

Jane by Marc Laidlaw

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The first we knew of the travelers was the tinkling of our falcon's silver bell. She landed on our Father's glove, and he leant his whiskered cheek against her beak. When he raised his head there was a look in his eyes I had not seen before.

He sighed and put his hand on my head and said,—Jane, go tell your mother we have visitors.

I walked across the wet grass to the house, and I heard him whispering to the bird as he clipped the leash to the silver varvels in her leather jesses. He climbed the porch and set her on her perch, and sat beside her in his rocking chair, oiling his glove and watching the bamboo thicket through the afternoon, while I stayed inside and played with little Anna to keep her out of mother's way.

The sun was at five fists when the travelers appeared. They stood at the edge of the clearing, staring at the house as if they feared it, until our Father rose and crossed the grass to greet them.

Two men and a woman. Although I studied them so closely that our Father had to shoo me away, I never thought to ask their names nor anything else about them. I only listened to the questions our Father asked, and to the answers they gave, and in so doing I learned as many new things about our Father as I learned about the visitors. I learned he had once lived in the city, which surprised me greatly since he had never told us he knew its evils from experience. I learned he had once been a traveler himself, with intimate knowledge of the roads he forbade us approach. I learned he spoke languages I'd never heard him speak until that night, when the three travelers stayed and shared our supper.

I remember steaming crocks of stew; mother's dense loaves of dark bread with cracked corn toasted into it; falcon-caught squab and squirrel, and wild pig my brothers had brought back from that day's hunt. I remember the glow of the lantern light in the travelers' eyes and the loudness of their voices as they drank our Father's wine and then his brandy late into the night.

Somehow Anna and I were forgotten, we girls allowed to stay up and listen, as if this were a special lesson. We knew it was rare. Even our brothers, old as they were, had never seen visitors before. Sometimes while hunting they heard the sound of travelers on the far-off road, but our Father always hushed them and made them retreat in utter silence so as to betray nothing of our presence. It was for the same reason they hunted with crossbows and never a gun. And although our Father had once been a fine shot, he now relied completely on his falcon.

The travelers admired his falcon greatly and asked many questions as she

perched near the table with the family. They remarked on the intricate designs on her polished silver bell and varvels, and I warmed with pride, for it was my task to keep the little cuff rings untarnished, although the designs etched in them meant little to me, being letters in a language I could not read. The lady traveler said the falcon was the bird of royals, to which my father replied,—Birds do not distinguish one type of man from another but will accept any master who treats them with dignity.

To prove his point, he took his huge glove and slipped it on my brother Ash's hand, and the falcon flew to Ash and landed on the glove.

And the woman said,—But the son of a royal is still a royal.

Then I noticed one of the men staring very hard at the glove, and the emblem stitched upon it, which always fascinated me though I knew not what it meant. It was a hook like a question mark with a barbed arrow for a tip and a slanted line cut through it, as if the question had been struck out.

I had seen the emblem all my life, but it had never meant a thing to me until I saw the travelers looking at it with such wonder. Our Father must have seen them looking as well, for he sent Ash to take the falcon to her mews and then began to question how they had happened upon us.

They had lost the road, they said, in a night of rain. They should have stopped and made camp but had hoped to find an inn.

—What night was this? our Father asked, for it had been dry several nights now; but the travelers could not say how long they had wandered. They asked if we knew the way back to the road, and Father nodded.

—My sons and I will see you there safely in the morning, he said.

This surprised me greatly, for our Father had commanded us to keep well clear of the road, my brothers most of all. I think he feared they would use it to escape, but in truth they were more scared of what lay at the ends of that road than of our Father.

At this time, Anna began to grow upset beneath her hood, which normally kept her so calm; and my mother bade me take her to bed. This made me angry, as I hated to miss any of the rare evening; but when the lady traveler made a comment about Anna being too old for such devices and said that the world no longer looked kindly on the practice, I rose and took Anna's hand and led her away so that the woman would not see how much she had offended me, for my own hood had not been off for long at all.

Sometime later I found myself in my own bed, with Anna's arms around me and voices coming from the next room where the firelight still flickered. I loosened

Anna's arms and went to see who spoke. The table had been cleared. I saw my parents standing over the sleeping forms of the travelers, wrapped in their bedrolls by the low-banked fire.

Our Father must have heard me, for he turned and gave me a look of grave concern and tenderness such as I had rarely seen on his hard, hard face. Then my mother followed his gaze and saw me watching. She crossed the room and turned me gently back toward my bed, but not before I saw that in our Father's hands, its head full of warm orange light, he held an ax.

—Back to bed, Jane, she told me.

The sight of the ax meant less than the look of tender love. Nor did I fully wake to the sharp sounds that came soon after, while my mother stroked my hair and told me that our Father loved us more than anything and had taken every step to see we lived in safety, and would do whatever he must to make sure no one ever threatened that, or us.

