The Bird King

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Part 1
The Pigeons

I was just about to get off my shift when Mom called and told me that Love was dead. She shouted it into my ear without even saying hello, without any kind of lead-up. I went into the customer bathroom and locked the door. Confused crane flies bumped their heads against the small window at the top of the wall above me, dangling their legs beneath them, awkwardly heavy for their tiny bodies. I watched them while Mom babbled away, her voice shrill, almost jubilant. She repeated the three words again and again as if she needed to hear them herself: *Love is dead*. After we hung up, I simply stood there, paralyzed, motionless. I turned on the tap and ran my wrists beneath the cold water, then leaned forward and let it stream over my face, washing off all my makeup. It was like the years were rushing through me, all the years I've lived, like being sucked backward through a tunnel.

Jeanette was putting new hot dogs on the grill when I came out. She'd styled her hair in a way that was a bit much for a Sunday shift at a gas station. I walked over to her and stood there for a few seconds, staring at the clips fastened in her shiny hair, sprayed stiff with layer upon layer of hairspray. She turned toward me, her mouth forming an O when she saw my face.

"What in the world happened to you?" she said.

"Is it okay if I head out a bit early today?" I asked.

"Of course, but what's going on?" she asked.

I glanced over the counter—there was no one there except for Werner, who was sitting in a corner drinking coffee, lifting the cup to his mouth as if in slow motion. I looked at Jeanette, at her filled-in brows, painted on like two wings, and I thought: now I can leave the ground behind, now I have wings. For the first time in fifteen years, I can fly. The feeling hit me like a punch to the gut as I stared at Jeanette's eyebrows rising and falling on her concerned face. The words tumbled out—through my mouth, with a breath:

"Love is dead," I said.

Vigdis Malmstrøm woke to the sound of a wasp that had found its way into the bedroom. Still half asleep, she listened to it bumping softly against the curtain. Its angry buzzing wove itself into her dream, which adapted to the foreign sound for a few seconds—until the dream unraveled and only the buzzing remained. She got out of bed and opened the window, watching the wasp float away before she lay back down again.

She had no idea how long she'd been asleep when her phone rang on the floor beside her. Fumbling for it with one hand, she saw the call was from dispatch. Her voice rasped in her ears as she sat up, still gravelly with sleep.

"Vigdis Malmstrøm."

The voice on the other end was chirpy, and she didn't recognize it or the name that followed. They asked if she was on call.

"Yes, I'm on duty," Vigdis said, standing up and waiting for more.

"We have a patrol car out at a house in Tyritorp."

"Okay?"

"Patrol entered the residence at approximately half past seven this morning following a call from a neighbor. We have a confirmed DOA. According to units on site, something seems off."

"Off?" Vigdis repeated, switching the phone to her other hand.

"They've cordoned off the area and are waiting for you there," said the high, almost sing-songy voice. It reminded her of a boy soprano—silver and genderless.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," she said as she stared at the light streaming into the room through a crack in the blackout curtain, casting a precise white stripe across the polished wooden floor.

She drove south along the highway from Nordbygda, turning off a few miles before the town center and heading up toward Tyritorp. The dirt road ran between two fields, an old stone wall on one side, birch trees lining the other. She spotted the patrol car from a distance, parked outside what must have once been a small homestead. The main house was a modest, two-story building perched on a tall foundation, its double set of large, lifeless windows staring blankly down at Vigdis. There were two other houses on the property, both newer builds. The little hamlet had gotten its name from the original farm: Tyritorp.

She turned off the engine. A woman was standing on the porch of one of the neighboring houses, but quickly retreated when Vigdis nodded to her, the door swinging shut in front of her face. Vigdis glanced toward the other neighboring house. No one was in sight.

A weathered old Land Rover was parked in front of the patrol car. Vigdis thought she might have seen it cruising around the village before with a dark-haired, burly man behind the wheel. She caught a glimpse of something in the trunk as she walked past—it looked like a birdcage. The gravel crunched beneath her feet as she walked toward the old house, where patrol had set up inner and outer perimeters. She ducked beneath the outer one and spotted her colleague, criminal investigator Naima Saleem, talking into her radio on the stairs. She ended the conversation when Vigdis approached.

