

7 Invisibility

Prرت. Prرت. Prرت. One interrogatory note over and over again, like a telephone call from a bird deep in leaves. That's what pulled me from sleep. The noise came from a chaffinch in the lime tree outside my window, and I lay watching the day grow bright listening to the sound move about in the tree behind the glass. It was a *rain call*, a beautiful name for a noise like an unanswered question. No one knows why chaffinches make it, but the name comes from an old tradition that it portends bad weather.

In the 1950s, in a small research station in Madingley a few miles north of where I lay, a scientist called Thorpe experimented on chaffinches to try to understand how they learned to sing. He reared young finches in total isolation in soundproofed cages, and listened, fascinated, to the rudimentary songs his broken birds produced. There was a short window of time, he found, in which the isolated chicks needed to hear the elaborate trills of adult song, and if that window was missed, they could never quite manage to produce it themselves. He tried exposing his isolated fledglings to looped tapes of the songs of other species: could they be persuaded to sing like tree pipits? It was a groundbreaking piece of research into developmental learning, but it was also a science soaked deep in Cold War anxieties. The questions Thorpe was asking were those of a post-war West obsessed with identity and frightened of brainwashing. How do you

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learn who you are? Can your allegiances be changed? Can you be trusted? What makes you a chaffinch? Where do you come from? Thorpe discovered that wild chaffinches from different places had different dialects. I listened carefully to the bird outside. Yes, its song was different from the song of Surrey chaffinches I'd learned as a child. It was thinner, less complicated; seemed to cut off before it was properly finished. I thought I would like to hear Surrey chaffinches again. I thought of sad birds in soundproofed cages, and how your earliest experiences teach you who you are. I thought of the house from my dream. I thought of home. And then, with a slow, luxuriant thrill, I realised that everything was different about the house I was in. It was the hawk. I shut my eyes. The hawk had filled the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent. It was about to begin.

In the half-light through the drawn curtains she sits on her perch, relaxed, hooded, extraordinary. Formidable talons, wicked, curved black beak, sleek, *café-au-lait* front streaked thickly with cocoa-coloured teardrops, looking for all the the hell is happening she is trying to fly away as fast as possible. Brought up short by her jesses she twitters in high-pitched distress as the realisation of her hateful circumstances strikes. She can't get away. I lift her back onto the glove. Under her feathers is sinew, and bone, and that fast-beating heart. She bates again. And again. I *hate* this. In these first few minutes there's nothing you can do but accept that you are terrifying the hawk when it is the very opposite of everything you desire. After three more bates my heart is beating like a fitting beast, but she's back on the glove, beak open, eyes blazing. And then there is a long moment of extraordinary intensity.

The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the gloom. Her beak is open. She breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burned stone. Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her

wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready for flight. I don't look at her. I mustn't. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there*.

Here's one thing I know from years of training hawks: one of the things you must learn to do is become invisible. It's what you do when a fresh hawk sits on your left fist with food beneath her feet, in a state of savage, defensive fear. Hawks aren't social animals like dogs or horses; they understand neither coercion nor punishment. The only way to tame them is through positive reinforcement with gifts of food. You want the hawk to eat the food you hold – it's the first step in reclaiming her that will end with you being hunting partners. But the space between the fear and the food is a vast, vast gulf, and you have to cross it together. I thought, once, that you did it by being infinitely patient. But no: it is more than that. You must become invisible. Imagine: you're in a darkened room. You are sitting with a hawk on your fist. She is as immobile, as tense and sprung as a catapult at full stretch. Underneath her huge, thorny feet is a chunk of raw steak. You're trying to get her to look at the steak, not at you, because you know – though you haven't looked – more than that. You must become invisible. Imagine: you're in a darkened room. You are sitting with a hawk on your fist. She is as immobile, as tense and sprung as a catapult at full stretch. Underneath her huge, thorny feet is a chunk of raw steak. You're trying to get her to look at the steak, not at you, because you know – though you haven't looked – that her eyes are fixed in horror at your profile. All you can hear is the wet *click, click, click* of her blinking.

To cross this space between fear and food, and to somehow make possible an eventual concord between your currently paralysed, immobile minds, you need – very urgently – not to be there. You empty your mind and become very still. You think of exactly nothing at all. The hawk becomes a strange, hollow concept, as flat as a snapshot or a schematic drawing, but at the same time, as pertinent to your future as an angry high court judge. Your gloved fist squeezes the meat a fraction, and you feel the tiny imbalance of weight and you see out of the very corner of your vision that she's looked down at it. And so, remaining invisible, you make the food the only thing in the room apart from the hawk; you're

not there at all. And what you hope is that she'll start eating, and you can very, very slowly make yourself visible. Even if you don't move a muscle, and just relax into a more normal frame of mind, the hawk *knows*. It's extraordinary. It takes a long time to be yourself, in the presence of a new hawk.

But I didn't have to learn how to do this. I was already an expert. It was a trick I'd learned early in my life; a small, slightly fearful girl, obsessed with birds, who loved to disappear. Like Jumbo in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, I was a watcher. I had always been a watcher. When I was a child I'd climb the hill behind my house and crawl into my favourite den under a rhododendron bush, wriggling down on my tummy under overhanging leaves like a tiny sniper. And in this secret fox-hole, nose an inch from the ground, breathing crushed bracken and acid soil, I'd look down on the world below, basking in the fierce calm that comes from being invisible but seeing everything. Watching, not doing. Seeking safety in not being seen. It's a habit you can fall into, willing yourself into invisibility. And it doesn't serve you well in life. Believe me it doesn't. Not with people and loves and hearts and homes and work. But for the first few days with a new hawk, making yourself disappear is the greatest skill in the world.

