

f e a t h e r l e s s



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*a novel*

a.g. mojtabai

**S L / . N T**  
B O O K S

## FEATHERLESS

A Novel

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To my daughter Chitra F. Mojtabai:  
You collaborated with me on every page of this manuscript.  
You bled over each and every word as much as I did.  
Without you, *Featherless* would never have taken flight.  
This book is half yours.

I dedicate this book to the wise and kind women who  
have been my caregivers. I have learned so much from you.  
Thank you for your attention and friendship, your patience  
and compassion. Here's to my Texas Toughies: Lisa Tucek,  
Pandora Box, Kimberley "Kiki" Grantham,  
Tammie Whitley, and Anna Oritz.

And to Ramin Mojtabai and Masoumeh Amin-Esmail:  
Long may you two reign.

A.G. (Grace) Mojtabai  
October 7, 2024  
Amarillo, Texas

In the end, only a small number of all this great company arrived at that sublime place to which the hoopoe had led them. Of the thousands of birds almost all had disappeared. Many had been lost in the ocean, others had perished on the summits of the high mountains, tortured by thirst; others had their wings burnt and their hearts dried up by the fire of the sun; others were devoured by tigers and panthers; others died of fatigue in the deserts and in the wilderness, their lips parched and their bodies overcome by the heat; some went mad and killed each other for a grain of barley; others, enfeebled by suffering and weariness, dropped on the road unable to go further; others, bewildered by the things they saw, stopped where they were, stupefied; and many, who had started out from curiosity or pleasure, perished without an idea of what they set out to find.

So then, out of all those thousands of birds, only thirty reached the end of the journey. And even these were bewildered, weary and dejected, with neither feathers nor wings.

—Farid Ud-Din Attar  
*The Conference of the Birds*  
Translated by Garcin  
de Tassy and C.S. Nott

I





## I

### Birds on a Branch

FIVE—two men, three women, on a bench—  
Five birds on a branch overhead—  
Five featherless bipeds perched on a bench—  
A moment of perfect synchrony.  
One lifts off—  
Now there are four.

## 2

### Daniel: Waking Late

THE PHONE was ringing—a gnat in his ear. The night before Daniel had thrown himself on the bed fully dressed (shoelaces too much of a bother to unlace). So when the phone began to ring, he pressed his face deep down into the pillow. When that failed to blot out the sound, he burrowed deeper. It was quieter there. Now he was running in his dream, only waking a half-second before crashing into the pavement. His heart lurched and skipped.

His eyes opened to full light. The phone was ringing. Had it been ringing all night?

*“Where are you?”*

*Who asked that?*

He burrowed once more and waited until the words became a mere fizzing in his ear.

But the phone wouldn't stop ringing.



Daniel was rushing, almost running. He had been summoned to the Deputy Director's office. By now, he had worked out all the shortcuts on the route there.

*This must be important.* Passing the Restricted Access sign, Daniel felt important. He took the stairs two at a time.

But the Deputy Director was displeased.

He was a man of moods, and Daniel had read this wrong.

"Do you realize how hard we worked to get you situated? You're one lucky boy! Your rent and meals are taken care of! And you receive a salary! You can walk to work! We've been calling you since 5:00 a.m.!"

True enough: Daniel did and did not want to be reached. He had reason to be wary. It felt too easy to fall into other people's plans for him. He was uncomfortable with the word "situated," one of the Deputy Director's favorites. It did not fit his case, as he saw it. "Perched" would be more accurate but nothing so permanent as being "situated."

Often, Daniel would summarize his situation as "betwixt and between." Literally. His apartment had two windows: one overlooking Brewster Municipal Park and its playground and the other one facing the entrance to the Residence at Shady Rest, Home for the Aged, where he worked ten hours a day. He feared that his entire life might be already mapped along these two coordinates, that he could too easily be "situated" here, unable to leave—on call forever. Daniel thought of this job as a placeholder, nothing he had ever considered as

a career. It had more or less been dropped in his lap—and proved a godsend in that respect—but it wasn't anything that would have occurred to him to go out of his way to apply for.

