

Birdsong Man

[Cue 1.]

[5 seconds then cue voice:]

Every morning out in the forest, an hour before dawn, Birdsong Man fixes microphones to the trees and in between the rocks.

Dawn comes up, light creeps in, and there he is: stock still. Wearing a suit, as if on official business.

As the chorus begins, he moves, tree to tree – but so slowly, at times he doesn't appear to move at all.

Then the sky ignites, and the birds sing like maniacs.

Birdsong Man hears every bit of it through his headphones; with both hands he clasps them tighter. He's on his knees in the bracken, head bowed, eyes closed, blackbirds in one ear and lapwings in the other, woodpecker percussion, cranes by the water, but all of it useless to him, none of it any proof. Every morning, every recording, is a failure.

"It is not possible," he says, "It is simply not possible."

Back at home his wife suffers the cardboard boxes piled high, the loudspeakers in every room of the house. "Not possible," she hears him mutter, as he lines up one more chorus. Sometimes he even says it in the little sleep he gets... turning over in the night, whispering: "not possible, stupid, not possible, can't. Can't."

Because every night: a phone call.

It comes in the lonely hours. Birdsong Man lifts the receiver and hears a voice, each time a different voice, but always the same question: "what progress, brother?"

When the calls began he had been some twelve months out of regular work. A year since the tanks had rolled across the border, and the region was claimed. A year since the radio station had been shut down, all employees sent home – including Birdsong Man himself. A year since some very good friends had vanished forever into the night.

Back then he had a normal sort of name. But now these phone calls have made him The Birdsong Man, who didn't drink with everyone else, the Birdsong Man who had gone mad, most likely. The Birdsong Man whose routines were well known. Whose reasons were not.

"What progress, brother?" He usually answers with technical information: analysis of the frequencies, migratory statistics. But the voice at the end of the line always grows bored. And very quietly, it says the worst things possible.

It enquires as to his family's health. It considers the route that his two young daughters walk to school. The voice usually concludes by noting the amount of time the Birdsong Man's wife spends alone in the house, before abruptly ending the call. And a few seconds later, there is always a tiny click on the end of the line, as some other unidentified listener hangs up.

And Birdsong Man packs his microphones, straightens his tie with shaking hands, and heads once more into the forest.

“Not possible. Not possible.”

Today he is exhausted. He wonders at his shaking hands. And slumped in the mid-morning, despairing at the bawl of birds all around, the sound he once loved so, so much, here's what he sees: a dunnock. A little bird from the west, a tiny but bolshy thing, very territorial. The dunnock is bouncing around on the rocks, and singing.

With no warning, it is attacked by another dunnock.

This second dunnock pecks furiously at the first, holding fast to its back, until the first bird is dead. It takes about two, maybe three minutes.

And all the while that it does this, the killing bird is singing. Singing its little heart out.

[Cue 1 rises in volume briefly, then cuts.]

Today Birdsong Man does not complete his recordings. He returns home, spends a long evening in the company of his family, silently watches them eat and talk; and then he sits and waits for the phone call.

And the voice asks: “what progress brother?”

To which he answers: “I have what you need.”

[1 second, then:]

[Cue 2.]

An intake of breath. A hand over the phone at the other end. Silence that speaks of consternation. The line goes dead. And then one hour later: a knock at the door.

There is a car to the station. And a private compartment on the train, with two silent men alongside him through the night, at every stop and interchange. He doesn't sleep.

And a black van from the station into the heart of the city. And where the van stops is a guarded doorway, a marble staircase, a vaulted corridor he walks for what seems like a mile, and his journey ends at an oak desk in what was once a ballroom; illuminated pillars, chandeliers.

And he is left there, alone, for what could be an hour.

Until –

A wooden panel slides open. An immaculate suit emerges from within. He carries a document folder. He's a proud man, no doubt. He walks the thirty paces to the desk, sits down, turns on the computer and waits for it to boot. It's almost as if the Birdsong Man isn't there. He taps something out on his keyboard, sighs, then scoots the mouse across the desk so that it falls and dangles over the side.

