

Scarlet's relationship with Alex might have continued, in that on-again, off-again way, if the new millennium hadn't brought some surprises, some of them more personal than others, for both her and her parents. What triggered Addie's restlessness again? A stolen presidential election? The threat of greater environmental losses than she and Tom would have even dreamed of, idealistically penning and illustrating *A Prosody of Birds* thirty years before? And eventually the unforeseen, and completely unimaginable, attack on the World Trade Center?

All those things, surely, but this time it was Tom who said they'd better get to work. There were all those dead crows and jays, for instance, that people had begun depositing at their doorstep—having decided, for some reason, that the crazy artist and her bird-loving husband needed to say, or do, something about the sudden appearance of this mosquito-borne malady called West Nile virus. While the bearers of the dead birds would arrive rubber-gloved and even, sometimes, surgically masked, the birds themselves wrapped in multiple plastic bags, Addie handled them

indiscriminately. There was no reason to worry about infection, she knew; they were, in all likelihood, dead not from West Nile, but from poisoning by the pesticide sprays coating the fields and streams of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York. Chemicals like Dursban, diazinon, ethyl parathion—all aimed at killing mosquitoes, mosquitoes that would then be eaten by birds that were soon falling, dead, into suburban backyards throughout the Northeast and the mid-Atlantic states.

And so Addie was at work again, quietly this time, in her charnel house. Here, by early 2001, she spent her afternoons, after mornings spent, once again, in the field with Tom, stuffing a seemingly endless series of crows (the jays, birds she'd always hated, she had less use for—even dead). She used models of these crows in her last major assemblage, titled *River Nile*. This river of black birds, flowing through a spare white room, was a surprisingly beautiful and moving work, especially in the wake of the September 11 attacks. And especially for those who knew, by the time *River Nile* appeared in her New York gallery, that Addie was ill once again, the cancer filling her womb and making its way toward her lungs.

And what was Tom doing? At first he was broadcasting the news that, one morning in May 2001, he had spotted a rare cerulean warbler on a wooded ridge near his and Addie's home. Then, when news of this sighting of such a rare and splendid species was barely noted at Burnham College, he was keeping strangely mute when Addie claimed, a few days later, to have spotted a Cuvier's kinglet. A bird that had never been seen before, except by John James Audubon (assuming he had been truthful). A pretty little bird very close in appearance to the ruby-crowned kinglet, except for a head stripe that, Addie insisted, more closely resembled that of the golden-crowned kinglet. Tom kept quiet, as well, when Addie went on to call for a change in this species' status, from either long-extinct or—in most people's estimation—a myth to a so-called hypothetical: a species whose existence in a given region is open to question because of the lack of an actual specimen, or a "bird in hand." But also a bird whose sighting,

by a serious enough observer, merits its inclusion in official checklists as a possible, or hypothetically present, species.

Interestingly, Addie claimed to have spotted the Cuvier's kinglet on the ridge above Nisky Creek the morning after the developer Bert Schafer made an irresistible offer to Burnham College, for three hundred acres of college-owned land, including this very ridge. Here he planned to build his largest housing development yet, along with a "minimall" holding a supermarket and several other stores. Addie and Tom's hope—a feeble one, to be sure—was that the college might be shamed into resisting the sale of this land, or at least the portion of it immediately surrounding Nisky Creek, on the grounds that Schafer's planned development would imperil one or possibly even two rare species of birds.

And finally, on the afternoon of September 11 came Bobby's reappearance in Scarlet's life—this time knocking on her door, shell-shocked and trembling. He hadn't gone to work that day, he told her that afternoon between rounds of inarticulate sobbing. In fact he had been fired the week before. He was on his way to clear out his desk, and he'd just stepped out of a subway station several blocks away from the World Trade Center when the explosions happened, and the world fell down around him, raining death and ashes.

Scarlet also learned that Cynthia had, by then, kicked him out of the house. That he'd been staying with friends on the Upper West Side, just two blocks away from her apartment, since being fired. And that this was the first time, that week, that he'd been sober for more than a few hours.

He told Scarlet these things, that afternoon, while she held him, trying somehow to calm his uncontrollable shaking, under a pile of blankets in her bed. "I don't know where to go," he'd said, when she'd opened the door to find him standing there, covered in dirt and ash. "And I can't get warm. Could I please just come in long enough to get warm?"

Outside it was a balmy, sunlit day. Though by that time, the acrid smell of smoke had already begun to wend its way toward upper Manhattan, to the air outside Scarlet's building.

IN HOVERING FLIGHT

Hours later, when Bobby finally slept, Scarlet turned on the television and, like everyone else in the country (except Tom and Addie, who were, at that point, trying desperately to reach Scarlet via the impossibly over-taxed New York telephone lines), watched the footage of planes crashing into the buildings and exploding—and bodies flying from the high windows, floating through the sky like desolate black birds—over and over again.