



Kurt Vonnegut 'Look at the Birdie' 2009

CONFIDO

The Summer had died peacefully in its sleep, and Autumn, as soft-spoken executrix, was locking life up safely until Spring came to claim it. At one with this sad, sweet allegory outside the kitchen window of her small home was Ellen Bowers, who, early in the morning, was preparing Tuesday breakfast for her husband, Henry. Henry was gasping and dancing and slapping himself in a cold shower on the other side of a thin wall.

Ellen was a fair and tiny woman, in her early thirties, plainly mercurial and bright, though dressed in a dowdy housecoat. In almost any event she would have loved life, but she loved it now with an overwhelming emotion that was like the throbbing amen of a church organ, for she could tell herself this morning that her husband, in addition to being good, would soon be rich and famous.

She hadn't expected it, had seldom dreamed of it, had been content with inexpensive possessions and small adventures of the spirit, like thinking about autumn, that cost nothing at all. Henry was not a moneymaker. That had been the understanding.

He was an easily satisfied tinker, a maker and mender who had a touch close to magic with materials and machines. But his miracles had all been small ones as he went about his job

as a laboratory assistant at the Accousti-gem Corporation, a manufacturer of hearing aids. Henry was valued by his employers, but the price they paid for him was not great. A high price, Ellen and Henry had agreed amiably, probably wasn't called for, since being paid at all for puttering was an honor and a luxury of sorts. And that was that.

Or that had *seemed* to be that, Ellen reflected, for on the kitchen table lay a small tin box, a wire, and an earphone, like a hearing aid, a creation, in its own modern way, as marvelous as Niagara Falls or the Sphinx. Henry had made it in secret during his lunch hours, and had brought it home the night before. Just before bedtime, Ellen had been inspired to give the box a name, an appealing combination of confidant and household pet—*Confido*.

"What is it every person really wants, more than food almost?" Henry had asked coyly, showing her *Confido* for the first time. He was a tall, rustic man, ordinarily as shy as a woods creature. But something had changed him, made him fiery and loud. "What is it?"

"Happiness, Henry?"

"Happiness, certainly! But what's the *key* to happiness?"

"Religion? Security, Henry? Health, dear?"

"What is the longing you see in the eyes of strangers on the street, in eyes wherever you look?"

"You tell me, Henry. I give up," Ellen had said helplessly.

"Somebody to talk to! Somebody who really understands! That's what." He'd waved *Confido* over his head. "And this is it!"

Now, on the morning after, Ellen turned away from the window and gingerly slipped *Confido's* earphone into her ear. She pinned the flat metal box inside her blouse and con-

cealed the wire in her hair. A very soft drumming and shushing, with an overtone like a mosquito's hum, filled her ear.

She cleared her throat self-consciously, though she wasn't going to speak aloud, and thought deliberately, "What a nice surprise you are, *Confido*."

"Nobody deserves a good break any more than you do, Ellen," whispered *Confido* in her ear. The voice was tinny and high, like a child's voice through a comb with tissue paper stretched over it. "After all *you've* put up with, it's about time something halfway nice came your way."

"Ohhhhhh," Ellen thought depreciatively, "I haven't been through so much. It's been quite pleasant and easy, really."

"On the surface," said *Confido*. "But you've had to do without *so* much."

"Oh, I suppose—"

"Now, now," said *Confido*. "I understand you. This is just between us, anyway, and it's good to bring those things out in the open now and then. It's *healthy*. This is a lousy, cramped house, and it's left its mark on you down deep, and you know it, you poor kid. And a woman can't help being just a little hurt when her husband doesn't love her enough to show much ambition, either. If he only knew how brave you'd been, what a front you'd put up, always cheerful—"

"Now, see here—" Ellen objected faintly.

"Poor kid, it's about time your ship came in. Better late than never."

"Really, I haven't minded," insisted Ellen in her thoughts. "Henry's been a happier man for not being tormented by ambition, and happy husbands make happy wives and children."

"All the same, a woman can't help thinking now and then that her husband's love can be measured by his ambition,"

said Confido. "Oh, you deserve this pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"Go along with you," said Ellen.

"I'm on *your* side," said Confido warmly.

Henry strode into the kitchen, rubbing his craggy face to a bright pink with a rough towel. After a night's sleep, he was still the new Henry, the promoter, the enterpriser, ready to lift himself to the stars by his own garters.

