

Razorbills

M.E. Proctor

On the other side of the locked door was the crisp sea air, the warmth of the sun, and a wonderful jumble of sound. Waves crashing on the cliff and tumbling back down in the loud cauldron of the crag, shrieks of birds playing, feeding, and arguing in their cryptic jargon. Clare listened, head tilted, but only a dim vibration reached her through the thick old walls of the cottage. She leaned on the cold bulk of the fridge and ran a hand on the metal panel, feeling for the magnet shaped like a flamingo. When Mike left the house before she was up, he always stuck a message for her under it. There was no message today and it upset her. Maybe he had stepped out for a quick errand, or he was in a hurry and didn't bother to use the braillewriter. She hadn't heard him leave. The alarm clock woke her up at eight. What day was it? Ah. Yes. Tuesday. Market day in the village. That explained his absence. Mike was always up early on Tuesdays to be on the square when the farmers set up. Clare suspected that some of the vendors waited for him to show up; they timed it so he could be the first customer. He was like a good luck charm. If Michael Doyle selected their tomatoes or radishes, the day would be propitious.

Clare felt a surge of affection for her brother. He loved her dearly, no doubt. If only he didn't worry so much. His insistence on locking her up when he left the house was irritating, demeaning too, as if her promise not to go out when he wasn't around wasn't good enough, as if he didn't trust her to keep her word.

All because of that one bad scare two months ago. Mike, back from a weeklong business trip to London, had found her standing at the edge of the cliff. The birds swirled around her, hundreds of them, coming up from below carried by the wind currents and swooping down to dive right in front of her, down the heart-stopping steepness of the cliff, into the boiling sea below, the noise of their wings louder than the wind. He fought the birds to get to her. They were packed tight around her. He was pecked and scratched. When he called she didn't hear him in the middle of the feathery turmoil. She was entranced, transported by the airborne maelstrom, fully alive, aware of the air brushing her skin, her senses tingling with joy, enchanted by the fantasy of taking flight and rising impossibly high into the endless spiral of the sky. When Mike grabbed her by the waist in a hold so tight that it hurt, she screamed her revolt.

He said the shrillness of the seagulls' cries made his teeth ache and she sounded just like them.

Not seagulls. Razorbills.

Mike dragged her to the house, sat her down in the kitchen and yelled at her. What was she thinking? She was a foot from the edge. A gust of wind could have pushed her off. What if a bird attacked her. What if a bird hit her and she lost her balance. What if, what if...an endless litany of raw fear and anxiety.

Clare told him that she knew exactly where she was. She wasn't going to fall off. Every blade of grass, every pebble of the cliff path was familiar to her. She understood the wind and the birds. She had spent countless hours up there since she could walk, even before she knew how to walk, when she crawled by Mama's side or nestled in Mama's arms. Mama who told her everything about the razorbills. How they mated and how they dived, and how they flew far at sea to fish and always came back, fearless navigators and precise aviators. The magical world of the razorbills.

Clare tried to explain but Mike didn't listen. Fear resurrected all the forgotten worries of childhood. The memories he had kept buried for so long. He reminded her of the day she slipped away from him in town when they went shopping for school supplies. She was nine then and he was fourteen. He had been so scared she was lost panic had tied his tongue for weeks and Mama thought he had lost his mind. And what about that other incident when Clare sneaked out of the house in the middle of the night and walked all the way to the churchyard to put flowers on Dad's grave, and the police brought her back in the black cruiser with the siren. How old was she? Five? Or that afternoon at the circus when she asked the acrobat girl to take her to the animal enclosure without telling anybody where she was going. She wasn't more than a toddler. Selfish, self-centered, oblivious Clare who never had a thought for the feelings of those who cared about her.

Clare didn't remember any of the episodes, the drama or the scolding. Mike remembered for both of them. Because he was sick with worry for her safety, she agreed to let him lock her up when he left the house.

Two long months already since the events on the cliff. Clare hadn't expected the locking arrangement to last that long. She thought Mike would realize how independent and self-sufficient she was and get more comfortable with her coming and going unfettered. But it hadn't turned out that way. Quite the opposite. He got used to bolt the door behind him. She didn't get used to hear the key turn in the lock. The compromise chafed. The bars of the cage rubbed on the tender points of her soul. Even when Mike was home, and all the doors were unlocked, she could still feel the weight of his watchfulness and his jittery nervousness. He walked with her, wherever she wished to go, even on the cliff path that he dreaded so much, but his constant concern was stifling. They used to talk freely and now their words were embarrassed by too much caution. She knew this wasn't the life Mike had envisioned for himself. He never talked about the friends and the job he left behind to take care of her after Mama died, five months ago. He told her he needed a quiet place to write, and it was probably true, but Clare knew the new book wasn't going well. The lack of progress made him snarky and short-tempered. They were both imprisoned. The bird and the birdwatcher.

