

## Picture Perfect

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Ray Skipter had finally decided on vegetarianism, but the way he arrived at this conclusion was much more interesting than the gleaming new cookbook he just picked up.

He was a *professional* window fitter. Being a small business owner, he needed to maintain that sort of air about him. He installed all kinds of windows—small ones that peeked out from attics; cloudy ones in bathrooms that concealed the toilet user but let in just the right amount of light; ones above the sink that offered a view while doing the dishes—but Ray's favorites were those of the picture variety.

He loved the grandiose look at the world they offered while positioned behind the couch in a living room or next to the dining room table. Wherever they were, they opened the area to a seemingly infinite array of possibilities. Maybe he just liked big windows.

It all started when he got a call for a job down by Marsh Lake, a small town almost twenty minutes from his home on the outskirts of Stratton. The caller was an older lady who wanted a nice picture window in her living room. Ray accepted the proposal immediately, set a date in his planner that worked for the client, and hung up happy. Up to this point, it was going to be the biggest window he had ever installed. Being only a few years into his self-employment, he had mostly been on average jobs where he replaced a frame, fixed a botched DIY, or fitted a

new pane of glass into a space that had previously been shattered. He was excited to have such a daunting prospect.

He surfed the web for longer than he probably should have, checking all his local dealers and then eventually moving on up to places where a shipment would be necessary. The small town chums didn't have anything big enough, so he ordered a sheet of glass from a faraway place. When it arrived, Ray marveled in its vastness and treated it like royalty. He didn't want a single scratch on its surface. Finally, the day arrived.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Barnes. My name is Raymond Skipter, but you can just call me Ray." He plastered on his best customer service smile and offered his hand. She took it delicately in her own and pumped it once.

"And you can call me Margarine, like the butter." She chuckled at this, even though Ray suspected it was a line she had used more than a few times. He was tempted to say that margarine was more of a fat than butter but knew better than to say such things to a lady.

"I got your big window in the back of my van here. How about you show me the spot you want it?"

"Well," Margarine began as she led him around the outside of the house, "I do have a big window in the spot, but it's scuffed up so bad that I can hardly see the birds when they get to my feeders."

"I totally understand." Ray had a few bird feeders in his backyard himself. On his days off, he would stare out the window that he himself had installed and admire the fluttering creatures as they fought over sunflower seeds and buried their beaks into suet cakes. Nearing the back of the house, Ray saw exactly what she was talking about. The sheet of glass that stood there was a grimy, lousy excuse for a picture window. He suspected that even a hearty cleaning wouldn't do it any good and his suspicions were soon confirmed by Margarine herself.

"I tried scrubbing it down real good with every kind of cleaner I could find down at the hardware store. It just doesn't seem to come clean." Margarine seemed disappointed at this, and Ray could tell she had put a lot of effort into something that he knew was a fruitful task. Nevertheless, he offered his sympathy.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get this new window put in and it'll be so clear you'll hardly be able to tell it's there." She brightened up a bit after that.

The installation went well. He carried the huge pane of glass into

the backyard using a giant, handled suction cup for support, and was able to take the old window out with no issues. Margarine had gone to do some errands while he worked, but she showed up just before he finished the final polish, mouth gaping at the clarity of the view.

"Oh, my days! That looks absolutely stunning. I'm not sure I'll be able to get anything done now; all I want to do is admire my new view." From her praising, Ray felt a certain sense of pride at doing a good job. She paid for the installation, graciously accepted his business card by saying she'll spread the word, and ushered him out the door with a smile plastered on her face. All seemed fine and dandy in Ray's mind. The customer was more than satisfied with his window, and the bigger project had gone without a hiccup.

A few days later he got a call on his work phone.

"Hello? Is this Skipter Windows? I need to talk to Ray." The voice on the other end was distressed, panicked.

"Speaking."

"You need to come over to my house and take a look at what you've done. Your darn window is too clear."

Ray was confused, "Too clear? May I ask who I'm talking to?"

"This is Margarine Barnes, down in Marsh Lake. You installed a picture window at my house just last week."

"Oh yes, Margarine like the butter. I'm not sure I get what you're saying. You said the window is too clear?"

