

CRIMSON BIRDS OF SMALL MIRACLES

Sean Monaghan

Through his childhood, Sean Monaghan www.seanmonaghan.com explored the bird-filled New Zealand forests, fascinated by avian flocking and other flight patterns. A keen amateur artist, Sean has exhibited in several solo and group shows. He wishes he could create the kind of art on display in this story.

C.J. Penn listened to his daughters sleep, Matilda's breath regular and assured, Jessie's labored and fluttery, like a fallen dying fledgling, gasping on the edge of a cold concrete walk. He wondered if he would ever get used to it.

Cool steely light from Ariosto's single big silver moon stole through the gap in the hotel room's thick black curtains. The light made an angled, blade-like slash across their beds, below Matilda's feet and on through Jessie's midriff.

Holding a hot fat-walled cup of local pekoe tea up near his chin, Penn felt entranced. They were really here. Ariosto.

The room didn't come cheap. Their beds had maroon satin quilts with gold trim, and actual loomed instead of filmed sheets. Eight hundred count cotton, whatever that meant. The hotel's advertising waft bragged that point.

On the wall above each bed hung a picture on a choice-screen. Matilda had chosen a minimal, ancient thing by an old master called Wyeth. Penn thought it looked like an elephant, but Matilda, fifteen, had explained with impatience that it was a cabin in the snow.

Nine-year-old Jessie's choice was an illustration from Lambert's book *Chicken Avoids Fox's Dinner Plans*. The bright red chicken, wings wide, leaping from the fox's den.

Matilda said it was childish, but Penn couldn't help but read Jessie's sophistication into it. A bid for freedom.

Matilda understood illustration anyway. Her drawing pane lay on the narrow bedside table. On the rare occasions she deigned to share her creations, they always impressed him. Ocelots pouncing on hapless prey, butterflies straining from their chrysalises, Penn frowning in concentration, deep lines on his forehead.

Lots of other people, too. Matilda had a real talent for portraits. None of Jessie though. She hated seeing her sister's slack damaged face. To Penn she was beauti-

ful, but he understood Matilda's resistance.

Vaporous wafts rose in curling spirals from the tea's surface, catching the moon's silken light, like tiny ghosts dancing between Penn and his daughters. He took a sip. Bitter. Perfect. The ghosts fled for a moment.

From outside, silence fell across him. Penn wasn't used to anywhere without wind. Of course it had to be that way.

The artificial birds flew just before sunset, over the mirrored lake. The reflecting effect would be lost with the weakest of zephyrs.

Their clever machine intelligence reminded him of Jessie's walkerskeleton, now folded next to her bed, ready to snap on come morning. Perhaps that similarity contributed to his attraction to coming here.

Reaching through the gap in the curtains, Penn placed one hand against the glass door. Cold. As if the night was going to freeze.

With his free hand, he took the edge of the intentionally coarse curtain material and pulled it around, stepping between the fabric and the door. Placing his hand on the cold door again, he called up menus. Above the tips of three fingers, a set of choices rose.

ROOM SERVICE, EXPLORE AND VISIT, ROOM COMFORTS. He tapped the last and tapped for the door to open. The glass dilated into an approximate Penn shape, and he stepped through into the cool night.

Overhead half a billion stars shone at him, their edges twinkling. Earth lay out there somewhere, and Kepler, and Holm. A dozen other worlds where they'd sought some kind of succor.

Penn shivered, his denim trousers and light film shirt inadequate against the evening chill. Bracing, he thought, and took another sip from the cup. At least he had thick warm socks and solid boots.

During Penn's childhood, his father had lost toes in a snowstorm while climbing Mount Hilden. For Penn, ever since, warm shoes were habit.

From across the shallow lake a bird called. A long, living screech. The water reflected the stars and moon as if there was a hole in the world.

Penn shivered. He finished the hot tea and set the cup on the balcony railing. The cup flashed at him, A REFILL SIR?

"No thanks," Penn said. "I'll just enjoy the view for a moment."

The cup's display faded.

Peering along to the right, Penn tried to spy the cave. There, at the head of the lake. A black mouth against the glitter of the water, and the gray-green of the low hills above.

Perhaps this time, Penn thought. Perhaps I'll see a genuine smile.

He knew Jessie had it in there. Buried away. It just needed for him to dig deep.

Coming here now was no accident. Shilinka Switalla, the artist who'd created *Crimson Birds*, would be making one of her routine visits.

Penn wondered if his long-shot message had gotten through. It would be remarkable if the girls could meet the woman who'd created this.

* * *

In the morning, Matilda hammered on the wooden door while he showered. The bathroom occupied almost as much floor area as their living room back home. A long, deep white surge bath took up a quarter of the space, with a vast mirror screen and a dozen amenities, from shampoo to brushes to soda bombs. A rack of thirty towels.

