

LISA WARING BIRK

Because Help Can't Wait

"Nobody move!" Paul says, leaping from the driver's seat to the pavement. The six of us seat-belted in the back of the van don't say a thing. Paul is the captain of our Red Cross Disaster Action Team. He is capable and organized, but tonight his face is sharp, shiny with the unseemly glow of an eyewitness to disaster. It is our biggest fire yet, five alarms, involving two triple-deckers. Still, I am embarrassed by Paul's fervor. By the time we're called in, the fire is out. The injured and the dead have been taken away. Our job is to assess damage to victims and buildings not prevent it.

Across the aisle sits James. Like me, he is older than the other volunteers, though not by much. They are in college and he is probably 28. I like James. He is, in a quiet way, solicitous. I have never seen him lose his cool. James looks up and I raise my eyebrow. But he is kind and will not make even tacit fun of our leader.

Out the side window an ambulance parked inches away blocks the view. Emergency lights flash coloring the ambulance red-white-red. The letters "M," "B," and "U" slide by. "Hey," I say. The "L" and the "A" slide by. "Hey, we're moving!" Six heads swing forward, looking at the empty front seat. James unbuckles his seat belt, and then Paul yanks open the driver door, leans in and pulls hard on the emergency brake. Everyone rocks in his seat. "Sorry 'bout that," Paul says, sheepish, and he ducks out again.

We are, the seven of us, Red Cross volunteers, AMERICAN Red Cross volunteers, which, I have discovered, is quite different than the international variety. First of all we don't do wars; and second we're not Swiss; and third we're kind but not all that competent. The cover page of the handbook reads "Volunteer Handbook—minus the second e—which about sums us up, well-intentioned and doofy. When I am feeling benevolent, I think we are noble in a vernacular way.

I'm not feeling benevolent tonight. It's hot, I'm sticking to my seat, and my boyfriend Roy has moved from the "serious candidate"

column to the "maybe not." I'm 41 and counting my eggs.

He's divorced and frankly, I thought that was a point in his favor, like divorce built up some kind of immunity in his blood, and if he married again, he'd stay. But the other night I came home and the milk was spoiling on the counter and he'd left the oven on and a casserole blackening inside, and for the first time I thought I might not stay.

I smelled burnt tuna as soon as I opened the door. Right away, I whistled for the cats—seven percent of all fire fatalities occur because somebody went back for a pet—and they came running and scooted out the door.

In the kitchen the smoke was thick and acrid, but nothing—thank goodness—had caught fire. No orange glow, no licking flames, no burnt-wood pungency. I threw open a couple windows and the back door, checked the smoke alarm (its battery was detached, probably from the last time Roy forgot something cooking on the stove) pulled the casserole from the oven, and set it on the porch to cool.

By the time Roy turned up, I was scraping the dish with a spatula.

"Hey," he said. I didn't look up, just kept chipping at the blackened Pyrex dish.

"Hey," he said softly, wrapping his arms around my waist, "what's the matter?" A breeze blew through the screen door lifting my hair. Roy snuggled in and kissed my neck. Pressed together like that we're warm and cool at once. "Bad day?"

In my head, I made a list of what else Roy doesn't remember, doesn't do: turn off the lights, hear the running toilet, put the tooth-paste cap back on, re-connect the smoke alarm, return phone calls within 24 hours, keep a running grocery list, buy insurance.

I jabbed at the dish in the sink. "That. That's what's the matter."

He rested his chin on my shoulder, peered down, "Oooops," he said, "Sorrryyy," and he bent his knees into the crook of mine and straightened. He had to push kind of hard to bend my legs, but he did, and we bent and straightened, bent and straightened, doing a little up and down dance.

Roy and I, we've reached that stage when you know you love each other, but you also know you have irreconcilable differences and the question is can you make the accommodation.

"Maxine called," he said. "She panicked about her delphiniums. I thought it would take two seconds."

Roy's a landscape gardener, and the first time I saw him was two summers ago. He was working on some massive lawn on Brattle Street, panting and hugging this bundle of a bush, its roots wrapped in burlap. He was dripping sweat and here and there grass clippings clung to his face.

"Hey, what you got there?" I said. I'm not usually this forward, but something about the way he carried that bush touched me.

He shifted the bush over, rested it on his hip, the better to see me. "I've got a baby Japanese maple," he said. He looked down at my satchel heavy with books and papers to grade. "What've you got?"

"Not much," I said and blushed.

After that, I kept seeing him everywhere. I teach not too far from Brattle Street, and later I found out that most of his jobs were in that part of town. Mostly he works for older women. They don't mind his erratic hours because he's always doing little extras. He'll oil a creaky door, unscrew a lid, or drive them over to the pharmacy. They invite him in for lemonade. Sometimes he comes home with a tin of homemade cookies.

"You always think things will take two seconds," I said. "You have no concept of time."

"I have no concept of time," he said sadly, shaking his head.

I turned sideways, looked him in the eye. "It's not funny. You know, this house could have burned down. Both cats could have died."