"Dear sirs!" he said heartily. "This is to notify you that two weeks from this date I am terminating my employment with the Accousti-gem Corporation in order that I may pursue certain business and research interests of my own. Yours truly—" He embraced Ellen and rocked her back and forth in his great arms. "Aha! Caught you chatting with your new friend, didn't I?"

Ellen blushed, and quickly turned Confido off. "It's uncanny, Henry. It's absolutely spooky. It hears my thoughts and answers them."

"Now nobody need ever be lonely again!" said Henry.

"It seems like magic to me."

"Everything about the universe is magic," said Henry grandly, "and Einstein would be the first to tell you so. All I've done is stumble on a trick that's always been waiting to be performed. It was an accident, like most discoveries, and none other than Henry Bowers is the lucky one."

Ellen clapped her hands. "Oh, Henry, they'll make a movie of it someday!"

"And the Russians'll claim *they* invented it," laughed Henry. "Well, let 'em. I'll be big about it. I'll divide up the market with 'em. I'll be satisfied with a mere billion dollars from American sales."

"Uh-huh." Ellen was lost in the delight of seeing in her imagination a movie about her famous husband, played by an actor that looked very much like Lincoln. She watched the simple-hearted counter of blessings, slightly down at the heels, humming and working on a tiny microphone with which he hoped to measure the minute noises inside the human ear. In the background, colleagues played cards and joshed him for working during the lunch hour. Then he placed the microphone in his ear, connected it to an amplifier and loudspeaker, and was astonished by Confido's first whispers on earth:

"You'll never get anywhere around here, Henry," the first, primitive Confido had said. "The only people who get ahead at Accousti-gem, boy, are the backslappers and snow-job artists. Every day somebody gets a big raise for something you did. Wise up! You've got ten times as much on the ball as anybody else in the whole laboratory. It isn't fair."

What Henry had done after that was to connect the microphone to a hearing aid instead of a loudspeaker. He fixed the microphone on the earpiece, so that the small voice, whatever it was, was picked up by the microphone, and played back louder by the hearing aid. And there, in Henry's trembling hands, was Confido, everybody's best friend, ready for market.

"I mean it," said the new Henry to Ellen. "A cool billion! That's a six-dollar profit on a Confido for every man, woman, and child in the United States."

"I wish we knew what the voice was," said Ellen. "I mean, it makes you wonder." She felt a fleeting uneasiness.

Henry waved the question away as he sat down to eat. "Something to do with the way the brain and the ears are hooked up," he said with his mouth full. "Plenty of time to

find *that* out. The thing now is to get Confidos on the market, and start living instead of merely existing."

"Is it us?" said Ellen. "The voice—is it us?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't think it's God, and I don't think it's the Voice of America. Why not ask Confido? I'll leave it home today, so you can have lots of good company."

"Henry—haven't we been doing more than merely existing?"

"Not according to Confido," said Henry, standing and kissing her.

"Then I guess we haven't after all," she said absently.

"But, by God if we won't from now on!" said Henry. "We owe it to ourselves. Confido says so."

Ellen was in a trance when she fed the two children and sent them off to school. She came out of it momentarily, when her eight-year-old-son, Paul, yelled into a loaded school bus, "Hey! My daddy says we're going to be rich as Croesus!"

The school bus door clattered shut behind him and his seven-year-old sister, and Ellen returned to a limbo in a rocking chair by her kitchen table, neither heaven nor hell. Her jumbled thoughts permitted one small peephole out into the world, and filling it was Confido, which sat by the jam, amid the uncleared breakfast dishes.

The telephone rang. It was Henry, who had just gotten to work. "How's it going?" he asked brightly.

"As usual. I just put the children on the bus."

"I mean, how's the first day with Confido going?"

"I haven't tried it yet, Henry."

"Welllll—let's get going. Let's show a little faith in the merchandise. I want a full report with supper."

"Henry—have you quit yet?"

"The only reason I haven't is I haven't gotten to a typewriter." He laughed. "A man in my position doesn't quit by just saying so. He resigns on paper."

"Henry—would you please hold off, just for a few days?"

"Why?" said Henry incredulously. "Strike while the iron's hot, I say."

"Just to be on the safe side, Henry. Please?"

"So what's there to be afraid of? It works like a dollar watch. It's bigger than television and psychoanalysis combined, and they're in the black. Quit worrying." His voice was growing peevish. "Put on your Confido, and quit worrying. That's what it's for."

"I just feel we ought to know more about it."

"Yeah, yeah," said Henry, with uncharacteristic impatience. "O.K., O.K., yeah, yeah. See you."

