

The Birds: The Accidental Ornithologist

written by Guest Contributor | January 28, 2021



I knew it was a long shot, but I had to do it. It was now or never. I promised Joe, my agent of thirty years, two weeks.

“Two weeks!” He rubbed his forehead wearily. “They’re saying you’re a dead ringer for the Oscars this year, Russ.”

“They say that every year. Nothing ever comes out of it.”

Joe spread his palms. “Character actors get a bad shot at it in this industry. But you folks are the important ones. You anchor the film.”

“They don’t seem to realize it.”

“That’s why we need you here to make the rounds, chat to the judges.”

“I schmooze every year, Joe. I’m tired of being drowned out.”

“You’re not thinking of retiring, are you?”

I shrugged.

Joe held up his palms. “You need a break. I get it. That Greek epic remake you just wrapped up was a tough one. When you’re too long on those massive sets, it gets a bit weird, you forget where you are. Too easy to disappear into them, become part of the tapestry.” He picked up his phone. “Tell you what. I’ll set up a spa retreat for you...”

“No.”

“...book your favorite meal at La Noche...”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“...get Robin to join you for dinner...”

“Robin’s in town?”

"Yes. She flew in yesterday. Didn't she tell you?"

I kept silent.

Joe's eyes narrowed. "Did you guys have one of your disagreements again?" He sighed as he put his cell phone to his ear. "She's trying to be seen, Russ."

I snorted. "Through the indie film circuit? Fat chance." My chest burned, a painful yet familiar sensation. Robin, my daughter, had talent, yes. She was also young. Dazzling. She could be a star, quicker than I'd ever be in Hollywood. But she couldn't see the headstart she had. What I wished I had.

I glanced at Joe, talking on his cell. It sounded like he was speaking to the restaurant. But La Noche wasn't going to do it this time, not after the huge flare-up Robin and I had last week. Images of the island I saw online last night floated into my mind, lush and inviting. I grabbed Joe's phone from him, leaving him in mid-protest. "No, Joe," I said. "There's a place...an island...that I want to go to."

"An island?"

"I've booked my air tickets. It's done."

"You booked..." Joe looked deflated, like a child whose prize was taken away from him.

I stood firm. "I'm sorry to miss Robin this time. Tell her that, will you? I'll catch her the next round."

Joe studied me, not speaking a word. He was used to handling even the most ludicrous requests from actors and I could see that this was what it looked like. But I just shrugged, my shoulders feeling arthritic and weighty.

"Ok." Joe sighed. "Two weeks. Then you come back. In this town, people's memories go fast. You're away any longer, you might as well be retired. The world moves on."

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Green trees, sandy beaches—the island looked heavenly even from the airplane window as we landed. I patted my camera that was slung over my shoulder. I was going to get some amazing landscape shots from this trip, no doubt about it. Taking photos of landscapes always relaxed me. It was something about having control over the shot, which I sorely missed in my line of work.

I quickly settled into a routine on the island. Every morning, I walked along the coastline, dipping my feet into the sparkling blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. I'd turn back and take in the colorful buildings behind me. Then, I'd head to the location I planned that day—a cave, a grotto, an old town, a beach, an archaeological site—and take photos there. Around midday, I lay on the beach, sometimes falling asleep under the sun. In the evening, I headed back to my hotel room and pored through the landscape photography book Robin gave me for my sixtieth birthday earlier this year.

Aperture, shutter speed, light, composition—I'd apply what I learnt to my photography the next day.

Over the days, a reel of landscape shots formed under my hands. I scrolled through it every night and showed it to my hotel housekeeper every afternoon, enjoying her cooing over them. I dreamt of hanging the photographs up when I returned home—a gallery wall of landscapes like those of the Dutch masters.

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The birds though, they had it in for me. They flew into my face as I hiked across teeth-white mountain rocks, they shat on me while I leant against the stones of a Bronze Age tower. Once, after I'd painstakingly adjusted my camera to capture the foaming waves off a gritty coast, a bird settled in the middle of the scene like a large soprano and refused to move. Despite my best efforts to deter them, the damn birds made ugly black blemishes on my photo reel. Every night, I deleted photographs with birds as soon as they crossed my sight.

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My fifth day on the island, it was the summer solstice. I went to the island's famous photo spot for capturing the sunset on that day. I went early, chose my spot in the gathering crowd, and adjusted my camera settings carefully.

The sun glowed, an orange yolk. I pressed the shutter, hearing the satisfying click. This was what I was here for, I thought. No Hollywood bullshit.

Then, it happened again. A bird disrupted my shot. But I was determined not to let it faze me this time. I shooed it away and continued shooting. The sun was descending slowly. Another bird appeared, and another, and became a rowdy audience, crowding my shot like a giant black hurricane.

Something in me snapped.