"It certainly is. I think you need to come down here and take a look at this."

Ray's thoughts were buzzing on the drive down to Margarine's place. He wasn't sure what exactly she was talking about when it came to the window being 'too clear.' For a second, he imagined her running into it late at night, thinking it was an open door rather than a closed window, and giggled at the thought. The humor petered out when he thought about Margarine getting hurt because of it and suing Skipter Windows until there wasn't one anymore. He pulled into Margarine's driveway and greeted her at the front door before following her around the house in a strong haze of déjà vu. The window was still standing, which was good, and Ray wasn't sure what the problem was.

"There! Don't you see it?" Margarine was nearly crying, pointing at the ground.

Ray did see it, or rather, them. Littered beneath the clear barrier

were multiple splotches of brown, white, and black. He stepped closer and was surprised to discover that they were birds. Nearly half a dozen sparrows, songbirds, and various other feathered friends were lying in heaps below the window, necks askew and wings broken. They had evidently mistaken the window as a gap of nothing, running headfirst into eternity.

"Isn't it just horrible? I can't take it anymore. They thump against the window all day thinking that there's nothing there! Oh, the poor things."

"Is this all of them?" Ray was still in somewhat of a daze, and his eyes were locked onto the crumpled forms laying on the ground. One of them was still twitching.

"No, not nearly. This is just from *today!*"

Ray was dumbfounded. It had been nearly a week since he had installed the window, which meant that dozens of birds had met the same grisly end. He bent down and gently scooped one of them up. It was warm and soft in his palm. It looked like any other sparrow he had seen, but Ray saw something special in it. Something that excited him.

"Well, are you just going to stare at it or are you going to fix this? I can't have all these birds dying just because I want a good view." Margarine was crying for real now. The tears streamed down her face and she sniffled between breaths.

Ray broke from his trance, understanding that he needed to maintain his professional demeanor, "I'm not too sure what I can do. You can dirty up the window or get some decals to stick on there so that they won't fly into it as much. You probably won't be able to stop them completely, but it would at least help." He paused for a moment, before adding, "I can clean these up for you too, Margarine. I'm real sorry that this happened. I've never seen anything like it."

"Please do. I don't want to touch another dead bird if I can help it. I've been throwing them into my trash can all week." She went inside with a huff, presumably to buy some of those decals off Amazon, and left him standing alone with the corpses. He scooped them up gently, one by one, and placed them into a plastic grocery bag that he retrieved from his truck. They huddled together at the bottom, pushed against one another by their own weight. He left Mrs. Barnes' place by saying goodbye and letting her know to call him if the same thing kept happening after the decals were put on. On the drive home, he couldn't stop his

eyes from lingering on the bag of birds, resting in the passenger seat, concealed from his view by the thin, opaque plastic. He could still see them underneath it. Formless blobs of brown and gray that refused to offer details. Halfway home, he opened the bag.

It was nearly the end of summer, and Ray was entering what he considered the busy season. Everyone wanted new frames and panes before the autumn chill began to seep through their old ones. No one wanted to get a window replaced during the wintertime. This year's busy season also carried with it an unexpected uptick in corporate contracts. Gone were the days when his bills were paid by local families who had a future doctor in their hands. Here were the days when law offices and college campuses pushed contracts to a blue-collared local so they could save a few bucks. Ray Skipter wasn't complaining. One of the better parts of this was that he was installing more picture windows than ever before. What had started as a rare few, beginning with old Margarine, had resulted in a picture-sized window nearly every week.

One of his biggest jobs came right before the first frost hit at the University of Portsmouth up by Burnsville. They had wanted Ray to replace nearly every window in one of their oldest halls. Ray was sorry to see them go. The old windows had been divided by muntins that gave the building a gothic aesthetic, which fit the bill since the brick and mortar were well over a hundred years old. The front entrances were adorned with fanciful brick designs, and the insides hosted the languages and philosophy departments. The university's PR group had rallied behind replacing these antique windows with sleek modern ones, a move that Ray didn't necessarily approve of but couldn't deny because of the pay. They were in the process of slowly renovating the building to revitalize departments that didn't get much enrollment. But that was really a crock of shit. The enrollment would stay the same, in Ray's opinion, and maybe even go down after they erased the historical charm.

