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The Crane Wife

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Ten days after I called off my engagement I was supposed to go on a scientific expedition to study the whooping crane on the gulf coast of Texas. Surely, I will cancel this trip, I thought, as I shopped for nylon hiking pants that zipped off at the knee. Surely, a person who calls off a wedding is meant to be sitting sadly at home, reflecting on the enormity of what has transpired and not doing whatever it is I am about to be doing that requires a pair of plastic clogs with drainage holes. Surely, I thought, as I tried on a very large and floppy hat featuring a pull cord that fastened beneath my chin, it would be wrong to even be wearing a hat that looks like this when something in my life has gone so terribly wrong.

Ten days earlier I had cried and I had yelled and I had packed up my dog and driven away from the upstate New York house with two willow trees I had bought with my fiancé.

Ten days later and I didn't want to do anything I was supposed to do.

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I went to Texas to study the whooping crane because I was researching a novel. In my novel there were biologists doing field research about birds and I had no idea what field research actually looked like and so the scientists in my novel draft did things like shuffle around great stacks of papers and frown. The good people of the Earthwatch organization assured me I was welcome on the trip and would get to participate in "real science" during my time on the gulf. But as I waited to be picked up by my team in Corpus Christi, I was nervous—I imagined everyone else would be a scientist or a birder and have daunting binoculars.

The biologist running the trip rolled up in a large white van with a boat hitch and the words BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES stenciled across the side. Jeff was forty-ish, and wore sunglasses and a backward baseball cap. He had a winter beard and a neon-green cast on his left arm. He'd broken his arm playing hockey with his sons a week before. The first thing Jeff said was, "We'll head back to camp, but I hope you don't mind we run by the liquor store first." I felt more optimistic about my suitability for science.

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Not long before I'd called off my engagement it was Christmas.

The woman who was supposed to be my mother-in-law was a wildly talented quilter and made stockings with Beatrix Potter characters on them for every family member. The previous Christmas she had asked me what character I wanted to be (my fiancé was Benjamin Bunny). I agonized over the decision. It felt important, like whichever character I chose would represent my role in this new family. I chose Squirrel Nutkin, a squirrel with a blazing red tail—an epic, adventuresome figure who ultimately loses his tail as the price for his daring and pride.

I arrived in Ohio that Christmas and looked to the banister to see where my squirrel had found his place. Instead, I found a mouse. A mouse in a pink dress and apron. A mouse holding a broom and dustpan, serious about sweeping. A mouse named Hunca Munca. The woman who was supposed to become my mother-in-law said, "I was going to do the squirrel but then I thought, that just isn't CJ. *This* is CJ."

What she was offering was so nice. She was so nice. I thanked her and felt ungrateful for having wanted a stocking, but not *this* stocking. Who was I to be choosy? To say that this nice thing she was offering wasn't a thing I wanted?

When I looked at that mouse with her broom, I wondered which one of us was wrong about who I was.

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The whooping crane is one of the oldest living bird species on earth. Our expedition was housed at an old fish camp on the Gulf Coast next to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, where three hundred of the only six hundred whooping cranes left in the world spend their winters. Our trip was a data-collecting expedition to study behavior and gather data about the resources available to the cranes at Aransas.

The ladies bunkhouse was small and smelled woody and the rows of single beds were made up with quilts. Lindsay, the only other scientist, was a grad student in her early twenties from Wisconsin who loved birds so much that when she told you about them she made the shapes of their necks and beaks with her hands—a pantomime of bird life. Jan, another participant, was a retired geophysicist who had worked for oil companies and now taught high school chemistry. Jan was extremely fit and extremely tan and extremely competent. Jan was not a lifelong birder. She was a woman who had spent two years nursing her mother and her best friend through cancer. They had both recently died and she had lost herself in caring for them, she said. She wanted a week to be herself. Not a teacher or a mother or a wife. This trip was the thing she was giving herself after their passing.

At five o'clock there was a knock on the bunk door and a very old man walked in, followed by Jeff.

“Is it time for cocktail hour?” Warren asked.

Warren was an eighty-four-year-old bachelor from Minnesota. He could not do most of the physical activities required by the trip, but had been on ninety-five Earthwatch expeditions, including this one once before. Warren liked birds okay. What Warren really loved was cocktail hour.

When he came for cocktail hour that first night, his thin, silver hair was damp from the shower and he smelled of shampoo. He was wearing a fresh collared shirt and carrying a bottle of impossibly good scotch.

Jeff took in Warren and Jan and me. “This is a weird group,” Jeff said.

“I like it,” Lindsay said.

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In the year leading up to calling off my wedding, I often cried or yelled or reasoned or pleaded with my fiancé to tell me that he loved me. To be nice to me. To notice things about how I was living.

One particular time, I had put on a favorite red dress for a wedding. I exploded from the bathroom to show him. He stared at his phone. I wanted him to tell me I looked nice, so I shimmied and squeezed his shoulders and said, “You look nice! Tell me I look nice!” He said, “I

told you that you looked nice when you wore that dress last summer. It's reasonable to assume I still think you look nice in it now."

