

YELLOW RIBBON

One Year in the Life of A House Sparrow

by

Jim Conrad

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JANUARY (THE SNOW)

On a cold Monday morning in early January, in a town perhaps not unlike your own, seven House Sparrows sail around the corner of a house. Having spent a bone-chilling night napping fitfully inside the inky shadows of a thicket of wall-clinging ivy, our birds fly through raw, frigid air almost suffocating with a certain creepy, anxious, piercing wetness. Moreover, it looks as if things can only worsen, for the sky ominously grows darker, not lighter.

Rounding the house's corner like a flurry of wind-blown leaves, our little squadron of sparrows streaks across an open area, then takes up position among the lower branches of a holly hedge at the open area's perimeter. The arrival of our birds hardly goes unnoticed. An up-tight Blue Jay in a nearby oak tree, worrying about incoming hawks, first flashes its wings hysterically, then, seeing that it's only sparrows, indignantly raises its crest, calls sharply, and preens its wing feathers in disgust. A high-strung squirrel in the open area, at first thinking the stir might be the neighborhood dog making one of his occasional raids, in a panic rushes to its "safe place" on a maple-tree's trunk, then hangs anxiously flicking its tail above it. Once everyone has calmed down a bit, they all return to their routines.

Among the holly hedge's lower branches, each of our birds finds a perch where it can see the whole open area. They've often seen the view before, for this open backyard is famous among local birds and squirrels for always offering food. The people living here, the Alexanders, enjoy watching from the windows as local wildlife visits their feeders and birdbath.

One feeder in the Alexanders' backyard, the one that's just a flat tray nailed atop a pole, offers table scraps. This morning a gray, long-tailed Mockingbird perches there pecking at a stale hamburger bun. The second feeder is a store-bought one shaped like a miniature barn. Through its two, clear-plastic windows you see the birdseed inside it. Right now three goldfinches are perched there. They pick out their favorite seeds, then knock the rest onto the ground below. Down below, a squirrel, a Cardinal, and four Dark-eyed Juncos are more than happy to receive the goldfinches' rejected shower of seeds.

Like the juncos, House Sparrows like eating on the ground much more than up in trees. Therefore, as our seven heroes watch from their perches among the holly hedge's lower branches, it's the seed-flecked ground below this second feeder that attracts them.

However, for the moment they do not fly there. They just perch there waiting, anxiously watching, watching, watching...

Right now, inside each of our sparrows there is a kind of debate going on. One side of the argument says, "We're too hungry to just sit here doing nothing! Beneath that feeder, the squirrel, the cardinal and some juncos eat the seeds we need to eat. Therefore, let's rush into the open area right now and gorge ourselves."

But the debate's other side says, "In the same way that right now we hide in the shadows of this holly hedge's lower branches, so can the cat hide. In the open space we'll be too vulnerable to sneak attack. For the moment we must wait and watch, wait and watch, making sure the cat isn't lurking nearby."

Slowly the fear diminishes and the hunger increases to the point that one House Sparrow -- her name is Yellow Ribbon -- can wait no longer. Without a peep she glides onto the ground beneath the second feeder and begins pecking millet seed. Quickly she is joined by Cat Chaser, Old Bird, and the others of her flock.

Almost as soon as our birds alight, snowflakes begin gently descending through the calm morning air, looking like enormous, widely spaced, brilliantly white and fluffy goose feathers. The sparrows simply ignore them, though sometimes a big flake shatters atop a bird's head, showering eyes and beaks with icy cascades of shattered crystals.

But the morning air doesn't stay calm for long. Much sooner than any of our birds would wish, the wind picks up and the snowflakes grow smaller and more numerous. For a while it seems that we'll have just a regular snow, so the sparrows and the squirrel and all the other birds just keep on eating.

However, now the wind grows into a gale, and the snowfall becomes a white deluge of stinging, icy pellets showering onto the ground. Seeds on the ground are being covered up as the ground turns white. The wind roars through the trees, moving whole branches as if invisible hands shook them. The million million falling ice pellets make a hissing sound as they streak through the air, then bounce off the ground. Among the humans in the surrounding town, excited announcers on TV report that the airport is canceling flights, schools are sending home kids who just got there, and all across town police-car and ambulance sirens scream and blue and red emergency lights flash.

However, the creatures at the Alexanders' feeding stations keep on eating, even as snow makes finding the food harder and harder.

So busy, so busy, so busy is every creature in the feeding station today. Scratch and peck, scratch and peck... knock away snow and scratch and peck some more...

The squirrel is the first to surrender. It climbs up the maple's trunk and slinks back toward its cozy den-tree. However, most of the birds stay, scratching and pecking, scratching and pecking...

Kilikiliki... !

No one has time to make the emergency *quer-quer* call. Cat Chaser cries a loud cheep! but it's too late to warn anyone. This isn't the first time the Kestrel with its curved-back wings, hooked beak and razor-sharp talons has ventured into the feeding station. Once, it flew away with a junco dangling from its talons...

However, today, like most other days, the Kestrel has captured no one. Once again it will have to take its meal someplace else.

For long minutes after the attack, around the feeders and birdbath, as snow falls and falls, and wind roars through the trees, not a single bird of any kind moves or makes a cheep. Inside the holly hedge our sparrows perch like statues carved of brown and gray wood, just letting the icy wind stream around them, and the snow pellets shower and bounce among the holly's glossy, evergreen leaves.

Eventually Cat Chaser chirp-calls from his bush's lower branches. Then a relieved-sounding chirp-call replies from nearby, and Yellow Ribbon nervously flits to perch beside Cat Chaser. From across the feeding area come sailing Missing Toe and Old Bird. One by one, from other well protected spots, all the other House Sparrows emerge. Soon most are chirp-calling, preening their feathers, and rubbing their beaks on the holly bush's stems. What else can they do? No one dares return to the open ground.

However, after ten minutes the sparrows do return to the ground, and so do most of the other birds. In the end, hunger almost always wins over fear.

That night our seven House Sparrows roost deep inside the ivy clinging to the south wall of Whitestone Hall at the local college. The snowstorm has moved through the area leaving behind a city whose streets are clogged with snow and a night sky that is crystal-clear, filled with twinkling stars, and so cold that just breathing the air almost hurts.

And deep inside the ivy, and inside each of our seven sparrows, there glows a seed-fed warmth that is nothing less than a gift from a certain family who makes a hobby of feeding the local wildlife.

FEBRUARY (FIRST FLIRTATIONS)

Whitestone Hall's ivy-covered walls make a good roosting spot. For over thirty years generation after generation of House Sparrow have spent their nights and quiet times roosting here. In fact, in their own way, Whitestone Hall's House Sparrows are as much a part of the college's campus as are the trees, the sidewalks, the buildings, and the big statue in front of the Student Union Building.

One reason the birds have survived for so long is that few people even know that they're there. Of course, sometimes from deep within the ivy's shadows a slumbering bird loses its balance and frantically beats its wings regaining its perch, and sometimes for one reason or another a sleepy bird might peep. In fact, a real House Sparrow concert takes place most dusks, when our birds chirp and flit from ivy-branch to ivy-branch, trying to make up their minds where they want to be. But, these modest disruptions are seldom noticed by anyone. On this campus, students and teachers live in one world, and birds live in a very different one.

Our heroin in this story, the House Sparrow called Yellow Ribbon, joined the Whitestone Hall flock when she was two months old, in September of last year. Now half a year later - - a long time in the life of a bird who normally expects to live for only two or three years -- Yellow Ribbon feels no attachment at all to her mother and father, or to the nest in which she was reared. Now she considers the ivy roost her home and she thinks of herself as a member of Whitestone Hall's flock of seven.

During most of Yellow Ribbon's life -- which began only last July -- she has known a world that only became more hostile, as summer's long, warm days gradually yielded to winter's cold, short ones. Now, in mid winter, this profound trend is reversing. Twice during this frigid month of February several days have come along with unexpectedly warm, sunny afternoons. And those warm, sunny afternoons left in Yellow Ribbon a mellow feeling which a human might call "spring fever."

Now, House Sparrows have daily routines, and one of the Whitestone Hall flock's most treasured routines is that of making a mid-day roost in a particular hackberry tree beside Chesterfield Avenue. Here, each mid-day when the weather is good, Yellow Ribbon's flock goes to chirp and preen feathers, stretch wings, and take brief snoozes.

Of course, spring fever can cause both humans and birds to do strange things. On the particular sunny, blissfully warm, spring-fever day in mid-February we're talking about here, a strange, itchy feeling inside our bird makes her do something extraordinary: As the rest of the flock wings toward the mid-day hackberry-tree roost, Yellow Ribbon breaks away and flies in the opposite direction!

Yes, today Yellow Ribbon simply feels like a change. Not a big change, mind you: Just something different. Our adventurous-feeling but cautious young bird lands in the first

open space that passes beneath her, actually not far from the ivy roost, but, still, a place she's never been before.

For twenty minutes she hops there, pecking tiny seed from a wet mat of tangled, straw-colored crabgrass. Becoming bored with that, she flies a little farther from the roost, across a parking lot, to where she perches on a telephone wire. Here she has a clear view of cars and buses passing below on West End Avenue.

Well, it has simply never occurred to our bird that one could perch on a wire and watch traffic in a street below, and this proves to be something wonderful to do. The traffic makes Yellow Ribbon a little nervous, but also she finds it exciting. The endless comings and goings almost hypnotize her...

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

Above West End Avenue's street-noise a simple, clear song wafts through the moist air, charmed with dazzling sunlight.

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

These lovely notes flow through the air like glistening bubbles in clear water. Never have Yellow Ribbon's ears heard any sound so sweet and bewitching.

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

Seeking out the source of this magical sound, our bird flutters to atop a sign over the entrance to the University Bar and Grill. The red, white, and blue sign reads "Pepsi," and a soft breeze rocks it gently on squeaking rusty hinges.

Chirup chireep chirup, chirup chireep...

The delightful melody issues from a male House Sparrow whom Yellow Ribbon has never seen. He sings from atop an air conditioner jutting from a third-story window above the sign.

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

Yellow Ribbon surprises herself by brazenly lifting herself to the air conditioner, landing opposite the male, and just standing there and looking at him. She looks. For long seconds she looks, and the male just sings, though he surely sees her standing there.

How black is this male's bib, his bill, and the mask upon his face! How dazzlingly white are the stripes upon his wings! Never has anything so stirred our bird as does this beautiful male!

Moreover, Yellow Ribbon seems to excite the young male quite as he excites her. He begins singing much more loudly and with much more feeling than before. His chant quickens and soars to a shrill pitch. He quivers his wings and spreads his tail feathers into an open fan. Ah, and how pleasing to look at is this wonderful male's gray rump...

Chirp chirp chirp chirp chirp...

Not knowing what else to do, Yellow Ribbon wipes her bill at the air conditioner's edge. The young male, whose name is Window Percher, is less at a loss for knowing what to do. Suddenly, as if snapping to attention, he further displays his gorgeous, white wing-bars by spreading his wings and drooping them. He emphasizes his seductive black markings and robust masculine size by lifting high his head and puffing out his glorious, black chest.

