

Bearded Tit

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Extract

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SCARY

Lizards don't scream with pain. They don't have the mechanisms for making noise. They can't purr or growl or bark or sing. The one we were watching was not screaming. It should have been. Its mouth gaped dumbly. Its eyes were blank. Its claws twitched and its tail flicked occasionally from side to side. We knew it was in pain though. It must have been.

It was impaled on a metal spike. The point of which was freshly and moistly red.

I felt scared.

Not for the lizard; not for me; but for the girl next to me. What did she make of this? She, who seemed to be made for compassion and humanity. Made *from* compassion and humanity, even. The girl whose eyes were green, bottomless pools of love and sympathy.

Would she be appalled by this?

And the lizard was not alone. A few inches further along the fence, a grasshopper was stuck on a wire barb.

Perched next to it was the bird.

A beautiful, cleanly marked grey and white bird with black wings. Its bill broad and heavy with a fine hook on the end. A bandit's black mask failing to conceal two dark eyes, lively with mischief.

The great grey shrike.

The butcher bird.

Lanius excubitor according to the textbooks. *Lanius* from a Latin word *lanio*, which means 'to mangle, tear, rip or mutilate'. Like an *excubitor* - that is, a vigilante or sentinel - this bird perches high up on branches or telegraph wires alert to any movement on the ground: an insect, maybe, or a reptile or small mammal. Whichever, it will soon disappear in a feathery flurry of black and white death. The shrike will eat it there or take it off to its 'larder', where it will be kept for later, stuck on a thorn or a spike.

I turned to the girl. 'Pretty gruesome, eh?'

She looked surprised.

'Why gruesome? It's only doing what a shrike does best.'

'Lizard-torturing?'

'What a very human interpretation. All it's doing is being a shrike. In fact, when it comes to being a shrike, you can't beat a shrike. I think it's quite impressive.'

Her matter-of-factness was scary.

'You don't like it, though, do you?'

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. 'There's nothing to like. Or dislike. It's nature. You're being too human.'

Was this a bad thing, I thought?

'Sorry, I was born human.'

She tutted.

'My parents were human. In fact, there've been humans in our family for generations. Mind you, there's always been a question mark over my great-uncle Daisy.'

She was ignoring me. 'Listen, nature is neither likeable nor dislikeable. Nature is just ... er, well, natural.'

And so was she. So natural. And so wise. That was scary.

And I was totally in love with her.

That was scary too.

Part One:

Falling From The Nest

THE BEAUTIFUL STRANGER

The seventies rose, ashes-like, from the phoenix of the sixties. With the 'midi' replacing the 'mini', and the 'maxi' replacing 'the midi', hemlines dropped like the shutters being pulled down on the age of carefree hedonism. I was eighteen, the age when you are the universe and the universe is you. The real world happened in an incoherent blur of meaningless names, unknown places and vague headlines. The narcissism of being an adolescent shielded me from the constant, grey drizzle of strikes, the Yom Kippur war, three-day weeks, power cuts, inflation, Nixon's impeachment and the *Watership Down* scandal. It was a low, nondescript and dispirited decade with the bleak tawdriness of 'glam-rock' as its embarrassing background music.

They were a decade-long morning-after headache, but, significantly, they were also the most formative years of my life.

In fashion, hair was huge and good taste was tiny. I don't think the phrase 'big hair' existed then, but it was the best way to describe mine: its curliness meant that it grew outwards rather than down. All the clothes then were made of too much material: three-piece suits, double-breasted jackets, wide ties and expanses of lapel.

And so in 1974, dressed in a dark maroon version of one such fabric nightmare, I arrived, virginal and awkward, in Cambridge to study modern languages: Spanish and French. I was to attend a college called Emmanuel.

The cinema across the road was showing *Emmanuelle*. It seemed only appropriate that I should go and see it. Nine times in the first week, in fact. I saw it so often that for years afterwards I was terrified of bumping into Sylvia Kristel in the street in case she recognized me from the end seat of row W. That said, it was the only meaningful relationship I had in my first year; a sorry state of affairs that I intended to rectify at the beginning of my second.

It was 1975, a few days before the official start of the new academic year, and a friend of mine, Richard McShee, and I were discussing the lamentable condition of our love-lives over a coffee in the market square.

'Too many blokes, Mack. The odds are stacked against us,' I said.

He agreed. 'Six male students to one female student, apparently.'

'She's not complaining though!' I said with half-hearted humour, realizing that comments like that magnified, rather than relieved, the bleakness of our situation.

A pigeon landed on the table and pecked at Mack's sandwich. I attempted to punch it and missed.

'Oi, that's not nice!'

'Bloody things,' I said. 'Flying rats, you know.'

'Well, actually,' said Mack, reminding me that he was studying zoology, 'they're more like flying reptiles. Birds are descended from reptiles, not mammals. The feather is an evolution of the scale.'

'No shit!'

'Plenty of shit actually,' Mack was pleased with this in a 'science student makes joke - hold the front page' sort of way.

I reminded him of our agenda. 'Girls, Mackie!'

'But you've no need to complain about lack of women, Ror. You had no problems last year!'

This came as big news to me.

'Didn't I?'

'Yes, you had loads of girls. In fact, we didn't think it was fair. You should have shared them round.'

I cast my mind back over the previous twelve months and struggled to think of a single romantic or sexual episode that included another person. Apart from Sylvia Kristel.

'Who were you thinking of?'

'That lovely waitress from the college canteen. With the amazing red hair. The South African one.'

Oh yes, Brigid. What a nightmare that was! And I think I speak for both of us ...