

**The
Language
of
Birds**

Jill Dawson



SCEPTRE

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The jingle for Club biscuits was written by Roger Cook and Roger Greenaway in 1973.

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ONE

The first time I heard the voice, I was six. It was a swan. I was walking home across the fen and this bird was in the beet field, and it stretched up its neck – it looked like a great big white coat-hanger nestling in all that green – and it spoke to me. I got the shock of my life. I was on my way back from church but I started running, tripping. I almost fell in a ditch. I was crying, and when I got into the kitchen, when I got out from under all that fen light beaming down on me – *Jesus loves me this I know* – I tried to tell my mum.

I had been thinking about the horrid minister. *Jesus Christ. The same yesterday, today and for ever*, the sign at our church said. I'd been reading it and trying not to think of anything else. Afterwards, I'd been walking home as quickly as I could on my short legs. There was a sound in the sedge beds, like snapping, like a fire. Then, in a big bluster, the swan was up and flying past, its neck like an arrow and shouting: 'You're not normal! You never will be!'

I fell down on the edge of the ditch and started crying. Then I shot up again, in case the swan came back and knocked me into the dead water. The sky above me was white. It looked like smoke and nothingness, with just this one tiny thread of geese in it, a long way off, like the tail of a kite. I thought – maybe the swan wants to sweep me up there with it. I ran until I got to the sprouting tractors and bits of old machinery – our back yard – and I was sniffing and snuffling, and trying to get the words out. 'Mum, Mum. A swan shouted at me!' I said.

My mum, she was always pale. That day she was so flimsy, like the little flame from a candle, and I was afraid she'd go right out.

I was always scared about that. She turned around from the oven, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She came into focus a bit, and she took off her yellow pinny and folded it and put it in a drawer. I could smell roast potatoes: Sunday dinner. She didn't look worried or scared. I was waiting and waiting to see what she'd say about the swan and how weird and white it was, and what was it doing talking to me and in a beet field?

She just smiled. She didn't even ask me what it said, either, and I never got to tell her about the minister. 'Oh, you're just like your granny,' Mum said. 'You've got the gift.'

Granny Otterspoor. She was a funny woman, with a fat tummy and thin legs. I thought she looked like a bird herself but she was kind, and because Mum was nearly always ill or in bed, she looked after me. Granny was born in another century and she used to tell me she was a witch. Granny might have been bonkers, but no one ever called her that. It was only me they ever said that about.

My brothers all worked for my dad on the farm and I was the only girl, the last, the baby. I sometimes thought it was me who wore Mum out, the worst, being the last, and her being older by then, maybe too old to have another. I was the one with opinions, too, and Mum said I was a Daddy's Girl. They said I should be a teacher or a preacher.

I did well at school. I flabbergasted them all: the first child to pass exams and even want to go and do a course at Chelmsford College. My brothers were all, 'What's wrong with the farm? Why do you want to go off there, then?' And Mum just smiled and said she was proud of me, but she coughed for a long time after she said it and sounded wheezy. I thought she was flickering, more than ever. I was scared to leave her.

Chelmsford. To do a course in child development and psychology. There was a brand new nursery on site, with brand new babies in it for us to observe. I don't know why I picked Chelmsford, really. Picked it out of a hat. It seemed close but not too close. As for the course, well, Granny had fourteen children

and Mum had had four, with me the only girl, and I suppose children and thinking about them, it was something I thought I could do.

All of them piled my stuff into a van and drove me there, singing, ‘Three Wheels On My Wagon’ all the way. All except Mum. She was coughing again, and fading out. She tried to wish me luck. She gave me a tea-towel and some cups for my little room, and a hug that felt limp and final. Why did I want to go? I was thinking. Go to my vast future, without her? And then angrily: Why *shouldn’t* I want to go? I was clever. I was the only one who was.

And I was lonely and I fell in love. His name was Dr Mills and he took me to the theatre a few times, and then I realised he did that to everyone, even the kissing and the cuddling. I’d been what my brother Danny would have called clout-headed. Daft. And then suddenly one morning they were at it again: the birds. This time it was wood pigeons outside my window. At first I thought somebody, maybe another student, was tooting one of those annoying paper party whistles. On and on it went.

Then I heard them clearly: they were saying, ‘Hey, Rosy! Go back to Ely and throw yourself under a train.’

I remember the station master and the porter in his uniform walking along the track, softly talking to me. A kestrel, trying to listen in, hovering overhead. I remember them, and the waiting room, and the police. Through the window of the police waiting room I saw a dead crow. Velvet, its wings spread, face down: a supplicant. Like me.