The water setting blasted a perfect balance of heat and pressure, massaging and warming-cooling at once. The water even had a sweet oily scent. Penn liked the feeling and wondered how he could obtain a shower rose like that back home.

Mertabe remained a frontier world. Out of the way, under-resourced and underpopulated. They only stayed because his agri-botics design business thrived. Every

trip, though, he found himself second-guessing.

"Come on, Dad!" Matilda hollered through the door. "You're going to use up all the water."

Despite all their travels, his elder daughter had still not gotten used to the idea of endless hot water.

She kept up with the hammering.

Penn shut the water off. "Two minutes," he told her.

She muttered a Bantu curse, thinking both that he couldn't hear and that he didn't understand.

He dried quickly. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he opened the door.

"Eww!" Matilda said. "I do not need to see chest hair!" She darted by him and slammed the door.

* * *

Dressed in the same denims, a new, warmer, plaid shirt, and his hefty boots, Penn found Jessie awake. She lay on the fancy bed, the covers pushed halfway down. Her tired eyes strained, angled up at the *Chicken Avoids Fox's Dinner Plans* picture.

"Good morning, honey," he said. "Are you ready for the birds?"

"Mwafess," she said. *Yes*.

Penn swallowed. Matilda didn't really know how good she had it.

He sat on the bed next to his younger girl and put his hand on her forehead. She felt warm. She smelled of urine.

"Whudonn," she said. *Don't*. She shook, trying to get his hand away.

"Did Matilda say something to you?" he said. Matilda baited poor Jessie too often. Penn wondered if that would be the same if they were closer in age.

Jessie's condition had been extant since birth, but the progression of the degeneration of her cortex had accelerated. A specific relative of Babbington's chorea, affecting the very young. Doctors struggled. Who knew how long she would live? A decade? A year? Something crushingly less.

Already she'd made it to nine.

Mertabe had three cases. Across the whole world. They'd tried to arrest the development with drugs, with some quantum implants, with physical and surgical therapies, but, to Penn's frustration, his girl continued a slow deterioration.

She'd walked, for a few years before becoming confined to complicated walkerskeletons at age five. Each over-priced machine consisted of a Jessie-shaped carbon-aluminum scaffold, with articulation and servo motors and even some medical intervention equipment.

Matilda had been eleven when the medical team had installed Jessie's first one. Already she'd been growing independent and frustrated by the attention her sister received.

"See said *noffing*," Jessie said in a whisper, disabusing him of her sister's wrongdoing.

"Okay, good. I'll change your diaper and we can go get some breakfast. Sound good?"

"Gud. An whirfen vartess?" *And then birds?*

"This evening, I think," he said. "I just have to check with the tour people."

"Gud."

From the bathroom came a yelp from Matilda. Doubtless some issue with water temperature or soap.

"Your sister, huh?" Penn said. "Like a princess."

Jessie's cheeks flickered, pulling her mouth open. Smiling.

That was too rare. And he wanted to see it from delight and amazement, not just from his jokes.

In her short life she'd seen so many things. The mists of six kilometer deep Manta Rift, the sparkling crystal geysers at Silicon Reach Park, a sad wildebeest migration at old Africa on Earth, a comet impact into a gas giant way out at Lely II.

Each of those moments, the disease pushed back and he had glimpses of delight. Glimpses of who she might be.

* * *

Downstairs, the layout of the hotel's restaurant reminded Penn of Seep-Toh, the most popular buffet chain back on Mertabe. Only bigger.

Through the center stood tables with waffle machines, fruit bowls and yogurts, and a hundred other selections. On the back wall human chefs in tall white hats and long smock aprons worked a long counter, cooking up any kind of eggs, okonomiyaki, and dozens of meats. Or anything else a diner could think of.

Having fun, they called encouragement to each other as they cooked. "Faster!", "No, give her four rashers!", "More oil!"

Egging each other on, Penn thought, groaning at his own "Dad joke." Just as well he hadn't said it aloud to Matilda. Jessie might have given him a smile. Or an eye roll.

Matilda had chosen a ridiculous outfit with long black boots, a white T-shirt with animated flying cranes, and short-legged denim dungarees. The cuffs came to barely below her crotch. She found them a four-place table against the windows, looking out over the sunlit lake. Penn saw warming ripples on the water's surface. Too early for the crimson birds yet.

High above, though, one of the native condors soared, wings wide, catching air currents as it hunted the scrub for its own breakfast.

Jessie walked slowly. The walkerskeleton was fluid and efficient over her diamond and penguin-patterned film overalls. This was her third device and the most expensive yet. It included tightly packed emergency equipment: bandages, scurrows, oxygen, and an epinephrine jab in case her circulation stopped.

Jessie's progress at learning this one's capacities and quirks was slower than with the others. The delays frustrated both her and Penn.

