

Ante Tomić  
**George the Walker**

*Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić*



## 1.

When he was born, George the Walker was just an ordinary bird hatched in an ordinary nest of starlings on a knot of an old mulberry tree, and back then he was not known as the Walker. The nickname that has made him famous among all starlings was given to him later. On the spring day when he broke the eggshell with his little beak as the fourth of six siblings, and peeped hungrily with his brothers and sisters, there was nothing to suggest that George was in any way exceptional. His mother Rose, who was already worried, impatient and exhausted from sitting on the eggs to keep them warm, smiled with relief and pride as she watched her nestlings crane their naked purple necks.

But that was just the beginning of the real work for her. The little ones had to be fed, and their father Tony, we are sorry to say that, was not much of a help. In the morning he would just make himself pretty, smooth his feathers with his beak and go about his business, without bothering to explain to Rose the nature of that business, while she frantically searched for the food for their offspring. Sometimes with happiness, other times with curiosity or true despair, the exhausted mother watched her babies, puzzled at where all the worms and flies, berries and seeds had gone to, surprised at how their small bodies could have swallowed them all.

Fortunately, there was a stable not far from their nest, and next to it a warm, smoking heap of cow dung which always offered many delicious morsels for starlings. It was from that heap that Rose one day brought a long, pink earthworm. Her babies had grown stronger by then. They squirmed and jostled each other all day long, teasing one another. The mother could hardly handle the playful young birds who were eager to leave their parental home and fly off towards the white clouds.

“Don’t play with your food”, she nervously rebuked George and his little sister Ana, who had taken that pink earthworm and were laughingly stretching it between their beaks like a strawberry flavoured chewing gum. „Don’t play with your food”, she repeated reproachfully, as every mother in the world would. „Don’t play with...” she was about to admonish them for the third time, when the mischievous Ana let go of the worm in her beak, and George widened his eyes in surprise, lost his balance, flapped his feeble wings clumsily and fell backwards out of the nest. The whole world spun once, twice, three times in front of the eyes of the little, helpless bird who could not yet fly.

“George!” his mother Rose screamed as she watched her child’s frail body roll in the air and tumble in the dust. She shivered in horror at the sickening thud of his fall. She jumped to his rescue but stopped short

when she saw Leo the Tomcat running from the other side of the yard. That evil, disgusting, greedy creature lurked upon them all the time, sneaking on its soft, furry paws silently around the tree with their nest, and now he finally lucked out, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Cover your eyes! Quickly, cover your eyes!" Rose ordered her offspring, to save them from the horrible sight of the evil cat devouring their brother, and all little starlings put their wings over their eyes in fear. Then Rose covered her eyes as well. She couldn't watch one of her children meet his end. A mother's heart wouldn't endure it. From the ground around the tree's base a blood-curling meowing was heard, followed by the short, final flap of a starling that would never feel the wind in its wings, fly in a dense flock carried by the air currents over a vineyard with sweet grapes, swing on the sunflowers on its thin little legs, peck at the juicy, pink peaches and experience the happiness above the endless fields of golden wheat, wide green rivers and blue mountains that only a starling can understand.

After several moments, Rose timidly opened her eyes, but the sight she saw confused her. The tomcat was not walking away full-bellied and happy, as she had expected, but clawing angrily at the bark of the mulberry tree and growling at something close to the roots.

"George!" Rose cried out with a trembling voice, not daring to hope for something that seemed absolutely impossible.

"Yes, mother!" her son George answered politely.

"You're alive?!"

"I'm alive, Mom."

The nest boomed with the cheers of the young birds, thrilled that their brother had avoided a certain death. Their mother silenced them impatiently, because she couldn't hear herself from the noise they were making.

"George, where are you?"

"I'm here."

"Where here?"

"Down here, in the hole."

As luck would have it, the old mulberry, like most old trees, was hollow inside and had a round hole near the base of its trunk, through which our little starling fled at the last moment. Before he crawled into the refuge of the hole, the predator just scratched him lightly on the left leg. Angry at having lost its prey, the tomcat nosed at the hole for a while, trying to squeeze his big head through the narrow opening, and then he gave up dispiritedly and left.

