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The Birds

Jane was walking home from a friend's house when the birds fell. It was New Year's Eve. She was one of only a very few who saw them rain down.

Old Lady Varble saw them. She was a famous insomniac, who at least once a week wandered the streets of the neighborhood in the earliest hours of the morning, wearing her pajamas with her bathrobe flapping open. On the night the birds fell, she had started her sleepless march earlier than usual. That put her underneath the night sky at just the right moment to see the strange downpour.

Stan the Garbage Man saw them too. He had a flat tire earlier in the day that set him back hours with his garbage route. He was picking up his last load behind the Piggly Wiggly. It was one minute past midnight, and a black bird landed square on the hood of his car with a thud. Right after that, another one hit the road in the beam of his garbage truck headlights.

Jane was trudging up LoLo Hill when the birds fell. The hill was steep, and every time she climbed it, she understood that the name was someone's idea of a joke. She had just watched a classic horror movie with her friend Mazie. Mazie lived a half a mile away. The movie starred Jason the Murderer in a Hockey Mask. Jason preyed on teenagers.

"Are you sure you want to walk home by yourself?" Mazie said once the movie was over, and Jane announced she was leaving. Mazie had bushy red hair that stood out in all directions. The kids at school called her Crazy Mazie. But Jane didn't care what the kids at school thought. Jane liked Mazie because she was weird. Mazie liked old horror movies and watched them everyday after school. Both Jane and Mazie believed that someday, all the hard work of watching these old horror movies would pay off for Mazie. Mazie had a dream of being a set designer. She was always making shoebox dioramas of scary rooms in haunted houses.

They stepped outside on Mazie's front porch. The moon shone like a spotlight. The air was cold but still. Jane could see Mazie's breath as she spoke. It came out in small white clouds.

"I mean—" said Mazie. She looked this way and that—like someone might be hiding in the shadows and jump out at them any moment. "—it's dark and all."

The horror movie was a classic so that's why they watched it. It was on a list of options from class. Now Jane was supposed to write a paper about what makes something classic and if this movie was a classic—why. But Jane kept laughing at the scary parts when she knew she was supposed to be terrified.

Other things scared her. Melting glaciers and drowning polar bears. Tsunamis and tornados. Bee die-offs and brown coral reefs. These things kept her up at night. The permafrost was melting and parking lots all over Alaska were caving in.

"I like walking at night," Jane said. "I'm not scared. It's only ten minutes."

Mazie twirled a strand of red hair around her finger and looked down the road towards Jane's house. "Text me when you get home," she said. "So I know you made it."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Don't count on it," she said.

Almost all of the birds were blackbirds. Jane thought blackbirds were mean. She'd had blackbirds chase her down the road by the river more than once because she got too close to a nest they had built somewhere in the grass or a roadside bush. They would hover ten feet above her head then dive at her, chirping and screaming. She didn't like them but she didn't wish them all dead.

The city had a long history with blackbirds. Every morning at sunrise, the blackbirds flew from one side of town to the other, then at dusk, they flew back again. They formed a long black column, slithering like a snake across the sky. They had been doing this for as long as Jane could remember. People hardly noticed anymore when they flew over the city.

The weatherman on T.V. talked about it. He said it had something to do with air currents and temperature fluctuations along with the obvious comings and goings of daylight. When they stayed on the outer edges of town, they didn't bother people much. But one year, for some reason, some of them split off and roosted not at the edge of town but in a stand of purple maples in Mrs. Varble's front yard.

They packed into the leaves and nestled on all the branches by the hundreds. The trees seemed to writhe and crackle, and if Jane walked near them, she felt herself followed by a thousand eyes. Sometimes the birds would rise out of the trees like black clouds, hover for an instant then disappear into the purple leaves again. It drove Mrs. Varble crazy. She stood in her yard and banged on pots. She threw baseballs at them, sprayed them with water and yelled at them. A few birds would rise up out of the trees when a baseball came close, but they quickly settled back down on the branches and stayed all day, only lifting off as one massive flock come nightfall. Jane watched all this with a pair of bird-watching binoculars from her second story bedroom window. By the end of the summer, Mrs. Varble was more of a spectacle than the birds as she staggered around her yard, muttering and yelling.

Then without warning, on a day in late fall, the birds went back to their old roost on the edge of town. The maples become just trees again, their leaves rustled only by the wind. But Mrs. Varble was never the same. Not long after, she started roaming the streets, wide-eyed and sleepless, as if now she couldn't bear the peace and quiet.

They started clean up the next day. Two thousand birds. Workers from an environmental service company the next town over turned up in white protection suits and orange hard hats. They wore thick, turquoise-colored rubber gloves, and face masks with long filter tubes covering their noses and mouths, like people in a science fiction movie about a nuclear power plant meltdown.

The mayor said the suits and masks were just a precaution, but it still made everyone nervous. What was in the air? What were they all breathing?

"There's a logical explanation," said the mayor. "It's the weather or New Year's Eve fireworks at the baseball stadium."

The man on Jane's street carried an orange bucket and stooped to pick up each bird, one by one. It took a full day. By Sunday, nearly every bird would be gone and people would already begin to forget. But Jane could not forget. Birds raining from the sky felt like a plague or omen.

