

A Flock of Birds  
by James Van Pelt

The starlings wheeled like a giant blanket flung into the sky, like sentient smoke, banking and turning in unison. They passed overhead so close that Carson heard their wings ripping the air, and when the flock flew in front of the sun, the world grew gray. Carson shivered even though it was only early September and warm enough for a short-sleeved shirt. This close he could smell them, all dark-feathered and frantic and dry and biting.

He estimated maybe 50,000 birds. Not the largest flock he'd seen this year, but one of the bigger ones, and certainly bigger than anything he'd seen last year. Of course, the summer before that he didn't watch the birds. No one did. No chance to add to his life list that year. No winter count either. The Colorado Field Ornithology office closed.

He leaned back in his lawn chair. The bird vortex moved east, over the wheat-grass plain until the sun brightened again, pressing pleasant heat against the back of his hands and arms. He was glad for the hat that protected his head and its middle-aged bald spot. This wasn't the time to mess with skin cancer, he thought, not a good time at all. He was glad his teeth were generally healthy and his eyesight was keen.

The binoculars were excellent, Bausch & Lomb Elite. Wide field of vision. Top notch optics. Treated lenses. He'd picked them up from a sporting goods store in Littleton's South Glenn Mall. Through them the birds became singular. He followed discrete groups. They swirled, coming straight toward him for a moment, then sliding away. Slowly he scanned the flight until he reached the leading edge. Birds on one half and sky on the other. They switched direction and the leaders became the followers. He took the binoculars away and blinked at their loss of individuality. In the middle, where the birds were thickest, the shape was black, a sinuous, twisting dark chord. One dot separated itself from the others, flying against the current. Carson only saw it for a second, but it was distinctly larger than the starlings, and its wing beat was different. He focused the binoculars again, his breath coming fast, and scanned the flock. It would be unusual for a single bird of a different species to fly with the starlings.

Nothing for several minutes other than the hordes streaming by, then the strange bird emerged. Long, slender wings, a reddish breast, and it was fast. Much faster than the starlings and twice their size. The cloud shifted, swallowing it, as the entire flock drifted slowly east, farther into the plains.

The bird looked familiar. Not one from his journals, but one he'd seen a picture of before. Something tropical perhaps that had drifted north? Every once in a while a single representative of a species would be spotted, hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles from where it was normally found. The birder who saw it could only hope that someone else confirmed the sighting or that he got a picture, otherwise it would be discounted and couldn't be legitimately added to a life list. If he could add a new bird to his list, maybe that would make things better. A new bird! He could concentrate on that. Something good to cling to.

The flock grew small in the distance.

Carson sighed, put the binoculars back in their case, then packed the rest of his gear into the truck. He checked the straps that held his motorcycle in place. They were tight. The tie-down holding the extra batteries for the truck and motorcycle were secure too. From his spot on the hill he could see the dirt road he'd taken from the highway and the long stretch of I-25 that reached north toward Denver and south to Colorado Springs. No traffic. The air above the Denver skyline was crystalline. He strained his ears, tilting his head from one side then the other. He hadn't heard a car on the highway behind him all afternoon. Grass rustle. Moldy-leaf smells, nothing else, and when he finally opened the truck's door, the metallic click was foreign and loud. Back at his house in Littleton, he checked the photoelectric panels' gauges

inside the front door. It had been sunny for the last week, so the system was full. The water tower showed only four hundred gallons though. He'd have to go water scavenging again in the next few days.

"I'm home," he called. His voice echoed off the tiled foyer. "Tillie?" The living room was empty, and so were the kitchen and bedrooms. Carson stepped into the bathroom, his hand on his chest where his heart beat fast, but the sleeping pills in the cabinet looked undisturbed. "Tillie?" He found her sitting in the back yard beneath the globe willow, still in her robe. The nightgown beneath it was yellowed and tattered. In her dresser he'd put a dozen new ones, but she'd only wear the one she had in her suitcase when he'd picked her up, wandering through the Denver Botanical Gardens two years ago.

He sat on the grass next to her. She was fifty or so. Lots of gray in her blond hair. Slender wrists. Narrow face. Strikingly blue eyes that hardly ever focused on anything.

"How's that cough?" he asked.

"We never play bridge anymore, Bob Robert."

Carson stretched out. A day with binoculars pressed to his face and his elbows braced on his knees hurt his back. "Tough to get partners" he said. Then he added out of habit, "And I'm not Bob Robert."

She picked at a loose thread in the robe, pulling at it until it broke free.