The machines drained his wallet, too. His family did all right, and still traveled, seeking he wasn't sure quite what anymore, but he knew despite the success of his agri-botics design business they would never be rich.

Some of the other adult diners stared before turning back to their breakfasts. The other kids kept staring.

The staring frustrated Penn, though he knew he shouldn't let it. It didn't bother Jessie. Matilda didn't care.

"Go sit with Matilda," Penn said. "I'll get you some breakfast." The smells of crackling bacon and pungent sweet fruit drifted around.

"Ged my own," she said.

"Honey, please."

"Ged my own."

He knew he should love that determination, but he worried. The walkerskeleton was a miracle of engineering, snap-wired to her cortex, and with a pretty souped-up A.I., but it was still controlled by Jessie. He could just picture her with a bowl of milky cereal, spilling the lot across the floor.

She stared at him with fixed, resolute eyes. "All right," he said. "Go ahead."

"Doond wadsh." *Don't watch.*

"I won't." He bent to her, whispering, "I'm starved. I'm getting a slap-up big breakfast. Keep me going for the whole day. Steak, hash browns, a giant cheese omelet, fried tomato, crispy—"

"Yoo ged fad." Her right hand reached out, tapped his slightly-too-big belly.

He grinned and rubbed. "You're right. I could stand to lose a couple of kilograms.

I'm having dry cereal." He looked around. "Where is that?"

Jessie laughed.

Penn felt a lift inside. Already just being here was working. Perhaps. Maybe that anticipation of watching the birds in flight was having an effect.

Eyeing the chefs as they seared and sizzled up big breakfasts, he got a bowl of nutty, fruity granola. Jessie would approve.

As he sat, Matilda sat with him. Pixie rolls, custard tarts, and strawberry donuts made a mountainous stack on her plate. He figured another dozen sweet non-foods hid within the pile.

"Dad," she said, sneering at his bowl. "You do know it's a buffet, right? You don't have to economize today." She sat with a thump, rocking the table.

"Yeah, sure," he said.

"I like the lake anyway," she said.

In his peripheral vision he saw her pointing out over the table. Toward the lake.

"Mm-hm," he said. He kept an eye on slow-moving Jessie. She stood at the fruit and yogurt table with a bowl. She made excruciating slow scoops of the dripping white yogurt into her bowl.

Penn glimpsed Matilda's arm drop.

"You going to eat that?" she said, "Or are you just going to stare at her?"

Penn glanced at the bowl. He hadn't even added soymilk. It looked unappetizing.

"Are you going to eat all that?" he said, eyes flicking up at her and down to her plate.

Even as he said it, he cursed himself. He shouldn't bait her like that. No matter what she said, he was still the parent.

"Maybe I will." She picked up one of the pixie rolls and bit the end off like a wild animal, baring her teeth as she chewed through the unfortunate cake.

"Mind if I have one?" he said, pointing. "Your sister told me I should eat this."

Matilda darted her hands out, shielding her mountain from him. "If that's what she said, then that's what you should do."

"So now you're ganging up on me?"

Matilda smiled. "Maybe we are."

Penn nodded, feeling like he'd recovered the situation. "All right." He picked up the bowl. "But I am going to get some milk fo—"

A crash interrupted him.

Whipping around, he saw the last moment of Jessie's fall. The yogurt bowl spun, landing on her hip. Yogurt and fruit splattered across her and the floor.

The restaurant fell silent.

Penn darted across. Staff came almost as quickly.

Jessie lay, lips trembling, tears already in her eyes. Her breath came in struggling gasps.

"Honey," he said, crouching to her. He grabbed for the walkerskeleton's oxygen mask. It popped out from the shoulder bar, flopping onto the carpet. Penn picked up the yellow cone as it inflated to full size.

Jessie bumped it away with her arm. "Lemeebee." *Let me be*. Her speech always got worse when she got stressed.

Already, the trim, tidy waitress was wiping the spill from Jessie's clothes.

"It's all right," Penn said. "I'm sorry. You don't have to do that."

"Oodonnbee saawy." *You don't be sorry*.

Penn swallowed. She didn't like him taking responsibility for things that went wrong. Good for her, he thought, but it still made him crumple inside.

"Go way. Barkta chuble." *Go away, back to the table*.

"I'll have to wipe the floor, sir," the waitress said.

The oxygen mask deflated. It wound back into the shoulder post.

"Of course." Penn stood. He turned to the windows.

Around him the diners had just about gone back to their meals and conversations. Some threw him glances they thought surreptitious.

From behind he heard the quiet whine of the walkerskeleton as it helped her up. A thump as she grabbed the edge of the table.

He swallowed, felt his throat tighten. His vision hazed, but he saw Matilda waving him over. He went.

"Here," she said, holding out one of the strawberry donuts.

Penn laughed. Nervous.

"Look," Matilda said, with a nod back toward the food tables.

