

What actually woke him was the unearthly sound itself – a mournful shatter of frozen midnight falling to earth to pierce his heart and lodge there forever, never to move, never to melt – but he, being who he was, assumed it was his bladder.

He huddled under the covers, sending out mental feelers to see how urgent the call was. Urgent enough. He sighed. Forty-eight still seemed too young to be having to get up in the night so often to relieve what was patently an old man's need, but there would clearly be no getting back to sleep until the matter was addressed. Maybe if he was quick about it he wouldn't even really need to wake all the way up. Yes. All right, then. Here we go. Upright, down the hall.

He gasped as he stepped onto the bathroom floor, cruelly cold against his bare feet. The room had no radiator, just a mysterious flat pad-type thing on the wall – he could never describe it adequately to other people – that, when turned on, grew too hot to touch while also managing to not even vaguely warm the surrounding air. He'd been

meaning to remedy the problem since he'd moved here after the divorce, but a ninth year had just passed, a tenth begun, and here he was, still freezing his toes and the surprisingly soft skin of his arches as he stood, naked, at the toilet.

'Cold,' he murmured, using the glow of moonlight through the window to more-or-less aim into the bowl, guiding the rest by sound once he'd got a stream started.

The winter had been snowless but bitter, the damp of the house making it seem even more so. A huge city allegedly thrummed and dazzled just metres from his doorstep, yet inside might as well have been draped in the chill fog of a hundred years past. At her last visit, his daughter Amanda had stopped halfway through taking off her coat and asked if he was expecting a plague cart.

He finished urinating, shook off the last few drops, then tore a square of toilet paper to gently dab away the excess from the tip of his penis, a habitual action that his ex-wife had inexplicably regarded with enormous affection. 'Like pretty eyelashes on a bear,' she'd said.

She'd still divorced him, though.

He dropped the square of paper into the bowl, leaned forward to flush, and in that ignominious moment the sound came again, heard consciously for the first time.

He froze, hand mid-way to the flush handle.

The bathroom window faced his small back garden, a narrow one that elongated back in perfect mirror of the two on either side, and the sound had clearly come from there, somewhere beyond the marbled glass.

But what on earth was it? It matched nothing in the hurried catalogue of plausible things it might be at this time of night in this particular neighbourhood: not the unnerving scream of a mating fox, not the neighbour's

cat trapped in his garage (again), not thieves because what thief would make a sound like that?

He jumped as it came yet again, slicing through the night, clear in a way that only very cold things are.

A word sprang to his groggy, shivering mind. It had sounded like a *keen*. Something was *keening* and it welled him up with entirely unexpected, in fact, frankly *astounding* tears. It tore at his heart like a dream gone wrong, a wordless cry for help that almost instantly made him feel inadequate to the task, helpless to save whatever was in danger, pointless to even try.

A sound which, later on, when he remembered this night forever and always, thwarted all sense. Because when he found the bird, the bird made no sound at all.

He rushed to his bedroom to dress: trousers without underwear, shoes without socks, jacket without shirt. He didn't look out of any of his windows as he did so, the one logical action, simply checking on what the sound might be, left bafflingly undone. Instead, he moved with instinct, feeling somehow that if he hesitated, it – whatever it might be – would somehow slip away, dissipate like a forgotten love. He merely moved, and quickly.

He bungled down the stairs, fiddling his keys out of his trouser pocket. He stepped through the cluttered sitting room and into the kitchen, angering himself at how loudly the keys banged against the back door lock (and who had a key lock on the *inside* of a house? If there was a fire, then *whoof*, you were gone, banging on a door that would never open. He'd meant to fix that as well, but ten years later . . .).

He opened the door, swinging it out into the freezing

night, knowing that whatever had made that noise *must* be gone, surely, in all the racket he was making from his clumsy door-openings and key-clatterings. It would have fled, it would have flown, it would have run—

But there it stood. Alone in the middle of the modest stretch of grass that made up the modest back garden of his modest detached home.

A great white bird, as tall as he was, taller, willowy as a reed.

A reed made of stars, he thought.

Then, ‘*A reed made of stars*’? *Where the hell did that come from?*

The bird was illuminated only by the moon in the cold, clear winter sky, shades of white, grey and dark against the shadows of his lawn standing there regarding him, its eye a small, golden glint of blinking wet, level with his own, its body as long as he’d been when he was at his teenage gangliest. It looked somehow, he stupidly thought, as if it was on the verge of speaking, as if it would open its pointed, clipped bill and tell him something of vital importance that could only be learnt in a dream and forgotten on the instant of waking.

