

THE QUARRY

Liam and the Swan

Thomas Noss

Liam had gotten pretty good at using his telescope with one hand. Unimpressive, sure, unless you consider that it was this piece of rickety plastic crap that'd been part of a junior astronomer's kit he'd received for his sixth or seventh birthday or something. Before the growth spurts and the angry red acne, anyhow. If you didn't hold it right, the stupid tubes and lenses would slip out of alignment and all you'd see was the distorted, blurry shape of Justine Fowler; instead of just seeing Justine Fowler, which was the whole point of the exercise. Well, not the whole point. That had more to do with what his other hand was holding: a contraption assembled from one sock, one optimistically purchased condom, and one good glob of spit.

He could have saved himself the trouble of holding the telescope – not to mention the familiar wave of post-climax self-loathing – if he'd only exercised a bit of patience. 'JustFitJustine' would be uploading all the footage to Instagram and Twitter and YouTube soon anyhow, all with a much better view than he could hope to get from his bedroom window. But this would be it. He meant it this time. The videos would be enough from then on; even if the final edits never kept those precious moments between the deep stretches and the sit ups and the yoga poses, where she'd stop to adjust her sports bra or check how her butt looked. Even if they didn't show her like this, sitting with her feet in the pool, throwing a ball for Lucky the Labrador, who had no goddamned idea just how lucky he was to be that close

to Justine freakin' Fowler. God, to be that close. To be with her, to be touched by her, to be *so close...*

'Damn, bro', a voice said from beside him.

It was only all the practice from having his mum knock on his door that prevented Liam from shrieking. Instead, he pulled his shirt down over his crotch as best he could and spun around, managing to knock over a small tower of plates and bowls that had accumulated on his bedside table.

'I didn't! I mean, I wasn't...'

On the foot of his bed stood a pigeon, flicking its head from side to side to look at him with one eye, then the other. If pigeons could grin, then this one was grinning.

'Looked like you were gonna start a fire, there,' it said.

'Wha... What?'

'Hah! Only joking, bud. Didn't mean to ruin your finishing touches. Think you'll be alright? Need me to turn around for a bit?'

'I—no, but—'

'Fair enough. Sometimes helps me clear my head, but if you wanna save it up for later, I can respect that.'

Liam only stared, barely registering the wet plop of his masturbatory aid falling to the carpet. After a long pause, the pigeon sighed.

'I swear, mortals these days. No sense of humour at all. Gods appear to you and it's all "Oh no, I'm hallucinating, get the lithium".'

'Gods?'

The pigeon grinned again, and was replaced in a blink's instant by a man wearing a flowing white robe. Grey-haired but powerfully built, with olive skin and eyes like thunderclouds, complete with the occasional subdued pulse of lightning. Liam was startled all over again, but soon managed to put down his telescope and accept the man's proffered handshake.

'Zeus. At your service bro,' he said, giving Liam an enthusiastic slap on the shoulder.

'Zeus?'

‘That’s the one, man. Lord of the Sky and King of Olympus. Jupiter, if you’re feeling a bit Roman,’ he said with a wink. ‘You know you’re allowed to pull your pants up, right? Feels like I’ll keep getting one-word questions until that happens.’

Liam did so, struggling to tug his pants and underwear up while still trying to hold his shirt down. Zeus looked on, waiting until Liam was all tucked and settled.

‘There, that a bit better?’

Liam nodded. ‘Um, listen, I’m... I’m really sorry for not, like... praying to you or anything. I think my mum has some candles. I can go make a shrine or—’

The god held up a hand.

‘That won’t be necessary. Actually, I’m here to help.’

‘Help... me?’

‘That’s right, my dude. With the object of your affection. ‘Cos you, my young friend, have got yourself a problem.’ The god nodded his head to the side, gesturing out the window.

Liam peered out to where Justine Fowler had begun her routine again, shifting herself from a push-up to a squat position, jumping in the air, then lowering herself back down to her yoga mat. She was speaking, no doubt giving instructions that her viewers could follow along at home. Liam had tried to do the exercises plenty of times, imagining building the bulging muscles that a girl like her might actually go for, but she was just so... distracting. Even without his telescope, he could have sworn he could see the beads of sweat rolling down her skin, glinting in the sunlight, dampening her clothes and—

‘Yep, that’s the look you get, right there. All that desire, all that passion. And the furthest it goes is into a tissue, a shower drain, or a banana peel that one time. Do you realise how frustrating it is?’

‘Uhhhh—’

‘What you need,’ he said, spreading his arms wide, ‘is a wingman.’

