

THE SPIRIT BIRD

THE TURBOPROP KING AIR DESCENDS from the clouds and cants low over the sea, around the snowy block of Sevuokuk Mountain—the sacred place—and there’s the town of Gambell: lines of shacks strung out on a stark gravel bar, with the lake behind, still frozen at the end of May. Some of the shacks have red roofs, some blue, some shiny tin, and each house has a four-wheeler beside it. There are no trees. I see only one large building, the aluminum-sided school at the edge of town toward the mountain, but otherwise, no brick post office, no granite courthouse, no white-painted town hall—no center. The plane circles the point, where offshore ice stretches away into the clouds forty miles to Siberia, and makes for the runway between the ocean’s shoreline and the frozen lake. It’s mid-afternoon, but time doesn’t matter here because, this far north, it’s daylight forever.

On the ground, the eight of us birders, strangers to one another except for a mother and her college-aged son, are ferried by ATV to the hotel, such as it is, a modular structure with ten rooms along one hallway, a kitchen in the lobby, and a room for eating and watching television. I’m in number five with Janet Moreland, a forty-year-old widow from Minneapolis, and I unpack my sweat clothes, heavy socks,

slippers — I didn't bring makeup or my hair dryer — and then we assemble in the TV room and are reminded of the parameters of our visit. We have five-day permits to be on the road around the lake and in the boneyards and along the shore to the northwest point. If we want to search the tundra or the mountain — if we want to look for the Eurasian Dotterel — we'll need a native guide. No alcohol is allowed. No noise in the hotel after eleven p.m. We will monitor channel 6.1 on our two-way radios. As part of the package, our group has rented five ATVs, and whether or not we stay with our guides, Heather and Larry, or go off on our own is up to us, but we should pace ourselves. The days of long light can be wearying. Get some sleep. Most birds are not one-minute wonders; they stay a day or two.

Within an hour we're dressed in parkas and wind pants and are out with the guides in the Near Boneyard searching for thrushes blown off course from Asia, sandpipers and plovers that breed in the far north, pipits, Bluethroats, buntings, not one of which my friends in New Hampshire would ever have heard of. The boneyard is a dug-up expanse of what looks like a battlefield — holes ten feet deep, some with water or ice in the bottom, bones strewn everywhere. In decades and centuries past, the Yupiks buried the corpses of seals and walrus near the town. In the last fifty years, as walrus diminished and ivory carving became sought after, the walrus tusks had a new value, and the digging began. Birds hunker down in these holes out of the wind.

We walk through stealthily, in as much of a line as we can, Janet Moreland on my left, and the college kid, Eric, on my right. Heather calls out redpolls, Lapland Longspurs, Snow Buntings — all common birds here. Janet is a serious lister

and eager for a Brambling or Eye-browed Thrush. She has on a black parka with a hood and holds her Zeiss binoculars with both hands. I imagine her a store manager, setting up quotas for the sales force, or maybe an accountant. The boy, too, has all the gear—blue knit cap pulled low, gloves, red windbreaker, Swarovski glasses—but he’s not looking as the rest of us are. He pauses and stares out beyond the shacks to the beach, where, following his gaze, I see seal meat drying on racks and the skeleton of a whale. On his face is an expression of wonder, as if he were fleshing the bones of the whale and seeing it alive.

“You’re not a birder?” I ask him.

“My mother made me come,” he says.

“From?”

“Houston.”

“Good birding territory.”

“I know a little,” he says. “I’ve done High Island and Big Bend and the Lower Valley. My mother takes me to corroborate what she sees.”

“But you’re not a lister?”

“I know everyone else is. How many do you have?”

“Seven hundred and sixteen in North America. What would you be doing otherwise, I mean, at home?”

“Screwing around.”

“Literally or figuratively?”

He smiles, as if surprised by the intrusive familiarity of the question from someone my age. “What would *you* be doing?” he asks.

“I’m a professor from New Hampshire,” I say. “I’d be reading.”

He looks past the shacks again. “How do they kill the whales?” he asks. “Do they use rifles or spears?”