Jane had been watching birds since she was ten years old. Her father taught her. His office was on the third floor with windows on three sides so

it felt like a tree house. And crowding up to the windows were trees of all kinds. "The usual suspects," her father would say, "are the walnuts and oaks, because they are native." But the campus was a living tree laboratory started by a professor almost sixty years before. So there were other trees: Ginkgos in pairs, male and female, Grand Catalpas, with their foot long seed pods, pines and blue spruce whose needles whispered when the wind blew. Redwoods and dogwoods that flowered in the spring. And hidden in the branches of the trees were birds. Blackbirds, yes. But others too. Gold finches and cedar waxwings. Ladderback woodpeckers, the tufted titmouse and of course the noisy jays and crows.

The binoculars perched on the window sill beside her father's desk seemed to be waiting just for Jane whenever she came to his office – after school or if she stayed home sick. She learned which birds favored which trees – she always found the jays high up in the pines for instance. Sparrows kept to the dogwoods and lowlying bushes. Wren could be found in the honeysuckle hedges.

She also learned which birds migrated through – making an appearance for only a few weeks a year on their way to someplace else. She learned to anticipate the arrival of the orange feather orioles that settled briefly in the branches each fall and spring and then were gone.

It gave her an aerial, migratory view of the world – took her out and above the streets and footpaths and sidewalks of earth-dwellers like herself. It also taught her that something present might suddenly be gone.

Her father died when she was twelve. A single heart attack. Like falling out of the sky mid-flight. The hardest part was not the funeral. It was cleaning out his office. Boxes and boxes of papers and books – now stored in the garage because her mother could not bear to look at them. She kept the binoculars for herself and after that she became the weird girl at school: the one with binoculars. She wore them everywhere. At first, her teachers couldn't decide whether to let her wear them, or not. Then they said as long as she didn't use them in class – ok.

That Sunday, the day after the birds dropped from the sky, Jane watched the man with the orange bucket from her front window through the binoculars. Each time he came upon a fallen bird, he stooped, grabbed the feathered body with a turquoise glove, and dropped it in the bucket.

Jane went to the kitchen and, under the sink, found a pair of rubber gloves. They weren't turquoise but they were thick. She went to the hall closet and put on a hat and coat.

"Can I help?" she asked, a few moments later, standing behind the man as he stooped to pick up another bird.

He jumped. "You shouldn't sneak up on people!" he said. Maybe the job of picking up birds put him on edge. Jane supposed wearing one of those alien suits was like walking on the moon and thinking you were the only one around. She could see his eyes through the mask. "Can I help?" she said again. She showed him the gloves.

He shook his head. "Not allowed. But thanks." He shrugged. "Besides, I am almost done. See?" He reached down and grabbed a bird in the gutter. "Last one," he said. The bucket was full of stiff black birds.

She almost said something then but didn't. Instead, she asked a question. "What will you do with them?"

He shrugged again. It was hard to tell in the suit, but he seemed to use the shrug as a primary communication tool. "Not my job," he said. "Some will go to a lab, maybe. The rest will be dumped or burned." He started for his truck. The suit made him look like he was marching.

Jane waited until after nightfall, when her mother was finally in bed. She put on a black stocking cap and black pants. Her coat wasn't black but it would have to do. Under her arm, she carried a shoebox. It was hard to slip out and not be heard. The floor was wood and even when she tiptoed, her shoes clicked as she made her way down the hallway to the front door.

Outside, the air was cold and dry—the sky fully open. Overhead—a million stars like the eyes of the universe watching. She headed for the large bare lilac bush in Mrs. Varble's yard across the street. It would be months before the bush would erupt with the deep purple blooms Jane loved. Now it looked like a small stand of sticks stuck randomly in the ground.

Jane had seen the bird from her front window. When it came to spying things with binoculars, she was really good. The man in the space suit had missed one.

It felt necessary, what she was about to do. Two thousand birds dropped from the sky, and people barely paused to notice. She felt like that girl in the play she read in English—the one that crawled out at night to

bury her brother who had been tossed outside the city walls. That girl scratched some dirt with her fingernails and sprinkled it over her brother's body with a prayer. Antigone. That was her name.

Jane crossed the street and when she got to the bush, she got down on her stomach—the ground cold and hard against her chest. The bird was wedged between two branches deep inside the mass of twigs, so Jane had to crawl, struggling between the sticks.

It was a small thing she was trying to do. But still, it felt essential. Burying the dead, respecting life, enacting a ritual for no one to see, but because—it had to be done.

When she had her gloved hand stretched out and the bird was almost in her grasp, someone said, "What are you doing?"

It was a boy. She recognized him from math class. He stood beside the bush, holding a skateboard propped on its end and resting against his leg.

Great, Jane thought. Just great. Another story to pass around the school about The Weird Girl with Binoculars.

But he set the skateboard down on the ground and got on his knees. "Is that one of the birds that fell from the sky?" he asked. And then, without waiting for an answer, he said, "My name is Seb."

They buried the bird together, in Jane's back yard. The ground was too frozen to dig a proper hole, so she saved the shoebox for Mazie and her next diorama. Jane and Seb piled leaves on the bird, then covered the bird with a rock.