

The Gift Of The Starlings

a short story by JAMES CHARBONNEAU



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In the year 1944, in a Polish village fifty-five miles west of Krakow, the door to the house of Frederick Sokolowski, the village blacksmith, opens, and out slips the blacksmith's son. Jerzey is the boy's name. He is tall and slight, with a tuft of black hair falling over his forehead, and his hands, when examined closely, seem to be those of a man and not of an eight-year-old boy. Jerzey quickly and quietly latches the door to the distant shouts of his mother, demanding to know exactly

where he thinks he is going.

He is going to the one place his mother has always forbidden him to go: the railroad tracks. But so as not to lie, for lying is a mortal sin, he whispers, "Going to the tracks, Mama," before scurrying off. This way, later, when someone tells his mother of having seen him near the tracks, and his mother is yelling that he knows full well the tracks are forbidden to him, he can honestly say to her, "But Mama, I told you where I was going, I swear."

She will make him swear again, but this time on the souls of his grandparents, and he will. She will watch his eyes, his nose, his lips, trying to see the lie cross his face, but it will never appear, because, at least in his own mind — and to his mother's consternation — he will be telling the truth.

Jerzey's mother's name is Ezmerelda. She is small and stout and likes her occasional nip off the jug. She is known far beyond the village for her seamstress work and well within the village for her booming voice. She is also known for putting up with her husband, the blacksmith, who drinks late into the night and sleeps in the barn until late in the morning.

As for the railroad tracks and her errant son, Ezmerelda isn't worried about Jerzey being stopped by the German soldiers. She knows that, because of their need for a blacksmith's forge, the soldiers don't harass Jerzey. She also isn't worried about Jerzey being hit by a train. He is too smart for that. But trains always travel away, and watching a train go off into the distance does nothing for the boy but make him wonder what is around the next bend, or over the next hill, and then the one after that, and the one after that. Before you know it, the boy's mind is out of the village, maybe even out of the country, and the idea of high adventure in foreign places starts a fire that can't be put out.

Ezmerelda senses wanderlust in the boy, and she isn't going to have it. Just because she can never bring herself to tell the lying little whirlwind of trouble how much she needs him to stay and how important he is to the family, doesn't mean she can't use all the powers at her command to keep him in the place where he belongs. Which is why

when he asks about the German soldiers, and about the Jews of the town, and the Gypsies of the woods, and Laslo with the limp leg and slow speech, and Zephyr with the lilting tongue, and about anyone else the soldiers happen to pick, there is only one answer: They needed to be somewhere else, and that is none of his business, and he does not always need to be asking why, why, why and where, where, where. And so what if

he sees the words painted on the shops of the missing? Don't practical jokes happen all the time, and don't boys his own age, and sometimes older, find cans of paint and work mischief late at night? And so what if he sometimes hears the screams in the night? Don't husbands and wives have fights, and don't people, even adults, have nightmares? And so what if he even sees the soldiers taking some of the people away? Don't the soldiers have the right to do such things, and who are we to question what they are doing and why they are doing it? They would know more about what people have been up to than we do. And they would know what to do about it more than we ever will. So you stay out of it, she tells Jerzey. All we need to know, all we ever need to know, is that this is our village, and it is a good place to live and stay and grow old, and you must never forget that.

Then she asks him, "Would you jump in front of a moving train just because everyone else did?" Jerzey always shakes his head. And Ezmerelda always tousles his hair to the point of making Jerzey wince, and she tells him, "That is my boy. That is my boy."

At the first sight of Jerzey, the German soldiers standing guard at the outpost on the edge of the village yank their rifles to their shoulders, shouting at each other and at him, but then, recognizing him as the blacksmith's boy, they slouch back into their boredom, one raising his hand in a half wave. Another, Heinrich — who, when Jerzey asked him how many he had killed in combat, answered, *Not enough* — does not lower his rifle. He points it at Jerzey, sighs, and pretends to pull the trigger, the gun jumping in his hand.

Jerzey clutches his heart and spins before falling to the road, sending a plume of dust skyward. He kicks his feet once, twice, three times before going completely still. The soldiers laugh, and Jerzey leaps up and bows, bringing an even louder uproar from the men. He keeps bowing while walking backward until he finally turns and, taking long, exaggerated marching steps, cuts onto the path that leads to the tracks.

