

THE EXTRAORDINARY HAPPENS EVERY DAY

THE CRANE WIFE



PATRICK NESS

Also by Patrick Ness

A Monster Calls

Monsters of Men

The Ask and the Answer

The Knife of Never Letting Go

Topics About Which I Know Nothing

The Crash of Hennington

THE
CRANE
WIFE

PATRICK NESS



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Lyrics from 'The Crane Wife 1&2'

Words and Music by Colin Meloy

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For Marc

*And all the stars were crashing round
As I laid eyes on what I'd found.*

The Decemberis

In her dreams, she flies.

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I.

What actually woke him was the unearthly sound itself – a mournful shatter of frozen midnight falling to earth to pierce his heart and lodge there forever, never to move, never to melt – but he, being who he was, assumed it was his bladder.

He huddled under the covers, sending out mental feelers to see how urgent the call was. Urgent enough. He sighed. Forty-eight still seemed too young to be having to get up in the night so often to relieve what was patently an old man's need, but there would clearly be no getting back to sleep until the matter was addressed. Maybe if he was quick about it he wouldn't even really need to wake all the way up. Yes. All right, then. Here we go. Upright, down the hall.

He gasped as he stepped onto the bathroom floor, cruelly cold against his bare feet. The room had no radiator, just a mysterious flat pad-type thing on the wall – he could never describe it adequately to other people – that, when turned on, grew too hot to touch while also managing to not even vaguely warm the surrounding air. He'd been meaning to remedy the problem since he'd moved here after the divorce, but a ninth year had just passed, a tenth begun, and here he was, still freezing his toes and the surprisingly soft skin of his arches as he stood, naked, at the toilet.

'Cold,' he murmured, using the glow of moonlight through the window to more-or-less aim into the bowl, guiding the rest by sound once he'd got a stream started.

The winter had been strange and contradictory, as if it were battling with itself. Mild days, even sometimes gloriously sunny, but nights that were particularly bitter, the damp of the house making them seem even more so. A huge city allegedly thrummed and dazzled just metres from the man's doorstep, yet inside might as well have been draped in the chill fog of a hundred years past. At her last visit, his daughter Amanda had stopped halfway through taking off her coat and asked if he was expecting a plague cart.

He finished urinating, shook off the last few drops, then tore a square of toilet paper to gently dab away the excess from the tip of his penis, a habitual action that his ex-wife had inexplicably regarded with enormous affection. 'Like pretty eyelashes on a bear,' she'd said.

She'd still divorced him, though.

He dropped the square of paper into the bowl, leaned forward to flush, and in that ignominious moment the sound came again, heard consciously for the first time.

He froze, hand mid-way to the flush handle.

The bathroom window faced his small back garden, a narrow one that elongated back in perfect mirror of the two on either side, and the sound had clearly come from there, somewhere beyond the marbled glass.

But what on earth was it? It matched nothing in the hurried catalogue of plausible things it might be at this time of night in this particular neighbourhood: not the unnerving scream of a mating fox, not the neighbour's cat trapped in his garage (again), not thieves because what thief would make a sound like that?

He jumped as it came yet again, slicing through the night, clear in a way that only very cold things

are.

A word sprang to his groggy, shivering mind. It had sounded like a *keen*. Something was *keening* and it welled him up with entirely unexpected, in fact, frankly *astonishing* tears. It tore at his heart like a dream gone wrong, a wordless cry for help that almost instantly made him feel inadequate to the task, helpless to save whatever was in danger, pointless to even try.

A sound which, later on, when he remembered this night forever and always, thwarted all sense. Because when he found the bird, the bird made no sound at all.

He rushed to his bedroom to dress: trousers without underwear, shoes without socks, jacket without shirt. He didn't look out of any of his windows as he did so, the one logical action, simply checking on what the sound might be, left bafflingly undone. Instead, he moved with instinct, feeling somehow that if he hesitated, it – whatever it might be – would somehow slip away, dissipate like a forgotten love. He merely moved, and quickly.

He bungled down the stairs, fiddling his keys out of his trouser pocket. He stepped through the cluttered sitting room and into the kitchen, angering himself at how loudly the keys banged against the back door lock (and who had a key lock on the *inside* of a house? If there was a fire, then *whoof*, you were gone, banging on a door that would never open. He'd meant to fix that as well, but ten years later . . .).

He opened the door, swinging it out into the freezing night, knowing that whatever had made that noise *must* be gone, surely, in all the racket he was making from his clumsy door-openings and key-clatterings. It would have fled, it would have flown, it would have run–

But there it stood. Alone in the middle of the modest stretch of grass that made up the modest back garden of his modest detached home.

A great white bird, as tall as he was, taller, willowy as a reed.

A reed made of stars, he thought.

