

We are Birds from Different Nests

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For the commuters on Castle Street, crows were annoying scavengers with wings. This was why no one paid attention to the crows landing on the fire escape of the apartment building Next to the road. This was also why everyone paused in their busy lives to watch when the paramedics carried out Huilin's unconscious body, who was hugging two plastic crows tightly against her chest.

Iyoko was the person who called the ambulance. He lived on the same floor as Huilin. He would come to her apartment once in a few days to talk—they talked about everything—because they both grew up in rural villages where their childhood playmates were deers, sheep, and birds. After knocking on the door and not receiving a response, Iyoko went back to his room to access the fire escape. That was when he saw her bedroom window was left open and her lying there on the floor, clenching onto two plastic crows.

Iyoko had seen those plastic crows before, at a small family-owned thrift store a few blocks away.

When the police questioned Iyoko about Huilin's life, he said that Huilin loved watching the real crows that would come to her fire escape in the mornings.

"She didn't grow up in a big city," Iyoko said.

"Do you know if anyone has the motivation to harm her?" An officer asked.

"She didn't grow up in a big city," Iyoko repeated. "She came here alone."

The small apartments looked like boxes, and Huilin felt she was a cat living in that box. Schrödinger's cat. There were so many small apartments above, below before, and behind her room that no one would have known if she were to die here in her sleep. She would wake up each morning when some crows came to the fire escape outside. They weren't here because there was food. There wasn't any food, so after paddling their feet against the rusted metal stairs for a while they would fly off.

The quick and faint footsteps of the crows on the fire escape would remind her of the sound of her dog from her childhood home. The dog, a furry yellow shepherd dog, had greeted the young Huilin every morning until it was killed one day by a pack of wolves when Huilin's father and it were herding.

Life on a farm was not a safe life, especially considering her older brother thought she was a burden. But she woke up to the birds in the morning, and now she looked down from her window and could only see the bustling noises of Castle Street. The people traveling down the sidewalk never bothered to look up to see a woman with messy hair gazing down at them. People have said the sky was a person's biggest blindspot because one could be vigilant enough to constantly check their four cardinal directions, but few remembered to notice the sky since only planes were in the sky or the city crows fattened by the calories from the half-eaten sandwiches from street corners. Neither of these two flying things looked intriguing to city dwellers.

When Huilin reached out her right hand for the water mug she had put on her nightstand, her fingers trembled and dropped it. The mug was empty, and despite that, she tried to remember to keep some water in it before going to bed. That rarely happened. Each night she came home, she would throw her tired self onto the bed. Before, it was the symphony of crickets that kept her awake when the moon was up, but now she heard only car horns.

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Iyoko had wanted to be a pilot, but he never passed basic aviation training, so he gave up that dream. That was how he ended up working at the fast-food restaurant next to the bus station that Huilin used each day.

“You won’t like the food here,” Iyoko had said a few years back when Huilin first came into the restaurant.

“Why?” She had asked.

“This food is for the people who like to smell car emissions.”

Huilin gave a weak smile.

“I can tell when someone grew up in nature,” Iyoko added.

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Huilin and Iyoko never asked each other what their hometowns looked like or where the towns were. It wasn’t a rule for people who grew up outside cities to avoid talking about their rural homes. Huilin simply could not see a way for her childhood memories to come and give her a hand in her conversation and then safely escape the tall buildings to go home.

Iyoko, on the other hand, was loud. Whenever Huilin was slowly finishing her dinner in his restaurant, he was talking loudly with some customers about his farm, his bicycle, his chickens, and his blue sky.

Some long-time customers of Iyoko’s restaurant began to notice Huilin. She always sat at a window seat alone. She rarely talked to Iyoko because they communicated silently through quick eye contact.

One of them had dark brown eyes and one had light blue ones, but they were the only two pairs of eyes in that restaurant that paid attention to the birds.

“Why does she always get the best seat?” A businessman asked when ordering his food.

“You should get here earlier tomorrow,” Iyoko replied, not looking at his customer.

The businessman grunted.

He then walked around the restaurant, despite that it was almost empty, and found a seat next to the door. It was raining outside, so the water on his shoes left a trail of footprints on the floor that Iyoko would mop clean each day.