"Male victim, around forty. Shot in the chest. Dead on arrival," Naima said, brushing a few strands of hair out of her face.

"Anyone else in the house?" Vigdis asked.

"Nope. Just him," Naima said, and handed her a disposable white PPE suit.

"Who called it in?" she asked as she stepped into the suit.

"A neighbor called it in this morning. William and I were on patrol. He's with her now," Naima said, nodding toward the neighboring house. Vigdis caught a glimpse of the top of the roof, partly hidden by a silver birch.

"Has he been identified?"

"Not officially, but it's the owner of the house, according to the neighbor," Naima replied. "His name is Lars Ove Jansen."

Vigdis glanced toward the driveway.

"Did he drive a Land Rover?" she asked. Naima nodded without looking. Vigdis noticed a faint smudge of mascara beneath one of her eyes.

"He's in the living room," Naima replied.

The hallway floor had a faded floral pattern, the linoleum mottled in shades from white to brown. A worn wooden staircase led up to the second floor. It was dim inside and the air was stale, a mix of mold and something sweet, almost cloying. A large, framed photograph of a little boy hung on the wall, a typical school portrait. The photo was slightly discolored as if from water damage, but you could still see that the boy had a big, dimpled smile and missing front teeth, an open book propped in front of him. She continued further into the hallway and pushed open the tall door to the living room, where the sweet smell grew even stronger.

A man was sitting directly in front of her, slumped in an armchair, his arms hanging down over the sides. His mouth was agape, torn open as if by a scream. One eye was staring into nothingness, the other was closed. He was bathed in the soft morning light filtering through the lace curtains. She recognized the twisted face; it was the man she'd seen driving the Land Rover around town.

Vigdis forced herself to walk up to the chair, a wave of nausea hitting her as she leaned forward and stared at the small, dark patch of blood on the front of his cotton t-shirt. She couldn't tell if the smell was coming from him or something else. His blood had sprayed in a straight line across the floor toward the doorway. Other than that, there was very little mess. She swept her gaze across the room, which was furnished with various old objects—lamps, ashtrays, trinkets cluttering the windowsill. She noticed a porcelain figure of a child and a dog staring into each other's eyes; she'd had the same one as a child. It was only when she stepped to the side that she spotted the pistol on the floor. What appeared to be a Luger was lying just in front of the patio door. She measured the distance with her eyes: roughly six feet from the pistol to the man in the chair. Sunbeams streamed onto the windowsill, and she suddenly remembered the name of the porcelain figure of the dog and child. It was called "Can't you speak?"

Mom is standing in front of the trailer when I get back. She stubs her cigarette out in the flowerpot she uses as an ashtray and holds the flap to the awning open for me. She must have just finished washing the floor inside. There's a bucket on the floor with a rag lying on top like a tablecloth. She pulls the door shut behind me and points at my shoes.

"Take 'em off," she says.

Then it's like she remembers there was something else she should've said first and wraps her arms around me. I let her hug me, smelling the scent of smoke mixed with pine soap.

"Oh, honey," she says. I pull away and look at her.

"Who told you?"

"Who? No one, I guess. I heard it at the store. Everyone was talking about it."

I feel something surge inside me, sudden and jerky.

"Goddammit. Why can't people just keep their mouths shut?" I say, and once I've said it, it's like it grabs hold of me and drags me along, relentless, and I repeat—so loudly I'm almost screaming—"Why the fuck can't people just keep their mouths shut?"

I raise my hands, my fingers splaying and curling like claws, like I'm a wild animal. If I had something to tear into, I would.

Mom has started filling the kettle. Her dress is covered in a shiny, gaudy pattern with flowers that look like dragons spitting water. She doesn't really react to my shouting.

“Have people ever kept their mouths shut?” she says with her back to me as she takes the can of instant coffee from the cupboard.

I sit down on the sofa, which wraps around the coffee table like a horseshoe. Mom sets a cup of coffee in front of me. She opens the fridge, pulls out a carton of milk, and splashes some in my cup. I glance at the carton.

“Skim milk,” I mumble. “Are you on a diet again?”

She doesn’t answer, just grabs the half-smoked cigarette from the ashtray and fiddles with her lighter.

“Can you at least open the window?” I say. “Otherwise I’ll puke.”