Another time he gave me a birthday card with a sticky note inside that said BIRTHDAY. After giving it to me, he explained that because he hadn't written in it, the card was still in good condition. He took off the sticky and put the unblemished card into our filing cabinet.

I need you to know: I hated that I needed more than this from him. There is nothing more humiliating to me than my own desires. Nothing that makes me hate myself more than being burdensome and less than self-sufficient. I did not want to feel like the kind of nagging woman who might exist in a sit-com.

These were small things, and I told myself it was stupid to feel disappointed by them. I had arrived in my thirties believing that to need things from others made you weak. I think this is true for lots of people but I think it is especially true for women. When men desire things they are "passionate." When they feel they have not received something they need they are "deprived," or even "emasculated," and given permission for all sorts of behavior. But when a woman needs she is *needy*. She is meant to contain within her own self everything necessary to be happy.

That I wanted someone to articulate that they loved me, that they *saw* me, was a personal failing and I tried to overcome it.

When I found out that he'd slept with our mutual friend a few weeks after we'd first started seeing each other, he told me we hadn't officially been dating yet so I shouldn't mind. I decided he was right. When I found out that he'd kissed another girl on New Year's Eve months after that, he said that we hadn't officially discussed monogamy yet, and so I shouldn't mind. I decided he was right.

I asked to discuss monogamy and, in an effort to be the sort of cool girl who does not have so many inconvenient needs, I said that I didn't need it. He said he thought we should be monogamous.

*

Here is what I learned once I began studying whooping cranes: only a small part of studying them has anything to do with the birds. Instead we counted berries. Counted crabs. Measured water salinity. Stood in the mud. Measured the speed of the wind.

It turns out, if you want to save a species, you don't spend your time staring at the bird you want to save. You look at the things it relies on to live instead. You ask if there is enough to eat and drink. You ask if there is a safe place to sleep. Is there enough here to survive?

Wading through the muck of the Aransas Reserve I understood that every chance for food matters. Every pool of drinkable water matters. Every wolfberry dangling from a twig, in Texas,

in January, matters. The difference between sustaining life and not having enough was that small.

If there were a kind of rehab for people ashamed to have needs, maybe this was it. You will go to the gulf. You will count every wolfberry. You will measure the depth of each puddle.

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More than once I'd said to my fiancé, How am I supposed to know you love me if you're never affectionate or say nice things or *say* that you love me.

He reminded me that he'd said "I love you" once or twice before. Why couldn't I just *know* that he did in perpetuity?

I told him this was like us going on a hiking trip and him telling me he had water in his backpack but not ever giving it to me and then wondering why I was still thirsty.

He told me water wasn't like love, and he was right.

There are worse things than not receiving love. There are sadder stories than this. There are species going extinct, and a planet warming. I told myself: who are you to complain, you with these frivolous extracurricular needs?

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On the gulf, I lost myself in the work. I watched the cranes through binoculars and recorded their behavior patterns and I loved their long necks and splashes of red. The cranes looked elegant and ferocious as they contorted their bodies to preen themselves. From the outside, they did not look like a species fighting to survive.

In the mornings we made each other sandwiches and in the evenings we laughed and lent each other fresh socks. We gave each other space in the bathroom. Forgave each other for telling the same stories over and over again. We helped Warren when he had trouble walking. What I am saying is that we took care of each other. What I am saying is we took pleasure in doing so. It's hard to confess, but the week after I called off my wedding, the week I spent dirty and tired on the gulf, I was happy.

On our way out of the reserve, we often saw wild pigs, black and pink bristly mothers and their young, scurrying through the scrub and rolling in the dust among the cacti. In the van each night, we made bets on how many wild pigs we might see on our drive home.

One night, halfway through the trip, I bet reasonably. We usually saw four, I hoped for five, but I bet three because I figured it was the most that could be expected.

Warren bet wildly, optimistically, too high.

“Twenty pigs,” Warren said. He rested his interlaced fingers on his soft chest.

We laughed and slapped the vinyl van seats at this boldness.

But the thing is, we saw *twenty pigs* on the drive home that night. And in the thick of our celebrations, I realized how sad it was that I’d bet so low. That I wouldn’t even let myself *imagine* receiving as much as I’d hoped for.

*

What I learned to do, in my relationship with my fiancé, was to survive on less. At what should have been the breaking point but wasn’t, I learned that he had cheated on me. The woman he’d been sleeping with was a friend of his I’d initially wanted to be friends with, too, but who did not seem to like me, and who he’d gaslit me into being jealous of, and then gaslit me into feeling crazy for being jealous of.

The full course of the gaslighting took a year, so by the time I truly found out what had happened, the infidelity was already a year in the past.

It was new news to me but old news to my fiancé.

Logically, he said, it doesn’t matter anymore.

It had happened a year ago. Why was I getting worked up over ancient history?

I did the mental gymnastics required.

I convinced myself that I was a logical woman who could consider this information about having been cheated on, about his not wearing a condom, and I could separate it from the current reality of our life together.

Why did I need to know that we’d been monogamous? Why did I need to have and discuss inconvenient feelings about this ancient history?

I would not be a woman who needed these things, I decided.

