

Michael Joyce

STORM-TOSSED

In a gesture of solidarity his son went birding with him in the days following the hurricane. There had been reports of storm-tossed birds in the valley, wood stork, skimmer, and sooty tern, each of them carried in the envelope of the storm's eye and delivered here like temporary miracles.

It happened sometimes. In August 1933 a herald petrel was sighted near Ithaca, New York, the first and only sighting of the species outside the south Atlantic. These misplaced birds were really not so much carried as left to fly for their lives in a moving bubble of still air, itself conveyed at the center of a great perturbation, a pocket of calm flying within storm like anyone's inner heart.

He would try not to say such things in his son's presence. His son was, for whatever reason and for however long, in retreat from poetry. Or at least his father's version of same. At college his son had become a sociology major and now he saw all things as forces against which we huddled in groups like people getting out of the rain await a bus in a glass shelter.

He had wanted his son to study art or poetry or geology or even plumbing, something with substance and mystery. Yet his hopes were so clearly projecting himself on his offspring that he had not said anything. His own degree was an MBA from Wharton and now he was being downsized.

He should have stayed with poetry, he thought.

It had been three days since the hurricane which had struck further down the coast and headed into the Appalachians. It worked through the mountains like a tractor dragging a thresher of sharp, sustained winds behind it. As the storm muscled through the mountains microbursts of rain loitered behind like bullies in isolated villages and hollows. A full fifteen inches fell like a biblical plague on a Pennsylvania town which had already lost the members of its high school French club in a terrorist attack on an airplane.

His son had been to twelve European countries by the time he finished high school, all on his own. He thought the world was a neighborhood and now he slipped from the car and grabbed his field glasses and his Walkman to head off into thin woods with his father in search of alien birds.

His father would not say anything about the Walkman although he did not think you could bird while your ears were filled with other music. It was still gray and humid after the storm, even more humid when the sun found wispy patches of blue.

The storm was named Franz, after Kafka he supposed although these days the baptism of tropical storms was generated from a database of unusual names of alternating genders. Whether Franz or Zelda or Cabot, they had no history and were connected to nothing but themselves.

It was similar for the wind-blown birds. Once the storm lost its strength any surviving bird would drop, exhausted and lost, from the popped bubble of the storm's center and land without history and connection. Out of instinct they would head for rest and water and with luck would find their way to rivers and from rivers to the sea and so southward home.

Like his son, he too carried electronic equipment upon his waist. The Garmin GPS 40 personal global positioning navigator was not much bigger than a Walkman but it listened constantly to eight different satellites, offered up to two hundred and fifty waypoints, and ran on AA batteries. It was possible to store thirty reversible routes of up to twenty points each, though the math didn't add up and he wasn't certain that his life held thirty destinations in any case.

"So you'll be able to write up exactly where the birds are?" his son had asked when they packed the GPS in the car.

"Birds aren't current events," he said smartly. "They'll be long gone from where we find them by the time we report them."

He had not followed with the pun that had come to mind. How, borne on by winds, birds were paradoxically nothing less than the events of wind currents. For his own part his son had seemed to forego the natural question about why they would take along the GPS otherwise.

Surely it wasn't possible to be lost in the local?

They were learning pretty well what not to say to each other. Which made space for all they really did have to say to each other now that the storm of adolescence had passed and they could try to understand what it meant to be together as men of different ages.

Thus, for instance, he did not say aloud what came to mind as they first moved up the brambly slope toward the ridge above the creek where they would bird. He was thinking of something he had heard a fat man say on

Christian television while, sleepless, he sat up all night and zapped through channels with the remote control.

“Our happiness comes through the mercy of God,” the fat man said and mopped his brow. He was lecturing people—he supposed the word was preaching—from a stage set made to look like the lobby of a convention hotel, although it was a little too luridly done up in red satin wallcovering and gilt furniture to really be one.

“Our happiness comes through the mercy of God,” the man repeated it, more softly now.

As he sat watching this lonesome spectacle he suddenly realized he had no sense of what was meant by mercy. It was not simply this religious usage, he didn’t know what the word meant at all. He knew he had been taught it at some time, could even recall other instances of its usage: he begged mercy, mercy me, have mercy, mercy sakes.

For a moment as they trod up the ridge behind each other—in his case more short of breath than he wished—he considered asking his son whether they taught mercy anymore. Or at least if he knew what it meant.

The urge to ask the question was prompted by what he sometimes felt as a refreshing awareness that his son knew things that he did not. The decision not to ask the question was prompted by the fact that the question could seem laden, even vaguely accusatory.

They lived in an upscale suburb, at least for now, and their cable system was unique, not linked to any conglomerate. One channel showed the great movies of Godard, Bertolucci, Varda, and Truffaut. Another shifted after midnight to a Tibetan Buddhist network with softspoken and laughing men and bright orange colors. There was even a channel which ran nationwide classified ads from the Wall Street Journal news service.

It wasn’t anything you would want to lose.

Mercy, he knew, was when you could harm someone but did not do so. Torquemada and the SS could show mercy, as could a mugger. By extension a storm could also metaphorically show mercy. A father could mercifully forego certain questions, as could a son.

