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WHITE CROW

Marcus Sedgwick

Orion
Children's Books

Resurrection

The earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession. The trumpets of the apocalypse ring out.

There is no judgment,
no sinners,
no just men,
no great
and no small;
there is no punishment
and no reward.
A feeling of overwhelming love fills us with bliss.

We know, and are.
And we know with all certainty.
God *does* exist.

Rebecca

She could have been anyone.

She could have been any girl who arrived in Winterfold that summer.

That sounds strange, doesn't it?

It sounds strange to my ears, anyway. Summer in Winterfold. How can there ever be any other season here but winter, with a name like that? But whatever the time of year, Winterfold has a cold embrace, and like the snows of winter, it does not let you go easily.

Once upon a time there was a whole town here, not just a handful of houses. A town with twelve churches and thousands of people, dozens of streets, and a busy harbour.

And then the sea ate it.

Storm by storm, year by year, the cliffs collapsed into the advancing sea, taking the town with it, house by house and street by street, until all that was left was a triangle of three streets, a dozen houses, an inn, a church. Well, most of it . . .

And then, that summer, she arrived. And actually I'm lying.

She couldn't have been anyone, because the moment I

saw her beautiful face I knew I loved her, and I knew she would love me too.

I knew.

— *Saturday 17th July* —

Rebecca slides out of her father's car and the first thing she notices is the smell.

She sniffs the air, and without knowing it, she tries to break it all down. She gets some of it. She gets the hot salty air of the seaside, the tar of the fishing boats hauled up on the beach just out of sight over the ridge, the marram grass of the marshes inland, the hot engine oil because her father has flogged the old car all the way from Greenwich to this God-forgotten place.

She pulls back a long curl of hair blown into her face by the stiff breeze from the shore. Her father pops the boot on the car and grabs both of her bags at once.

The tiny cottage, idiotically named The Mansion, is disappointing; dark, with low ceilings.

Her father drops the bags on a shabby rug, kicks the door shut behind him with the heel of his boot.

'Well,' he says, but Rebecca already doesn't want to hear. She knows what's coming next. 'Your home for the next six weeks. Welcome.'

He's trying to sound carefree, and opens his arms as if

he thinks she'll run into them.

She doesn't. Slowly his arms fall back to his sides.

'Your room's at the top of the stairs. Here, I'll show you.'

'I'll find it,' Rebecca says, taking her bags. She turns her back on him, though even as she does so she hates herself.

Her room is a little better than downstairs. She drops her stuff and goes to the window, pulling her backpack off as she does and throwing it on the bed.

There is the sea.

Just beyond the ridge that slopes up to the right to become the cliffs, there's the beach, and the sea, and it burns brightly blue this afternoon, a diamond sea sparkling in the hot sun.

She turns to her backpack on the bed, knowing she has lost.

For a moment she wonders what exactly it is that she's lost, and decides it's a few different things, though what she feels most is that she's lost the battle to stop hurting herself.

The bag had been between her feet all the way from Greenwich, and yes, they'd had the radio on loud to hide the fact that neither of them was speaking, but even so, she would have heard it.

So she knows that Adam hasn't rung, and she knows

there's no point looking, but unable to stop herself she unzips the front pocket, and pulls out her phone.

She stares at the blank screen. Nothing. Nothing. No texts. No missed calls.

For a second she tells herself there's probably been no reception since halfway through the journey, but she has a couple of bars.

So she knows that he's not interested. She tells herself to be strong, but that lasts for five short heartbeats, and then she pushes redial.

When he answers he sounds surprised to hear her.

'Becky?'

She hasn't thought what she's going to say, so it comes out, blunt and raw.

'You said you'd call.'

'I did.'

'No you didn't. You said you'd call. Three days ago.'

'I will,' he lies, barely trying to sound as though he means it.

'You won't, because I left today,' Rebecca stabs, 'So you won't be coming round now. You . . .'

'Becky, listen . . . You don't need to . . . Look, I've got to go.'

Then there's laughter at the other end of the phone. Several voices. His mates. A girl's high-pitched laughter rises over the babble.