Mike would never let go. He couldn't. Mama made him her guardian and he took his duty seriously, as he did everything. But today there was no message on the fridge. Was it just a small meaningless lapse? The morning coffee was still warm in the thermos bottle and Clare poured herself a big cup. She added two packs of sugar.

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Mike came back a little after the mantel clock rang noon. Clare was in the kitchen stirring a big pot of spaghetti sauce.

“Smells fantastic,” Mike said.

“I used the minced garlic, from the jar. I didn’t have the patience to peel the cloves.”

He was standing next to her—she smelled the subtle citrus scent of his cologne. “It looks great.”

“Is the sauce the right color? I know it tastes all right.”

“It’s beautiful,” Mike said. “It makes me hungry. I’ll get the pasta going.”

“Pick us a good red wine to go with. What does the weather forecast say for tomorrow?”

“A little warmer than today. Sunny with no wind.”

“I’d like to go for a long walk and take a picnic. We have to make the best of these days. Summer’s almost over.”

Mike started protesting that he had a pile of work to do and Clare shushed him. “You’re not getting anywhere with these chapters. How many pages have you knocked out lately? You need a big gulp of sea air to clear your head, and so do I.” She heard him set the table. “Any new gossip in town?”

Mike snickered. “You mean between Gary complaining he can’t find renters for his holiday cottages, Stan falling off his bicycle stone drunk, and Maude losing three chickens to a wily fox? Because that’s about the extent of the exciting local news.”

“You were gone much longer than usual.” Silence. Mike was draining the pasta and making too much noise with the sauce pot. Clare sighed and sat at the table. “You didn’t leave a note on the fridge.” The pop of the wine cork. Liquid filling glasses. Mike put down a plate of spaghetti in front of her. She put a finger on it to check that he’d loaded the dish with grated cheese, the way she liked it. He had. Of course.

“I figured you would know where I was,” Mike said. “It’s the same every week. The Tuesday market run.”

Clare didn’t insist. He was in full prickly defensive mode. Tomorrow, she would try again. When they were out of the house, away from the thick walls of the cottage.

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For once the forecast was accurate. Sunny with a light sea breeze. Mike made sandwiches, found the old picnic hamper in the closet and retrieved a tablecloth from the sideboard. Clare was putting a dab of suntan lotion on her nose.

“You forgot the tip,” Mike said. He gently smoothed the white streaks of excess lotion. “That’s better. You didn’t say where you wanted to go.”

“I thought we could go to the round fort, have lunch on the battlements and come back by the cliff path. If the wind stays low.” She smiled and grabbed her cane. “I have my good shoes and my walking stick. I can go miles.”

“I bet you could walk me into the ground.”

They set off. Mike carried the basket. He offered Clare his arm and she accepted it with a giggle and a crooked curtsy. There would be time later to show him that she could negotiate difficult terrain by herself. The sun was warm and she turned up her face to it. She breathed in the smell of the roses that were in full bloom.

“I’ll get some for your office,” she said.

“There’s a bunch of sweet peas along the back fence,” Mike said.

“I remember Mama saying that the more you cut them, the more flowers you get. I’ll make you a big inspiring bouquet.”

“I need all the help I can get.”

It was said with a hint of wry amusement. Clare was encouraged. He had decided to leave the doldrums behind. “Where are you in the story? We used to talk about your work.” She didn’t add: *before you got upset with me.*

“The last few months have been rough, Clare. I don’t like what’s going on between us. It gets to me so bad, my mind whirls round and round like a mouse in a wheel.”

“And mine bangs against the walls.” She didn’t want to say more just yet.

By the time they reached the ruins of the old fort, they were both starving. Mike spread the tablecloth on a flat stone and they sat in the grass to eat their lunch. They were alone with a few wandering sheep.

Mike sighed. "I'm sorry, Clare. I know locking you up is boneheaded, but I don't know what else I can do. You drive me mad sometimes."

"Most of the time, actually," she said. "Mama always said I was part nettles. I have a natural talent for irritation. And cooking. Providing I'm not hurried. Don't ask me to flip burgers in a fast food joint at lunch time!"

He laughed. "You make the best spaghetti sauce. And cake. You know, the first time I saw you handling the kitchen knives, I was scared shitless."

"Of course you were." She lay flat on her back in the grass. "You think I need watching, because I could fall down the steps, or I could cut or burn myself. You see so many dangers around me. I took care of Mama for over a year, Mike. On my own, except at the very end. I'm not a fragile, helpless little thing. I'm used to getting things done."

"You're very good around the house."