We were his sweet, sweet angels.

That night I dreamt I was an angel, flying in the clear night air, and around my neck I wore a tinkling silver bell, and around my ankles leather cuffs with silver rings that bore my name. And in the morning, the travelers were gone. We found mother washing the floor and cleaning up after having fed them early and sent them on their way. She scrubbed the house so thoroughly that soon there was no sign they had ever passed through, and for once she did not insist that Anna and I share the chores but bid us go amuse ourselves outside. We went as far as the bamboo thicket, I leading Anna by the hand as she could not be unhooded until our Father's return, since the hooding was always and only at his discretion. I thought to look for the departed travelers' tracks. Then Anna said she heard something, and I stopped and listened with her. From far off we heard sounds that continued through much of the morning, rising and falling but never going any farther, never coming any closer until some time past noon when we heard our Father and brothers crashing through the jungle from a direction I had never associated with the road. We had been listening to them all along.

—We took the long way round, my brother Olin said. The river was in flood and forced a detour.

—Yes, our Father said. But we saw them off all right in the end.

Olin and Father chuckled, but Ash looked angry and threw aside the machete he carried for cutting through undergrowth. He stormed off, with our Father glowering after him. We were all used to his moods.

Our Father scooped up Anna and unhooded her, to cover her rosy cheeks

with kisses; and Olin took my hand; and we turned to see mother waiting on the porch, smiling as we crossed the grass. It was the kind of moment I had always known. It was as if the visitors had never come. But everything had changed without my knowing it.

For the next few weeks, our Father forbade Olin and Ash to hunt, although with winter coming on, this made no sense to me. Already there were fewer birds, the great migrations having passed; and the prey available to our Father's falcon was scarce. Ash began to stomp about, and although he never spoke against our Father, his anger became a thing you could almost touch, though it would burn your fingers.

Our Father finally eased his restrictions when mother wept about the state of the larder. There were signs that winter would come early and harsh and outstay its welcome by many weeks. I was there at the edge of the clearing when he sent my brothers out with express instructions to hunt until the sun was at five fists and no lower. I was there when the sun sank to five and then four fists. It was almost night when Olin finally stumbled from the jungle in tears. He had argued with Ash, and they had fought; Ash had struck him in the temple with a broken branch and fled while he was down. Olin had followed as far as he dared. And our Father said,—How far was that? Through sobs Olin said he had seen Ash step onto the road and set off in the direction of the city.

That night, after hours of sorting through belongings and packing them into old canvas knapsacks from the shed, we left the house. Anna and I did not ask where we were going, or when we might return, but Father put on his glove and fetched his falcon from her mews, and I knew we were going far and would be gone for a long time. Anna was hooded against the fearful shapes of the night, and it fell to me to take her hand; and I remembered when I had been much younger myself and how it felt to be led along through darkness, trusting completely in the hand that guided me; and the smell of the hood; and I almost wished for that same security now. But I was a girlchild no longer; I had left the years of hooding behind when our Father felt I was too old for it, so the sheltering blindness was Anna's luxury and not mine. I tried to be a good guide, in spite of needing guidance myself. At first I thought we were heading to the road, in search of Ash, but Olin said no, the road was in the opposite direction. Sunrise proved him right. We were somewhere in the jungle I had never been, following a track the wild pigs and small deer must have made. Our Father knew it well enough to have guided us in the dark. My mother moved carefully, without complaining, though I knew her joints were swollen and always troubled her. When Anna began to complain, Olin picked her up and carried her, even though his pack was heavy. From that point on, I walked in front with our Father, holding his free right hand.

When I looked up at our Father, I saw the hardness there, and the worry; but in catching his eye, I also saw the love that drove him, and I felt such love in return that I never thought to question where we went, or why.

We rested as often as we dared. Our Father was mindful of Anna and me and solicitous of my mother's pains. You never would have thought he'd had any infirmities himself; he strode along as powerfully as my brother. When we stopped to make camp at the end of the day, he built us a shelter against the night rain; then he sent up his falcon, and before long we heard her bell and she descended with a bright-plumed bird that we roasted over a small fire. Our Father joked that he should teach her to catch bats, and then we should be well fed. But he put out the fire as soon as we were done, and I heard him whispering to my mother that we dared not make another. The falcon took stand in a branch above our camp, where I could hear her wings rustling in the dark from time to time. Among all the noises of the jungle I found comfort in that sound.

The morning of the second day, we woke and marched, and that day was like a dreary dream. Anna could be carried, but I could not, and I wished that like our falcon I could fly aloft to take the weight off my blistered feet. Yet I tried not to complain, especially after looking upon my mother, who said not a word although you could see in her face that she thought of nothing but Ash.