Rebecca holds the phone away from her head as if

it's burning her. Slowly, she moves her thumb over the keys and ends the call. She drops the phone on the bed and stares at it for a long minute, then goes downstairs, fingering the silver crucifix Adam gave her for her birthday. It wasn't a religious thing. More a Goth thing.

Until then, she'd always worn a silver heart pendant. It had been given to her by her dad, years ago, when Mum had died. He'd told Rebecca it was so she'd always remember he was there for her, that he loved her, even when they weren't together. But when Adam gave her the crucifix, she'd taken off the heart pendant, and not worn it since.

Maybe her dad had noticed. Neither of them had said anything about it. She tried not to feel bad about it; she wasn't Daddy's little girl any more, it was stupid to cling to that kind of stuff anyway.

Her father comes out of the kitchen.

'Nice room, isn't it?'

She opens the front door.

'I'm going out,' she says.

'I'll do something quick. For seven. Don't be too long.'

But she's already gone, into the hot late afternoon, and she's so preoccupied that she's unaware of the various eyes that are appraising her.

The new girl.

She blinks in the blazing sun, and looks to her left and right. She turns left, and passes the pub. Briefly she notices the sign. The Angel. It's beautiful, handmade, maybe years old, but someone has freshly repainted it. A beautiful stylised angel, handsome, with blond curling hair and glowing white robes, a golden halo and a golden sword. He stares into the blue-sky corner of the sign, as if staring up to God. His face is serene, and yet full of yearning too.

The inn marks the end of the street, and here the road turns back inland, up past the ruins of the priory, so she takes the track down to the beach, but has only taken a few steps when she sees a footpath leading into the darkness of the woods on the cliff.

The beach is full of happy laughing people, sunshine and sea, and joy. All these things feel dead to her. She considers the path up into the darkness, where she can take her pain away from all the brightness, and hide it.

That's the way she chooses.

1798, 7m, 13d.

There came a newcomer to Winterfold today, and God-to-tell, that is a rare enough happening, but further to that, something even more remarkable. He has taken the Hall.

At the inn, they say he is French, and his name is indeed French. He is called Dr Barrieux, but Martha told me that his voice is not foreign, but that he speaks English as Jesus did.

Bless Martha. At least she cooks passably well.

1798, 7m, 27d.

I learned more of our newcomer today, and yes, Grimes at the Angel Inn said to me that indeed he is newly come from France, from Paris. From Paris! To Winterfold! Think on that. From that most recent hotbed of foment and revolution to our sleepy village, a backwater on any map.

He has taken the Hall, Winterfold Hall, even though it has been empty these long years. For sure, Grimes says, he has been placing a great number of orders for supplies, for vittles and drink, for tools and diverse materials, and also various items of function not known to Grimes.

1798, 8m, 4d.

A hot day today, and one on which wearing the cloth of God was a great burden. I sweltered through my duties, and of course gave succour to the needy and comfort to the weak, but God curse me, I was only too ready to return to the rectory and divest myself at the end of the day.

I lay on my cot, naked like a baby, listening to the seas on the shore, hoping to feel the coolness of the coast stroke my fat belly, but there was not a breath of breeze. It was as hot as Hell.

As Hell.

If Hell is indeed hot.

Bring Me To Life

I might have been normal but if I was I cannot remember that time.

Once, for my birthday, my mother gave me a book of poetry. It was a book of poems that she had written, because she was a poet, and she had written a whole cycle of poems about me. The first ones she had written before I was born, when she was pregnant with me, and the others when I was small.

'This is your gift,' she said to me. 'Your gift from me. It's better than chocolate, or a toy, because no one else has these poems, and they will last forever.'

I was eight years old.

I remember that I nodded solemnly.

'Mother,' I said, 'you are a genius; you are a poet just like Shakespeare. Like him, you have suns, planets, ants, frightening skeletons. I prefer things which are frightening.'

I was eight years old when I said that.

Mother smiled but even as she did I could see sadder things in her eyes behind her smile.

— *Tuesday 20th July* —

The weekend drags by for Rebecca as she realises just how little there is to do in Winterfold. Her father, though he has nothing to do, spends the time finding ways of being busy, of being away, of being absent. He goes for long walks, presumably to try and clear his head.

She hardly sees him.