When his food was ready and he stood back up to pick it up at the counter, the businessman walked by Huilin’s table. She only had a cup of tea before her, and her eyes were fixed on some finches outside. They tried to fly down and approach a plastic bag on the sidewalk—it probably contained food—but the pedestrians and cars rushing by made the finches retreat every time.

“What’s so interesting to watch?” The businessman asked.

“I miss the time when I could meet a whole flock of them whenever I had wanted, and now I only get to meet a few of them,” Huilin said. “And I don’t dare to go outside to watch them because they’ll think I’m one of them.”

The businessman paused for a while, shrugged, and went to his table to gorge on his food.

At first, Huilin’s parents wanted another boy. Her older brother, Wulin, even at a young age, was an excellent farmhand. He would teach Huilin how to tend to the cows, how to fix

fences, and how to build a small shack for her dog. But their parents thought that she should spend more time in school.

The village they lived in was surrounded by mountains, and the only connection to the outside world was a narrow road that allowed only two motorcycles to travel on. It would take them three hours to walk to the nearest city. Her father would make the walk every Friday to Sunday to sell pork in the city. He had to wake up at 3 am during those days because the city's market opened at 6:30. He needed to arrive half an hour early so to get a good spot. The merchants from the city weren't as hard-working as him, so he, a farmer from "down there," always could sell all the pork.

Her mother proposed the idea of Huilin going to school, and she convinced her husband that education was more important to the whole family than another pair of farmhands. He agreed after talking to one of his customers, who just come back from a larger city even farther away, saying that she got there and survived because of a degree.

She wanted to help her brother on the farm. There were some drawbacks, of course, such as the sunburns, the bug bites, and the times all the skin on her feet turned completely pale because she was standing in the muddy field for too long. There were some nights that she had to go to sleep with an empty stomach, and during holidays, when there would be more food, she always overstuffing her stomach. Yet, she got to see the pigeons landing outside her window in the morning and watch crows circling above her head when clearing weed with her brother.

On the first day of school, Huilin hid in the barn so she didn't have to go to school.

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Castle Street had a parade that Sunday, so Iyoko received more customers that day than the entire past week. Huilin came, too, and ordered a herb tea.

“You know you don’t have to pay to drink here,” Iyoko said.

Huilin smiled and thanked him, but she still left three coins, the price of the tea, on the counter.

When she walked to a table with her tea, someone shouted from the parade. It was probably a joyful cheer, but it still made Huilin’s handshake violently. Her teacup dropped to the ground as if someone had slammed it out of her hand with a baseball bat.

“Are you okay?” Iyoko rushed up and asked.

“No... don’t worry about it, sorry. I’ll clean it up,” Huilin quickly said.

It was a group of people surrounding a woman with a microphone. She was reading something, probably poetry. It wasn’t rare for traveling artists or writers to come to this street intersection to present. Sometimes they could attract a large crowd. Sometimes they presented their poetry to the car engines and cold wind.

Huilin watched the woman for a while. She remembered that, when they were young, Wulin loved poetry. He once found a coverless pamphlet of ancient poems from the village common and read it out loud to the family during dinner.

“What do they actually mean?” Huilin asked. “It can’t be just about a man sitting beneath a peach tree.”

“I wish I knew,” he shrugged. “But at least that line sounds really good.”

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On the second day of school, Wulin found his younger sister in the barn, hiding behind a rotted wooden shelf.

“Get up and go to school,” Wulin said. “So you don’t have to live like me.”

“But I do live like you,” she replied.

“I wake up at 3 with mom and dad.”

“I thought we woke up at the same time!”

“I just come back to the house when you wake up in the morning.”

“But you always looked...”

“I just appear to look like that.”

Huilin was escorted to school that day by her brother. He promised that they would go to the mountain slope after school. There was a small creek, and, for years, Huilin always enjoyed stuffing pebbles in it hoping to stop the water flow.

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The adults rarely allowed kids to climb the mountains alone because the slopes were steep. Rain would make the ground muddy, and the dense trees created enough shade to keep the slopes always wet. Every few years someone, even an adult, would slip and fall to their death.

Huilin had been asking her brother to take her to the slopes ever since she was four.

