

IVORY-BILL SIGHTING

The first time Gina saw the twin boys, they were waiting at the bus stop on the first day of school. Gina's birder's eye caught them in the chaos of passing foot traffic, the same way that in a forest made up of greens and browns she caught a flash of red that might mean only a cardinal, or the elusive and magical scarlet tanager, or even the ivory-billed woodpecker, so rare that it had slipped from reality into myth. If Gina wanted to catch glimpses of birds she had never seen – as if by seeing them, she pinned them to the world and made them real – her eyes had to make up for the rest of her failing body. Her eyes had never let her down yet. So, out of the tangle of moving people and the grime of city exhaust caught in a haze of humidity, she saw the two boys, who with their pale skin and blond hair looked like they had been transplanted from some pure snow-covered country.

They looked innocent, practically angelic, Gina thought, standing too early at her kitchen window with a cup of herbal tea. The muggy late-August city weather did her body no favors. The boys had delicate faces, narrow noses and high cheekbones. They stood shoulder to shoulder, separate from the knot of other neighborhood kids, as if they needed to hold each other up, or as if they were getting ready to march off together into battle. Gina guessed they were about eleven or twelve years old: they had narrow shoulders and chests, and the uneasy gangly look of kids trying to settle into their growing bodies. She could see their profiles, both set and serious. They wore jeans like the other neighborhood kids, but the fabric looked dark and new, free of faded patches and ragged hems. They wore button-down shirts instead of baggy tees, and neither of them had a sports

team baseball cap turned the regulation wrong way with the bill yanked down in the back. Their backpacks and clean sneakers looked new too.

The neighborhood kids ignored them. Gina knew the locals very well; she and her husband Ted had lived on this street, in this same red brick rowhouse, since they'd gotten married eleven years before. Gina had seen the same kids year after year, working their way down the row of houses at Halloween with their pillowcases and brown paper bags, or sloping off to the 7-Eleven at the corner for sodas and candy. She had watched one generation of kids grow up and either slip into the stream of regular city life, working blue-collar jobs with too-light paychecks, or else disappear into the city's shadowy fringes. People around here walked a narrow line that didn't always stay on the right side of despair. The kids at the bus stop could tell that the two blond-haired boys came from some other place, probably one where you could trust today and believe in tomorrow, so they didn't try to reach across the strangeness and talk to them.

Gina stood at the window, sipping her tea, and watched the school bus pull up on the other side of the chain link fence that separated her narrow strip of yard from the sidewalk. The neighborhood kids got on it first, littlest kids at the head of the line because some of them still looked forward to getting to school, and then the older girls, with the boys bringing up the rear in a tangle of shoving elbows and thumping feet. The twins waited until the very last second, after the last of the other boys had disappeared into the bus. Then one started up the steps with the other following on his heels.

The door closed behind them and the bus pulled away from the curb in a grind of noise and a cloud of fresh exhaust. Its high yellow sides towered over the rest of the cars in the stream of traffic. Through the dirty windows, Gina couldn't make out the shapes of the kids inside, but she kept her eye on the bus until it turned left at the next traffic light and disappeared.

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Gina had quit her job back in May. She had loved working at the inner-city library, but after a while the hours on her feet got to be too hard. She'd still gone stubbornly back every morning until Ted finally talked her out of it. His job at the university could support them both, he insisted. His health insurance would at least make a dent in her medical bills. He wanted her to have time to relax, he said, take care of herself, and most importantly, get out into quiet woods and open spaces and look for her birds. Every birder, Gina included, had a lifetime list of species to find. Gina and Ted never had to talk about how the word "lifetime" didn't mean the same thing to her that it did to other people.

When Gina was seventeen, her friends had said goodbye to high school, made plans for college, gotten engaged. Gina hadn't had a chance to shape her future before chilly medical words seemed to wipe it away. The thing migrating through her body had no proven treatment and no guarantees.