That led to a spot in The Poplars, which was good, yes, that was a good thing in the end, because that was where I met Mandy. And Mandy changed everything. Mandy introduced me to something, an idea that Mum had never managed: there was such a thing as happiness. Despite all that had already happened to her, Mandy was often laughing. Smoking, laughing, making naughty faces, she was . . . oh, I don’t know . . . she was *lively*.

She was the opposite of Mum. Not feeble like a candle flame but burning steadily.

Joy. You could expect it. You might not get it, but at least, well, you knew it existed: it was a thing. It was worth dreaming of. Mandy was my first proper friend, and she was in there for a kind of breakdown. They sometimes said mine was psychosis, but we helped one another: we laughed at them, we took the pills, and when we met Dr Ryan, we were so amazed by him, so under his spell, we stopped the pills. We hid them. That was what he told us to do if we ever wanted to get out of there. Mandy didn't think I was bonkers, she never called me that, but also, not being religious, she didn't think I was gifted either. I told her about Granny and how she had imps, familiars – that was what witches had – and hers were crows and surely mine were birds too.

Mandy said, 'Blimey, Rosemary, do you really believe all that? And, God, you're fascinating.' That's the exact word she used. She was the first person who did. I liked being fascinating and normal for a while, under Mandy's gaze. From the window in The Poplars there was a line of trees, like bristles on a chin, but the birds were at a distance, out of earshot.

I could see pheasants strutting in the fields, lapwings flipping – they always reminded me of fluttering handkerchiefs in the wind. There was a buzzard, fierce and suspicious, stuck on a post, but birds never spoke to me when Mandy was around. It helped me to get out of The Poplars quickly. That was when Mandy came to live with me at the farm. Those were the best times. I saved her, and she was grateful.

So there was the swan that day when I was six and then the pigeons at Chelmsford telling me to go home when I was eighteen. In the years between those times I listened. I was nervous whenever the first whooper swans started to arrive, congregating in the fens (were they all talking about me? What were they saying?), but there was nothing. I couldn't hear them any more. My voices were silent after The Poplars too, just like Dr Ryan

promised. He said it was only a 'rare visitation' and that I might be prone in times of stress, but could otherwise expect a quiet life. He was right, too. He made me feel confident that my life could be normal. They were silent through Norland College, all through my new job with Lady Jane in Belgravia, thank God. I thought they had left me for good – I even missed them a bit. But that night, an autumn night, a Thursday in November 1974, a conker-coloured sort of evening – the same colour as Mandy's hair – it started up again. Not birds this time. That night a new voice came: Mandy's.

Mandy's voice was lovely, young for her age, sweet. It had a sort of husky, cigarette-thickened sound. What did she say? Dr Ryan had insisted that four per cent of the Western population hear voices: 'Don't worry, Rosy, it's not as rare as you think. And two-thirds of these voice-hearers don't think of it as a sickness, as schizophrenia or anything like that, either, but actually *experience the voices as helpful.*' That was what he told me. Mandy used to say that everything is chance – the way a leaf falls from a tree: *which one, when?* The throw of dice on a game of Monopoly. Ending up in Park Lane not Mayfair – she didn't believe in Fate, or God, or destiny so how could you foretell the future? 'The future doesn't exist yet. It's going to be made up tomorrow. It's just *random*, Rosemary,' she'd say.

The night it happened, the Thursday when Mandy went down to that basement kitchen, I was in Belgravia. I was washing up and a bubble of liquid popped on a long wooden spoon and I looked at it, and I can remember standing by the window staring out at a great drooping cherry tree that Lady Jane had in her London garden, and it was dark so I couldn't really see the tree, just shapes. Quarter past nine. Instead I saw, I was seeing, Mandy's little navy court shoes for no reason at all, as if they were in front of me, seeing them right there in the black pane of glass. I mean, truly vivid: shiny, navy patent, small, scattered. Footless. That was the word that popped into my

head because she wasn't wearing them. Then: *footloose* and fancy-free.

It came at me with a slicing pain in the head and a scream and a shock like the swan and then a chilling, icy trickle. A lovely sweet voice, young-sounding. Saying my name, over and over. 'Rosemary – Rosy!' she called. *Help me.*

TWO

Long before she was twenty-six, the age she was when she came to London, Mandy River had learned to trust her intuition about people. Starting with her mother, she knew that people were mostly cowards and self-deluders. She might be small but she was brave, *brave*. Cowardice was the trait she despised most in others.