The installation had gone smoothly. None of the windows had broken and there had been a stretch of good weather while Ray was sequestered to the rickety scaffolding that clung to the side of the building. He was just finishing up the final window, giving it a polish and making sure the seals were sound, when a loud thump nearly sent him hurtling towards the ground. He looked around him and saw that no one was nearby. It was late in the afternoon and most of the students who had been milling about all day were now back in their apartments or

dorms. He was about to lower himself safely back to the ground when he noticed a smudge in the window that he had just finished polishing. The smudge was dusty and possessed a red haze. Ray had a suspicion of what had caused the mark and was proved correct when he looked towards his feet. Laying on the grate of the scaffolding was a small brown bird. Its body was canted awkwardly at an angle that was wholly unnatural, and its beak was skewed nearly backwards. The poor thing had flown full speed into the invisible barrier, shattering its body and ending a glorious flight in an abrupt, sad way of being. Without a second thought, he scooped the bird up into his hand and placed it into his pocket. Blood had been leaking from its nostrils. It was a dark red, rich with oxygen and vitality. His palm was smeared with it, the streak pushing up towards his wrist from the motion of stuffing the small animal into his pocket. By the time he reached the ground for quitting time, his hand was licked clean.

Ray was a man of many trades when it came to windows. When business was lacking, he took up the methodical job of cleaning windows to pay the bills. He didn't like cleaning windows as much as installing them, but it oftentimes gave him a good look at the work other installers were doing around the area. There had even been a few instances in which he had convinced a client that the windows were not up to specifications, and that they would do best to let him reinstall them. He didn't shy away from this. A good window wouldn't make or break a good home, but a bad window could.

There was an incident a few weeks back when he had been cleaning windows for a nice family over in Brewersville. They were a young couple who didn't have a kid over the age of five. The fingerprint smudges relegated below two feet were certainly evidence of this. Ray was doing his thing, whistling a tune from the Eagles, using the wand to deftly scrape across each pane with smooth, unbroken movements, when an imperfection caught his eye. There was a spot on the window to the nursery where the frame hadn't quite settled. The gap was large enough to let in cool air or a few bugs but not big enough to grab the attention of any average Joe. He had brought up the issue with Bart and his wife Joan before he had left.

"Say, before I go, I noticed that there was a bit of an issue with the window to the nursery. Do you happen to know who installed it?"

"I'm not sure," Bart had replied, "We haven't gotten anything big done to the house since we bought it last year. I'm sure it'll be fine if

we've made it this far."

"Oh yeah, it'll probably be okay, but it wouldn't hurt to fix it either. Could save a few bucks on your gas bill this winter if you do."

Bart had looked at his wife, who shook her head slightly, "I think we're okay. We're not afraid of throwing on a sweater or two inside during the winter. We all run pretty warm anyways."

Ray had hesitated and then left before saying more. There was some part of him that had wanted to push it, but he knew that being overly persistent was likely to lose him a customer quicker than gaining one. It wasn't too weeks later before he had caught their last name on the second to last page of the local paper. The family was grieving after one of their sons, a three month old named Sammy, who had been found dead in his crib. It turns out the kid was allergic to bee stings.

He had one more job for the day in Stratton, not a few blocks away from his own home. This was a quick one; just a few small windows and a single sliding glass door that led into the Crafton family backyard. He saw the BBQ grill out back and his mouth watered. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten all day aside from munching on unsalted sunflower seeds as he worked. Popping another handful into his mouth, he squirted a few pumps of his own special mixture of window cleaner. It was really only a few different household names dumped unevenly into a spray bottle from Walmart, but it boosted his credibility to say that he developed his own formula. Besides, it's about the scrub of the sponge more than the zip in the chemical. Cleaning was meditative for Ray. He didn't listen to music or podcasts or an audiobook as he worked. Instead, he preferred to hear the swish of the microfiber towel as it rubbed across the glass. The grating pump of the cleaner being sprayed into the window. The squeal of the wand gathering liquid. The sounds and smell of the job were enjoyable and didn't need to be covered.