Now, almost twenty years later, she knew she had spent more than half her life on borrowed time. Treatments kept the disease at bay, but couldn't cure it or hold it off forever. She was already luckier than she had any right to be. Still, every night before she went to sleep, she wrapped her right hand around her left wrist to feel her heartbeat.

That first morning when she saw the twins, she finished her tea after the bus pulled away, rinsed her cup at the kitchen sink and went back to bed for the last few minutes before Ted's alarm went off. She knew she wouldn't get back to sleep, but she liked those moments when the sun spilled like honey through the gaps in the window shades and she could lie on her back and listen to Ted breathing beside her. He slept curled up on his side, always facing her, with the sheet pulled up over his head and around his face so he looked like a papoose. She liked the way sleep melted years and worry from him. And even though the alarm made her jump every time, she liked the moment after Ted fumbled behind him to turn it off. When he opened his eyes and looked at her, they could

have been any married couple, leaning on each other the way you leaned on a strong old tree that had always been there and always would be.

This morning, after the alarm went off, she and Ted traded the smile they had greeted each other with every morning for eleven years. Ted said, “How are you feeling today?”

“I’m okay.”

Ted’s hand found hers under the sheet and rested on top of it. She felt the cool pressure of his wedding ring against her little finger. “Are you hurting?” he asked.

“Some.”

She never lied, and he never pitied. “What are you going to do today?” he asked.

“I thought I’d go up to Roland Park. See who’s around.”

“Who” meant birds, not people. Roland Park, a few miles north of the city, gave Gina her closest outlet into the woods. She had been there often enough to know what kinds of birds she’d normally find: thrushes and finches, sparrows, maybe a bluebird or two. Nothing more exciting than that, but the quiet green woods and the smooth gray-blue surface of the lake were worth the trip by themselves.

Ted smiled. “Say hi for me.”

“I will.”

After he took the bus to the university, Gina backed their rattling old Celica out of the narrow alleyway behind the rowhouses and drove north to the park. Ted had also finally talked her into getting a handicapped parking tag, which would have let her put the car right next to the entrance gate, but if she couldn’t walk the length of the parking lot she thought she might as well pack it in right now. She slung her binoculars around her neck and picked up her backpack, which held her birding notebook, water bottle and a peanut butter sandwich. One step after another, she crossed the parking lot and went through the gate and down to the lake.

A handful of people were out today, joggers and a couple of dog-walkers getting out early to try to beat the August heat. Gina sat down at a picnic table near the water, bracing herself for the walk around the lake in the sun, to get to the woods and trailheads on the other side. A couple of years ago, she wouldn't have needed this breather. The sky was a crisp, clear blue, but the air felt soupy and thick, and the sun came down on her like a too-hot shower.

She got up from the table. One step after another: surely the lake got bigger every time. Maybe that was it, Gina thought. Maybe her body wasn't getting weaker after all. The lake, the parking lot, even her own house were playing a trick on her, stretching themselves out when she wasn't looking, whispering and giggling to each other behind her back.

The black backpack heated up in the sun and tugged at her shoulders. She didn't really need her birding notebook at a place like this. It only meant extra weight to carry. Always, though, there was the chance of a flash of color, a rustle of movement, and maybe, if she was quick enough, she would lift the binoculars in time to catch someone new resting on a branch or needling through the gap between trees. The bird would be there whether she saw it or not, but if she recorded it, that here-and-gone presence would stay forever on her page.

She wouldn't see any of her real lifetime birds here; she'd have to go farther afield. Out west, for instance, for the festival-colored green jays and painted buntings. To New England for loons, to hear that soaring spine-tingling call in the wild for the first time. A few years ago Gina might have been able to plan trips to other parts of the country. Probably not anymore.

One particular bird, though, she would have loved to see, and once upon a time she could have found it not far from home. The ivory-billed woodpecker had been common in the southeast before woodland gave way to suburbs and highways. It had been huge, hawk-sized, easily outclassing its next-biggest cousin, the pileated. Its sleek black body had been ornamented with white patches

like racing stripes on its shoulders and sides. On its head it had a thatch of ruby-colored feathers like a beacon.

