

The Eagle Has Landed

A Cautionary Tale...

Steven was taking in the rays. It was one of those glorious late summer days when it not only had the nerve to be sunny and hot without humidity, but it also had the sense to be a weekend. Apart from the trifling inconvenience of sunset, he could expect this perfection to continue for almost 36 hours before the real world raised its ugly head once more. He could even tolerate the few hours of darkness. A barbie was the obvious solution. Aromatic essence of summer baked into the food and ingested to absorb the season into the bloodstream. A few bebies to help wash it all down would provide the icing on the cake. Such was the pleasant reverie when he first saw the golden eagle.

At first it was a mere speck in the sky. It only attracted his attention at all because after circling lazily for what seemed like hours but must have been minutes, it suddenly stopped circling and appeared to hover. Gravity being what it is, things don't hover and the incongruity tweaked Steven's awareness. In fact it wasn't hovering at all. It was stooping. This is eagle talk for a headlong dive. It was also heading straight for Steven. It had started so high up that from his angle there was no apparent motion. It was 10 or 15 seconds before he twigged that it was getting bigger and another 10 before he reached the obvious conclusion that it was indeed diving straight at him.

Neither fear nor even apprehension entered the scene. It never occurred to him that he might be the Eagle's target. It didn't even occur to him that Eagle's only do this sort of thing at targets. Nope. He was initially mildly curious, then interested and, finally, fascinated. But don't worry. He wasn't in danger. At least not yet.

It was a stunning experience. About 12 feet above his head, the Eagle finally opened its wings and applied the brakes. The downblast was such that Steven's drink (bottle of Ice cold Sol with the obligatory lime stuck in the neck) was blown over and his shades moved at least an inch down his nose. The magnificent bird settled majestically on the upper limb of his deck-chair with its talons approximately 3 inches from Steven's scalp. Or rather where Steven's scalp had been about 1.3 seconds earlier.

It was now, along with all his other bits, sprawled inelegantly at the base of the chair where his belated reflexes had thrown him when he had finally taken in the possibilities of the sky dive. He was endeavouring to crawl away from the scene like something out of a cartoon.

His limbs were moving in an unco-ordinated threshing motion which had the effect of leaving him exactly where he was - somewhat like a non swimmer chucked in at the deep end. The Eagle preened its left wing.

By a miracle of levitation Steven's body eventually overcame the problem of inertia and found its way at what must have been near world record pace for the 10 metres dash inside the comforting security of his French Windows. The Eagle preened its right wing. Steven shut the windows. Steven breathed. Steven stared.

Steven began to tremble. The Eagle found a particularly irritating tick and plucked it out. Steven stared. After almost another minute - he even breathed again. Finally the mental processes began again - albeit slowed and distorted by shock.

There was an Eagle in his garden. On his deck chair, no less. Not more than 3 inches from where his head had been mere seconds previously. This was unreal. This sort of thing did not happen. A pigeon - perhaps, made tame by its years of contact with man. A Robin maybe - used to getting winter scraps. But a Golden Eagle with 7 foot wing span? Here? In West Crawley? In the back garden of number 22 Redland Street? Nah! This was a dream. The sun must have got to him. Or the Sols. But he'd only had two! And he'd only been out 45 minutes!

The thing about becoming conscious that you're in a dream, is that you can then seize control of it and either steer it your own way or hit Ctrl Alt and Del and reboot into the waking world. Steven tried. He dreamed the Eagle back into the air. He shook himself awake. The Eagle preened its left wing. "Photograph". That was his next thought. Followed by "Camera" and "Bedroom" in that order. The instant conflict was, of course, that he had no way of retrieving the equipment. No-one else in the house. And no way was he leaving this scene - which was entirely within his vivid imagination of course - in case it wasn't.

But if he didn't capture it on film no-one would ever believe it. He didn't. Why should anyone else. Shit. No Film. Finished off the last reel with a meaningless shot of Marion's Triumph Vitesse reversing into the garage - just to finish it off so he could send it off to get the thing developed before it began to ferment in the camera. It still had the ski-ing photo's on it from Christmas. Well so much for posterity. He'd just have to live the moment himself and bore anyone gullible enough to believe it later. So he settled down to watch.

