

# **THE COWBIRD'S SONG**

**Bill Baynes**

## 1.

He became aware of a luster. He had no language to describe it. He had nothing to compare it to. He had no idea how long it had been there. It was everywhere, a sourceless shine. He was inside it.

Could he get out? He moved and his head bumped into something that stretched, but did not give way. He wriggled and kicked and he could feel how long he was, how big his feet were, but he could not break free.

He sensed something at the front of his head, some extension. He didn't understand what it was, but he discovered he could make it move. It made him hungry.

It was different than his feet. When he moved his long front, there was impact, an impression of collision. Something stopped him and some tiny piece of something fell on him. It wasn't pleasant, this contact, this struck shock, but he did it again.

And again. More pieces fell.

He kept his head moving. He was getting tired, but he was getting hungrier too. He whipped his neck. He hit and hit.

A radiance appeared, an uneven crack of brightness right where he was hitting.

Again. Again and again.

A larger piece fell and he shook his head and vivid light broke onto him – unlikable, burning – and he turned his head away from it and fell forward into a new world.

He struggled upright and shook himself. Little bits of luster were scattered around him. He was surrounded by harsh, inescapable light.

He was sodden, shivering, confused. And hungry.

He was hatched.

“Well, hello,” said Sandy the sparrow. “You’re the first and you’re so ... so ... big.”

His head was so heavy he could hardly lift it. He could barely see her. She was a bustle of brownish gray blur, a shape covered with peculiar fluffy stalks.

“Peep,” he managed.

He didn’t know what it was he wanted. But he wanted hugely. It consumed him.

When Sandy hung a worm over his wide-open mouth, he gulped it down so fast he never tasted it. How did he learn to swallow?

“Yikes!” Sandy said. “A bottomless pit.”

He was drying out, getting a little stronger and a lot louder. He had no trouble being heard. When the sparrow settled, he lurched toward the edge, squawking.

When Sandy took off again, he tried to taste the walls, the lumps of luster he sprawled across, his own legs, the air, anything. He stumbled around the nest clacking his mini-baby beak until the sparrow returned and fed him.

This occurred over and over that day, every day, until finally he forgot what he wanted and slept. Then the little sparrow nudged him aside then and settled softly over the rest of her eggs.

Once he woke and she was gone. He was frantic, famished, frightened. He flopped in every direction, searching for her. When one of the eggs began to shake, he fell on it, bill snapping, thinking it was good to eat. Food wriggled.

His tiny sister did not. Not for long.

When Sandy touched down with another worm, he leaped for it. The sparrow hurried to her dead newborn. He swallowed.

Then he started to screech. Sandy was prodding him. It was clear to her now. He didn't look like a sparrow. He was too aggressive. And the eggs ... she couldn't lose any more.

He didn't like her pushing him. It hurt. He didn't want to move, but he inched across the nest, staying away from the pointy beak.

Half-lifted up the twiggy wall, he balanced on the edge. He screamed in protest. He backed onto a branch, fluttering his unformed wings, still crying, appealing to his mother.

He glanced down and – Whoa! He swayed and looked back at Sandy, who seemed to be tilting.

He fell.

He landed on soft undergrowth, unhurt but utterly confounded. He craned his neck and saw Sandy looking down from far above. She yanked her head out of sight.

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