But he felt too cold under his one layer of clothes for this to be a dream, and the bird, of course, remained silent, not even a repeat of the keening that could only have come from it.

It was magnificent. Not just in its unexpectedness, its utter incongruity in the backyard of a London suburb celebrated for its blandness, a place from where native-born artists were noted for moving away. But even in a zoo, even to a non-bird lover, this bird would have caught the eye. The staggering whiteness, even in the dark, of its breast and neck, a whiteness that seemed as much a part

of the cold as the frost on the grass behind it. The whiteness flowed down into its wings, the one on the side facing him dipping almost low enough to brush the grass.

Triangles of black pulled away from its bill on either side, and a startling cap of red crowned its head, distinguishable even in this low light, like a military insignia for somewhere impossibly foreign. Its stare was commanding, unyielding in that way of birds. It knew he was there, it met his eye, and yet it didn't start or fly away or show any fear.

Or rather, he thought, the fear it showed wasn't of *him*.

He shook his head. These thoughts weren't helpful. The cold, far from waking him, was so ferocious it was actually making him sleepier, and he thought for a moment that this must be how people die in snowstorms, this lethargy which felt warm against all available evidence. He rubbed his arms, then stopped should the action startle the bird away.

But the bird remained.

A heron? he thought. *A stork?* But it was nothing at all like those hunched, purplish grey birds he sometimes saw skulking around the city like unwashed old gentlemen.

Then, for the second time that evening, the word came to him. Who knew if he was right, who knew such things any more, the right words for birds, the right words for anything, who bothered to remember them in an age when knowledge was for putting into a cloud and forgetting, then forgetting again that you ever needed to remember it? But the name came to him, and regardless of where it might have come from or how it might be right, *it was* right. He knew it, and speaking made it more so.

'A crane,' he said, softly. 'You're a crane.'

The crane turned, as if in answer to his naming of it,

its eye still on his, and he could see that the wing the bird had kept behind it wasn't folded down like the nearside one. It was outstretched, awkwardly.

Because it was shot through with an arrow.

'Oh, shit,' the man whispered, the words appearing before his lips in a fruitless puff of steam. 'Oh, no.'

The arrow was long, extraordinarily so, at least four feet, and the more it resolved in the man's vision, the more he could see that it was some kind of terrifyingly *proper* arrow, too, with crisply cut feathers fletched up in three evenly spaced rows around one end and a glinting, shiny arrowhead easily the width of two of his fingers at the other. There was something weirdly ancient about it as well, something that hinted at its carving from authentically expensive wood, not balsa or bamboo or whatever chopsticks were made of, and it was a whole world more serious than the business-like rods you saw fired on the Olympics coverage of smaller nations.

This was an arrow for killing. An arrow for killing men, even. An arrow over which a medieval archer might have prayed that the grace of God would bless its arc and send it straight into the rancid heart of the infidel. The man could see, too, now that he was looking for it, the dark stain at the crane's feet where its blood had dripped from the arrow's tip onto the frosted grass.

Who in the world would fire such a thing these days? And *where*? And, for God's sake, *why*?

He moved forward to help the crane, not knowing what he might do, feeling certain he would fail, but he was so surprised when it didn't back away from him that he

stopped. He waited another moment, then found himself addressing it directly.

‘Where have you come from?’ he asked. ‘You lost thing.’

The crane remained silent. The man remembered again the keening he’d heard, felt an echo of the mournful pressure of it in his chest, but no sound came now from the bird. No sound came from anywhere. The two of them could have been standing in a dream – though the cold that shifted through his shoes and bit at his fingers suggested otherwise, and the quotidian leaking of a stray drop, despite his best efforts, onto the crotch of his underwear-less trousers told him definitively this was still real life, with all its disappointments.

But if it wasn’t a dream, it was one of those special corners of what’s real, one of those moments, only a handful of which he could recall throughout his lifetime, where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life. Like when he lost his virginity to the girl with the eczema in his Honours English Class and it had been so intensely brief, so briefly intense, that it felt like both of them had left normal existence for an unleashed physical instant. Or that time on holiday in New Caledonia when he’d surfaced from snorkelling and for an oddly peaceful moment or two he’d been unable, due to the swells of the ocean, to even see the boat from which the divers had leapt, and then the angry voice of his wife had shouted ‘There he is!’ and he’d been sucked back into reality. Or not the birth of his daughter, which had been a panting, red tumult, but the first night after, when his exhausted wife had fallen asleep and it was just him and the little, little being and she opened her eyes at him, astonished to find him there, astonished to find *herself*

there, and perhaps a little outraged, too, a state which, he was forced to admit, hadn't changed much for Amanda.

