

The Birds: Breadcrumbs

written by Guest Contributor | September 17, 2021



Curiosa, Grande (detail) by Marta Czok.
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The interviewer arrived ten minutes late, which was not a good start. She introduced herself as Pauline, and looked twentyish, and disoriented. I know that at 20 one is still a child, especially with these new generations, but when you're eighty, and by her age you had already discovered two species of birds, and spent all your winters studying their migrations, discovering a new route nobody had noticed, your benchmark is set a little high.

I walked her through the entrance which is full of my watercolor illustrations of birds and heard her speak to herself. She said something like 'Hey, Siri, take a note, film the illustrations of the birds.' I was about to ask her if she wasn't called Pauline but then I imagined that had to be her nickname. We arrived in the sitting room, which has a huge bay window overlooking the garden. The outside green reflects itself into the room, leaving most guests impressed. And I wanted to impress her, or rather that's what Margie, my publisher, wanted.

"At eighty," Margie had said, "You have to play your cards well. And despite your career, your autobiography won't sell itself."

"But I don't want to do filmed interviews," I complained.

"It's either you open your own Instagram account..." I raised my brow—at eighty?—"or have someone who's already popular there interview you. End of the story."

And there I was, with this twenty-year-old girl who apparently had hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram, whatever that meant, and yet, my publisher had stressed that yet, she wanted to interview me.

"So, you're a hornothologist," she said with an enthusiastic smile. I looked straight into her eyes, for four very long seconds and then focused on the tray holding a teapot with two cups.

"Ornithologist, yes," I smiled politely. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Just black, thank you."

I sat, hands in my lap, waiting for the first question but she got distracted by the shortbread.

"Did you make it yourself?" she asked.

"Yes, the stuff you buy from the stores is always too sugary, especially with my diabetes."

"Oh, that's very interesting," and she started taking pictures of the shortbread from every angle, as if I were no longer there.

I looked at her, wondering whether she was supposed to interview someone else and, by some strange coincidence, had ended up in front of my house in the middle of the forest at the same time when my real interviewer was meant to arrive. She must have understood I didn't get it because she explained:

"Food, it always does wonders with my followers."

"But I'm not a cook," I said.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she replied. All the while, she never looked me in the eyes, she was always focused on her mobile phone.

"So, tell me about your work..." she said at last.

"It's all in my book. There isn't much to add to that."

She looked at me blankly.

"Haven't you received the advance copy? I thought my publisher had sent you one."

"Oh, she did. But I didn't want to be influenced by it. I prefer to offer a fresh take on things."

"So, you have no idea what's written in the book?"

"None whatsoever." And she was proud of that.

At that point she pulled out all her equipment from her backpack. It was mostly little gadgets she attached to the phone: a microphone, a steady cam. I knew those instruments, I had them myself. Except I used them to point them at birds, not at people.

She started asking me about my everyday life. What food I liked, mostly. She asked me about my favorite music. And about my routine. When I told her I usually wake up at four when I'm working, she looked at me like she didn't know that time existed. That's of course after she realized, I didn't mean four in the afternoon.

She also told me a lot about herself. In fact, she was always talking about herself. At times, I thought I was meant to interview her. Perhaps that had been the agreement Margie had made, without telling me, of course. She showed me her famous Instagram account, which mostly had pictures of herself, sometimes holding a product, or testing it in any case, sometimes standing next to someone. She told me about her business. Apparently, she considered posting pictures of herself a business.

“I mean, my parents are working in an office nine to five every day of the week and hate it, and I do something I love and get money for it. Isn’t it crazy?”

I agreed. And, for the first time, I thought that we had something in common: we were both fortunate enough to do something we love for a living. It made me laugh and she noticed, but I was too shy to tell her.

Sometimes she flooded me with questions, like she had set her brain free, and was just releasing any thought that came to her mind, unfiltered. They call it brainstorming, and I’ve never really understood it.

We had a picnic in the garden, under the trees. Of course, she was vegan, but at least that I knew so I made her sandwiches with some sort of fake meat my publisher insisted I buy, and with proper meat for myself. I tasted some of the fake meat when I was making the sandwiches, and it reminded me of cardboard, but she made plenty of yummy noises so either it was really good, at least in her opinion, or she was a good actress. Maybe a bit of both, which strangely I appreciated.

We spoke about what it was like being a woman scientist. We spoke about glass ceilings and I made a joke that the only glass ceiling I would like was one that allowed you to look at the birds from below, but avoid having them shit on your head. Or face.

This made her laugh. She told Siri too.

I kept wondering whether her followers would ever read my book. Whether they would ever consider buying the book of an eighty-year-old woman who had spent her entire life chasing birds from a distance, listening to their song, observing their nests, their eggs, their mating rituals. And by the end of the day I found myself hoping they would because I was starting to like this girl. We spoke of poachers, of corruption, of research funds. She wasn’t particularly interested in the politics of my research, but she made an effort.

“I have one more question for you. I’m sure you covered it all in the book, but let’s repeat it for the camera, shall we?”

By this time, I had gotten used to having the camera pointed at me, I felt rather at ease, and even professional. I thought I probably looked good, for an eighty-year-old scientist.

“Why did you decide to study birds? What was your first inspiration?”

For some reason, that was not the question I was expecting. Somehow, I had steered clear of that question all my life. Not even my parents asked me.

“So? How did you decide?”

That’s when I told her. I told her of that summer Henry and I spent with our grandparents. Our grandmother took us to a little lake near her house one day. They were renting out pedalos, small ones, just for two. I was twelve then, Henry was ten, and the people renting them agreed to have us go by ourselves. Our grandmother gave us a paper bag full of breadcrumbs for the ducks. And there were plenty of ducks. We were in the middle of the lake and they all swam towards us. I’d never seen animals so greedy. I got scared. They were too many now, and some were trying to climb on the pedalo, or so it seemed to me. I told Henry to pedal with me, we had to escape, and I started to pedal as fast as I could, but every time I looked behind my shoulder, they were there, swimming faster than us, it seemed. I was about to turn to Henry and tell him to pedal faster when I realized: he was still giving them breadcrumbs, and wasn’t even pedaling. He just laughed and laughed.

“When did he die?” she asked when I had finished my story.

“How...? Six months ago.”

“So he was the ‘H.’ at the end of the book.”

“You did read the book!” I clapped my hand on my knee, a gesture that made Henry and I laugh when our grandmother did the same.

“How about we start from this, then?”

And that’s where the story started. Even Margie was pleased.



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