Despite her confusion of feelings, Yellow Ribbon eventually notices a loose collection of twigs, straw and dried grassblades haphazardly assembled atop the air conditioner, against the wall. The center of this loose creation is occupied by a shallow depression lined with feathers and grassblades.

Actually, this shabby construction is no more than an old House Sparrow nest, one built long before both Yellow Ribbon and Window Percher were born. Nonetheless, at this moment Window Percher seems to consider it his own, and, even more outlandish, he appears to think that Yellow Ribbon should come take a look at it. He conveys these thoughts by hopping back and forth between the nest and the air conditioner's top.

Indeed, longer days and uncommonly warm weather have stirred up hormones in each of our birds, and now for the first time in both of their lives they're experiencing home-making instincts. Window Percher is for the first time feeling the urge to entice a female to come nest with him, and Yellow Ribbon is experiencing for the first time the excitement of courtship. Of course, even though the whole scene has a hormonal basis, it also must be admitted that right now these two House Sparrows atop an old air-conditioner jutting from a brick wall along busy West End Avenue are enjoying themselves immensely!

After several hops into and out of the nest Window Percher works himself into a romantic fervor: He hops so near our bird that it quite unnerves her. Defensively Yellow Ribbon flattens her body against the air conditioner's surface and threateningly stretches her head forward. To prove that she isn't to be fooled with, she gapes wide her mouth, charges Window Percher, and pecks him.

However, her pecks are only half-hearted ones, and Window Percher seems to know it.

For two minutes Window Percher continues hopping into and out of the nest, and attempting to get closer to our bird, but Yellow Ribbon keeps resisting. One would think that a female offering such resistance would simply fly away... but that's not, of course, the way courtship works.

Nonetheless, eventually Yellow Ribbon does fly away, simply leaving Window Percher standing dumbly looking after her. She lands on the telephone wire leading into Wright's Photography Shop. There, with the sun shining warmly onto her back, she pauses to preen her feathers and wipe her bill, trying to calm down, trying to stop trembling from having seen such a beautiful male, and from having been introduced to a nest that, perhaps, could have become her own...

In February, warm days never last for long. When nighttime comes on this day when Yellow Ribbon meets Window Percher, another winter storm blows into town, bringing with it the usual snow, and the coldest temperatures Yellow Ribbon ever has experienced. At dawn the next morning, inside the ivy roost on Whitestone Hall's southern wall, Yellow Ribbon perches with her feathers fluffed out and with her head tucked deep into the soft feathers of her chest, looking like a soft ball of gray and brown fuzz. As the sky flushes with dawn's first milky light, our bird feels numb and groggy. How distant seem yesterday's odors of thawed mud and melting snow, the feeling of warm sunlight upon one's back, and how long ago were Window Percher's sweet chirps.

On this coldest morning of the year a tragedy has befallen Yellow Ribbon's little flock. Weakened by parasitic worms in his gut, Old Bird has died an hour before dawn. The time simply came when his body needed more energy to stay warm and alive, and to feed his worms, than his weakened system could provide.

Now a thin crust of white ice crystals border the lids of Old Bird's half-closed eyes. His stiff body will perch frozen until warm weather thaws his feet and then he will tumble unnoticed onto the ground below the ivy.

One could say that this is an omen: For, the rest of February will bring only overcast and sometimes snowy days, and bitterly cold nights. Memories of the encounter between Yellow Ribbon and Window Percher will fade as all House Sparrows in town bend to the simple but vital task of each day eating enough to fuel the body during the following night's life-threatening coldness.

MARCH (SOFT CHIRP)

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

Spring comes for the first time in Yellow Ribbon's brief life. A certain playfulness in the wind draws itself across winter's icy grime and monotonous browns and grays so that lawns hesitatingly flush slightly green as tender grass-blades emerge from thawing mud. At the corners of houses, bright crocuses blossom in cheerful and simple shades of red, yellow, white, and purple.

Chirup chirup chireep...

By mid March, Yellow Ribbon has experienced several bouts of spring fever. She's visited several chiruping males and inspected their nests, and now she doesn't become so flustered. And what a variety of males and nests she's seen!

For instance, one sunny morning she heard a male chiruping from atop a bird box. Even though she had no interest in such cramped apartment living, Yellow Ribbon entered the birdbox hole claimed by the male, just to see what it was like. Another time, the chiruping male was so old that his black bib wasn't at all glossy, and his fanned-out tail revealed several missing feathers. However, maybe the strangest visit of all was the male found chiruping in the corner of a house's aluminum rain-gutter. When Yellow Ribbon alighted there, the male had hopped into and out of the gutter as if it were a nest he'd built himself, and which he wanted her to accept as home!

Some males had invited her to visit run-down old nests in use for several House Sparrow generations, and others had showed her brand new ones. Some nests were built with covers and others were topless. Lots of nests were half-finished. In fact, always there had been something about the particular male or nest being visited that caused Yellow Ribbon to fly away. Always, that is, until today...

Today Yellow Ribbon leaves the mid-day roost earlier than usual, perhaps more vulnerable to that delicious chiruping call than usual. Flying into a part of town she has never visited, it's not long before the first chirups reach her ears.

It's the call of the young male named Soft Chirp. He chirups from atop a tall concrete column at the elementary school's entrance. Echoing beneath the high ceiling, the call rings extraordinarily clear and sweet in Yellow Ribbon's ears.

The moment Yellow Ribbon lands atop the column's high corners she sees Soft Chirp proudly standing next to his nest. It's a topless nest but, here beneath a ceiling, what use is there for a top? It's a used nest. However, it's built well and it's in good repair, with straws crisp and yellow, and not too dusty.

Chirp chirp chirp chirp chirp...

By now Yellow Ribbon is used to the routine Soft Chirp begins performing. Stiffly at attention, tail up and fanned out, wings quivering and drooped, chest puffed out, hopping in and out of the nest...

But, somehow, this time it's different. It's better. Who can explain when there's chemistry between two individuals meeting for the first time? Almost instantly Yellow Ribbon feels a special bond to this young male.

For several days in a row Yellow Ribbon returns to Soft Chirp and his nest atop the column. For Soft Chirp the sight of his female visitor sends him into a frenzy of romantic strutting, tail raising and fanning, wing quivering, chest puffing, and hopping in and out of the nest. For Yellow Ribbon, it's a more confusing matter.

For, what does it mean when life has always been so simple that all you needed to do was to find enough food to keep alive, stay out of trouble all day long, and have a safe roost in which to spend the nights, but, now, you find yourself suddenly needing more? What's to be made of this new preoccupation with a young male, and the exhilarated, trancelike state you get in when he struts, wing quivers, and all the rest? And why, suddenly, is there this need, which grows daily, to be near the nest, that nest he hops in and out of, the nest that is just yellow straw and feathers, but which beacons you to come, immerse yourself in it, and stay, stay, stay... ?

During a whole week, every day, Yellow Ribbon visits Soft Chirp and his nest. Each visit lasts longer than the previous one, for at the end of every visit Yellow Ribbon finds it harder to leave. Perhaps inevitably, at the end of one visit, our bird's emotional state seethes with such unmanageable confusion and yearning that she finds she can no longer simply fly away at the usual time. Yellow Ribbon spends her first night in the nest, with Soft Chirp perching nearby.

Of course, no romance ever proceeds without at least some disharmony. During the first days of Yellow Ribbon's residence at the new nest, Soft Chirp doesn't seem to get the message that he has a new mate. He continues chirping and chirping, advertising his nest to all passing females, even though Yellow Ribbon is right there beside him, claiming the nest he has tried so hard to get her to claim. Maybe it's Soft Chirp's thinking, if House Sparrows really think, the he just needs to see if Yellow Ribbon likes him and his nest enough to stay, even if competition comes around...

More than once, Yellow Ribbon makes her opinion on the matter clear: Whenever Soft Chirp lures another female to his nest, if the new visitor doesn't flee the instant she sees Yellow Ribbon, who glares at her with lowered head and wide-open beak, our bird explodes from the nest and chases the interloper away! After several such scenes, Soft Chirp ceases chirp-advertising his nest.

Starlings are aggressive, long-beaked black birds about twice the size of House Sparrows. One morning a starling lands atop the column, briskly and confidently walks up to the nest, and -- though Yellow Ribbon rests inside the nest and Soft Chirp perches nearby -- the insolent bird tugs hard on a straw needed for his own nest.

Once our birds realize what's happening, they both attack the thief, stabbing toward him with their beaks and flapping their wings loudly against the concrete floor. The starling shrieks and flies away zigzagging defensively, and without his straw. When Yellow Ribbon and Soft Chirp return from chasing him, the memory of their having defended their nest together brings them closer to one another than ever.

Each day Yellow Ribbon and Soft Chirp mate many times. When Yellow Ribbon feels that the time for mating has come, she crouches before Soft Chirp, draws her head into her shoulders, and quivers her wings, much like a baby sparrow begging for food. While she does this, she utters a high-pitched *teeteeteeteeteeteete...* Then Soft Chirp hops onto her back.

Once they have mated, Soft Chirp hops off and either nonchalantly wipes his bill at the edge of the column top or casually preens his feathers. Sometimes, just moments after mating, Yellow Ribbon wants to do it again, so once more she quivers her wings and draws her head into her shoulders, and once more Soft Chirp hops atop her, and they mate. Sometimes as they mate they touch together their bills, and sometimes Soft Chirp pecks at the feathers on Yellow Ribbon's neck.

One day a remarkable thing happens. Soft Chirp is in the mood to mate but Yellow Ribbon isn't. A little upset because Soft Chirp is pestering her, Yellow Ribbon begins chattering in a nervous manner, which even a human would understand as a complaining sound. However, this uproar only stirs Soft Chirp's blood to the point that he rushes at our bird, pecking hungrily at the base of her tail.

Upset by such pestering Yellow Ribbon sails from atop the column and makes a beeline toward the Japonica bush at the edge of the elementary school's playground. Soft Chirp chases after her. Not unlike human lovers engaged in a spat, both birds chirp loudly at the same time.

Cat Chaser, the second-year male who during the winter roosted with Yellow Ribbon inside Whitestone Hall's ivy-covered wall, has just begun building a nest atop the column opposite Soft Chirp's. As Soft Chirp had once done, now Cat Chaser monotonously *chirup chirup chirreeps* next to his nest, and as he does so, he can't avoid noticing the noisy pair streaking toward the Japonica. Without hesitating, he abandons his calling and streaks off after his neighbors, adding his own loud chirps to theirs.

Broken Toe, a first-year male preening his feathers in a Sugar Maple tree in the middle of the school's playground, hears the three stirred-up sparrows flying by his tree, and he, too,

joins the chase. So do White Feather, Chipped Beak, and Fountain Feeder -- all male House Sparrows busy at House Sparrow jobs when they hear the clamor, and all very happy to participate in the pandemonium.