Then, '*A reed made of stars*'? *Where the hell did that come from?*

The bird was illuminated only by the moon in the cold, clear winter sky, shades of white, grey and dark against the shadows of his lawn standing there regarding him, its eye a small, golden glint of blinking wet, level with his own, its body as long as he'd been when he was at his teenage gangliest. It looked somehow, he stupidly thought, as if it was on the verge of speaking, as if it would open its pointed, clipped bill and tell him something of vital importance that could only be learnt in a dream and forgotten on the instant of waking.

But he felt too cold under his one layer of clothes for this to be a dream, and the bird, of course, remained silent, not even a repeat of the keening that could only have come from it.

It was magnificent. Not just in its unexpectedness, its utter incongruity in the backyard of a London suburb celebrated for its blandness, a place from where native-born artists were noted for moving away. But even in a zoo, even to a non-bird lover, this bird would have caught the eye. The staggering whiteness, even in the dark, of its breast and neck, a whiteness that seemed as much a part of the cold as the frost on the grass behind it. The whiteness flowed down into its wings, the one on the side facing him dipping almost low enough to brush the grass.

Triangles of black pulled away from its bill on either side, and a startling cap of red crowned its head, distinguishable even in this low light, like a military insignia for somewhere impossibly foreign. Its stare was commanding, unyielding in that way of birds. It knew he was there, it met his eye, and yet it didn't start or fly away or show any fear.

Or rather, he thought, the fear it showed wasn't of *him*.

He shook his head. These thoughts weren't helpful. The cold, far from waking him, was so ferocious

it was actually making him sleepier, and he thought for a moment that this must be how people die in snowstorms, this lethargy which felt warm against all available evidence. He rubbed his arms, then stopped should the action startle the bird away.

But the bird remained.

A heron? he thought. *A stork?* But it was nothing at all like those hunched, purplish grey birds he sometimes saw skulking around the city like unwashed old gentlemen.

Then, for the second time that evening, the word came to him. Who knew if he was right, who knew such things any more, the right words for birds, the right words for anything, who bothered to remember them in an age when knowledge was for putting into a cloud and forgetting, then forgetting again that you ever needed to remember it? But the name came to him, and regardless of where it might have come from or how it might be right, it *was* right. He knew it, and speaking made it more so.

‘A crane,’ he said, softly. ‘You’re a crane.’

The crane turned, as if in answer to his naming of it, its eye still on his, and he could see that the wing the bird had kept behind it wasn’t folded down like the nearside one. It was outstretched, awkwardly.

Because it was shot through with an arrow.

‘Oh, shit,’ the man whispered, the words appearing before his lips in a fruitless puff of steam. ‘Oh, no.’

The arrow was long, extraordinarily so, at least four feet, and the more it resolved in the man’s vision, the more he could see that it was some kind of terrifyingly *proper* arrow, too, with crisply cut feathers fletched up in three evenly spaced rows around one end and a glinting, shiny arrowhead easily the width of two of his fingers at the other. There was something weirdly ancient about it as well, something that hinted at its carving from authentically expensive wood, not balsa or bamboo or whatever chopsticks were made of, and it was a whole world more serious than the businesslike rods you saw fired on the Olympics coverage of smaller nations.

This was an arrow for killing. An arrow for killing men, even. An arrow over which a medieval archer might have prayed that the grace of God would bless its arc and send it straight into the rancid heart of the infidel. The man could see, too, now that he was looking for it, the dark stain at the crane’s feet where its blood had dripped from the arrow’s tip onto the frosted grass.

Who in the world would fire such a thing these days? And *where*? And, for God’s sake, *why*?

He moved forward to help the crane, not knowing what he might do, feeling certain he would fail, but he was so surprised when it didn’t back away from him that he stopped. He waited another moment, then found himself addressing it directly.

‘Where have you come from?’ he asked. ‘You lost thing.’

The crane remained silent. The man remembered again the keening he’d heard, felt an echo of the mournful pressure of it in his chest, but no sound came now from the bird. No sound came from anywhere. The two of them could have been standing in a dream – though the cold that shifted through his shoes and bit at his fingers suggested otherwise, and the quotidian leaking of a stray drop, despite his best efforts, onto the crotch of his underwear-less trousers told him definitively this was still real life, with all its disappointments.

But if it wasn’t a dream, it was one of those special corners of what’s real, one of those moments, only a handful of which he could recall throughout his lifetime, where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life. Like when he lost his virginity to the girl with the eczema in his Honours English Class and it ha

been so intensely brief, so briefly intense, that it felt like both of them had left normal existence for a unleashed physical instant. Or that time on holiday in New Caledonia when he'd surfaced from snorkelling and for an oddly peaceful moment or two he'd been unable, due to the swells of the ocean to even see the boat from which the divers had leapt, and then the angry voice of his wife had shouted 'There he is!' and he'd been sucked back into reality. Or not the birth of his daughter, which had been a panting, red tumult, but the first night after, when his exhausted wife had fallen asleep and it was just him and the little, little being and she opened her eyes at him, astonished to find him there, astonished to find *herself* there, and perhaps a little outraged, too, a state which, he was forced to admit, hadn't changed much for Amanda.