“They ride ATVs and snowmobiles,” I say. “I suppose they use rifles.”

He ponders this. His face bears into the wind, and longish hair spills from beneath his knit cap. His eyes are brown, his chin bristly. He reminds me of my own son I never had, an invisible son, one I imagine.

Then a Bluethroat appears in a hole in front of us. It hops to the edge and struts among the bones—smaller than a robin, rusty tail. “Bluethroat,” Janet calls out, and the line of birders breaks and runs toward the bird.

The next morning the weather is foggy, with a cold wind from the east. For passerine vagrants, we want a west wind, but there are still migrating seabirds. Heather and Larry set up scopes on the gravel spit at the northwest point of the island, where the ice pack is a few hundred feet offshore. We collect shreds of cardboard boxes, pieces of plywood, even a smashed Clorox bottle to sit on because an inch under the gravel is solid ice. Hundreds of thousands of auklets and murrets fly past, scores of puffins, loons, and eiders. Kittiwakes and gulls weave sinuous lines higher in the air. Now and then someone calls out “Emperor Goose” or “Arctic Loon,” and we all find the bird and follow it with our binoculars.

Eric’s mother is small and round-looking in her layers of clothes and has on a knit cap like his. Over the course of a half hour, she circles closer to me, then paces nearby. Finally she says, “You’re the one Eric likes.”

I’m watching a string of Horned Puffins pass by and lower the glasses. “Are you talking to me?”

“You’re Lauren from New Hampshire. The professor. Eric has an awareness of people.”

"He seems like a good kid," I say.

"I'm Eve Harrison," she says. "Eric's not so good as you imagine. I wanted to get him away from Houston for a while."

I train my binoculars out to the shelf ice where gulls are loafing. "He says he's not much of a birder."

"Oh, he's good. He knows more than I do. But if I'd let him stay home, I wasn't sure what he'd do."

She breaks off and turns away. Again I lower my glasses.

"I wish you'd talk to him," Eve says.

"About what?"

"About whatever. He lost his father recently—the man lived in California, we were divorced, a real bastard, but Eric doesn't know that."

"I'm sure you haven't told him."

"Please," she says. "Eric needs friends."

I look around the group. "Where is he?" I ask.

"I don't know," Eve says. "He's a loner. When I woke up this morning, he was gone."

Eric doesn't show up at the hotel for lunch, and all afternoon as I trudge with the group though the Far Boneyard at the foot of the mountain I wonder where he is. There's nowhere to go except along the coast or around the frozen lake. I imagine him in a Yupik shack talking to children, tutoring, maybe—there's something childlike about him. Or taking drugs. That's possible, too. Is that what Eve meant when she said he wasn't as good as he seemed?

Snowmelt runs off the slope of the mountain and alongside the boneyard. Where there's no snow, grass grows among the rocks. We find a Northern Wheatear and a Yellow Wagtail, though we've already seen these birds on an

excursion around Nome. The wind is chilling and incessant, and several of the group have gone back to the hotel, though not Janet, not Eve. They doggedly follow the guides, checking each hole in the ground, scanning the hillside, looking into the sky.

Why am I the one he claims as a friend? I'm no one he knows. I've been a comp lit professor at UNH for fifteen years, never married and never needed to be. From early on I had an intellectual bent. I read; I considered alternatives; I stayed aloof. Growing up, I engaged the nearby terrain—Maine, Plum Island and Newburyport, the White Mountains—and in doing so found an affinity for birds. As I learned more, I was led farther afield to the arid mountains of southeast Arizona, the humid river bottoms of Texas, the Florida Keys, even the islands off California. Birding drew me to the wider world, though my friends claimed the opposite—it made me sacrifice myself to a quest with no meaning. What was to be gained by counting species? What does seeing a bird mean? When the spirit is always on the move, how can it settle?

Heather flushes a Brambling from one of the holes, though none of us has a good look at it before it darts into another bone pit. As we pursue it, I see Eric in his red windbreaker coming up the road from the far end of the lake. I put my binoculars on him, and in that crisp circle he is defined by fog, shrouded in grainy imperfection. He looks up at the mountain with the same expression of wonder I saw earlier, as if he's seeing through whatever he's looking at. He doesn't look at us.