When Liam next blinked, he found himself looking at an immense eagle, no smaller than the man that came before it. Its white-brown mottled feathers flashed gold with every minute movement, creating a dazzling display that did nothing to distract from its viciously pointed beak and a set of shining black talons. Zeus allowed Liam a moment to gawk.

‘Cool, right? Anyhow, what form were you thinking? I recommend bull. Big, powerful, definitely a classic. You think she’d dig it?’

‘Wait, I’d be a bull?’

‘Yeah dude, keep up. Ooh, does she have a husband? We could give you his form and then be all like “Honey, I’m home.” Trust me, works every time.’

‘Uh... I don’t think she does, but I wouldn’t wanna—’

‘You’re right, let’s stick with animal. Snake?’

‘But I—’

‘Nah, too Christian. Ant?’

‘How would that even—’

‘Mm, yeah. Too freaky for a first timer. Let me think.’

Zeus stared out the window, furrowing his feathered brow and tapping one wing to his beak.

‘Zeus, I... you know, absolutely no offence, but I thought you meant we would, like... go talk to her.’

The eagle paused, pivoted to look at Liam, then threw back its head and let out a booming laugh.

‘I mean,’ Liam murmured, hardly able to hear himself. ‘Maybe she would like me.’ He sat down on his bed, staring at the skirting board while he waited for an oversized god-bird to stop laughing at him. It took some time.

‘Oh, Liam. Liam, Liam, Liam. You? Talk to *that*? “Hi, I’m Liam. Wanna hold my telescope? It’s a bit sticky.” Oh, you’re adorable. I take back what I said about your sense of humour.’

Liam frowned, clutching at the mattress.

‘Oh, hey now, don’t get upset. It’s not your fault. You can’t help being so modern about it. See, I’ve been around for eons, man. Long ones. And let me tell you, the rule of nature still applies. Might makes right. Did you know dolphins will gang up to separate a female from the pod until she lets them have a poke at her?’

‘Ew, what?’

‘Not so cute anymore, are they? There are these hermaphroditic flatworms, too, that like to swordfight with their dicks to see who has to be the pregnant one. And man, don’t get me started on ducks. Their junk’s all spiral-shaped so that—’

‘Alright, but I wouldn’t... I’m not a duck. Or a flatworm, or a... weird, rapey dolphin. I wouldn’t do that.’

‘Oh, because you’d need permission? Is that what you tell yourself during your little perv sessions? You’re a beast, Liam.’

‘No... no, I’m a human.’

‘Exactly. You are. You’ve just forgotten what that means. The whole damned lot of you have. Well, I’d say it’s time for a reminder.’

It took Liam a moment to realise that he was no longer gripping the mattress. He turned his gaze downward and saw only feathers. White, gleaming, pearlescent feathers. He craned his neck further, eyes wide, to discover two stubby legs ending in a pair of orange webbed feet. Then, realising that no neck should bend that far, he half fell, half flapped his way to the closet mirror. It confirmed what he already knew – that his gangly, misproportioned self was gone.

‘Oh my god oh my god oh my god.’

‘Yes, yes, and yes?’

‘I’m... you’ve made me—’

‘Striking. Majestic. Enrapturing. Everything we need to execute our plan.’

‘*Our* plan?’

‘Esh, ouw 'an,’ Zeus said, tugging the window open with his beak. ‘Just follow my lead, I’ve done this plenty of times. Now, get ready to evade.’

‘Evide what?’

And the eagle rushed at him, talons extended.

Justine frowned at the small screen attached to her video camera. She rewound the recording again, watching the miniature version of herself babble away.

‘So that’s it for today, everybody. Thanks for tuning in, and if you think this video helped you out, don’t forget to hit follow and leave a comment – it really means a lot to know that—’

Ugh. She shouldn’t beg. People hate begging. And look, she was hardly even smiling at the point she’d paused it. She needed to smile more.

Lucky came over and flopped next to her, letting her stroke his fur while she whipped out her phone to flick through her account details. Still only a trickle of ad revenue, nothing like the spike from when she’d posted the bikini bod video. A couple hundred bucks from that diet shake company, but she’d need to at least double her subscriber count before the big sponsors would start showing any interest. Everything would be fine then. She could pay down her study debts and relax a bit. God, she hadn’t even looked at her assignments yet.

She sighed, hitting the record button, pulling down her top a touch further and moving back into view of the camera. She put on her best smile, making sure to include her eyes. People always noticed if you didn’t smile with your eyes.

‘Thanks so much for tuning in, everyone. If you enjoyed today’s workout, don’t forget to—’

A noise interrupted her – something between a cry and a... honk? She looked toward the back fence in time to see a streak of golden-brown sweep down from above, dip out of sight behind the palings then shoot up into the sky again. Some sort of enormous bird? Lucky was barking, but a booming voice drowned him out.