She pushes the roof hatch open, the skin dangling loosely from her upper arm. Aside from the roof hatch, the room is sealed around us like a tin can.

“Where’s Carla?” I ask, looking around. My daughter has more or less moved in here, even though school started up again a few days ago.

“In the trailer over there,” Mom says and points out the window.

“Was it his heart?” I ask, looking down at my coffee. The skim milk gives it a watery brown color. I take a sip, and it tastes just about as good as it looks. She shakes her head.

“They said there was an ambulance outside the house,” she says.

I picture the driveway of the house where Love has lived his entire life. Where I once lived with him when we were together, half a lifetime ago.

“An ambulance and two police cars,” Mom says. She takes a puff of her cigarette, tilts her head back, and blows smoke toward the roof hatch.

“Police,” I say, and suddenly the fear is back—because it never really goes away. It never will. I get up abruptly, shove aside the curtain that divides the trailer in two, pass Carla’s bunk bed, find the tiny bathroom, and do the same thing I did at work: run my wrists under the cold water and wash my face. Afterward, I dry off with one of Mom’s threadbare towels, pressing the nearly transparent fabric to my face as I think about the wings that were supposed to grow between my shoulder blades, the ones I’d felt earlier today, the ones I was going to fly with.

A colleague from the patrol unit had taken over for Naima when Vigdis came out. He told her the crime scene tech was on his way. Vigdis breathed in the fresh air. She stepped down the stairs and onto the grass, her colleague’s radio crackling behind her. The ropes on a flagpole in the middle of the garden were slapping and ringing against the pole in the light breeze.

Vigdis caught a glimpse of herself in a window, looking like an alien in her white PPE suit. A lopsided clothesline with a few sun-bleached clothespins dangled in the wind. She spotted a shed with a tall roof at the very back of the garden. The entire front side was made of chicken wire, and she could hear rustling and bird sounds coming from inside. Still, it took her a few seconds to realize that the shed was full of pigeons. They started flapping frantically as she approached, their cooing growing louder. She pulled out her phone and called dispatch as she peered inside.

"This is Vigdis Malmstrøm. I'm at a crime scene, and there are a ton of pigeons here. The owner is deceased. Can someone figure out what we should do with them?" she said, feeling the rush of air from the birds' thrashing wings against her face. The walls were covered in small shelves shaped like rooftops and the pigeons perched on top of them, reminding her of grave ornaments in a cemetery.

Bård Jensen had arrived. The crime scene tech was standing in the living room with a camera hanging around his neck and a measuring tape in his gloved hand. Vigdis was happy to see him. The oppressive atmosphere in the room somehow felt easier to handle now, and even the smell seemed less intrusive.

"Hi, Bård," she said. He straightened up.

"Hi, Vigdis."

She stopped in front of the man in the armchair and nodded toward him.

"I only see one entry wound."

"Me too," Bård said, moving around the chair. She followed him. "It seems to have exited there," he said as he pointed at the back.

Vigdis leaned forward and saw a small hole in the eggplant-colored leather.

"Who reported it?" he asked, lifting the camera.

"A neighbor."

"Did they come inside?" he asked. He snapped a few pictures.

"I don't know," Vigdis said, looking around the room. The sunlight had changed angles and was no longer hitting the armchair. The porcelain figures were still clustered on the windowsill as if in the middle of a conversation. She lowered her gaze to the Luger lying on the floor.

"She might've kicked the gun," she said.

Bård lowered the camera. His forehead was shiny with sweat beneath the hood of his suit.

"You know he's an old acquaintance?" he said.

"Of the police?"

“Love Jansen,” Bård said, wiping his forehead with his forearm and pushing the hood back. “We haven’t heard much from him lately, but he’s racked up quite the record.”

The forecast called for rain, but the rain never came. The clouds just drifted by, gray and dry. Someone had ordered a pizza, and the box lay open on the table. Naima was twisting a napkin between her fingers, still dressed in her uniform. William Lund, who had been working with them since graduating from the police academy a little over a year ago, sat at the head of the table, where he stacked two slices and folded them in half. He was devouring them as he said:

“I thought eating might help. But I just can’t get full.”

Naima nodded silently. Vigdis grabbed a slice.