"Have you seen the garden? Not a flower in it. A single geranium or a daisy would give me hope. If just one dead thing would come back."

"I've brought you seeds," he said. "You just need to plant them."

She wrapped the thread around her fingertip tightly. "I waited for the pool man, but he never came. I hate skimming." She raised her fist to her mouth and coughed primly behind it twice, grimacing each time.

Carson raised his head. Other than the grass under the tree, most of the yard was dirt. The lot was longer than it was wide. At the end farthest from the house a chicken wire enclosure surrounded the poultry. A couple hens sat in the shade by the coop. No pool. When he'd gone house hunting, he'd toyed with the idea of a pool, but the thought of trying to keep it filled and the inevitable problems with water chemistry made him decide against it. The house on the other side of the privacy fence had a pool as did most of the houses in the neighborhood, now empty except for the scummy pond in the deep end. In the spring he'd found a deer, its neck bent unnaturally back, at the bottom of one a block over. Evidently it had jumped the fence and gone straight in.

"Are you hungry?" Carson asked.

Tillie tilted her head to the side. "When will the garden grow again?"

He pushed himself off the ground. "I'll fix eggs."

Later that evening, he tucked Tillie into bed. The room smelled of peppermint. From the bulge in her cheek, he guessed she was sucking on one. In a little-girl voice, she said, "Can you put in my video?" Her expression was alert, but her eyes were red-rimmed and watery. He smiled. This was as good as she got. Sometimes he could play gin rummy with her and she'd stay focused for an hour or so before she drifted away. If he asked her about her past, she'd be unresponsive for days. All he knew about her came from the suitcase she carried when he'd found her. There was a sheet of letterhead with a name at the top: "Tillie Waterhouse, Marketing Executive," and an athletic club identification card with her picture and name. But there was no Tillie Waterhouse in the Denver phone book. Could she have wandered away from the airport when air travel was canceled? The first words she had said to him, when she finally spoke, were, "How do you bear it?"

"Did you have a good day?" He turned on the television and pressed rewind on the VCR.

Her hands peeked out from under the covers and pulled them tight under her chin. "Something magical is going to happen. The leaves whispered to me." The video clicked to a stop. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. The television flickered as the tape started, a documentary on the 2001 New York City Marathon a decade earlier. It opened with a helicopter flyover of the racers

crossing the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge into Brooklyn. The human crowd surged forward, packed elbow to elbow, long as the eye could see. Then the camera cut to ankle level. Feet ran past for five minutes. Then it went to face level at a turn in the course. The starting crush had spread out, but the runners still jogged within an arm's length of each other, thousands of them. Carson had watched the video with her the first few times. The video was a celebration of numbers. Thirty-thousand athletes straining over the twenty-six mile course through New York City's five boroughs.

"Here's the remote if you want to watch it again."

"So many American flags," she said.

"It was only a month after that first terrorist thing." Carson sat on the end of her bed. Some runners wore stars and stripes singlets or racing shorts. Others carried small flags and waved them at the camera as they passed.

"I won't be able to sleep," she said.

He nodded. "Me either."

Before he left, he pressed his hand to her forehead. She looked up briefly, the blanket still snug against her chin. A little fever and her breath sounded wheezy.

Later that night he made careful entries in his day book. A breeze through the open window freshened the room. He'd spotted a mountain plover, a long-billed curlew, a burrowing owl and a horned lark, plus the usual assortment of lark sparrows, yellow warblers, western meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, crows, black terns and mourning doves. Nothing unusual beside the strange bird in the starling flock. Idly he thumbed through his bird identification handbook. No help there. Could it actually be a new bird? Something to add to his life list?

Tomorrow he'd take the camera. Several major flocks roosted in the elms along the Platte River. He hadn't done a riparian count in a couple months anyway. After visiting the distribution center, he'd go to the river. With an early enough start, he would still have ten hours of sun to work with.

He shut the book and turned off his desk light. Gradually his eyes adjusted as he looked out the window. A full moon illuminated the scene. From his chair he could see three houses bathed in the leaden glow, their windows black as basalt. His neighbor's minivan rested on its rims, all four tires long gone flat. Carson tried to come up with the guy's name, but it remained elusive. Generally he tried not to think about his neighbors or their empty houses. He couldn't hear anything other than the wind moving over the silent city. Not sleepy at all, he watched the shadows slide slowly across the lawn. Just after 2:00 A.M., a pair of coyotes trotted up the middle of the street. Their toenails clicked loudly against the asphalt. Carson finally rose, took two sleeping pills and went to bed.