There were only two windows left, both in the master bedroom, when Ray heard the muffled thumping that came from the living room. He walked across the house to investigate the noise, hoping he would see what he wanted to see. A swarm of birds had swooped a little too low on one of their acrobatic passes, and nearly a dozen of them had collided with the still gleaming windows. Sure, Ray knew he would have to wipe down again before he left, eliminating any evidence, but feelings akin to the joy of Christmas morning had begun to seep into Ray Skipter. He whistled as he worked.

There were ten birds in the plastic shopping bag that Ray held in his hands as he walked up the front steps of his modest home. Two of them were still alive, presumably with broken wings or legs. Just enough to keep them kicking. He liked it when they stayed alive for a while. There was a spare bedroom towards the back of his home where he kept them. Before going into the kitchen, he tossed these two survivors into the carpeted room and locked the door behind them. They joined a multitude of other prisoners. There were woodpeckers with streaks of brown and gray in their feathers, finches that possessed bold yellow markings and thick beaks, chickadees with fluffy black and white feathers, and a few red-winged blackbirds that croaked at the new arrivals. They were both mere house sparrows but stood out for a moment amongst the others who shied away from them instinctively.

Ray sang a tune as he worked. "He rocks in the tree tops all day long, hoppin' and a-boppin' and a-singing his song." The feathers of the birds fluttered to the countertop as he plucked. He was careful to make sure none fell on the floor, as he had plans for them, but the most precious bits were the glistening medallions of meat hiding beneath the feathered exterior. There was now a row of miniature breasts that ran alongside a white plastic cutting board. "All the little birds on Jaybird Street, love to hear the robin go tweet, tweet, tweet."

Ray had been eating songbirds for a while now. It had started when he had gotten called to Margarine's house nearly a year ago. The birds lying in a heap on the ground had fascinated him. For some reason, he had felt compelled to take them with him rather than throw them in the trash that day. He wasn't entirely sure why. His mouth had begun watering on the drive home.

By this point, he considered himself a pioneer in fowl cooking. He populated and even founded several threads, blogs, and forums on various websites advocating for the consumption of otherwise unheard of meal choices. He wasn't sure how he would prepare these ones. There was a recipe he had developed and published last month. It was a circle of roasted finches surrounding blue jay foie gras. The creation had been meticulous. Harvesting the jay livers alone had taken him nearly two weeks of patrolling. It would have been much quicker if he substituted other species, but what could he say, he was a purist.

His contemporaries enjoyed the presentation of his meals more than anything else. The variable plumage of songbirds begged for a

beautiful plating at each meal. He had lined one dish with feathers, placed a few primaries so they stuck up like a frill on another, and even arranged them upon the table to resemble the birds who had grown them. He felt he was doing a mighty service to the animals, much more given than for any cow or pig.

They didn't like it so much when he discussed uncooked meals and he felt that they truly weren't able to wrap their head around his genius. Sushi prepared with the uncooked brains of finches possessed a slight metallic undertone which sent glorious shivers of ecstasy down his spine with each bite. He also regularly munched on raw wings and legs. The typical American tradition of chicken wings was archaic. Smothering the flesh with batter and cooking until the juices no longer had a proper home, only to cover up what taste remained with a litany of sauces that were nearly blasphemous to Ray by now. He couldn't go for more than a day or two without eating. In the beginning, he had only indulged here and there when the opportunity arose. Not unsurprisingly, the local grocery store didn't carry cardinal. That was where the Chirp Shack came into play. That was what he had started calling it. The back room which had become rank with the smell of droppings housed a repository of backup plans in case he didn't come across anything fresh.

He scoffed at the idea of preparing lowly poultry dishes along the lines of chicken, duck, and turkey. He believed that the true holy grails of meat lay within the birds everyone saw in their backyards, picking at the cracked sunflower seeds and drinking sweet syrup from feeders. He gained a sense of freedom from eating what others deemed inedible. He also knew that with this afternoon's fare, tonight's dinner would be one for the recipe books.

