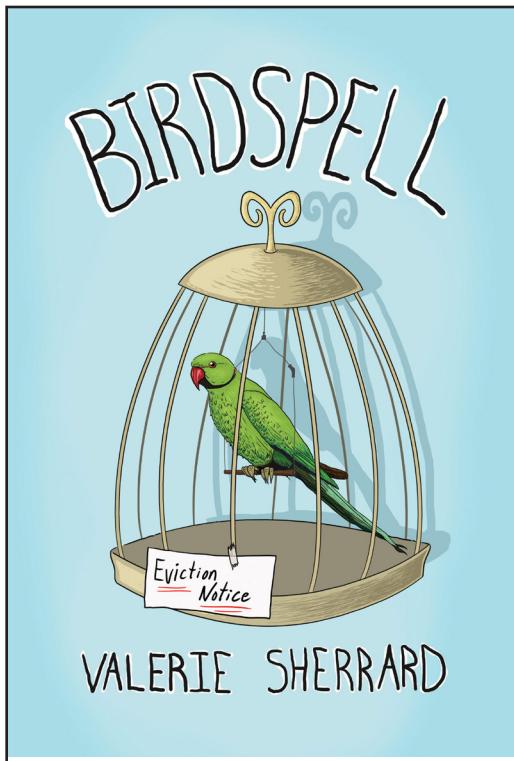


Excerpt from *Birdspell*  
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# one

When you're walking home from school beside a girl who's promised to give you something you really, really want, getting slugged is about the farthest thing from your mind. Which is why I was unprepared for the palm-slam that knocked me sideways into a recycle bin. It went down without a fight, and took me with it.

"Hey!" That one-word protest *should* have been me, but strangely enough it was her. My assailant. Izelle of the lightning-quick, came-out-of-nowhere strike.

I scrambled to my feet, resisting the urge to dust myself off. Enough dignity had been sacrificed to the blue bin.

"You're joking, right?" she said. "About not having a cell phone?"

That's the problem if you live in Normal. You think the whole world should sync itself to your way of life.

"Nope," I said. "I really don't have one." And then, in a stroke of genius I added, "We're what you call minimalists."

This was not strictly true. But it might let me explain a bizarre part of my life to her, which was something I knew I'd be doing in a matter of minutes.

"Is that like some kind of religion?" she asked.

I listen carefully. So I'd heard the *way* she said "religion" and it was casual and curious. No hidden sneer. Safe.

"Yep," I said, but I knew immediately I'd made a mistake. If she googled it, she'd know I was lying.

“That is,” I backtracked, “it’s not *exactly* a religion, but some people kind of look at it like it is.”

Izelle stopped walking. Her fists found her hips and her mouth went into a pout that I could easily picture her practicing in front of a mirror.

“Tell me the *truth*, Corbin — are you some kind of weirdo?”

“Of course not.” That’s true. I’m reasonably average. Her question made me wonder, though, how innocently trusting she was to ask something like that. Would a weirdo admit it? Or even know that’s what they were?

At the same time, I wished I knew her well enough to calm any misgivings she was having. But our contact has been limited to a few weeks and a couple of short conversations.

Izelle is in the class I joined less than a month ago. Grade six at Middling Academy. So far it’s not the worst school I’ve ever had to switch to mid-year. I gave them points right off for not assigning me a buddy like the last place did. At that school the guy they put in charge of helping me settle in had loads of free time to devote to the task since he was essentially friendless. Maybe they were trying to kill two birds with one stone. I don’t know, but it didn’t end well.

That was behind me now, while in front of me was this girl. A girl I know nothing about.

No, that’s not true. I know one thing. Izelle is a chatterer, which is not a trait that hides in a corner and one day jumps out to surprise you. The first conversation we had was kick-started when I asked her where the school computer lab was. She rewarded me with a prattle of information that included stuff about library programs and social groups, and she only paused when she was desperate for air. I almost missed the actual answer — the lab was in a room off the library — in the flood of words.

She’s nice enough though, I guess. That’s more or less “what-

ever” to me. What matters is that she’s giving me her parakeet. At least, I *hope* she’s giving it to me.

Before that can happen, she insists on checking out my apartment. The thought of taking anyone there almost made me back out, but I really want that bird.

Not that I’ve been hankering for a bird specifically. I’d take almost any kind of pet, really, as long as it was some kind of company.

It was last week when I overheard Izelle telling her friend Mandy she had to find a new home for her parakeet. I asked her about it later that day, but she said Mandy had dibs on it and she’d let me know if that didn’t work out.

“Sure, okay,” I told her, adding as if it was an afterthought, “I didn’t catch the price. How much is it?”

“It’s free. Bird, cage, cover, toys — *everything*. My mother says selling a family pet is bad luck.”

Then there was a long and convoluted explanation about why the bird had to be re-homed. Something about allergies — I didn’t actually catch who was allergic before she went on to say her great aunt had just moved in and her father had switched to a home office, although how, or even *if*, the aunt and dad parts had anything to do with why the bird had to go I couldn’t say. Since someone else was already planning to take it, I wasn’t exactly motivated to pay attention.

I did catch the bird’s name, which is Sitta.

“You probably think that’s a weird name, right?” Izelle asked. “But it’s *meaningful* when you know the story behind it.”

I raised my eyebrows, which she mistakenly took to mean “how interesting, please go on.” Whether she needed the encouragement or not — I doubt this very much — Izelle did indeed go on.

“It’s short for the actual, proper name for the Rose Ringed Para-

keet, which is *Psittacula Krameri*.”

“Huh,” I said.

“You can’t tell from the way it sounds, because the P is silent, but it’s spelled P-S-I-T-T-A-C-U-LA K-R-A-M-E-R-I.”

“Ah,” I said.

“So, if you drop the P, which is silent anyway, and look at the next five letters, there you have it! Sitta. Cool huh?”

Like I said, I’ve wanted a pet for years. A dog would have been my first choice, but I like cats too. Neither have ever been an option. I could have had a fish anytime, but that didn’t interest me. A bird on the other hand, should be pretty good company, especially when the place gets too quiet. A free bird — now *that* was perfect. I can usually find a way to scrounge together a few bucks when I need to, but if they’d been charging for the bird and cage and other supplies, it would have been out of reach.

And of course since someone else “had dibs” it was still out of reach until the end of class today when Izelle hurried up to me.

“Hey, Corbin! Mandy’s mother is being unreasonable and won’t let her have Sitta. Do you still want him?”

“Sure!” My head started to race with plans. Izelle broke into them almost immediately.

“I just need to see your place first. You know, to be sure Sitta will approve of it. I might as well go home with you now.”

My brain froze, which explains why my mouth said, “Uh, okay.”

So there we were, on the way to the place I call home. We’d resumed walking as soon as I’d assured her I was not, in fact, a weirdo. A denial was apparently all the proof she required.

And then we were there, climbing the stairs to the second floor, making our way to the last unit on the right.

I’d more or less decided it didn’t really matter if I got Sitta, because chances were about to go way, way down.

And of course, as soon as the door was open and she'd taken a few steps into the apartment, out it came. The question I'd been expecting.

"Um, Corbin? Where's your furniture?"