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"The woman who stays with me is sick," said Carson. He rested his arm against his truck, supplies requisition list in hand.

The distribution center manager nodded dourly. "Oh, the sweet sorrow of parting." He hooked his grimy thumbs in his overalls. Through the warehouse doors behind him Carson saw white plastic wrapped bales, four feet to a side, stacked five bales high and reaching to the warehouse's far end. They contained bags of flour, corn, cloth, paper, a little bit of everything. Emergency stores.

Carson blanched. "It's not that. She just has a cough and a bit of fever. If it's bacterial, an antibiotic might knock it right out."

"T.B. or not T.B. That is congestion, Carson," he said, laughing through yellow teeth. Carson guessed he might be fifty-five or sixty.

Carson smiled. "You're pretty sharp today."

"Finest collection of video theater this side of hell. Watched Lawrence

Olivier last night until 3:00 or 4:00." The manager consulted his clipboard. "No new pharmaceuticals in a couple months, and I haven't seen antibiotics in over a year. I could have my assistant keep an eye open for you, but he hasn't come in for a week. Lookin' sickly his last day, you know?" The manager rubbed his fingers on his chest. "Could be that I've lost him. Have you tried a tablespoon of honey in a shot glass of bourbon? Works for me every time." A car pulled into the huge, empty parking lot behind Carson's truck, but whoever was inside didn't get out. Carson nodded in the car's direction. Evidently they wanted to wait for Carson to finish his business. He handed the manager the list. "Can you also give me cornmeal and sugar? A mix of canned vegetables would be nice too." "That I've got." The manager hopped on a forklift. "Tomorrow may creep in a petty pace, but I shouldn't be a minute." When he returned with the goods he said, "The quality of mercy is not strained here. I'm not doing anything this afternoon. I'll dig some for you. Few months back I heard a pharmacy in an Albertson's burned down. Looters overlooked it. Might be something there. I've got your address." He waved the requisition list. "I could bring it by your house." Carson loaded boxes of canned soup and vegetables into the truck. "What about the warehouse?" The manager shrugged. "Guess we're on an honor system now. Only a dozen or so customers a day. Maybe a couple hundred total. I'll bet there aren't 50,000 people alive in the whole country. I'll leave the doors open." For a moment the manager stared into the distance, as if he'd lost his thought. Behind them, the waiting car rumbled. "You know how they say that if you put a jellybean in a jar every time you make love the first year that you're married, and you take one out every time you make love after that, that the jar will never be empty? This warehouse is a little like that." When Carson started the truck, the manager leaned into the window, resting his arms on the car door. This close, Carson could see how greasy the man's hair was, and it smelled like old lard. The manager's smile was gone. "How long have you known me?" he said, looking Carson straight in the eye. His voice was suddenly so serious. Carson tried not to shrink away. He thought back. "I don't know. Sixteen months?" The manager grimaced. "That makes you my oldest friend. There isn't anyone alive that I've known longer." For a second, Carson was afraid the man would begin crying. Instead, he straightened, his hands still on the door. Tentatively, Carson said, "I'm sorry. I don't think I've ever asked what your name was." "Nope, nope, no need," the manager barked, smiling again. "A rose by any other moniker, as they say. I'll see what I can find you in the coughing line. Don't know about antibiotics. Come back tomorrow." It wasn't until Carson had driven blocks away toward the river, as he watched the boarded up stores slide by, as he moved down the empty streets, past the mute houses that he realized, other than Tillie, the manager was his oldest friend too.

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Sitting on his camp chair, Carson had a panoramic river view. On the horizon to the west, the mountains rose steeply, only a remnant of last winter's snow clinging to the tops of the tallest peaks. Fifty yards away at the bottom of a short bluff, the river itself, at its lowest level of the season, rolled sluggishly. Long gravel tongues protruded into the water where little long-legged birds searched for insects between the rocks. A bald eagle swept low over the water going south. Carson marked it in his notebook.

