

The Passage Bird

When Shiri was growing up, her family lived so close to the airport that the bones of the house shivered when planes passed overhead. From her bedroom window, she saw the Fraser River; from the living room, the runways. She could tell time by rumbles in the walls.

The year was 1971, Shiri's father worked as an airline mechanic for Boeing, and they lived in one of the small, identical houses built for company employees. Two parents, two children: a family constructed to fit the house. Like every other dwelling on that block, it had three bedrooms, one bathroom, an unfinished basement, and a front yard with a young cedar tree. Her parents appreciated the uniformity of the street. It confirmed that Canada was a new, safe, clean continent.

As a child in Germany, her father had seen an Allied pilot drop from a burning plane, graceful as a diver until the parachute failed to open. Hirsch was six years old, the same age as Shiri now, and he never forgot the sight of the pilot's body hitting the ground—a crunch of bones, limbs bent at unnatural angles. That's when Hirsch decided that the world needed competent mechanics and engineers, men who could fix problems, save lives. Now he came home each evening smelling of exhaust, his hands smeared with grease that could never be scrubbed clean. When he picked Shiri up, she buried her face in his overalls and smelled the sour odor of fumes, of flight. She'd never been on a plane, but when her father lifted her in his arms, she imagined taxiing down the runway and rising smoothly into the air.

"She's meant to fly," said the Hawk Man. "I can tell."

He too worked at the airport, flying his hawks and falcons on the runway to keep smaller birds away from the planes' engines and windows. And though her parents didn't observe Shabbat after moving to North America—they kept their heritage to themselves—the Hawk Man's Friday evening visits were a kind of ritual. His truck pulled up in front of the house, the engine cut out, and Shiri and her brother, Dann, ran to the window. *The Hawk Man! The Hawk Man!* they shouted as he strode, lean and confident, toward the house. He always had a bird with him, perched on his gloved hand. A leather hood covered its eyes.

"Good evening, Hirsch." The Hawk Man shook her father's hand. When sober, the two men were formal with each other. Standing on

the porch, their differences were clear. Hirsch could block a doorway with his chest, and there was a physicality to his commands. *Leave that alone*, he'd say and snatch the comic book from Dann's hands. *Get down from there*, and he'd wrap one of his thick arms around Shiri's waist, pull her from the branches of a tree. The Hawk Man—much younger than Hirsch—looked like he never told anyone what to do, and probably no one had ever bossed him either. He had an unkempt amber beard, sun-tanned skin, and two gold fillings, one in each eyetooth.

Unlikely friends, as Shiri's mother put it. Not that any of them, other than Dann, had many friends. They didn't quite fit in this town. Other families went to church, Shiri noticed; no one else's parents had accents; and other girls had straight hair that she envied, hair that hung prettily down their backs.

The two men spent Friday evenings on the porch, drinking the beer Shiri's father made in the basement and smoking cigarettes the Hawk Man rolled himself. Her father rested his hands on his hard stomach, and the Hawk Man propped one long leg on the railing and leaned back in his chair, his bird's talons wrapped around his wrist.

Shiri's mother brought them cheese and crackers and a bowl of pickles—Ruth didn't bother to cook dinner because she wouldn't allow the bird in the house. Shiri and Dann hovered in the doorway behind the screen, staring. Dann was two years older than her and braver, so he would talk to the men. "Can I have some beer?" he'd ask, and sometimes Hirsch would let his son taste the bitter, golden liquid.

Shiri kept quiet and watched the bird shift its weight, or pick at the Hawk Man's sleeve, or nip the hair at his temple. Every once in a while, he gave a gentle tug on the bird's beak. "How are you, love?" he whispered. Or, "Ready to go, my dear?"

The Hawk Man spoke directly to Shiri only once, when her father went into the house to use the washroom and her brother was sent to the basement to bring up more beer.

"Come on out here." He nodded toward the bird, a small brown thing with a sharp and curving beak. "She won't bite."

Shiri wasn't sure if she was more afraid of the bird or of him. Her brother knew things she didn't and had told her stories. He said the Hawk Man always wore that glove because it had magic powers. What kind of powers, she wanted to know, and her brother said the Hawk Man could bring dead birds back to life, and that he could turn himself into a bird of prey—a hawk, of course, or a falcon or an eagle—that would swallow you whole. "Can not," she said. "Can too," he replied.