## 2.

George remained in the hole at the base of the mulberry tree, because he was too heavy to be carried back into the nest, not to mention how dangerous it could have been. It was unheard-of, in his flock and among all the starlings that ever lived, for a young fellow to become independent of his parents and leave the family nest at such an early age. His mother visited him only sometimes, to feed him and tidy up his hole, for she didn't want her child to live in a pigsty. In the following few weeks, George's legs and wings got stronger, his body became bigger, and he grew thick, black feathers shining like coal. He didn't leave his hole even when Rose started to teach her children to fly, the most important skill a starling needs.

"Hurry up, George, we're going to fly!" his brothers and sisters called to him excitedly, as their mother fastened helmets on their heads, because all young starlings are required by law to wear helmets made from walnut shell halves when they first start learning to fly.

"You just go ahead, I think I'm going down with a cold", George replied from his hole.

"Cold? What cold?" Rose was surprised.

She flew to his hole in alarm and found her child shivering on the bed of dry straw.

"I don't know why I'm feeling under the weather, I guess I didn't cover myself well last night", George said to his mother, who felt his forehead and asked him to open his beak so she could see his throat.

"You don't have a fever, and your throat is not inflamed", his mother concluded, but she nevertheless added: „Still, it's better to be safe than sorry. Stay in bed today and rest, and tomorrow you will come with us."

"Okay, Mom", George said.

But the following morning his stomach hurt.

"Your stomach hurts? Why would it hurt?" Rose asked.

"Those berries I ate yesterday evening must have been rotten", George moaned in faint whisper, holding on to his stomach painfully.

"It can't be the berries", his mother said. "We all had them for supper, and nobody complained."

"But they disagreed with me", the fledgling insisted stubbornly.

"All right, never mind", his mother said suspiciously and cut the discussion off. „You'll stay in bed today as well."

George thus missed the second day of flying lessons as well, and on the third he had a headache.

"That's enough!" his mother said angrily. "One day you have a cold, another your stomach hurts, and now you claim you have a headache. You're just making excuses not to go to school."

"But my head really aches", the fledgling protested.

"Get out of that hole, you impudent little fellow. You should be ashamed of yourself for lying to your mother like this", Rose got angry, and George felt ashamed and admitted his real problem.

"Mom, I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of? Flying?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sweetheart", his mother said tenderly, for she could never be really angry at George. Ever since his accident, she was more indulgent to him and paid more attention to him than to her other children. She sent the other fledglings, who had already mastered the basics after two days of lessons, to practice alone by flying from their nest to the stable roof and back, and she devoted herself to George alone.

"Now do as I say", she instructed him, hovering in front of his hole, while he stood rigidly on the edge of the opening. "Just let yourself go. Jump, pull your legs up, flap your wings, and it will all come to you naturally."

"I can't, I'm afraid!" George screamed in terror as he looked down, as though he were not standing very close to the ground, but on the edge of a bottomless abyss.

"Go ahead, just try it", Rose urged him. "Come on, son. We don't have the whole day."

George timidly let go of his perch, flapped his wings clumsily several times and landed heavily on his head. He was lucky he had a helmet on his head and hadn't fallen from a greater height, or he would have suffered a serious injury. Like this, he was not harmed by the fall, quite the contrary...

"How was I?" he asked his mother with hope in his voice and his walnut shell helmet tilted over his eye.

"You were great! Well done, George!" Rose praised him, but to herself she thought: Dear me, this will take a while.

Aware that George's flying education would contain many falls, and knowing that it was not wise to linger on unsheltered ground, she took him to the vegetable garden fenced on all sides with dense wire mesh, through which no cat or dog, or any other hostile animal could crawl. There among the cabbage stalks, the real learning began.

"Pay close attention now. This is the first thing you have to correct", Rose explained to her son, showing him what to do. "In flying, both wings have to move up and down at the same time."

"Aha!" George got it. "So, that's the secret!"

"Of course. Don't flap your wings like an idiot, with your left wing down and the right one up. Move them both in the same direction... up-down... up-down... up-down... Now you try it."

"I get it, I get it all", George said with enthusiasm, flapped his wings several times and then bravely took off from a cabbage head.

"No!" his mother cried.

Thud! He fell again.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" the little starling shrieked from the ground, before his mother had the time to ask anything.