Across the river stood clumps of elm and willows. He didn't need his binoculars to see the branches were heavy with roosting starlings. Counting individuals was impossible. He'd have to estimate. He wondered what the distribution manager would make of the birds. After all, they had something in common. If it weren't for Shakespeare, the starlings wouldn't be here at all. In the early 1890's, a club of New York Anglophiles thought it would be comforting if all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays lived in America. They tried nightingales and chaffinches and various thrushes, but none succeeded like the 100 European starlings they released in Central Park. By the last count there were over two hundred million of them. He'd read an article in one of his bird books that called them "avian cockroaches." He set up his camera on a tripod and scanned the trees with the telephoto. Not only were there starlings, but also red winged blackbirds, an aggressive, native species. They could hold their own against invaders. Carson clicked a few shots. He could edit the photos out of the camera's memory later if he needed the space. A group of starlings lifted from some of the trees. Maybe something disturbed them? He looked for a deer or raccoon on the ground below, but couldn't see anything. The birds swirled upwards before sweeping down river. He thought about invaders, like infection, spreading across the country. Carp were invaders. So were zebra mussels that hitchhiked in ships' ballast water and became a scourge, attaching themselves to the inside of pipes used to draw water into power plants. It wasn't just animals either. Crabgrass, dandelions, kudzu, knotweed, tamarisk, leafy spurge, and norway maple, pushing native species to extinction.

Infection. Extinction. And extinct meant you'd never come back. No hope. Empty houses. Empty shopping malls. Empty theaters. Contrail-free skies. Static on the radio. Traffic-free highways. The creak of wind-pushed swing sets in dusty playgrounds. He pictured Tillie's video, the endless runners pouring across the bridge.

Carson shook his head. He'd never get the count done if he daydreamed. Last year he spotted 131 species in the fall count. Maybe this year he'd find more. Maybe he'd see something rare, like a yellow-billed loon or a fulvous whistling duck.

Methodically, he moved his focus from tree to tree. Mostly starlings, their beaks resting on their breasts. Five hundred in one tree. A thousand in the next. He held the binoculars in his left hand while writing the numbers with his right. Later he'd fill out a complete report for the Colorado Field Ornithologists. A stack of reports sat on his desk at home, undeliverable. He couldn't hear the birds from here, but their chirping calls would be overwhelming if he could walk beneath them.

A feathered blur whipped through his field of vision. Carson looked over the top of his binoculars. Two birds skimmed the tree tops, heading upriver. He stood, breath coming quick. Narrow wings. Right size. He found them in the binoculars. Were they the same kind of bird he'd seen yesterday? What luck! But they flew too fast and they were going away. He'd never be able to identify them from this distance. If only they'd circle back. Then, unbelievably, they turned, crossing the river, coming toward him. The binoculars thumped against his chest when he dropped them, as he picked up the camera, tripod and all. He found the birds, focused, and snapped a picture. They kept coming. He snapped again, both birds in view. Closer even still until just one bird filled the frame. Snap. Then they whipped past, only twenty feet overhead. And fast! Faster than any bird he'd seen except a peregrine falcon on a dive.

His hands trembled. Definitely a bird new to him. A new species to add to his life list. And the bird he'd seen yesterday couldn't be a single, misplaced wanderer, not if there were two of them here. Maybe a flock had been blown into the area. He knew Colorado birds, and these weren't native. He stayed another hour, counting starlings and recording the other river birds that crossed his path, but his heart wasn't in it. In his camera waited the

image of the new bird, but he'd have to transfer it to the computer where he could study it.

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Tillie was in bed. Beside her, on the night stand, were packets of seeds. She hadn't moved them since he'd brought them to her in the spring. The television was on. There were, of course, no broadcasts, so gray snow filled the screen, and the set softly hissed. Carson turned it off, darkening the room. Sun light leaked around the closed curtains, but after the brightness outside, he could barely see. In the silence, Tillie's breathing rasped. He tiptoed around her bed to put his hand to her forehead. Distinctly warm. She didn't move when he touched her.

"Tillie?" he said.

She mumbled but didn't open her eyes.

Carson turned on her reading light, painting her face in highlights and sharp shadows. He knelt beside her. Her lips were parted slightly, and she licked them before taking her next rattling breath. He wanted to jostle her awake. She slept so poorly most nights that he resisted. The fever startled him. As long as it was just a cough, he hadn't worried much. A cough, that could be a cold or an allergy. But a fever, that was a red flag. He remembered all the home defense brochures with their sobering titles: Family Triage and Know Your Symptoms. "Tillie, I need to check your chest."

His fingers shook as he pulled the blanket away from her chin. Her neck was clammy, and underneath the covers she was sweating. She smelled warm and damp. Clumsily he unbuttoned her nightgown's top buttons, then he moved the light so he could see better. No rash. She wasn't wearing a bra, so he could see that the tops of her breasts looked smooth. "Tillie?" he whispered, really not wanting to wake her. Her eyes moved under her eyelids. Maybe she dreamed of other places, the places she would never talk to him about. Gently he rubbed his fingertips over the skin below her collarbones. No boils. No "bumpy swellings" the brochures described.