But *this*, this moment here, this moment was like those, and more so. The gravely injured bird and him in a frozen back garden that could have been the borders of the known universe for all he knew. It was in places like this that eternity happened.

And as he watched, the crane took a single step to the side, and stumbled.

He leapt forward to catch it, and like that, it was in his arms, the surprising weight of its upper body and its reaching neck (so like a swan's but so different, too), its good wing flapping and out.

And the smell! Of panic and shit. Of blood and fear. Of the impossible labour of flight that seeps through every atom of a bird. The smell, more than anything, convinced the man this wasn't a dream. Even in his worry about hurting the crane, even in the sudden calamity of flapping wings and flying feathers and the stabbing of a beak that looked as if it might well be able to go straight through his chest and into his heart, he knew that his brain – likeable though it was – was incapable of conjuring a scent this crowded, this peopled by so many different spices.

'Whoa, there,' he said, the bird twisting, fighting, perhaps realising too late that a separate, possibly predatory creature now had it in its grasp. The beak poked again, notching his cheek, drawing blood. 'Dammit!' he said. 'I'm trying to help you.'

At which the crane leaned back its neck, its head reaching to the sky, and it opened its beak to call.

But it didn't call. It gaped silently at the moon, as if breathing it out.

The crane's full weight suddenly pressed against the man's chest. That long neck fell forward like a ballerina's arm accepting applause, and it wrapped around him, its head hanging down his back, as if embracing him. Only the heaving of its narrow breast told the man that the bird was still alive, that in its exhaustion it had given itself into his keeping, that it would hand over its life to the man if that was what was required.

'Don't die,' the man whispered, urgently. 'Please don't die.'

He knelt down into the grass, the frost instantly wetting his knees, and with one arm still around the body of the crane, he used his free hand to gently grasp the arrow-pierced wing and unfurl it.

The span of a bird's wing is mostly feather; the meat of the muscle that regularly performs the casual miracle of self-activated flight is entirely in a long, narrow arm above the spray of feathers below. The arrow had pierced this length of sinew on the underside, catching quite a lot of white feather but still hitting more than enough muscle to have lodged, seemingly irrevocably, through the crane's wing.

The man wondered if he should call someone who'd be about eight million times more qualified to help than he was. But who? The RSPB? A vet? At this time of night? And what would they do? Would they 'put it down'? A crane so gravely injured?

'No,' whispered the man, though he was unaware of doing so. 'No.'

'I'll help you,' he said, more loudly. 'I'll try. But you have to hold still for me, okay?'

Foolishly, he found himself waiting for the bird's response. All it did was continue its desperate breathing against his neck. The arrow had to come out, and the man had no idea how he was going to do that, but that's what needed to be done and he could feel himself already manoeuvring the crane to do so.

'All righty then,' the man said, and then he said it again. 'All righty then.'

He cradled the bird's weight away from him, and with no small amount of awkwardness, he worked his way out of his jacket, gently moving the crane's head and neck to slip the cheap fabric from underneath. One-handed, he stretched the jacket out on the frost and laid the crane down onto it, folding its good wing beneath it. The crane acquiesced with an ease that terrified him, but he could still see it breathing, its chest rising and falling, more rapidly than seemed right but at least still alive.

The man was now naked from the waist up, kneeling in frozen grass, on a clear night in a cold season that could very well kill him if he stayed. He worked as quickly as he could, keeping the crane's injured wing unfurled in a vertical from the ground. He – along with conceivably everyone else in the entire world – had only ever seen arrow injuries in the movies. The rescuers always broke the arrow and pulled it out the other side. Was this even the right thing to do?

'Okay,' the man whispered, taking hold of the arrow's end in one hand and slowly letting go of the injured wing with the other, so that all that was holding up the crane's wing was the arrow itself, now in both his hands.

It felt shocking against his fingertips, even though they were quickly numbing in the cold. The wood was surprisingly light, as it would have to be for an arrow, but still

signifying strength with every inch. He looked for a weak spot, found none, and felt increasingly sure of his inability to break it, certainly of his inability to break it without having to try several times and cause the creature unthinkable agony.

‘Oh, no,’ the man mumbled to himself again, starting to shiver uncontrollably now. ‘Oh, shit.’

He glanced down. It looked back at him with that golden eye, unblinking, its neck curved against his coat like a question mark.

There was no solution then. It was too cold. *He* was too cold. The arrow obviously too thick and strong. It might as well have been made of iron. The crane was going to die. This reed made of stars was going to die right here, in his sad little back garden.