“Nobody’s going home today before we have a debriefing,” she said, scooting her chair forward a bit. Naima opened her laptop, and a large photo of Lars Ove Jansen appeared, taken during an arrest from several years ago. His face was broad with dark shadows beneath his eyes. Vigdis was reminded of the school portrait hanging in the hallway.

“Lars Ove Jansen,” Naima said. “Also known by the nickname Love. 40 years old, worked part-time at Sørbygda Sawmill.”

“The sawmill here in the village?” William asked.

“Yep. He was born and raised in Tyritorp and has lived there his whole life, apart from a few stints in prison. Decent criminal record, but it’s been a while since we’ve heard anything from him.”

Vigdis swallowed a bite of pizza. She thought of the face she’d seen in the dim light of the house, one eye open, the other closed, the mouth that looked like it had been torn open by force.

“First conviction, drug dealing, when he was 17. Same thing again a year later. Then several more convictions followed: driving without a license, burglary. His longest sentence was for the armed robbery of a bank in Veiker fifteen years ago. He was sentenced to four years without parole and served the full term. Seems like he left the criminal life behind after that.”

“Family?” Vigdis asked, unscrewing the cap from a bottle of fizzy water.

“Nope. No close family, no registered children or partner. His mother died a couple of years ago,” Naima replied.

Vigdis turned to William.

“Have we contacted any next of kin?”

“Not yet. Apparently there’s a cousin, but he hasn’t answered the phone.”

“Okay. Keep working on it. We’ll hold off on releasing the name until we’ve notified him. Then we can see what kind of tips come in.”

“Are we getting any backup?” Naima asked, exchanging a glance with William. Vigdis took a sip of water.

“I’ve spoken to Elin Hammer,” she said. “We’ll know more about resources by tomorrow. She’s coming to our morning meeting. But we have to act on fresh leads now. Most people forget most of what they’ve seen or heard within 48 hours.”

Carla’s grandma moved out to the campground this spring and has been living here all summer. She has an awning attached to her trailer and a wooden deck outside with two chairs and a plastic table covered in a large jigsaw puzzle. Grandma doesn’t have flowerpots or garden gnomes like lots of the other trailers. She has a small, rickety table that she bought at a flea market, decorated with real butterflies pressed under a glass top. You can see their little bodies pressed flat under the glass— “lying in repose,” as Grandma puts it. Their wings shimmer blue and green. Grandma keeps her ashtray on top of it.

In the evenings, she smokes and works on the puzzle. She rolls her own cigarettes. The puzzle has 1,000 pieces and is set up on a wooden board. She carries the whole thing into the awning every night, along with the butterfly table. Last year, she finished Gustav Klimt’s “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I.” It took the whole summer. Now, it’s Van Gogh’s “The Church at Auvers.” It’s almost fall and she still isn’t finished. Carla helps her, but that doesn’t really make things go any faster. She likes the feeling she gets when she finds the right piece. She doesn’t know what to call it, it’s just good.

Grandma buys her puzzles at flea markets. “The Church at Auvers” was still wrapped in plastic when she got it. The church looks like it’s trembling, like it’s about to disintegrate. It looks like an animal. The fact that Carla is fourteen and spends her evenings sitting outside a trailer working on puzzles with her grandma—well, she tries not to think about that too much. She’s been living at the campground since the beginning of summer break. Now break is over, but Grandma doesn’t move back home, and neither does Carla. There are only eight trailers in the campground. Most were used a little during the summer, but it’s just Grandma and Carla left now—and the deer.

The armchair was empty, but there was still an imprint in the leather where Lars Ove Jansen had been sitting. Vigdis walked over and examined the back of the chair. It looked like a bullet hole had been sliced into the shiny leather with a scalpel.

The crime scene officer on duty appeared at the open living room door.

"There's a journalist here," he said. "What should I do?"

"I'll take care of it," Vigdis said. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror hanging in the wallpapered hallway—the white crime scene suit, her hair tucked under her hood. She paused for a few seconds, remembered her lipstick was in her purse out in the car, then moved on.

Two journalists were standing at the outer perimeter. She recognized one of them as the crime reporter from the local newspaper. He squinted at her through his thick glasses. The other was from one of the national papers, holding out her phone as a microphone, her hand beyond the cordon. Vigdis stopped and pulled her hood down.