Within seconds after Yellow Ribbon lands beneath the Japonica the six males chasing her land on the ground around her. As if showing Yellow Ribbon what she ought to do, they droop and quiver their wings, as if they were female House Sparrows wanting to mate; but, also, like aroused male House Sparrows, they hop in front of our bird, fan their tails, puff up their black chests, and stiffly bow; two or three go so far as to peck her. All seven birds chirp so loudly that Mrs. Holt, sitting on her front porch across the street, lays down her newspaper and peers over her bifocals toward the Japonica. What a scandal when House Sparrows are so boisterous that even a human takes notice of them!

After thirty seconds of bedlam, Broken Toe, Chipped Beak, and Fountain Feeder lose interest and fly away. However, the three remaining males continue giving Yellow Ribbon plenty of trouble. While two distract her with their hopping and bowing, the third pecks at her. But soon White Feather and Cat Chaser also lose interest. They fly away leaving Yellow Ribbon alone with Soft Chirp, who still is very excited, and who still wants to mate.

Soft Chirp jumps onto Yellow Ribbon's back to mate but Yellow Ribbon throws him off and hops away. At this point Soft Chirp also gives up and then both birds fly away. Moments later they perch preening their feathers and wiping their bills in a street tree, acting as if nothing has happened.

What was accomplished by all this?

Maybe nothing, or maybe it's just one of nature's ways of getting an unwilling female into the mood to mate. Whatever is behind it, House Sparrows sometimes do it, especially in the spring, so it's one of those things that makes a House Sparrow a House Sparrow.

In the afternoon of this same day, Yellow Ribbon and Soft Chirp fly to behind Aiken Elementary to hop in the grass. At last, spring is coming. Green shoots of grass poke through the gray, winter-killed lawn. In the grass there's plenty to eat, like Chickweed flower-buds and Crabgrass seed. Beside the seesaw Soft Chirp discovers a white, spongy kernel of popcorn dropped last Sunday afternoon by a snacking kid playing with a friend...

Killy killy killy killy killy killy!

It's over as fast as that. As Soft Chirp hops from beneath the seesaw seat tilted onto the grass, not paying enough attention to possible hazards, he has been grabbed with needle-sharp talons by the Kestrel.

As Yellow Ribbon cowers deep inside a Forsythia bush across the street from the playground -- the Forsythia is resplendent with yellow flowers on gracefully arching,

slender limbs -- the Kestrel perches on a crossbeam of the telephone pole at the intersection of Fairfax and Natchez Trace, nonchalantly devouring Soft Chirp.

APRIL (THE FIRST BROOD)

At the nest Yellow Ribbon waits for three days but of course Soft Chirp doesn't return. During these days Yellow Ribbon's confusion is haunted by echoes. They are the echoes of Cat Chaser's nest-call.

Chirup chireep, chirup chireep chirup...

From beside his nest atop one of Aiken Elementary's entrance columns, across from the nest in which our bird awaits Soft Chirp, Cat Chaser calls and calls. Several females have dropped by to inspect his nest but none has stayed. Maybe it's surprising that so far everyone has rejected Cat Chaser and his nest, for the nest seems to be a good one, and, at least to Yellow Ribbon, Cat Chaser himself is desirable...

On the morning of the fourth day of Soft Chirp's absence, Yellow Ribbon flies to be with Cat Chaser.

Upon landing atop the column, Yellow Ribbon watches Cat Chaser predictably stand stiffly erect, puff out his black chest, fan his tail, and hop in and out of his nest. Our bird flies away, but then she soon returns, and the whole ceremony is repeated. This happens again and again, and finally they mate. By the end of Yellow Ribbon's second day with Cat Chaser she feels completely bonded to this new male and his nest.

The next special event in Yellow Ribbon's life comes on an April morning when occasional brilliant sunlight floods from the sky onto streets, houses and lawns, but then the next moment a brief April shower drenches everything with soft rain. Patches of pale blue sky alternate with scattered, milky, dark-bottomed clouds, and warm breezes carry the mingled odors of green grass and blossoming bush-honeysuckle. On such a day Yellow Ribbon enters Cat Chaser's nest and lays a single egg.

The egg is glossy, drably colored, irregularly blotched, and spotted with shades of brown and purple. It's smaller around than the diameter of a dime. As soon as the egg plops into the depression beneath Yellow Ribbon she raises herself, pushes her body back so that her tail sticks straight up, and for a long time stares at the egg. Our bird had not known that such a thing might come from her!

The next morning she lays another egg. And the next morning there is another. After the third egg she begins staying on the nest full-time, day and night. On the fourth day she lays her fourth and final egg. Now her nest is complete. Now she will sit and wait and wait and wait, incubating the eggs with the motherly warmth of her body.

Though Yellow Ribbon does most of the setting, five or six times each day Cat Chaser visits to relieve her. Sometimes Yellow Ribbon resists leaving the nest, but then Cat

Chaser utters a special *churrrrrr* call and quivers his wings. This always persuades his mate to leave the nest for fifteen or twenty minutes and go forage for food while he keeps the eggs warm.

For twelve days Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser incubate the nest. Then they begin detecting -- ever so slightly -- the eggs beneath them shifting. On the twelfth day clicking sounds arise from inside each egg, for now inside each egg baby sparrows are breaking through their respective shells to the outside world.

Breaking from an eggshell is not an easy task for an unhatched bird. However, nature has provided each unhatched sparrow with a special tool just for this very moment in their lives. Atop each baby sparrow's beak grows a sharp bump or cusp called an egg tooth. It's not a real tooth -- just a sharp hump like a tiny knife, which the escaping bird presses against the eggshell's interior walls as if it were indeed a tiny knife. The goal is to cut an escape hatch into the egg's larger end. Once the cutting is finished, each bird knows to push with its feet until the escape hatch comes loose.

Around 3 PM the first two eggs that were laid hatch at the same time. The third egg hatches at dusk. The last-laid egg begins hatching at dawn the following day. Unfortunately, with this hatching there's a problem: This young bird can't unstick itself from its shell's interior wall.

Seeing the problem, Yellow Ribbon instinctively takes into her beak the part of the eggshell sticking to the chick and shakes it. Usually for other House Sparrow mothers with the same problem this technique works. However, Yellow Ribbon shakes the shell again and again, but this young bird simply doesn't come unstuck.

After failing many times, Yellow Ribbon becomes confused. Therefore, without any particular plan, with her beak she lifts the part of the eggshell with the young bird still in it and hops from her nest. When she lands atop the column, the jolt knocks the young bird free. And then, so quickly that it's over before anything can be done, the nestling simply rolls across the column's flat top and tumbles into open space.

Yellow Ribbon doesn't see the tiny creature strike the cement floor twenty-five feet below. Nor does she see the young human who had been standing in the school's door approach the fallen nestling, pick it up by one toe, look at it with a sad face, and toss it into the grass.

Because Yellow Ribbon is only a House Sparrow, she cannot comprehend the fullness of her tragedy. She knows only that the stuck nestling no longer is a problem needing attention. Automatically she flies with this last empty eggshell in her beak and drops it with the others in the grassy outfield beside the baseball diamond.

Changes... The three nestlings change so impressively during their first few days.

In the beginning they're featherless and pink, and so helpless they can't open their eyes. Yellow Ribbon keeps them warm by spreading over them the soft feathers of her breast and wings. Though the nestlings can't see, they can hear, so when Cat Chaser alights next to the nest they hear him and poke their scrawny heads straight up, begging with their beaks gaped wide open. Then Cat Chaser bends forward and into their throats regurgitates partially digested, soup-like food from his own stomach.

On the fifth day of the nestlings' lives they open their eyes and begin eating solid food -- mostly caterpillars and other insects their parents bring them. Still they can't digest the hard seeds that will become their main food as adults. By the nestlings' eighth day so many feathers have grown on their bodies that they're no longer pink. By the tenth, the nestlings look like small, gray versions of Yellow Ribbon.

The nestlings always seem hungry -- even though Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser now become like food-gathering robots whose single function is to shuttle between the nest and insect-rich lawns, bushes, and trees, carrying beakfuls of grasshoppers, beetles, ants, wasps, and other unfortunate creatures. It's typical that during just one hour they visit the nest twenty times -- often with more than one insect in their beak!

About two weeks after the nestlings hatch they grow restless. As if they can't make up their minds where they want to be, hundreds of times they hop back and forth between the edge of their nest and the column's hard top. Sometimes they teeter at the column's edge watching humans pass into and out of the schoolhouse's big front doors. Other times, as if they were exercising or trying to learn to fly, they perch on their nest's edge, flutter their wings until exhausted, and then plop tail-first back into their nest.

On the sixteenth day of the nestlings' lives they become very quiet. Crouching low in their nests, they almost look as if they're afraid of something. It's as if they know that soon they must face something dreadful...

On this same day, Cat Chaser stops feeding them. Instead, he perches atop the column where Yellow Ribbon's first nest had been and calls *chirup chireep*. When Yellow Ribbon brings the nestlings food, Cat Chaser calls much more loudly and sometimes quivers his wings.

The next day, the seventeenth day, once again the nestlings cower in their nest. Furthermore, on this memorable day, neither parent feeds them. Once again Cat Chaser perches atop the opposite column calling. Sometimes he waves his head side to side as if to say that something momentous, difficult, and dangerous is about to happen.

The nestlings listen to Cat Chaser's special call and they watch both their parents behaving strangely. And on this last day of April, as their hunger becomes almost too painful to bear, they also feel that special command which nature has stored inside them just for this very moment in their lives...

It's the command that says, "Go ahead. Now is the time for you to leave your nest. Jump... Jump... Leap into the empty void... "

MAY (THE VISITOR)

One by one, they had jumped. Each nestling had hopped to the edge of the column's top, perched for a long time peering fearfully into the open space beneath them, and then each bird had simply launched itself into a broad, downward-spiraling half-circle. Falling more than flying, they had fluttered over the portico's floor and finally veered over the school's steps.

When at last they landed in the grass beside the sidewalk, no longer were they nestlings. At that moment, on the last day of April, Yellow Ribbon's three nestlings became fledglings.

On this first morning in May the fledglings are encamped beneath a yew bush, gazing incredulously across an ocean of dewy blades of grass. Dazzling yellow sunlight pours from the sky they've never seen before, and chilly dewdrops on green grass glisten rainbow colors. One dewdrop shines emerald green, then in a twinkle it blossoms into daffodil yellow, then the same dewdrop glows blue, then red, then green again...

One fledgling is more curious than the rest. Cautiously it hops from its low perch in the yew bush and pecks at the sparkling dewdrop. Immediately an unexpected cold wetness spreads across the fledgling's tongue. How unlike the dead hardness of the column's concrete capital and the dusty chaff of the nest is this fresh, new world of green grass and dew!