A tidal wave of failure washed over him. Was there another way? Was there any other way at all? He turned back to the door to his kitchen, still open, letting out every bit of meagre warmth from the house. Could he carry the crane back inside? Could he lift it and get it there without hurting it further?

The crane, for its part seemed to have already given up on him, to have already judged him, as so many others had, as a pleasant enough man, but lacking that certain something, that extra little ingredient to be truly worth investing in. It was a mistake women often seemed to make. He had more female friends, including his ex-wife, than any straight man he knew. The trouble was they’d all started out as lovers, before realising that he was too amiable to take quite seriously. ‘You’re about sixty-five per cent,’ his ex-wife had said, as she left him. ‘And I think seventy is probably my minimum.’ The trouble was, seventy per cent seemed to be *every* woman’s minimum.

Seventy seemed to be the crane's minimum, too. It had made the same mistake as all the others, seeing a man when, upon closer inspection, he was only really a *guy*.

'I'm sorry,' he said to the crane, tears coming again. 'I'm so sorry.'

The arrow moved unexpectedly in his hands. The crane, seemingly in an involuntary shudder, nudged its wing forward and the arrow slid through the man's fingers.

And stopped.

The man felt something. A small crack in the wood of the arrow. He looked closer. It was hard to see in such dim light, but yes, definitely a crack, one big enough to follow even with frozen fingertips. It spliced through the shaft, no doubt broken there by the struggles of the crane's great wing. The man could even feel that the arrow was at slightly different angles on either side of it.

He looked back down at the crane. It regarded him, thinking who knew what.

An accident, surely. Absurd to think that the animal would have led his fingers to it.

But also absurd that a crane with an arrow through its wing had landed in his back garden.

He said, 'I'll try.'

He gripped the side of the arrow closest to the pierced wing and held it as steadily as he could. He took the other end in his fist near the crack. The cold was so fierce now that he was feeling actual pain in his hands. It would have to be now. It would have to be right now.

'Please,' the man whispered. 'Please.'

He broke the arrow.

* * *

A massive sound rent the air, not from the breaking arrow but as of an enormous flag slapping in a gale. The crane surged to its feet, flinging wide both its wings, and the man fell back in surprise onto the concrete slabs at the edge of his lawn. He threw up an arm to protect himself as the pointed end of the arrow flew free, bouncing harmlessly off his arm and leaving a smear of the crane's blood across it, the other half disappearing into darkness. He would never find either, always firmly believing that the blood had been too tempting for a starving winter fox not to carry them off.

The bird stood above him now, reaching its head up into the night and calling silently again at the moon. Its wings, fully unfurled, were wider than the man was tall. The crane flapped them in long, slow, powerful movements. It shook the damaged wing once, then once more. The man could still see blood staining the feathers from the wound, but the crane seemed satisfied with its performance.

It stilled itself, its wings reaching out as far as they could go.

It turned its head to regard him with that unblinking eye, a shock of gold under its dark, red crown. The man wondered for a fanciful moment if it was going to reach down and scoop him up in those wings, as if this was some kind of test that he'd passed, one that, had he failed, he would never have remembered taking.

Then he found himself saying something stupid, something that made no sense at all.

'My name,' he said, 'is George.'

He said it to the crane.

As if in answer, the crane bowed its long, long neck low towards the ground, keeping its shoulders up and wings out. It began flapping them in a different way, one

that caused it to almost fall forward onto the man. He scooted back some more, and when the crane left the ground its burning white breast soared an inch from the man's upturned nose. He looked back to watch it veer sharply upwards to avoid running into his house, carrying on up to the peak of his roof and alighting there for a moment. The moon was bright behind it, cutting it into a frozen silhouette.

It ducked its head once more, unfurled its wings, and swooped down over the back garden, its thin black legs trailing behind it, then up and up and up and up and up, until it was nothing more than one star among many in the night sky and soon not even that.

The man, George, rose slowly from the icy ground, a worrying ache starting to curl through his bare torso. He was shivering so badly now it was all he could do to stand, and he wondered if he was falling into shock. He would need a warm bath, and he'd need it soon, though he was already wondering if he'd have the strength to make it back inside—

A jolt ran through his body as he heard it, one more time. The *keening*, the mournful call that had brought him out here in the first place. It echoed through the frosty, clear air, as if it was the night itself calling out to him. The crane was saying its goodbye, its thank you, its—

And then he realised that the call hadn't come from an impossible bird vanishing from his garden and life and out of the whole world for all he knew. The keen had been set free from his own body, cried out from icy blue lips, torn from a chest that suddenly seemed to hold his irreparably broken yet still beating heart.