

## The Birds in Between

Lewis tries not to stare at Nan as she cleans her binoculars. Fogging the lenses aggressively with her mouth, she reminds him of a fish gasping for air. Except he knows that Nan would never gasp. The thought makes Lewis irrationally angry and he has to push down the urge to reach across the fire and rip the binoculars away.

She's the reason Lewis hadn't wanted to come on the camping trip, but his wife Poppy had convinced him against his better judgment. He looks at Poppy now and the sight of her instantly soothes him. He takes another slug of wine, feeling it wind through his limbs.

"There's no such thing as a goatsucker," Nan says, not bothering to look up as she speaks. "That's one of those myths, and let me tell you there are too many of those."

Poppy leans forward in the camp chair, her eyes bright in the fire.

"I think they're called Nightjars in England, right?" she asks. "I read that in *Bird Watcher's Digest*?"

"I meant it's a myth about them sucking milk from goats," Nan sighs. "It's so ridiculous, birds that drink milk. And they're called whippoorwills here."

"Don't get her started on myths," Nan's husband, Walter, reaches for her knee and Lewis thinks he sees her stiffen.

"What about the exploding gulls," Lewis says. "I know for a fact this is true. I saw it with my own eyes. These kids fed the poor shit some alka-seltzer and then next thing you know, kabam, feathers and worms everywhere."

"Whippoorwills are the only birds that hibernate in winter instead of migrating," Nan continues as if he hadn't spoken. "Their body temperature drops from 102 to 65."

"Sounds like a myth to me," Lewis says. He knows he's had too much wine but takes another mouthful anyway.

Walter raises his eyebrows at Lewis apologetically and the gesture makes him feel guilty. He can't imagine what it's like to be married to Nan. She's nothing like Poppy, who is pliant and salty and ready to please when it's least deserved.

“Well, it’s not a myth about some birds mating for life, right?” Poppy asks. “Like swans?”

Nan sighs again, lowering the binoculars. “I hate to tell you this, but it’s not true.”

“How do you know that?” Lewis asks.

“Pairs can stay together for years, yes, but there have been studies proving reproductive strategies are at play, including extra-pair fertilization.”

Walter leans toward her. “Extra what?”

“Infidelity,” Nan meets Lewis’s eyes and he feels derailed before recovering.

“Even birds can be dirtbags, eh?” Lewis laughs. “Maybe we’ll catch them in the act this weekend.”

“I wouldn’t call them that.” Poppy’s eyes are unnaturally bright. “I’m sure they don’t think they’re doing anything wrong. Maybe they don’t think at all.”

“You’re not going to be victim to that myth, are you?” Nan lasers in on Poppy.

“What myth?”

“That dirtbags don’t think,” Nan picks up the binoculars again, putting them to her face. “That’s all they do. And don’t let them fool you into thinking otherwise.”

Lewis tries to catch Poppy’s eye but she is following the path of Nan’s binoculars. He does the same, only to be disappointed that the view doesn’t match what he’d expected from the looks on their faces.

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An undetermined amount of time passes, marked to Lewis by a string of vaguely pornographic-sounding birds spouting from Nan’s mouth; *yellow-breasted warblers*, *American coots*, *rose-breasted grosbeaks*. Walter stands and nods off toward the woods.

“Join me in the little boy’s room, Lew?”

Lewis heaves himself up and follows. When they’re at a safe distance, Walter stops and shines the flashlight at him.

“I wanted to show you something.”

When Walter pulls out the gun, Lewis cannot at first place what it is.

“What are you doing with that?” He asks finally.

“I thought we could have some fun with it.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Well, I have this theory...bear me out here,” Walter is talking fast. “You tend to get edgy whenever we go on these trips and I think I’ve figured out why.”

“You have?”

“It’s the birds.”

“The birds? That’s what we’re here for, right?” Lewis is perplexed. “This bird, that bird, the birds in between.”

“I think you’re afraid of them,” Walter says.

“Afraid?”

“I think that if you shoot a bird, you’ll get over your fear.”

Lewis can feel Walter’s giddiness penetrate the dark.

