

# THE DANCE OF LIFE: AS TOLD BY CARDINALS

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## Definition

Cardinals are popular songbirds, credited for their beauty. So eye-catching are they that seven U.S. states call them their state bird (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

## Courtship

Courtship consists of the male and female cardinals singing softly with their heads held high, swaying back and forth, in rhythm with the song (Kaufman).

## Jitterbug #1

BJ and Jim’s first date was actually not even a date. Instead, it was a double date. They came with two other partners, who are not important now. It was their first dance. Dancing along to the radio was free so, growing up poor with not much to do, Jim and his sisters were excellent dancers. His date was not.

“Do you know how to jitterbug?”

“No.”

Looking across the table, his eyes landed on BJ, with her fiery red hair.

“Do you know how to jitterbug?”

“A little.”

Next thing she knew they were out on the floor dancing the night away. Their original dates stayed sitting awkwardly, sullen about their pairs of two left feet.

## Songbirds

“In summer, their sweet whistles are one of the first sounds of the morning” (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

## Songs

The next thing she knew, he was calling her and leaving messages with her roommates. BJ worked long hours and did not have an answering machine. She was getting tired of them asking, “Who’s Jim?”

## Migratory Birds

Cardinals are also one of the only birds in the northeast who tough out the winter, opting out of migrating to Florida (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

Christmas in New England is almost concurrent with the beautiful red body of a cardinal backed by pure white snow. This wistful image is seen on almost as many Christmas cards as picturesque lighthouses framed by the white of the snow and cool blue of the ocean.

## Migration

“You’re going to be an old spinster.” A taunt that BJ’s brothers always launched at her. BJ, unhindered by this threat, decided to go to nursing school.

“When I was out of high school there were two options. Be a teacher or be a nurse, so I decided I guess I’d be a nurse.”

The Peter Bent Brigham Hospital is where she went to school and later worked, only leaving in a spur of the moment decision so she and a friend could travel to Europe. As penny-pinching nurses, they took a boat, not a cruise, and decided to vacation until they were out of money.

They elongated their stay to 3 months by residing 6 days a week in hotels without private showers, electing to wash their hair in the sinks.

After coming back to Boston, they then made a slight detour to San Francisco, then finally back home to Boston, where she stayed, through the snowy weather and cold nights.

### **Songbirds Revisited**

Cardinals attract many people to the bird watching hobby not just because of their bright red plumage, but for their beautiful songs (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

### **Songs Revisited**

As head nurse of the coronary care unit she was a lot of things. Headstrong, knowledgeable, and determined to name a few. Her most admirable trait was her compassion. The many times she sat by the bedside of someone who was nearing the end of their life, she reassured their families that the last sense to go was hearing. Your dying child, brother, sister, mother, or husband could not taste or smell anything, see you, and could not feel you but, to their last faint beat of heart, they could hear you.

### **Treats**

Long after BJ had ever had a dog, she still carried dog treats with her in her car. That way if she saw any dogs while she was out, she'd always have something to give to them.

### **Proposal**

Their love story was not all roses and butterflies after that first magical not-date. Jim started ignoring her so, in her normal independent and stubborn fashion, she started seeing other people. Then one fateful night he called her, practically begging her to come to dinner with him. She conceded but in protest wore the ugliest dress she could find in her closet. That was the night he proposed.

Her answer, “I’ll think about it.”

### **Mating Birds**

Many cardinals are said to mate for life (Kaufman, Kenn & Kimberly).

### **St. Louis Cardinals**

The St. Louis Cardinals were given the name when “one day, Willie McHale, a sports reporter for the St. Louis Republic heard a female fan praise the color (of the players’ socks) as a ‘lovely shade of cardinal.’ So, McHale called them Cardinals” (“1901 St. Louis Cardinals Roster”).

### **Mates**

She did think about it. She didn’t have a choice. He’d call every day.

“Hello my beautiful red-head. I thought I’d help you make your decision, so I made a list of pros and cons of marrying me. I have a whole list of pros, but I can’t come up with any cons.”

### **Food**

Male cardinals represent that “you are what you eat.” Their red color is the result of the carotenoids in their diet (Clifford).

### **Beer**

Jim loved his beer, but he was not a drunk. He had at least 2 drinks a night. Evidence of this was found in his leprechaun-like beer belly. However, every so often he’d go a week without any alcohol at all, just to prove, to himself, to the fates, maybe to God, that he could.

### **Nest-Building**

Female cardinals are not as popular on Christmas cards. Their duller plumage doesn’t hold a candle to the magnificent red of the male cardinals. However, the female’s song is just as alluring, and she is the one who does the most building of the elaborate nest the family resides in (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

### **Home-Building**

After marriage and their first child, she said she was staying home.