The new arrivals had been gradually accepted into the ranks of Ray's prisoners. They chirped anxiously amongst themselves, sharing what went on in this strange place, how long it had been since they felt the wind under their wings, and the strange happenings that had resulted in their capture. It was the sort of interspecies communication they would have turned away from when they were free. Things like that dissolved when situations became desperate. One of the sparrows that had been soaring high with its compatriots that very afternoon looked around the room with interest. There was nothing in the room aside from bare walls and carpet, or what had been. The tan shag had nearly been drowned out by the black and white paintings of its fellow prisoners.

There was no closet, but two windows allowed jutting rays of sunlight to burst into the room. Several of the birds had managed to get themselves onto the ledges of these windows, broken wings and legs aside, and wouldn't come down even to eat from the seeds that Ray scattered across the floor or drink from the metal bowl of water in the center of the room. The sparrow flew up to one of the ledges, finding that it had merely been stunned by the impact rather than mortally wounded. Its wings felt sore but strong.

The windows were kept in impeccable condition so they could peer into the backyard. It was decently sized, with a small grove of trees lining the far end, and a multitude of bird feeders that hosted many eager beaks. The free birds flitted from pole to pole, feasting while those inside the room looked on with weariness. While they could see into the outside world, there was nothing the outside world could do for them.

The sparrow was not quick to give up, however, and flew around the room in what started at first as panicked circles. It soon turned into exercise for both the body and mind. It noticed that the towel which had been shoved under the crack of the door hadn't been replaced after Ray had last been there. The other birds were either too weary or too dumb to notice; of which the sparrow wasn't sure. It landed at the base of the thick oak door and peered out from underneath. The hallway was dim and lit only by the glaring fluorescents in the kitchen. Whoever lived here was strange. It slid underneath the door, panicking slightly as its body became stuck in the middle, and then popped out into the hallway. Aside from the whispering chirps behind it and the singing that came from the kitchen, the house was silent.

"Rockin' Robin, tweet, tweet, tweet. Rockin' Robin, tweet, tweedle-lee-dee." The sparrow knew that its chances were slim, so it jumped into the air and burst into the kitchen.

There were bodies everywhere. They were the first thing the sparrow noticed. Wings lay askew attached to dead birds on the countertop, feathers were scattered across the entire kitchen as the man at the counter was dancing and singing, tossing fuzzy down into the air and letting it drift lazily toward the floor. Occasionally, a white tongue would dart out of his mouth and snatch a piece from the air, and the man would close his eyes in euphoric bliss. He didn't notice the sparrow since he was too engrossed in this ritual, and the bird managed to make its way into the living room. Its escape was nearly cut short. An entire wall had

been converted into a giant window, opening up the living room so that the backyard was merely an extension of the house. The sparrow remembered the pain of its collision earlier that afternoon and stopped itself short before crashing into this one.

“Aagh! I knew one of you fuckers would escape eventually.” Ray stood behind it. His hand was white knuckling a butcher knife and the other was curled into a fist that was quivering in the sparrow’s direction. It bolted. Speeding around the left side of the room, hugging the wall, and sticking towards the ceiling, the bird made its last ditch effort at a longer life. Ray swiped through the air with his knife and missed. He screamed in frustration.

The kitchen was now filled with a sizzling noise that made the bird’s stomach turn. A massive black cast iron pan was sitting atop the stove, emitting steam and pops of juices as the tiny bite-sized chunks of flesh developed their crust. It flew in the only direction it hadn’t been yet, which was down a narrow hallway that branched off in the opposite direction of the Chirp Shack. The hallway was also filled with windows, not nearly as large as in the living room, but big enough to make the narrow space feel open. Roomy, even.

It felt a slight breeze as it passed by one of them and nearly crashed into the wall. The second to last window was open just a crack. It flew down to the sill and began scrambling through the opening. It could hear Ray stumbling through the kitchen, pausing for a moment to flip the bird burgers.

It wasn’t going to make it.