Turning, he saw Jessie standing at the yogurt table again, a bowl in the walkerskeleton's hand claw as she scooped more yoghurt in.

He gasped.

"Dad," Matilda said. "Get it together. I think it's kind of cool."

Matilda ate another pastry.

After a minute, Jessie carried her fresh plate across to their table.

* * *

From their bedroom balcony, Penn stood watching the lake. The sun warmed him, soaking through his clothes.

Some living birds flew across the water. Some kind of heron. Like the cranes on Matilda's shirt. None landed.

The lake's water, he'd read, was shallow and treated. The artist, Shilinka Switalla, had made it that way to prevent the water fouling. Over a hundred hectares, the lake made a long, excavated rectangle, two hundred and fifty meters across and almost five kilometers long. Watching the whole of the display was not possible.

"Message," Matilda said, coming through from the room. She'd changed into a dark red button-front jumper with an illustration of an erupting volcano on a black shirt underneath.

"Message?" he said. "From whom?"

She rolled her eyes and tapped the railing. Right away the words scrolled up on the narrow edge.

MR. PENN, I HEARD YOUR FAMILY HAD COME TO SEE MY PIECE. I WOULD BE DELIGHTED IF YOU WOULD JOIN ME FOR A LATE AFTERNOON TEA AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO WATCH THE DISPLAY.

It was signed SHILINKA SWITALLA.

"You know who that is, right?" Matilda said.

Penn glanced through the dilated door. Jessie sat up on her bed, reading from a handpane.

"I know who she is," Penn said. The artist. The aging woman who'd created the lake and the birds.

"Did you know she would be here?"

"Maybe," he said.

Matilda's mouth dropped open. "You did know! She's the most famous—"

"All right," he said. "I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up."

Jessie angled her head to look at them.

"We can meet her?"

Penn blinked. Possibly the clearest sentence he'd heard from her in three years.

He swallowed. "Maybe we can," he said.

* * *

Later, a concierge in a stiff black uniform with red piping and a matching cap, with just a little gold trim that matched the girls' quilts, guided them to the hotel's fifth

and top floor. The carpets lay thick and dark. Clearly, these upper reaches wanted to seem plush and mysterious.

“Fancy,” Matilda said. She carried her drawing pane and pen.

The hallway smelled of polish, as if it had been freshly cleaned.

The walls had base reliefs and brass-handled light fittings. The reliefs, all in plain eggshell plaster, depicted birds in flight, of course, over high mountains.

The concierge knocked on a solid wooden door toward the end of the hallway.

“Notice,” Matilda said, “that there aren’t many doors?”

“Big roomsh,” Jessie said.

“Yeah. Fancy all right.”

The door opened. A man in his early thirties with short-cropped dark hair stood there, smiling. “Come in, come in.” He swept his arm by, ushering them through.

Penn followed the girls. He glimpsed the man tip the concierge before closing the door. Penn stood just inside the door, in the suite’s vestibule.

“It’s very good of you to see us,” he said, holding his hand out to shake.

“Miss Switalla likes to accommodate people.” He took Penn’s hand with a warm, firm grasp. “I’m her assistant. James.”

“C.J. Penn.”

“What’s that stand for?”

“Just call me Penn. That’s fine.”

James smiled. “Come through, all of you. This must be Matilda and Jessie.”

“No,” Matilda said. “We’re a couple of kids he found in the lobby. I’m Yevgensha.” She blinked at him, innocent. “Where’s the candy he promised?”

James grinned. He leaned closer. “Miss Switalla is going to love you. Come on through.”

Penn wished Matilda had left her flippancy behind. Preferably on some other planet.

The main room took up twice the square footage of their whole two-room suite downstairs. Choice-screens on the walls showed birds in flight, and the floor to ceiling windows looked directly out on the lake. One corner just about hid a kitchenette. The middle held a plump gray-blue lounge set with four two-seater sofas and a couple of armchairs. A bowl of fruit sat on a glass table in the middle. Exotics he’d never seen before among the peachapples and bananas and other more familiar items.

“Take a seat,” James said. “Let me get you something to drink. Miss Switalla will be out presently.”

Penn sat. The upholstery felt soft and welcoming. Matilda picked up a plumbe from the bowl and took a bite. Jessie sat slowly, the walkerskeleton whining.

“All right?” he asked her.

“Fine.”

James brought over a tray of drinks. A bottled grape soda for Jessie, a thick steaming mock-mocha for Matilda, and a pekoe tea for Penn. “The hotel sent us your preferences.”

“Cool,” Matilda said.

Jessie leaned forward, stretching the walkerskeleton’s claw for the drink.

Penn had to resist trying to help.

James withdrew to the kitchenette.

Matilda gulped at her mock-mocha, relishing it.

“Slow down,” Penn said.

She kept gulping.

Jessie got a grip on the grape soda and lifted it to her mouth. The cap irised and she drank. Almost gulping like her sister.