“Sometimes people disappear,” Dann told her, “and everyone knows it’s ‘cause they went to the Hawk Man’s house.”

“She’s a sky hawk.” The Hawk Man unsnapped the leather hood and peeled it off to reveal the bird’s hard eyes. “Also known as a red-tailed hawk. But you can call her Rose.”

Shiri thought of the gold chain her mother wore with a delicate pendant in the shape of a rose—the only thing she’d managed to save from before the war. But there was nothing delicate about the hawk. Rose had a cream-colored belly, a curved beak, and yellow feet that were scaled like a snake.

“Don’t be scared,” said the Hawk Man.

Shiri stepped onto the porch, but the falcon turned with such a fierce, jealous glare that she looked down at her socked feet. When Shiri glanced up, the bird stared past her. Cold, superior.

“Don’t mind her,” said the Hawk Man. “She doesn’t mean it.”

“Where did you get her?”

He took one of Shiri’s hands and stretched out her arm like a wing. “I turn little girls like you into birds.” He smiled and showed his gold teeth, two tiny suns in his mouth. “Would you like that? Would you like to fly?”

She was about to say *yes* when her father gripped her arm and tugged her away. “That’s enough. Back inside.” He didn’t want his children near the birds, said they’d get their eyes plucked out.

“She’s just making friends,” said the Hawk Man. “They’re both daughters of the air.”

That’s when he said Shiri was meant to fly.

But her father opened a fresh bottle of beer and said that no child of his would ever get on a plane; it was too dangerous. “Too much can go wrong.” He took a swig. “And I should know.”

“What could go wrong?” said the Hawk Man, giving Shiri a wink.

Her father shook his head. “Everything.”

Everything did go wrong, though not in the ways her father predicted. Shiri and Dann didn’t break bones or lose an eye or get kidnapped by strangers. They grew, their changing heights recorded on a corner of the living-room wall, until Dann was so tall that their mother couldn’t reach to make a pencil-mark above his head. He could do fifty-six push-ups without stopping and was captain of the swim and debate teams. At school, when he bothered to talk to Shiri, he called her *Shitty*. But at home, he asked her to walk on his back to crack it, and he let her eat all the chocolate from the brick of Neapolitan ice cream. And even though

they were too old for it, sometimes he helped her climb the tree in the front yard, gripping her hand so she could reach the tallest branch.

Up there, they talked. He still knew things she didn't: he taught her the cosine rule, told her which boys to stay away from, and explained matter-of-factly that their parents had probably never been in love.

"Maybe they were," she said. "But a long time ago."

"Yeah. And they're friends at least." Dann picked up an insect from one of the tree's needles. "I'll pay you five bucks to eat this ladybug."

"No thanks."

Then he swallowed it himself, just to watch her face. "There." He coughed. "Not so bad."

He was like that sometimes, needing to prove something. Maybe that was why, on his sixteenth birthday, he got drunk and, on a dare, dove off the Moray Bridge. He fell into the Fraser and never came up.

Shiri was fourteen and had never been invited to join Dann and his friends, so she was asleep when it happened. But she could imagine the way he must have stood, brave and foolish in the cool air. She imagined that last breath he must have taken, filling his lungs. She imagined his friends cheering him on, whooping and laughing while they waited for him to surface. Then waiting longer, too long, their cheers dying out.

Then she decided to imagine that he hadn't drowned. She'd once seen a raven near the river, so she imagined that Dann had turned himself into one as he fell. That he hadn't hit the water but had soared away from it, invisible, as black as the sky.

His body was found two days later, bloated with river water.

He was so transformed that the funeral required a closed casket. They didn't sit *shiva*—who would visit them, asked Shiri's mother; they had no family outside the thin walls of this house. But they did sit at the kitchen table, watching the Fraser flow past. The house was quiet without Dann to slam doors, to whistle while he made a mustard-and-chicken sandwich, to tell his little sister that she smelled like dirt. The only sound was the thunder of engines overhead. Shiri's mother stood and closed the curtains so they wouldn't see the water. Now only the runways were visible from the house—smooth, clean stretches of concrete.

"There," she said. "That's better."

Ruth was a *survivor*—that was the word Shiri learned in school for people who'd lived through the Holocaust camps—and she understood that what was important was to live, to get through. She did not dwell.