There was no point in arguing with her.

She raised the kids; he raised a business. The bank laughed at him when he requested a loan. They thought never in a million years would that corner of Charlestown, overrun with crime and poverty, ever be an ideal place of business. Obstinate in his decision, he scraped together every penny. The building still stands, in a now flourishing part of town, a testament to their hard work and, more importantly, stands for how they strived to provide a great life for their children.

She did the bookkeeping—all the way up to 6 months before she died.

He was never able to shake off the aftertaste that getting evicted from his home as a child had left. Therefore, he worked for the company he grew from the ground up, all the way until the day he died.

### **Confidence**

Puffing out their chests and standing with heads held high, cardinals can be seen as an extremely confident species (Clifford).

### **Bullshit**

One of the traits Jim Balcam possessed that made him a stellar businessman was the ability to “baffle you with the Balcam Bullshit.” He could sell a glass of water to a drowning man. After a meeting one day an adjuster said to my mother, “It’s so hard to say no to him when he looks at you with that big Irish smile.”

### **Nest-Building Revisited**

The female crushes twigs with her beak until they are workable. She then pushes them into a cup shape creating a four-layered nest. One layer with coarse twigs, then covered in a leafy mat, then lined with grapevine bark, and then covered finally with grasses, stems, rootlets, and pine needles (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

### **Origin**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “cardinal” comes from the Latin word “cardo” meaning “hinge” (“Cardinal”).

### **Home-Building Revisited**

She remembered the names of all the people that he couldn’t remember.

She used to paint his fingernails with clear polish. If he wanted to be a good businessman and make an impression, he couldn’t show up to meetings with chewed-off fingernails.

If you needed someone to make you the best birthday cake, to make a new craft for the church sale, to take care of your kid when they were sick, someone who knew how to do the Heimlich when you’re out to dinner with the family (this happened twice)—she did it all.

### **Territorial Birds**

Oftentimes cardinals attack their own reflections in the spring and early summer. This is because they are obsessed with defending their nest from intruders. They’ll spend hours fighting these “intruders” in a hopeless battle (“Northern Cardinal: Life History”).

### **Territorial**

Her strong headedness never faded either. As an 80-something year old who drove 20 under the speed limit, she only ran a red light twice—both times was when Jim was in the hospital. Hobbling up to the front desk the secretary told her she couldn’t go back to see him. Leaning her frail body on her cane for support she said,

“Look, I understand that you have rules but you’re going to need a lot more security out here if you don’t let me back there.”

He let her by, apparently worried that this grandma could indeed bash his nose in with her cane, as she insinuated. Leaving the hospital later that day she said thank you and goodnight and, under her breath in an embarrassed tone, “I almost assaulted him on the way in.”

## Religion

Cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church are high ecclesiastical officials ranking just below the pope (Clifford).

## Minister

Jim was a good man; this didn't stop him from trying to secure his place in Heaven. At the nursing home where he spent the last few months of his life, he'd slip the minister a \$20 bill every time he came around, just to be sure.

## Superstition

Cardinals are often seen as good luck charms—especially for a family as superstitious as mine. Jim never walked under a ladder, always picked up a penny when he saw it, and always went out the same door he came in. For our family, seeing a cardinal represents that a loved one is still watching over you.

My grandma spent many afternoons sitting in her kitchen bay window, often accompanied by my dog on the other side of the table. From there they had a perfect view of the brilliantly red cardinal who called the top of the tree across from her condo, his home. Day in and day out he'd be there, rain or sun or storm.

## Name

Now I apologize because Jim was not even his name, it was his middle. However, I only know the first letter of his first name. My mom only found out his first name when her sister found his birth certificate and she will be taking that secret to the grave. His parents named him after someone in hopes that the person would leave Jim money in his will. According to Jim, the H in H. James (Jim for short) stands only for "Honorable."

## Nubble Light

Nubble Light is BJ's favorite place. During the summers that BJ, Jim and their family spent at York Beach she'd walk to the lighthouse every day. Years later, in their kitchen Jim stated to his eldest daughter,

"When I die, have me cremated and hold on to the ashes and then when your mother dies you can have her cremated and then mix our ashes together and spread them in the Piscataqua River."

"Don't you dare Debra. That's not what I want... You can go in the river; I'm going to Nubble Light."

Jim, knowing better, quickly conceded.

"Ok, we'll go to Nubble Light. Can I go too?"

"I'll think about it," she said.

We all knew she'd give in.

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