But *this*, this moment here, this moment was like those, and more so. The gravely injured bird and him in a frozen back garden that could have been the borders of the known universe for all he knew. It was in places like this that eternity happened.

And as he watched, the crane took a single step to the side, and stumbled.

He leapt forward to catch it, and like that, it was in his arms, the surprising weight of its upper body and its reaching neck (so like a swan's but so different, too), its good wing flapping and out.

And the smell! Of panic and shit. Of blood and fear. Of the impossible labour of flight that seeps through every atom of a bird. The smell, more than anything, convinced the man this wasn't a dream. Even in his worry about hurting the crane, even in the sudden calamity of flapping wings and flying feathers and the stabbing of a beak that looked as if it might well be able to go straight through his chest and into his heart, he knew that his brain – likeable though it was – was incapable of conjuring scent this crowded, this peopled by so many different spices.

'Whoa, there,' he said, the bird twisting, fighting, perhaps realising too late that a separate, possibly predatory creature now had it in its grasp. The beak poked again, notching his cheek, drawing blood. 'Dammit!' he said. 'I'm trying to help you.'

At which the crane leaned back its neck, its head reaching to the sky, and it opened its beak to call.

But it didn't call. It gaped silently at the moon, as if breathing it out.

The crane's full weight suddenly pressed against the man's chest. That long neck fell forward like a ballerina's arm accepting applause, and it wrapped around him, its head hanging down his back, as if embracing him. Only the heaving of its narrow breast told the man that the bird was still alive, that in its exhaustion it had given itself into his keeping, that it would hand over its life to the man if that was what was required.

'Don't die,' the man whispered, urgently. 'Please don't die.'

He knelt down into the grass, the frost instantly wetting his knees, and with one arm still around the body of the crane, he used his free hand to gently grasp the arrow-pierced wing and unfurl it.

The span of a bird's wing is mostly feather; the meat of the muscle that regularly performs the casual miracle of self-activated flight is entirely in a long, narrow arm above the spray of feathers below. The arrow had pierced this length of sinew on the underside, catching quite a lot of white feather but still hitting more than enough muscle to have lodged, seemingly irrevocably, through the crane's wing.

The man wondered if he should call someone who'd be about eight million times more qualified to help than he was. But who? The RSPB? A vet? At this time of night? And what would they do? Would they 'put it down'? A crane so gravely injured?

'No,' whispered the man, though he was unaware of doing so. 'No.'

'I'll help you,' he said, more loudly. 'I'll try. But you have to hold still for me, okay?'

Foolishly, he found himself waiting for the bird's response. All it did was continue its desperate

breathing against his neck. The arrow had to come out, and the man had no idea how he was going to do that, but that's what needed to be done and he could feel himself already manoeuvring the crane to do so.

'All righty then,' the man said, and then he said it again. 'All righty then.'

He cradled the bird's weight away from him, and with no small amount of awkwardness, he worked his way out of his jacket, gently moving the crane's head and neck to slip the cheap fabric from underneath. One-handed, he stretched the jacket out on the frost and laid the crane down onto it, folding its good wing beneath it. The crane acquiesced with an ease that terrified him, but he could still see it breathing, its chest rising and falling, more rapidly than seemed right but at least still alive.

The man was now naked from the waist up, kneeling in frozen grass, on a clear night in a cold season that could very well kill him if he stayed. He worked as quickly as he could, keeping the crane's injured wing unfurled in a vertical from the ground. He – along with conceivably everyone else in the entire world – had only ever seen arrow injuries in the movies. The rescuers always broke the arrow and pulled it out the other side. Was this even the right thing to do?

'Okay,' the man whispered, taking hold of the arrow's end in one hand and slowly letting go of the injured wing with the other, so that all that was holding up the crane's wing was the arrow itself, now in both his hands.

It felt shocking against his fingertips, even though they were quickly numbing in the cold. The wood was surprisingly light, as it would have to be for an arrow, but still signifying strength with every inch. He looked for a weak spot, found none, and felt increasingly sure of his inability to break it, certainly of his inability to break it without having to try several times and cause the creature unthinkable agony.

'Oh, no,' the man mumbled to himself again, starting to shiver uncontrollably now. 'Oh, shit.'

He glanced down. It looked back at him with that golden eye, unblinking, its neck curved against his coat like a question mark.

There was no solution then. It was too cold. *He* was too cold. The arrow obviously too thick and strong. It might as well have been made of iron. The crane was going to die. This reed made of stars was going to die right here, in his sad little back garden.

A tidal wave of failure washed over him. Was there another way? Was there any other way at all? He turned back to the door to his kitchen, still open, letting out every bit of meagre warmth from the house. Could he carry the crane back inside? Could he lift it and get it there without hurting it further?