“You can’t see the city unless we climb all the way to the top,” Wulin said.

“We don’t have to go that high,” she replied.

“Why?”

“I want to see the city.”

“From down here?”

“I want to want to see the city.”

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Iyoko saw a job post two days after his sixteenth birthday. It was about a position at a restaurant in the city. So he went.

Plain and simple. Just like that. But he carried with him a reservoir of hopes. The reservoir was so deep that even he himself couldn't see the bottom. Whenever he unlocked the door of his small restaurant at the beginning of the day, he feared that some dragon or shark would rise up from deep water and drag him down.

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When Huilin first found that apartment unit on Castle Street, she spent a few weeks getting used to looking out the window but not seeing the ground. For as long as she could remember, her feet would touch grass or soil after stepping out of her family's house. Now, she was sandwiched by the rusted metal platform leading to the fire escape and the torn carpet on the apartment corridor.

The landlord said she was lucky because he had just repainted this unit before she moved in. Huilin couldn't remember her parents painting their house even once, so she felt slightly relieved.

The paint wasn't pale white, as how she had expected. It was like a coat of warm cream, a shelter between the fire escape's dark brown beneath the worn-away red and the carpet's gray.

Three crows landed on the fire escape's rail. They shoved each other, and one of them slipped and fell.

Huilin had seen too many birds, and anyone would know that no bird would die from falling from high ground, but Huilin almost jumped when seeing the crow's large and wide eyes as it disappeared.



The crow quickly reappeared, of course, and returned cawing at its companions, but Huilin couldn't sleep the first night in the protection of the newly painted walls. The look of that crow falling repeatedly flashed before her eyes.

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Wulin began going to the city's market with their father to sell pork. Huilin said that she also wanted to come. Their father finally agreed to take her along when she turned eight. She hopped and jumped to the chirping of the morning birds as the three rushed to the market. She had been to the city before—the villagers weren't that seclusive toward the outside world—but that was only for a traveling physician's presentation. The whole village went, and they saw the man wearing a white robe and carrying a leather bag standing on a makeshift podium.

He was talking about how to prevent heart disease, and he said he learned the information from a school in a large city.

Huilin's parents loved large cities. They even had a calendar that depicted their capital in the living room.

Wulin was at the physician's gathering as well, and he was asking the physician all sorts of questions about how to get into a school in the city because he wouldn't win competing against students from wealthier families.

"You know that you'll miss school today," Wulin said to his sister as they approached the city market.

"Mom and dad agreed, remember?" She replied. "And I want to see what the candy merchant is selling today. Dad always talks about the candy merchant and how she sells different flavors every day."

“What did Ms. Gong teach yesterday?”

“Some sort of poetry. She said she would talk more about it today, but I don’t mind missing out.”

Wulin didn’t reply. He once asked their parents if he could go to school as well. He said he didn’t mind being a first grader despite his old age. It was common for older children, even adults, to be in their village’s elementary classroom.

But he rejected his proposal before their parents could say anything. It was spring, and their farm needed his skills.

“Next time, only come with us on weekends, okay?” Wulin said.

“But Dad said the candy merchant only sells candies shaped like animals on Fridays. She only sells leftovers on weekends.”

“I’ll bring the animal-shaped ones back for you.”

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Iyoko once suggested Huilin visit the ocean-side park at the edge of the city. He said his childhood village was a fishing village, and he always feared that, one day, the waves would break the ships of their adults, and they would not return.

But the seagulls, the salty wind, the sunshine, the chiming ripples of the water. Iyoko added that a small part of him thought that death-by-ocean would be much more beautiful than death-by-ocean-of-concrete.

It was a half-hour subway ride to the ocean, and Huilin had to beg her employer at the clothing store to take a day off. She had to spend the weekends working at the large department shopping center further downtown.

Iyoko wasn't lying about the seagulls. They were different than the pigeons or finches of the mountains or the crows of her fire escape. They would approach the skyscrapers just adjacent to the beach, gently circle around them, and fly back to the ocean.

Huilin thought that, if she were to board that subway back to her apartment, she could not escape again as easily as the seagulls. In the end, she still walked back down the stairs to the subway station. She remembered that the crows of her fire escape probably only knew what it felt like to stand on metal bars and would never have experienced standing on a tree branch.