With the fledglings on the ground, life is no easier for Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser. Still the nestlings require nearly all their food to be brought to them. Of course, eventually the young birds will learn ways of finding their own meals, and they'll even learn how to fly. But, for right now, these fledglings have a good deal: They can let their parents do all the work, and simply bring the food to them!

As days pass the fledglings experiment with flying, usually making their longest flights when one of their parents approaches with a beakful of caterpillars, for the one who flies closest to where the parent alights usually gets the meal. Sometimes the young even haphazardly forage for themselves.

Eventually the fledglings learn quite well how to feed themselves, and surely could survive on their own if they had to. However, like other young animals growing up, they hesitate to become independent. It's much easier just to let the old folks bring food to them and plop it into their mouths!

If Yellow Ribbon or Cat Chaser, tired of gathering food, fly into the lower branches of the Red Maple tree to rest and preen, they won't enjoy their rest long before one or more fledglings fly there to join them, screaming and fluttering their wings, begging to be fed. Usually, after resisting for a few moments, Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser give up and get

back to work. Just how does a parent convince its children to be more responsible for themselves... especially when the children can fly to wherever you are and beg, beg, beg?

After helping Cat Chaser feed the fledglings for one week, Yellow Ribbon discovers within herself three powerful and somewhat conflicting urges. First, she is so tired from her parenting that she'd love to just fly away from all her responsibilities. Fortunately for her offspring, her second urge, the one to stay and take care of her family, is stronger than the urge to escape.

Nonetheless, on a certain day Yellow Ribbon finds that a third urge has grown even stronger than the other two. This powerful, irrepressible urge sends her back to her nest to deposit yet another egg, thus starting the whole exhausting nesting cycle all over again. During upcoming days while Yellow Ribbon incubates the new set of eggs, Cat Chaser continues taking care of the first brood.

However, this time, the cycle of nesting events is not destined to proceed as smoothly as with the first brood. Trouble announces itself at dawn on the morning just before Yellow Ribbon arrives atop the concrete column's capital to lay her second egg for this clutch.

While morning is still just a pale glow in the eastern sky, from deep within the shadows of the big Sycamore tree in front of Aiken Junior High, there arises a mysterious, sputtering, flute-like call. A few seconds later, on silent wings, a dark creature much larger than a House Sparrow flutters straight from the Sycamore, whisks close beneath the entrance-porch's ceiling, and disappears into the shadows enshrouding Yellow Ribbon's nest. There's a brief rustling sound, and then two minutes later the dusky bird flies away just as silently as it came.

An hour after the visitor leaves, Yellow Ribbon arrives at her nest and finds in it not the single egg she laid the day before, but two eggs. The new egg is very similar to the other in color and size, but it's a little more rounded. However, Yellow Ribbon is unable to figure out that something is terribly wrong here. She simply yields to the need within her to lay another egg.

The next morning Yellow Ribbon returns and lays another egg, and the next she lays another. On that fourth day of her second laying cycle she begins incubating the nest night and day. On the fifth day she lays the nest's sixth egg. Now her second clutch is finished. And inside Yellow Ribbon still there is no suspicion at all that beneath her an awful problem is developing.

During the first nine days of incubation everything proceeds normally. However, on the tenth day there occurs the first hint that something queer is happening. From time to time she feels very slight movements inside the eggs beneath her. This is as it was during the last hatching. The problem is that in one egg -- the one that's a little more rounded than all the others -- the movement is much stronger.

On the eleventh day, clicking sounds develop inside the roundish egg, but not in the others. In the afternoon of this same day a tiny beak breaks through the shell. By evening, although in the other eggs clicking hasn't even begun, the nestling from the roundish egg is completely hatched.

From the beginning differences are obvious between this nestling and the ones that had hatched in the first brood. This bird is much larger than they. Moreover, a newborn sparrow is naked and pink, but this bird is densely covered with olive-gray down. This nestling is more hungry and it complains more aggressively than a newborn House Sparrow should. However, neither to Yellow Ribbon nor to Cat Chaser does it occur that perhaps this nestling is not their own...

No, this nestling is not any kind of sparrow. The shadowy creature that had entered the nest at dawn two weeks earlier had been a female Brown-headed Cowbird. Of all of North America's different bird species, only the cowbird regularly lays its eggs in the nests of other bird species. It is this continent's only nest parasite.

Usually Brown-headed Cowbirds leave their eggs in the nests of small birds such as flycatchers, finches, vireos, and warblers. However, when nests are hard to find, the female cowbird settles for almost any kind of songbird nest, including those of the House Sparrow.

During Cat Chaser's first visit to the nest after the baby cowbird has hatched, the nestling huddles behind one of Yellow Ribbon's wings. When it hears the flutter of Cat Chaser's wings and the soft patter of his feet upon the concrete, it thrusts its head from behind Yellow Ribbon's wing, peeps loudly, and gapes wide its mouth.

Now, when a newly hatched House Sparrow is ready to eat, it acts in a certain way and has some specific needs. It is weak and naked and the nourishment it needs is food regurgitated from the throats of its parents. This cowbird nestling, however, is strong and well feathered, and it throws open its mouth in a manner that seems to beg for a kind of food Cat Chaser isn't prepared to offer.

Perched on the side of the nest, Cat Chaser feels confused. Who knows what kind of chemistry works inside him right now? Who knows how much he understands of what is happening? Cat Chaser inserts his beak into the nestling's throat and regurgitates a little food, but the nestling doesn't respond right. Cat Chaser flies away and wipes his beak on a maple twig. Usually the "adopted parents" of a cowbird nestling unhesitatingly feed the young bird the food it needs. However, in this nest, for many subtle reasons, the young cowbird will not be fed as much as it needs.

The next day, several times Cat Chaser comes and several times attempts are made to feed the nestling cowbird as if it were a nestling House Sparrow. This robust cowbird nestling needs huge quantities of caterpillars and worms, not half-digested regurgitation. During the first full day of its life it should eat so much that its weight nearly doubles. However, by the end of the first full day of this nestling's life, already it is starving.

When Cat Chaser comes the next day he finds under Yellow Ribbon's wings the cowbird nestling and five pink, naked House Sparrow nestlings. When the nestlings beg for food, the baby cowbird begs much harder, and thus receives more regurgitated food than they - - yet, this isn't nearly enough. It stays hungry and grows weaker, and neither do the House Sparrow nestlings receive all the food that they need.

By the fifth day the House Sparrow nestlings' digestion system has developed enough for Cat Chaser to begin offering them hard food. However, for the unfortunate cowbird nestling, these caterpillar- and worm-morsels arrive too late.

The afternoon before, during one of Cat Chaser's visits, it had begged so hard that in its enthusiasm it had tumbled from the nest onto the concrete column- top. It had been too weak to return to its nest. Desperately it had tried to climb back inside. In one last great effort it had tried to pull itself over the nest's rim but it had only lost its balance, stumbled backward, and disappeared silently over the concrete capital's edge.

Now the House Sparrow nestlings will develop normally, though always they will weigh a little less than they should, and be a little smaller than other House Sparrows of their age.

JUNE (TAMALE)

On the morning of June 7th a commotion shatters the quietness atop the marble column. Once again Cat Chaser perches on the next column making the call that says, "If you want to eat, then leave your nest. Jump! Jump! Jump!"

Chirup chireep chireep, chrup chireep...

One nestling, a male, is larger, more alert, and more adventurous than the others. Lately he's spent more time than the others flapping his wings while holding onto the nest's edge with his feet, so now he's the strongest "flier." This morning he's the first to leap into the great space below the nest.

Down, down, down the hungry bird flutters, his wings a frenzied blur, his promise as a good flier even now evident. Over the concrete floor he makes a complete circle, nearly crashing into the base of his home column before veering into the lawn. Touching down, his face slams into the grass and he somersaults onto his back.

On the ground the new fledgling looks around astonished. Earlier his view from atop the column showed a world of cold, gray concrete, and dizzying emptiness below. Now this new world is just the opposite, with the sea of blue emptiness above, and the part below firm and good-natured, for grass-blades tickle one's eyelids and the soft skin beneath one's wings...

The fledgling smells the grass and feels its moist coolness. This new world is soft and green, so unlike the scratchy, flaky, yellow nest... And when you look into the open sky... What a feeling... What a feeling...

And now it simply ends.

Neither Yellow Ribbon nor Cat Chaser had known that a certain treacherous yellowness had been attracted by Cat Chaser's chirps atop the column that morning. They had not known that the tabby cat called Tamale had took up position beneath the yew bush beside the portico's steps. Like a yellow statue, for a long time he's been staying there, his eyes searching upward to where the chirping came from. There he had waited and waited and waited...

Tamale had not been hungry. However, when the tiny ball of feathers had made its clumsy landing, all of his instincts had told him to attack and kill...

It's just that a cat such as he from time to time needs to hunt. He needs to practice using his natural killing skills. Yes, how easy it is and what a pleasure it gives to bite a creature behind the neck and to feel it instantly going limp. Yet, what a shame that it all passes so quickly. Too bad there isn't more time in it...

Tamale skulks across the lawn carrying the dead fledgling in his mouth. Cat Chaser above him chirps loudly and makes dive-bomb attacks. When Tamale crosses the street Cat Chaser returns to his nest. Lying in the grass of Mrs. Jones' lawn, Tamale idly paws at the House Sparrow corpse, then with satisfaction gnaws upon the fledgling's neck and wings and legs.

Back in the nest the young birds sense that something is wrong. However, that doesn't lessen their hunger or their profound wish to be fed. Likewise, Yellow Ribbon knows that a problem has arisen but neither can she think of anything but the need to keep coaxing the young from their nest.

Cat Chaser wipes his beak at the edge of his calling-column and nervously preens his feathers, working out his anxieties. Is it safe now for the nestlings to fly onto the ground? They need food. But, what if the cat returns? Listen to the nestlings peeping. But someplace right now the cat still sits with his claws and his fangs so terribly sharp...

Gradually the fledglings' hungry peeps have their effect on Cat Chaser. His anxieties give way to his instinct to coax the hungry nestlings onto the ground.

After much chirping, again one bird does finally leap and as the ball of fluff descends a terrible yell once more bounds across the street and the lawn, heading straight to where the fledgling lands.

This time Tamale doesn't kill quickly. He plays with the creature, even as Cat Chaser swoops at him from above. *Quer quer quer*, Cat Chaser screams. Then Tamale picks up the peeping fledgling and carries it to Mrs. Jones' lawn, and lays it neatly in the grass next to the corpse of the other fledgling.

Now Tamale will take his time and sharpen his reflexes. He will remind himself fully how it feels to have a living bird beneath one's paws... He will see again how quickly a bird can be retrieved if somehow it escapes, and how a single claw can pierce a covering of fuzz...

Atop the concrete column Yellow Ribbon, Cat Chaser, and the remaining nestlings awkwardly wait for the situation somehow to improve. The nestlings are now even hungrier. Yellow Ribbon is upset but she knows this is the time her brood must leave the nest. Cat Chaser wipes his bill on the edge of the column and preens his feathers. He looks over the side of the column's top and listens to the fledglings begging for food. And inside him there grows an ache as big as a House Sparrow can know.