Even in summer, she wore long sleeves to hide the numbers tattooed on her arm.

As a boy, Shiri's father had seen his parents carried off in a train to the camps while he hid in the neighbor's cellar. And when his son died, he did the same thing he'd done then: he went into hiding. He started sleeping in the basement, on the old, dusty couch with its protruding springs. Soon he refused to come up for meals, or to take a shower, or to go to work.

"Will he stay down there forever?" Shiri asked her mother.

"How can I know?" said Ruth, who seemed to have grown heavier overnight, her ankles thick with fluid and her skin sagging from the bones of her face.

Shiri watched the closed basement door. Her father was so quiet you'd never know he was down there.

At six years old, he'd spent weeks in the cramped, earthen room under his neighbor's house, playing with a faded deck of cards and reading any books they could spare by the light of one small, smudged window. He heard life above him—footsteps, muted speech—but saw no one and ate only what the neighbors brought him. *They were so good to me*, was all he ever said of it.

Shiri knew almost nothing about this time in his life, except for the stories he told, stories he used to invent for his children before bed. About a boy who could turn himself into a mouse and burrow into the earth. The mouse dug deeper and deeper until he found an underground river.

"Like the Fraser?" Dann asked, and Shiri used to imagine underground log booms and hauls of yellow sulfur.

Like the Fraser, her father nodded. Except the water flowed like tar, and the boats were steered by blind men, and the fish didn't have eyes.

Because Hirsch no longer went to work, Shiri's mother got a job in a clothing store called Eve's Fashion Shop. It was in the Richmond Square Mall and catered to women who worked as secretaries and receptionists, women who needed suits and blouses and fake pearl earrings.

Her mother worked until the store closed, so it was Shiri's job to cook dinner and care for her father. She made tuna sandwiches, rice with stewed tomatoes and ground beef, or soup from a can that formed a gluey skin as it cooled in the pot. She left some on the stove for her mother, then made up a tray and carried it down to the basement.

Her father kept the room dark. Once, her mother had flicked on the light and Shiri saw him, vulnerable and startled, blink into the bright-

ness. Shiri preferred that their interactions remain blind, so she stepped slowly down the dark stairs, the tray gripped tightly in her hands. The basement was cooler than the rest of the house and smelled of mildew and of her father's unclean body. She held her breath as she took one step, then another. She could see his outline on the couch. She breathed through her mouth. "Dinner's ready."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He sat up, breathing hard as he heaved his own weight. "You're so good to me."

He liked when she sat beside him on the couch and told him what she'd learned in school. She had trouble remembering anything—each school hour felt slow and blurry—so she invented stories the way he had once done at bedtime. She mentioned books she hadn't actually read; projects she hadn't actually completed; tests she hadn't actually passed. She didn't mind telling lies but hated that he believed them.

"That's wonderful." He patted her knee. "That's my girl."

Anything he left on the tray she carried up and ate herself. She was eating the rest of a cold grilled-cheese sandwich, dipping it in ketchup, when the Hawk Man showed up.

She hadn't seen him in years, not since she was a child—her father and the Hawk Man, she supposed, had simply drifted apart. But she recognized his truck when it pulled up in front of the house, then that lanky gait as he walked toward the door. His beard had thinned and darkened to a burnished gold. He didn't seem as tall as she remembered, but he still carried a bird on his arm.

"Shiri." He spoke to her through the screen door, as he'd always done. "Is Hirsch in?"

"He's downstairs." She stared at him. "He doesn't want to see anyone."

"I heard about your brother."

She pointed to the bird. "What's that?"

"I believe you've already met." He looked down as though he'd only just noticed the hawk's presence. "This is Rose."

Even with the leather hood covering her eyes, the bird looked proud and stubborn.

"If you took off her blindfold," said Shiri, "would she kill us?"

"She wouldn't bother." He laughed. "She finds us absurd at best."

"What does she eat?"

"Insects. Rodents. Small birds. Tears the wings off those and tosses them on the ground." He winked at Shiri. "They eat the way we'd eat, if we were allowed."

She smiled at that.

“You should come by sometime,” he said. “Meet the others. You’d like the owl. She looks like she’s made of snow.”

Shiri looked at his leather glove and remembered the stories Dann used to tell about the Hawk Man. “Maybe,” she said.

