Bird of Paradise

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THE NEW PRISONER who entered the cell was slight of build with a mass of black hair over a face that had already taken on a slight tinge of prison pallor. His darting eyes passed over the few details the cell had to offer, then alighted and remained on the cell's other occupant. His attention was momentarily diverted by the clang of the closing door, but he had no sooner determined the origin of the sound than he returned to his observation of the stocky figure staring out the cell's window. Still not receiving any acknowledgment of his presence, he walked forward and tapped the other on the shoulder with a bony knuckle.

"Hiya. Name's Wheeler. Guess you didn't hear me come in." He moved back half a step and waited for a reaction, but received none. He tapped the shoulder again, harder this time. "Hey! You sick or somethin'? I said the name's Wheeler. Franklin Wheeler. Frankie for short."

The other's head turned quickly and Wheeler found himself regarded by a pair of angry blue eyes. The anger held for an instant then dropped, leaving the heavy face almost empty of emotion. The head nodded.

"I heard the door. I heard you, too. Welcome to cell two-eighteen."
Wheeler nodded his satisfaction and answered with a toothy grin before he turned about and seated himself on the bottom bunk and looked up at the other. "Thanks," he said. "Not that I'll be here long, though." His grin widened. "My lawyer's workin' on it. Be out in a week or so." His companion turned his head back to the window.

"What's yer name?"

"Myers."

"Been in this hole long?" When the question went unanswered, Wheeler came off the bunk and gripped Myers' shoulder, roughly turning him around. "Wassamatter? I look like I got a disease or somethin'? You guys that been here for awhile think you're one up on me. Well, you got another think comin'. I'll be out o' here so soon you won't even be sure I was ever here." He loosed his hold on Myers' shoulder and stepped back. Anger and concern in his face gave way to an empty smile as he began again:

"We've got to spend some time together anyway. We might as well get used to each other and be friendly."

"You're wrong."

"Waddaya mean, I'm wrong?"

"I mean you don't have to be afraid that anybody thinks they're one up on you." He half smiled and jerked his head toward the door. "A new prisoner gets more respect than he deserves. Until they know something about you, they won't pay much attention to you."

"And after that?"

Myers shrugged. "From what you say, you won't be here long enough to worry about it."

"Yeah. Hell with these people." Wheeler seated himself on the bunk once more and leaned against the wall with his fingers laced behind his head. Silence prevailed for several moments while he supplemented his previous hurried inspection of the cell with a more leisurely one. Getting up from the bunk he strode to the door and back several times before returning his attention to Myers, who was again staring out the window.

"What's the big attraction out there, anyway? Ya got a buddy out there or somethin'?" He stood behind Myers and peered over him through the window to the exercise
yard below. "Nobody there now. Nothin' 'cept the wall. Kinda quiet out there. Nice lookin' country over the wall. Whatcha lookin' at?"

"You might say I'm waiting for a friend." Myers' voice had an annoyed sound either ignored or missed by Wheeler. "Yeah? Hey, there's a bread crust on the ledge." He looked at Myers. "You put it there?"

"Yes."

Wheeler grinned at him. "What for?"

"You're pretty nosy, aren't you?"

Wheeler stepped back and lifted his hands. "Don't blow yer stack, Myers, I was just askin'."

"All right. Sorry. I'm too touchy I guess. Every afternoon a bird comes to that ledge for food I put there for him."

"Yer kiddin'." Wheeler's face spoke of disbelief. "What kind of bird?"

"A sparrow."

"A sparrow?" He stepped to the center of the cell and became convulsed with affected laughter. "A sparrow!" He suddenly stopped and looked at the scowling Myers. "By God, yer serious!" He returned to the window and looked down. "How come yer feeding a damn — Hey! There he is!"

On the ledge below, the small mud-colored bird was already attacking the bread crust with short, abrupt pecks. He frequently interrupted his meal with a momentary search for competition. He ate with care but with rapidity in the manner of his kind.

"Watch him," said Myers.

"Why? What's he gonna do?"

"When he's finished, he'll fly away — over the wall."

"So?"

"So you don't know what that wall means yet." Myers' face was an angry red and his voice rose. "Spend a year or so looking at it and you will know."

Wheeler opened his mouth as if to say something, but did not. Myers had returned his gaze to the ledge.

"There he goes!"

With a preparatory flick of his tail, the sparrow left the ledge and flew once around the yard in low arcs before streaking over the wall that meant nothing to him. He became a speck soon lost in the detail of the surrounding fields.
The door grated open and a guard stood in the opening. "Which of you is Wheeler?"
"I am."
"Come with me. Your lawyer wants to see you."

Wheeler turned to Myers. "See? What did I tell you?" He turned and left with the guard, grinning as he had when he first came in. The door slammed shut, leaving Myers standing at the window. There he remained for a long time. His posture finally relaxed, and he turned about to survey the cell which was again his alone. When Wheeler returned, Myers was lying on the top bunk with his arms folded over his face. He did not move when the other came in, nor did Wheeler pay any attention to him.

"Damn lawyer's a shyster. Bungler."
"What happened?" Myers' voice was muffled by his arms. Wheeler sat on the bottom bunk and covered his face with his hands. "Lawyer screwed up. I'm not gettin' my appeal." The voice was thin, almost a whisper.

"Sorry." Myers rolled over and looked down. "Isn't there another chance?"

"Lawyer says there is." Wheeler stood up and strode to the window. He looked down at the vacant ledge. "Lawyer's a liar," he said. "No chance."