The gap was simply too small, and the bird was simply too big. It was stuck in the middle just like the door in the dreadful Chirp Shack and soon the man would be coming down the hallway towards him and when he got there he would slam his fist on the top of the window and crush it or cut it with his knife or snatch it up in his hand and squeeze until he was satisfied and then he would raise its broken body to his face and—

Ray’s heavy feet clomped along the hardwood floors, growing louder and louder. He had spotted it. The sparrow heard the man chuckling to himself. He was muttering something about stupid birds and their windows. The sparrow decided to give up. That this was the time to be done with it all. It had been through enough.

But there was something else.

After a split second it realized there was wriggle room. The fresh

air pumping through the window was the scent of freedom and it shuffled its body one last time.

The tip of the knife embedded itself in wood as the sparrow broke free. It soared high into the air and was soon beyond the range of the terrible man's anguished wail.

Ray was furious. This was the first time a bird had escaped his grasp and the great number of specimens still in his possession did nothing to ease him. He marched back into the kitchen, surly despite the smell of meat, and resumed his dinner preparations.

With shaking hands, he took the meat out of the pan and let it rest on the cutting board. Something needed to be done to calm himself. He went to the living room window and began squirting cleaner over it. The swooping of a microfiber towel, the sharp scent of window cleaner, and the perfect view of the backyard helped to soothe him. It made him happier seeing all the birds that populated his backyard feeders. Over the last few months, he had bought nearly every kind of bird feeder imaginable. There were long and skinny feeders that held perches for small sparrows. Next to those were triple-barreled feeders that only emptied out at the bottom with a large tray. He had issues with squirrels at first, but a little PAM cooking spray on the stands solved that problem. He loved the look of the nectar feeders that housed sweet concoctions of cherry and pure sugar. Their bulbous forms stood out among the ramrod straight feeders that stereotypically took over a backyard. He had rammed several posts into the ground with platforms on top that resembled plates. On these he would scrape spoonfuls of jelly or marmalade for the orioles and others with sweet beaks. Sometimes, if he felt like splurging, he would buy oranges and grapefruit to cut in half and place atop the plates. The birds went absolutely feral for these arrangements. They shoved their faces deep into the flesh of the fruits and Ray watched them with mesmerized joy. He had set up some feeders inside as well. They were decoys to incite collisions with the glass. It had worked fairly well so far, and he believed that more birds had been stunning themselves than before he set them up, but he wanted something more.

That was enough daydreaming for today. He felt much better, and besides, a five star meal awaited him and his theoretical guests. He swooped into the kitchen.

"Friends, family, and exalted guests, welcome. I present to you a feast of unimaginable proportions. Dug from the pits of my own creative

genius, I have prepared a three course meal that would satisfy even the snootiest of critics.” Ray marched around the kitchen with exaggerated vigor. He had donned a tan sport coat and kept both buttons undone. His bloodstained shirt shone beneath it. “The courses have been meticulously arranged for your eating pleasure. First, we will begin with the house salad. This selection of greens has been pruned from the finest grocery store down on 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. However, the real star of the show is not the greens, but everything else. Each dish is adorned with a soft-boiled Jay’s egg. The yolk is soft and creamy. Let it roll over your tongue like a delicate wine. Next to the egg are chopped hearts from various choice songbirds. The heart is one of the most nutrient dense organs and it provides this dish with the zip that makes your mouth water. Finally, it’s all covered with a nuthatch balsamic glaze which is made by blending nuthatch breasts with balsamic vinegar. With a combination of secret spices, the vinegar is slowly reduced over the course of an afternoon, eventually culminating in the pinnacle of flavor available for your drizzling needs.

Ray’s speech for the first course was over, and he sat at the table he had been setting as he spoke. Tonight was a performance for him. He munched quietly on his salad, occasionally looking over at the bowls he had set out for his invisible guests. He finished by licking his bowl clean and placing it back in the cupboard. He sat back down at the table and was still for a moment before clearing away his guests’ portions.

“Ah! I see we are enjoying the first course, I am glad. Our next course is meant to pique the curiosity of the tongue. A homespun classic in the form of fine dining.” Ray began placing plates onto the table loaded with food. “What we have here are seared sparrow medallions with an accompanying gravy. They are seasoned only with salt and pepper to preserve their genuine taste. You will notice notes of sunflower, orange peel, and fresh air within these cuts. Each medallion is garnished with a pinfeather. It functions as a beautiful display of color given to us by these very birds but also fills another purpose: a toothpick! Please, dig in. We wouldn’t want it to get cold now, would we?”