The third day dawned in horror. We woke to screaming and woeful calls, which came from somewhere we could not imagine. Our Father needed not caution us to silence, for none of us would have made a sound against the awful cries. They seemed to fill the jungle, echoing from every shadow. And as the sun rose and filled the dark places with light, the sound grew stronger, moving now this way, now that, as if buffeted by the wind.

We crept through the woods, away, always away from our homestead, but the screaming trailed us. My mother wept silently, and Olin's face was pale and our Father's grim beyond belief. He must have known immediately what the rest of us did not, for it was hours before mother said,—It's Ash! And he nodded only once.

We did not sleep that night. Nor did Ash by the sound of it, for the sourceless, ceaseless wailing roamed the dark, ragged and full of pain. On this night there was no rain, and the clouds kept back as if agreed the moon should shine on us remorselessly. We cowered in a clearing and tried to rest, and as I looked up at the moon I tried to make my peace with it and prayed it would keep watch over us somehow. I did not know what other power to pray to.

Then across the face of the moon, something drifted like a skeletal kite; but only the bars of the kite, with the sail itself all twisted and in tatters. And then I woke, thinking it was a dream, but did not wake, for it was not a dream. The kite drifted untethered, under its own power, and the thing that writhed upon it began to scream and beg for death and mercy. It cried out in my brother's voice:

—Father! Mother! Anna! Olin!

—Jane! it called, for I was always his favorite. Jane!

We all lay still as it passed above. Something fell from it and splattered on my face like a raindrop, a tear, or more likely blood. I only stirred to check that Anna's hood was fastened so she would not be too frightened, and then not a one of us moved. I saw that our Father had put his hand over mother's mouth so that she would not make a sound and betray us. And though at first she wept and moaned, in time she grew quiet.

For hours it hung there. I could study every bared sinew in the moonlight. I could see how his skin had been peeled away, the muscles severed from tendons and separated strand by strand from one another. But I could not see how he lived, let alone cried out with such ferocity.

Near morning, as the moon sank, the wind rose and the clouds regathered, and a high breeze caught hold of the kite and moved it on. Both sight and sound of Ash faded away. Our Father took such a deep, shuddering breath that I could almost believe he had not breathed in hours. Then he said only,—They will pay for this in kind. The sky above the city will be full of kites!

Our Father took his hand away from mother's mouth, then looked down and kissed her eyelids closed, and I saw how she had managed to lie so still through that terrible night as her firstborn hung flayed and screaming above her. Our Father's hand had been firm inside his heavy glove; and though she must have wailed and wept, we remained undiscovered; and when I saw the blood and how the thick leather of the palm had been torn by teeth, I recalled her words when I woke in the night and saw the ax. I found new comfort in them now.

We had come to rocky country, where the land rose in shelves of tumbled stone. It was deep in one of these crevices that we laid our mother, covered in the brittle yellow leaves of bamboo, with rocks chinked in around her like a loose-fit wall. Olin would not speak, but he worked alongside our Father while I held Anna and watched. Olin carried Anna the rest of the day, and she did nothing but weep inside her hood, but my eyes were dry.

In the afternoon, we heard Ash again. This time our Father's face grew dark, and he leant to his falcon and whispered something fierce that roused her. Then he cast her off.

We climbed farther, then descended into a shallow valley, which was comforting for the shadows it held. I walked behind Anna and Olin and sometimes lifted her hood just enough to tickle her lips with a blade of grass, reminding her to smile. I felt the valley contained a magic that had cut us off from all unpleasantness, for all afternoon it was quiet. But then we heard something I had hoped we'd left behind: Ash's screaming and pleading. The cries came on closer and faster than ever. Olin cried out and took off running with Anna, crashing deep into the jungle without looking back. But I clung to our Father's hand, and he never trembled but

stared at the broken sky through the trees as the sound grew louder and louder. Then down through the leaves came his falcon, with the sound of Ash's torment circling round her, and I understood nothing—for how could a bird scream like a boy? She circled our Father's head and dropped a ragged, bloody scrap from her talons to his hands. Then she settled on his wrist.

He held out his right hand so I could see the quarry. It was fleshy and clear, like yellowed glass with milky green shapes inside. It was veined and buzzing with botflies. And it screamed and screamed with my brother's voice until our Father set it on a granite slab and crushed it under his heel.

We looked for Anna and Olin through the rest of the day and long after dark, not daring to call for them. Finally, our Father pulled me into a cave among the stones, very much like that in which we had left mother. He devised a perch for his bird inside the mouth of the cave, though I knew it pained him that she had no room to spread her wings, for several times I woke to hear him apologizing so deeply that he wept.