He shrugged as if to say *do what you want*, and she liked that. Since her brother died, people watched her too closely. Teachers at school gave her concerned looks, and other students stared like she was somehow changed. Even her best friend, Marla, acted shy around her.

“Give my best to your parents.” He didn’t pat her shoulder or try to tell her that time heals all or that Dann was in a better place now or that everything would be okay. He turned and strode back to his truck.

She next saw him when she sat on the curb outside Eve’s Fashion Shop. She’d trailed around touching the clothes—slippery polyester, stickily acrylic—until her mother slapped her wrist and said, “Hands off.”

“Can I have two bucks for a snack?” Shiri wanted to sit at one of the plastic tables in The Copper Grill and eat fries with gravy, looking at the tiles the way some people watch clouds.

“Do you think we’re made of money?” Her mother whispered so customers wouldn’t hear. “There’s food in the fridge at home.”

And now Shiri was on the sidewalk, staring at the pavement, nearly crying. She was bored and hungry and wished she had money to buy a hair dryer—she wanted soft, shaggy waves instead of the dark curls that frizzed around her face.

The Hawk Man pulled up and rolled down the window of his truck. He had a falcon perched on the back of the bench seat. “Hey, Shiri. You need a ride?”

She hated him for seeing her like this. “Why are you here?” She gestured to the mall, the parking lot. “I thought you liked nature.”

He pointed to three women on their smoke break outside Field’s department store. “You don’t call this nature?”

The women looked at him like he was a predator and at Shiri like she was something worse.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll take you home.”

She would have to sit right in front of the bird, its talons near her head. “Will that thing claw my eyes out?”

“You’re just like your dad, you know? ‘That thing’ has a name.”

“Rose,” said Shiri. “I don’t like her.”

“I’m sure she can live with that.”

Shiri lifted her bike into the bed of his truck, then climbed into the cab. The vinyl bench was warmed by a few rays of winter sun; the seat

felt soft and sticky and intimate under her thighs. It struck her that no one knew she'd gotten into this truck, that she could disappear.

"You said I'd like the owl," she said. "Maybe I want to see it."

"Maybe you do? Or you do?"

She turned to look at him, his sun-beaten face and the glint of gold in his mouth. He had mud splattered up the legs of his pants and there seemed to be dirt—later, she would learn it was blood—under his nails.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

He lived in a place he'd built himself, on a soggy property near a patch of trees. It was more cottage than house, with wood beams and a simple porch. That's where he left her, standing on the porch while he went inside to tidy up.

"It doesn't matter." She'd never made a man nervous before. "I don't care if it's not clean."

"You might care," he said, "if you saw the place."

He disappeared into the house and she could hear him walking on what must have been a wooden floor. She didn't feel like waiting.

"You're not as shy as you used to be," he said when she stepped inside.

The house was as dim as a basement, the walls and floor bare of paint or varnish. She was in the kitchen now and it had a table, two chairs, a stove, a fridge, and a stand-up freezer. Rosemary and mint were drying on the counter, laid out on sheets of newspaper.

Dead birds were mounted on every wall. Robins, starlings, falcons, and other kinds she didn't recognize. They stared, dead-eyed and caught, forever in mid-flight. And on the table there was a taxidermy in progress: the feathered skin of a headless bird, its flesh scooped out, wire jutting from its neck. Beside it were a knife, a needle and thread, cotton balls, antiseptic. A chipped jar full of glass eyes.

He followed her gaze. "A grouse. Found him on the road. If I'd known you were coming—" He pushed the knife and wire cutters to one side of the table.

So her brother had been right: the Hawk Man could bring dead birds back to life.

She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorjamb, tried to adopt the tough, indifferent stance she and her friend Marla perfected in front of mirrors. "Where's the owl?"

"The birds are outside. Their quarters are much more comfortable than mine."

He brought her to the aviaries behind the house, large wire-mesh cages. Inside were branches for perches and plastic buckets filled with

water for baths. He first introduced her to the vultures, Hansel and Gretel. Hunched together on the same branch, they looked like old men in overcoats, but the Hawk Man said they were, in fact, both female. Their heads were covered in rough, red skin that looked like a bright scab.

“Wonderful creatures,” he said. “I thought I’d become a better man if I owned vultures. Reminders of mortality and all that.” He carried a shoulder bag full of raw meat and took a chunk out, opened the cage, and fed them from his gloved hand. “What’s bad for us is manna for them. They can digest arsenic. It’s almost enough to make you believe in God. Do you believe in God?”