Ray was about to sit down for his second course when he heard a thump from the living room. An excited palpitation ran through his body. A bird must have hit the window. He ran into the living room and began inspecting the outside world. Before he could find the source of the sound, another thump rang out, and a bird flopped to the ground,

leaving a smear of blood behind.

"Holy hell! You must've been booking it to leave a mark like that. I'm gonna have to clean that after dinner." Ray remarked as he studied the bird. It had run into the window with enough force to shove its head into its chest cavity. Blood spurted from its eyes, nose, and ears. Ray watched the bird take its dying breath. Another bird ran into the window, not as hard as the previous, but enough to kill it instantly. Ray couldn't believe his luck. The silence between the thumps slowly began to shorten as more and more birds met their grisly fate.

"Yes! Yes! I can't believe it. Fly to me my little birdies. Fly, fly, fly!"

Ray began to sing "Rockin' Robin" at the top of his lungs, spinning in circles as the murmuration of birds that had been gathering above his house began dropping down into his backyard to greet an invisible forcefield of death. They were endless. Timeless. Lifeless. They collected on the ground at the bottom of the window and died buried beneath their friends as Ray sang and jumped around, not noticing the growing smear of blood and feathers that grew on the center of the window. When silence no longer existed between the collisions, when the non-stop suicide of the birds became unignorable, Ray began to get nervous. The flow of birds wouldn't end. It seemed like it never would. They piled onto the ground and covered the window in gore. He screamed for them to stop. He begged. He offered seeds and nuts and fruits beyond their wildest dreams while kneeling against the window.

The glass spiderwebbed and cracked as the beaks pummeled its surface. Ray's intuition had proved reliable with the death of baby Sammy. It had proved reliable when seeking out gaps or weak spots in window composition. It had proved more than reliable in flouting recipes of grand proportion for his eager followers.

This time, his infallible intuition told him to run.

Soon after ducking into the kitchen, a loud crash came from the living room, and a wave of noise rolled through the house. They poured through the open window and filled the house, tearing at Ray as he swatted into the air. Their sharp beaks stabbed into him, and he groped for them, crushing dozens in his fists with his eyes squeezed shut. He needed to get away. They were going to kill him. Other windows throughout the house began bursting inwards as the droves of birds shattered the glass. They liberated the Chirp Shack, and the few able-bodied prisoners flew out into the world, free to do and fly as they pleased.

Ray scrambled across the floor on his hands and knees, aiming for the bathroom. It was the only room in the house without a window. They pummeled his back and left deep gouges in his skin. His hands were covered in blood by both him and the birds he murdered. He forced the door shut after crawling into the bathroom. They squeezed under the door and began pestering him, two replacing every one he killed. This was it. He was going to die in this bathroom with no place to go. He thought of every window he had ever replaced, every pane he had painstakingly cleaned. None of them had been worth it. He shoved a towel under the door and spent the rest of his time killing the remaining birds. He threw them all into the tub and closed the curtain.

He was alone now.

The fluttering outside his door didn't go away for a long time. Ray wasn't sure how long it took exactly, but his knees were stiff when he finally worked up the nerve to leave. He left his house and didn't come back for three days, sleeping in the back of his work van, cancelling all his appointments, and driving aimlessly around the area. He visited all the places where he had picked dead or stunned birds: businesses that had entire walls as windows; university campuses that house giant windows where birds struck and then fell into the mulched landscaping; residential neighborhoods where the sun glittered off windows as he drove. Each place lured its victims with the prospects of exploration, new foods to be eaten, or shelter to keep them safe.

His final stop was at the Walmart in Stratton. He didn't feel like cooking at home much anymore, but when he eventually came around to it, he knew he would need some good recipes to follow.

If you've ever read a book or short story that was so scary it knocked your socks off, **Brenden Kimpe** would like the recommendation. When he isn't reading or writing, Brenden enjoys cooking, listening to music, watching movies, and fawning over his cat, Marcelline.