The crane, for its part, seemed to have already given up on him, to have already judged him, as so many others had, as a pleasant enough man, but lacking that certain something, that extra little ingredient to be truly worth investing in. It was a mistake women often seemed to make. He had more female friends, including his ex-wife, than any straight man he knew. The trouble was they'd all started out as lovers, before realising that he was too amiable to take quite seriously. 'You're about sixty-five per cent,' his ex-wife had said, as she left him. 'And I think seventy is probably my minimum.' The trouble was, seventy per cent seemed to be every woman's minimum.

Seventy seemed to be the crane's minimum, too. It had made the same mistake as all the others, seeing a man when, upon closer inspection, he was only really a *guy*.

'I'm sorry,' he said to the crane, tears coming again. 'I'm so sorry.'

The arrow moved unexpectedly in his hands. The crane, seemingly in an involuntary shudder, nudged its wing forward and the arrow slid through the man's fingers.

And stopped.

The man felt something. A small crack in the wood of the arrow. He looked closer. It was hard to

see in such dim light, but yes, definitely a crack, one big enough to follow even with frozen fingertip. It spliced through the shaft, no doubt broken there by the struggles of the crane's great wing. The man could even feel that the arrow was at slightly different angles on either side of it.

He looked back down at the crane. It regarded him, thinking who knew what.

An accident, surely. Absurd to think that the animal would have led his fingers to it.

But also absurd that a crane with an arrow through its wing had landed in his back garden.

He said, 'I'll try.'

He gripped the side of the arrow closest to the pierced wing and held it as steadily as he could. He took the other end in his fist near the crack. The cold was so fierce now that he was feeling actual pain in his hands. It would have to be now. It would have to be right now.

'Please,' the man whispered. 'Please.'

He broke the arrow.

A massive sound rent the air, not from the breaking arrow but as of an enormous flag slapping in a gale. The crane surged to its feet, flinging wide both its wings, and the man fell back in surprise onto the concrete slabs at the edge of his lawn. He threw up an arm to protect himself as the pointed end of the arrow flew free, bouncing harmlessly off his arm and leaving a smear of the crane's blood across it, the other half disappearing into darkness. He would never find either, always firmly believing that the blood had been too tempting for a starving winter fox not to carry them off.

The bird stood above him now, reaching its head up into the night and calling silently again at the moon. Its wings, fully unfurled, were wider than the man was tall. The crane flapped them in long, slow, powerful movements. It shook the damaged wing once, then once more. The man could still see blood staining the feathers from the wound, but the crane seemed satisfied with its performance.

It stilled itself, its wings reaching out as far as they could go.

It turned its head to regard him with that unblinking eye, a shock of gold under its dark, red crown. The man wondered for a fanciful moment if it was going to reach down and scoop him up in those wings, as if this was some kind of test that he'd passed, one that, had he failed, he would never have remembered taking.

Then he found himself saying something stupid, something that made no sense at all.

'My name,' he said, 'is George.'

He said it to the crane.

As if in answer, the crane bowed its long, long neck low towards the ground, keeping its shoulders up and wings out. It began flapping them in a different way, one that caused it to almost fall forward onto the man. He scooted back some more, and when the crane left the ground its burning white breast soared an inch from the man's upturned nose. He looked back to watch it veer sharply upwards to avoid running into his house, carrying on up to the peak of his roof and alighting there for a moment. The moon was bright behind it, cutting it into a frozen silhouette.

It ducked its head once more, unfurled its wings, and swooped down over the back garden, its thin black legs trailing behind it, then up and up and up and up and up, until it was nothing more than one star among many in the night sky and soon not even that.

The man, George, rose slowly from the icy ground, a worrying ache starting to curl through his bare torso. He was shivering so badly now it was all he could do to stand, and he wondered if he was falling into shock. He would need a warm bath, and he'd need it soon, though he was already wondering if he'd have the strength to make it back inside—

A jolt ran through his body as he heard it, one more time. The *keening*, the mournful call that had brought him out here in the first place. It echoed through the frosty, clear air, as if it was the night

itself calling out to him. The crane was saying its goodbye, its thank you, its—

~~And then he realised that the call hadn't come from an impossible bird vanishing from his garden~~ and life and out of the whole world for all he knew. The keen had been set free from his own body, cried out from icy blue lips, torn from a chest that suddenly seemed to hold his irreparably broken yet still beating heart.

‘But this says *Patty*.’

‘Yes, that’s what it says here on the order form, too.’

‘Do I look like a Patty to you?’

‘I suppose they could have thought it was for your wife.’

‘My wife is called Colleen.’

‘Well, then, Patty would have clearly been wrong for *her*—’

‘I saw the man type it in myself. Pea, ay, double dee, why. Paddy. And yet, follow along with my finger here as I underline the letters, this very, very unambiguously says *Patty*.’