“I don’t know.”

“Good answer. It’s the only truthful one.”

“Do you?”

“Almost.” He squinted and leaned against the wire mesh of the cage. “I often wonder, a god in man’s image? Why would God want to be like us when He could be a turkey vulture?”

“Are you kidding?”

“If you could soar through the air or crawl around like a grub on the ground, which would you choose?”

“I guess—”

“Exactly. You would fly. Who wouldn’t?”

Rose was in the next cage, on the ground in a patch of sun, her wings spread.

“She likes to sunbathe. Belongs in Malibu.” He squatted down so he was eye level with the hawk. “Isn’t that right, love?”

She made a growling, coughing noise, rolled her eyes toward the back of her head, then regurgitated what looked like a large wet pebble.

“She has no manners,” said the Hawk Man. Then he picked up the soft pellet and crushed it between his finger and thumb. Inside was part of a skeleton, a small backbone. “This used to be a bat,” he said.

Next he showed Shiri the noisy dovecote, where he had five mourning doves. Last week there had been six, he said, but doves were less peaceable than their reputation suggested, and yesterday he found Victoria pecked to death in a corner. The doves’ coos sounded like laments, and a fine gray powder from their feathers silted the air.

Lastly, he showed her the owl, putting on his glove and opening the cage. “A barn owl. Or a heart owl, because of the shape of her face.”

He held out his arm and the owl stepped onto his wrist. He clipped leather straps—he called them jesses—onto her legs, then tied a thin leash to his glove’s metal loop.

“This is Eugenie.”

The owl turned her flat, open face toward Shiri.

“You can touch her if you want. Here—” He took her hand and placed it on the soft tips of the owl’s feathers. Her wing felt like a fraying hem of silk.

“No oils on the feathers. Helps her fly more quietly.” The Hawk Man untied the leash. “Listen.”

Then the owl flew from his arm, edging into the stand of trees, and Shiri heard exactly nothing.

When he drove her home, he didn’t bring any of the birds. They were alone in the truck, and Shiri searched for something to say, more questions to ask. “Is Rose your favorite? It’s like you’re married or something.”

“We’ve known each other the longest. We’re used to each other.” He was quiet for a moment, and Shiri listened to the rattle of the truck’s engine. “I had a goshawk once,” he said. “A passage bird. She was probably my favorite. She was terrifying.”

“Passage?”

“From the wild. I was in love with her. Helen. I could admire her all day.” He turned onto the Sea Island Bridge. “She had gold eyes. And she was totally indifferent to me. ‘Musée des Beaux Arts.’ The Auden poem—do you know it?”

Shiri shook her head.

“You’d like it. A boy falls out of the sky but no one pays attention. *The white legs disappearing into the green water*. We need that sort of reminder. Of how unimportant we are. Helen was my reminder.”

“How did you get her?”

“Same way I met you. By chance. By luck.”

“What happened to her?”

“You ask a lot of questions. Shows you’re clever.” He had one hand on the wheel, the other dangling out the window. “She might still be around somewhere. Every time I see a hawk overhead, I wonder if it’s her.”

“She escaped?” That pleased Shiri.

“I released her. Fed her and set her free.”

They pulled up in front of Shiri’s house, and she felt as if she were in two places at once. She was here, in the truck, fourteen years old. And she was still six, inside the house with her brother, their hands pressed to the window. *The Hawk Man! The Hawk Man!*

She turned to face him. “You just let her go?”

“She was done with me, that’s all.”

“She didn’t like you?”

“I’m not sure any of them like me. I’m not sure that’s how their minds work. The best you can hope for is that they tolerate you and get used to you. It’s called imprinting.”

“They don’t love you?”

“Love is something humans impose on them.” He shrugged. “You never really own birds. Just get to be their companion for a while.”

“That’s dumb.” Shiri crossed her arms. “I would have kept her.”

He laughed, showing his gold teeth. “You’re clever and you’re honest,” he said. “But who knows?” He reached past Shiri to open the passenger door, his arm brushing against hers. “Maybe she’ll come back to me.”