He listened very closely but there was no leakage from the earphones of his son’s Walkman. It was an atavistic instinct. When his son was younger the tinny noise from the earphone would upset him unreasonably. For some years he patrolled all silences and was ever vigilant for escaping noise. They had grown beyond such regulation.

He thumbed the controls of the GPS and saw the reassuring display of the test screen. Thoughts of regulation reminded him of a curiously poetical sentence from the specifications for the GPS. The sentence said that the GPS was “subject to accuracy degradation to 100m 2DRMS under the United States Department of Defense imposed Selective Availability Program.”

It stayed with him. He had easily memorized the sentence. He was known in his company for this ability to get and retain arcane information verbatim on just one seeing. It was a valuable ability.

The sentence from the specs seemed to suggest that the GPS was purposely inaccurate under certain conditions. It was meant, he supposed, to keep spies and terrorists from navigating too securely.

It was like the old saying: keeping someone off balance.

They hadn’t seen anything much.

“Just the usual suspects,” he said to his son.

“What’s that?” He fiddled with the earphone.

“I’m sorry, I forgot you couldn’t hear.”

“I can hear alright,” his son said, “I just didn’t understand what you were talking about. What usual suspects?”

“It’s a movie,” he said. “It was a movie. I’m surprised you don’t know it. Casablanca. With Humphrey Bogard.”

“Bogart,” his son said. “You said Bogard, D, like Dirk Bogard. It still is,” he said, “it’s still a so-called cult favorite. I just didn’t hear you.”

“I said the usual suspects meaning just common birds. Beautiful nonetheless.”

They had disturbed the silence and now it would have to settle again, like when your hand stirred a pool and then you had to wait for the surface to turn still again. This was why one did not ordinarily carry on conversations while birding. You could hear the warning screeches as the whole forest signalled following an exchange between you.

The silence, in fact, was as much a noise as a silence. There was a silence which was the noise of ordinariness. It was what one summoned.

They had come into a stand of black walnut trees which at the full of summer was still and cool, a dark canopy through which little light penetrated. Now it was thinning with the onset of autumn in late September. Even the gray light streamed through. Black walnut like willow yellowed early.

It felt like cancer, the wasting away of shade and protection, the thinning of hope.

"I love you," he wanted to say to his grown son but didn't.

From time to time his son would stop, as if impossibly hearing some new sound through the music which filled his ears. He would raise his field glasses and search the trees or the slope down to the creek below and then, just as quickly and without comment, continue softly onward.

He had taught him to walk quietly. He was proud of this. A son who could walk quietly could see more.

He wondered what the music was on the Walkman. Not the "Moonlight Sonata" he supposed.

He smiled to himself. It wasn't making fun. He liked the music his son played on the car tape player sometimes. Not all of it, of course, but some, although he couldn't recall the names of anything and so wouldn't be able to say anything to him.

He didn't remember everything, of course, had no photographic memory. Merely a knack for certain key pieces of information.

This morning for instance he had been mistaken. There was mail at home from a William Palmer, Orchidist, at a Florida address with a special offer of a free gift. When they were leaving to go birding he noticed that the return address said Orchardist. The slip had made him inordinately sad.

Orchidist and orchardist. Lost between the flower and the fruit.

You wanted to avoid saying things you would regret: Would we ever have a garden again if we lost this house. How will we pay for your college.

Storm-tossed, we are lost between the flower and the fruit. There was a certain poetry to that. He liked the phrases.

"I like that," his son said. "What's that from? Shakespeare?"

How strange. Had he said it aloud he wondered. He must have.

"Me," he said, "me."

"Cool," his son said.

"I was just thinking—" he said but his son had already begun to say something more. He asked him to repeat it.

"Do you have a golden parachute?" he asked.

How naive and ridiculous, how wonderfully caring. What did they learn in Sociology? Idle phrases and popular notions.

He met his son's eyes and saw a storm of worry.

"Not really," he said. "Those things are in newspapers and upper management. There will be outplacement, of course. Severance. Counseling. Transitional support."

All these were words, he realized, no different from golden parachute, wood stork, skimmer, or sooty tern.

"Good," his son said.

How could he hear through the music? How could he see through the gray?

"Wait!" his son hissed and whispered, grabbing his father's arm. "Look!"

In an uphill swail turned to a boggy pond in the aftermath of Franz stood a great blue heron. For every pond a king. One of the usual suspects, yet always beautiful nonetheless.

Ardea herodias, one of the day herons, subfamily *Ardeinaethe*, family *Ardeidae*, order *Ciconiiformes*.

Sometimes words showed you where you were as certainly as the GPS 40, though they too were subject to accuracy degradation.

His son thought it was something. And it was, a temporary king, storm-tossed here as certainly as a sooty tern was elsewhere. He begged him mercy. It was something, the heron and the son.

The bird studied them with a calm eye then lifted, its wings flapping haughtily, barking its forlorn, disdainful cry across the sorry pond and down the ridge, through a gap to the creek which eventually ran to the river.

Nothing was so certain or so linked. Nothing so simple a consolation.

On the way home he tried to say what could be said.

"What were you listening to while we walked?" he asked his son.

"Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure."

It was more surprising than Beethoven. A spoken word book in which an actor recited lines from a story by Chekhov, words so sad and splendid they seemed like music to him. It was a consolation. They drove the rest of the way home in the birding silence, the one that was as much a noise as otherwise.