Tillie mumbled again. "Bob Robert," she said.

"I'll get some aspirin and water." He pulled the blanket back up. She didn't move.

"You're nice," she said, but her head was turned away, and he wasn't sure if she was talking to him or continuing a conversation in her dream.

As he poured water from a bottle in the refrigerator, he realized that it would be difficult to tell if Tillie became delirious. If she started talking sense, then he'd have to worry about her.

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The distribution manager had said to come back the next day, so there was nothing to do other than to give her aspirin and keep her comfortable. She woke up enough to take the medicine, but closed her eyes immediately. Carson patted her on the top of her hands, made sure the water pitcher was full, then went to his office where he printed the pictures from his camera. The last one was quite good. Full view of the bird's beak, head, neck, breast, wing shape and tail feathers. Identification should have been easy, but nothing matched in his books. He needed better resources.

Driving to Littleton library meant passing the landfill. Most days Carson tried to ignore it—it reminded him of Arlington Cemetery without the tombstones—but today he stopped at the side of the road. He needed a place to think, and the broad, featureless land lent itself to meditations. Last year swarms of gulls circled, waiting for places to set down. The ones on the

ground picked at the remnants of flags that covered the low hills. The year before, wreaths and flags and sticks festooned with ribbons dotted the mounds while earth movers ripped long ditches and chugged diesel exhaust. Today, though, no birds. He supposed there was nothing left for them to eat. No smells to attract them. The earth movers were parked off to the side in a neat row. Dust swirled across the dirt in tiny eddies that danced for a moment, then dissipated into nothing. The ground looked as plain as his back yard. Not a tree anywhere or grass. He thought about Tillie searching for a geranium. He looked up. The sky was completely empty. No hawks. Could it be that not even a mouse lived in the landfill?

What would he do if she left? He leaned against the car, his hands deep in his pockets, chin on his chest. What if she were gone? So many had departed: the girl at the magazine stand, the counter people at the bagel shop, his coworkers. What was it he used to do? He could barely remember, just like he couldn't picture his wife's face clearly anymore. All of them, slipping away. He slid his fingers inside his shirt. No bumps there either. Why not, and were they inevitable?

A wind kicked across the plain, scurrying scraps of paper and more dust toward him in a wave. He could taste rain in the air. Weather's changing, he thought, and climbed back into the car before the wind reached him.

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Skylights illuminated the library's main room. Except for the stale smell and the thin coating of neglect on the countertops and the leather chairs arranged in cozy reading circles, it could be open for business. Carson saw no evidence that anyone had been here since his last visit a month ago. He checked his flashlight. Sunlight didn't penetrate to the back stacks where the bird books were, and he wanted to make sure he didn't miss any.

On the bulletin board inside the front doors hung civil defense and the Center for Disease Control posters filled with the familiar advice: avoid crowds, get good sleep, report symptoms immediately. The civil defense poster reminded him that Patriots Protect Their Immune Systems and the depressing, Remember, It Got Them First.

The cart he found had a wheel that shook and didn't track with the others. It pulled to the left and squeaked loudly as he pushed it between the rows. In the big building, the noise felt out of place. Absurdly, Carson almost said, "Shhh!" A library was supposed to be quiet, even if he was the only one in it.

Back at the bird books, he ran his flashlight across the titles, all his favorite tomes: the Audubon books and the National Geographic ones. The two huge volumes of Bailey and Niedriach's Birds of Colorado with their beautiful photographs and drawings. He placed them in the cart lovingly. By the time he finished, he'd arranged thirty-five books on the cart, every bird reference they had. He shivered as he straightened the collection. The back of the library had never felt cold before.

At the checkout desk, he agonized over what to do. When he was a child, the librarian filled out a card that was tucked in the book's front cover.

Everything was computerized now. How was he going to check the books out? Not that it was likely anyone would want them, but it didn't feel right, just taking them. Finally he wrote a note with all the titles listed. He stuck it to the librarian's computer, thought about it for a second, then wrote a second one to put into the gap he'd left in the shelves. He added his address and a P.S., "If you really need these books, please contact me."

Before going, he wandered into the medical section. Infectious diseases were in the 600 area. There wasn't a title left. He took a deep breath that tickled his throat. It felt odd, so he did it again, provoking a string of deep coughs. It's just the dust in here, he thought, but his lungs felt heavy, and

he realized he'd been holding off the cough all day.

