

Bird, Man, Dog

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It was a bone-chilling day in mid-December when Bird first thought about trapping seagulls and terns. He was on his daily beachcomb when he spotted a washed-up piece of fishing net. He crouched down like those African bushmen he'd seen on television, bending his knees and lowering his backside to just above the wet sand. He examined the net, sniffed it, its ancient engrained fishy scent making his nose wrinkle and he brushed the back of his hand across his nose, prickling it with sand. (Sand was never far from his skin. He always left a silt in the bath. His mum would take hers first – she told him there was no way did she want to bathe in his sandy water. So he had to put up with her whiskery water, her shavings gathering by the edges. He may have been clean when he got out the bath and clean when he went to bed, he may have been clean when he got up in the morning and went to school; but by the time he was home again, he was sand-grubby, or dirt-sweat stained and his mum always said how he smelt of the sea. You were probably a fucking dolphin in a previous life, she once said. And he asked her what previous life? And she said: It's just an expression for fuck's sake. But then he wondered if there was such a thing as a previous life. Or a future life.)

The edges of the netting were frayed and straggled. A gull was walking and pecking nearby and he threw the net towards it. The gull did a little hop of disdain as the net landed softly nearby. Bird picked up the net, the gull head-nodding away, and tossed it higher in the air, an arc designed to drop on the gull, but as the edge of the netting brushed its wing, the gull skipped, wings flapping, with a screech of irritation.

Bird brushed his hair from his eyes. His brown hair was long and lice-riddled and the winter wind whipping off the North Sea was messing it like when his mum used to blow-dry it, and he would have to close his eyes to stop them watering. He sat on the beach and pushed

a pebble into the wet sand. On the horizon a huge tanker in profile appeared to be unmoving. The sea was grey like old dishwater and the white horses – a thousand white moustaches on the sea's face – were trotting to the shore. He examined his piece of net, pulled the holes as far as they would go, testing its strength, thinking. He picked up a pebble and threw it towards a tern a few yards away. He missed, and the tern made no reaction. He picked up another pebble and found a loose strand of fibre dangling off the end of his net and tied on the pebble. He threw the net towards the same tern and caught the bird a glancing blow on the back and the bird took off. Bird watched it drift upwards, allowing itself to be carried by the wind. It called, to no-one or no thing in particular, just a squeaky screech as though it were crying an indignant 'hey hey'.

He retrieved his net and tied more pebbles on it. When he had used up all the loose strands, he flung it towards the sea and watched it fly through the air, unaffected by the wind. It landed with a clack clack amongst rocks and pebbles and empty shells and he looked round to see if anyone else was as impressed as he was by this maiden flight. But there was no-one.

He meandered along the shore, away from the town centre, hurling his trapping net at any unsuspecting seabird, missing his target, running after it, retrieving it and trying again. When the grey of the sky matched the grey of the sea, he turned towards the red cliffs and the path that led up to the top, and headed home.

Home was four rooms he shared with his mum in a Hunstanton back street. They had the ground floor flat and above them lived stompers, shouters and screamers. One room was a kitchen, one a sitting room, one a bedroom, one a bathroom. He let himself in with the key hidden under the half brick by the doorstep. He put his net in the red and yellow plastic lego box under his side of the bed, before going into the kitchen and reading the note held onto the fridge door with an ice cream shaped magnet. *'fish fingers and smileys'*. He looked at the calendar. Written in the boxes headed Thursday and Friday was '4-12'. Saturday's box had

'Graham, here, 8'. He'd be sleeping on the sofa that night. He switched on the oven, went into the sitting room and hit the television remote. He kicked off his shoes. Two brothers in love with the same girl (according to the rolling caption) were shouting at each other, fingers jabbing, audience clapping. He turned up the volume to drown out the screaming coming from the flat upstairs.

The next morning, he was woken by his mum pushing and nudging as her alarm sounded. He clambered over her ('watch where you're putting your knees') and made himself some breakfast. Opening the curtains, he saw snow covering everything.

School was closed for the day and walking through the cliff-top park, slushing the fresh snow with his shoes, net dangling from his pocket, he was looking for a victim. He saw a pigeon. A grey-green-blue pigeon, too plump for quick lift-off. It was by a tree, the melting snow from the branches spattering the ground beneath and odd blades of grass poking through.

Bird crouched down. The pigeon had its back to him and was pecking around. Between pecks it would raise its head, listen, look, before moving another pace or two and pecking again. Bird stayed behind the pigeon, edging ever closer, net in cold hand, feet shovelling the snow as he slid, backside hovering just above the snow, occasionally dipping down, wetting his seat. A slow rise, one foot in front of the other for balance, clasping the net tight, ready to frisbee it at the pigeon. Bird launched the net with a flick of the wrist and a forward thrust of his whole body. The pigeon's head snapped round. One pebble caught it on the side of the head, and the pigeon stumbled.