Somehow during such times -- even for a House Sparrow -- time passes. In the afternoon, while a moist heat hangs over town, the sun is high, trees are as green as they can be, with dark shadows pooling beneath their boughs... the last three nestlings make it safely onto the ground, for Tamale the cat is napping.

To fledge three nestlings out of five original House Sparrow eggs -- that's about average...

Grasshoppers, caterpillars, spiders, crickets, click beetles, aphids, leaf beetles... At the end of three weeks, how many of each have Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser plopped into the mouths of the three fledglings? Once again it's the old problem of how do you get youngsters to start taking care of themselves instead of eternally begging, begging, begging... ?

One day at noon when the heat has slowed the fledglings down a little, Cat Chaser tries to sneak a little peace inside the big Sycamore, and Yellow Ribbon flies to a spot she's noticed earlier, with the same thought. It's beneath a house trailer being used as a portable classroom beside the schoolhouse.

Beneath the trailer Yellow Ribbon finds plenty of dust -- dust so fine and deep that our bird's legs sink into it up to their feather line. The dust feels good because it's cool and dry on a hot and humid day.

Yellow Ribbon pokes her bill into the dust and shakes her head, stirring up a cloud of dust that settles on her head and back. How good this feels! She rests her breast upon the dust and flutters her wings as if she were a duck splashing water at the edge of a pond.

Yellow Ribbon fluffs out her feathers and lets the friendly dust insinuate itself all the way to her feathers' bases. She fans her tail and pushes her head forward along the ground, first with one side of her face slide through the dust, then the other. Now she indulges in an orgy of head-scratching and feather-preening, and flutters her wings until a nest-like hollow forms in the dust beneath her. Settling into this depression she feels so relaxed, so peaceful...

Aaa-aaa-aaa! Aaa-aaa-aaa!

Begging for food, a fledgling as big as Yellow Ribbon herself comes gangling across the dust, gaping mouth pleading for food. How has this aggravating creature found her here? With one last violent shake, sending dust flying everywhere, Yellow Ribbon explodes from beneath the temporary classroom.

When the dust settles only a disgusted fledgling is left. Gritty dust from Yellow Ribbon's rude departure fills the fledgling's mouth. The fledgling tries to shake off the filth, but this only stirs up more dust. The fledgling chokes and gags and feels very rejected and betrayed.

Sullenly it hops to the edge of the dust pile and flies toward West End Avenue. Never again will it beg for food. As of this moment, it has left home.

JULY (THE STORM)

At last Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser have only themselves to feed. Now days are filled with long, pleasant hours spent dozing, preening and eating, for these are days when fat lost during the nesting days can be restored.

Something important is going on inside Yellow Ribbon. The close bonds that all spring and summer united her with Cat Chaser and the nest now are melting away. To Yellow Ribbon, every day Cat Chaser is becoming more and more just another bird and the nest now seems cramped and uninteresting.

The same thing is not happening inside Cat Chaser. In fact, on July 2 once again we find him perching beside his column-top nest making *chirup* calls. Yellow Ribbon isn't responding to his song, however. In fact, now when Cat Chaser makes signs that he wants to mate, Yellow Ribbon just flies away.

Yes, now instead of dealing with family duties Yellow Ribbon prefers to dust-bathe beneath the portable classroom and to fly alone into new parts of town. In a way, her lack of interest in beginning a third brood is a little surprising. In the part of America where she and Cat Chaser live, House Sparrow couples often raise three broods each season.

On the morning of July 4th, the young, mateless female whose name is Lawn Hopper comes onto the scene. Hearing Cat Chaser's beautiful *chirup*-call, she visits him atop the marble column. Cat Chaser puffs out his chest, fans his tail, and hops in and out of his nest. Yellow Ribbon isn't there. She's far away perching on a wire leading into Wright's Photography Shop, watching the traffic on West End Avenue.

On the hot, humid morning of July 4th, Lawn Hopper's arrival signals the end to the affair that has been going on between Yellow Ribbon and Cat Chaser.

On this day, Yellow Ribbon becomes independent of Cat Chaser and his nest. Now begins a completely new phase of Yellow Ribbon's life.

On July 15th, at noon, Yellow Ribbon roosts in a large Sugarberry tree beside the city's railroad yard. This is a part of town our bird has never seen before. On the branches around her, about a dozen young House Sparrows perch preening and chirping.

Now, when House Sparrow fledglings mature enough to leave their parents they join into flocks that roam over a wide area. In late summer these flocks are joined by adults who have finished nesting, and Yellow Ribbon has become the first adult to join this particular group. Though there is no way to know for sure, it's possible that some of her own children are in this flock. Everyone here has separated completely from his or her past family.

The bond that Yellow Ribbon feels to this group isn't nearly as strong as the other bonds she has felt during the year. Her staying with these young birds is just the comfortable thing to do. It's pleasant to roam with them, explore new territory and try kinds of food she's never eaten before.

Today, in this railroad yard, the heat is worse than Yellow Ribbon ever has known it. During the last four days each afternoon has been hotter than the last. Today's heat is almost unbearable.

Deep inside the Sugarberry tree, holding her wings away from her body and breathing with her beak wide open, Yellow Ribbon tries to keep cool. Quietly she sits. In the railroad yard nothing is moving. The whole city seems numbed and paralyzed by wet heat.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the heat begins to kill. In some parts of town where House Sparrow nests are built close beneath tin roofs or in places where air can't circulate well, overheated nestlings are dying. Old birds whose tired bodies can't function under extreme conditions also die. However, Yellow Ribbon is healthy and now she's sheltered in the Sugarberry tree's shadows, so everything is alright as long as she can perch quietly, quietly, with her wings outspread and her bill open...

In the southwestern sky a black cloud is forming. Already you can hear the almost continuous rumble of far-away thunder. A storm is brewing.

Now, a storm has a beginning, a middle and an end, and during a storm's life usually it travels from one place to another. Yellow Ribbon's storm is beginning twenty miles northwest of town and its track will bring it exactly here. As the storm comes, passes around her, and finally goes away, our bird will experience each of the storm's three stages.

The storm's first part begins with just waiting for the action to arrive. During this part Yellow Ribbon perches listening to the thunder growing louder, watching the black blanket draw itself across more and more of the blue sky until suddenly it covers the sun, the land grows darker, and in the air there's something that keeps saying, "It's coming... It's coming... It's almost here... Here it comes... It's coming... "

During this first stage, things happen in slow motion. Thunder becomes louder by such small degrees that from one rumble to the next there's hardly any difference at all. Tree leaves hang limp and silent. Everything else holds its breath. And in hundreds of trees and building nooks and crannies all over town thousands of Yellow Ribbons perch waiting, watching, and wondering what happens next.

Yellow Ribbon isn't prepared for Stage Two's beginning. A bolt of lightning flashes so intensely that even the Sugarberry's interior is flooded with brilliant light. Cracking thunder rages almost simultaneously through the Sugarberry's branches, nearly shaking Yellow Ribbon from her perch.

Trembling with anxiety, Yellow Ribbon feels the thick, dark heat around her metamorphose into something sharp and tingly. Where before the air filled one with numbness and lethargy, now it's rousing every cell in the body. In the sky a dangerous-looking, brooding, unified mass of black, turbulent cloud spreads from one horizon to the other. Nervous gusts of wind in the railroad yard stir up dirty sheets of discarded newspaper and gritty clouds of gray dust.

Then the rain comes. At first its drops are widely spaced and so heavy that when they hit the ground you hear little thuds. These raindrops knock down blades of grass, punch spiders out of their webs, and on black, heat-oozing asphalt streets leave broad, glossy splatters.

In this kind of storm you can become sidetracked watching ten thousand, thousand individual happenings. You can get lost -- washed away -- in fantastic swirls of rain-white wind and an overkill of light and sound and the broad confusion of hitting and dripping and splashing...

Overcome with her sense of helplessness and fear of the unknown, Yellow Ribbon flees the Sugarberry tree. Through mighty gusts of wind and heavy white rain she flies across the railroad yard looking for any kind of safe haven. She finds it in the form of a boxcar standing on the tracks with its doors open. She flies into the car, flutters onto the metal floor, and skids onto her rump.

Inside, Yellow Ribbon listens to the wind, the pounding rain, and the thunder. She feels the floor vibrate from heavy raindrops pelting the car's aluminum roof and sides. She feels the entire car heaving in the wind.

When the storm's Stage Three comes, Yellow Ribbon is perched at the edge of the floor looking across the railroad yard. A large branch has been torn from the Sugarberry tree where she was earlier, and who knows where her former roosting mates are?

Stage Three is cool -- almost cold. Just an hour ago tree leaves were hot and limp, photosynthesizing sunlight into tree food, but now many of those same leaves are stuck onto automobile windshields, lying tattered on the ground, or still on the trees, but crisp and cool, and wet with beaded raindrops inside which, if you look very closely, you can see the whole world turned upside down.

Yellow Ribbon is in an orange boxcar on the sides of which is written "Cotton Belt." When Stage Three ends, brilliant, yellow, late-afternoon sunlight slants through the car's open doors. Our bird flies out. Though usually sparrows fly close to the ground and travel only for short distances, now there's something in the air that sends Yellow Ribbon soaring into the sky. Now she swims in the cool, wet air above the city.

On wings that cannot carry her fast enough she flies to see what lies beyond the next hill... behind that last row of street trees at the edge of town... along the river's far banks...

AUGUST (HIJACKED)

Now Yellow Ribbon enjoys long days during which there is plenty to eat and lots of time in which to perch in the Sugarberry tree and preen in its cool shade.

The railroad yard's weedy edges provide seeds that House Sparrows love to eat -- crabgrass, ragweed, knotweed, bluegrass, timothy... Our bird spends a great deal of time foraging among these weeds. However, in this railroad yard sometimes even better feeding places can be found.

From time to time railroad cars filled with grain such as wheat or corn are left parked along the tracks. Of course the grain is enclosed inside the covered cars but sometimes a bird can find seeds on the car's running gear accidentally spilled there when the grain was being loaded. Maybe the grain fell there in some far-away farming community, then rode on the car's running gear past dozens of farms and big and little towns, through forests and across rivers, just to end up sidetracked in Yellow Ribbon's town and eventually inside Yellow Ribbon's belly.

One morning Yellow Ribbon and her young companions arrive at the yard to find several newly arrived grain-filled cars. Yellow Ribbon heads for the nearest car. When she lands on the car's running board she discovers herself near a young male from another flock, tugging at a grain of wheat stuck in a crack.

As soon as the male sees Yellow Ribbon he knows that he must defend his treasure. He raises his wings over his back into a threatening, shallow V, and flicks them. When this doesn't drive our bird away he lunges toward her, sending her in retreat around the car's corner.

Once our bird regains her composure she begins remembering the young male's plump grain of wheat. It's not long before she flits back around the corner and lands not far from her competitor.