The Eagle hopped. Steven hopped pointlessly in reflex unison. He hadn't expected it to move. But Eagles do lots of that when they're in the mood. It hopped and turned its back on him - still standing on the deck chair but now with its tail over the seat. Whereupon it proceeded to relieve itself of the remains of yesterday's rabbit.

Now then; a bird crapping on your deck-chair is not usually regarded as a cause for

celebration. But Steven was ecstatic. His brain was almost up to speed by this time and he realised that whatever happened now, he could at least prove the visit had taken place. Eagle shit must be identifiable, he reasoned, even if only by trained experts. He didn't know any Eagle shit analysts personally but he was sure they must exist. Any reasonably well known Naturalist would do. Perhaps he could persuade David Attenborough or David Bellamy to pop over and peruse the poop.

The bird had now been down for about 3 minutes. Steven was transfixed. He just stood and stared and stared and stared. The Eagle completed its preening and began to take a casual look around the garden. It did not do anything very interesting. Mind you, just its being there was interesting enough for Steven. It changed position from time to time. Sometimes facing Steven and other times with its back to him. At one point it opened up its enormous wings and for a ghastly moment Steven thought it was about to make its farewell. But no. It merely did an ungainly pirouette on one taloned foot and used the wings to balance.

After about 20 minutes, Steven's body protested that he hadn't changed his own position. He relaxed and dared to take his eyes off the bird long enough to glance at his watch. It was twenty past four and he was pretty sure that the last time-check had been at five to - just before he'd noticed the hover. He began to think about getting closer to the bird but was scared that any move he might make would alarm the bird and make it fly off.

He wrestled with the risk for another few minutes and then thought "Sod it" and gently slid open the window. The Eagle focussed on Steven. Steven froze. The Eagle lost interest. Steven took a step forward. The Eagle focussed on Steven. Steven froze. The Eagle lost interest. He was about to take another step when it occurred to Steven that he did not know how close he could get and had no idea what he would do when he got there. "Food" he thought. Offer it some tasty morsel to indicate friendship.

He took a step back. The Eagle focussed on Steven. Steven froze. The Eagle lost interest. Another step back. Wait for the loss of interest and one more. He was back inside the house. He walked backwards across his living room in order to maintain visual contact as long as possible. He successfully avoided all obstacles. No problem. However, he knew he now had to take the risk. If he wanted to get the food from the kitchen, he'd have to take his eyes off the bird long enough to dash into the kitchen, find something and dash out again.

He flew. He was in the kitchen; spotted and retrieved the french stick and back out into the living room within 4 seconds. He wasn't even panting. It was still there! Cautiously he made his way to the french window. Then once again, took that first step outside. The Eagle focussed on Steven... you know the rest.

He'd taken about 5 paces and was within 6 metres of the bird before it stopped losing interest. It was now permanently focussed on Steven and extremely interested in his every

movement. He stopped. He stared back. His pulse was up around the 140 mark. He was very very nervous. Not scared. He'd realised by now that although the Eagle could hurt him with its talons and beak, it couldn't do much serious damage to him. Moreover it clearly had no hostile intent. No what he was afraid of was simply frightening it off.

So what to do? The Eagle did not look too happy at the prospect of closer attention. Steven did not want to throw the bread towards the bird as this might look like an attack but he felt it needed to be a little closer. So what he did was to squat slowly on his haunches and lean forward to place the bread as far in front of him as he could. He then slowly stood up and equally slowly backed off towards the house again.

The Eagle studied the bread from its perch. And, to Steven's great surprise and delight, after a minute or so's careful contemplation, hopped off the chair down onto the lawn and across to the bread. It gripped it with a talon and leapt back to the deck-chair. Here it stabbed it once with its cruel beak. It looked surprised and stabbed once more. Then perching on its empty foot, and with what can only be described as massive disdain, it held the loaf out and let it fall to the ground. The Eagle had lost interest. Steven felt a bit foolish as he realised that offering a loaf of bread to one of the world's best developed carnivores was not the most diplomatic approach he could have made.