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The teacher asked the students to find a rare fruit that was mentioned in a poem they read yesterday. They were to bring this fruit to school the next day.

Huilin knew where to find it. There was a small bush of that fruit beside the creek she and Wulin always visited on the mountain slope.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Wulin said.

"I think I'm old enough to go by myself," Huilin replied. Both parents were at their neighbor's house, and whenever they were there, the "adult conversation" would not end until late at night.

Wulin insisted on coming, saying that it was getting close to evening, and he didn't want his younger sister alone when the sun was setting.

"Why did your teacher ask for this?" Wulin said as they left the range of their farm and entered the forest.

"She said another teacher from the city would be coming over to visit, and we could use these as a gift."

“When is the teacher coming?”

“Next Monday. Do you want to come as well?”

“Yes, definitely.”

They walked in silence for a while. It began to rain, but neither of them minded. They were used to walking in the rain, even if their clothes were completely drenched.

“When you grow up, you get out of here, okay?”

“I mean, we’ll all have our own farm sometimes.”

“No, I meant to get out of here.” Wulin turned around and pointed at the houses beneath them.

“Why?”

“You’ll hear some people your age thinking that these mountains are all we need, but no.”

“You’ve never stayed in a city for a long time. We usually come back from it before dark.”

“One day I will. Maybe I’ll go to school when there’s less farm work.”

Huilin didn’t know how to reply to that. The field attached itself to farmers, like a bulldog biting its prey, and would not let go.

“The rain is getting heavier,” Wulin said after they connected a pocketful of the fruit.

“I’m getting cold,” Huilin shivered. They had been in the rain for almost an hour now. Even that was too long for a village kid.

The sound of a crow echoed in the distance. The crows of this mountain rarely flew in the rain. They just huddled under somewhere dry and sang into the empty sky.

Wulin slipped on the wet mud as the two quickened their steps down the slope, but he managed to catch a thick branch before tripping himself. Thick trees grew on one side of the trail, and the cliff was on the other. To Huilin, its height barely qualified it as a cliff. She doubted that anyone would die from falling off it.

“Watch out. Don’t go too fast,” Huilin shouted as she couldn’t keep up with her brother.

“Come on, I don’t want you to get a cold. You still need to wake up early tomorrow, remember? Tomorrow is Saturday.”

Just as Huilin was thinking about the candy merchant, Wulin slipped again. This time, his waving hands missed a tree branch.

“Wu!”

She shouted as her brother fell. His mouth was exclaiming something, and his wide eyes stared straight at her.

Huilin had seen people falling from this cliff before, and they, although with a broken limb or heavy bruise, had all survived. But Wulin landed with his neck on a large rock.

Later, the village doctor said that Wulin had to be sent to the hospital in the city. The village doctor had an old motorcycle, so he and their father drove the unconscious Wulin to the city while everyone else traveled by foot immediately behind.

Wulin had always wanted to stay for more than just the market’s few hours in a city. He finally got this wish by being paralyzed on a hospital bed.

Huilin hurt her hand when traveling by train to this even larger city. The train car’s door was slammed shut by the wind while she was holding onto the door frame when boarding. This

city was Wulin's wish. He learned from the physician of this ocean-side metropolis and said that, one day, one of them would get to live here.

At the time, Huilin was not that interested in the picture of a city with glass skyscrapers. But it was Wu's wish. The first thing she bought with her salary working at the department store was two used plastic crows. Huilin only knew about plastic flamingos, but apparently, someone was interested in making replicas of the symbol of death and bad luck.

When Iyoko arrived at the hospital that received Huilin, the staff said that the woman with the toy crows was completely fine and had probably gone through some emotional shocks. There wasn't much the hospital could do, and she insisted on leaving, so they let her go.

It didn't take Iyoko too long to find out where she was. Huilin stood outside the glass window of a pet store about five miles from their apartment building, hugging her two plastic crows and watching the finches in the cages. Pedestrians in suits passed by her smoothly and quietly, as if she was a stone standing in a creek. The current couldn't move the stone, and the stone couldn't stop the current.