Gulls wheeled as Mandy leaned over the solid brown river, taking deep, smoke-scented breaths and wondering at the marvel of it all. She let her hair stream out, whipping round her face and behind her – what a mess she was making of it and how her mother would have something to say about that. Beattie River was a mother who always had an opinion and didn't let her own ignorance, lack of education or experience get in the way of a firm view, energetically expressed. More often than not, these opinions were about her daughter. Mandy's hair, her eating, her tidiness or lack of it, her clothes and whether her skirt stuck out at the back or her collar looked 'ridiculous', her dolls and their tidiness, their clothes, their hair, whether they should be dressed or naked: all came under Beattie's scrutiny and most were found wanting. Beattie thought of herself as an excellent mother, despite the straitened circumstances in which she found herself. A static caravan, for goodness' sake. Brian losing his job – well, no doubt all that cheap labour coming in after the Fanfare for Europe meant he'd never find another farm to take him at his age. Another baby to care for at *her* age. It was fresh lemon and honey for sore throats, hot-water bottles for stomach-ache, but it's true she was lost, completely lost, when it came to *feelings*.

Mandy's father was silent when his wife went on the attack, though if it was about the IRA or joining the Common Market and those 'bloody people' on the telly, he could sit up from his prone position on the sofa and be as wide awake as the next man.

In 1963, when Peter John River had come along, both parents had decided that the less said about him, the better. Peter was popped into a white, brushed-cotton romper suit, kissed and cuddled, welcomed into the family. Beattie was secretly pleased that, despite the inconvenience of his arrival, so late in her marriage, right when she thought she was done with mothering, he did at least have the good sense to be born a boy. Mandy remembered seeing her father standing looking tired – so *tired* – by the bed in the blue light of the early hospital morning. One extraordinarily beseeching glance was directed towards her. She couldn't read it. She had never thought of it until now, standing on a bridge, her hair flying out behind her, staring into the river Thames. Perhaps she had been wrong about him. What had her father meant?

So much that was puzzling. How come she hadn't known there would be seagulls in London? Surely they only existed in seaside places, like Hunstanton or Holkham, their cries a lamenting backdrop that echoed her own (once as a girl she had thought it sounded a bit like calling *Help! Help!* And when she met Rosemary she discovered that for some it was more than a thought: it was a conviction); but here they were and maybe they'd come from home, too. She was here, she'd made it, joining the damp-speckled late-blooming flowers, the pigeons and magpies and glittering tourists that littered the pavements. Shiny benches with winged, gilt-tipped arms, foreign voices, people endlessly stopping to take photographs, the sounds of wet tyres sloshing, an abandoned champagne bottle floating in the river: nothing was as she'd imagined it would be. She could even shake her head and erase, almost successfully, the picture of Peter on his birthday a few weeks ago, intent on his train-set, kneeling on the strip of maroon carpet at the bottom of his bed that passed

for floor space, placing the little wheels more solidly and securely on the track, his blue eyes not on her but the train, and think: My God, I'm here, at last. I've arrived in my own life. They'll all be fine. It's done.

She had in her coat pocket the folded envelope, scrawled with the address of the agency. It reminded her of long ago, another address on an envelope, a place near Newmarket that stank of the farmyard, a place that had terrified her, The Poplars, a place that, somehow, she had always known she'd visit, at least once in a lifetime.

People: Mandy liked the ones best who knew their own badness or weakness. The ones who wanted to open things up, kick a molehill apart, see the soft blackness spill and know a living creature was down there, that just because you couldn't see him didn't mean he didn't exist. That was the main thing. Things that didn't exist. Things that Rosemary was certain of and Mandy only caught a glimpse of once or twice, could only guess at. She liked Rosemary's 'wackiness'. She couldn't share it, she had a deep constitutional scepticism that only occasionally splintered, but what she liked best was that Rosemary's soaring thoughts so contradicted Mandy's mother, planted as she was so firmly in the Fens soil. Beattie.

Beattie was certain that so many things did not exist. Like money. 'That's not for the likes of us,' she'd say. Or desire. 'It's all very well for a man – they're just animals, really. Women have to be *responsible*.' Or happiness. 'No one has it easy. We all have our crosses to bear.' Ease, or a life without crosses to bear, did not exist.

Then Beattie's other favourite saying: 'Some folks don't know they're born.' This was an attack on the privileged, on some television personality who had just divorced and ended up with a palace and a stash of jewels, but as a child Mandy had always felt it angrily directed at herself and countered with 'I do! I know I'm *born!*'

Born *again*, perhaps, like a Christian? She almost did a twirl, right there on the bridge. She would walk to the agency, she

decided. She took the envelope out of her pocket and studied again the address Rosemary had written for her, circling the word 'Knightsbridge'. Rosemary had said, 'It's like *Upstairs Downstairs*. You'll love it.' She had as a safety net a second suggestion, West London Nannies, and Mandy had decided to register with both. She paused to study her *Geographer's A to Z* to calculate the distance . . . Maybe a twenty-minute walk from here.