“I’m not afraid of the birds,” he finally says.

And while this is true on a basic level, Walter is right that there’s something about birds that bothers him. Mysterious, untouchable, he doesn’t want to watch them, he wants to understand them. Like Darcy in his office; she doesn’t exactly remind him of a bird, but there’s something impenetrable about her, something that provokes the same feeling as these trips.

“Your wife would use that gun on you if she knew what you were suggesting, Walt.”

“Nan doesn’t need to know everything.”

“Well, she seems to know an awful lot.”

“What does that mean?” Walter asks.

Lewis feels the conversation going the wrong direction and decides to head it off.

“She’s smart, that’s all I meant.” He nods his head toward the gun. “So maybe tomorrow?”

Walter looks down at it in confusion, like he’s forgotten what he’s suggested. Then his excitement returns, muted but still palpable.

“I think it would be good for you, Lew.”

Closing his eyes, Lewis walks away and relieves himself against a tree, the sound drowning everything out. When he’s done, he turns to find himself alone in the dark.

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In their tent, Poppy cuddles up to him, whispering. “I’ve never heard you use that word before?”

“What word?” Lewis asks, his head beginning to spin.

“Dirtbag.”

“It’s not much of a word.”

“I guess it was the way you said it,” Poppy’s voice is quiet.

Lewis rolls toward her, her face skeletal in the angle of the lantern. It momentarily disorients him.

“It’s Nan. Something about her…” he trails off, aware suddenly of Nan and Walter’s proximity. He wonders what they’re doing in their tent.

“She knows a lot, Lewis.”

“How do you even know what she says is true, Poppy?”

“Why would she lie?” Poppy is shocked, and it reminds Lewis of why he loves her. He wants to tell her that people just do. For no reason, sometimes for a reason, but normally they just do and the reason is always overshadowed by the lie anyway. Poppy’s face suddenly scares him, how he doesn’t recognize it as hers. He closes his eyes.

“I’m sure she’s not,” he says. “I’m just drunk.”

She leans forward and pets his forehead like a puppy and he leans into it.

“I’ll be better tomorrow, Pop. I promise.”

With his words she’s almost instantly asleep, her weight taken that easily. Lewis wishes someone could do that to him, hand him promises that take everything else away in a puff. Thoughts of Darcy at the office, flashes of what he’d done, all gone with a simple promise. But left to his own defenses, Lewis can only focus on stopping the world from spinning away from him.

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The bird wakes him up. Lewis at first doesn’t remember where he is. Opening his eyes, the light through the tent reveals the beginning of morning.

Moving carefully, he unzips the door slowly and ducks out. Nan and Walter’s tent gives off a stillness reserved for sleep. He can’t believe Nan isn’t up yet. The bird calls again and he wishes he’d paid more attention last night. What was the bird Nan wanted to see? He remembers thinking it would be a good band name, something like Brown Rash or Blue Thrasher.

Stepping into the woods, Lewis hears it again. This time it’s taunting, as if the bird is messing with him. He makes his way through the trees, finding the path to the lake. It’s not

long before the foliage breaks and the water spreads out before him, revealing Poppy standing by the lake.

In the surprise, Lewis believes her a specter. How can she be in the tent and here at the same time? She is unusually still, looking over the water, and Lewis understands this is not something he's supposed to see.

Then she moves, beginning to turn, and he ducks behind a tree, heart racing. It is all he can hear, the birds silenced, all thoughts of Darcy at the office vanished. He waits for what feels like forever, finally having the courage to peer out.

She is gone.

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They're having coffee when he gets back, Walter flipping bacon in the fry pan over the fire. The smell makes him nauseous.

"Where were you?" Nan's voice is bright but not enough to disguise the accusation.

"Just doing a little research," he winks at Poppy, who smiles over her mug.

"So what's on the agenda for today, Nan?" Poppy holds up the *Bird Watcher's Digest* in question.

"I think we should head to the north side of the glen," she answers. "Maybe we'll see a Brown Thrasher."

"Why are you so obsessed with that bird?" Lewis asks.