Meat, of course, was the answer. Into the kitchen, open the fridge. Raw chicken sat awaiting its fate at the barbie. But now it had a much more important end in sight. Steven siezed the plate with both pieces and hastened back to the garden, slowing down as he exited the windows etc etc.

When he got to the 6 metre mark this time, the Eagle was taking a much more detailed interest in the meat than it had done in the bread. He felt confident enough to take an extra step before gently laying down the offering. This time, the Eagle had landed and retrieved the first piece before Steven had even got back to the house. And this time it almost appreciated the gift. It greedily tore a strip of flesh from the chicken and swallowed it with something approaching enthusiasm. Then, amazingly, it dropped the remains on top of the bread. It hopped to the remaining piece and lifted it for closer examination. Then it abandoned it and returned to the perch.

Steven was crestfallen. Then it hit him. Perhaps eagles don't eat cold food! Their kills are fresh and at or near blood temperature. Cold meat to an Eagle probably meant old meat and they just wouldn't be interested. Right! Back to the fridge. Best end leg of lamb - also waiting to be barbied. Warm it up warm it up. Under the hot tap? No - wash off the blood, probably likes blood. Microwave it. Yes that's it. 3 minutes in the microwave - should warm it up without cooking it. Slap it in. Shut the door. Set the timer. Go! Rush back to the living room, Yes it's still there. Come on - warm up you bastard. Quick quick before it flies off. The three minutes stretched to about thirty. Eventually the bell went "Ting!.,Ting!.." and

before it could manage a third "Ting!" Steven had the lamb in his hands and it did - to his lay touch at any rate - feel the sort of temperature he'd have expected a newly slaughtered lamb to have been.

The Eagle was interested as soon as he stepped out of the house. As he made his slightly less cautious approach this time, the bird was hopping from foot to foot and half unfurling its great wings in anticipation. He got within 3 metres before placing the meat on the ground. He'd only backed halfway to the house before the bird had retrieved it and returned to the perch. This time the porridge was just right. The Eagle stripped the flesh and swallowed it with obvious gusto.

It was not a fast eater and Steven sat on the step outside the window and watched it clean the leg bone over the space of about ten minutes. Occasionally it would pause and cast its golden glare over Steven before returning to the feast. As it was clearly nearing the end, Steven realised that he had no more lumps of raw meat to offer. He had the mince for the burgers, which an Eagle could hardly be expected to get its beak into and after that he was down to mushrooms, peppers, rabbit food and... well ... there was a smoked pork sausage... but surely it wouldn't be interested in that... Oh well, nothing ventured nothing gained.

He cut off a quarter of the sausage; flash warmed it in the Microwave and returned to the garden just in time to see the bird making its final attempt at getting the marrow from the now clean bone. He was now able to walk slowly but without the acclimatisation pauses directly to the 3 metre mark. From there he gently lobbed the sausage portion to the foot of the deck chair. The bird pounced on it without waiting for his retreat and hopped straight back to the perch. It took some time to examine the piece. No blood but it was clearly warm. It did not feel veggie. It took a tentative stab. Then a larger slice. It gazed upwards as though seeking inspiration - "where have I tasted this before?" Then it finished the remainder in a single swallow. It spread its wings and gave a self satisfied croak that made Steven jump with surprise. It then did the old Katha Kali bit with the alternating feet and the head moving from side to side whilst maintaining its golden stare very firmly in Steven's direction. It was also leaning forward from the perch and quietly repeating the croak. All in all it looked as though it was about to launch itself at Steven.

And it was obvious to Steven that it wanted more of the sausage. "Wait here" he said. It was the first time he'd ever personally spoken to an Eagle. A master of avian conversation, he was not. He scuttled into the kitchen, cut another quarter, warmed it and scuttled out again. The bird met him half way. Literally. They were less than a metre apart when he lobbed the sausage and the Eagle didn't even bother returning to the perch. It picked it up and swallowed it in one. And then stood there waiting for another piece. "Hang on - I'll be back" said Steven. "Crroork" said the Eagle - which we must interpret as being Eagle-speak for something along the lines of "well get on with it then - I haven't got all day".