I woke to see distant light, jagged and raw, and heard the sound of voices, these not screaming but calling out with urgency, very brisk and efficient. Father crouched in the mouth of the cave, whispering to his falcon where she perched on his glove. Then he cast her off, and she was gone, with only the faintest sound of a bell. I wondered that he had not removed her bell, but I think the screams of Ash must have deafened him to many sounds. Then, still wearing his glove, father took my hand and tugged me quietly to the threshold, and as we looked over the broken stones we saw greenish fog creeping through the valley below. All sort of animals had struggled from their burrows to die there in the morning mist: marmots and rabbits and lizards, some still thrashing. A wind had begun to thin the shallow cloud, but it also pushed traces of the acrid mist uphill, and we hurried to climb faster than it could seep. His falcon charted our path from above, but although I sometimes saw her shadow or caught a silvery tinkling of her bell, she never came down to us again. And I wondered what my Father could have told her to keep her away.

As we topped the crest and came down the other side of the ridge, we saw a farther valley where traces of the mist still lingered. And this time, among the small furry bodies, were two larger ones we knew on sight, flushed from their desperate burrow. It needed no closer inspection to know that Olin lay there, and many yards away lay Anna, just out of reach of our Father's sheltering hand. I thought of how it must have been for Anna, wandering blindly without a guide, never thinking to lift the hood without Father's permission. That was the first moment I saw the hood as a hateful thing and knew it was only by chance that my childhood had not ended the same way; and I wondered if without it she might have escaped.

We kept to the ridge until we heard voices coming up from the valley to one side where a stream ran. Soon after that, I saw others moving far off among the bamboo staves, and the hue and flow of their garments reminded me of the three

travelers, but there were many more of them.

To avoid being seen we went down from the ridge and sought a more choked passage, where sometimes we went on all fours and sometimes had to wriggle like snakes. From time to time our Father had to pull me over shelves of rock I could not climb myself; he had taken to using his gloved hand to help me, so I could not feel his fingers through it but only the thick, tough leather. It broke my heart, for it seemed he could not bear to touch me without the glove; as if he were already preparing to be apart. I felt almost relieved we were alone now, because my mother would have had no heart for this, and my sister not enough strength. Only I did miss Olin, though.

In the afternoon, we stepped onto a spur of rock like a stone finger pointing straight out from the mountainside; and I saw more of the world in that one instant than I had seen in my whole life. The land fell away below us, sheer above a rocky slope that thickened into jungle down below. The jungle gave way to a wide plain, burned and bare and grey with the look of recent devastation. Beyond the plain, in a smoky haze, were unnatural shapes that could only be buildings, although the thing they most reminded me of was mountains. The stony finger pointed right at this place. When I asked my father if that was the city, he took his eyes away from it and said,—Yes, Jane.

And then he said,—I never showed you this. And I hadn't meant to show any of you, although your mother knew, for we fled from there together. She carried Ash in her belly, while I brought nothing with me but my falcon.

I looked closer at the city, and in its jumbled center I saw something that puzzled me for seeming so familiar. It was a tall spire, the tallest of them. And at the very tip of that spire was a curved shape that looked like a crook or a question mark, though it ended in a barbed tip; and across it was a slash that seemed to cut through all the haze of distance so that I turned and stared at the emblem on our Father's glove and saw they were the same.

—I have done all I can to keep you safe, our Father said. Almost all.

—Come to me, Jane. Do you understand what we must do? Come to me.

He stood at the edge of the rock and held out his gloved hand as he had all these days. His face was no longer hard, no longer the face of our Father. I could not see him in it anywhere. Yet I stepped up beside him, for I heard voices coming up among the rocks. I heard footsteps and scrabbling and harsh, panting breaths.

I hardly sensed his fingers through the thick leather; his hand felt insubstantial inside the heavy glove. Looking out at the city, I thought the air above it was full of dark vibrant motes, and I remembered what he'd said about a sky full of kites. I was not sure if they were present and real or a vision vouchsafed of the future. I only

knew they depended on my eyes to see them, for my father's eyes were lost and empty now, no matter what they had been the day before. It was as if he had pulled a hood over his own head and now expected me to guide him.

—Ah, Jane, he said.

And then we took a step together. But his was one step forward, and mine was one step back. I held fast to the glove when his hand went out of it. Then I knelt on the tip of the stone finger and watched him fall until green swallowed him.

Voices gathered in the air behind me and grew still. I heard footsteps settle at the edge of the rock. They came no closer.

A shadow brushed over me, and I heard my falcon's bell. I slipped my hand into the glove and she settled on my wrist in a flurry.

I leant to put my cheek against her feathers, for she deserved my respect more than any of them. More even than he had.

When I had made them wait long enough, I left off whispering. I slowly turned to put the city at my back. In the slant evening light, I made sure they saw my face, and I held up the glove so they could all see the emblem upon it.

At the sight of that, they stared. Then they knelt and bowed their heads, and some lay face-down flat upon the rock.

—I am Jane, was all I said, and all I had to say.