"I screwed up," he says, letting go of me. "I'm sorry. Do you want *me* to clean the pan?"

"It's not about the pan," I said, whacking the sink with the spatula. "It's about being responsible; it's about planning; it's about future."

"Oh," he said, "not this again."

"Yes, this again. Exactly how much insurance are *you* carrying on this apartment?"

He opened the refrigerator door, "Hungry?"

"Nope," I said, and concentrated on dislodging the crang of tuna caught in the corner, and wondered, can you trust a guy who forgets tuna casserole in the oven *not* to forget your baby in the stroller at Store

24? I mean is this the guy for *my* eggs?

* * *

I think about this egg stuff all the time, even now while volunteering on a disaster call for the Red Cross on our biggest fire yet. The van's rear door opens, and Captain Paul pokes his head in again. "Anderson, Chen suit up." James—aka Chen—permits himself a small grin. We're both thrilled Paul chose us for damage assessment. "Chen, flashlight, clipboard. Anderson, handheld." By "handheld," Paul means the walkie-talkie, but at the Red Cross everything has a special word. It's part of the fun. "The rest of you set up for clients. We're going to have a *motherload*," he says, and slams the door.

Somebody flicks on the generator, it roars up and the van is fluorescent as a Dunkin' Donuts. Somebody else brews bad coffee, and Maureen, the chipper freshman, volunteers to take the first client. She's plump in a comforting way but not tender. Once, during a client interview, she stood up and said, "Mind if I watch the fire?" The woman, her client, was maybe 23, an immigrant with long, dirty blond hair. She had just lost everything, her home, her car, her green card. "I'll be right back," Maureen said, not waiting for an answer. The woman didn't even nod, just sat there, one hand in her lap palm up.

Maureen's been to a couple fires now, and she's quieter now. Her better qualities, efficiency and cheer, are poking up. Like now she says, "I'll get the 901-As," and she bends down, reaching into the cabinet for the client registration forms. James starts to hand me the walkie-talkie over her back. The van is crammed: six adults, two benches, six cots (folded), bins of sneakers and sweat suits and comfort kits for men women and children, cups and sugar packets and Cremora and cocoa and napkins and stirrers and a restaurant-sized coffee-urn. Every move should be collaborative, choreographed. But we don't play every night, and we frequently bump into each other. Maureen stands up, knocking James's outstretched arm. The radio crashes to the floor. A little plastic rectangle—the battery door it turns out—sails under the cabinet and the batteries roll under the stack of cots. This time James raises an eyebrow at me. We both laugh. After three months with the Red Cross, I tell my friends, "My apartment burns down and you see a Red

Cross van, send them away. Tell them I'm fine, just get them out of here."

James and I drag all the boots out of the closet. They are firefighters' cast-offs, all of them men's and not all of them in pairs. I wear a size seven shoe but settle for a size nine on the right and an eleven on the left. James finds a pair that more or less fits, and then we go through the jackets. They're rubber and sooty; they must weigh twenty pounds. In this heat I'm afraid I'll faint, so I leave the thing unbuckled, but I'm slimy with sweat before we jump from the van.

A dozen fire trucks, an ambulance, five cop cars, and two Red Cross vans are parked at odd angles up and down the narrow urban street. Hundreds of people stand in the eerie gray light looking up. Smoke smudges the sky.

We weave between people and trucks and hoses. We're careful that way. In Emergency IA-1 the Red Cross instructor showed a filmstrip on the dangers of firehose abrasion. But most of us, we didn't need the filmstrip, our mentality is calamity. Between calls we sit in the radio room telling our *own* stories, of near disasters and quasi-heroic saves, and when we run out of those, our preparations for disaster. Most of us keep a suitcase by the door packed with flashlights, batteries, a radio, photo albums, wills, marriage, birth and divorce certificates.

I fit right in. I don't keep the suitcase, but I rehearse exit locations and escape plans and what I'd take with me in a flood, hurricane, fire. I imagine disaster scenarios constantly. Not just the usual fantasies, like when you're a bridesmaid, and you picture the aisle and the bride and the wrinkle in the carpet and your spectacular slow motion fall caught on the brother-in-law's video, but more arcane and spectacular disasters. The kind the Red Cross specializes in.

Anyway, I figure I'm protected by all this planning but then I read about creative visualization, and I thought, "Wow, maybe I'm just creative visualizing myself right into disaster." Which brings me back to my boyfriend Roy.

We live together, have for the last six months or so, and a couple times my legs went weak and jittery right there in the middle of CVS shopping for toilet paper on sale, because I thought, *This is the man I'm going to marry.*

I've never been married, and at 41, believe me, I've dated a lot

of men, many of them nice, but most of them disappointing. Remember when Colombo Yogurt went from the eight ounces to seven? And from the outside, the container looked to be the same size, but when you stirred, your spoon hit bottom a lot earlier than you were expecting? That's because those clever marketing people kept the container the same size, they just raised the floor a half-inch or so. I never could adapt. In the end I just gave up the yogurt.