He returned with the remaining sausage duly warmed and cut into 2 further quarters to find the Eagle impatiently alternating on the chair. The bird flew to his feet as he stepped out of the house. He didn't quite dare hold the sausage to the bird. A misplaced beak could take one or more of his fingers with it. So he dropped one to the ground, where it was instantly consumed and the Eagle spotted the last portion and made as though to peck it from his hand. Hastily he dropped that too and within seconds, it too was history.

Then came something of an impasse. The bird was clearly turned on by this new experience of smoked meat and was by no means bored with the sensation. It wanted more and Steven had no more. His real problem, however, was that he wasn't quite sure how to persuade the Eagle of this shortage. Holding out his empty hands to be prodded by a four inch sharpened beak seemed less than prudent. On the other hand keeping them behind his back for safety made it look like he had something to hide - which is clearly what the Eagle believed. "I'm sorry, that's all there is" said Steven whilst trying to work out how to protect his hands and his groin simultaneously. He had become aware that the skimpy trunks he wore while sun-bathing did reveal, to the keen observer, a buried contour not too dissimilar from the bits of smoked sausage he'd just been feeding to that keenest observer of them all. After all you don't get more eagle-eyed than an eagle! "Crroorrk" said the Eagle. Which on this occasion I think we can take to mean "Bollocks" which, in turn, in the circumstances, was dangerously ambiguous.

Steven backed slowly away. The Eagle hopped after him. "Crroorrk" it insisted. Steven made it to the window. The bird hopped about on the step but wouldn't come in to the house. He felt safe enough to leave the window open. But the bird was not happy. It had tasted a new delight and it wanted more of the same and it wanted it now! "But I haven't got any more" pleaded Steven. "Crroorrk" replied the Eagle, sarcastically. It pecked at his curtains either in a fit of pique or just to see if they were smoked pork flavour. They weren't. The bird was disgusted. The confrontation ended without warning. The Eagle simply turned and flew back to the deck-chair and began preening again.

Steven felt huge relief. He had played with fire and got away with it. Once more, the bird emptied its bowels onto Stevens chair. He smiled indulgently. Then just as he was beginning to congratulate himself, the Eagle gave one more "Crroorrk", spread its wings and flew off. Not quite as suddenly as it had arrived but with just as little consultation. Steven leapt from the house and shouted a futile command for it to return but within seconds it was, once again, a mere speck in the sky.

Steven was a mass of seething emotions. He was devastated that the encounter was over. Ecstatic that it had taken place. Frustrated that he didn't have a better record of the event than two samples of Eagle shit and honoured that it had chosen to shit on his deck-chair in the first place. Yes Honour. That was, as he began to calm down, the dominant emotion. The lord of the air had paid him an unannounced visit and had accepted his hospitality. He

felt that he had just been paid an enormous compliment and that he had been granted a unique privilege. He was on a high like he'd never imagined. In short, he was well and truly gobsmacked!

He was still about six inches above the ground when Marion returned expecting a barbecue. "You did what?!" "Come and look if you don't believe me" "Steven its not entirely a question of whether I believe you or not" she said as she followed him out into the garden. "In fact, I'll be even more upset if you're telling the truth! The thought of that barbie, a litre or two of warm red plonk and the prospect of a night of sordid sex has been the only thing that has kept me sane all day and I come home to find the plan wrecked!" "Two out of three aint bad" he retorted and winced at the sharp kick in the shins. And there, sure enough, scattered within feet of the deck-chair, were the remains of the prospective feast, clearly the worse for wear and in a state no longer fit for human consumption. "And look at this" pointing proudly at the pile of poo. She looked at the drying mess with bits of fur and bone sticking out of it. She didn't really want to know but she asked anyway. "Eagle Shit" he said proudly - as though he'd laid it himself. She failed miserably to grasp the source of his obvious enthusiasm. Why someone should be so eminently cheerful that some beast of the air had done a huge woopsie on his furniture was beyond her immediate capacity to comprehend.