‘Which is what it says here on the order form.’

‘But which is not what I saw the man type.’

‘I’m guessing maybe they looked at the vest and thought that since it was so *pink*—’

‘They? Who are they?’

‘The printers.’

‘This isn’t a printers?’

‘Not *that* kind of printers. We’re more of a flyer, poster-design kind of—’

‘So you’re a printing shop that doesn’t do its own printing.’

‘Not at all, as I say, we’re more of a flyer—’

‘Regardless, for printing onto running vests—’

‘And t-shirts.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s not just running vests we send out. T-shirts, too. Hen nights, stag dos, that kind of—’

‘You send them out.’

‘We send them out.’

‘With specific orders that someone in this shop types into a form on your screen there.’

‘Yes.’

‘So when I saw the man, quite a bit older than you, which is to say a grown-up, he typed in, before my very own eyes, Pea, ah, double dee, why—’

‘That would have been the specific orders to the outside printing company, yes.’

‘Which they didn’t follow.’

‘According to you, anyway, but it clearly says *Patty* on the order form—’

‘DO I LOOK LIKE A PATTY TO YOU?’

‘There’s no need for the shouting. We’re just trying to solve a problem, two reasonable men—’

‘Neither of whom are called *Patty*.’

‘I’m from Turkey. We don’t have Paddy versus Patty, okay? So how am I to know? Like I said, the probably saw the colour of the vest—’

‘That’s the colour of the charity. Pink is the colour of the charity. Breast Cancer. Pink. Because it affects women. Mostly women do the fundraising, but some men do, too. We run, we raise money. It

the colour of the *charity*. It has nothing to do with the gender of the vest.'

'Well, now, see, that's interesting. Would you say vests *had* genders?'

'Yes, I *would* say that. Men's extra large. It's right there on the tag. Men's. Extra. Large. Really, and I being filmed? Is that what this is? Ah, *here's* the guy—'

'What's going on, Mehmet?'

'Customer here not happy with his order, Mr Duncan.'

'Do I look like a Patty to you?'

'I couldn't really say without knowing you better, but I'm guessing no.'

'Then why does this say—'

'Obviously an error. I very clearly remember typing in Paddy with two dees.'

'Thank you.'

'We'll get that fixed for you overnight.'

'The race is on Sunday.'

'And overnight will be Friday. It'll be fine.'

'I'm just saying there's no room for error. Any *more* error.'

'Don't you worry. You've got my personal guarantee.'

'You hear that? George Duncan's personal guarantee.'

'Which means exactly what?'

'It'll be here tomorrow, Paddy, I promise you. If I have to drive to St Ives—'

'Your printer's in *St Ives*?'

'If I have to drive to St Ives and pick it up myself.'

'That's a twelve-hour round trip.'

'You've done it? I've found the A30 not too bad if you—'

'Just . . . By tomorrow, please. Spelled properly.'

'You have my word.'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'... Well, *he* was a grouchy one.'

'Stop winding up the customers, Mehmet. There's a recession on.'

'Ah, see, another good point. *With the recession on, Patty, does the misspelling of one's name really amount to so very, very much—*

'What do I keep saying? Customer service. It's not something I've just made up to punish you.'

'They only do that stuff in America, George. Can I Help You, Sir. You Look Fabulous In That, Sir. Can I Get You Some More Iced Tea, Sir.'

'... so you've never *been* to America then.'

'Television. Exactly the same thing.'

'Please, just call St Ives, tell them we have an urgent correction. And while you're at it, ask them where the Brookman Stag Do t-shirts are. The boys are leaving for Riga tonight and they should have been here by—'

'Brookman?'

'... Oh, what's that look, Mehmet? I don't like that look. Please tell me—'

'The Brookman ones have already gone out. He came by when you were at lunch.'

'Oh, no. No, no, no. I checked the order myself and all that had come in were—'

'The light blue ones with the kittens on the front.'

'Those were the O'Riley Hen Night! Why on earth would light blue kittens be for a stag do? They even *said* Hen Night—'

'We don't have hen nights in Turkey! How am I supposed to know the difference?'

'You moved here when you were *three!*'

'What's the big deal? They'll all be so drunk, who's going to notice?'

'I suspect ten soldiers from Her Majesty's Coldstream Guards might notice that a light blue cartoon kitten with a hand over its genitals isn't quite—'

'Paw.'

'What?'

'If it was a kitten, it'd be a paw. And what's it supposed to be doing, anyway? Pleasuring itself? Because how is that a theme for a hen night?'

'...'

'What?'

'Call Brookman, Mehmet. He obviously hasn't opened his box of t-shirts yet for whatever reason—'

'Yeah, he did seem in a bit of a hurry. Not even enough time to look at them.'

'... You're smiling.'

'I'm not.'

'You are. You did it on purpose.'

'I did not!'

'Mehmet!'

'You accuse me of everything! It's racist!'