It had been magnificent. Gina would have liked to see it for that reason alone, but more importantly, no one could be sure it still existed. Ivory-bills had disappeared along with the virgin forests. Even so, more than seventy years after the last confirmed sightings, rumors floated around the birding world that they were out there somewhere, if only you knew where to look.

The first trailhead came up on the left and Gina ducked into the trees. As the green-and-brown shade closed around her, she took a deep breath of the cooler air. She wouldn't find any ivory-bills here, only sparrows and robins, blue jays and chickadees, but they were still worth it. Her body might not let her walk very far today. Better start.

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As August gave way to September, the heat drained little by little out of the city. Most mornings Gina still woke up too early. She didn't mind, because it gave her a chance to check on the kids at the bus stop.

She had thought that after a few weeks of school, the twin boys would have found a place for themselves. They weren't like the other neighborhood kids, but the kids Gina knew weren't "bad." They had tough attitudes and thick skins, had learned early on to brace themselves against whatever life threw at them, trying to take care of themselves and get by. With a little effort, Gina thought, the twins would find a way to reach across to them.

That didn't seem to happen. Gina watched, every morning, as the two blond boys stood shoulder to shoulder at the bus stop. They never said a word to anyone, even each other. Their faces never relaxed into smiles. At first Gina thought she might be imagining things, but as the weeks went on she felt sure the boys had started to look steadily older. Not the way kids should look as they grow up, as if the real selves inside them had bloomed and filled them out. They looked like

adults whose faces had crumpled into permanent tiredness, after something had hurt too much for too long.

Those early mornings, she didn't open the door and cross the yard to the bus stop to talk to the kids. She could have, even in her bathrobe and slippers. She knew most of the kids by name, or at least had seen them around, maybe knew an older sibling who had finished with school and moved on. Her appearance would have startled them. There would have been some shuffling and muttering, one or two "Hey, Miss Gina"s from kids who took her handouts at Halloween. They wouldn't have appreciated an adult barging into the temporary private world they built every morning. Still, she thought later, she might have built a bridge between the insiders and the outsiders, if she had done something as simple as ask the twins their names.

She didn't try. The narrow yard seemed to get bigger, stretching an impossible distance from her back door to the sidewalk, the same way the lake had grown at Roland Park. Gina didn't like to go outside in her bathrobe and show the world her too-skinny arms and bony ankles. Real fall weather came fast and early that year, so that the mornings felt crisp and too chilly.

One morning early in October, one of the twins came to the bus stop alone. Gina didn't think much about it at the time, but when Ted came home from work that evening, he dropped his briefcase on the floor by the kitchen table and turned on the TV that sat on the narrow counter. "I ran into Maurice Brown down the street just now," he said, changing the channel with the remote. "He told me..."

He didn't finish. The local news blared on. Ted sat down next to Gina at the table.

Gina didn't feel like watching the news. She hadn't gotten outside during the day; she hadn't even managed to get dressed because moving around made her feel sick. When Ted came in, she'd been sitting at the table in her bathrobe feeling frankly sorry for herself. She tried not to, because it never did any good, but sometimes you just wanted to quit.

She forced herself to look at the TV screen. It showed a photo of the twin boys, standing on a sunny lawn in front of a big yellow house with brown shutters. They wore matching shorts and polo shirts and had their arms around each other's shoulders. Both of them were grinning. Gina realized she had never gotten a good look at their faces before, or seen them so young and happy.

“Anton and Easton Eisenhower,” the newscaster said, in the carefully crafted voice that meant bad news. Gina caught the words “family moved to the city this summer,” and “father’s professorship at the university.” She found herself thinking about the house in the picture, big enough to contain her and Ted’s rowhouse with plenty of room left over. “...has run away from home,” the newscaster went on. The picture on the screen zoomed in for a closeup of the twin on the left. “Easton Eisenhower left a note for his parents and brother saying that he would try to get to his grandparents’ house in Pennsylvania. Anyone with information about his whereabouts should contact...”