"Steven," she said "that is going to take a serious clean if you ever want to use it again." "Don't you lay a finger on it!" he warned. "That's my evidence! I'm going to find me one of those biologist chappies, or even a bird spotter, to come along and certify what species must have been responsible. Together with the beak marks on the bones, an expert should be able to confirm exactly what did it"

Slowly she let the idea sink in. An Eagle had landed and stayed for tea. It was kind of weird but she could also conceive of the wonder. In fact the more she thought about it, the more envious she became that she hadn't shared the experience. She became quite enthusiastic and started bombarding Steven with all sorts of questions, most of which he couldn't possibly answer like "Where did it come from?", "Why did it land here?", "Why you?" and stuff like that,

Together they speculated. Favourite was the theory that it must have escaped from a zoo. Together they contemplated what to do about it. After much discussion, favourite was nothing at all. Telling the papers might lead to its recapture and both were quite pleased at the idea that it may have escaped. It was evil even to consider depriving such a wonderful creation of its freedom.

Thus having recreated a measure of harmony, they made good use of the raw mince and settled for a Spaghetti Bolognese and a rather large bottle of Chianti Classico. Apart from the absent barbie, the evening proceeded much as Marion had planned. They were making

love long and leisurely when the thunderstorm began at about 2 in the morning. They turned off the lights, opened the curtains and incorporated the stage effects into a spontaneous new love game loosely based on Wagnerian fantasies.

This was all going rather well and 'Brunhilde' was really about to get her rocks off when 'Wotan' suddenly shot bolt upright. "Shit" he announced. "It's going to wash the shit away!" Without another word he leapt off the bed and ran downstairs. 'Brunhilde' was in mild shock as she heard scurrying noises, doors opening, closing muffled curses and, eventually, a wet and naked 'Wotan' returning up the stairs. By then, of course, the mood was well and truly smashed. In fact, sad to say, things were never quite the same again after that. Not surprising really. Not many women would willingly accept that their peak of passion should take second place to a bird turd.

And so it came to pass, that after one or two hours of rowing and recrimination, Steven felt obliged to prove his passion all the way through to dawn. Which is why they didn't get up till 2 in the afternoon and had a very late breakfast. Steven then spent a fruitless hour or two with the phone and Yellow pages trying to locate an expert on Eagle Excrement. Strangely few advertised their services in the directory and even fewer chose to answer their phones on a Sunday afternoon. Meanwhile Marion potted off to the supermarket to get provisions for that evening and the next few days.

Which was why she wasn't there when it came back.

Steven didn't know how long it had been there, looking at him. He just looked up from the phone and there it was perched on the deck chair again. He had in fact brought the chair in last night during the storm but had put it out to dry in the hot sun while Marion cooked the breakfast. Be that as it may, there it was again. A Golden Eagle, larger than life. Quick as a flash, he located the Asda phone number in the book and begged them to page Marion.

He had nothing remotely acceptable for presentation to an Eagle. He didn't believe this was happening again. He dared not move. The phone rang. "Bring back half a dozen horses willies and film for the camera – it's in the garden again" "Steven?" his mother inquired incredulously. "Ahh! sorry mum, thought you were Marion, listen I'll have to ring you later, I'm waiting for a very urgent call from Marion. Alright? Goodbye" He cringed at the prospect of explaining the greeting at a later date. 'Horses Willies' was their private and mildly amusing reference to Dutch Smoked Pork sausages for reasons which I'm sure you can work out for yourself. It rang again. "Marion?" he said, having belatedly learnt caution. It was she. He repeated the instruction and urged her to return with utmost haste "but leave the car on the road just in case you frighten it off".

All credit to Marion. Despite the untimely interruption to last night's performance which was due entirely to this uninvited visitor and which might thus have reasonably been

expected to diminish her enthusiasm for meeting it, she was in fact tremendously excited at the prospect and managed to purchase the willies, and the film and return three miles across town in under ten minutes. She found Steven unusually pleased to see her and he dragged her straight in to the living room to see for herself.

She too was Gobsmailed. It was an amazing sight. The beautiful golden bird sitting on their very own deck chair in their very own garden. While she was in her trance state, Steven took one of the willies and warmed it whole in the Microwave. Then he cut it in half and prepared to welcome his visitor. As soon as he opened the window, the bird hopped down onto the ground and bounced across to him. "Crroorrk" it said. Meaning "About bloody time if you don't mind my saying so - I've been here half an hour!"