Clare took a deep breath. "You know so little about me." She raised on one elbow. "You're smirking. I don't have to see to know you're smirking. You left twelve years ago. You went to study abroad, then you traveled the world. I heard you on TV. Michael Doyle, international correspondent, reporting from war zones or disaster areas. We were so proud of you, Mama and I. And all that time, I stayed here, in what you think is a small, constricted bubble, separate from the real world. You're wrong, you know. I wasn't idle and I wasn't lonely." She felt tears welling and blinked to block the waterworks. "I'm not the gawky thirteen-year-old you remember. I had my own fighting and learning to do." She fished a soda can from the picnic basket. "I didn't know what was in the will. I was shocked. I thought Mama knew I could take care of myself, but she handed me over to you like a cumbersome package." She drank from the can. Now she could pretend the bubbles made her cry. "It felt like a betrayal. A vote of mistrust. You don't want the burden of me, Mike. I'm a stone around your neck."

"Don't say that. God!"

He sounded angry. No, he was terrified. Just like that other time when she had slipped away from him in town. The sudden understanding knocked the air from her chest. "You thought I was going to jump! Oh, Mike, never, never, I swear!" She grabbed his arm, shook it. "Look at me!" Oh, how hurt he must have been. She was not fighting the tears anymore. "You have to believe me. I would never do such a thing!"

"I left you alone for a week. I thought you would be fine. I wanted to *believe* you would be fine. Then I saw you up there. I could see you falling and I knew I would be too late. I... I lost it."

“I’m so sorry.” She moved to his side, wrapped her arms around his waist and put her head on his knees. “You’re right. I am selfish. There’s this joy I feel. The freedom. With the birds, like I’m sailing with them, and I forget everything.”

Mike was silent. He ran his fingers through her hair, a tentative caress. When he spoke his voice was croaky. “What should we do?”

“I love you, Mike. And I love this place. I love knowing it so well. It’s my home. It makes me feel competent. Do you understand?”

“I do. I think. But I can’t stay here forever. Only until the book is done. You know that.”

She smiled. “That gives us time to figure it out then. You’re an awfully slow writer. Or lazy.”

He chuckled. “Hold your tart tongue, sis. You have something in mind, don’t you? What is it?”

“I’ll tell you later. If you come clean and tell me how you managed to spend four hours shopping for lettuce and tomatoes.” She folded the tablecloth and picked up plates and napkins. “Did I miss something?”

“You don’t miss much.”

“People who can’t see often have excellent hearing. Clarissa Weatherhill, schoolteacher. Young. Is she pretty?”

He planted a loud kiss on her cheek. “You aren’t half nettles, you’re half sprite. She’s almost as pretty as you. What’s your secret plan?”

“Dr. McLean said they might have something for me at the bird sanctuary. Rescue. That was before Mama got sick, so I don’t know. I hope the position is still open. I’ll call him.”

“Fixing broken wings. You would be good at that.”

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On the way back, Clare told Mike that she preferred to find the path with her cane without being led.

“I’ll take the cliff side,” he said.

It was an acceptable compromise.

Soon she heard the familiar cries of the razorbills counterpointing the deep rumble of the waves. The air was subtly different, layered, and she tasted salt on her lips. The breeze had picked up slightly. Her cane found the flat rocks laid like smooth paving stones on top of the cliff.

“I’ll take two steps to the right,” she said. “This is exactly where I stood two months ago.”

“How do you know?”

“Smells, sounds, the feel of the rock under my feet and my cane. Sonar. Whatever. Stand behind me, Mike. You can hold me but keep it light, okay?”

“I don’t think I can do this. The drop. It’s straight down. And the rocks below...”

His voice was reedy. He was so close she could feel his chest heaving with his breathing, too fast. He had wrapped an arm around her waist. It was trembling.

“The birds are coming. Be still.”

“This is insane.” A wavering whisper in her ear. His fingers were hard against her ribs.

“Close your eyes.” Mike’s arm tightened around her waist. “I can only imagine your world through what you describe to me, the wide horizons, the hills covered with purple heather, the colors of the roses and the sweet peas, and other countless wonders. I want you to step into my world for a short time. Call it a test drive. Close your eyes. I’ll keep you safe.”

The birds were all around them, chattering, calling each other, exchanging tips on the best air currents and the perfect angle of the wings. On a quiet day like this, the best technicians found the subtle lifts that would send them soaring and the young ones practiced. Clare smiled. Mike’s arm around her waist had loosened and his breathing had slowed.

She felt the joy, the surge. “It will be all right. Trust me.”

M.E. Proctor is currently working on a series of contemporary detective novels. Her short stories have been published in *Bristol Noir*, *Close to the Bone*, *The Bookends Review*, *Tilde*, *Expat Press*, *The Blue Nib*, *Fiction on the Web*, and others. She lives in Livingston, Texas.