Gina lost the thread again as she stared into the missing twin’s face. Bright blue eyes, feathery blond hair, a grin of mischief and delight.

Ted clicked the TV off. He leaned back in his chair and looked at Gina. “You said you’d seen them getting on the bus?”

Gina nodded. “Every day, till this morning.”

“Maurice told me he’d heard about it on the radio.” He shook his head. “Hell of a thing for the kid to do. Disappear like that.”

Gina knew what he meant. Easton’s parents must be frantic; but instead of the adults she had never seen, Gina found herself thinking about the two boys walking up the narrow steps to the bus, sticking as close together as they could. Easton might have blamed his parents for coming to the city, managed not to think about how they would worry. But if he’d had a choice, how could he have left his brother behind?

Gina reached over to touch Ted's hand. "I'll make us some dinner," she said. "We've got chicken in the fridge."

Ted pushed his chair back. "I'll take care of it. You don't feel good today."

"No, I'm okay. You go change clothes. I'll cook."

She stood up before he could argue. Over to the fridge, bend down to take the package of chicken off the bottom shelf. One step at a time.

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Over the next three weeks, Gina woke up early every morning specifically to watch for the kids at the bus stop. Sunrise came later and it got harder to make out shapes and faces, but she never missed Anton's blond hair. Each time she saw him there alone she felt a quick plunge of disappointment. During the day she counted the minutes till the local evening news, certain that *this* time they would report that Easton had been found at a bus stop, at a train station, buying fast food somewhere, had called his parents collect to come and take him home. Her heart thumped more painfully every time she looked out the kitchen window, and sank farther every night when the TV reporter still had nothing new to say. By the beginning of November, Easton should have made it to his grandparents' house. Still no one had heard anything.

One cold morning during the first week of November, Gina decided to go to Roland Park. Her body complained as she backed the Celica out of the alleyway. She didn't care. Anything was better than sitting alone in the house, looking outside at the gray sky and the dead leaves blowing along the sidewalk.

At the park she could have used her handicapped parking tag, but again she refused. Get out of the car, hoist the backpack on, string the binoculars around her neck. One painful step after another. The wind sliced through her denim jacket and cut at her bare cheeks.

Anything could have happened to Easton. He was one kid, young and fragile. He had disappeared into the huge world, blown away like one of the fallen leaves. You could step on a leaf and crush it, pick it up in your hand and squeeze it into dust.

One step after another. Gina knew she shouldn't do this to herself, she would pay for it later, but she was here, now, with the day in front of her. She would not let it slip away. The dull gray surface of the lake got closer with every step. Pavement gave way to grass under her feet. She went straight past the picnic tables by the water: if she stopped, she might not get back on her feet again.

Nobody else had come out to the park on such an unfriendly morning. Gina aimed for the trees. At the first trailhead, the brown woods opened up for her. Leaves crunched under her feet, smelling of dust and earth. Around her, the bare branches of the trees tangled together, reaching for the overcast sky.

She had to be careful. If she ran out of energy or if walking hurt too much, she wouldn't be able to get back to the car. Ted hadn't said a word against her going out today, but he'd been anxious. Told her to call him when she made it home.

Anger spurted up her spine. She didn't get angry often, the same way she tried not to pity herself, but Ted had to worry about her going into the woods. They both had to get through every day knowing that someday, they didn't know when, time would run out. Then Ted would have to make his way through the world alone.

No. No. It's not fair. The words beat in Gina's head as she marched down the path. Her anger warmed her and sent currents of energy down her aching legs. She wanted to say she wouldn't stand for it. She wanted to say, *I won't go.*

The silence of the woods settled around her. The trees made a barrier against the wind. After a while, when she glanced over her shoulder, she couldn't see the open patch of grass and sky that

marked the trailhead. With the fallen leaves all around, she would hear any small creatures moving, but she seemed to be the only living thing in the woods.

