

THE FLIGHT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

by Heather Meyers

This all started because I was really fucking unmotivated one day. I'd been procrastinating and half attempting to complete projects polluting my itemized To Do List until I couldn't stand it anymore. Instead, I opened the waiting icon with a brilliant white lowercase "f" against a blue circular background, and breathed a sigh of relief to see notification alerts waiting. Someone was trying to connect with me other than bill collectors and those daily calls from cheerful voices telling me my car's extended warranty was about to expire. I don't even own a car.

I belong to various groups within the community of 2.85 billion users worldwide. There is excitement in thinking I might converse with someone I'd normally never meet. There are groups for anything and everything imaginable: embroiders, train lovers, foodies, ghost story tellers, Christmas decoration collectors, homesteaders- just to name a few. (There are some incredibly weird groups as well; if you can imagine it, it probably already has a group page) Some pages are public, some private. Some group admins provide you with a questionnaire for membership approval that is so detailed you think you might be provided government credentials once admitted in.

One group I recently joined called themselves *The Backyard Birders Brigade*, whose mission is to share their midwestern backyard bird feeder experiences and enthusiasms. The page's wall is filled on a daily basis with photos of Gray Catbirds and American Goldfinch from someone's backyard somewhere. Even the occasional Red-tailed Hawk made a pictorial appearance- who is often portrayed as a villainous hunter or proprietor of the circle of life depending on who responded. Proper bird names were considered best practice. Personal attacks during online disputes result in permanent removal from the group.

A few summers ago a dear friend gifted me a beautiful hummingbird feeder along with premade, blood red nectar for my birthday. In early April, I found the feeder while unearthing my dirt encrusted gardening tools. I didn't know what the hell I was doing and obviously poured the whole packet into the feeder. Most spilled down my arms as I clumsily attempted to hang it from the eyehook under the eaves of my front porch. I wasted pretty much the entire food source, which became a sticky mess as flies gleefully slurped up the puddles forming at my feet. Determined to do better, I dutifully began my research. Online sellers confirmed my suspicion that premade food was extremely expensive. More searches resulted in homemade recipes for hummingbird nectar. But the part I found most confusing was the actual measurements that disagreed ever slightly with one another. Stumped, I turned to my birders group, naively assuming this would be an easily answered question: Which recipe is best?

I posted and became distracted by cooking lunch and finishing off the early morning errands I'd abandoned. Returning a few hours later to gather advice from much

more experienced birders, I was amazed to see my post garnered over 210 comments. This was exciting- I mean nothing I'd ever posted anywhere yielded much response. Ever. Damn- today I was seen! But as I scrolled through my treasures, the tone turned from cheerful encouragement and genuine congratulations on my newbie choice to avoid store-bought product turned to vicious in-fighting between members disputing the amount of sugar vs. water mixture. And what type of water to use- boiled, purified, tap. Type of sugar. How long the mixture could be stored. The topic of how often to clean the feeder resulted in verbal barbs so vicious that I quickly thanked everyone for their input and turned off the comments. (*If you can't clean your feeder daily you might as well kill all the hummingbirds YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!!!!*) This was my first clue to how serious hummingbird devotees are.

Neil entered the conversation much like that really smart kid who really did know all the answers. A know-it-all who made no excuses. He inserted sudden corrections when he found errors in the information posted by others. One particular shared note was a reply to Betsy's comment telling me store bought nectar burned hummingbirds' tiny throats. That nugget of information was particularly disturbing to me and I replied in kind. Neil called this *glaringly bad information*. He shared a terrific article with me entitled, "*What to Expect When You're Expecting Hummingbirds*". No one seemed to defend themselves against Neil and left him unchecked. But more interesting than that- Neil made a public statement alluding to his status. *Watch your message requests, as I'm sure someone is going to backchannel you to tell you not to listen to me..... there is tons of bad info circulating among the "hummingbird people" and they can be very aggressive about defending it.* His statement also went undisputed. Nobody reached out to me privately.

Except for Neil.