'Call him. Now.'

'I don't see why I have to do all the crappy jobs around here. All you do is moon around in the back making your precious little *cuttings*. Like what's that one even supposed to be?'

'What one?'

'The one you've been carrying this whole time. The one you just hid behind your back.'

'This? This is nothing. This is—'

'Looks like a goose.'

'It's not a goose. It's a crane.'

'A crane.'

'A crane.'

'... like the kind that builds buildings? 'Cause, George, I hate to break it to you—'

'Go. Now. Now, now, now, now, now—'

'I'm *going*. *God*. Slavery was abolished two hundred years ago, you know.'

'Yes, I know, by William Wilberforce.'

'And you wonder why no one asks you out. I really don't think women get turned on by William Wilberforce references. Not that I'd *know*, I'll admit—'

'I have had no problems with girlfriends, Mehmet.'

'You mean like the last one? The secret girlfriend no one ever saw who didn't have a name? Did she live in Canada, George? Was she called Alberta?'

'I don't even begin to understand those sentences.'

'Musical theatre reference. Like a foreign language to you. Which reminds me, I've got an audition—'

'Yes, fine, whatever, just put it in the schedule and *make the call*. And don't spend a half hour twittering before you do.'

'*Twittering*. Was the world in colour yet when you were born, George? And gravity all the time?'

'Do you honestly think you're a quality enough employee for me not to fire you?'

'Oh, here we go. "It's *my* shop. *I* own it—"'

'I *do*.'

'Fine. I'll leave you here alone with your goose.'

‘Crane.’

‘Well, I hope you’re gonna label it, because no one is ever going to think “crane” when they see that.’

‘It’s not for everyone. It’s . . .’

‘It’s what?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No, you’ve gone all bashful. You’re even *blushing!*’

‘No, stop, what? Nothing, no. I just. Saw a crane. Last night.’

‘. . . by “crane”, do you mean “prostitute”?’

‘No! Jesus Christ, if you must know, a crane landed in my garden.’

‘. . . And?’

‘And nothing, go make the calls!’

‘Fine, watch me walking.’

‘And quit sighing like that.’

‘Customer, Mr Duncan.’

‘What?’

‘I said, *customer*, George. Behind you.’

‘I didn’t hear the door—’

‘. . .’

‘. . .’

‘. . .’

‘Can I . . . ?’

‘My name,’ she said, ‘is Kumiko.’

People were always surprised to find out that George was American, or at least that he had started life that way. They told him he didn't 'seem' American. When asked what exactly this entailed, they would look uncertain – not uncertain about what 'seeming' American might mean but uncertain about how badly they wanted to offend him.

These people, friends even, many of them highly educated, many who had visited America several times, were surprisingly difficult to budge from their assumption that, George aside (of course, of course), his 300 million compatriots were all of them passport-less, irony-hating Jesus-praisers who voted for apparently insane politicians, all the while complaining that their outrageously cheap petrol wasn't nearly cheap enough. 'America is,' they would say, and so confidently, without fear of contradiction or rebuttal to anything that followed.

'*The New Yorker*,' he would reply. 'Jazz. Meryl Streep.'

This usually just prompted them to try out their approximation of an American accent, all wheedling brightness and too much blinking. At least it had morphed over the years; for a full decade after he'd moved to England, people would dive ecstatically into J.R. Ewing's worst twang. 'I'm from Tacoma,' he would say.

No one wanted to hear that people other than themselves might be complicated, that no one was ever just one thing, no history ever just one version. It was oddly hard for them to accept that, though American, he was neither from the Deep South or the East Coast, that his upbringing was in the Pacific Northwest, where the accents were mild and nearly Canadian, and even though his parents had ticked a stereotypical box by being regular church-attenders – which, all right, it *was* difficult to find American Protestants who weren't – they'd been slightly *laissez-faire* about it, as if it were a duty, like vaccinations. His father had been a secret smoker, for example, even though the church was of an evangelical strain and frowned on such things. George also knew from a startling, never-to-be-discussed accidental sighting that his parents occasionally rented pornography on VHS from the gas station down the road. 'People are legion,' he would insist, 'even when it's inconvenient to a worldview.'

Take his one anomalous school year. Even *that* wasn't a simple story, as if there were any such things. He had sailed through kindergarten (though who doesn't sail through kindergarten? he thought). Wasn't it basically just showing up and not choking on things?) and performed above his level through first and second grades – indeed, occasionally being sent up to fourth grade reading groups just to keep the boredom from setting in. The teachers loved him, loved his big blue eyes, loved a compliance that bordered on the slavish, loved a complexion that looked like he was about to grow a beard, aged six.

'Sensitive', they called him in Parent/Teacher Conferences. 'Dreamy, but in a good way.' 'Always with his hand in the air.' 'Such a special, tender little guy.'

