

THE MOONLIT PAGE

Before the List



An illustrated story for a quiet evening

"The first one was a blackbird," Daniel said.

"The first one was on the path."

"That doesn't tell me what it was."

"It tells you which one came first."

Iris set her binoculars on the bench. Daniel put his beside them, lenses facing away from the edge. They had reached the forest overlook with a flask, a folded map and a disagreement neither considered serious enough to abandon.

Daniel kept a list of the birds they could identify. Iris liked to remember where each bird had been doing whatever it was doing. His notebook said things such as blackbird, two. Hers, when she bothered with one, said beneath the crooked fence, throwing leaves about.

"It went into the hedge before we saw it properly," he said.

"You saw it well enough to say, 'Mind the bird.'"

"I didn't want you to tread on it."

"Then it was certainly there."

He conceded that it had been there.

They took off their coats. The bench was wide enough for the coats, the binoculars and both of them, although Daniel moved everything twice before accepting this. As he lifted his binoculars to make more room, one of Iris's eyepieces rose with them.

He lowered them immediately.

"We're connected."

She looked down. While moving the coats, he had passed one pair through the other's loose neck strap. Now both straps crossed under a sleeve, making it difficult to see which loop belonged where.

"Don't pull," she said.

"I was considering an apology."

They spread the straps flat. Iris freed the sleeve, and Daniel turned his binoculars back through the loop. It was a small problem, made larger by four hands trying to solve it at once.

"You hold still," she said.

"Me or these?"

"Let's start with you."

A bird moved in the tree beyond the railing.

Both looked up. It was halfway along a branch with a pale fork at the end. For several seconds it stayed where they could see it without magnification, a small dark shape turning its head.

Daniel's hands remained beside the straps.

Then the branch was empty.

"There goes another one," Iris said.

"Another what?"

"Exactly."

He laughed and finished separating the loops. They put a pair of binoculars on either side of the bench, away from the coats this time.

Daniel took out his notebook. A loose scrap slipped from its back cover. Iris caught it against her knee before it could reach the floor.

The scrap was an old list in his handwriting, folded into four soft squares. At the top he had written the name of this same wood. Underneath were six bird names and, in a smaller hand, a seventh crossed out.

"Our first visit," he said.

"I remember your new boots."

"They were very uncomfortable."

“You walked as though someone had told you not to bend them.”

He unfolded the paper. He remembered being pleased with that list. Seven birds had become six when they checked the book at home, but six had seemed a respectable beginning.

Iris leaned closer.

“Where's the one in the car park?”

He studied the names.

“Which one?”

“On the sign. Before we even started. It kept wiping its beak.”

“I don't know what that was.”

“Neither do I. You spent ages trying to get me to see it.”

He remembered now: Iris looking at the wrong sign, then the wrong corner of the right sign, while he pointed so emphatically that she had to push his arm down to look past it.

She had finally found it. They had both stood there watching it rub its beak against the metal edge.

It wasn't on the list.

"I liked that one," she said.

"So did I."

Daniel turned the scrap over. On the blank back he wrote: Before we started. Car-park sign. Beak.

Iris watched his pencil.

"No number?"

"I can't fit it into the order now."

"Good. I'd only dispute it."

He folded the scrap along its old creases and tucked it into the notebook. Today's page still had room beneath the two blackbirds.

They poured the coffee. Iris held the cups while Daniel tightened the flask lid, then he took his cup and looked back towards the pale fork in the tree.

"If it comes back," he said, "that's where it was."

"I know."

They kept watching the empty branch for a little while. The binoculars stayed within reach, one pair on each side.

Four moments to remember

A small memory card for retelling the story in your own words.

1. At a forest overlook, Daniel counts identifiable birds while Iris insists an unidentified bird on the approach path was their first sighting.
2. Their binocular straps become loosely crossed while coats are moved; they pause the untangling to watch an unidentified bird on a pale forked branch.
3. An old list recalls their first visit and a bird on a car-park sign that both enjoyed but never identified or recorded.
4. Daniel adds the remembered scene to the back of the old list without renumbering it; they drink coffee and keep watching the branch with their binoculars separated beside them.