Miserably, Ellen hung up, depressed by what she'd done to Henry's splendid spirits. This feeling changed quickly to anger with herself, and, in a vigorous demonstration of loyalty and faith, she pinned Confido on, put the earpiece in place, and went about her housework.

"What are you, anyway?" she thought. "What *is* a Confido?"

"A way for you to get rich," said Confido. This, Ellen found, was all Confido would say about itself. She put the same question to it several times during the day, and each time Confido changed the subject quickly—usually taking up the matter of money's being able to buy happiness, no matter what anyone said.

"As Kin Hubbard said," whispered Confido, "It ain't no disgrace to be poor, but it might as well be."

Ellen giggled, though she'd heard the quotation before. "Now, listen, you—" she said. All her arguments with Confido were of this extremely mild nature. Confido had a knack of saying things she didn't agree with in such a way and at such a time that she couldn't help agreeing a little.

"Mrs. Bowers—El-len," called a voice outside. The caller was Mrs. Fink, the Bowerses' next-door neighbor, whose driveway ran along the bedroom side of the Bowerses' home. Mrs. Fink was racing the engine of her new car by Ellen's bedroom window.

Ellen leaned out over the windowsill. "My," she said. "Don't *you* look nice. Is that a new dress? It suits your complexion perfectly. Most women can't wear orange."

"Just the ones with complexions like salami," said Confido.

"And what have you done to your hair? I love it that way. It's just right for an oval face."

"Like a mildewed bathing cap," said Confido.

"Well, I'm going downtown, and I thought maybe there was something I could pick up for you," said Mrs. Fink.

"How awfully thoughtful," said Ellen.

"And here we thought all along she just wanted to rub our noses in her new car, her new clothes, and her new hairdo," said Confido.

"I thought I'd get prettied up a little, because George is going to take me to lunch at the Bronze Room," said Mrs. Fink.

"A man *should* get away from his secretary from time to time, if only with his wife," said Confido. "Occasional separate vacations keep romance alive, even after years and years."

"Have you got company, dear?" said Mrs. Fink. "Am I keeping you from something?"

"HMMMMMM?" said Ellen absently. "Company? Oh—no, no."

"You acted like you were listening for something or something."

"I did?" said Ellen. "That's strange. You must have imagined it."

"With all the imagination of a summer squash," said Confido.

"Well, I must dash," said Mrs. Fink, racing her great engine.

"Don't blame you for trying to run away from yourself," said Confido, "but it can't be done—not even in a Buick."

"Ta ta," said Ellen.

"She's really awfully sweet," Ellen said in her thoughts to Confido. "I don't know why you had to say those awful things."

"Aaaaaaaah," said Confido. "Her whole life is trying to make other women feel like two cents."

"All right—say that *is* so," said Ellen, "it's all the poor thing's got, and she's harmless."

"Harmless, harmless," said Confido. "Sure, she's harmless, her crooked husband's harmless and a poor thing, everybody's harmless. And, after arriving at that bighearted conclusion, what have you got left for yourself? What does that leave you to think about anything?"

"Now, I'm simply not going to put up with you anymore," said Ellen, reaching for the earpiece.

"Why not?" said Confido. "We're having the time of your life." It chuckled. "Saaaay, listen—won't the stuffy old biddies around here like the Duchess Fink curl up and die

with envy when the Bowerses put on a little dog for a change. Eh? That'll show 'em the good and honest win out in the long run."

"The good and honest?"

"*You*—you and Henry, by God," said Confido. "That's who. Who else?"

Ellen's hand came down from the earpiece. It started up again, but as a not very threatening gesture, ending in her grasping a broom.

"That's just a nasty neighborhood rumor about Mr. Fink and his secretary," she thought.

"Heah?" said Confido. "Where there's smoke—"

"And he's not a crook."

"Look into those shifty, weak blue eyes, look at those fat lips made for cigars and tell me that," said Confido.

"Now, now," thought Ellen. "That's enough. There's been absolutely no proof—"

"Still waters run deep," said Confido. It was silent for a moment. "And I don't mean just the Finks. This whole neighborhood is still water. Honest to God, somebody ought to write a book about it. Just take this block alone, starting at the corner with the Kramers. Why, to look at her, you'd think she was the quietest, most proper..."

"Ma, Ma—hey, Ma," said her son several hours later.

"Ma—you sick? Hey, Ma!"

"And *that* brings us to the Fitzgibbonses," Confido was saying. "That poor little, dried-up, sawed-off, henpecked—"

"Ma!" cried Paul.