He was very kind, offering to answer any questions I may have along the way. Neil told me about falling in love with hummingbirds as a child. He thought it was some mystical creature when he first spotted one in his Grandmother's garden around age 5. His Grandmother was delighted in his interest and gave him her feeder to take home. She carefully taught him how to care for the magical feeder that called the hummingbirds to it. She told him to be patient and wait. They would come find him. And she was right. Neil signed off by reminding me to use BPA free storage containers for the hummingbird food.

Weeks passed by and I dutifully made the food, stored, cleaned and waited. But no long-nosed, iridescent miracles arrived at my feeder. At least not while I was around to witness it. It was about that time I heard from Neil again. He asked how it was going.

Not well, I'm afraid. No luck here.

There's no luck about it. It's about persistence.

More time passed. I was about to put my feeder back into storage. As if he somehow sensed it, Neil sent a message inquiring how it was going. I didn't want to admit I sucked at this. I mean thousands of people have successful feeders all over. And I was like a stink bug at a garden party. Before I replied, I viewed Neil's profile. I wondered what he looked like. Did he have family? Was he lonely like me? And then there he was- smiling with, of course, a hummingbird feeder in the background. He seemed like a nice man. I smiled back at his profile picture. I suddenly noticed we lived near each other. My heart beat fast. I messaged back.

Hey you live in Cary! I'm over in Waukegan.

You should come see my set up. Maybe you'll get inspired.

We made plans for me to drive up the next week for lunch. He proclaimed to make an unforgettable Matzo ball soup. It happened to be my favorite comfort food on the planet. Done deal.

Neil's garden was filled with an amazing array of native plants. The flowers were buzzing with bees. His vegetable garden was chugging away, threatening to burst with tomatoes and zucchini and sweet peas climbing the trellis like Jack and his beanstalk. We chatted easily together until a voice burst through a thicket of roses.

You should tell that girl you are a hummingbird killer.

Go fuck yourself, Betsy.

Neil rolled his eyes and guided me toward the backyard. *She's been a pain in my ass since the day she moved in.* Neil told the tale of his old neighbors, The Millers, with whom he and his wife had a lovely relationship with until the couple moved away to be closer to their grandkids. And then his beloved Jacques died. He barely noticed Betsy the first year they were neighbors. And then they began talking over the Rhododendron, comparing notes on what The Millers grew in the garden. And when he looked closer, he saw she'd taken it all out. Just ripped out all the Hydrangea, Jack-in-the-Pulpits, all those beautiful beds were now bare. He tried to hide his disappointment. It was her garden now, after all. And that's when he spotted the hummingbird feeder hanging from the old maple. *Well, she can't be so bad then- can she?*

It was the beginning of the end of their polite neighboring conversations. She criticized his daily cleaning of the feeders. He never approved of her storage methods. He boiled, she didn't. But worst of all- they had vastly different recipes for hummingbird nectar. And that was the boiling point of their relationship.

Neil ushered me into a shaded area under a wooden gazebo with comfy chairs and little twinkly lights. We sat together and drank the pitcher of fresh lemonade Neil squeezed this morning. He entertained me with stories of his favorite hummers who

were repeat visitors. Neil could tell them all apart, or so he claimed. I asked what was the big secret- how did he attract all the hummingbirds? He pointed up to the sky. And when I looked up, I saw dozens and dozens of hummingbird feeders hanging from the ceiling. It took my breath away. *Where did they all come from?* Gifts, souvenirs from trips, second hand stores, pretty baubles in store windows Jacques saw and made him turn the car around to buy, he even smuggled one from overseas inside his duffle. Each had a special memory and no two looked alike. He pointed to the largest of the bunch and said *That one is Granny's*. I smiled and tried not to let Neil see the tears welling up in my eyes. We sat in silence as I watched in amazement at dozens of tiny hummingbirds visiting each feeder, like small fireworks against the gazebo's canopy.

A voice from behind the shed in the corner of the property shattered the moment:

Did he share that piece of shit article with you? You know the one about what to expect when expecting? It's a crock a shit. Did you see it came from The Flourish Network? Yeah- it's a bunch of friggin' crazy cultists. They teach you how to make your own medicine to prevent overuse of antibiotics. Backyard breeding tips. Fuckin' zealots. Don't believe a goddam word that comes out of his dumbass mouth.