'Not special at all,' said Miss Jones, in the first Parent/Teacher Conference of third grade, a scant two weeks after he'd started. 'And far too much of a smarty-pants. No one likes a know-it-all. Not th

other students and certainly not *me*.'

George's parents had sat there in polite astonishment, his mother clutching her handbag as if it were a dachshund about to leap down and soil the carpet. His mother and father exchanged a look, his mother's face especially retreating into that shocked expression she always got when unexpectedly confronted by life. Which essentially was every time she left the house.

George knew all this because 1) they were the kind of parents who would go to every Parent/Teacher Conference (he thought it might be the 'only child' thing; they didn't want to miss even a moment, lest they irreparably screw something up) and 2) they'd been unable to get a sitter that night, despite the vast squadron of teenage girls usually on offer at the church, so he quietly drew with coloured pencils at a spare desk while his mother and father crouched, comically low, in the plastic children's seats before Miss Jones's desk.

But Miss Jones was only getting warmed up. 'I just cannot tell you how tired I am,' she said, lifting her eyes to Heaven as if praying for an answer to her tiredness, 'of every single parent coming in here and telling me how their little Timmy or Stephanie or *Frederico*' – she said the name so scornfully even George knew she was talking about Freddie Gomez, the only other boy who'd gone up to higher grade reading groups with him and who smelled eye-wateringly of soap – 'is special and talented and God's gift to third grade knowledge.'

His father cleared his throat. 'We're not the ones saying it, though,' he said. 'The *school*–'
'Oh, the *school*, is it?' Miss Jones leaned forward, coming nearly all the way across her desk. 'Let me tell you something, *Mister Duncan*,' she said. 'These boys and girls are six and seven and eight years old. What do they know about anything except how to tie their shoes and not wet themselves when the bell goes? And not that all of them are so great at *that*, I can tell you.'

'Well, what does that have to do with the price of milk?' his mother said, in a tense, strangled tone that made George's ears prick. She was a nervous lady, his mother. She'd clearly been thrown off balance by Miss Jones's forthrightness, her volume, her – let's face it – blackness, and already he could see that things weren't going to go well. He went back to colouring every quadrant of Snoopy the same shade of green.

It was just this moment when Miss Jones made her mistake. 'Now, you listen to me, Mrs Duncan,' she said, and she stuck out her finger and shook it in George's mother's face. 'Just because your boy doesn't eat paste doesn't mean he's gifted.'

George's mother's eyes never left the end of the dark brown finger wagging so close to her nose, following it as it bobbed up and down in righteous instruction, invading George's mother's space in a way that even George found obscurely upsetting, and just as George's father said, 'Now, you listen here,' in his authoritative, construction foreman voice-of-doom, George's mother leaned forward and bit the end of Miss Jones's finger, snapping it hard between her teeth and hanging on for a surprising second or two before all the screaming started.

Now this story, when George told it, always made him nervous in that it gave slightly the wrong impression of his mother. Biting an obnoxious teacher's finger – though not drawing blood and not quite so painfully that Miss Jones couldn't be talked out of an assault charge by a principal who acted for all the world as if this wasn't the first biting-of-Miss-Jones incident to come across his desk – could easily be read as a heroic action. His mother was the star of this story, and why shouldn't she be? As family anecdotes went, it was a corker, retold with gales of laughter and at frequent request.

'And I thought,' his mother would say, blushing with horror and delight that every eye in the room was on her, 'someone's gonna bite that finger one of these days. So why not today?'

But George knew, really knew in his heart, that the biting wasn't the act of someone mastering a

situation and bringing it to a close with the perfect outrageous resolution. His mother had *actually* bitten Miss Jones because of a certain detachment from reality, a certain panicky falling-away from things. She was anxious to the point of brittle, like a champagne flute – when, age nineteen, George finally saw his first champagne flute – that needed wrapping and packing away. His father performed this function, taking care of every emergency, handling every possible crisis. His love of his wife – and George was quite certain that he loved her – took the form of ongoing protection that perhaps, in the end, did her more harm than good.

When Miss Jones wagged the finger, George was pretty sure his mother hadn't felt insulted, she'd felt *attacked*, as if the world was tipping beneath her, and she'd bitten Miss Jones not as an act of triumphant assertion, but because she was trying to *hold on*. By her literal teeth. Life was unravelling under the threat of a single, terrible finger, looming as large as a coming apocalypse from which there would be no mercy, no forgiveness, just everlasting despair. Who wouldn't lash out in the face of such a terrible affront?

That his mother had gotten it accidentally exactly right, well, that seemed to be just one of those things, and a part of him was pleased for her that, for once, she had. But the story that was told and the story *underneath* that story were different things, and perhaps irreconcilable.