At the same time Jerzey Sokolowski is heading to the railroad tracks, Mila Mantz wakes up to find herself already standing. She is in a railway car packed with other Jews, on her way to a death camp. She holds her dying baby in her arms. And the reason she is standing, the very logical reason, is that she is the twenty-first cigarette in the pack of twenty. There is no room to move, no air to breathe, and, if death comes, no room to fall.

Days have passed, and some have died. Some have shit and vomited and bled, and although those nearest the shitters and vomiters and bleeders have suffered the worst from the physical proximity, all those in the car, as if they were all connected with the same thread, know what all the others in the car think and feel. Never in her life has Mila felt closer to a group of people, and never in her life has she wished death upon so many at once.

The reason for her wishing them all dead is something she is also awakening to: they want her baby.



Mila remembers how her baby was crying and how people throughout the car had shouted at her to shut it up. Mila could not grasp the problem, as there were others in the car, grown men and women, making worse sounds of illness and death than her little son would ever be capable of making. But people's patience was at an end. Maybe it was just the sound of a baby, a sound particular unto itself, that made people think too much about beginnings and much too much about endings.

Then her little Jozef stopped crying. In that moment's respite, someone said, The baby is dead. Mila said, No, my baby is alive and breathing. Someone else, a milky-eyed old man squeezed in right next to her, said, She is lying, the child is dead. Someone in the back of the car said he had freed two loose boards from a vent. If they passed the dead baby over, he could put it out. Then, the man said, maybe he could get more boards free and throw out the rest of the dead. To the man with the milky eye Mila insisted, My baby is alive. Mila grasped her child with all her might, and the crowd that Mila knew herself to be so much a part of surged into her from all sides, and it all went blacker than it already was. This is when she dreamed of a field and a cow and a hammock and a day filled with sunshine.

So, Mila thinks, I was not asleep, and yet I had a dream. I have discovered something new.

Much to Mila's surprise, a woman on her other side elbows her in the head. Mila reaches up to touch the bump forming on her forehead and realizes her hands are free. Her baby is gone. She twists and turns, looking for her baby, but there is no room to move. She catches a glimpse of hands raised high in the air and a wisp of the ragged blue blanket that dangles from her son's body as he is carried toward the light in the back of the car. Then the light is blocked. Then the light streams in again.

The wail that comes from Mila Mantz reaches deep into everyone's bowels; even the sick and dying go silent for a time. As Mila calls out her son's name and weeps madly, some in the car wish her dead as well, while others wish they had let her keep her dead baby, regardless of the stench that would have come.

Jerzey watches a bird land on a branch and sing, seemingly just for him. He bends down and picks up a handful of dirt from the side of the tracks. It is cool and gritty against his palm. He has an urge to throw it into the sky, but he squeezes it instead. He digs some more, reaching ever darker and richer soil. As he digs, his palms grow brown, and the backs of his hands and fingers become more and more like the earth.

Jerzey looks up to see the shadow of a cloud racing up the tracks. He wishes he could bring his mama to the tracks and have her dig in the dirt and tell her to listen when the train approaches — as it does now — and he wishes she could close her eyes as the shadow runs across her face. Just as the train is going by, the sun would come out and warm her face, and she would feel so good — like he does now — that she would throw her arms out from her sides — just like him — and take

in the air and the sun and the rushing of the train, and the dirt would blow free of her hands in an ever-expanding swirl, and that is when the baby hits Jerzey square in the chest. He is knocked backward so hard, and the air leaves him so violently, that Jerzey thinks he has been killed. He instinctively closes his arms around the flying infant, and, even though he doesn't know he's doing it, he folds his body, acting as a cushion as he rolls backward, landing in the bushes with a breaking of branches that sends birds flying and a mouse skittering.

Jerzey lies flat and looks up at the sky. He thinks maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to bring Mama down here after all.

The infant on his chest begins to cry. Jerzey jolts upright. Out of breath, he watches, fascinated, as the baby turns from a bluish hue to yellow and finally to a flesh tone that matches the skin of his own arms. He brings the baby to his face. The breath from the baby, so soft and tender he thinks he can see its passage, enters his mouth, and he breathes it in.

The cloud continues down the tracks, the birds sing again, and Jerzey breathes out. Thinking that he has been both killed and saved in the course of the last minute, he comes to the conclusion that the flying baby from heaven must be something very special indeed.