Once more the young male forms the shallow V with his wings. This time he also gapes wide his beak, then again he rushes at our bird. However, this time Yellow Ribbon stands her ground. She opens her own beak and raises her own wings.

It's a bluffer's fight. Just as quickly as the young male hops toward Yellow Ribbon, he hops back without having touched her. Then Yellow Ribbon hops at him the same way, also without touching him. Several times the birds "attack" one another, threatening and bluffing, but never making any contact at all.

When finally Yellow Ribbon bumps the young male aside and begins tugging at the grain herself her opponent becomes provoked enough to grab hold of Yellow Ribbon's bill with his own. Breast to breast, for about two seconds they stand pushing one another until the young male lets go. Immediately Yellow Ribbon flies away.

Never has Yellow Ribbon experienced such a terrible fight! Very seldom in her life has she even used the shallow V wing-formation. She flees into the Hackberry tree to preen her feathers until she can calm down.

In a few minutes the big confrontation is forgotten by both birds. Before the morning is over Yellow Ribbon discovers and devours a few grains for which she doesn't have to fight. With a full belly, around noon, she flies to perch in the open door of one of the boxcars standing at the far end of the freight yard. She is wiping her bill at the door's edge when she hears this:

"Morton, you better close that one up before they get here."

Yellow Ribbon has heard humans make their sounds before. She knows that they don't bother House Sparrows. However, it's always better to play safe in such instances. She hops deeper into the boxcar, intending to wait there until the humans go away.

But then, suddenly, a great rumble shakes the floor and before she can gather her senses the door slams shut and Yellow Ribbon instinctively launches into the darkness, unable to see where she is going!

Almost instantly a sharp pain shoots across her head and neck as she collides with one of the boxcar's walls. Inexplicably finding herself knocked to the floor she flies back into the darkness but once again comes the terrible flash of pain and once again she is knocked onto the floor. Over and over she hysterically repeats her doomed flights until she grows so exhausted that all she can do is to sit on the boxcar's floor, tilted awkwardly onto her breast and wing-tips, panting rapidly and feeling faint.

After what seems like a very long time she notices a little light issuing from around the boxcar's loosely fitting door. This comforts our bird. Gradually she calms down. She raises herself off her breast and wing-tips and stands like a proper bird.

Just as she begins hopping toward the dim light issuing from the door's crack she hears a mighty rumble different from the one before, and this time it's accompanied by an awful jolt that knocks her onto one side. What difference would it make if she understood that this second jarring results from the big diesel engine backing into the long line of boxcars, hitching onto them? Again our bird flies into the darkness and again she is knocked onto the floor. Again and again...

Now suffering through an endless series of rumbles and jolts, for eighteen hours Yellow Ribbon experiences a terror that House Sparrows are not created to endure. Sometimes she makes her way to the crack in the door and feels fresh air gushing through the crack. Eventually she learns to sit quietly and simply wait. The hours pass.

When at last the rumbles and jolts end, Yellow Ribbon just sits still, having no idea what will happen next, or what she should do. The light that earlier entered the doors' cracks

long since has disappeared. Now inside the boxcar it's very dark and quiet. Now Yellow Ribbon sleeps.

Bam... !

The boxcar's doors rumble open and brilliant morning sunlight floods inside. Without thinking, Yellow Ribbon flies into the air of a new day. And the very moment her mind focuses enough to sort out things she understands beyond all doubt that now she occupies a completely new world.

The town that Yellow Ribbon always has known was a small one. Its streets had been lined with trees and none of the town's buildings had been very tall. In Yellow Ribbon's town there had been the small college with its spacious grassy lawn, the Wal-Mart with its large asphalt parking lot, the courthouse with its tower with a clock on it... So, where were all these places now?

Fluttering aimlessly across the freight yard, Yellow Ribbon sees that her friendly weed patches at the yard's perimeter have been replaced by huge, windowless warehouses, and beyond them sprawl car-choked streets and miles and miles of buildings rising higher than any Yellow Ribbon ever has seen. Here no trees line the streets and buildings have no lawns.

Seeing this, Yellow Ribbon grows profoundly dispirited. Dropping earthward, she alights on the eaves of a warehouse roof. Long she perches gazing incredulously at what lies before her.

Yellow Ribbon has never had problems finding food. In her former town, in almost every corner, there had been weeds and insects, and nearly always there had been easy food in the Alexander Family's bird-feeding station. However, in this new town, where does a bird find patches of weeds? Where is there even a lawn in which crabgrass seed might be found? Where is Peace Hill and the Alexanders' feeding station?

A week has passed in this new city and now Yellow Ribbon knows the feeling of being hungry all the time. She finds enough food to stay alive, but just barely.

One day, on a sidewalk, she finds half of a Twinkie. Never has she tasted such a thing! She pecks on it and the sweet goo sticks to her bill. She tries to scrape it off by rubbing her beak on the sidewalk, but the goo only smears across the side of her face. Before she's eaten all she wants it's also sticking to her legs and wings. Later, atop a warehouse, she must preen a long time to clean herself up. However, despite the mess, the Twinkie was a good find. If you're starving, even a Twinkie is better than nothing.

Though each day Yellow Ribbon explores her vast new home, never can she find anyplace in which she feels the least bit safe or comfortable. This new town seems to have no boundaries. Everyplace she goes she feels squeezed-in and hopeless. One night she sleeps above a theater's lit-up marquee. Another night she camps on a window ledge. Last night she just perched on a telephone wire until dawn.

If it were in Yellow Ribbon's character to soar into the open sky like some species of bird do, or to simply fly and fly until the city were left behind, and below there would be a swamp or a desert or a grassy mountain side or a small town -- it would be different. However, it's simply the nature of House Sparrows to fly low and to stay more or less in one place. House Sparrows want to find themselves a nice little home-area, get to know it very well, and each day visit the same places at about the same time. It just never occurs to them to fly far away.

Therefore, for days Yellow Ribbon wanders in her new home and each day her instincts are frustrated, and her loneliness and hunger and sadness only grow.

SEPTEMBER (THE BIG CITY)

By mid September Yellow Ribbon has discovered several small parks, each surrounded by tall buildings, and some streets having a few trees. However, in these trees few caterpillars and bugs can be found, for air pollution kills such sensitive creatures. The few grassy areas in the parks and along sidewalks are mowed so that seldom can a grass-plant be found producing seed.

Nonetheless, Yellow Ribbon is surviving. Mostly she eats garbage. Sometimes, as in garbage bins behind restaurants, she finds great heaps of it. However, such sources seldom last for long, for eventually humans in their big machines come to sweep or haul her discovery away, and then she must search all over again.

In September, as is typical among House Sparrows, Yellow Ribbon is molting -- her old feathers are dropping out and new ones are appearing. Though molting is a gradual process that never leaves a bird completely featherless, in September important feathers missing from House Sparrow wings and tails makes flying hard. Already weak from malnourishment, and dispirited, Yellow Ribbon's missing feathers just add to her miseries, and to her sad appearance.

One day, at noon, Yellow Ribbon flutters around the corner of an apartment building, lands on a second-story balcony, and sees something that astonishes her:

In a tall Tree-of-heaven a small flock of House Sparrows is enjoying its midday roost. For several minutes Yellow Ribbon perches on the balcony watching the birds and listening to their chirps. It's been so long since Yellow Ribbon roosted with other sparrows that at first, for some reason, she feels nervous about joining them. However, soon she flies to be with them.

How splendid is the appearance of every bird in this flock! Even though they, too, are molting and their wings and tails also have missing feathers, each sparrow looks fat and healthy. Seeing that no bird acts eager to leave the roost, Yellow Ribbon knows that already today each bird has eaten all it wanted. Now each bird is content to perch in the shade and preen, and to watch humans and automobiles pass by below them.

There's something else, too. In many small, hard-to-describe ways, these sparrows are different from any Yellow Ribbon has ever seen. Not only are they slightly larger than House Sparrows Yellow Ribbon is used to but also their chirps are unlike any Yellow Ribbon has heard. Their phrasing is different and they chirp with a twang -- they call with a House Sparrow accent!

It's true that since European House Sparrows were introduced into America in the 1800s they have been evolving into various races which differ from one region to another. Since Yellow Ribbon has been transported into a new geographical region, it's only natural that she should find herself among House Sparrows of a different race.

By now Yellow Ribbon has become used to surprises, so the minor dissimilarities between her and this flock hardly matter at all. The pleasure felt in at last finding other House Sparrows outweighs any doubts she has about slight differences between them. When in late afternoon the sparrows leave their roost, Yellow Ribbon flies with them.

Their flight path takes them around a tall building and across a street into a territory Yellow Ribbon has not yet explored. What Yellow Ribbon sees when she sails over the next row of buildings dumbfounds her.

Here is a forest -- a city-surrounded park-forest -- as big as any she has ever seen! Tall trees sway in summer breezes. And there... a lake! Humans in small boats... swallows soaring above green water, and ducks and geese on the lake's shore... asphalt trails winding through woods and between buildings and across broad grassy areas...

Yellow Ribbon's new companions are not the least interested in landing in any of the park's trees, though surely they must harbor a few bugs of the type a House Sparrow can eat. Yellow Ribbon stays with her flock, winging past several garbage cans in which surely there would lie at least one half-eaten Twinkie. Yellow Ribbon's new comrades are headed directly toward a cluster of curious looking buildings at the park's corner.

On outspread wings the flock banks sharply around the corner of one of these buildings and immediately comes to a landing atop a chain-link fence shaded by a tall Sugar Maple tree. Not yet feeling a real member of the flock, Yellow Ribbon lands apart from the others, yet not so far away that they can leave without her.

The fence on which they perch encloses a square, open area about the size of a house's lot. This fenced-in area is just one of several along one side of a long building. Access from each fenced-in lot is gained to the long building through a barn-type door. Some of these doors stand open. Through them one can see concrete-floored stalls.

And then Yellow Ribbon notices that not far from her stands a black-and-white- striped zebra. In the next lot stand three llamas, and in the next, three Bactrian camels, and in the next, a pair of tapirs, and in the next an Indian rhinoceros, and in the last, two tall, slender giraffes...

Yellow Ribbon hardly pays attention to these creatures. From her perch on the wire, the thing that attracts her attention is something looking like a small seed embedded in one of the zebra's droppings. In fact, in all these animals' dried-out patties of manure lie undigested grains of corn, wheat, and oat.

Yellow Ribbon's instinctive fear of entering open areas without first studying the situation keeps her from immediately flying to pick out the seed. Thus, right now, despite her hunger, she only watches and waits, watches and waits...

The zebra wanders from the open area into its stall and saunters into a corner where a shallow trough is mounted on the wall. It dips its muzzle into the trough and when it lifts up its head it's chewing something. Then the animal swings its head over its shoulder to ward off flies and some of the matter in its mouth scatters onto the concrete floor. When Yellow Ribbon sees that the zebra eats a mixture of cracked corn, wheat, and oats, she is no longer able to stay perched on the fence.

