

## The Bird

by Sue Hitchcock

In the city where Michael lived most of the birds were grey. They strutted around outside the shops looking for scraps of food on the pavement.

In the park the little brown birds flew into the bushes when boys came to play football or a dog was snuffling around in the leaves.

One day Michael's mum said, "Why don't we go and stay with Grandpa for a holiday."

Grandpa lived near the sea. In his living room Grandpa had a bird in a cage. It was green with a hooked beak and it could talk. Mostly it copied the music at the start of "Match of the Day" but sometimes it would say, "Shut up, you silly bird!" and it sounded just like Grandpa.

After Grandpa had given them their tea, Michael asked him, "Is the bird a girl or a boy?"

"Well, Mikey, I don't know for sure. I call it Cocky."

"He sounds just like you."

"He might sound like you, if you spoke to him everyday for a year."

Michael shrugged his shoulders and made a face.

The next morning Grandpa suggested they feed the birds in the garden. Michael could see some black-coloured birds sitting on the roof of the house opposite. They watched as he tore the bread into pieces and threw it on the path.



Only when they went inside and shut the door did seven birds fly down and snatch up the bread.

Grandpa said, "We need a bird table."

In the shed he found a broom handle and an old tray. Then he hammered a long nail through the tray into the end of the broom handle. "That should do!"

Grandpa pushed the broom-handle deep into the ground, till the tray was low enough for Michael to reach. They put out the bread and retreated indoors to watch.

The birds had been watching and waiting. They seemed to approve of the new table, holding on the rim with their claws.

The next day one bird came and perched on the table while Michael was still there. He looked at the bird and it looked back with one blue eye. (The other eye looked the other direction, watching for danger.) Michael made a little click with his tongue and the bird made a gentle cry in answer.

When Michael woke the next morning he could hear the birds' strange cries, halfway between a click and a mew. He would save some of his cereal as well as a piece of bread for them today.



Surely the bird waiting at the table was the same one as yesterday. Michael offered him some crumbs in the palm of his hand and the bird took them. Did he dare to touch the bird? Would it peck him? Slowly he offered a finger and the bird tilted its head away, offering its neck. Michael gently touched the feathers where its grey hood met the black feathers of its body. He shivered and closed his eyes at the softness.

The friendship between them grew. Next the bird sat on Michael's shoulder and introduced his wife. They must be a pair, as they would perch side by side and groom each other's feathers.

Michael wished he could fly, and he thought maybe the bird could teach him. At the table he asked the bird by spreading his arms wide and the bird spread his wings too. Michael moved his arms up and down, but the bird shook his head.

He showed how to turn his wings and push downwards, which almost launched him into the sky. Michael tried but he was too heavy, even if he jumped.

“We should take a bus ride up to Beachy Head. There are skylarks up there, as well as seabirds and buzzards.” Grandpa arranged the trip and Mum made a picnic.

There were lovely birds on the clifftop, but they were strangers. Yet in the sky other things were flying, not birds, but like parachutes.

“Grandpa, are they kites?”

“No, Lad. It’s people flying, just for fun. Can you see they are in a seat hanging underneath the parachute thing?”

One came low and the man waved. Michael knew then, that he would fly one day and maybe he would meet his friend, the bird, up there.