I would need less. And less.

I got very good at this.

*

“The Crane Wife” is a story from Japanese folklore. I found a copy in the reserve’s gift shop among the baseball caps and bumper stickers that said GIVE A WHOOP. In the story, there is a

crane who tricks a man into thinking she is a woman so she can marry him. She loves him, but knows that he will not love her if she is a crane so she spends every night plucking out all of her feathers with her beak. She hopes that he will not see what she really is: a bird who must be cared for, a bird capable of flight, a creature, with creature needs. Every morning, the crane-wife is exhausted, but she is a woman again. To keep becoming a woman is so much self-erasing work. She never sleeps. She plucks out all her feathers, one by one.

*

One night on the gulf, we bought a sack of oysters off a passing fishing boat. We'd spent so long on the water that day I felt like I was still bobbing up and down in the current as I sat in my camp chair. We ate the oysters and drank. Jan took the shucking knife away from me because it kept slipping into my palm. Feral cats trolled the shucked shells and pleaded with us for scraps.

Jeff was playing with the sighting scope we used to watch the birds, and I asked, "What are you looking for in the middle of the night?" He gestured me over and when I looked through the sight the moon swam up close.

I think I was afraid that if I called off my wedding I was going to ruin myself. That doing it would disfigure the story of my life in some irredeemable way. I had experienced worse things than this, but none threatened my American understanding of a life as much as a called-off wedding did. What I understood on the other side of my decision, on the gulf, was that there was no such thing as ruining yourself. There are ways to be wounded and ways to survive those wounds, but no one can survive denying their own needs. To be a crane-wife is unsustainable.

I had never seen the moon so up-close before. What struck me most was how battered she looked. How textured and pocked by impacts. There was a whole story written on her face—her face, which from a distance looked perfect.

*

It's easy to say that I left my fiancé because he cheated on me. It's harder to explain the truth. The truth is that I didn't leave him when I found out. Not even for one night.

I found out about the cheating *before* we got engaged and I still said yes when he proposed in the park on a day we were meant to be celebrating a job I'd just gotten that morning. Said yes even though I'd told him I was politically opposed to the diamonds he'd convinced me were necessary. Said yes even though he turned our proposal into a joke by making a *Bachelor* reference and giving me a rose. I am ashamed of all of this.

He hadn't said one specific thing about me or us during the proposal, and on the long trail walk out of the park I felt robbed of the kind of special declaration I'd hoped a proposal would entail, and, in spite of hating myself for wanting this, hating myself more for fishing for it, I asked him, "Why do you love me? Why do you think we should get married? Really?"

He said he wanted to be with me because I wasn't annoying or needy. Because I liked beer. Because I was low-maintenance.

I didn't say anything. A little further down the road he added that he thought I'd make a good mother.

This wasn't what I hoped he would say. But it was what was being offered. And who was I to want more?

I didn't leave when he said that the woman he had cheated on me with had told him over the phone that she thought it was unfair that I didn't want them to be friends anymore, and could they still?

I didn't leave when he wanted to invite her to our wedding. Or when, after I said she could not come to our wedding, he got frustrated and asked what he was supposed to do when his mother and his friends asked why she wasn't there.

Reader, I almost married him.

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Even now I hear the words as shameful: *Thirsty. Needy*. The worst things a woman can be. Some days I still tell myself to take what is offered, because if it isn't enough, it is I who wants too much. I am ashamed to be writing about this instead of writing about the whooping cranes, or literal famines, or any of the truer needs of the world.

But what I want to tell you is that I left my fiancé when it was almost too late. And I tell people the story of being cheated on because that story is simple. People know how it goes. But it's harder to tell the story of how I convinced myself I didn't need what was necessary to survive. How I convinced myself it was my lack of needs that made me worthy of love.

*

After cocktail hour one night, in the cabin's kitchen, I told Lindsay about how I'd blown up my life the week before. I told her because I'd just received a voice mail saying I could get a partial refund for my high-necked wedding gown. The refund would be partial because they had already made the base of the dress but had not done any of the beadwork yet. They said the pieces of the dress could still be unstitched and used for something else. I had caught them just in time.

I told Lindsay because she was beautiful and kind and patient and loved good things like birds and I wondered what she would say back to me. What would every good person I knew say to me when I told them that the wedding to which they'd RSVP'd was off and that the life I'd been building for three years was going to be unstitched and repurposed?

Lindsay said it was brave not to do a thing just because everyone expected you to do it.

Jeff was sitting outside in front of the cabin with Warren as Lindsay and I talked, tilting the sighting scope so it pointed toward the moon. The screen door was open and I knew he'd heard me, but he never said anything about my confession.

What he did do was let me drive the boat.

The next day it was just him and me and Lindsay on the water. We were cruising fast and loud. "You drive," Jeff shouted over the motor. Lindsay grinned and nodded. I had never driven a boat before. "What do I do?" I shouted. Jeff shrugged. I took the wheel. We cruised past small islands, families of pink roseate spoonbills, garbage tankers swarmed by seagulls, fields of grass and wolfberries, and I realized it was not that remarkable for a person to understand what another person needed.

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