Penn heard a hinged door open and stood. Turning, he saw an old woman, lined, nut-colored skin, aged-white hair in an anemone burst around her head, long waft-

ing saffron robes hanging from her shoulders.

"C.J. Penn," she said, as if the privilege was hers alone. "It's such a pleasure to meet you and Jessie and Matilda." She walked across with an assured, strong stride that belied her age. "I'm Shilinka."

"Thank you," Penn said. "The honor is ours, I think. I didn't expect to meet you."

She smiled, warm and inviting. "I see you have drinks. Wonderful." She sat in one of the armchairs, facing the family. James handed her a tall glass with a milky drink. She sipped.

"So," she said, putting the glass on the table. "You've come to see the birds?" She looked over them all, but Penn saw how her gaze fixed on Jessie.

"Why did you build them here?" Matilda said. "Don't they bother the native birds?"

Shilinka smiled. "It's not quite temperate, not quite desert. There was an ecological impact, but we mitigate that elsewhere. We were intrigued to see what the local avians would think." Shilinka smiled. "They're not interested."

Leaning toward Matilda, Shilinka said, "I saw your pictures. The few you uploaded. You're very talented."

Embarrassed, Matilda tried to hide the drawing pane behind herself. "Why don't they fly all the time?" she said. She picked up her mug, tipping it and draining the last of the mock-mocha.

James moved and retrieved the mug from her. "Another?"

"Please," Matilda said, at the same time as Penn said, "I don't think so." She would end up wired and awake all night. She glared at him.

James stood with the mug, heading for the kitchenette, but with his eyes on Penn.

"That's all right," Penn said. "She can have another." Despite all their traveling, mostly their life remained fairly frugal. Saving for Matilda's education and paying for Jessie's treatments kept their discretionary spending minimal.

Penn wondered if it was time to give up the traveling. Despite the search, nothing was bringing them a cure. Maybe some solace, but nothing permanent. This trip—to see the birds—was probably the most whimsical and far-fetched of all.

Matilda inclined her head at him. He shrugged.

"The birds," Shilinka said, "fly only occasionally because . . ." she trailed off, eyes darting from Jessie to Matilda.

"Because . . . ?" Matilda said.

"Vey err mah xshul," Jessie said.

"They're more—" Penn started.

Shilinka cut him off with a wave. "I've got it," she said. "Exactly right, Jessie. They're more special. If they flew every night, people would lose interest."

"It's artificial anyway," Matilda said. "So isn't it kind of cheating?"

"Matilda," Penn said.

Another wave. "I wonder about that myself," Shilinka said. "But each bird is a biological robot. Your father would understand that."

"Why?" Matilda said.

Penn didn't say anything.

"His business," she said.

"He's just a farmer."

Shilinka smiled. She looked at Penn. "Perhaps, in a way. I read about you, of course. The things he does do result in food production. Agri-botics design, isn't it?"

"Yes," Penn said.

"Lucrative. You girls should be grateful."

Matilda rolled her eyes. She didn't know how much money her college fund actually contained.

"Not so lucrative," Penn said. "We blow a lot on travel." He gestured to Jessie, re-

greeting the word “blow.” That wasn’t what he meant.

“Mm-hm.” Shilinka took a draft from her glass. “I hope you enjoy the birds, Jessie.” She looked at Matilda again. “The birds have to feed, have to charge. Their cave houses their stations. They fly back and hang like bats, plugged in and gaining strength. Maybe they’ll fly again in a month, maybe a few days.”

“What’s nice about them,” James said from the kitchenette, “is that they let us all know a year or so in advance.”

“But only,” Shilinka said, “with a margin. I wasn’t sure if they would fly last night. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow.”

“Pardf dart,” Jessie said. Her words had begun slurring again. Penn figured she needed a rest.

“It’s part of the art, that’s right,” Shilinka said. “We won’t know if they’re flying until after dusk.” Putting the glass down, she leaned forward. “Anticipation is part of the artwork. Did you go out to watch for them last night?”

“We got in too late,” Matilda said. “Could have missed them easily.”

Shilinka smiled. “Well, you didn’t. I’m pleased you could join me. *Crimson Birds* is one of my favorites of my own works.”

She had a lot of huge installation pieces around numerous worlds. *Cathedrals* took up almost an entire uninhabitable planet, *Dooshta* sang from caves on Kaeba, *Sunrise Arcs* stood kilometers tall at the edge of the Overbeckan continent on Hura, casting twinkling shadows for hours over the desert.

“Tonight,” Jessie said, clear and confident.

“Tonight,” Shilinka said. “Perhaps. You have viewing platform tickets?”

“All booked,” Penn said. “We’ll head down in a few hours.”

“Wonderful, James, would you see if we can get tickets for the same platform. I’d love to spend more time with these enchanting girls.”

