

Ghosts

Fran isn't sure what's hit the window, hard enough to flex the glass, but she can guess. *Damn kids!*

She had been sorting through photographs, the old kind, which sensible people arranged into albums and stored beneath their beds, but which Fran had, at some point in the past, thrown haphazardly into a box which proved heavier than anticipated when extricated from the attic and showered her with stoor on its descent. Wiping the cobwebs from the lid, Fran was disappointed to note how few of the images inside were of herself or Niall. Instead, they were mostly of birds, not your common or garden chaffinch but the kind which had blown off course on their journey to Africa or Europe and had found themselves preening on a spade on an allotment in Forres, or perching on a telegraph wire on Tulloch Moor, or flitting amongst the wind-blasted tussocks of Fair Isle. There was the odd beach scene, in which one or other of them was waving and smiling against a backdrop of white dunes and emerald seas, but, as she recalled, these were taken after a frantic flight to the Scilly Isles, to tick off an Eyebrowed Thrush or a Dusky Warbler, rather than somewhere remote and tropical. Just over those dunes, she was sure, would have been thirty or so camouflage-clad birders, festooned with binoculars and telescopes and mumbling conspiratorially to each other, *much about?*

It takes a bit of digging but eventually, towards the bottom of the box, she finds what she's been looking for, a faded paper Bonusprint wallet with five square photographs inside. These were the first. The top one, of course, is a bird, a rather stunning bird to be honest, *her* bird as she likes to think of it. It had appeared one day in the garden of her digs, a shabby overcrowded ex farmhouse, not far from Loch Pityoulish. She'd been working as a chamber maid in one of the local hotels, killing time after college, not sure what direction she wanted her life to take. 'Bloody hell, Si,' she'd said, when the bird strutted into view beneath the kitchen window. 'Come and look at this. What do you think it is?' Professing zero knowledge in the identification of wildlife of any kind, Si had given her the number of a guy who came into the pub occasionally, whom he felt sure would know the answer.

'Describe it,' the guy had said, when she'd called.

'It's black with a pink waistcoat on.'

'Rose coloured starling,' he'd said. 'Don't take your eyes off it, I'll be there in twenty minutes.'

And here he is in the next photograph. Niall, looking just as he did on that morning, young and stocky, clad in his customary faded jeans and green flash tennis shoes, one hand thrust into the pocket of his army surplus jacket, a pair of binoculars dangling from the other, squinting into the sunlight. It had been taken the following Tuesday, on her birthday. He'd bought her a pair of second-hand binoculars and *The Shell Guide to British Birds* and taken her to Loch Vaa to look for Slavonian Grebes. And that was all it had taken. Handsome? Not particularly. Prospects? None at all! In fact, two weeks later when she moved into his caravan, hidden down a track through the woods somewhere outside Coylumbridge, Simon had commented that he must be packing some pheromones because goodness knew he had little else to offer. Still, he was funny and kind and, despite his sneering dismissal of further education, more knowledgeable than anyone else she knew. He could tell you anything, from the chances of being hit by lightning, to the satellites of Venus and the age and location of the world's oldest tree. An encyclopaedic knowledge, the guys at Mac's Pub, where he frequented the Quiz Nights, had called it, although Niall himself was more reticent, putting it down to nothing more than lucky genes and taking an interest. She'd liked to tease him about it, saying no head could realistically contain that much information without eventually exploding, and when the scans came back, he had mentioned as much to the surgeon, although by then nobody was really laughing.

It takes most of the afternoon to shuffle through the remaining photographs, each with its accompanying memory: the stone curlew they'd searched for for hours and then nearly trodden on as they'd returned to the van, Niall's hat being plucked from his head by an aggressive Bonxie on Hoy, the Wryneck which, minutes after the photo was taken, was grabbed by a passing cat, and Niall had actually cried. Looking at them was like gazing into the device the optician used to test her peripheral vision, tiny sparks of memory firing in her head. Yes, I remember that. Yes. And yes. And yes! No wedding photographs though, *why would we need to do that*, and no photographs of children. It is as she is returning the prints to the box that she hears the thump against the window, loud enough for her to jump.

They'd had problems with next door's children since the family moved in. Prior to them, their neighbour had been Effy, born and raised in the property, now seeing out her days in a home somewhere over Grantown way. True enough, the house had needed work by the time she moved on, but Fran was glad that the old lady couldn't see the state the new occupants had made of her garden,

which was now little more than a toilet for a succession of dogs of varying bark and tooth size and – more intolerable in Niall’s eyes – a variety of gnomes. The children – how many were there now? – experienced little in the way of parenting and, when Niall was ill, she had been forced to rail at them on a number of occasions about the noise, so that their view of her, she was sure, was of some rabid old harridan to be avoided and reviled.

Going into the garden she anticipates they’ll all be there, the whole clan, waiting for their ball to be thrown back. As it turns out though only one child, the youngest, is waiting for her by the fence and, where she’d expected to find a ball, a bird lies dazed and blinking beneath the window.

‘What’s that?’ asks the boy, his adenoidal twang crying out for a handkerchief. Fran stoops and gently lifts the bird, cupping it in her hands. Despite its size, the poor thing seems too light, too insubstantial to contain the mechanisms for living, and yet she can feel it’s heart flickering through its feathers.

‘It’s a dove,’ she says, carrying it to the fence and lowering it for the child to see. ‘Do you see those little lines on its neck, as if it’s wearing a collar? That means it’s a collared dove.’ The boy stretches out a finger but falls short of touching the bird.

‘Is it dead?’

‘No. I think it’s just stunned.’ Then, unsure whether a child of that age would understand, she adds, ‘it’s having a wee sleep.’

The boy’s expression remains impassive, but he withdraws his finger and thrusts his hands deep into the pockets of his shorts. ‘Is your man dead?’ he asks, matter-of-factly.

‘Yes,’ replies Fran. ‘I’m afraid he is.’

‘Are you sad?’

‘Yes, I am. Very.’

‘My mum says we shouldn’t come near your house because he’s a ghost now.’

Fran laughs, imagining how amused Niall would be to hold such sway. ‘Really?’ She says, adding, ‘I don’t believe in ghosts, do you?’

The boy’s eyes shift from Fran to the bird and then back again. ‘Me tea’ll be ready,’ he says, turning towards home, and Fran, watching him disappear, has a sense that she had been granted the privilege of spending time with some mythical creature, a unicorn perhaps or a yeti. The dove stirs in her hands, its wings urgent against her fingers, and carefully she loosens her

grip, thrusts her hands upwards and launches the bird into the early evening air. Effortlessly it takes flight, clattering into a leylandii on the opposite side of the road. Returning indoors, Fran feels once more the hollow dread that comes with entering an empty house, the incoming tide of loss dragging ashore its flotsam of jagged grief.

It isn't until later, when the setting sun hits the sitting room window, that the ghost appears: a perfect image of a dove in flight, each of its feathers replicated on the glass in soft white powder. Looking closer, Fran can see the eye, its black void gazing in at her, both disturbing and exquisite. Picking up a tea towel from the kitchen, she heads outside to wipe the image away, surprised to find when she gets there that she is quite unable to do so. Instead, tomorrow, she'll knock on the neighbour's door and invite the boy to see.

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