"I'm not obsessed," Nan bristles. "I haven't seen one and that's the whole point in what we're doing."

"I don't get the point," Lewis persists.

"The point is to try to see what you haven't. To try to find what you can't in real life."

Walter butts in. "Let's not go all philosophy now, you two. I haven't even finished my coffee."

Lewis breaks eyes contact with Nan, then at a loss strolls over and grabs the book. Leafing through the pages, the birds are aloof, and it comes back how foreign they are to him.

"If you could be any bird, what would it be?" He asks to no one in particular.

Nan stands and pours herself more coffee from the press. "No, let's do what kind of bird you already are."

“Oh, I’m definitely a seagull,” Walter grabs a piece of bacon, dangling it between thick fingers. “I like the beach and will eat any garbage you put in front of me.”

“I hope that’s not a commentary on my culinary abilities,” Nan says.

“Why do you think I do the cooking?” Walter drops the bacon in his mouth, smiling.

“What about you?” Nan asks Poppy.

“I don’t know, what do you think?”

“A red-throated loon,” Nan takes a sip. “They’re the only loon that can go into flight from water and land. You’re adjustable that way.”

Poppy looks pleased at the comment.

“What about you, Nan?” Lewis asks.

“Cerulean warbler,” she doesn’t hesitate.

“What’s their thing?” Walter asks. “Other than warbling.”

“They’re elusive. They stay high in the trees, making them difficult to see,” Nan answers, keeping her eyes on Lewis. “What would you call yourself, Lewis?”

“A woodpecker,” he’s trying to make a joke but realizes the accuracy as soon as it’s out; how he feels the perpetual need to penetrate, pecking away at surfaces to whatever lies beneath.

“I think a Least tern fits you better,” Nan says. Of course she’s picked a bird with a pathetic-sounding name.

“I don’t want to know,” he says.

“It’s not bad,” Nan says. “They’re fast and notable because they hover before diving for their prey.”

“So, I came up with a plan last night,” Walter interjects. “I think we should split up today. Me and Lew will go one way, you girls another.”

“Why would we do that?” Nan asks.

“To make it a competition...see who can spot more birds.”

Nan’s eyes brighten and Lewis is vaguely surprised at Walter’s ability to manipulate her; he had always thought him too stupid.

“Well, the girls call the glen then,” Nan says. “You boys can stay over on the other side of the lake.”

When she retreats to collect her gear, Walter turns his hand into a pretend gun, pointing it up in the trees. Lewis tries not to cringe. He was hoping to get Poppy alone today, to tell her

what he's been trying to since they left. But he can do it later and the thought of being away from Nan for the day is appealing.

He grabs a mug and fills it with the dark brew, the bite making him instantly feel better about what lies ahead.

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"Just shoot it already."

Lewis can see the gun yet can't feel it, as if his hand belongs to someone else. He's not nervous, but he can't seem to get his finger to twitch.

"Come on, Lew," Walter pokes. "I didn't take you for a wimp."

He's not a wimp, he knows that. And if Walter knew what he'd done with Darcy in the office he wouldn't think he was a wimp either. He still doesn't know why he'd done it, only that it took more courage than anything else in his life.

"There aren't any birds to shoot. I can't see any birds."

"Then just aim it at a tree and fire. I'm telling you, it will change your life." Walter is sweating.

Lewis lowers the gun, the sensation returning to his limbs. "Why do you think I want to change my life?"

"It's just an expression."

"Well, you wouldn't say it if it didn't mean something."

"We all have things we want to change, right?" Walter holds out his hand for the gun but Lewis doesn't pass it.

"What do you want to change, Walter?"

Walter's face caves slightly. "Come on, Lew, let's not get all soap opera. The girls aren't even here. Let's be men while we can."

Lewis sighs. He's not sure he knows how to be a man, or at least a man who deserves a woman like Poppy. Raising the gun, he fires it into the woods with no hesitation, making Walter jump. Then Walter guffaws, kidlike again.

"That's it! Do you see what I mean? How it makes you feel?"

"I see what you mean," Lewis says, just to stop him from talking.