Both girls smiled.

“I’m sure we can arrange that,” James said.

* * *

The sun crept for the horizon. It hung behind a band of buoyant gray cloud, ten or fifteen degrees from setting. Bright lancing rays leapt across the firmament, their reflections slicing the still lake, turning it into a cracked mirror. Juniper and hawthorn stood on the far side, silhouettes frozen and eerie. Their piney scent lay heavy in the cool air.

Penn stood by the glass railing at the cylindrical platform’s edge. A circular puffy black vinyl sofa occupied the platform’s center, making it feel like a merry-go-round. The others sat there.

Jessie shivered and Penn went to her to zip up her jacket. She didn’t resist. She barely even noticed him. Her eyes focused on the dark maw of the cave, almost a kilometer away. The jacket closed up over the walkerskeleton, cocooning her against any chill.

Only a few hundred meters from the hotel, the platform afforded occupants a view of virtually the entire lake. Other platforms, spaced about every hundred meters, made a series along the low beach. Most had viewers. Families, couples, small tour groups. Possibly even a few locals.

“The hotel,” Shilinka said from her perch on the sofa, “would like the birds to fly every night.”

“They don’t like the empty rooms so much?” Penn said.

“The artwork includes many other things to explore. Walks in the junipers, a cave tour, art classes. They do all right.”

“And they charge a premium for nights around the predicted flight days.”

“There you are,” Shilinka said.

"And pay you."

She smiled. "I am a businesswoman, too. These structures cost significant amounts of money. Grants don't cover anything like the cost."

"Here they come," Matilda said. She leapt from the sofa, pointing along the glistening lake.

Penn looked.

* * *

The sound hissed around. Like a distant swarm of bees.

Penn saw what seemed to be a bright red haze, flowing from the cave. As if someone had taken a fog machine inside and mixed in cotton candy, spraying the resulting syrupy mess out over the water.

But as he watched, the haze coalesced.

Specks and glints. It reminded him of the snow on Mount Hilden. Fluttering down from a black sky, coating the whole mountainside.

"Oh boy," Matilda said.

Penn turned to Jessie. She stared straight out at the water, not at the approaching birds.

"Honey?" he said.

She coughed. He crouched to her. She blinked, eyes watery.

Vague. Pupils dilated.

"Watch them flock!" Matilda yelled. "Oh man!"

Shilinka and James stood with her. She bounced on her toes, excited. The sound of the birds grew louder and louder.

"Do you want the oxygen?" He reached to unzip the jacket.

"It's all right," Jessie said. She coughed again. Focus came back to her eyes. "Wannoo see vards."

Penn smiled. "All right." He held his hand out and she surprised him by taking it. In her own hand, not the walker's claw.

Together they took a few steps to the almost transparent rail. It adjusted itself to her height, so she would have a clear view.

The birds sped along in a sinuous, writhing flock. Penn could see they were birds now, rather than just a haze. Their plumage caught the low sun, throwing it off in spackles of coruscating vermilion and pinks, crimsons and ambers, scarlets and magentas.

The birds rose and plunged, swept left and right.

The swirl of colors streaked back from the lake. It was like two teams of saffron cherry ballerinas on opposite sides of a window, copying each other's every move.

"They're getting closer," Jessie said. She glanced at him, grinning, almost laughing.

Penn couldn't speak. There had to be thousands of birds. More still seemed to be coming from the cave.

As they darted along, wings beating, they chirruped to each other. To the viewers.

"Why don't they crash?" Matilda said. "There are millions. They can't keep track of every other bird. Even if they have got computer brains."

"Seventy-seven thousand," James said. "They don't crash because each bird keeps track of the nearest seven birds."

"An old principle," Shilinka said. "I stole it."

Jessie caught Penn's eyes. "Why doesn't she see the poetry?" she whispered.

"Who?"

"Matilda. It's like haiku in the sky."

Penn didn't even know Jessie knew what haiku was. But she was right. It was perfectly like haiku in the sky.

The birds had almost come abreast with the platform. Penn saw ripples in the surface. The wake from the flapping of thousands of wings. Even the ripples made startling patterns.

“Crimson paints blue air,” Jessie said. “Cold as night, but fiery gold, feather patterned lake.”

“Haiku,” James said.

“That’s wonderful,” Shilinka said. She looked at Penn. “Your daughter is a treasure.”

“I know,” Penn whispered, barely able to speak. So used to her slurring and struggling he felt stunned hearing her so articulate. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“Watch the birds, Dad,” she said.

“I will.”

Grinning, Penn watched them streak over the water, painting the air crimson. Through his hand he felt Jessie shiver.

The flock’s leading edge looped up, spinning high and arcing back over. It dove through the trailing mass, integrating and swinging low. Penn felt sure he saw wingtips touching the water, leaving more distinct wakes.