Sit and spin, Betsy!

Over the rest of the summer, I took many trips out to visit Neil. He regaled me with tales from his past- his memories were rich with stories of his time in the Navy, falling in love, breaking his arm as a kid trying to climb out the window of his best friend's second story window to get onto the roof. And of course he checked my progress of my hummingbirds. I lied and told him I was slowly seeing visitors and he clapped his hands with joy. *Hot Dog!* I hadn't put the feeder out in weeks, but I kept coming to visit.

One hot August day, Neil hurried me into the backyard and spoke to me in low, hushed tones. He told me what he saw while pruning his bushes. Betsy was alone in her backyard (where she planted a shit-ton of hasta and had six birdbaths with feeders over each). He heard soft sobbing. So like a good nosy neighbor, he kept silent but waited to see what he could see. Betsy was emptying the birdbaths with her bare hands. And when he looked closer, he could see they were full of dead hummingbirds floating like fish on the surface of the water.

Betsy- what the fuck is going on?

Fuck you, asshole.

Holy shit Betsy- what did you do?

Listen jerk-off- sometimes shit goes wrong. I switched to a different sugar source. My recipe was off. Fuck. FUCK!!! Just fucking LEAVE ME ALONE!!!

At the beginning of every visit with Neil, he hobbled toward me down the driveway. Like he told me- his age was showing. We always met by the mailbox and he'd walk me back to the hummingbird gazebo. Like a gentleman, he'd offer his arm and I'd gladly take it. I'd tell him about my day. He'd tell Betsy to go fuck herself after she fired some insult at him through the tree line.

But on my last visit, Neil didn't meet me. I remembered smelling something faint hanging in the air. Something that didn't quite belong. Rotten eggs. I decided I'd just walk back myself. When Neil saw me approaching, he stood up and smiled. I could tell he'd been napping. I asked if Betsy had recently egged his house. He looked confused.

And then the explosion happened.

In the moment before I was knocked off my feet- I saw Neil's horrified face as glass sprayed everywhere under the gazebo as all the hummingbird feeders exploded at once. And then I don't remember anything. The smell of ammonia woke my senses. Once I opened my eyes again, I saw the roof had collapsed, burying Neil beneath it.

Betsy came screaming around the corner. She was babbling incoherently about the mixture being off. The recipe was bad. I didn't understand at the time. It was only later the pieces came together, after the investigation, when the police explained to me that Betsy had done this. She cooked up what she thought was a low level smoke bomb. She packed a cylinder full of Tannerite, thinking it was going to be like one of those gender reveal things you see on the YouTube. She tossed it out onto the roof of the gazebo. It was supposed to spray colors and smell like a rotten fart meant to inconvenience our afternoon. But she covered the end with duct tape. Betsy basically made a pipe bomb.

I still visit Neil. I come every other day. He needs me now. I began buying feeders to replace the ones destroyed. I'm trying to make new stories to share. And I have to clean the feeders, put out fresh nectar to attract magical hummingbirds to visit Neil again. I bring my supplies, careful to keep up with the routine. I hang my washrags over his headstone, and water the native plants growing from its base. And then I lie down, facing the sky. I wait for the hummingbirds to come. I know each one by sight and never forget a name. Grumpy, Doc, Happy, Bashful, Sneezy, Sleepy and Dopey. There is a cute couple that flies together- The Millers. Of course Neil and Jacque, who have the prettiest coloring out of the bunch. And there is a fucking aggressive hummer who tries to chase off the others and steal the nectar for herself. That's Betsy. They all come while I'm there and fly over me to reach the feeders hanging above the grave. One time Neil pecked me on the nose, as if he gently kissed me. I feel lucky to still have a connection. But am reminded that Neil says its not luck, its about persistence. I'm thinking about Neil's lemonade as I feel a drop on my face. As I wipe it away, I see its hummingbird shit. I look up to catch Betsy hovering above me. That fucking bitch.