I expect to see Eric at dinner, but he isn't there. I eat with Larry, who teaches ornithology at UCLA, and two men from Ohio who've never been to Alaska. From walking

and being in the wind, we're all hungry for the chicken and mashed potatoes.

In the middle of the meal Larry leaves for a phone call, and Eve sits down. "I saw him walking back from the lake," I tell her. "Is he in your room now?"

"He brought cheese and crackers and chocolate bars," Eve says. "If he doesn't eat with us, it's his decision. I gave up telling him what to do a long time ago."

"You made him come on this trip."

"Is that what he told you?"

"He said you wanted him to see the birds, as a witness."

Eve laughs. "People like to be believed," she says, "but my list is my list. A witness doesn't change what I see."

Larry returns, and Eve gets up. "Talk to him," she says.

Eve sits in front of the TV. She's right—it's what you see yourself that matters. When I finish eating, I find a Ziploc bag and pack Eric chicken and potatoes and niblet corn, but when I knock on the door to their room, there's no answer.

The whale skeletons on the beach are draped with rotting flesh. Dilapidated scaffolding holds the whale carcasses, and at the same time falls down around the bones. It's almost eleven o'clock at night, and though the sun is under clouds, it's still light out. I'm walking to escape my room, or, really, Janet, who talks nonstop about birds. Partly, though, it's to feel the place at this hour. In New Hampshire it would be dark, people in bed on a Wednesday night, but here several young girls loiter at the airport runway, some riding bicycles on the only pavement. Two boys race a rattletrap ATV across the humps of pebbles on the beach and pass me without waving. The wind hides the sound of the motor, and then there's nothing but the swirling clouds low over the ice. There's an

urgency to things here—people who hunt seals and whales and pick greens from the wild must know in their blood and bones where they are on the planet.

I never did. As a teenager and through college I felt on the outside of things. I had friends, of course, men and women both, lovers, but I didn't know what to do with them, whether to embrace them or push them away. Gina and Ray—two random people—Gina, the year after college when I'd gone to Guatemala to build houses for the poor, and Ray, a welder I met during graduate school. Gina was five feet six, my height exactly, and dark-haired, from Rochester. We shared a room with two beds in a cinder-block building, but after a few days, even in the heat, we slept in one. When our time in Guatemala was nearing its end, Gina wanted to know what was next for us, what we'd do together when we got back to the States. I was going to graduate school. Where, she wanted to know. Should she move? For me such a question had no answer. I didn't want her to go home to Rochester, but I didn't want her to live with me, either.

It was the same with Ray. He had a welding shop next to the repair place I took my Camry, and he drank coffee with his mechanic friends. We had dinner at a café and, a week later, slept together. He was a kind, gentle man with a good sense of humor. He enjoyed his work and talking with his friends. For money he welded car parts, but his real calling was making sculptures from discarded pieces of metal. I went to his duplex on Fridays and left at eleven. Then it was Friday and Sunday and Wednesday. He said I might as well live with him—why did I want to leave? I told him I had reading to do. "Reading?" he said. Two weeks later we broke up. Ray wasn't getting enough from me. He said, "You're not with me." I said, "I'm not against you." He said, "You know what I mean."

So it went. I finished my doctorate, got a job and did research, and absorbed myself in birds.

Eric is alone at the northwest point. His binoculars are trained on the ice, and even though it takes ten minutes' walking on the loose pebbles to reach him, he never alters his attention. When I'm close enough, I follow where I think he's looking, and a whale rises from the sea, bends its ridged back, and dives again.

Finally he lowers his glasses and waves at me. "Did you see it?" he asks.

"Your mother's been worried," I say.

"The nubbly back? It was a bowhead." He looks back into the mist where the whale has disappeared.

A moment passes, and I come up next to him.

"I saw the dead," he says.

I turn toward the ice and raise my binoculars, not knowing what to say. The ice is jagged white, crevassed, stretching out into the mist.