"Nobody is listening to you!" I shouted at the birds. "You're not important!" I ran at them, swinging my camera strap like a noose. The birds scattered but continued calling, whistling, laughing. Something in my head exploded.

"You want to be the stars of the show," I shouted, "you got it!" I ran into the gaggle and started shooting the birds, clicking the shutter hard, paparazzi-like. They cawed louder and swooped around like acrobats. Anger seared through me. "Fickle creatures!" I shouted. "The attention is on you now but you fly away! What more do you want?" The deep orange sun seared into my eyes as I ran close to the laughing birds.

All light disappeared.

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I blinked. The sun had set. Night fell like a dark cloak over the island. The birds were gone.

I turned back to where I'd left my things. A crowd of eyes met mine. Under the gaze of the locals, I felt my cheeks burning up.

I gathered my things and went back to the hotel immediately, walking so quickly that I could barely see. In the corridor, I bumped into the housekeeper. "Nice pictures?" she asked, coming close, ready to coo over the day's photos.

"No...no nice pictures today," I said in halting Italian. "Gli uccelli..." *They've ruined this whole trip for me*, I wanted to say. The housekeeper shook her head, not understanding. She moved away and continued down the corridor to the next room, pushing her overflowing trolley, her gaze barely lingering on me.

I sat on the bed, my camera held tight in my shaking hands. I scrolled through the images, too fast, such that they flashed across my eyes in a blur of blues, ochres, greens. I blinked away the sweat that dripped into my eyes. Slowed down the scrolling.

My camera, with its long distance lens, had worked against me utterly. Birds splotched across the images like roadkill, feathers and beaks in a blur. But another discovery made my heart stop. In my madness, I'd shot over all my landscape photos, wiping out my beautiful reel. I felt faint. A dense blackness shifted across my vision.

RING!

I started, fumbling for my cell phone like a blind man. I cradled it to my ear like a buoy.

Joe's voice sounded out, familiar and warm through the wire. "Russ, I hate to cut your trip short, but--"

"Dammit Joe, find some other sucker to do the rounds! It's barely been a week!"

Silence. Then Joe spoke again. His voice was cold. "It's Robin."

"What about her?"

"She's had an accident. Car crash."

"What..." The dense blackness smothered me. I could barely speak.

"Russ...Icarus. Are you there?"

"Yes...yes I am. I'll fly back immediately." I put down the receiver and sat with my hands on my knees, statue-like.

* * *

"Robin, what happened?" I brushed strands of golden hair from my daughter's Botticelli face. Her large eyes burned into mine, even at thirty, just like

they did when she was born.

"It was just an accident. Joe is overreacting. You didn't have to rush back." She squinted at me. "I hardly recognize you. You look different somehow."

I looked at my reflection in the mirror by Robin's bed. My greying hair was disheveled, my face pale. I didn't recognize myself too. *But this was about Robin.* I turned to my daughter again. "What happened, my little bird?"

I hadn't used Robin's nickname since she was a child. It slipped from my lips so easily that I was surprised. I saw that Robin was jolted too. Her eyelashes fluttered like wings.

"I was driving around L.A., along Sunset Boulevard, checking out a site for my next film." My daughter looked at me sideways, that wary look she got whenever the topic of her indie film career came up between us. I didn't say a word. She went on. "It was so hot. I was melting. All of a sudden, this car came out of nowhere and smashed into me."

My mind went blank as I pictured what Robin said. I saw it frame by frame. I stroked her cheek harder. I must have been silent for a while because I heard Robin calling out to me. "Dad...Dad!"

I shook myself. "But you're ok? No broken bones?"

"No broken bones."

"Good." I stroked Robin's hair absentmindedly.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Joe said you were on an island?"

"Yes."

"What did you do there?"

I blinked. "I took photos."

"Oh? Show me."

Robin tugged at my camera bag, which I'd forgotten about in my rush to get to the hospital. Before I could stop her, she switched on the camera and started scrolling. "Dad," she laughed, "these pictures are all blurry!" She squinted. "What are those black spots in the middle?"

"Birds."

"Birds?!" Robin cocked her head towards me. "Blurry doesn't cut it, Dad, even if you're trying to be avant-garde." She frowned. "What did you want to capture?"

I rubbed my neck, feeling tired. "I don't know. I thought I knew at first, but not anymore."

Robin squinted at the pictures again. Then, she said slowly, "These pictures aren't any less beautiful, Dad."

"What do you mean? The birds are splattered all over!"

Robin gazed at the ceiling arched over her. "They bring out other spots of beauty that we don't usually see, that have their own character. Let me show you."

We scrolled through the photographs together, one by one. Robin guided me, her finger pointing here and there, at spots where I hadn't noticed. Under her hands, my picture reel changed. Another film emerged.



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