Then, as she came around a slight bend in the trail, she heard a disturbance in the branches over her head. Glancing up, she saw something big and dark.

Probably a crow, or at most a hawk. Still, she pulled out her binoculars and trained them on the shape in the tree.

Bigger than any crow. Bigger than the red-shouldered and sharp-shinned hawks you got in these woods. And no hawk had these colors: through the binoculars Gina saw a sleek black body with splashes of white like racing stripes on the shoulders. On the head – she adjusted the focus, tried to see more clearly through the tangle of branches – on the head, a thatch of red like a beacon.

An instant later, the bird took off in a clatter of wings and clash of dry leaves. Gina tried to keep the binoculars trained on it, to get one more look, but it glided away into the trees and disappeared.

She lowered the binoculars. Her eyes had never failed her yet. Gina closed them, standing there alone in the cold, and conjured up the image she had seen. The size of it. The black body, the white markings, the bright flame on the head.

A gust of wind needled through the trees. Gina opened her eyes, slipped out of her backpack and lowered it to the ground. Unzipping it, she took out her birding notebook and pen.

Her hands shook, not because of the cold. She pressed the ballpoint tip against the lined page.

November 7, 2006, 9:36 am. Roland Park. Ivory-billed woodpecker.

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The next morning, the sky outside was still dark when Gina got up and wrapped her bathrobe around herself. The kids were waiting as usual at the bus stop. Through the kitchen

window, Gina saw Anton right away, standing apart from everyone else, staring down at the sidewalk with his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his heavy brown jacket.

She opened the door and went across the yard. It hadn't gotten big enough to stop her after all. The gate's hinge squealed when she pushed it open. The kids looked around at her, startled faces peering through the half-dark.

"Morning, kids," she said. Exactly as she'd expected, she heard "Morning, Miss Gina" from a couple of the older ones. The little ones retreated like a cloud of sparrows in the underbrush. The older boys stood their ground but looked at her suspiciously, probably assuming that as an adult, she was going to tell them off about something.

Gina didn't worry about any of them. Only one of the kids hadn't looked at her. Anton stood perfectly still, studying the sidewalk, as if he didn't know anyone else was there. She went over to him.

"Anton?"

His head came up as if her voice had dragged it. Wide scared eyes looked back at her.

Gina knew she couldn't stay out here too long. The cold air bit into her bare ankles and her bathrobe wasn't thick enough to keep goosebumps from jumping out on her arms. She got to the point as quickly as she could.

"My name's Gina," she told him. "I live in this house right here." She pointed across the yard at the back door. "I heard on the news about your brother."

Anton nodded without speaking. She went on, "I wanted to tell you, I know your brother's out there somewhere. They're going to find him."

As she said it, she thought he might shake his head, or tell her he didn't believe her. Why should he, after all? She was a total stranger, a fragile skinny woman in a lumpy bathrobe claiming to read the future. She couldn't guarantee the first thing about tomorrow, including her own existence.

Trying to forget that for now, she held out her hand. “You hang in there,” she said. “It’s going to be okay.”

Anton looked at her. The disbelief she half-expected didn’t come. Instead, his back straightened a hair. His chin came up.

He took his own hand out of his pocket. When their fingers connected, a current of warmth ran up Gina’s arm to her shoulder.

“Okay,” he said. His voice sounded small and dusty, as if he hadn’t used it in a long time. “Are you...” He hesitated, and then words came out in a rush. “You live here? Will you be outside tomorrow too?”

Gina understood. “Sure,” she told him. “I’ll come say hi.”

Back inside the warm house, standing over the sink and willing the tea to thaw her out even if it couldn’t take the sickness away, Gina watched the bus pull away from the curb. She couldn’t make out the faces of the kids inside, but Anton was in there somewhere. She had a feeling he had his eyes fixed outside the window, on her house, pinning her to the place where he needed her to be.

Tomorrow. Gina kept her eyes on the bus until it turned left at the next traffic light and disappeared. Yes, she would be here tomorrow.