Carson stopped at the distribution center on the way home. The parking lot was empty. He wandered through the warehouse, between the high stacks, down the long rows. No manager. No assistant. Last year Carson had hauled a diesel generator into a theater near his house. He'd rigged it to power a projector so he could watch a movie on the big screen, but the empty room with all the empty seats gave him the creeps. He'd fled the theater without even turning off the generator. The warehouse felt like that. As he walked toward the exit, his strides became faster and faster until he was running.

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As the sun set into the heavy clouds on the horizon, he accepted the obvious. Whatever Tillie had, he had too. She breathed shallowly between coughing fits, and, although the fever responded to aspirin, it rebounded quickly. The aspirin helped with his own fever, but he felt headachy and tired. Sitting beside her bed, he put his hand on her arm. "I'm going to go back to the distribution center tomorrow, Tillie. He said he might find some medicine."

Tillie turned toward him, her eyes gummy and bloodshot. "Don't go," she said. Her voice quivered, but she looked directly at him. No drifting. Speaking deliberately, she said, "Everybody I know has gone away."

Carson looked out the window. It would be dark soon.

Tillie's arm burned beneath his fingertips. He could almost feel the heated blood rushing through her. "I've got to do something. You might have pneumonia."

She inhaled several times. Carson imagined the pain; an echo of it pulsed in his own chest.

"Could you stay in the neighborhood?" she asked.

He nodded.

Tillie closed her eyes. "When it started, I watched TV all the time. That's all I did, was watch TV. My friends watched TV. They played it at work. 'A Nation Under Quarantine' the newscasters called it. And then I couldn't watch any more."

Carson blinked his eyes shut against the burning. That's where he didn't want to go, into those memories. It's what he didn't think about when he sat in his camp chair counting birds. It's what he didn't picture when he bolted solar cells onto the roof, when he gathered wood for the new wood stove he'd installed in the living room, when he pumped gasoline out of underground tanks at silent gas stations. Sometimes he had a hard time imagining anything was wrong at all. When he drove, the car still responded to his touch. The wind whistled tunelessly past his window. How could the world still be so familiar and normal and yet so badly skewed?

"Well, we keep doing what has to be done, despite it all," he said.

"I was innocent." Her gaze slid away from his, and she smiled. Carson saw her connection to him sever. The shift was nearly audible. "I don't want to see the news tonight. Maybe there will be a nice rerun later. Friends or Cheers would be good. I'll go to the mall in the morning. The fall fashions should be in." She settled into her pillow as if to go to sleep.

Carson set up a vaporizer, hoping that would make her breathing easier, then quietly shut her door before leaving.

Crowbar in hand, he crossed the dirt expanse that was his front yard, stepped over the dry-leafed hedge between his yard and the neighbors. The deadbolt splintered out of the frame when he leaned on the crowbar, and one kick opened the door. The curtains were closed, darkening the living room. Carson wrinkled his nose at the house's mustiness. Under that smell lingered something rotten, like mildew and bad vegetables gone slimy and black.

He flicked on his flashlight. The living room was neat, magazines fanned



across a coffee table for easy selection, glass coasters piled on a small stand by a lounge chair and family photos arranged on the wall. Three bedroom doors opened into the main hallway. In one, a crib stood empty beneath a Mickey Mouse mobile. In the second, his light played across an office desk, a fax machine and a laptop computer, its top popped open and keyboard waiting. The third door led to the master bedroom. In the bathroom medicine cabinet he found antacids, vitamins and birth control pills, but no antibiotics. When he left the house, he closed the front door as best he could.

An hour later he'd circled the block, breaking into every house along the way. Two of the houses had already been looted. The door on the first hung from only one hinge. In the second, the furniture was overturned, and a complicated series of cracks emanated from a single bullet hole in the living room window. In some of the houses the bed sheets covered long lumps. He stayed out of the bedrooms. No antibiotics.

His chest heavy, barely able to lift his feet, he trudged across the last lawn to his house where one window was lit. Whatever the illness was, it felt serious. Not a cold or flu, but down deep malignant, sincere, like nothing he'd ever had before. This was how he felt, and he'd started in good shape, but Tillie hardly ever ate well. She never exercised. Her system would be especially vulnerable. He pictured his house empty. No Tillie gazing over her cards before drawing. No Tillie wandering in the yard, looking for a single geranium to give her hope. "How do you bear it?" she'd asked.

Tillie was sleeping, her fever down again, but her breathing was just as hoarse. In his own lungs, each inhalation fluttered and buzzed. He imagined a thousand tiny pinwheels whirling away inside him.