Marion didn't know whether to be alarmed or amazed. She was already fully amazed so she chose alarm. "Gurrpp" she spluttered incoherently in what sounded to Steven like a feeble attempt at imitating the Eagle. She needn't have worried. Steven lobbed half a sausage towards the Eagle and it grasped it and demolished it with the oblivious impatience of a junkie getting a much needed fix. This bird was seriously interested in smoked pork. The second portion vanished in similar fashion and Steven was pleading with Marion to warm up the next one. Marion, however, was in the early transfixed state and could no more have responded to his urging than a rabbit would react to a shouted command to get out of the headlights.

So he was forced to back into the house with the Eagle "Crroorrk"ing after him and pecking at his departing trainers. It got so carried away that it actually followed him to the French Window and perched on its edge angrily hissing and snapping at the curtains - which had still not acquired a smokey flavour of any note. The sight of the snapping Eagle that close caused near panic in Marion. "Gurrpp" she repeated. Steven took this as a sign of acceptance and continued his headlong rush to the microwave. He returned with no less than 2 warmed willies cut into 8 sections. As he emerged from the kitchen he was pleased to see Marion and the bird were getting on so well. "Gurrpp" she would say in reply to the Eagle's every "Crroorrk". As the bird sensed the approach of more of the sensational meat, it calmed down somewhat and waited with near dignity for the next offering.

Steven did not particularly want the bird in the house, especially if it was inclined to leave more 'evidence' over their somewhat more precious domestic furniture. So he lobbed the next quarter over the Eagle's head and out into the Garden. Sure enough the bird chased the sausage like a dog. He used this technique to steer it back out into the vicinity of the deck-chair. Marion, meanwhile, was emerging from her trance and had the presence of mind to think "Photograph". She flew upstairs and down again and fumbled the film into the camera. Fortune had it that she was a mean photographer and it was a mean camera. She got some excellent shots. And when Steven asked for the next warmed offering, she was able to respond more usefully than "Gurrpp". She hadn't quite plucked up the courage to join him

so close to the massive bird, but he only had to retreat to the window to pick up the next sausage.

By contrast, Steven was feeling very adventurous. He deliberately placed the next portion on a garden spade and held it horizontally out in front of him. Sure enough, the Eagle flew to the new perch and seized the sausage. Even more impressively, it ate it whilst continuing to perch on the spade. Steven was surprised at its weight. Holding 6 kilos of bird out in front of you can get quite painful if it chooses to get comfortable. It made for a fabulous photo, of course. So did the Eagle's next move. Steven's hands were, of course, both occupied. The remaining sausage bits were in his breast pocket. The Eagle was perfectly aware of this and once it had polished off the spade offering, without so much as a 'by your leave', it shuffled sideways up the spade handle and with astounding delicacy, plucked the two pieces out of the pocket. Steven's face was a splendid mix of incredulity and terror at the sheer proximity of the beast.

And then, it finally seemed to be sated. But it was clearly rather comfortable on its new mobile perch. So comfortable and relaxed that it promptly deposited more 'evidence' on the lawn and began preening itself. Steven practised his Zen. Pain would have to wait. As you can imagine, the pride/awe/honour he now felt were beyond even yesterday's high. All the more so because this time he had a witness and it would be captured for posterity. This really was something to tell the Grandchildren about. Whatever happened after this, these moments would stay with him for the rest of his life.

And thus the tableau remained for perhaps another few minutes, during which Marion spent the rest of the film. And then, despite the Zen and the adrenalin, Steven's will collapsed and he slowly lowered the spade to the ground. The Eagle hopped nonchalantly off and up on to the chair. It stood and looked Steven in the eye. Steven looked back. Steven's emotions were indescribable. The only way we can get anywhere near expressing them is to say that, at that moment, Steven felt that he and the Eagle were the only beings in the universe. He fell in love with the Eagle. He was in awe of it. He worshipped its strength, its independence, its grace, its beauty and above all he felt ecstatic gratitude that it had chosen to share these precious moments with him.

He had no idea how much longer they stood facing each other. His reverie was broken by Marion informing him that she had another warm willie on offer. "That's OK, she doesn't want any more." He knew the sex as certainly as he knew it was replete. "She'll be back tomorrow - she can have it then" - he knew that too. "Crrork" said the Eagle, smugly.