But he doesn't see what Walter means; he can't see anything but trees and pieces of the sky above. Not a bird in sight, Lewis feels the first inkling of desire. He realizes he wants to spot a bird, one of the rare kinds.

"Let's go to the other side of the lake," Lewis says. "Just to make sure the girls don't hear us. We can shoot the shit out of stuff that way."

Walter smiles and turns in the direction of the lake. There is a moment where Lewis sees his arm raising toward Walter's back, the gun going off under some impulse that's not his own. Shaking his head, Lewis is relieved to find he hasn't moved an inch, the gun still silent by his side.

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"Where do you think they are?" Walter asks. "It's almost dark."

They've been back at the camp for what feels like too long.

"It is dark."

"Did they bring flashlights?" Walter asks.

"I'm sure your wife is prepared," Lewis answers, trying to maintain a casualness he doesn't feel.

Just then he hears them coming, the snap of approach. Lewis stands, suddenly eager to see Poppy. He can take her down to the lake now and tell her what he needs to. While it's tempting to let her drink some wine first, he can no longer wait. The darkness should help. Nan steps into the clearing, something odd registering on her face. She looks disheveled, at least for her.

"How many did you see?" Walter calls out, not seeming to notice anything wrong.

"I can't find her."

As Nan comes closer, Lewis sees what it is he hadn't recognized: fear.

"Poppy. She went off to pee and she didn't come back," Nan says. "I've been looking and I'm sure she's just turned around but I don't know what to do now. So I came back."

She looks to Lewis. He wants to sit but doesn't think it's a good idea to be looking up at Nan when he talks.

"I shot a bird," says. "The one you wanted to see."

"Lewis!" Walter scolds.

"Did you hear what I said, Lewis?" Nan perseveres. "We need to go find her."



Lewis is trying to picture in his head where he left the gun. After a few drinks, he'd thought it best to hide it from Walter before someone got hurt.

"It was a Brown Thrasher," he adds.

Nan turns to Walter. "What's the matter with him?"

"You don't know anything about me," Lewis says.

"I think he's in shock or something," Walter says to Nan. "Let's go...let's get moving and he'll snap out of it."

Lewis remembers. The gun is in the coffee press; a place no one will look until morning.

"We should split up, don't you think?" He pulls up straight, trying to look like he's regained himself. "It makes more sense logistically."

"But you don't know where you're going," Nan says, her bossiness rearing.

"Neither do you, clearly," Lewis says.

"Your wife is the one who's lost, not me." She shoots back.

"OK, this isn't going to help anything," Walter intercedes. "I'll go with Nan. Lewis you loop around the other side of the lake, in case Poppy is going that way."

Lewis waits until they're out of hearing distance before retrieving the gun. It is wet and feels different in his hand this time. Heading toward the lake, the path feels endless, but then the water appears.

Lewis shines the flashlight on it and unexpectedly gets answers to questions he'd been avoiding. The first is that he has to tell Poppy everything. His plan had been only to reveal he wasn't going back to the office Monday, that it was time for bigger and better things. He had thought it was all that was needed, that it would be enough information to appease both of them. But the view is making it clear this is not the case.

The lake, in that convoluted way of nature, is demanding he tell her about the e-mail. It won't be easy, to verbalize the fantasies he'd written: Darcy bent over the bathroom sink, mouth gaping as he tries to decipher her from behind; her breast pump suctioning his parts normally reserved for Poppy; Darcy's dimpled legs spread for him in the cleaning closet next to the mop.

Yes, the words had been crude and bold but they were honest and exactly what he felt, which was different than what he actually wanted. Most people never understood that concept, as simple as it was. And Darcy had been one of them, not only misunderstanding but showing the e-mail to personnel.

But Lewis believes Poppy will get what Darcy didn't; that like in bird watching, it's not about what you actually see but what you aim for. His urgency in finding Poppy is suddenly overwhelming. Lewis considers throwing the gun in the lake, then thinks better of it. It's something he might need in his journey to find her.

Somewhere in the distance there is a cry. Tucking the gun in his jacket pocket, Lewis turns and heads in the direction he believes it came from.