It was half crouched under the net, wings outstretched, eyes betraying nothing. Its final caroo-caroo would linger in Bird's head for days.

He brought his foot down on the skull. His eyes watered when he saw what he had done, saw the blood-pink snow. He knelt down and touched the breast – warm and soft – and stroked it. Now he had to eat it.

He hid it under a bush, buried in snow. He needed matches. He walked along the path of the park on the cliff overlooking the North Sea. The wind from the east gusted and rocked him. He shivered and kept his head down when a man and woman walked past him, tutting. He went down the steps between the raised beds covered in snow and onto the pavement. Parents gripping children's hands passed him as he reached the bowling alley. A man was sitting on the pavement, his legs outstretched, ankles crossed. He was leaning back against the plate glass of the alley, a dog lying by him, its head on the man's lap. The dog was stretched out and its tarnished gold fur was ridged by ribs. The man drew on a ciggy, the end glowing red. His blue hood cowled his face which was grey-stubbled and grainy like sandy driftwood. Bird could see brown eyes with creamy whites that seemed to be concentrated on the deserted bandstand opposite. He asked the man if he had matches. The man ignored him.

– You got matches? Bird repeated.

The man looked up. Bird wondered if he didn't understand English, so he cupped an imaginary matchbox and struck an imaginary match.

The man took the ciggy from his mouth and stubbed it on the pavement. A quiet sizzle as it vapourised slushed ice.

– You got a fag, have yer? he asked.

– Don't smoke, said Bird.

– What you want matches for then?

– I want to cook a pigeon.

– How you gonna do that?

Gulls above them yelped as they hung on the winter thermals. Bird's teeth clickered and he tightened his body.

– Don't know, he said.

– You share it with me, you can have a match.

– You know how to cook it?

– Better than you do by the looks of yer.

The dog raised its head, yawning, baring its yellow teeth. Its nose twitched in several directions, twitch twitch twitch, searching for the source of its interest.

– It's in the park, said Bird, nodding his head towards the sea front.

The man stood up. Bird took a step back. The dog sniffed around his feet, up and down his legs and Bird stroked the top of its head.

– Come on then young 'un, gruffed the man.

They walked towards the park.

– What's yer name? asked the man.

– Thomas, said Bird.

– Whatcha doing out on yer own?

Bird shrugged.

The man raised his chin. Bird wondered about the man's mouth and how small it looked. His cheeks and nose and chin all seemed to be drawn towards it as though it was slowly sucking in his whole face. His lips were thin like pencil lines. The dog drank from a melting pool in the road by the kerb.

– I've never eaten pigeon before, said Bird.

– By the looks of yer, you ain't eaten much of anything.

– I do alright.

– Where yer sleeping?

– In my bed, said Bird, pointing ahead, beyond the park.

The dog walked with them, tail swinging.

– What's its name? asked Bird.

– Just call it Dog.

– Doesn't it mind?

– It's a dog.

– Yeah but all pets should have a name.

– Says who?

Bird couldn't think of an answer to this so he kept quiet.

They reached the park and Bird ran ahead to retrieve his pigeon. Dog chased him, running around him, his nose leading him straight to the carcass. A bark from the man meant he only sniffed round it. Bird picked up the pigeon by the feet and showed it to the man. The man took it.

– Good and plump, he said. We'll take it down the beach.

– Why?

– It's more private.

They walked down the tarmac ramp to the beach and the man led them to the foot of the cliffs.

– First thing you have to do is pluck it, he said. You ever done that before?

Bird shook his head. The man brushed snow off a rock, revealing red stone, and sat close to the cliff-face. Dog foraged among the rocks and pebbles, his nose leading him where it would. The man tugged at the wing feathers and they came away with a knuckle-crack. He pulled at the smaller, fluffier feathers underneath and Bird began to see grey-blue flesh around one wing. The man did the same with the other wing. Bird watched the feathers fly away, higher and higher. He watched one feather in particular, trying to follow it. Dog barked

at the gulls above its head and they screeched back. Bird listened to the battle of bark and screech.

– Are you watching? said the man. I'm doing this for you, you know.

Bird squatted and folded his arms, shoulders hunched.

– What's your name? he asked.

– Guess.

Bird frowned. Breast feathers were swirling all round them, swarming like butterflies released.

– I can't guess, said Bird. It could be anything.

– Could be. But it ain't. Now, see how I do this? Pull em out gentle. It's very important not to tear the flesh, see.

– Let me try.

The man handed Bird the pigeon and Bird tugged at the downy feathers. They came away from the breast and he was surprised how easily they did so.