The next week, Shiri made pasta covered in a can of mushroom soup and egg-salad sandwiches. She fed her father and herself and left the rest on the stove for when her mother got in. She couldn’t focus on her schoolwork and didn’t feel like going to Marla’s. Everything they used to do—choreographing dances to David Cassidy or smoking filched cigarettes in the basement—seemed uninteresting. But she couldn’t stay in this too-quiet house.

She thought of going to see her mother at the store but knew she’d just be in the way. Eve’s Fashion Shop was her mother’s first job, unless you counted doing labor at Ravensbrück, and Ruth treated the work like it was her key to life. Maybe it was the racks of skirts and blouses, organized by color and size, or the mirrors wiped spotless—the clean predictability of retail. Ruth worked split shifts and overtime and never complained about being on her feet all day. Tough bones, a strong heart—those had helped her to survive before, and they would get the family through now.

So Shiri rode her bike until it got dark, even in the rain. Raced as fast as she could, then raised her feet off the pedals and soared down hills, wind sweeping her hair from her face.

She ended up at the Hawk Man’s house. It was dusk, and she could tell he was home by the light through the window and smoke from the chimney—his rooms were heated by an old potbellied stove he’d found at a garage sale.

She rested her bike on the grass and heard the plaints of the doves, the owl’s haunted and hollowed-out voice. She stepped onto the porch, and the Hawk Man opened the door before she knocked. “Shiri. This is a surprise,” he said, though he didn’t seem surprised.

He wasn't wearing a shirt. His skin was tanned and hair grew over his chest and down his stomach, toward his belt.

"Are you hungry?" He gestured for her to come in. "I'm just about to eat."

There was a good smell coming from inside, and she saw a pot bubbling on his gas stove. Lentil soup. The Hawk Man, she learned over dinner, was a vegetarian. "Well," he corrected, "I only eat the meat my birds catch." He drank his soup from a metal cup. "So sometimes I literally eat crow."

She looked at him and blinked. "You're insane."

"You aren't the first woman to point that out."

After dinner, he worked on the grouse. He told her that he'd used a knife to scrape the innards out, then sprinkled the skin with a mixture of borax and cornstarch to dry it. Now he wired the wings so they stayed open as if in flight.

"Made of the same stuff as human hair." He held one bent feather to show her. The grouse had probably run into a car's windshield, he said. Some of its feathers needed repair.

"Have you ever been on a plane?" Her mind was drifting. "I'd like to go somewhere. To Europe, maybe."

He seemed not to hear her—she would get used to the way his focus was always to the side of her, on the birds. One of his hand-rolled cigarettes dangled from his mouth and he explained that each feather locked into the next; each one was necessary. A perfect architecture of flight.

"It's enough to make you believe in God," he said.

"Almost," she corrected him.

She started spending every evening with the Hawk Man, riding to his place after she'd prepared a meal for her father. It didn't take long to get used to the wooden walls, the fridge full of exotic cheeses and leafy vegetables, and the stand-up freezer where he kept food for the birds. Raw turkey necks, frozen mice, bags of yellow chicks.

And she became familiar with his face. The scar along his jaw where his beard didn't grow, the cluster of wrinkles that spread like sunrays from his eyes, a jagged tear in his left earlobe. The scar and the torn earlobe were gifts from Rose, he said. "She likes to remind me of who's in charge."

Shiri wondered how old he was. Older than her brother, younger than her parents.

She went with him when he flew his birds, releasing them and luring them back with raw meat that he held in his glove. The birds got smaller and smaller in the sky, the chime of the bells on their ankles fading. Sometimes they disappeared, and she thought they were gone for good. Then, as if by magic, they swooped toward him and landed magnificently on his arm.

“Beautiful,” he always said when they alighted, and she pretended he was talking about her. It was possible—he’d started talking to her in the same gentle voice he used to address the birds. And sometimes he let her wear his glove, so it was easy to imagine she’d slipped her hand into his.

He taught her to tie a falconer’s knot: hitch the loop, under, over, through and tight. She used her right hand to secure a leash to the glove, and soon the birds would perch on her wrist. The owl was lighter than seemed possible, a cloud of cotton. But Shiri spent the most time with Rose, flying her on a creance, or the two of them sitting on the grass, the hawk spreading her wings to warm herself.

Shiri was browned from the spring sun and wore a necklace the Hawk Man had made her out of wire and one of the falcon’s tough feathers. Her sneakers were dirty; her clothes hardly got washed; the powder from the dove’s feathers left a pearly film over her hair. She stopped eating lunch with Marla, then stopped going to class altogether. She rode to the Hawk Man’s place in the morning and stayed there all day, even when he worked at the airport. She went home to make dinner and returned as soon as she’d brought her father a tray of food.

