.

I walked out into the living room, all robe and threadbare socks, mug of cold coffee in hand, forehead furrowed beneath an uncombed head of hair. I made a right turn at the dining area – a spacious extension of the kitchen – and faced the sliding doors of the back patio. There, a bright red cardinal was flying against the glass.

“Dude,” I said. “What are you *doing*?”

The cardinal dropped onto a patch of snow, limp and exhausted.

“Don’t kill yourself, bird brain,” I said to it through the glass.

I wasn’t too concerned though, as birds, especially cardinals, had a habit of starting fights with their own reflections. A territorial thing. And they never seemed to truly injure themselves in the process.

I looked at the clock and groaned; it was too early for a beer. So I shuffled back to the writing room and took a moment to admire my favorite zombie action figure. That’s when a series of louder bangs began.

“Here we go again,” I said to the zombie. “Bird braaaains,” I imagined the zombie saying back.

This time, about a dozen birds were whacking themselves against the patio doors. Pop, went a sparrow. *Pop*, a wren. *Pop pop*, a pair of titmice.

“What the hell?”

I looked slightly to my left. Frankenwhiskers, my tiger striped cat, was staring at the lower cabinet where I kept his food.

“Don’t you *see* this, Frank?”

That’s when I noticed the birdfeeder I’d hung off the eave of the roof: it was completely iced over, the tasty morsels trapped inside. “Is that what you’re all so creased about? Can’t get to the birdseed? Well that’s a dumb reason to bang your skulls against my window!”

Frankenwhiskers walked up to me and began figure 8-ing between my legs. If I didn’t feed him soon he’d open the cabinet with his paw and start biting the cat food bag. That’s when it occurred to me: the birds wanted inside the house, they wanted the birdseed in the plastic green bin near the patio doors. No doubt they’d seen me open it each time I refilled the feeder.

“Okay, you can calm down now!” I said to the birds. “Jesus.”

Two mockingbirds flew up and hopped along the doors, chattering to one another and peering into the house. I went to get my coat and boots. That’s when the phone rang: my lovely fiancée calling from Chicago where she was attending a conference.

“How’s the writing going?” she asked. I may have lied when I assured her it was going “super superbly.” She hadn’t laughed at that.

What did make her laugh, however, was my “story” about the birds. “It’s true!” I said. “Here, listen.” I put the phone next to the patio doors but all was silent. The birds had gone.

“Ah hell. You bastards.”

“Okay, well, see you in a couple of days then,” she said. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

After turning off the phone I fed Frankenwhiskers, got distracted by another phone call, and then went back to my writing. Somehow I forgot all about the birdfeeder.

For the next couple of hours I was pretty much unaware of anything else but my story, although I did hear pitter-patter on the roof and the cracking of ice now and then.

At ten seconds to noon I was back in the kitchen eating a sandwich, patiently waiting to take a swig of beer. Suddenly, a windowpane shattered and a long stream of birds came rushing into the house. There were dozens of them – and they all had sharp icicles in their beaks.

Frankenwhiskers meowed “Crap!” and ran behind the couch. Pussy.

“Whoa, wait a minute. Waaait a minute!” I announced to the Hitchcockian gathering, my hands up, my back pressed against the refrigerator. A crow flew atop the birdseed bin and began to tap the lid aggressively with its icicle. “Okay, okay – you’re hungry. I get it. No problemo!”

I inched my way towards the bin, eying each bird cautiously. Some were perched on chairs and cabinets, others stood directly on the counter, their icicles pointed forward. A turkey – seriously, a *turkey*? – poked its head through the broken glass holding a large, double-spiked icicle of its own. The two mockingbirds from before zipped past me and landed on the floor by the couch.

As I reached for the bin the crow flew to the side and landed atop the kitchen table. It raised its body at me and gave me the cold eye, then “sharpened” its icicle on the edge of the table and pooped.

A second later, Frankenwhiskers yelped in pain and bolted out from behind the couch with two icicles stuck in his back. I nearly screamed and made a move to help him, but the birds were staring at me, their heads tilted. Silence followed. No sound but the *drip-drip* of a few icicles. So I held my breath, slowly lifted the lid off the bin and looked inside. I was all out of birdseed.

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