As if driven by a gust of wind she flies onto the concrete floor, takes a cracked grain of wheat into her bill and returns with it to the fence. She works the grain's husk off, then grinds the soft, plump grain into pulp, swallows, and instantly flutters off to secure another seed. This she does again and again, and other sparrows join her. When the whole little flock makes itself at home on the floor eating the zebra-scattered food with no apparent fear, our bird grows as contented as she has been for a long, long time.

Exploring the zoo becomes a joy. Not far from the zebra's Ungulate Barn there's a shallow pond with an island on it where several hippopotamuses live. Each day Yellow Ribbon bathes in the pond, then flies with her new friends to rest in the shade trees beside the lake. In the elephant pen she loves hopping in the straw, and on the hottest days she relishes perching among the fronds of a cluster of tall, potted palms in the middle of the zoo's rooftop cafe. From her perch there she can see the whole zoo.

At night Yellow Ribbon roosts with her friends among the rafters of the zebra's stall. At first our bird could not accustom herself to how night arrives in this new home. First, as Yellow Ribbon and her flock perch preening and chirping in the Sugar Maple outside the zebra's stall, darkness comes in the usual way. Then everyone flies inside where once again it's light as day. After a while, there's a small click someplace and then, instantly, without warning, darkness finally comes...

When at dawn sunlight filters through the stall's ventilation openings, the sparrows know it won't be long before a human comes making its noises. Sometimes it makes a sound like this:

"Mornin', Zebras. How we doin' today, Babies?"

Then among crashes and clanks food appears in the zebra's trough. At first this combination of the human voice and the noise fills Yellow Ribbon with fear, for similar human sounds and crashes and clanks preceded the moment when the boxcar's doors slammed shut... However, soon Yellow Ribbon looks forward to the keeper's talk and clanking buckets, for in this new place those sounds mean nothing but the arrival of new food.

OCTOBER (INDIAN SUMMER)

Yellow Ribbon saw days like this last year when she was only a few months old. However, back then she had had no way of knowing just how special such days are.

At dawn on this late-October morning, frost crystals formed lacy white borders on red, yellow, orange, brown, and green leaves. Some leaves still hanging on the trees looked like flimsy tatters of colored tissue-paper. Most leaves, however, already were on the ground.

By 10 AM all the frost has melted. Because cool winds from the northwest have lately blown away summer's haze, the sunlight this morning is so intense that colors are dazzlingly bright. How blue is the sky! How black and cold are shadows!

Once fall's first frost has occurred and then warm, sunny weather returns, people say that they're having Indian summer. Well, one interesting thing about Indian summers is that sometimes they stir up hormones that cause House Sparrows to behave strangely...

Chirup chireep chirup, chireep chireep chirup...

From the banks of the alligator's island, Yellow Ribbon hears the old, familiar song.

Chirup chirep chirup...

The singing comes from beyond the big wall separating the zoo from the rest of the city. Yellow Ribbon flies atop the wall to see who's singing.

The call comes from across the street. Traffic noise almost drowns it out, but it seems to originate from the little drive-in restaurant across from the zoo's entrance. Our bird flies there.

And there, singing his song on the eaves of the drive-in's back roof, perches the young male called Happy Face.

When Happy Face spots Yellow Ribbon landing in the Sycamore not far away he swells with enthusiasm. Like an excited butterfly he flits to beneath the restaurant-roof's eave and takes up position on a nest messily concocted atop a floodlight and does his little dance.

What memories, what soul-pleasing associations this little display evokes for Yellow Ribbon. Certainly our bird doesn't feel like mating with this young male. Yet... this young male stirs Yellow Ribbon so deeply that she must preen her feathers just to calm herself down.

But, this day, nothing else happens. Before long Yellow Ribbon just flies back across the street to forage in the elephant's hay, leaving Happy Face singing his song.

The next day, remarkably, Indian summer continues and once again Yellow Ribbon hears Happy Face's *chirup*-call, and again she returns to the drive-in restaurant. This time, instead of alighting in the Sycamore she lands on the gravel parking lot below the nest. Happy Face flits down beside her. Together they hop in the gravel and peck at whatever looks interesting.

The air is warm, moist, and fresh, and Yellow Ribbon feels good to be with a male again. Moreover, young Happy Face has never been alone with a female and his sense that Yellow Ribbon is at least slightly interested in him and his nest excites him profoundly. Later, when Yellow Ribbon flies to hop in the elephant's hay, Happy Face follows her but after they forage together for only a few minutes he flies back to his ramshackle nest.

The next day Indian summer continues for yet a third day and when Yellow Ribbon arrives at the drive-in restaurant she finds Happy Face adding fresh straw to his nest. Yellow Ribbon flies atop the nest and discovers many things wrong with it. It's an old one that's been unused for so long that one side is falling away. The straw is dry and dirty. Yellow Ribbon takes into her bill a weed-stem that has dried stiff and hard, flies away with it, and drops it beside a nearby hedge. When she returns she finds Happy Face weaving into the nest a pink ribbon found in a garbage can. In just such a way, two springs ago, our bird's father had woven a yellow ribbon into his own nest...

Throughout the morning Yellow Ribbon carries away old straw and weed stems and Happy Face carries in fresh material. Once, while Yellow Ribbon is at the nest, Happy Face arrives with fresh straw from the elephant's pen. Perching on the nest's edge, ceremoniously he presents the new straw to Yellow Ribbon, who weaves it into the nest. Then they press together their open bills.

Later in the morning they fly to hop in the elephant's straw together, leaving a nest that is considerably better than before, but still not good enough for nesting. However, today they're just working for the fun of it. Yes, today is just a day in which to play and to be a little romantic, and not do anything serious.

After all, Indian summers never last for long, and winter always follows soon after them...

By the last day of October, on Halloween, Indian Summer's pleasant hours are a distant memory. Now the sky is gray and cold winds bring too much drizzle. In the air there's a "get-ready-for-really-bad-weather" feeling.

When Indian summer ended, the affair between Yellow Ribbon and Happy Face lost its steam. Sometimes the two birds accidentally meet in the elephant's pen and when they do they recognize one another. However, there's not more than that. Now every bird's life revolves around little more than finding food, preening, enjoying warm sunlight when there's any to enjoy, and surviving the long, cold nights. Yellow Ribbon roosts in the

zebra's stall and Happy Face spends his nights in a corner of one of the zoo's maintenance buildings. Maybe next spring they'll become more serious with one another, but not now.

Just before dusk on Halloween night Yellow Ribbon and her companions perch chirping and preening on the fence outside the zebra's stall, preparing to enter for the night. Suddenly, from inside the big building, from along the walkway beyond the stall, Yellow Ribbon hears a human making its sound:

"OK, boys, we can't let them roost in here all winter. Again, if there's any possibility at all that a ricochet might hit one of the animals, don't shoot. A pellet will bounce off a critter's hide, but if it hits an eye it'll put it out. Now, let's get going. Pop it to them when they land on the crossbeams. They'll come in one at a time or in little groups."

Yellow Ribbon has become very familiar with this human sound, associating it with food being dropped into the zebra's trough. Usually at this time of evening humans do not appear. However, humans are a very unpredictable species.

Maybe because Yellow Ribbon is the oldest bird in her flock she is the first to enter the stall. She flies inside and lands on a crossbeam beneath the ceiling. With her beak she begins scratching the tender flesh beneath her uplifted left wing...

Pffft!

All of Yellow Ribbon's senses focus into a shocking, blinding flash of pain. She finds herself on the stall's floor. When she tries to fly, her wings only flutter uselessly. The zebra snorts nervously and paws the cold, straw-strewn concrete.

She tilts forward, her legs useless below her, her face crammed into the straw, her drooped wings keeping her from rolling onto her side. She looks dead, but there's still a spark of life. As minutes pass and more of her companions are shot, a few only wounded but most of them killed, very slowly her senses return. Her wings feel like lead but still she is able to coordinate them, and to will herself into the air.

Into the black night she swims through cold, blinding pain. Up and up and up, unable to think out a plan, only wanting to escape, one wingbeat after another, up and up and up, higher than a House Sparrow ever should go... up, up, up so high that lights below glimmer... or is it that the eyes are growing weaker... ?

There in the black sky a certain numbness begins spreading throughout Yellow Ribbon's body.

Losing altitude... hardly able to glide... down, down... There: The highway in front of the zoo... The drive-in... The floodlight behind the drive-in... Happy Face's rickety nest...

NOVEMBER (THE INVALID)

On this first morning in November Yellow Ribbon awakens with her wings stained mustard-yellow. The night before she hadn't reached Happy Face's nest. Instead she had plummeted like a rock into the open garbage can below the nest. Cold and in awful pain she lies with her wings sprawled across crumpled napkins and paper cartons. Odors of dill pickles, onions, and fried ground beef waft from below her.

Hours pass. Two humans drop trash into the can, not noticing that a bird is there. At midday there comes a loud roaring noise and Yellow Ribbon hears a human making its sound:

"Hey, Carlos, looky here. There's a little bird in the trash can. It's hurt or something... "

Through half-closed eyes Yellow Ribbon sees a hand reaching toward her but she is too weak to flutter her wings. She feels herself lifted from the trash can.

"It's just a dirty little sparrow, man, You gonna get bird-lice all over you... "

"Carlos," Yellow Ribbon hears, "do you think it'd eat some hamburger-bun?"

"Man, them sparrows eat anything. They're like mice or rats. What you tryin' to do?"

"I'm gonna put this bird beneath the hedge and I'm gonna put some crumbled-up hamburger-bun right here next to it so it'll have something to peck at."

"Playin' Salvation Army, man; you bein' bad, hee hee, hee!"

Carlos finds a paper cup capped with a plastic lid. Inside the cup, ice has melted leaving water tasting of Orange Crush. He pours the water into a plastic, boat-like tray that once held a banana split.

"Hamburger bun on one side and water on the other! Man, this little birdy gonna get on the road to recovery!"

For the rest of the day Yellow Ribbon sits beneath the hedge. Sometimes she eats or drinks but mostly she sits with her eyes closed, only half alive. Now is a time simply to endure the cold, endure the pain... to wait and see what happens... to survive another night...

With the next dawn Yellow Ribbon finds her body so stiff and painful that she can hardly move at all. A light sleet is falling. Icy pellets pepper through the hedge's leafless branches, bouncing all around her.

At noon a black poodle bounds from a car, makes sharp, nerve-shattering barks, runs to the shrubbery, sniffs, and keeps on snooping until it finds Yellow Ribbon, the hamburger bun and the water. Keeping an eye on Yellow Ribbon it gulps down the hamburger bun, laps up the water, then sniffs our bird, and runs away.

Yellow Ribbon does not register the event. She only feels the cold wetness and hears the sound of her erratic heartbeat in her own ears.