The Hawk Man seemed to enjoy her presence but didn’t seem to require it. In the evenings, he smoked and rebuilt the grouse, and she read his books. She liked Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, cheerful stories of girls avoiding grief or rape by turning themselves into cows or laurels or birds. She also flipped through his tattered copy of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a book that had instructions on how to build a bomb, how to raise chickens, how to give cunnilingus. It seemed akin to a book of spells, and she thought it must be illegal. “Where did you get this?” she whispered, but the Hawk Man only laughed at her.

He never touched her. He drove her home each evening, dropped her off, and never made plans for the following day. He seemed confident she’d return to him.

Her mother must have seen his truck idling outside the house, but she didn’t mention it. She was exhausted after her shifts at the store, and Shiri found her in front of the TV, her feet propped on the coffee table. She hardly seemed to be watching whatever show played in front of her,

though she always turned up the volume when the weatherman came on. She stared at the map of Canada, the highs and lows marked over each province, and when she talked to Shiri, it was like from across time zones. “How was school today?” she asked, even though she must have been getting calls about Shiri’s truancy.

“It was fine.” Shiri clenched her fists, dug her nails so deep that her palms almost bled. She wanted to scream, to fill this house with sound. To rage and lament like one of the doves. “I’m going upstairs,” she said.

Then she lay on her bed and looked at the glittering stucco on the ceiling. Its gold flecks reminded her of the Hawk Man’s teeth, and she pressed her hand to her mouth, practicing. She wanted to be kissed so hard it left an imprint on her skin. She slipped her hand under her jeans, touched herself the way she’d learned to do from the *Whole Earth Catalog*, then fell asleep on top of the sheets.

Once she woke in the night and saw a bird’s golden eyes—two small suns burning in the dark. A goshawk. A passage bird.

“Dann?” she tried, but the hawk didn’t answer to her brother’s name. It perched on her and dug its talons into her skin. In the morning it was gone. The only evidence was the blood that ran down her leg and onto the sheet.

“We should go for a hunt,” the Hawk Man said that evening. “You fly Rose this time.”

“Me?”

He gave her a wink. “You.”

It was nearly sunset when they reached a wide, empty field in Delta. The Hawk Man pulled off the road and cut the engine, and Shiri climbed down from the truck. She put on the glove, and Rose stepped lightly onto her hand. Just as she’d been taught, Shiri tied the jesses to the glove’s metal loop, then slipped the hood off the bird’s eyes. “Hello, love,” she said.

There had been rain earlier in the day, and as she followed the Hawk Man through the grass, her sneakers got soaked through. They stopped near a stand of fir and pine, and Shiri untied the hawk’s leash. Rose hesitated, shifting her weight from one side to the other.

“She’s being shy.” The Hawk Man patted the bird’s yellow foot and Rose flapped her wings to lift into the air, the bell ringing sharply. She climbed higher, leveled and soared, circling the field.

“There she goes,” said the Hawk Man.

To be seen through his eyes—that’s what Shiri wanted. But she was heavy and plain, feet on the ground.

The bird plunged and disappeared into the tall grass. The Hawk Man was already running, ready to grab the quarry, but then the hawk rose into the air again, wings flaring.

“She’s carrying something!” The Hawk Man took a piece of raw meat from his bag and tore it open so it would shine with blood. He placed it in Shiri’s glove to lure the bird back. “Hold it up so she can see.”

The bird dove toward her. Shiri held out her arm, closed her eyes, and heard a whistle of air through brittle feathers and metal bells. The sound grew louder, brighter, then the hawk slammed into her arm.

Shiri opened her eyes and Rose was perched on her wrist, a mouse in her beak.

“She brought it back!” said the Hawk Man. “She’s never done that.”

The hawk’s talons had punctured one of its eyes—blood poured from the socket—but the mouse was still alive. The hawk dropped it into the leather, and Shiri could feel the thrum of its small heart. She also felt pride, adrenaline, ambition fulfilled, and wasn’t sure if these were her feelings or those of the bird, transmuted through the glove. She was shaky and crying, and the Hawk Man was laughing. Shiri laughed too, tears streaking her face. The hawk didn’t wait for the mouse to die before starting to devour it. She tore at the fur and crunched the bones until, finally, the heartbeat stopped.