"Please stay outside the perimeter," she said coolly.

"What happened here?" the local reporter asked, notepad ready.

"A body was discovered at the scene. That's all I can say for now."

"What can you tell us about the cause of death?"

"Nothing at this time."

"Are you treating the death as suspicious?" the other reporter asked, now holding her phone just outside the tape.

"As I said, I can't say any more at this time. We'll hold a briefing later," Vigdis said.

On her way back to the house, she pulled out her phone and checked the local news site. The story was already up—a picture of the police tape, the patrol car, a short video clip of the house. *Story being updated*, it read at the bottom. She checked the national paper as well and saw it had the same thing: a photo, a few brief lines. She shoved her phone back into her pocket, annoyed.

She headed for the kitchen once she got back inside. There was an empty bowl with a spoon in it and a box of cornflakes on the counter. She studied them. A bowl, a spoon, a cereal box… not exactly what you'd offer someone if you had company. She spotted a bird feeder outside that was almost completely full of seeds. He must have filled it recently, maybe even only yesterday. What kind of person feeds birds in the middle of summer? She watched the sparrows eating outside and thought about death. You're there one day, going

about your business, and the next day you're not. Everything continues like before, but you're no longer there.

It's everywhere now. Spreading. On all the news sites—photos of the house and garden with police tape out front. There's nothing new, though, no real updates, just a note saying the story is being updated. Mom doesn't have a TV in the trailer, but she checks her phone when she thinks I'm not looking. I'm lying on the old camp bed outside with the flowery blanket, my knees pulled up to my chest, the metal frame pressing into my hip. The garden table is made of plastic. If you bump into it, everything jumps and teeters so whatever's in your cup or glass spills out. Mom has had that table and the camp bed for as long as I can remember. She never replaces anything, no matter how impractical it is. She just adapts—and doesn't fill the coffee cups all the way to the brim.

When I was in elementary school, there was a boy in my class who would sometimes hit us without anyone stopping him. You'd be walking across the playground, minding your own business, and suddenly get socked in the gut. I still remember the feeling—how he knocked the air out of me, that sudden rush of pain, fear, and confusion. That's how it feels now. Like I can't quite fill my lungs.

Mom comes out carrying a tray with a pitcher of fruit punch and three glasses. She sets them down on the jumpy table.

"So that's what you thought I needed?" I say, sitting up halfway. "A glass of punch?"

Mom settles into a newer camping chair and lights a cigarette.

"Was there something else you wanted?" she says, crossing one leg over the other.

"Yeah," I say without moving. She jerks her thumb toward the trailer.

"There's gin in the cupboard, tonic in the fridge, ice in the freezer. Help yourself."

The camp bed creaks as I get up. I cross the deck and kick off my sandals before going in. The vinyl floor is warm under my feet, and it smells faintly of plastic inside. I take two glasses from the cupboard and slice a lemon, then grab the ice tray from the freezer, banging it against the counter to loosen the cubes. A wasp is buzzing at the window, but it can't be opened. I take a few sips standing at the counter, feeling the drink fizz against the roof of my mouth, and it's like the pressure in my chest eases up a little. I pour some more gin into my glass before heading back outside. Mom is sitting with her back to me, scrolling on her phone. I catch a glimpse of a photo of Love's house over her shoulder as I place a glass on the table in front of her. Then the tears come like rain, washing me from the inside

out. Mom sets her phone down—she's crying now too—but she stops before I do, waves away a wasp, and takes a sip.

We don't notice Carla coming until she's suddenly there, standing between the trailers, silent as an animal, dry leaves tangled in her hair.

"Are you crying?" she asks.

"Just a little," Mom says. "Come here."

Carla doesn't ask what's wrong, she just walks over, sits down on the ground in front of her, and lets her pick the leaves from her hair. The sight of it fills me with longing—longing to be the one she's sitting in front of, the one who gets to touch her hair. All I have to do is reach out, but I don't. Showing care isn't something you can just do on a whim.

"Where have you been?" I ask.

"In my trailer."

"What were you doing?"

"Watching YouTube."