They finished plucking and the man took a knife from inside his coat. It had a big blade, shiny. The man placed the carcass on the rock and held out a wing. He chopped down hard and made a sawing movement to get through the bone. He flipped the pigeon over and repeated the action with the other wing.

– Now we cut off the feet.

He tossed the pigeon feet away and stretched the neck out along the rock.

– You made a mess of its head, he said.

– Didn't know how to kill it, said Bird. So I stamped on it.

– Good a way as any, if yer don't know.

The man cut off the head, close to the body, and lobbed it into the snow nearby. He called to Dog. Dog bounded towards them and his nose found the head, blood-marked and crushed. The man cut just below the breastbone.

– This is what Dog's waiting for, he said.

He pushed two fingers deep into the pigeon, feeling in the bloody darkness. He pulled his fingers back and the blood-brown innards spilled onto the rock. He dived his fingers back in and flicked out the heart and lungs. He gathered the guts and the sinews and threw them to Dog.

– Your hand's all bloody, said Bird.

– Dog'll lick that clean.

He held out his hand. Dog had swallowed the innards in a single gulp and was sniffing the snow and pebbles around. His nose found the man's outstretched hand and he licked it clean, licking his lips when he finished, savouring his drool.

The man opened his sack and took out a small saucepan.

– Fill this with snow and mind you don't get any sand in it.

Clambering, Bird scraped snow from the rocks into the pan. When he turned back, he saw the man was walking to the snow's edge, where the sea had absorbed the snowfall and the beach was visible. Bird followed him.

The man had put down his pack by a barnacled groyne and gathered some rocks into a ring.

– Are we cooking it now? said Bird.

– Sit yourself down there.

Bird sat on the damp sand. It was cold and he felt a creeping dampness in his seat. Dog nudged him, its nose cold on his cheek. Bird scruffed its head. The man took a camping stove

out of his pack and set it in the middle of the rocks. He lit the stove and put the pan of snow on it.

– How long will it take? asked Bird.

– Do you want taters with it?

Bird nodded.

– Take about forty minutes I reckon. Snow's got to melt, then boil, then cook.

– What about the pigeon? How long does that take?

The man reached in his pack and took out a small frying pan.

– We'll cook it in this, won't take long. I like em pink.

The man tossed Bird two potatoes and held out his knife.

– Peel these.

– Never peeled potatoes before, said Bird.

– You wouldn't survive long on yer own would yer?

– I'm a fast learner.

The man grinned and sliced rough chunks of skin off one potato.

– Now you try, he said. Move the knife away from yer or you'll end up cutting yerself.

Bird swiped the knife across the potato and a large chunk landed on the sand.

– That's your bit, said the man. Not so hard, remember you just want the skin off.

Bird tried again and another lump, similar sized, fell onto the sand.

– Give it here, said the man. Or we'll starve.

When the water was boiling, the man dropped small cubes of potato into the pan then took out his tin of baccy and papers and rolled a cigarette.

– Want one? he asked Bird.

Bird shook his head and said:

– Have you always lived like this?

The man concentrated on his roll-up, licking the paper. He struck a match in cupped hands and lit the ciggy.

– Not always.

– Why do you?

– Why do I what?

– Live like this.

– Maybe I like it.

– I'd like it, said Bird.

– I don't think you would.

– Why not?

– Freezing your bollocks off every night? I'd rather have what you got, a place to go home to. Warm is it?

– Suppose so.

– Live with your mum and dad?

– Just mum.

– She look after you?

Bird shrugged.

When the man finished his ciggy, he flicked the browned, dry-sucked end over the groyne.

– Can I come with you? said Bird.

– Come where?

– Wherever you go.

The man wheezed and laughed. His laugh turned into a cough and back into a laugh. Dog barked.

– You wouldn't last five minutes. Anyway what would yer mum say?

– Don't know.

– Well I do. And after she said it, she'd call the police and I'd get had up. Anyway, I'd rather stay at yours instead of you coming with me.

– She wouldn't like that.

– There you are then.

– She doesn't like dogs.

– Tell you what, have you got a coin?

Bird reached in his pocket, felt a fifty pence piece. He handed it to the man.

– What do you want it for?

The man balanced it on the back of his thumb, the thumb tucked under his forefinger.

– Heads I stay at your place tonight. Tails we hit the road.

He spun the coin into the air and they both watched it skywards and followed it to its soft splat on the wet sand.

– You'll need a name, said the man.

– I've got a name.

– A proper road name, a name that says something about yer.

Both were silent before the man said:

– Well, he's Dog, so you can be Boy.

– Boy's boring.

The man thought, stroking his stubbly chin.

– Well yer small as a sparrer, legs like twigs. How about bird?

– I like bird.

– Bird it is then.