"The ground is frozen, so they put them in coffins and set them in the rocks."

I lower my glasses again. "You saw them?"

"The weather breaks the coffins apart, and the bones disperse. . . ." He turns to me. "I know we aren't supposed to go up there, but at the end of the lake the slough was frozen, and there were no birds, so I climbed to the saddle."

"You went up on the mountain?"

"I was looking for the dotterel," he says. "The higher I climbed, the colder it got."

"Did you see it?"

"What can you see in the clouds?" he asks. He peers through his glasses toward the moving water between us and

the ice. "Dovekie," he says. "King Eider. And look there—a Ross's Gull."

I gauge the angle and lift my glasses. Among the spikes of ice are groups of kittiwakes and larger gulls and then one small one with a pinkish chest and a thin black collar—Ross's Gull. I radio Heather and Larry and report what Eric has found.

One spring semester I had a student in my seminar in South American literature—a brilliant woman from North Carolina named Kellie. She had come to the university, she said, to be far away from the South and from the life of women there. She was coffee—that's how I thought of her—almost six feet tall, strong, dark-skinned, a smell around her, not sweet, not bitter. She had short, curly hair that looked unkempt—appearance didn't matter to her. She was fascinated by literatures that offered ideas of cooperation instead of avarice, sensitivity instead of violence, the search for meaning and joy instead of acquisition and material possessions. "Like Borges," she said in my office one afternoon. "He was a celebrity who lived a modest life in an apartment."

"He had his imagination," I said. "He lived in other worlds besides Buenos Aires."

"That's what I mean," Kellie said. "Why don't we offer our children this opportunity?"

At the end of the term, Kellie went to Ecuador to learn Spanish so she might have a new perspective on her studies. I stored her books and clothes for her—a few boxes stashed in the attic—and one evening in September she reappeared. She was not much changed, except her hair was longer and prettier. She wore shorts and a white shirt with stitched colors.

At dusk, we sat on my terrace at the edge of the marsh in

Stratham, drinking wine and watching the egrets and gulls and crows fly to roost. "I'm moving to Arizona," she said. "It's because of you."

"Me? I haven't done anything."

"You're *here*," she said. "You're alive. I've thought of you so often because you inspired me to risk."

She explained why she wanted to go to the desert—to write she had to isolate herself—and I found myself agreeing with her desire to search on her own for what she needed. She might not find answers, but often questions were better than answers.

It was dark when we finished the bottle of wine. We went inside, and Kellie embraced me, and we went upstairs and undressed. For a few minutes, an hour, maybe, the burden of everyday life was lifted from me, and I felt the moment when all was all. We slept holding each other.

After midnight, with the moon on the bed, Kellie woke me. "We should agree to have a child," she said. "A son, like Borges."

"I want to," I said.

And from this, in my mind, my son was born.

On the fourth day there's a north wind, and it turns colder. The fog isn't so thick—more wind-blown mist than heavy clouds, but, with the humidity, the wind chill is debilitating. The guides lead us through the boneyards for what seems the hundredth time, and there are no new birds. Even redpolls and longspurs are scarce. Heather proposes to take up the sea watch again, but it's so bitter cold I opt to go back to the hotel. Even Janet's riding with me on the ATV doesn't dissuade me, and I steer across the gravel bar, fighting the wind, listening to her talk about, of all things, looking for

the dotterel. It's a rare breeder in northwest Alaska, a little smaller than a Killdeer, but the same plover shape. It has a noticeable white eye stripe and a white band above a chestnut belly. Because its habitat is so remote, even Heather and Larry have given up looking for it. "If there's a warmer day," Janet says, "I'm getting a permit."

I keep quiet, and we ride past the school and across the pebble track worn through the middle of town. At the hotel I downshift and let the engine die just as Eric is coming outside.

"Your mother's going to the sea watch," Janet tells him. "She says you're welcome to join her."

"Okay," he says. "Thanks."

Janet and I get off the ATV, and she goes inside.