The confidence with which I sat there with the hawk was absolute. *I know how to do this*, I thought. *I am good, at least, at this. I know all the steps to this dance*. First the hawk will feed on my gloved fist. Then as the days pass she'll grow tamer, partly because I am keeping her indoors and constantly in my presence, just as fifteenth-century falconers had done. Soon she will step to my fist for food, and later she will jump to it. We'll go for long walks to accustom her to cars and dogs and people. And then she'll fly to me when I call her, first on a line, the creance, and then free. And then.

And then. I'd instructed my friends to leave me alone. I'd filled the freezer with hawk food and unplugged the phone.

a lens,' he said once, a little sadly, as if the camera were always there, stopping him getting involved, something between him and the life that other people had.

The chaffinch was calling again. *How you learn what you are.* Had I learned to be a watcher from my father? Was it a kind of childhood mimicking of his professional strategy for dealing with difficulty? I kicked the thought around for a while, and then I kicked it away. *No*, I thought. *No*. It was more *I can't think that* than *It's not true*. All those thousands upon thousands of photographs my father had taken. Think of them instead. Each one a record, a testament, a bulwark against forgetting, against nothingness, against death. Look, *this happened*. A thing happened, and now it will never unhappen. Here it is, in the photograph: a baby putting its tiny hand in the wrinkled palm of an octogenarian. A fox running across a woodland path and a man raising a gun to shoot it. A car wreck. A plane crash. A comet smeared across the morning sky. A prime minister wiping his brow. The Beatles, sitting at a café table on the Champs-Élysées on a cold January day in 1964, John Lennon's pale face under the brim of his fisherman's cap. All these things had happened, and my

father had committed them to a memory that wasn't just his own, but the world's. My father's life wasn't about disappearance. His was a life that worked against it.

He'd come home from work strangely disheartened one winter evening. We asked him what was wrong. 'Did you see the sky today?' he said. He'd been walking through a London park on his way back from a press-call. It was deserted but for a small boy playing by a frozen boating lake. 'I said, "Look up, look at that. Remember you saw that. You'll never see it again."' Above them both was a vast tracery of ice-rings and sun-dogs in a wintry, hazy sky. A 22° halo, a circumzenithal arc and an upper tangent arc, the sun's light refracting and cutting the heavens into a complicated geometry of ice and air and fire. But the boy didn't seem interested

at all. Dad was baffled. 'Maybe he thought you were one of those strange men,' we sniggered, rolling our eyes, and he looked embarrassed and faintly cross. But he was so very sad about the boy who didn't see.

Now that Dad was gone I was starting to see how mortality was bound up in things like that cold, arc-lit sky. How the world is full of signs and wonders that come, and go, and if you are lucky you might see them. Once, twice. Perhaps never again. The albums on my mother's shelves are full of family photographs. But also other things. A starling with a crooked beak. A day of hoarfrost and smoke. A cherry tree thick with blossom. Thunderclouds, lightning strikes, comets and eclipses: celestial events terrifying in their blind distances but reassuring you, too, that the world is for ever, though you are only a blink in its course.

Henri Cartier-Bresson called the taking of a good photograph a *decisive moment*. 'Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera,' he said. 'The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone for ever.' I thought of one of these moments as I sat there waiting for the hawk to eat from my hand. It was a black-and-white photograph my father had taken many years ago of an elderly street-cleaner with a white goatee beard, wrinkled socks and down-at-heel shoes. Crumpled work trousers, work gloves, a woollen beret. The camera is low, on the pavement: Dad must have crouched in the road to take it. The man is bending down, his besom of birch twigs propped against his side. He has taken off one of his gloves, and between the thumb and first finger of his bare right hand he is offering a crumb of bread to a sparrow on the kerbstone. The sparrow is caught mid-hop at exactly at the moment it takes the crumb from his fingers. And the expression on the man's face is suffused with joy. He is wearing the face of an angel.

Time passed. Hawks gorge themselves in the wild and can spend days without food. I knew the hawk would not eat from my hand today. She was scared, she wasn't hungry; the world was an insult. Both of us needed a break. I popped the hood back over her head. *There*. Fleeting panic, nerves afire, and then she relaxed because the day had turned to night and I had disappeared. The terror had gone. *Hood-winked*. It was an ancient piece of trickery and an excusable one: the darkness would give her space to set her frayed nerves to rights. As would it mine. On her perch, she slept. I slept too, wrapped in a duvet dragged over the sofa. Later, when I picked her up again, the mood in the room had changed. She had done this before; was no longer entirely certain I was a monster. She bated, once, towards the floor, but it was a bate to the floor, not away from me in blind terror. I lifted her back onto the glove. We sat some more. Then, instead of fixing her gaze on me in horror, she began to examine her surroundings. New things. Shelves, walls, floor: she inspected them all carefully with small, sideways movements of her head. Hawk parallax, judging perfect distances. She observed the ceiling as far as it would go, the lines of the

She observed the ceiling as far as it would go, the lines of the bookshelves beneath it, cocked her head to consider the strip of messy tassels along the edge of the rug. Then came a decisive moment. It was not the one I was hoping for, but it was thrilling all the same. Regarding the room with simple curiosity, she turned her head and saw me. And jumped. Jumped exactly like a human in surprise. I felt the scratch of her talons and her shock, too, cold and electric. That was the moment. Until a minute ago I was so terrifying I was all that existed. But then she had forgotten me. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. The forgetting was delightful because it was a sign that the hawk was starting to accept me. But there was a deeper, darker thrill. It was that I had been forgotten.