The immediate result, anyway, was that George was airlifted out of Miss Jones's third grade class Henry Bozeman Elementary School and sent to the O Come O Come Emmanuel & Ransom Captive Israel Self-Directed Learning and Holiness Academy, which despite having 'Israel' in its name was wholly staffed by people who might never have actually met anyone Jewish in their entire lives. (Growing up in Tacoma, George knew any number of other evangelicals, plus a packet of Mormons, a few Catholics, and even practising Buddhists from the largest integrated Asian community in the country. Jewish people, not so much. He would only actually meet two Jewish people in his life before going to college in New York. Where he met several more.)

O Come O Come – loosely affiliated with his parents' church, if perhaps only by good intentions – had a student body of a mere forty-eight pupils, kindergarten through twelfth grade, with learning done from self-read (and often self-marked) booklets, plus a half-day on Wednesday when the O Come O Come visiting minister held a church service in lieu of afternoon classes. This involved songs and sermons and a once-weekly change from the school uniform of yellow shirt with green tie and trousers to *white* shirt with green tie and trousers.

George was eight, and at eight the definition of normal is whatever is happening in front of you. He glossed over the differences from public school – starting with the comprehensively pale ethnicity of his new classmates – and got on with it, doing his usual ingratiating with the two elderly bachelorettes who ran the school: Miss Kelly with her red hair pulled back so tight she looked permanently surprised and Miss Aldershot with her kindly eyes, hairy chin and vicious way with a ruler.

George enjoyed himself there, on the whole, though his standards weren't perhaps wildly high. He wasn't a fan of the school-wide dodgeball, which was about all the elderly bachelorettes could come up with by way of physical education, aside from the occasional round of jumping jacks and running in place (all done for brief, sweaty spates without ever involving the removal of a tie), but he liked their library, though even 'darn' and 'gosh' had been blacked out of the school's dog-eared copy of *The Incredible Journey*.

The boy closest to him in age there was Roy, an old-fashioned name even then, if not in quite the same way as 'George'. Roy was a year older, a year taller, a year wiser, all of which was proved by the fact that he had a bike.

'It's from the War,' he'd said to George when they first met. 'My dad brought it back. He stole it from the Japs after we bombed them.'

This was the seventies and Roy's dad was undoubtedly not much more than an infant during

Nagasaki, but George swallowed every word like God's Own Truth.

'Wow,' he said.

'That's why it's so heavy,' Roy said, tipping it up with some effort in his nine-year-old hands. 'To survive the grenade attacks when you ride behind enemy lines.'

'Wow.'

'When I get older, I'm riding it all the way to Vietnam and throw grenades at the Japs.'

'Can I try it?'

'No.'

The school was on 35th Street. Roy lived on 56th and George lived on 60th in a house no one in the family would remember fondly. Usually his mother, who didn't work, would pick him up at school and drive him home, but occasionally, when she was busy, he'd walk, going part of the way with Roy who'd push the bike between them, its green metal bulk as steadfast and calm as a cow.

On this particular day, a spring one, the sun held court in the sky, with a few supplicant clouds criss-crossed by the vapour trails of jets from the nearby Air Force Base. Just the kind of lovely day when God liked to test you, Miss Kelly often said.

'So then you find out the whole ship is a gun, right?' George was saying, excitedly. 'The *whole* ship! And it shoots this huge blast of light out the end and BOOM! They destroy the Gamilon home world!'

Roy's family didn't have a television because TV was where the Devil did his best recruiting (George had decided not to mention this problem to his own parents, though in retrospect it seemed unlikely they would have agreed, given the porn), so George would often fill their walk home with what Roy was missing.

'Except it's not a whole planet?' Roy asked.

'No!' George shouted with amazement. 'That's the most incredible thing ever! It's *half* a planet and it's floating in space and there are cities on the top half and it's all rocky and round on the bottom. Except it isn't any more, because the Starblazers blew it up.'

'Sweet,' Roy said, with due respect.

'No kidding, it's sweet,' George agreed seriously.

They reached 53rd, the busiest street between O Come O Come and their respective homes. They walked past the supermarket on the corner, its parking lot filled with slightly sluttier versions of their own mothers, along with kids smaller than Roy or George who tended to stare at their uniforms. Across the street was a gas station, filled with much the same.

Roy and George waited at the crosswalk for the light to change.

'Except I think some Gamilons escaped or something,' George said, 'because no one seemed very happy. And there was also a lot of shouting and stuff I didn't understand.' He smiled again. 'But the whole ship was a gun all along!'

The light turned green, and the 'Walk' signal came on. They entered the crossing, Roy pushing his bike along, George caught up in the unfathomable mysteries of Japanese animation.

'I'm going to turn this bike into a gun,' Roy said. 'I'll take it to Vietnam when I turn sixteen.'

George said, 'That'd be.'

And the car hit them both.

When George told this part of the story, he invariably found himself saying 'This actually happened' and 'I'm not making this up' because it seemed too cruel that the car that had run the red light and knocked into Roy and the bike and him should have been driven by an eighty-three-year-old lady who could barely see over the steering wheel.

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