

To Watch and Witness with the Cable Man

[Patricia Schultheis](#)

A Monday morning in early September, and I am enjoying the sight of the sapphire sky mirrored in my condo complex's reflecting pool. I am waiting for the cable man, who has gone to his truck to retrieve the appropriate "black box" for my TV — all weekend long my screen has been sending a "No Signal" message.

Suddenly an unnatural, metallic twang resounds behind me. Not deep and reverberant like a rock hitting a rain barrel. But not fleeting and tinkly either. No, something soft but solid has struck metal, like when one of those hacky sacks my boys used to play with hit a downspout. I turn from the reflecting pool and see a single sparrow lying on the stone steps of Building Four.

Over each entrance to my complex's five buildings hangs a large metal lantern. So elaborate, these lanterns remind me of ones my husband and I used to glimpse through the massive gates of some Florentine palazzo back when he and I traveled. The only explanation I can find for the twang is that the sparrow slammed into the lantern of Building Four.

And now the poor creature lays with its beak opening and closing like a mechanized cuckoo's. One wing is tucked under its breast, while the other is spread open like a brown and gray feathered fan, and a leg claws the air as if it's trying to grasp one final twig. Not a hatchling, the bird should have been an experienced flyer — by early autumn all birds should be experienced flyers. I scan the façade for some protrusion, even for a deteriorating nest that maybe toppled the bird into the lantern. But spot nothing. The deliberateness of the twang bothers me. No last-second feathery fluster preceded it. No twitter of alarm. Self-contained and unambiguous, it sounded as if the bird had been flung into the lantern. Or, as if anticipating the coming winter and time's downward thrust, the sparrow had flung itself.

The cable man returns with the appropriate black box and joins me in watching the bird's agony, then he states the obvious: "He's dying."

But that's not good enough for me. I demand "Why?"

"Who knows? Maybe he's sick. Or maybe it's just his time. Who knows?" The cable man speaks with an accent I can't identify and moves with a tall man's efficient grace. Lifting the bird by its tail, he removes it from the stone steps of Building Four and lays it on the grassy lawn surrounding the reflecting pool.

"Now at least no one will step on it. It's all we can do," he says. What he does not say, but what I think we both feel, is that the grass, rather than stone, will ease, maybe even welcome, the bird's devolution.

And then the cable man and I go into Building Five, into my building. As he and I wait for the elevator, I learn that he has been working for the company for slightly more than a year.

By the third floor, I find out that he's been in the United States almost three.

And, then, by the fifth floor, by my floor, I will learn to wonder if the bird's collision with the lantern wasn't a prelude . . . if the cable man and I weren't meant to meet so that I could appreciate the difference between those who watch and those who witness.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

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"Baghdad," the cable man tells me. "I am from Baghdad." Then, seeing a mixture of alarm and curiosity flicker across my face, he adds, "Yes, I was there. I was twelve when all that started. I saw things. Many, many things. I was twelve."

I remember Baghdad. Baghdad was back before I moved to my condo, back before my husband died. Back when he and I watched Baghdad on a boxy old TV with no cable. I remember the explosions' brilliant reds feathering to orange and yellow against the night sky. And I remember how the bombing didn't seem real,

how it seemed like special effects . . . I kept waiting for some plot to unfold. But, of course, there never was any plot.

There was only the bombing, which went on and on. Night after night, my husband and I would eat dinner, switch on the TV and watch. But it never seemed real, at least to my mind, which couldn't accept the bombing as real because if it were real, that would have meant that this country, *my* country, was bombing people to pieces. Was atomizing them. Was denying them even the dignity of devolving into the earth.

"I'm sorry" I say to the cable man. "Sorry" is the only thing I can offer, knowing even before it's out of my mouth that "sorry" is wholly inadequate. "Sorry" is nothing compared to the mother and father he tells me that he left behind in Baghdad. Or to his wife and children here, whose lives forever will be shaded by estrangement. Or to the boy, who despite the cable man's self-possessed exterior, must still live within him, and who, as a twelve-year-old, must have raised his supplicating arms to the murderous sky and demanded "Why?" And the sky's reply? — "No signal."

With a rueful nod the cable man accepts my apology, then sets about installing my new box. When I'm fully connected, with infinite patience, he shows me how to aim my remote toward the box's green light and what buttons to push. And then he's gone . . . off to the next job.

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But, of course, he's not completely gone. Forensic scientists tell us there is no touch without trace, and so faint remains of the cable man stay on my remote, on the cables that connect me, and on my new black box.

And he lingers within me as well. The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner says that all those we've ever met live on in a different dimension of time where everything that ever was continues, not just to be but to grow and change. And so, long after I hear the elevator doors close on him, my heart and soul reverberate from my chance encounter with a man whose life was forever changed by this country, by *my* country. Like a single note trailing after a lifted bow, or thunder's softer, second rumble, I thrum with the memory of the tenderness he showed an injured sparrow. And with my paltry "sorry." And with guilt.

By the time he leaves, my fifth-floor condo is bright with noontime light, its atmosphere virtually shimmering with sunbeams. And with sudden wonder calling me to witness. I am struck with the astonishing possibility that in all of time's great whirl, the cable man's trajectory and mine were meant to intersect so that on an early autumn morning he and I would meet. And, beside a sapphire-blue reflecting pool, the two of us would witness an injured sparrow's last bit of life. And so share sympathy for the fallen.