### 3.

George's learning to fly was time-consuming and difficult, and it took him longer than any other bird from Rose's nest to master that skill, but Rose didn't give up and she encouraged her little son, until he somehow managed to fly a short distance between two low plants. With alighting, however, there were some minor problems. He panicked, forgot to stretch out his legs and rolled over the blue cabbage leaves. When the sun touched the edge of the woods bordering the farm, his feathers were ruffled, he was covered in mud from head to toe and he was limping slightly on his left leg, but it could not have been denied that he had made some progress.

The following day the young starling was even better. He flapped his wings harmoniously, more often than not lifted and lowered his legs at the right time, he even mastered the gentle turns by tilting his body to the left and right, and by midday he managed to fly over the whole cabbage bed without a hitch.

"I'm going to take the helmet off", he said bravely.

"Don't even think about it", his mother warned him strictly, sensing that the real learning was yet to come. She suspected that the flying difficulties of the fourth out of her six children were the consequence of his falling out of the nest when he was a baby, and that there was still a long way to go before they were overcome. And she was right. She realized that the first time they tried to rise above the cabbage heads to the height of the fence. At one point she looked over her shoulder and could not believe her eyes.

"George, what are you doing?!" she shouted. "Open your eyes!"

"I can't, I'm afraid!" the fledgling replied with his eyes squeezed shut.

"Open your eyes! You can't fly with your eyes closed, you'll crash into something!"

When they landed, little George was shaking in terror and it took him some time to recover. Then they tried again, slowly flying higher and higher into the air. George no longer had his eyes closed, but he kept his chin up, so he wouldn't see what was under him. And he did just fine, until his feathers started to quiver in a strong wind. He found the courage to cast a quick glance at the ground and he suddenly felt dizzy, just like that day when he had almost fallen into the cat's jaws. A great terror filled him when he saw tiny houses, a stream meandering between the fields and a road lined by plane trees. His heart started to race, his mouth dried, his vision became blurred, and all of a sudden he was too weak to lift his wings. He just stopped, as if he were dead, closed his eyes and started to fall.

"George!" his mother screamed and dived after him. "George, flap your wings! Flap them, son! George, you mustn't stop flapping!"

But her voice now seemed to be coming from a great distance. Dazed, the fledgling was dropping like a stone towards the ground, and it would have certainly been the death of him, he wouldn't have had any chance of surviving a fall from such a great height, if his mother hadn't managed to catch a long feather on his tail with her beak. Of course, she couldn't lift him up, but it softened the blow when they hit the ground. They fell heavily on the meadow grass and remained lying among the yellow primroses for a while, breathless and moaning in pain.

Rose realized it was best to end the lessons for the day. Holding on to each other, they silently returned to the mulberry tree, where George went into his hole, and Rose into the nest on the knot. At supper time, George's father Tony returned from his wanderings. The family of starlings spent some time joking in their nest. The little ones were now flying around the whole neighbourhood, they met other starlings that lived on the farm and they had many interesting stories about their new friends to tell. They shouted and rudely interrupted one another until nightfall, when they all fell asleep, exhausted with the excitements of the day.

"I don't know what to do about George", Rose then whispered to Tony.

"Why, is he no good at flying?"

"Flying is not the problem, he's almost as good as the others, but he's terrified of heights. You should have seen him today. We were lucky we hadn't died. He gets terribly scared when we fly high."

"A starling that is scared of heights?" Tony couldn't believe it. "I never heard of such a thing."

"The child has his problems, and there's nothing we can do about it. You know what he's been through, poor thing. He needs help."

"Just make sure you don't neglect our other children because of him", the father said.

“For heaven’s sake, Tony, how can you say such a thing?” Rose protested.

“Sorry, have I said something wrong? What can you expect from a bird which is afraid of heights? How will it survive? How will it fly around looking for food? What will it do when autumn comes and the flock migrates to the south, where the climate is warmer? A starling has to be strong and healthy to endure everything that comes its way, but I’m afraid our son is a lost cause.”

“You’re disgusting”, Rose said and turned her back to him. “I’m not talking to you.”