And he was right. So sure was he that it would return that he had asked special permission to leave work early, raced to the Supermarket for a dozen of the pork persuaders and raced home to be there for quarter to four. And spot on four, down came the Eagle.

To cut a long story short, their relationship blossomed, whilst the situation between Steve and Marion rapidly deteriorated. While she could understand and, to a large extent, share his excitement and honour, no woman takes kindly to being second fiddle. And second she most certainly became. Steven became utterly obsessed with the bird. He changed his job for one with more suitable hours - even though it was for less money. That was one of many rows. He went to expert harriers, pumped them dry of information and bought the proper protective gear so that he could feed the Eagle perched on his arm. He set up three automatic video cameras to catch the action in moving detail. He lost interest in all his other social activities and his entire world became focussed on the wonderful wild bird. But it didn't matter, Steven was happier then than he had been in his whole life. It didn't matter that the visits generally lasted less than an hour. That hour made his day worth living. Those days made his life worth living.

And so it went on for 52 consecutive glorious days. And on the 53rd, it didn't show up. Steven was utterly crushed. Not only had it never missed a day, it had never even been more than 5 minutes late. It had become so much a part of his life that it had never occurred to him that one day it might not return. He was in agony. One part of him was saying that one missed day meant nothing. Another part knew this was the end. One part was terrified the Eagle had suffered an accident, another part almost hoped it had - because this would be an acceptable reason for its absence. He couldn't bear to contemplate that the Eagle had simply had enough of his company and gone off to look for pastures new. And yet another part of him knew that it had.

And he was right. It didn't return. And his life lay in ruins. He had thrown away his human relationships, given up a promising career, lost his will and ability to communicate with his own species in favour of his privileged relationship with another. It would have been difficult to rebuild his former life even if he'd had the will. In the circumstances, it was impossible. From a deliriously happy recluse he quickly became a miserable hermit.

He spent days constructing edited highlight videos. His favourite scenes included the Eagle hopping from one arm over his head to the other and the one where he appeared to be cradling it in his arms and the bird took the sausage from his mouth. Then he got so depressed that he burnt everything. All traces of the Eagle were extinguished. And when the enormity of that self-flagellation hit home, he became almost suicidal. By Christmas he utterly hated the bird for what it had done to him. He even fantasised about stuffing it for Christmas dinner.

This in a sense was the first positive development because his hatred made him want to do things to forget about the bird and thus he took his first tentative steps back into human society. He went to his mother for Christmas and almost enjoyed himself - which is as much as any of us can expect.

Slowly the repair work continued. He even managed to get his old job back. Marion was not interested, but there were other fish in the sea and he began to get the occasional nibble. By Spring, he was able to look at the experience with a much more detached view and realise what a complete arsehole he'd made of himself. And by early summer, even a little affection for the Eagle returned. After all said and done, he had been deeply honoured and it had been an amazing, if short lived, affair. One he knew no-one else would ever experience and that he would never experience again. At least he had experienced it.

And he was wrong! Mowing the lawn the first Sunday in June. One minute it wasn't there - as usual. Then as he turned round at the end of a row, there it was perched on the spade handle. He nearly cut his own toes off! After the first shock, the reaction was so deep that all he could do was cry. Great gulping sobs of relief, pain and pleasure overwhelmed him for several minutes. "Crroorrkk" said the Eagle, eventually. I would like to think it meant "there there" or something soothing to that effect.

"I haven't got a horse's willie" he confessed modestly, "but how do you fancy some stewing beef?" "Crroorrkk" agreed the bird. It has to be said that the improvement in conversational gambits had become very one sided. Nevertheless Steven duly warmed some dead cow and gave it to his long lost avian lover. He felt completely numb. He had so firmly written off the possibility of return, that, in a sense, it hit him almost as hard as the original departure. He went through the next forty five minutes in a sort of daze and when the bird departed all he could do was smile weakly after it. Five minutes later he couldn't even be sure it had really happened. It was the empty wrapper labelled 'Lean Stewing Beef' that convinced him.