Shiri wiped her bloodied hand on the wet grass and Rose cleaned her beak and talons by scraping them on the leather glove. Then the Hawk Man hooded the bird, and suddenly she was blinded and subdued. A harmless, decorative thing.

“Good job tonight,” he said when he drove Shiri home. “You’ll be a falconer soon enough.” He pulled up outside her house, reached across her, and opened the truck’s door. Shiri didn’t move.

“You should hurry,” he said. “You’re probably expected.”

“I’m not going in there.” She stared at her hands, at the blood that had dried under her nails. “I’m staying with you.”

“Your parents wouldn’t like that. It would break their hearts.”

She almost laughed. “What do you care about their hearts?”

She wanted him to say it. To expose his hunger so she could hate and pity and love him for it. She wanted him to grip her hand the way the hawk had.

“I’ll live with you and Rose and Eugenie,” she said. “Rose likes me now.”

“You know that’s not true. She doesn’t like anyone.”

“Almost,” said Shiri. “She almost likes me.”

“You have to understand something.” He turned toward her so their knees almost touched. “I tend toward fanaticism, Shiri. That must be obvious by now.”

“So?”

“So I’m your father’s friend.” He whispered now, as though Hirsch might hear them from the basement. “And you’re fourteen years old.”

“Fifteen. My birthday was two months ago but everyone forgot.”

“Do you know I can remember a time before these houses existed? No sidewalks, no yards. Just open fields and forest.” He pointed toward her house. “I trapped Helen here, my passage bird.”

“What does it matter? Who cares how old you are?”

“You’d tire of us. Of me and Rose and the others.”

“I even like the vultures. They make us better, don’t they? They do.”

“Shiri, listen to me. You’ll finish school. You’ll get a boyfriend. You have an entire life to live.”

When she pictured the rest of her life, she always unintentionally imagined herself working at Eve’s Fashion Shop. She was prone, that year, to confusing herself with her mother. Even her body looked more like Ruth’s—it had gone from being slim like her brother’s to being full and soft. She missed feeling light and nimble, climbing the cedar tree.

She looked him in the eye, kept her gaze steady as a hawk’s. “I want to be with you.”

She knew what that meant. She remembered the way he’d held out her arm when she was a child, stretching it like a wing. *I turn little girls like you into birds*, he’d said, and even then she knew he was telling the truth.

“Come on, Shiri. You’re too smart for this.”

She could still feel the pulse of the mouse’s heart, beating itself out in her hand. She never wanted to hit the ground again. “Or maybe I’m insane like you are.”

He looked at her, shook his head. “A raven.” He touched her dark hair. “Something clever. Did you know ravens are also called ‘ravishers’?”

She knew that ravens were birds of mountains and tall trees. She saw herself in high, silent places.

“I’m told that once you have one,” he said, “all your other birds seem uninteresting.”

She imagined soaring, catching a current of air. She saw herself hooded and leashed.

His eyes took her in. “You want this?”

She thought of her mother in that store, on her feet all day, wearing orthopedic shoes. And her father underground: he hadn’t seen the sky in months.

She slipped her hand into his.

“You’re sure?” said the Hawk Man. “You have to say *yes*.”

Was she sure? She thought of her father, heaving himself up to sit beside her. Her father saying, *You’re so good to me*. And her mother, trying to believe in a story, trying to survive. *How was school today?*

“Shiri?” said the Hawk Man. “Yes?” And air from his lungs swooped into hers.

She didn’t go inside the house. She climbed the tree and sat on the highest branch she could reach. She wished her brother were with her—wished they could live here, between the basement and sky.

Maybe everything would happen the way the Hawk Man said it would. Maybe she would finish school and get a boyfriend. She wanted to go somewhere—fly to Europe, walk along the Danube all the way to the Black Sea. She’d read about it in one of his books. There were red-footed falcons there, and herons, even pelicans.

A bird’s shadow passed over her. She looked up, hoping for a hawk or a falcon—she would have even accepted a vulture—with a message for her. There was nothing but a setting sun, and she watched it plunge into the water, bleed along the horizon. She would go inside when it got dark. But for now she perched in the branches, tying and untying a falconer’s knot in her own hair.