"What were you watching?" I ask. I often ask that kind of thing without really listening when she answers. Carla leans against Mom's knees. Her hair is shoulder-length, her lids lowered, pale lashes casting soft shadows down her cheeks. She fiddles with her phone, with Mom's fingers in her hair, and I lean back in the camp bed, breathing in the slightly musty smell of the fabric. I take a sip of gin and repeat:

"What were you watching?"

"Pigeons," she says.

It was late when Vigdis got home. The sun had been beating down on the living room windows all afternoon, and she opened the patio door to let some air in. Yesterday's dishes were still on the counter—a plate, a knife with some crusted cheese, a wine glass, a grape stem. She tossed the stem in the garbage and put the plate and glass in the dishwasher. The bottle of wine she'd opened last night was still in the fridge, and she poured herself a glass. It was too late to make dinner. She spread the rest of the cheese onto a few crackers and carried them out onto the terrace, wine glass in hand. Sunday night. Family time. She and Joachim always used to eat dinner together late on Sundays. Then she would read or watch TV, and Joachim would play computer games in his room. Now it was just her, alone within the walls of the home she had spent the last twenty years building around her son. Without him, it felt

as worthless as an empty milk carton. Joachim was gone, and the packaging was left flapping in the wind.

He'd moved out a month ago, was renting an apartment in Oslo with a friend and had gotten a job at a warehouse. He hadn't been back home a single time since he left. She'd been so happy when he moved; she wanted him to go out in the world, after all. And yet… She took a sip of wine and thought about how she would give almost anything just to be able to hug her son. Imagine if he came right now—he'd ring the doorbell and she'd find him standing on the porch, tall and brimming with fresh air, full of strength, the kind of physical power that simply comes naturally, he'd fling his bag on the floor and let her hug him for a few seconds before pulling away. If she shut her eyes, she could almost feel it. She gazed across the dark garden, where late summer had settled in—at ease now, its work completed after the vibrant, surging energy of spring and high summer. Now, it was over. The garden had finished blooming, the rhubarb leaves were as big as umbrellas, the rose branches drooped heavy and dark on the trellis. The birds had left their nests.

Mom is sitting outside the trailer in the dark, her phone glowing in her hand. The half-finished puzzle she's been working on is on the table, but it's too dark for that now. I sit down in the empty chair next to her.

"I think I'm gonna stay home from work tomorrow," I say.

"Why?" she says, putting her phone down.

"Because Love is dead."

I can't see her face, but her voice is clear and steady in the dark.

"You're staying home from work because someone you were with fifteen years ago is dead?"

"He's not just dead, Mom! He was murdered!"

"How do you know that? You don't. No one's told you that."

"Because the police were there! Because it was on TV…" I say weakly.

"Listen to me," Mom says, leaning forward. "You are going to work tomorrow. People are going to talk, and if you aren't at work, they'll talk even more."

"People are already talking, and now they have more to talk about than ever," I say, my voice raised and my temples pounding.

"Shh," Mom says. "There's no point in sitting around here shouting. I thought you didn't even care about him, Gry?"

She points at her phone.

"They're asking for tips on the news."

"Who?"

"The police. They're calling the death suspicious. Promise me you won't give them any tips."

"Mom. I don't *have* any tips. We broke up fifteen years ago. What would I even tell them?"

"I'm just saying," she continues. "Don't get involved. Don't talk to anyone. Don't say anything. Say you don't know anything. Don't answer if anyone asks."

I stand up abruptly and stride into the trailer. She doesn't follow me. Carla is lying on the narrow lower bunk inside, her phone lighting up her face. I sit down on the edge of the bed.

"Hi, sweetie," I say.

"Hi."

"How's it going?"

"Fine."

I should have said more, but where would I even start?

"Can I lie here for a bit?" Carla doesn't respond, but she makes room, wriggles over slightly, leaving a thin strip of space for me. I lie down carefully—don't overdo it, don't hold her, just breathe in the smell of her hair, soft and sun-warmed. I rest my arm lightly across her and lie there, breathing, until she says: "Mom, you have to go now. I'm trying to sleep."

Through the window, I see the sky glowing faintly over the woods. I get up, bumping my elbow against the wall, and whisper to her: "I must've fallen asleep. I'll head home now. Goodnight, sweetie." She doesn't respond, she's already asleep in the forest, my little green one.