Mila cries until her body has run dry and her tear ducts ache from opening and closing with no moisture to ease them. The death of her boy leaves her with nothing but questions, which the train seems to answer with its lurches and rattles, somehow knowing enough to carry her forward, a simple act that she can no longer do on her own.

Later, when the sound of the train finally enters Mila's ears once again, when she allows herself the sense of motion in a world that has stopped, she feels a despair so black and wide it's as if she were a hole that swallowed up everyone around her, the train, the tracks, all the way to where she thinks her poor baby must be.

Then the feeling shifts to a not-so-unpleasant unconsciousness that borders on that rare, blissful moment between dream and day that one can capture only with the waking from sleep and the coming of the dawn. Mila can't decide which is the better place to be: the place she figures she should be, with the guilt and the pain; or the place she longs to be, with memories twisting away as quickly as they form. So she stops trying to decide. In an airless train car rolling forward and rocking from side to side, packed with people who have no say in the matter, it somehow seems to make sense never to have to decide anything, ever again.

Jerzey slowly turns in a circle, looking at the baby in his arms. Then, with a quick stop, he tells the baby, "You are my new brother," and christens him Carl. Three years ago a traveling circus stopped in their village, and the main acrobat, the trapeze-and-tightrope man, was named Carl. What better name for a flying baby?

"And now I take you, my new brother Carl, to meet our mother," Jerzey says, but he doesn't move an inch up the path.

“Maybe it is the worst thing I could do. Maybe she is the last person I should tell about you. But these are the times to make great decisions, and I have just made one.” Jerzey smiles at Carl, and Carl smiles back. “Besides, Mama will know what you want to eat.”

With that, Jerzey begins his walk home. But he stops after three steps, pivots, and takes his first step off the path directly into the woods. He knows he has to avoid Heinrich and the others, even though it is the long way home.

Mila and the other prisoners are unloaded from the train car and led into a courtyard. As they wait in a seemingly endless line of people, one guard calls out to another, “The lines for the showers are moving too slowly. Have them undress before they enter the building.” The prisoners are ordered to strip off their clothes right where they stand, in front of the guards and each other. Mila hesitates. She looks out across the compound and sees several brick buildings with tall chimneys. The chimneys push out smoke, and Mila can smell the awful stench. Then a guard pricks her with the tip of his bayonet.

As blood trails from her breast and Mila is throwing the last of her clothes into a pile at her feet, a flock of birds saves her life. This flock of maybe a thousand starlings loses that ability that God gave them, that mingling that allows them to swoop and dive and bank all as one, a strange living unison that creates the illusion of a massive being made up of a thousand moving parts, changing its shape at will and cutting its way across the sky. The flock zigs when it should zag, and the center of this churning cloud flies into the mouth of a smoking chimney. The other starlings skirt the sides of the chimney, and the massive being is split in two. Mila watches as the remaining birds, coming dangerously close to the ground, veer off in opposite directions just in time to save themselves.

Clogged almost to the brim with small dead and dying bodies, the chimney leaks smoke from its base and all its cracks and then from the doors and windows of the building. Soldiers and men in white coats and people from other trains spill out of the building as well. The soldiers and the men in white coats bustle around the building, trying to stem the flood of smoke, but it is no use. This chimney won't be operational for the rest of the day.

Five hours later Mila finds herself alive and in a barracks with many other women from her train.

Mila considers the birds a gift from God. After mulling over the idea that, because of the loss of her son, she deserves such a gift, she realizes it also comes with a penalty: she will not leave this life soon enough. Because of this, she isn't sure it is a gift at all. But she finally decides that if God made a flock of birds clog up a chimney and sacrificed all those living things just to let her live, there must be something big in her future that she cannot yet see or understand.

God's plans not being her own, she thinks long and hard about how to accept this gift. Finally she comes to the conclusion that the time on the train when she had decided not to decide — although it was good while it lasted and served its

purpose — is now done. Now she will make a decision. Now she will choose a path that honors the death of so many small things.

Mila sits up in the crowded barracks, making the woman on her left moan and the woman on her right cry out, and she proclaims that she, Mila Mantz, will do everything she has to do to survive. She will honor the gift of the starlings, she says, and she will live to find the bones of her son and bring him to the resting place of her village.

A woman across the barracks tells her she admires her very much and that is wonderful, but would she mind shutting the fuck up; there are people dying here.

Not me, says Mila, and she goes back to her spot between the moaner and the crier and doesn't even try to go to sleep, doesn't even close her eyes.

(end of excerpt)