The aerobatics continued on. The group split and rejoined. It broke into a dozen or more units, each making their own reflected dance.

A half an hour, Penn thought, as the sun continued on for its nightly rest.

The birds ducked and wove. People on the next platform cheered and clapped, the sound somehow incongruous in the quiet continuous flap of wings.

As the last sliver of sun reached the horizon, the birds turned, all heading back for the cave. In under a minute, the show came to a close, the birds all slipping away. Vanishing.

Jessie took a breath. “I love it,” she said. She took Penn’s hand.

Matilda bounced over. “Did you see it! Wow!” Her grin just about split her face. Her eyes open bright and almost glowing. “Wow. It was amazing!” She hugged Jessie.

Jessie smiled. “Pretty amazing.”

Shilinka stood against the glass railing. Penn went to her, still holding Jessie’s hand.

“Thank you so much,” he said.

Shilinka just smiled. “We’ll be leaving in the morning. Would you join us for breakfast?”

“Would love to,” Jessie said. “Please.”

“I’d like to hear more of your haiku.”

“That was my first and only one.”

Shilinka bent closer. “Jessie, there are always more.” She stood. “James, can we get a vehicle to take us back?”

“I’ll arrange it,” James said.

As Shilinka stepped from the platform, James turned to Penn. In a barely audible whisper, James said, “Tomorrow we’ll have one of the birds, as a gift. If you’d like.”

Penn looked at Jessie.

“He doesn’t have to whisper,” she said. “I heard it anyway. Can we?”

Penn nodded.

“Breakfast, then,” James said. “I’ll have a cab along for us in a moment.” He stepped down with Shilinka.

Jessie turned to Penn, pulling him into a hug. She used the walkerskeleton’s strength to hold him close. “Thank you,” she said. “Best yet.” She gave a little cough.

“Are you all right?” Penn said, rubbing her back.

“Better than all right.” Pressed in tight against him, she kept smiling.

Matilda wrapped herself around them both. “Best yet. Best ever. Can we come

again next month?"

Penn smiled. "Let's get off to bed, you two. We can talk about it in the morning."

They peeled away. Penn saw several lit carriages trundling along from the hotel, coming to pick up them and other viewers. He felt warm and buoyant.

Maybe not a permanent solution, but perfect nonetheless.

A small miracle.

* * *

A scream woke him. For a broken second he forgot where he was.

The hotel. The suite's small separate bedroom. The smell of wood polish. A warm black and gold quilt lying across his—

Another scream. More of a wail.

Matilda.

Penn flew from his bed, through to the main room. Half-light from the big moon slashed through the curtain gap. Matilda sat on her bed, gasping, covers thrown back.

"What?" he said. "What's wr—"

"Jessie's not breathing."

"It's all right." Penn slowed. No sense in tripping.

"It's not all right!"

He bent to Jessie's bed. She didn't move as he leaned in. He listened at her mouth. No sound.

The room closed in on him.

He put his hand on her cheek. Cool.

A chill ran through his body.

"Jessie?" he said. He shook her shoulder. She lolled.

"What's wrong?" Matilda said.

"Call the desk," he told her.

"Is she dead?"

"Call the desk." Penn shifted. He put his arms under Jessie's back. Lifted her. She felt light as a bird.

A dead weight.

Please just be unconscious. But she really wasn't breathing.

He set her on the floor. Her head wobbled.

"Dad?" Matilda. Weak voiced.

"Call the desk. Now. Get a medic up here."

Reaching for the folded walkerskeleton, he grabbed the epinephrine jab. He unclipped the cover and stabbed her chest. The plunger wound quickly down.

No effect.

He put his mouth over Jessie's. She was too cold. He puffed a breath into her.

A tremor ran through him. *Not now*, he thought. *I'm not ready to lose you.*

He started pumping her chest. He felt like he'd fallen into a well. The sides constricting. Impregnable.

Somewhere in the distance he heard Matilda speaking. He heard a whimper.

For a moment he thought it was Jessie. Brought back to life. But it was Matilda. Shouting at someone. She seemed so far away.

Penn leaned back. What was he doing? Pushing something.

He shook, as if he'd fallen on ice. Sucking every last morsel of heat from his body.

No. Jessie. He needed to pump her chest. Had to keep her alive.

He leaned forward. Push. Push. Push.

Don't leave me.

He kept going. Push. Push.

Strong arms grabbed him. Pulled him away.

Someone said something in his ear. Some kind of instruction.

“No,” he said. “I’m busy here.” He couldn’t remember what it was, but whatever he was doing was very important. Very important.

He pushed again.

Someone tried again to pull him away. He fought back.

“Don’t.” Weeping now. “Don’t try to stop me.”

“Sir.” More strange instructions.

He kept pumping.

“Let him be,” someone said. “Work around him.”

“You have to stop doing that, sir.”

