

Cardinals

Joe Cardinal stood watch in the sweetgum tree while his wife Madge pecked at the buffet line on the bird feeder. A cold gust of wind ruffled his feathers and blew a few more brown leaves off the tree. A shiver went down his spine, more from anticipation than from cold. It was a bit chilly now, but he knew it would soon get much worse. Soon the cold gusts would pelt him with snow and sleet.

"It's getting cold" he called to Madge, more as an observation than as a complaint.

"If you don't like the cold, why don't we fly south for the winter? Like Sarah and Bill do." Madge replied.

"I didn't say I didn't like it. I just said it was getting cold." Joe answered.

"Well do you like the cold?"

"Not really" Joe admitted. "I much prefer summer."

"Well there you have it." Madge said. "Sarah told me they have a lovely nest in Florida, where it never gets cold. She said they look forward to going there every fall."

"They're robins." Joe countered. "They're a migratory species."

"I don't see what that's got to do with it. Bill takes Sarah to their Florida home every winter."

"We're non-migratory" Joe answered. "I don't even know where Florida is."

"We could follow Sarah and Bill" Madge suggested.

"They're worm eaters!" Joe was struggling to find a reason not to migrate. "How do we even know they have seeds in Florida?"

"Ugh! I ate a worm once." Madge said. "It wasn't so much the taste I objected to. It was the texture. Slimy. I don't mind a crunchy beetle now and then, or maybe a spider, but I much prefer sunflower seeds."

Joe decided to keep silent. He was glad the conversation had turned away from migration, and he thought it best not to stir things up.

Madge turned her attention back to the buffet line. "There seems to be a lot more millet than there used to be. I haven't found a sunflower seed in ages."

"You might try looking on the ground underneath the feeder" Joe suggested. He meant it as a helpful comment. He often had good luck looking there, as for some reason other birds sometimes tossed sunflower seeds out of the feeder while searching for seeds that were easier to crack open. He forgot that Madge considered that to be a disgusting habit.

"Down there?!!" Madge exclaimed as she peered down at the ground. "In that pile of squirrel poop and spit-out seed hulls? You want me to put my feet in that filth and rake through the compost heap with my bill, searching for a seed somebody else rejected?"

"Sorry" Joe called back. "Just trying to be helpful."

Madge twisted her head around and stared up at him. "Are you feeling OK?" she asked. "You don't look as bright as you used to."

"That was my mating plumage" Joe answered. "I only grow that in the spring. Now I'm molting and switching to my dull winter plumage."

Madge looked hurt. "So you only turn red when you want to fool around? And now you're not interested in me?"

"It's not that, Madge." Joe desperately tried to undo the damage. "It's just nature. I change colors in the winter." Madge still looked unconvinced so he tried to strengthen the argument. "Everybody does it. You're looking a little olive, yourself."

"What?!!" There was genuine shock and pain in Madge's response. Tears welled up in her eyes. She turned away from him and stared dejectedly at the buffet line. "I am not turning into a little olive," she sniffed.

"No! I didn't mean you were turning into an olive. I meant your feathers were getting olive colored. It's what female cardinals do in the winter. It's in all the bird books. You could look it up."

Madge still looked crestfallen. Joe frantically searched for a way to make her feel better. An apology that would undo the hurt he had accidentally caused. He spotted a sunflower seed on the far side of the feeder, where Madge couldn't see it. He decided the situation was desperate enough to justify leaving his post. He fluttered down, grabbed the seed, and then landed on the perch beside her. He laid the seed at her feet.

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Madge. I think your winter plumage is beautiful."

“Really?” she asked. Her voice was soft, like she was trying to believe him.

“Yes, I really do.” Joe answered. “I think it’s absolutely stunning.”

“You used to go absolutely frantic, trying to protect me any time another cardinal came around.”

“Remember the time I almost broke my beak attacking the cardinal in the car mirror?” Joe asked.

Madge giggled in reply.

“I’d do it again today if he came back.” Joe declared.

Madge snuggled a little closer to him. “I could never be interested in another cardinal” she said.

Joe thought carefully before he spoke. “If you really want to go to Florida for the winter,” he said. “I’ll find a way a way to do it.”

“That’s OK.” Madge answered. “As long as I’m with you, I don’t mind the winter.”

“I love you, Madge.”

“I love you, Joe.”