And his Excellency, the President, looks around the room and says: “I can't work in here. Every time I hit the space bar it's like a door slams.”

His gaze settles upon the Birdsong Man. “They told me you were the one who could do it. Am I right? A database – “ at which he taps his temple, “A musical memory for every bird, in yer cranium. That’s right isn’t it?”

Birdsong man nods.

As if the answer would not have mattered, the President continues: “So I was interested in a measure of the people’s general happiness, because as you’re aware that’s the sort of thing I’m interested in. What did I call it?” he frowns and opens up the document folder –

He finds the words. Runs his finger over them. “An index... yes, that’s it... of contentment. Our policies are sound and the people are happy and the earth... responds, sings... forth... produces, et cetera. So I’m a busy man and I’ll need a summary; what progress? Is it true?”

“Your Excellency,” says Birdsong Man, “I’m not sure what to tell you.”

The President leans forward: “Do the birds sing louder than they used to? Are they happier? More vim, more general productivity? It’s very simple. Yes or no?”

[Pause, 2 seconds.]

[Cue 3 simultaneous with voice.]

And Birdsong Man thinks: I’ve never been so tired. He stares at the floor.

What would happen if he told the truth? If he said: “no”? He imagines his family, lined up against some outhouse on the edge of the forest, shot and left for the crows. To answer “yes” might be even worse. He would be asked to prove it, and that he cannot do. He puts a clammy, shaking hand over his left arm. He’s amazed at the ferocity of his own pulse.

At which he wonders at the heavy paperweight on the desk. At which he notes the short distance between himself and Mr President.

At which he considers whether he could do enough damage before men with guns entered the room and put a stop to his sterling efforts. Climbing trees, taping microphones to frosted bark the winter long, it’s given him strong and gnarled little hands, powerful things for his size. Yes, thinks Birdsong Man, yes!

But the moment of calm is fleeting... because his thoughts return to his wife, and his girls, their backs to a firing squad. No.

The Birdsong Man reclines in his chair. He lets out a long breath, closes his eyes.

And he says: “Your Excellency, in fact, birds are never happy.”

This seems to confuse his Excellency.

So Birdsong Man continues: “Mr President, the birds are just shouting. They’re little, selfish, thuggish things. They scream at you to stay away. This is mine, they say. Or they say, won’t someone be mine? Won’t you be mine? It doesn’t matter how lovely it sounds, because actually, it makes no sense – it’s just, over and over: stay away, be mine. Keep back, come closer. And there’s a million of them, shouting in the morning, like yobs, like horrible little children demanding the world of you. They don’t care. They’re not happy. They’re idiots. Why would you want to say: I, your President, I made that stupid noise *louder*?”

The President says nothing.

[Pause 1 second]

[Cue 4.]

Some moments later the Birdsong Man is escorted from the palace, this time by men with cheaper clothes and mud on their shoes.

When the car leaves him at the village boundary, he runs towards home, panicked, barely able to breathe. Birdsong Man almost kicks down the door.

He finds his wife and daughters inside. They are gloriously alive.

He cries until sunset.

He barely notices that every tape and machine has been cleared from the house. Every morning, of those hundreds of mornings: gone.

That day he begins his life again, and his family go out to the forest with him and sit, listening as the night folds over the world. And Birdsong Man wonders to himself: do the birds think any less of me? For telling such a fantastic lie? That even for one moment, for the best or worst of reasons, I sold them short?

Many years later Birdsong man – the quiet, unassuming little man – passes away. The night of the funeral, his wife has to make her way through a darkened house, in nightdress and bare feet, to a ringing telephone. She hears a very familiar voice at the end of the line; softer than it sounds on the official broadcasts, but most unmistakable.

And the voice asks: is it true? Is the Birdsong Man dead?" "Yes," she replies. There is a pause, and the sound of the caller hanging up. Then a tiny click, as another listener disconnects. And then, a few seconds later: a third click.

[Ends.]