London was abuzz, a streak of red from a squealing bus as it passed her, a dark man with thick hair in the style of Uri Geller calling out something only loosely translatable as 'STANDARD, *Evenin'* STANDARD.' The newspaper had a cover photo of two pandas. The new arrivals seemed ridiculously happy, too, draping the bars in their cage at London Zoo. She would go there one day, she thought. She walked quickly, her mood lifting with every step. *I did it. I did it.* Who could imagine what it had taken, the length of the leap? She would visit the zoo with her new charges, whoever they might be. She pictured herself with a pram, with twins, perhaps, or toddlers, wheeling them round the zoo: gurgling, happy babies, knitted hats. What child could resist a live cuddly panda bear?

When she reached the address, the agency building surprised her: it seemed more like a house, not a shop front, as she'd imagined. Spotless white steps, fancy black door, a bell with several names next to it. She rang the bell beside 'Knightsbridge Domestic Services' and a woman who seemed too young to be wearing her hair in that stiff blonde bun answered and led her wordlessly to a reception room. It was just as Mandy had suspected: everything in London was unreal and unspoken.

Mandy wondered whether she dared smoke a cigarette, and decided against it. She sat with legs crossed at the knee at first, then remembered that crossing at the ankles was more lady-like. Talking about herself, why she wanted this kind of work, deciding which details to give. She began biting the skin around her nails and her voice was suddenly called. Miss Amanda River.

‘Mandy,’ she said. ‘I’m mostly called Mandy.’

The stiff blonde led to her to another room where an older, friendlier-looking silver-haired man stood up from his leather chair to welcome her. He was Mr Reed, she’d been told. He sat back down, indicating the chair for her in front of his desk.

‘Do come in, Miss River, and tell us all about yourself. Marvellous reference here from Miss Rosemary Seaton, a Norland nanny with a lovely family. Did you both train at Norland?’

‘No – I— We’re friends from Ely. Rosemary’s been working in London for a while and – she loves it. I’m experienced, though. With children, I mean.’

Now was the moment to mention so many things. But, really, why should she? And wouldn’t it just – get in the way?

‘I wanted to come to London. You know. Leave Ely and . . .’ (Could she say, ‘I’m looking for something better?’ or did that give away too much, suggest she’d come from a poor background, or was leaving trouble behind? She hadn’t expected to be interviewed by a man: she’d definitely pictured a woman, a fierce, matronly type, but this was all to the good. The old gent was fiddling with his tie and straightening his cuffs; that usually meant something. His gaze on her was keen, lit-up and prickly. She was used to this. It had started when she was fourteen and then it had surprised her; it didn’t any longer. She crossed her legs again, this time at the knee. His gaze followed.)

‘And it’s *Miss River*, is it?’

‘Yes.’ She closed her mouth so hard she could feel her teeth clamping together.

‘Let’s see what we can find, shall we? You didn’t train at Norland. I see. That was the referee who recommended you. Well, not to worry, plenty of our girls don’t . . .’

He stared at her for a second and then began flicking through a leather ledger. ‘There are new families on our books including . . . Where is it? . . . One from a lady I know well, a countess in fact. Where is it? Lucinda! Lucinda!’

The door had been left ajar and the blonde appeared, black-lined eyes flicking over Mandy.

‘Her ladyship – this morning? Lady Morven? Do you have the piece of paper where I jotted it down?’ he asked, drumming fingers on the blotter in front of him.

The note was produced and he began copying details onto a piece of headed paper. ‘When I read your form I thought, This girl is perfect. She’s worked with boys of exactly this age – the boy is ten – and a nice recommendation . . . warm and unflappable. That’s what this poor Countess of Morven needs. She’s had a rather difficult time of it lately. There’s a baby too, a year old. You have experience in a hospital, and with new-borns . . .’

Yes, she had experience with babies. Her mother had had a late child, her brother Peter, and she’d helped to bring him up. Oh, and she’d worked with an elderly couple as a help, and in a hairdresser’s (not relevant, she guessed, but showed she was versatile) and briefly in a hospital, where she’d considered training as a midwife.

‘And decided against it?’ the gent enquired, when she paused for breath.

She nodded. No need to tell him more. She should bite her lip now, and wait.

‘So what I’ll do is telephone her ladyship and ask her if she might be willing to interview you this afternoon. How would that be? Or tomorrow, if you prefer. She sounded rather desperate. Her other girl left suddenly and, of course, she can’t manage a baby and a ten-year-old boy. Though why he’s not away at school at the moment I don’t know. Summer holidays, I suppose. He’ll be gone in September and then it’s just the baby.’

Mandy nodded and allowed him to make the appointment, sitting silently while he chatted on the telephone. She was thinking: Why *can’t* this countess manage a baby and a ten-year-old boy? Women did it all the time. But she and Rosemary had talked and she knew that such thoughts had to be suppressed. Posh women couldn’t manage their own children and that was that.