She lies on her bed for hour after hour, killing three books from cover to cover and as she ends each one drops them broken-spined onto the rough old floorboards.

They collide briefly during mealtimes, until on Tuesday her father's early return to the house forces her out into the heat.

She explores Winterfold. It takes about twenty minutes. She tells herself off for being a silly city girl, and explores it again properly. This time it takes twenty-five.

There's The Street, where their rented cottage is. It nestles halfway along the row, with its back to the sea, a late medieval cottage with two and a half rooms down

and two rooms up. No two houses are alike; there are some older cottages, some more recent ones, probably Victorian. It's like a short lesson in the architecture of English villages. The Street runs parallel to the shore, but the sea is almost entirely hidden behind the houses.

At its northern end is the village shop and a junction. A road leads across the marshes to Crowburgh, while The Street dog-legs sharply back inland, with one or two expensive old houses dotted down either side. She can hear a garden party in full swing behind a high brick wall, the raucous music at odds with the Englishness of it all.

She turns and walks back along The Street, past The Mansion.

At the southern end is the pub, from where a small unmade road bumbles down to the beach car park, where a notice warns that it can get flooded at times of exceptional tide. The sign brings a smile to her face: a solemn diagram of a car half under water, a stick-man driver standing on its roof waving for help.

Here the road turns back sharply inland, running past the entrance to the ruins of the Priory, once thriving, now just ghosts and stones. Further on are more big houses behind high walls and hedges, until this road meets the one coming from the other end of The Street, and the triangle that is Winterfold is completed.

Rebecca finds herself at the entrance to the path into

the woods again, and again she is drawn in.

She notices another, easier path, straighter, running along the back of the woods, but it looks well used, the sort of path dog walkers take to make sure they have a chat with someone. So she chooses the smaller, steeply twisting path into the thin sliver of woods that stands between her and the sea.

She waits a moment as her eyes adjust to the gloom after the bright sunshine of the village, enjoying the sudden cool of the greenness. She retraces her steps from Saturday, but sees a glimpse of blue through the thick undergrowth, and impulsively she pushes off the track and through elder bushes and nettles.

She finds herself in a new universe, just a few paces wide.

What she has found is a clearing in the woods, once probably well inland, but now eaten in half by the cliffs. Behind her, she's hemmed in by a semicircle of densely packed branches and leaves, a wall. She stands on a patch of neatly cropped grass, right up to the point where the land falls away, and beyond that is the infinity of the sea.

It's like a little room, without a roof, and with natural walls and floor, and the best view of the sea anyone could have. There ought to be a bench, but there isn't, and somehow that pleases her. She wonders who keeps the grass short, then notices the rabbit droppings everywhere.

The temptation to jump comes on her suddenly.

There is the cliff in front of her, only steps away, and timidly, like a frightened cat, she creeps towards the drop.

She's very close to the edge before she sees just how high the cliff is. She can see the beach below, and she knows it would be enough to kill her if she fell.

She pictures herself stepping off, and it makes her head swim, so she creeps back and gazes out at the sea.

It's a unique place, and though she can hear sounds from the village over the rush of the waves on the beach, it feels a million miles from anywhere or anyone.

It's the need for the comfort of childhood that starts her daydreaming. It's a safe thing to do, something which does not rely on her father, or Adam, or anyone else. Happy memories are invincible, protected and protecting, no one can destroy them.

Words drift into her head, images from books. For some reason she's thinking of Treasure Island, but she knows why; she's found the best pirate's look-out point that ever was. Treasure Island, Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family Robinson. Then music. She's thinking about the cliffs and a song about bluebirds, but not even realising she's got two different songs mixed up, the song in her head is Dorothy's from The Wizard of Oz.

She remembers the production at little school, smiling, remembering the blue gingham dress that she

wore, and wonders if she can still hit those first two notes, a whole octave apart.

'Some-where.'

She falters, stops, and tries again, louder this time, and hits it perfectly.

'Some – Where.'

And before she can utter another note, the line is finished by a voice behind her.

'Over the rainbow, bluebirds fly . . .'

Her heart racing, Rebecca spins round, catching her heel on a rabbit hole.