At dawn the next morning Yellow Ribbon's temperature has dropped almost too low for a bird to keep on living. However, during the night the sky has cleared, so when the sun rises above the buildings its rays slant across the street to beneath the hedge where Yellow Ribbon sits. The sun glows upon her grayish-brown back and bestows our bird with desperately needed warmth. It recalls our bird from the very threshold of death.

By mid morning Yellow Ribbon's body temperature is normal, but her hunger is overwhelming. When afternoon comes she is so weak from hunger that she can hardly hold up her head. But then, through her misery, she hears a certain song...

Chirup chirup chirup...

Happy Face perches above her, beside his nest atop the floodlight over the trash can. Indian summer is long past but the bright sun of this November day is warm and the sky is blue so...

Chirrrrp...

Happy Face hears this feeble call.

Chirrrrp...

Happy Face flies into the hedge above Yellow Ribbon and chirps in a way that says, "Well, come on!"

Yellow Ribbon tries to fly but her wings only quiver. She tries to chirp again but this time her mouth only spreads into a wide gape.

To Happy Face, Yellow Ribbon is behaving like a nestling when it begs for food from its parents by quivering its wings and gaping wide its mouth. Purely accidentally Yellow Ribbon is telling Happy Face that she wants to be fed. Happy Face spots a large crumb from a greasy onion-ring next to the garbage can, picks it up, and plops it into Yellow Ribbon's mouth.

Several times this sequence of events is repeated. Eventually Yellow Ribbon learns to gape wide her mouth, even if she doesn't intend to chirp, and to Happy Face these are just the old games of Indian Summer. However, when the sun moves behind a tall building

and cold shadows arrive, he loses all interest in the game and simply flies away leaving Yellow Ribbon begging beneath the hedge.

The food has been enough to keep the flame of life inside Yellow Ribbon burning for at least one more night. Unfortunately, this is the last sunny day these parts will see in a long time. Happy Face will not return to his nest atop the floodlight for the rest of the year.

Each Monday, Wednesday and Friday the garbage men make their rounds. Today, a Friday, they find Yellow Ribbon not far from where they left her.

"Hey, birdy, I thought a cat woulda done got you! How you doin', Baby?"

Today Yellow Ribbon has managed to climb into the hedge's lower branches. From her low perch she watches as Carlos crumbles two stale doughnuts below her and fills another banana-split tray with somebody's undrunk, still-fizzy Sprite. When the men leave, Yellow Ribbon eats and drinks all she wants, finds herself stronger than ever, and then withdraws deep into the hedge's shadows.

The next morning there's still crumbled doughnut and Sprite left, and after her first meal she finds herself feeling better than for a long time. In fact, once she's climbed back into the shrubbery, it occurs to her that probably she could climb even higher.

Slowly and methodically she pulls herself from one branch to another until she's among the hedge's topmost branches. By now she enjoys the best view she's seen in a long time -- a view that revives her spirits and fills her with confidence. What a relief to see something other than gravel, trash, and stunted crabgrass beneath the hedge!

Atop the hedge, for the first time Yellow Ribbon notices that not far away a young Hackberry tree's trunk grows up through the hedge, and rises far above it. The trunk is thickly overgrown with ivy. It's ivy like that which crept up Whitestone Hall's walls where once she roosted so long, long ago. Yellow Ribbon enters the ivy and there she finds a maze of intertwining stems on which a bird can perch and climb.

Using the ivy's stems like a ladder she climbs upward inch by inch. Eventually she reaches a large branch emerging from the ivy jungle so she follows the branch as it extends away from the trunk. Out on the branch she is greeted with a true bird's-eye view, a vista that causes her spirit to soar!

She cannot keep herself from hopping farther and farther along the branch, as far as she can. And what a pleasure when at last she finds herself above the drive-in's parking lot, not far from the drive-in's roof...

Of course, House Sparrows are not famous for thinking things out. It's just natural for them to fly when they want to fly. Therefore, right now our bird simply surprises herself by leaning forward and beating her wings, and fluttering into the cold November air.

Yellow Ribbon's voyage is more falling than flying, for still her body isn't healed enough for real flight. Nonetheless she lands upon the drive-in's roof without hurting herself, and this little success brings as much pleasure to our bird as a little House Sparrow is allowed.

Yellow Ribbon perches at the edge of the drive-in's roof and chirps. She does this for a long time. It's a Monday, so eventually the garbage men come.

"Carlos!" the human-sound says, "it's up there on the roof!"

"Hey, man, our lil' birdy is gittin' around!"

A human steps onto a garbage-can rack, reaches up and takes Yellow Ribbon in his hand.

"Carlos, you think it'd like to be put in that old nest atop the floodlight?"

"If it don' like it, man, it can just jump out. And maybe putting it there is a good idea, you know, 'cause they say it's gonna snow big tonight."

"Looky here little birdy, we got you a good ol' hamburger bun and we're gonna stick it right here next to you... "

In the night, the night before Thanksgiving, the snow does come. With a full stomach Yellow Ribbon perches in the nest watching large snowflakes descend through the floodlight's beam of light. Rising from the floodlight, a beautiful, warm breeze curls around her. From the ventilation shaft in the restaurant's wall beneath the floodlight issue odors of dill pickles, onions, and frying ground beef.

DECEMBER (THE CHRISTMAS TREE)

A week before Christmas, in the zoo's parking lot across the street from Yellow Ribbon's restaurant, the humans erect a Christmas tree. During the day the tree's glittering tinsel sparkles in the sunlight. At night, sparkling colored lights cause the tree to be like nothing our bird has ever seen, and sometimes it snows, making the scene even more wondrous.

Yellow Ribbon's garbage men do not forsake her: Each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday they leave her something to eat. Stale hamburger buns and crumbly, greasy doughnuts keep her alive, but how she yearns for the grain the zebra knocks from its trough!

During recent days her improving health has enabled her to each morning flutter from the nest to the gravel below. After hopping and pecking there for a few minutes she enters the shrubbery, makes her way to the Sycamore's trunk and ascends by the ivy ladder. Then she hops onto the big branch until she's above the drive-in's roof, and from there it's easy to flutter onto the roof. If the sun is shining, before making the short flight from the roof top to her nest, she perches at the roof's corner and chirps and preens, enjoying a noon roost, almost like a normal sparrow.

Flying from the roof into the nest beneath the eaves is the hardest part of her journey. Sometimes she misses, plummets onto the gravel, and then must repeat the entire tree-climbing cycle.

However, lately, Yellow Ribbon hasn't failed to reach her nest. In fact, just yesterday she was strong enough to fly from the gravel to the top of the hedge, and then to fly to the out-jutting Sycamore limb, and then to fly to the roof top.

Of course Yellow Ribbon wants to fly even farther than that. She wants to fly across the street to where she can eat the zebra's grain, hop in the elephant's hay, and be with other House Sparrows. However, the street between her nest and the zoo is very wide and very busy, a loud and bustling barrier too immense to fly over. Too immense for now...

On Christmas eve, Yellow Ribbon notices unusual activity across the street. Late on this sunny afternoon, she perches in her nest as several humans in the zoo's parking lot come together and begin making their human sounds in a strange way:

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright...

Several humans carry yellowish objects made of brass. One is a huge tuba with sunlight reflecting brilliantly from its broadly flaring bell.

Eventually the humans leave the parking lot. Before today, the Christmas tree's lights burned only at night, but today they're left burning all the time.

This curious series of events piques Yellow Ribbon's curiosity. As she perches at the nest's edge straining to see or hear any further activity, she feels within herself a powerful mingling of new-found strength, excitement, and overwhelming yearning to return to her home at the zoo. For the first time since her ordeal began she spreads her wings not with the simple idea of merely flying onto the gravel, but with the purpose of somehow getting back home to the zoo!

She leaps into the cold, December air.

First she flies into the shrubbery's upper branches, and her success only exhilarates her more. She climbs to an opening in the shrubbery where she can flap her wings without hitting twigs and leaves, and again up she flies, this time reaching the Sycamore's big, out-jutting branch. It's the first time she's flown here and she is astonished at how easy it seemed. Not for many weeks has she felt so like a regular House Sparrow. Now she flutters from branch to branch until she's high on the Sycamore's topmost branch.

From here, the busy street below doesn't look nearly as dangerous as earlier it did...

And, look across the street at the zoo... Not only does the parking lot with its blazing Christmas tree look much closer, but also from here you can see the zoo's ponds with their sandy beaches dotted with ducks and geese. And over there, there are walkways and bridges and hot-dog stands and drinking fountains and over there the long buildings, and next to one of the buildings stands a zebra...

How very, very near the Christmas tree seems. Sunlight glistens in its windblown strands of tinsel. Colored lights glow splendidly in the late afternoon's faltering light.

Yellow Ribbon leaps into the cold air, eyes fixed on the zebra's shed. With immense satisfaction she sees the Sycamore's topmost branch being left behind.

Soon she is about to cross the street. A terrible rush of traffic moves below her. And exactly now Yellow Ribbon begins feeling the first flashes of pain stabbing across her breast, and she is losing altitude.

A car, a bus, and then another car pass beneath her, each closer than the last. Already she sees the impossibility of reaching the zebra's shed, or even the wall surrounding the zoo. The best she can hope for is to land on the concrete sidewalk between the wall and the street.

A bus approaches. Traveling the outside lane nearest the zoo, it's a city bus stopping at every major intersection. It stops exactly beneath Yellow Ribbon.

Yellow Ribbon smacks onto the bus's top. She sits there, tilted forward onto her breast and wing-tips, panting hard, her heart speeding, her mind dazed and her entire body hurting. The bus's diesel engine revs up. Our bird feels the bus-top shake and now as the bus lurches forward inertia and wind push her toward the back of the bus. Her claws uselessly scratch at the bus's smooth, metallic top.

Unnoticed by any human, Yellow Ribbon tumbles over the bus's rear. At first the wind pushes her downward, but then other currents curl beneath her and like invisible hands set her sprawling but unharmed onto the sidewalk beside the zoo's wall.

Long Yellow Ribbon huddles at the wall's base. Several humans pass, but none notice her.

Now, as the day's last light withdraws from the street, Yellow Ribbon begins hopping. Pure luck sends her toward the zoo's entrance. The gate is locked but passing beneath its steel bars is easy for a House Sparrow. Our bird enters the parking lot and half hops, half flies toward the big Christmas tree.

The Christmas tree is a large fir and now it stands before her like a mountain on fire. The tinsel flashes and rustles in the wind. Colored lights blink on and off, and large, sparkling ornaments dangle from the big evergreen's boughs. The great tree's pungent odors fill Yellow Ribbon's nostrils.

Over the street noise Yellow Ribbon hears music. Part of the music is human-made, for at Christmas humans make music all the time. But another part of the music is House-Sparrow made, and it comes from inside the fir.

Onto the lowest bough and then the next lowest... then up and up she climbs toward the beautiful chirps until deep inside the majestic tree she finds White Feather, Chipped Beak, Elephant Rider and others.

And Happy Face is there, too

*** THE END ***