Peeved as he was, the Deputy Director had an assignment for him:

“We need you to handle something, Daniel. We need to nip this thing in the bud. PR needs to do some damage control.”



The present issue was this: the night before, the emergency alarm had sounded at 4:21 a.m. Daniel had failed to hear it (or had he?). As he was now informed, the backstory behind management's urgent call stemmed from an incident that took place some years back. There had been a middle-of-the-night escape attempt by two love-stricken residents. They had been promptly collected and safely returned, but the former director, welcoming the friendly attentions of the press, made free use of the word “elopement” (an old-fashioned word rarely used these days, a euphemism covering prison breaks and runaway weddings alike). He had imagined the romantic version of their story might be a boon for recruitment and worked to keep it in the local news. That had been a mistake. He was promptly sacked, the event was not to be mentioned, and the present state-of-the-art alarm system had been installed. There had been no breaches since, until the night before. This

time, it had been an actual elopement at the hopeful outset, but the fugitives who were fetched back that morning had been confused and shivering in their robes and slippers. That wouldn't be good publicity.



Daniel assured the Deputy Director that he would say what he had been told to say. That there was no security breach, merely a mechanical malfunction of the emergency back-up alarm system. (Although he was surprised that Shady Rest was that technologically prepared.) He found himself flattered again to be trusted with an administrative secret. Even if he didn't know what really happened.

Leaving the administrative offices, Daniel was disappointed to see that he was too late for breakfast. He'd been counting on having a few minutes over coffee to prepare for what would be his first unsupervised intake interview later that morning. Also, he was hungry.

As it happened, the old editor at the *Brewster Sentinel* had already heard about the 4:00 a.m. alarm and remembered the "elopement" story. He wanted to send someone out to see if there was something to it but didn't want to spare his top reporter. Instead, he would send out the new girl.

### 3

## *Brewster Sentinel* Sends Out a Reporter

*THAT MUST be Daniel.*

The reporter had been told to look out for a young man named Daniel who would be attending to his usual group of residents.

She recognized him at a distance, shepherding his tiny flock.

*He was not young. But not old.*

The fresh face of a young man but with the slumped shoulders of a much older one—“neither fish nor fowl.”

When they had settled themselves on their bench, she walked up and introduced herself as Amy Something from the *Brewster Sentinel*.

In the future, there would be much discussion about the reporter’s last name. Daniel was sure he heard Leather, and Maddie remembered it as Feather. Eli insisted on Seller. Everyone heard something different,

## Brewster Sentinel Sends Out a Reporter

and for a while the subject became a reliable resource when conversation lagged. In the end, it didn't matter. They would not see her again.

Daniel introduced himself in turn, and the residents spoke their names: Eli, Gladys, Elora, and Mad-die at the end of the bench.

Whether considered singly or together, Amy was unable to distinguish them one from the next. Their faces blurred and merged, all beiges and grays.

She had resolved not to grow old if she could help it. Still on the safe side of thirty with time yet—but not by much. Here it was, the twenty-first century, and they still hadn't figured it out. She had been reading a whole bunch of cutting-edge reports. These were real medical articles on Google. Double-blind studies. Calorie restriction to near starvation levels, slowing down the metabolism, or at the other extreme, an all-meat diet. Whatever it took. Brewster Community College was offering a night course called “Hibernation 101, Benefits and Risks.” She had seriously considered auditing it.



Meanwhile, Daniel's recounting of the fire drill-elopement story was a non-starter.

An errant alarm, mechanical glitch, nothing more. Waste of a long drive.

But Amy decided to hang around for a while yet, not more than an hour at most, to give a listen. Since she was here already.

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She needed to go back to the office with *something*.

But these people seemed dazed, and only Maddie looked to be fully awake.

Amy approached her, “Mind if I ask you some questions?”

Maddie brightened, answering, “We don’t usually get the chance, thank you for your interest. Why don’t you take me into lunch and we can visit.”

Offering her elbow to the reporter, she added: “I could use another arm.”