Carson started the New York City Marathon video, then returned to the chair next to Tillie's bed. He wet a washcloth then pressed it against her forehead. She didn't move. "What a celebration of life," said the announcer. "In the shadow of disaster, athletes have gathered to say we can't be beat in the long run." A map of the course winding through the five boroughs appeared on the screen. Then a camera angle from a helicopter skimming over the streets showing the human river. At one point a dozen birds flew between the camera and the ground. "Doves," thought Carson, feeling flush. Even his eyes felt warm, and when he finally rested his head on Tillie's arm, he couldn't feel a difference in their temperatures.

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He dreamed about bird books spread across a desk in front of him, but he wasn't in his office. Other desks filled the room, and at each one a person sat, studying books. In the desk beside his, a man with tremendous sideburns that drooped to the sides of his neck picked up a dead bird, spread its wing feathers apart, scrutinizing each connection. He placed the bird back on his desk, then added a few lines to a drawing of it on an easel.

"Purple finch," said the man, and Carson knew with dreamlike certainty that it was John Audubon. "A painting is forever, even if the bird is not." Audubon poked at the feathered pile. "It's a pity I have to kill them to preserve them."

"I'm searching for a bird's name," said Carson. Some of the people at the other desks looked up in interest. He described the bird. "I've only seen three of them flying with European starlings."

"Only three?" Audubon looked puzzled. "They flew in flocks that filled the sky for days. Outside of Louisville, the people were all in arms. The banks of the Ohio were crowded with men and boys, incessantly shooting at the birds.

Multitudes were destroyed, and for a week or more the population fed on no other flesh, and you saw only three?"

Carson nodded.

"With European starlings?"

Carson was at a loss. How could he explain to Audubon about birds introduced to America after his death? He said instead, "But what is the bird's name?"

"Purple finch, I told you."

"No, I mean the bird I described."

Audubon picked up his pencil and added another line to the drawing. He mumbled an answer.

"Excuse me?" said Carson.

More mumbling. Audubon continued drawing. The bird didn't look like a finch, purple or otherwise. His lines grew wilder as the bird became more and more fantastic. He sketched flames below it with quick, sure strokes, all the while mumbling, louder and louder.

Carson strained to understand him. What was the bird? What was it? And he became aware that the mumbling was hot and moist in his ear. With a jerk, he sat up. Tillie's lips were moving, but her eyes were shut. What time was it? Where was he? For a moment he felt completely dissociated from the world. Two aspirins in hand, he tried waking her up, but she refused to open her eyes. Her cheeks were red, and in between incoherent bursts of speech, her breathing was labored, as if she were a deep-sea diver, bubbling from the depths. Her forehead felt hot again. A sudden shivering attack took him, and for a minute it was all he could do to grit his teeth against the shaking. When it passed, he swallowed the aspirins he'd brought for her. Maybe there might be antibiotics in one of the houses a block over.

He put on a coat against his chills, grabbed the crowbar and flashlight, then crossed the street. In the night air, his head seemed light and large, but walking was a strain. The crowbar weighed a thousand pounds.

In the second house he found a plastic bottle marked Penicillin in a medicine cabinet. He laughed in relief, then coughed until he sat on the bathroom floor, the flashlight beside him casting long, weird shadows. Only two tablets, 250 mg each. They hardly weighed anything in his hand. What was an adult dosage? Was penicillin the right treatment for pneumonia? What if she didn't have pneumonia, or she did but it was viral instead of bacterial?

Carson staggered back home. After fifteen minutes, he was able to rouse Tillie enough to take the pills and the aspirin. Exhausted, he collapsed on the chair by her bed. He put his head back and stared at the ceiling. Swirls and broad lines marked the plaster. For a moment he thought they were clouds, and in the clouds he saw a bird, the narrow winged one that he'd seen by the river, the one Audubon said he knew, and suddenly, Carson knew too. He'd always known, and he laughed. No wonder it looked familiar. Of course he couldn't find it in his bird books.

Smiling, holding Tillie's hand, he fell asleep.

. . . . .

A pounding roused him.

Thump, thump, thump. Like a heartbeat. His eyelids came apart reluctantly and gradually he focused on the length of bedspread that started at his cheek and reached to the bed's end. Without moving, without even really knowing where he was, he knew he was sick. Sickness can't be forgotten. Even in his sleep, he must have been aware of the micro war within. It surged through him, alienating his organs, his skin. The machine is breaking down, he thought. "Someone's at the door," said Tillie. She stirred beside him. "It might be the pool man."

Carson pushed himself from the bed, his back cracking in protest. His legs felt wooden. How long had he been next to her?