She falls, and knowing the cliff is at her back, her hands flail wildly, grasping for the ground.

She ends up on her side, winded, her head hanging into thin clear space.

She looks up into the eyes of the strangest-looking girl she's ever seen.

The strange girl says a strange word.

'Ferelith.'

Rebecca faints.

Four Sea Interludes – I

I left school when I was fourteen.

I left because there was nothing else that anyone could teach me. I know this sounds like I'm boasting, but it's just the truth. It was on the day that I found myself explaining Game Theory to my maths teacher that I knew there was no point being there any longer.

I got up from my seat, ignoring all the names and the insults from the others.

'Ferelith!' my teacher yelled. 'Sit down!'

I didn't.

I walked out of the classroom, straight out of the school gates, and down to the bypass, and I put my thumb out until a truck stopped and I hitch-hiked all the way home.

When I got home I expected a lecture about how dangerous it was to hitch-hike, but my father had other things on his mind.

That was the day I realised that if there is a God in the sky then he's vindictive and cruel, because I arrived home to find my mother being taken away in an ambulance. There actually were men in white coats. It's really funny if you think about it.

But I tried not to.

I visited Mother a few weeks later, but the trip to the home that she had been sent to upset me so much that my father never took me again. Anyway, he lost interest after a couple of months, not just in her but in me too, so that was that and when he went away I was left on my own.

So instead I made Winterfold my own, my own place, and I continued my education, in two ways. First, I used the internet, because I couldn't afford the bus into town to go to the library, and anyway the library is really old and the books on the shelves there are dying.

Secondly, I continued my education in a more important way, through the observation of everyone around me, because nothing is more important to learn in life than the interaction of a human being with another human being.

And that's what I did for a few years, and it suited me fine. Winterfold was the perfect place for my strange life. Claustrophobic. I lived a life of confinement while I bided my time. Maybe it's not how everyone lives, but I don't mind about that.

I think I was waiting, though I didn't know what I was waiting for. I think, though, that I knew I was waiting not for something, but for someone.

So when I heard there was a new girl in the village, I went to find her and I found her in the Lover's Seat.

I watched her for a few moments, and decided she was as beautiful as they'd said in the pub. She had her back to

me, so I hadn't seen her face yet, just her winding red hair. I tried to think of what colour it was; burnt caramel, sunset corn, honey beer, and then I thought I sounded like the dumb names they give paint in the big DIY place in town. So I stopped that.

She was singing! From my favourite film. I only needed two notes to recognise it, and so I joined in, but I think I scared her, which was stupid of me.

She turned as she fell, and I rushed to her.

I leaned over her and I think she must have thought that she'd fallen right over the cliff, because her eyes rolled back in her head and closed.

I couldn't pick her up, but I managed to pull her back away from the edge, and then I sat with her, as she lay on the grass.

I didn't look at her straightaway, I'm not sure why. Maybe she was too beautiful, too dazzling? No, that's dumb. Maybe I just wanted to draw it out, discovering her face, I mean. So I looked and saw the softness of her skin, which as far as I could see was utterly perfect.

That was enough for now, and so I sat with her till she woke up, my hand resting on her hair as she breathed lightly, watching the sunlight on the sea.

1798, 8m, 19d.

For the space of nigh a whole fourteen-night the Lord saw fit to visit upon me a sore and tiresome succession of bodily evils, which kept me abed until yesterday around Vesper.

Today being the Lord's day, I performed my duties, now, God-to-praise, mercifully freed of my sicknesses. I confess that even as I performed these duties with my ever-firm intent, I was mindful that we might find a new parishioner among us. I was thwarted however, for though I cast an eye across the whole of my dwindling congregation, I could see no one that befitted the description of the new French doctor.

Indeed, I recognised every solitary sore-ridden face of my cursed flock, God save them. Each and every one a sinner, I am sure, but that is not for me to judge, but for Him.

And so, I blessed them all, and sent them scurrying back into the August sun with visions of Hell snapping at their behinds.

My labours for the Glory of God being at an end, I

decided that it was indeed something of a slight on the part of the doctor not to come to the Lord's house on a Sunday, and so I ventured to make a visit myself to the Hall, and introduce myself and the village to our newcomer.