“I’m not disgusting, I’m just warning you”, Tony concluded harshly. „If that boy doesn’t overcome his fear of heights, he will be a burden to himself and to us. He will be in constant danger, and so will we, if we try to help him. I know this is not nice to hear, but the sooner he dies, the better it will be for both him and us.”

Still shaken by that day’s accident, the wretched fledgling was awake in his hole and he heard his father’s words. They echoed clearly all the way down the hollow trunk of the old mulberry tree. George’s little heart sank in sadness, and a barely audible sob escaped his throat.

#### 4.

The following few days he tried harder than everybody else. He got up at dawn, almost before daylight, and started to practice. Simon the Cock, the only one who was awake at that time of day, turned in surprise on its perch on the top of the fence after the young starling flying low over the yard and garden, and around the stable, pigsty and the barn. He heard him encourage himself in a frightened, agitated voice: „Come on, George! Higher! Just a little bit higher!” But when the young bird reached the lowest branches, it was always the same sad story, with the same sad ending. It seemingly no longer had the control over its body; it would flap its wings awkwardly, peep helplessly, turn over and tumble down.

Thud!

And again, thud!

Then again, thud!

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Simon would shudder, hide his little head between his shoulders and close his eyes in horror when the young starling crashed down to the ground. The old cock would then carefully open one eye, not expecting to see him alive, but he would find George back on his feet and flying again.

“This kid is not in his right mind”, Simon concluded.

When the sun was up, the cock went to take a nap, but George continued to practice. He practiced all day long, without a pause. In the evening, when he finally lied down, he was so exhausted and bruised, that his every, even the smallest feather on the belly hurt. But the following day he was again out in the yard before sunrise, shouting: "Come on, come on! Come on, George, you're a legend!"

Simon the Cock just gaped at him. His beak fell open in stunned surprise, and he almost forgot to announce the beginning of the day.

Countless times did George try, but it was all in vain. He could now fly very fast, better than some adult starlings, low above the ground, but every time he would dare go higher, every time he would reach a possibly fatal height, the familiar fear and weakness would overcome him, and his wings would no longer obey him. His mother Rose watched his distress and at first she cheered him on, encouraged him not to give up. But in the end she sadly fell silent, realizing that all George's efforts were futile.

There was simply no hope for her sweet, kind son, the child that was maybe better than any bird that had ever hatched in her nest, and to make his misery worse, he became the object of ridicule of other birds, who have all noticed his desperate trying and failing. One afternoon the whole flock gathered to watch his clumsy stumbling in the air, and many among them were not well-disposed and sympathetic to a bird with developmental difficulties. Quite the opposite, young starlings, George's peers who hatched that same spring, mocked him with the cruelty children are no strangers to towards someone weaker than them.

"Would you look at that clodhopper!" the fat Natasha shrieked with malice, happy she could laugh at someone worse than her, who was still a bad flyer and had a hard time keeping her big body in the air.

"A low flyer", Goran snorted with disdain. He was the most handsome of all young starlings and the one all girls were secretly in love with.

"Maybe he wants to smell the flowers", Desiree ridiculed him from the nest on a big locust tree on the edge of the farm.

"Or he's mowing the grass." That came from Miro, who always showed off, corrected others and added something to their words.

"My eyesight is failing. Is that starling flying, or just walking very fast?" one of the older starlings asked, feigning surprise.

"Walker!" someone cried and the whole flock took it up: "Walker! Walker! George the Walker!"

And the nickname stuck.

George, however, didn't hear them. Or he pretended not to hear their mocking. He dashed like an ar-

row, like a wind, like a bolt of lightning, but very low above the ground, almost as low as the tallest purple irises that grew along the path between the house and the stable. Every starling will tell you that it is very dangerous to fly very fast at a low height. If you make a mistake, you will fall and break all your bones, before you have the time to correct it. But George seemed to deliberately tempt fate. He seemed not to care if he would die. Nothing mattered to him, their insults did not reach him. He cut through the gentle spring breeze so fiercely that tears came to his eyes.

But then Goran flew down from the walnut tree, encouraged by the sneering comments of the flock. He rushed up to George, pecked his back and quickly flew up. The blow caught George by surprise, and he swerved from his course and almost crashed into a wall.