There's an awkward moment. Eric looks at the ground, and I stare off toward Sevuokuk Mountain. "I saw you coming," he says. "I waited to come outside." He pauses. "There's nothing new at the sea watch."

"You never know what will pass by. Maybe a Bean Goose."

"I'm not going."

"I didn't think you were."

"Are you too cold to come with me?"

"Yes," I say, "but I'll get warm another time."

He raises his eyes, and I know where he means to take me. He gets on the ATV, and I climb up behind and he starts the engine. I hold my binoculars to the side and lean into his back.

We drive through town on loose stones, curve past the school, and climb the hill toward the spring where the town gets its water. There we turn right onto the muddy track above the lake. The swirling mist comes hard, and I crouch

behind Eric's shoulder. The motor is too loud for talk. Even though I roll my hands into fists, my fingers are frozen inside my heavy gloves.

It takes twenty minutes to negotiate the two miles to the slough at the end of the lake, and then we bear left up the hill. The ATV coughs, bounces through rivulets of snowmelt, roars, and lurches forward. The road turns to rocks and ruts with a stream coming through. I hold tightly around Eric's middle.

Higher up, surprisingly the mist dissipates—we get above it—and we have a view of the high country and the wider island. Rocks and snow and green tundra are interspersed, and water is running everywhere. At the top of the ridge, we stop, and Eric turns off the engine.

The sound of water and wind, ceaseless motion. Mist rises from below, but where we are the sun throws down its luminous rays. Far off across the strait the white icy mountains of Siberia shoot up above the clouds. We get off the ATV, and without saying anything, Eric starts hiking up the ridgeline.

I follow twenty yards behind across the snowfields and tundra. Lichened rocks poke out. Every so often my attention is drawn by a Snow Bunting's black-and-white wings or the leap and song of a longspur. I wish the sun were warm.

After several minutes, Eric stops, and when I catch up, he says, "This is where I saw the dotterel."

"Here?"

"I didn't tell you because you'd tell others. They'd all be up here."

"We all want to see it."

"Think of the bird," Eric says.

I scan the tundra but see no dotterel. Eric climbs high-

er, as if oblivious to the cold and to whether or not I find the bird. He scrambles over larger boulders at the base of the mountain, disappears, reappears higher up. The farther away Eric gets, the colder I am. I call to him, but the wind carries my voice away.

Why has he brought me with him here, a woman twice his age? Or is it I who's brought him, a boy half as old? Eric has disappeared again into the rocks, and I don't know where, and even as I sweat in my parka, I can't feel my fingers or toes. I don't want to go on, but I don't want to go back.

I climb higher and don't go far into the rocks before I see the coffins. They're made of old wood, weathered now, some large, some small—three or four small ones without markings. Five. One is split apart so the black interior opens to the light.

I hear splintering, breaking, and I find Eric behind a boulder tearing pieces of wood apart, separating boards nailed poorly together. He's stacking them in the small clearing. For a moment I think he's going to build a fire, but the wood is wet and rotten and wouldn't burn. He's not piling it, but throwing it down randomly, throwing it away.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He stops and looks at me. His eyes are hard and sharp, not really seeing me. "I saw the spirit bird," he says.

"The dotterel?"

He points at the splintered coffin. "It came from in here."

In the coffin a man or a woman, who is dried flesh, lies facing upward, palms up, too. The clothes—traces of red, brown, blue—have been eroded away.

"It's a he," Eric says. "Structure of the hips, the large bones. And there's a knife. I thought it had to be a man from the size of the coffin."

There's a long moment when he looks at me, and his face is twisted in such anguish I can't breathe.

"What now?" I whisper finally.

He doesn't answer but shakes his head, and in those moments, I hear the wind and water and feel the sun on my face. I understand why I'm here, what Eric needs, what every person needs in this life. Eric kneels down beside the bones and takes off his gloves and touches the fragile hand, the man's shoulder, the withered face. He rests his hand lightly on the desiccated lips, and the spirit bird rises from Eric's hands. I see it, too — misty, vaporous, insubstantial — and when he stands from the bones all I can do is close the few steps between us and put my arms around him.