He couldn't sleep that night. He genuinely couldn't fathom his emotions. He couldn't tell whether he was delighted to have seen her again, or terrified that if he let it all happen again, the nightmare of last year would be repeated. He knew he couldn't face that incredible rejection again. Of course, today might just have been a one off. But, just in case, he formed a plan.

And so, for one last time, he took an early finish, bought the sausage, and one or two items from the harrier's. He was home by three-thirty, donned the protective sleeves and was waiting with three warmed and ready cut sausages when the Eagle landed on his left arm almost spot on four. He had fed her two of the sausages and she was thoroughly relaxed when, just as the harrier had taught him, he slipped the hood over her head and while she stood stunned with disbelief, clamped the ring on her right leg. He carried the bird to the metal perch he'd hammered into the soil and padlocked the chain to the ring welded to it. He forced her to step on to the perch. "Crroorrkk?" she asked, unable to remember any previous games along these lines.

"Now my little beauty, I needn't worry any more, we need never be apart again" Steven informed the Eagle. And without further ado set about converting the garage to an aviary.

Every now and then he would look out to check on the bird and was pleased to see it still on the perch. It appeared to be a little disconsolate, but everything would be alright once it had its aviary. After all, it used to be a two car garage, so it was quite large. There'd be plenty of space for it.

It was dark by the time he'd completed the task. He went out to the bird, put the sleeves back on and gently took it from the perch. He unlocked the padlock and talking gently to the Eagle, telling her what a wonderful home he's built for her, and how happy they were both going to be, he slowly carried her into the aviary. He switched the light on and placed her on a new perch and padlocked her chain into place. "Best you get used to the place before you start flying around in it," he rationalised. But he did at last remove the hood.

And still the bird did not understand. "Crroorrkk?" it asked once more with a plaintive look in its eyes. Steven could not bear the implicit pain behind the gaze and hurriedly replaced the hood. "I'll see you in the morning" he said, and bade the bird "Good night my sweet".

In the morning, he removed the hood and still, the bird was puzzled and hurt. He tried to feed it the usual delicacy but it just wasn't interested. He persuaded himself that it might take some days for the Eagle to get used to this new arrangement, and starvation was a practised technique amongst the harriers, so, if necessary, he would use it here. He went to work in an almost jubilant mood.

For days he practised the same daily routine. Morning he would take in fresh water. Evenings he would offer the sausage, or occasionally fresh rabbit - which the bird was almost equally fond of. It would drink the water, but it refused to touch the meat. Gradually the light went out of its eyes. It became Grey rather than Golden. Sullen rather than serene. Whatever Steven did to try to entertain it, it remained utterly inert. Steven began to feel cheated. This was not the bird he loved. This was a miserable imitation.

Eventually, however, the hunger took over. It seized the meat and ripped it angrily to pieces. The light began to return. But it was a different light. A cold and angry light. Steven had to start taking precautions. Whenever he removed the hood, if he remained within striking distance, the bird would make a stab for the nearest exposed part of his anatomy. This was definitely not part of the plan. The ungrateful animal was clearly getting above its station. Gradually, as the pair began to hate each other, the whole purpose of the bird's captivity became crystal clear. Steven could not bear the Eagle's freedom. While he adored being its free choice of company, he could not cope with it exercising the same free choice to end the association. And as it became clear that he was obviously no longer its free choice, he became more and more determined never to let it regain that freedom. The proof would be too final. It was better to keep it captive and preserve the illusion than to suffer the humiliation of reality.

Daily he would risk serious injury by walking into the aviary, hooding the eagle and taking it outside to sit on the garden perch. Its chain just long enough to let it ground, so that he could play the old game of lobbing sausage. The bird was so hungry it had no choice but to co-operate in the ghastly charade. Unlike the previous year, he let neighbours and a few friends in on the secret, and daily they marveled at the control he appeared to have over the glorious bird. He even thought of calling in the press, but the thought that it might lead to a zoo taking her away from him was more than he could bear.

And when one day he was found wandering sightless in the street, with blood streaming down his face, begging for help; and in the garden, all they found was one talon still attached by its ring to the chain on the perch, no-one could understand why.

And Steven was not about to tell them.

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