She was sitting up, blankets over her legs, an open book face down under her hands. "You've been sleeping, Bob Robert," she said brightly.

He put a hand against her forehead, then against his own. "I'm not Bob Robert." She was cooler, and the wheezing in her chest didn't sound quite as

bad. The empty penicillin bottle sat on the night stand beneath her reading light. Could antibiotics work that fast? Even if they did, one dose wouldn't cure whatever they had. She'd relapse. He'd get sicker. He needed to find more.

A pounding from the front of the house again.

He stood shakily, his chest aching on each breath.

"I'll be back," he said.

"Oh, I'm all right. A bit of reading will do me good." She opened the book. It was one from his office. Sometime during the night she must have gotten out of bed.

Carson braced himself against the hallway wall as he walked to the front door, hunched over the illness. His head throbbed and the sun light through the front window was too bright.

"Carson, are you in there?" a voice yelled. "Birnam wood has come to Elsinore," it shouted.

Through the pain and fever, Carson squinted. He opened the door. "Isn't it Dunsinane that Birnam comes to?"

The warehouse manager balanced a box on his hip. "I saw the damnedest thing on the way here." He started. "Jeeze, man! You look terrible."

Carson nodded, trying to put the scene together. The manager's truck was parked next to his own in the driveway. The sun lingered high in the sky.

How long had he been sleeping? Carson forced the words out in little gasps.

"What are you doing?"

Grabbing Carson's arm, the manager helped him into the living room onto the couch. "I found the antibiotics I told you about," he said. "It wasn't in the pharmacy. The place burned to the ground." The manager ripped open the box lid. Inside were rows of small, white boxes. Inside the first box were hundreds of pills. He plucked two out. "But in the delivery area behind the store, there was a UPS truck chock full of medicine."

Carson blinked, and the manager offered him a glass of water for the pills. When did he get up to fetch the water?

"Your chest is heavy, right, and you're feverish and tired?"

"Yes," croaked Carson.

"I can hear your lungs from here. Pneumonia, for sure, I'll bet. If we're lucky, this'll knock it right out."

Carson swallowed the pills. Sitting, he felt better. It took the pressure off his breathing. Tillie had looked healthier. Maybe the penicillin helped her, and if it helped her, it could help him.

The manager walked around the room, stopping at the photoelectric panel's gauges. "You have a sweet set up here. Did you do the wiring yourself?"

Carson nodded. He croaked, "Why aren't you at the warehouse?" The light in the room flickered. Ponderously, Carson turned his head. Through the picture window, it seemed for a moment as if shadows raced over the houses, but when he checked again, the sun shone steadily.

Without looking at him, the manager said, "Time to move on. That warehouse paralyzed me. I've been waiting, I think. Olivier's Hamlet said last night, 'If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come it will be now.' "

"What was he talking about?" asked Carson.

"Fear of death. Grief," said the manager. "The readiness is all, he said. Ah, who is this?"

Tillie stood at the entrance to the hallway. She'd changed into jeans and a work shirt. Her face was still feverish and she swayed a little. "Oh, good, the pool man," she said. Without pausing for a reply, she waved a handful of packets at them. "I'm tired of waiting for flowers, Carson. I'm going to plant something."

Confused, he said, "It's nearly winter," but she'd already disappeared. He rubbed his brow, and his hand came away wet with sweat. "Did she call me Carson?"

Shadows hurried across the street again, and this time the manager looked too.

"What is that?" asked Carson.

"I was going to ask you." The manager stepped out the door and glanced up. "I saw them on the way over. They're funny birds."

Carson heaved himself out of the couch. His head swam so violently that he nearly fell, but he caught himself and made it to the door. He held the manager's arm to stay steady.

Overhead, the flock streamed across the sky, barely above the rooftops. Making no sound. Hundreds of them. Narrow wings. Red breasts.

"What are they?" asked the manager.

Carson straightened. Even sickness couldn't knock him down for this. The birds zoomed like feathered jets. Where had they been all these years? Had there just been a few hidden in the remotest forests, avoiding human eyes? Had they teetered on the edge of extinction for a century without actually disappearing despite all evidence to the contrary? Was it conceivable to return to their glory?

Carson said, "They're passenger pigeons."

The manager said, "What's a passenger pigeon?"

It's an addition to my life list, thought Carson. Audubon said they'd darkened the skies for days. Carson remembered the New York City Marathon. The people kept running and running and running. They filled the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

"I guess sometimes things can come back," said Carson.

The impossible birds wheeled to the east.

The End