‘I swear I’ll get you for real if you don’t stop farting around and get in there!’

The bird dived again, sending up a burst of the same cry-honking, but before it could swoop a third time, something blustered its way up over the fence and into her yard.

It... it was...

Striking. Majestic. Enrapturing. Utterly perfect, in a way she had never known could be possible. Its resplendent white plumage seemed to emit a light of its own, glowing in the afternoon sun as it spread its wings wide, glided down, and crashed into the pool in a somersaulting heap. It returned to the surface, hacking and spluttering.

‘Ju-Justine,’ it coughed. ‘You should—’

‘You’re supposed to be a mute swan, Liam! Mute!’

Something within her recoiled, twisting in her gut. She tore her gaze from the brilliant swan, looking up and down between it and what looked like a massive eagle circling overhead.

‘Come on, little man. Before she snaps out of it! Unleash the beast!’

A sense of wrongness welled up inside her. A sense of danger. She looked back down at the swan.

‘Uh, you should get inside, I think,’ it said.

She edged away from the pool at first, then bolted for the back door. Lucky darted through after her and sat whimpering at her side, as she slid the door closed and flicked the latch. The wide glass pane did little to muffle the sound of the booming voice outside.

‘Damn it!’

The eagle swooped down and landed at the pool’s edge, dwarfing the swan that was trying to clamber its way out of the water. It rounded on the smaller bird, hauling it out by its neck and leaving it in a dripping, panting heap on the ground.

‘You have one job, Liam. One! How hard is it to be an animal? Damnation, to be a *man*? Don’t you want to get the girl?’

‘Not like this. No. Just... no.’

‘Well that’s too bad, bud, ‘cos we’re doing things my way. The old way. So stop being such a pussy about it and stand back.’

The eagle took to the air again. Even from inside, Justine could see it gaining distance and height. Her head felt cloudy. Should she... call someone? The cops, at least? But her phone was out there. She was about to retreat to the bathroom, talking wildlife be damned, when she heard the swan mutter something that sounded like “oh no”.

She saw the eagle reach its zenith, then turn and dive down, gaining speed. As it neared the ground it levelled out its flight, rocketing straight towards them. Towards her.

The swan looked back at her, then out at the eagle. It scrambled in front of the door, planting itself between her and the monstrous bird, and spread its wings wide. As the eagle neared, it shouted out, its voice a piercing cry that shook the glass. That shook her very being.

‘MOVE, LIAM!’

The swan cringed, tucking its head against its body, but held its place, wings outstretched.

‘DAMN IT ALL.’

The eagle flared its own wings out to their full breadth, arresting its momentum mere millimetres from the quivering swan.

‘You think she’ll thank you? Take you in and make sweet love to her little white knight? Hm? What are *you* without *me*?’

Justine blinked, and a lanky teenage boy had appeared in the swan’s place. He stood, looking up at the eagle, his messy mop of hair and baggy, ill-fitting clothes trembling along with the rest of him.

‘Better,’ he said, in his small, wavering voice. ‘Better than this.’

The eagle pressed its face close to the boy, feathers bristling and eyes full of fury. Justine felt certain, in that instant, that the eagle would strike – would bury its talons in the boy’s flesh and leave him bleeding on the ground. Instead, it let out a quick, dry laugh and turned away.

‘Guess I overestimated you, Liam.’

It gazed out at the sunset, letting the warm light play over its form, and breathed a sigh.

‘Oh, but don’t you worry too much. I’ll get by. Never gone long without finding someone who wants a bit of help from old Zeus,’ it said and, with a wink and a smirk, vanished.

The teenager slumped to the ground. Justine looked past him to her camera, wondering if there was any academic policy that would help turn an animal attack into a deadline extension.

Liam's telescope had proven harder to break than he'd thought, and in the end he'd had to bend it over his knee and twist it to get it to snap. It made him feel better, though – much better than he'd felt muttering half-apologies to Justine on the way out of her house.

The “Justine Fowler” folder on his computer went next, sent to the recycling bin without so much as a glance through for old times' sake. That felt good too.

He got distracted while deleting bookmarks he'd saved for her social media pages, and some online galleries of her more risqué photo shoots. One of those included a link to a website where he found photos of girls with bodies like Justine's, but who wore less clothing than her. There were videos, too, where the girls did things that he had only imagined Justine doing.

He clicked on a few of those and stared at the screen for a while. Before long, and without much thought, one hand had found its way into his pants.