A roaring laughter boomed from the roofs and tree tops; the birds were delighted by Goran's mischievous prank. Only Hope, Goran's cousin and the best friend of George's sister Ana, shouted angrily:

"Goran, you idiot, you could have killed him!"

Goran paid no attention to this warning. He made a perfect spin in the air, so graceful and beautiful that everybody sighed in admiration, and plunged at George the Walker again. He swooped down on him sharply, from a great height, revolving like a propeller. The starlings shuddered watching it. They shrunk in fear, pressed their wings against their bodies and grasped the branches on which they were perched in anticipation of a fatal accident, but a moment before the collision, Goran twisted to a side and just grazed George's right wing with his left one. It was not a hard blow, and if the circumstances were different, George would not have felt it at all, but it was fatal at his speed and height. He flapped his wings clumsily and tumbled into the grass.

The birds cheered in unison, delighted with Goran's flying stunt. The old and experienced starlings, who flew to the far away countries and back, were impressed by the flying skills of a recently hatched young bird. "Hurrah! Well done, Goran! Good for you, young fellow!" they praised him. Even George's father Tony stood up and whistled with enthusiasm.

Out of everyone present, only Ana and Hope were worried about George. They quickly dashed down the tree and up to him.

"Are you all right, little brother?" Ana asked, and Hope took him by the wing to help him get up.

Angry and humiliated, George didn't want their pity and their help. He pushed them both away and got to his feet. His left foot hurt terribly when he leaned on it, but he closed his beak tightly and suppressed the cry of pain. He looked for Goran, burning with the desire to take revenge on him. When he saw him under the crown of the walnut tree bowing and waving happily to his audience, and sending kisses to his female admir-

ers, he dashed towards him eager for a fight. He wanted to peck that braggart hard all over, so that it would never again cross his mind to provoke him and mock him. But Goran was not scared.

“Here he comes again”, he said carelessly as he watched George coming towards him. „This one doesn't give up”, he added with laughter, taking refuge higher up in the air. „Come here”, he called to George, rising to a safe height, where he knew George would not follow him. „Come up here, Walker”, he teased him with malice.

George stopped and hovered, helplessly watching Goran high above, while the whole flock laughed at him.

## 5.

Starlings always fly in big, dense flocks. They all take off at the same moment and they all land as one. And they chatter all the time, interrupting each other impolitely. They argue on the roof of the stable so heatedly, that someone watching them would think they are about to get into a fight and never talk to each other again, but as soon as one of them goes to a poplar tree or a meadow, to peck at the seeds left there after the harvest, they all follow. Starlings can't do without the company of other starlings, and each one of them has a whole bunch of friends and cousins. They simply enjoy spending time together. It is unheard-of that a starling could be reticent or a loner, keep to himself and mind his own business, but George the Walker turned into such an eccentric.

From the day when the whole flock laughed at him, he neglected his flying practice, he no longer tried to overcome his fear of heights or longed to be accepted by others. As spring changed imperceptibly into summer, he wandered around the farm all alone. Apple branches drooped low under the burden of the fruit, honey bees buzzed busily around the purple heather bushes, yellow and blue butterflies fluttered in the warm air. But George hardly noticed any of that. While everything around him was bright and cheerful, he was sullen and sad. Sometimes the shouts of young starlings would reach his ears. He would then look up and watch them chase one another between the tree tops, and for a moment he would light up with happiness watching their carefree play. But then he would remember how they insulted him and rejected him, and bitterness would fill his heart.

“My dear son, you can't live all alone”, his mother Rose warned him as she tidied up his hole. „You have your father and me, you have your brothers and sisters, we all love you. Come up to our nest, so we can all have supper together, like a family.”

George, however, preferred to eat alone.

Ana and Hope once came to invite him to come to the river with them and rock on the reeds there, and he almost accepted their invitation. Rocking on reeds, nothing can compare to it. There is no better fun than holding on to the top of a long, soft stalk and shriek with fear as it bends towards the water, and then, at the last moment, when it almost touches the green surface, let go of it. All starlings love to applaud the bravest and nimblest among them, and laugh at the clumsy ones who fall into the river. But in the end George told his sister and her friend that he would not join them. He was a busy starling, with better things to do than stupid rocking on reeds.