That’s right. Jessie. Push. Push. Come on. Her little heart’s gotta keep going.

“Sir.”

“Dad.” Jessie?

No. Matilda. He looked for her. Everything fuzzed. Blurred out of sight.

“Dad, let them help.”

Gentle arms now. Pulling him back. Matilda. Holding him.

Penn fell back. Landed. With a thump.

Matilda close. Penn sobbed.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t go.”

“Dad,” Matilda said.

“Oh, honey.” He pulled her into his arms while someone else said something or other was too late.

“Just breathe,” Penn whispered.

* * *

Numb, Penn didn’t know how cold or hot it was. The air on the restaurant’s balcony ruffled his hair. He sat on a stiff wooden chair at a white iron table with a glass top. A cup of cold tea stood next to a porcelain saucer with a cut bagel next to a wedge of cream cheese.

Looking at it made him feel nauseous. Had he ordered it?

The morning sun blasted down at him. That probably meant it was hot.

He didn’t know how he’d gotten here. Didn’t know how long he’d sat. A blackbird with an orange bill landed on the balcony railing. It inclined its head, staring at him.

Penn swallowed.

He heard a swishing sound from behind. The balcony door dilating. Quiet footsteps. He knew who it was. Shilinka Switalla.

Her hand touched his shoulder.

“Penn,” she said. “I’m so very sorry.”

He swallowed again. “We always knew.” A sob rose through him. “We always knew she wouldn’t have a long life.”

“May I?” Shilinka indicated the chair next to his.

“Please.”

The blackbird considered them a moment longer. It turned, flicking its wings out and darting away across the water.

“She had a good life,” Shilinka said.

Penn met her eyes. From anyone else that would have sounded like a platitude, but from Shilinka it was simply the truth.

“She did. I feel very—” he took a small gasp, “—privileged.”

“Jessie was a treasure. I saw her last night, heard her speaking. Her spontaneous haiku.”

Penn had to look away, blinking back tears. “It was the most I’d ever seen. All these places we’ve been, the sights we’ve seen.” He looked back at Shilinka. “Every spectacular thing pushed back the disease for a moment. As if her delight rose above all

else and let the Universe sparkle for her, bright and clear."

"From you," Shilinka said, leaning close, "she got poetry."

Penn almost said "hardly," but held it. Shilinka, he could tell, never spoke lightly.

"We were going to give you this," Shilinka said, placing a small box on the table. Penn knew it contained one of the birds. Not one of those tourist trinkets, he was sure, but a genuine facsimile identical to those that flew. The ones that had inspired Jessie's moment of poetry.

"I understand," Shilinka went on, "if you decline."

"I feel honored," he said. "Part of Jessie's memory."

He heard the swish of the door again and looked around. Matilda. Carrying a thick steaming cup in one hand, her drawing pane in the other. She stayed by the door, cheeks streaked, watching him and Shilinka.

"These moments," Shilinka said, eyes still on him, "were your real gift. You're a generous man and *I'm* honored to have met you."

Penn sobbed again. He felt like it was the opposite. This generous woman who'd effectively gifted the *Crimson Birds* for his daughter's last moments. "The honor," he said, about to add "is mine," but she put her wizened hand to his lips.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I hope we meet again." She stood and went to Matilda, whispering a few words Penn didn't hear before heading back through the restaurant.

Matilda came to sit with him. She sniffed. He could hardly look at her.

"How are you doing?" he managed.

"Awful. You?"

"About the same."

She sniffed, holding back a full-on crying jag, he could see that. "I drew this," she said, holding the drawing pane out to him.

He took it. Shilinka was right. Matilda was very talented. She should exhibit, he thought.

And he realized what it really was on the pane. A pencil drawing of Jessie. The strokes perfect and controlled, the shading highlighting her eyes and smile. A rare, beautiful expression on her face. Exactly the smile she'd worn last night, out on the platform watching the birds.

Matilda had written Jessie's haiku in the right corner, below her face.

*Crimson paints blue air
Cold as night, but fiery gold,
Feather patterned lake*

A sob escaped him and Matilda leaned into his arms. He held her close.

"Just you and me now," she whispered.

He didn't know how to respond. Right now it was perfect just to hold her. He could not remember the last time she'd held him with love like this. There had been so much distance between them.

Jessie's real gift, he thought, letting him be close to Matilda again.

Staring over her shoulder, he saw a lone condor, soaring free and high, riding thermals, as beautiful as just about anything in the world.

"I'm thrilled to be part of the fortieth anniversary celebration. The idea for my current story borrows in part from one of my favorite tales by Isaac Asimov, "That Thou Art Mindful of Him," which features robot birds. The story has lingered with me since I first read it in the 1977 edition of *The Bicentennial Man*

January/February 2017

collection—forty years! It wasn't until after I'd completed my own story that I realized I'd subconsciously borrowed so freely.”

—Sean Monaghan