"Oh!" said Ellen, opening her eyes. "You startled me.

What are you children doing home from school?" She was sitting in her kitchen rocker, half-dazed.

"It's after three, Ma. Whuddya think?"

"Oh, dear—is it that late? Where on earth has the day gone?"

"Can I listen, Ma—can I listen to Confido?"

"It's not for children to listen to," said Ellen, shocked. "I should say not. It's strictly for grown-ups."

"Can't we just look at it?"

With cruel feat of will, Ellen disengaged Confido from her ear and blouse, and laid it on the table. "There—you see? That's all there is to it."

"Boy—a billion dollars lying right there," said Paul softly. "Sure doesn't look like much, does it? A cool billion." He was giving an expert imitation of his father on the night before. "Can I have a motorcycle?"

"Everything takes time, Paul," said Ellen.

"What are you doing with your housecoat on so late?" said her daughter.

"I was *just* going to change it," said Ellen.

She had been in the bedroom just a moment, her mind seething with neighborhood scandal, half-heard in the past, now refreshed and ornamented by Confido, when there were bitter shouts in the kitchen.

She rushed into the kitchen to find Susan crying, and Paul red and defiant. Confido's earpiece in his ear.

"Paul!" said Ellen.

"I don't care," said Paul. "I'm *glad* I listened. Now I know the truth—I know the whole secret."

"He pushed me," sobbed Susan.

"Confido said to," said Paul.

"Paul," said Ellen, horrified. "What secret are you talking about? What secret, dear?"

"I'm not your son," he said sullenly.

"Of *course* you are!"

"Confido says I'm not," said Paul. "Confido says I'm adopted. Susan's the one you love, and that's why I get a raw deal around here."

"Paul—darling, darling. It simply isn't true. I promise. I swear it. And I don't know what on earth you mean by raw deals—"

"Confido says it's true all right," said Paul stoutly.

Ellen leaned against the kitchen table and rubbed her temples. Suddenly, she leaned forward and snatched Confido from Paul.

"Give me that filthy little beast!" she said. She strode angrily out of the back door with it.

"Hey!" said Henry, doing a buck-and-wing through his front door, and sailing his hat, as he had never done before, onto the coatrack in the hall. "Guess what? The breadwinner's home!"

Ellen appeared in the kitchen doorway and gave him a sickly smile. "Hi."

"There's my girl," said Henry, "and have I got good news for you. This is a great day! I haven't got a job anymore. Isn't that swell? They'll take me back any time I want a job, and that'll be when Hell freezes over."

"Um," said Ellen.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," said Henry, "and here's one man who just got both hands free."

"Huh," said Ellen.

Young Paul and Susan appeared on either side of her to peer bleakly at their father.

"What is this?" said Henry. "It's like a funeral parlor."

"Mom buried it, Pop," said Paul hoarsely. "She buried Confido."

"She did—she really did," said Susan wonderingly. "Under the hydrangeas."

"Henry, I had to," said Ellen desolately, throwing her arms around him. "It was us or it."

Henry pushed her away. "Buried it," he murmured, shaking his head. "Buried it? All you had to do was turn it off."

Slowly, he walked through the house and into the backyard, his family watching in awe. He hunted for the grave under the shrubs without asking for directions.

He opened the grave, wiped the dirt from Confido with his handkerchief, and put the earpiece in his ear, cocking his head and listening intently.

"It's all right, it's O.K.," he said softly. He turned to Ellen. "What on earth got into you?"

"What did it say?" said Ellen. "What did it just say to you, Henry?"

He sighed and looked awfully tired. "It said somebody else would cash in on it sooner or later, if we didn't."

"Let them," said Ellen.

"Why?" demanded Henry. He looked at her challengingly, but his firmness decayed quickly, and he looked away.

"If you've talked to Confido, you *know* why," said Ellen. "Don't you?"

Henry kept his eyes down. "It'll sell, it'll sell, it'll sell," he murmured. "My God, how it'll sell."

"It's a direct wire to the worst in us, Henry," said Ellen. She burst into tears. "Nobody should have that, Henry, nobody! That little voice is loud enough as it is."

An autumn silence, muffled in moldering leaves, settled over the yard, broken only by Henry's faint whistling through his teeth. "Yeah," he said at last. "I know."

He removed Confido from his ear, and laid it gently in its grave once more. He kicked dirt in on top of it.

"What's the last thing it said, Pop?" said Paul.

Henry grinned wistfully. "'I'll be seeing you, sucker. I'll be seeing you.'"