In the end he never hung out with anyone and was surprised when someone addressed him. He was looking for insects in the grass, muttering something to himself, when a big, dark shadow fell over him and a deep voice from above asked:

"Young man, are you going to eat that chicory?"

"What?" George was surprised.

"The chicory?" repeated the cow, pointing with its snout at a patch of plants. "May I?"

"Of course, madam, by all means", George said and moved away.

The cow bit off the whole patch and chewed it with satisfaction.

"I know that chicory will disagree with me, but I simply can't resist it", she said as if apologizing. Then she swallowed, twitching her left ear in a strange way, and took a closer look at George. „One doesn't often see a starling walking in the grass", she said with curiosity and no evil intention. But George took it the wrong way.

"Why wouldn't a starling walk in the grass, if I may ask?" he asked in a quarrelsome manner. "Is there a law saying that all starlings must be high up in the air?"

"I apologize if I have offended you, I didn't mean to", the cow apologized, surprised at the anger of the little bird.

George calmed down. He looked into the cow's big, gentle eyes and realized he had overreacted.

"I am the one who should apologize", he said. "I thought you were mocking me. "

"Mocking you!?" the cow was stunned with that suggestion and she twitched her ear once again. "Why would I mock you, for heaven's sake?"

"Because I'm afraid of heights", George answered.

When she heard that, the cow chuckled against her will. What George said was so funny that she couldn't help but laugh.

"You are mocking me", George said sadly. "You are the same like everyone else."

"Oh, no", the cow quickly got serious, realizing that this small creature had a heavy burden on his heart. "I'm not mocking you, I'm just, I don't know... I'm surprised. You will agree that it is not every day one hears of a starling who is afraid of heights."

George nodded his head reluctantly – it really wasn't something one heard every day.

"How did it happen?"

"It's a long story", George waved his hand.

"I'm in no hurry", the cow said, and George then described to her how he fell out of the nest when he was a baby, and how that must have been the reason why heights filled him with unspeakable terror, and how his peers mocked him because of it, and the flock had rejected him, so that now his mother Rose was the only one he still talked to. After days and days of not speaking with anyone, words poured from him in a flood. As if he had just been waiting for a sympathetic ear, George told his whole sad story to the cow who was a total stranger to him. He told it at great length and in many details, one moment shouting, the other whispering, throwing himself onto the grass and fighting against the invisible opponent. The cow listened to him with interest as she calmly grazed the grass, remarking from time to time: "Poor little thing", "That's awful", "What a disgrace", "How could they be so rude!"

"So now they call me George the Walker", the little sterling concluded.

"You know what? It doesn't sound bad at all", the cow comforted him. "My name is Cherry."

"Nice to meet you, madam Cherry."

"You don't have to call me madam", the cow replied and twitched her left ear again. "We can be on first name basis."

"If it's not impolite to ask, what's wrong with your ear?"

"I don't know. Since yesterday afternoon I feel quick jabs of pain in it. It's probably a tick."

"Let me have a look", George suggested.

He flew up to the cow's left horn and moved apart the hair near her ear, looking for the cause of her pain.

"It's not a tick", he soon reported. "It's a torn."

"Oh, yes, now I remember. I shoved my head in the brambles yesterday afternoon, to reach a patch of delicious grass", Cherry said and then cried in pain: "Ouch!"

"Be still, I'm trying to get it out", George explained, pulling at the torn with his beak.

"It hurts! Stop it! Stop it!"

"Hold out a moment more, I'm almost done."

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!"

"I've got it! It's almost out! Here it is!" the starling shouted triumphantly with a long thorn in its beak.

"Whew!" Cherry sighed in relief. She twitched her pain-free ear with pleasure. „This is great. Thank you, George."

"Don't mention it", George the Walker replied, checking the spot in the cow's ear from which he has extracted the thorn. „Now you have a small wound there."

"Put a plantain leaf on it, it's best for wounds."

"I don't know what plantain looks like."

"There is a patch of it over there... Do you see those long, thin leaves to the left of the path? That's plantain."

The starling fluttered to the plantain, plucked a leaf, brought it to the cow's ear and gently placed it on the wound.

"I hope this will help."

"You are a fine young man, George", Cherry remarked.