That's how I feel about most of my exes. They looked good on the outside—they were nice to dogs and to children and even to me, and they supported my dream of graduate school and a career in publishing—but I kept feeling I was hitting bottom way too soon.

Roy's different. If he were a yogurt container, he'd look like an eight-ouncer, but he'd hold twelve. I used to dream that he lived in a big house with dark wood and a banquet-sized dining room. His home was always filled with guests and food and drink.

I've never liked anyone better, so I worry. I see worry as an amulet, "Protect me from disaster." Every time I'm the bridesmaid, I picture the carpet with the wrinkle before walking down the aisle, and since I'm prepared, I step over it. But this strategy can backfire. Like once before I cut the tomatoes, I pictured the blade slipping, so I gripped the handle extra tight and the tomato slipped.

Not to mention that my preoccupation with disaster causes trouble between me and Roy. That's one of our biggest disagreements. Once he found my disaster folder lying on the floor. Since junior high I've clipped newspaper photos of people on the brink. He picked it up and read the label out loud. In neat black lettering, it says, "Disaster."

I grabbed for it, but Roy's faster and taller, and he held it just over my head.

"Fine. Violate my privacy," I said.

"What the hell-?" he said laughing, "What on earth do you keep in here?" and he started leafing through these photos. This was early on in our relationship and I think he wondered what type of crazy he'd gotten involved with. I didn't say anything—what could I say? I crossed my arms, stood by the bookshelf, and let him look.

I knew what he was seeing. There's a photo of a man lying on a dirt road. He's leaning up against the wheel of a jeep, the same posture as if he were reading in bed. Except he has his hands in the stick-em-up

position. To look at him, you'd predict he'd live. He has the thick, capable fingers of a laborer, and his eyes, though wary, focused, are not afraid. But the caption says he was shot and killed seconds later. I can't get over that. I look and look at that picture.

There's a photo of Christa McAuliffe's family standing on those NASA bleachers when the Challenger blew. Her father, he's sheltering his wife, his arm around her shoulder, and he's holding the other daughter's hand. Their bodies make a small circle. The sister's screaming. The mother's frowning but also smiling. She's trying to make sense of one plume becoming two, and she can't. She's thinking back on what NASA told her, and she doesn't remember a two-plume scenario. The father, he's thinking first of the women's loss and sheltering them and later, later he will think of his own. I'm always trying to figure out who I would be: The sister, the mother or the father.

Roy set the folder down on my desk and sat heavily in the chair. He was silent for a long time. Maybe he thought I was into some weird, kinky sex, like *Crash* or necrophilia.

"You collect these," he said.

"I cut them out."

"And then?"

"And then I put them in the folder."

Roy sat there, waiting for a better answer.

"I hardly ever look at them," I said.

He cocked his head.

"It's true, I don't. I keep them more for reference."

"Reference," he said. He opened the folder.

I stepped forward, "Roy, don't."

He pushed the pictures around 'til they formed a circle. It was an awful circle, the soccer-fans-trampling picture next to the triptych of a woman about to be rescued when the fire escape detaches. She falls head first followed by a potted geranium. "What do you see in here?" he said.

I tried to sweep the photos back into the folder, but he put his hand out and held me off.

"What do you see?"

"Photos. I don't know. I see...people on the edge. Or over the edge." I laughed. "I see— Look at this man. He's pressed against the

chainlink fence, hundreds of people pushing him. He's maybe three minutes from death. But look at his arm."

Roy swiveled the picture so it faced him. "So?"

"His right arm. He's braced against the fence to protect this woman." I traced the man's arm from his shoulder, around her neck, over her shoulder to the fence. "See his knuckles are white from holding off the crowd."

"Great. An almost dead hero. And you have a picture of him."

"So why him?" I said. "Why of all the hundreds of people lining the fence is he the only one protecting someone else?"

"So what about this picture?" He pointed to the triptych of the woman falling. "There's no hero here."

"Oh, *that's* in there for a different reason. In the first picture, she's about to be rescued. The fire guy, he's maybe five feet from her. She's five feet from safety, and that's when the bolts on the fire escape snap."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said, slamming the folder shut. "You are obsessed! Get over it."

"You opened the folder."

"You *keep* the folder," he said.

He left and didn't come back 'til after dinner.

* * *

My boots clump along past a bent and smoking mattress. The center is charred and the stuffing pulled out. Glass sparkles on the pavement. The walkie-talkie thunks against my thigh and crackles periodically with numbers and codes. Off to the side, I see Paul wearing the regulation white helmet with the red cross, and our slogan spelled out in red letters, "Because Help Can't Wait." Paul leans over to a firefighter, speaks. They chuckle in that sit-com-hero way.

Everytime I read our slogan, I complete the sentence in my head, probably because when I'm not volunteering for Red Cross, I'm a teacher. "Because Help Can't Wait, you're stuck with us," or, more efficiently, "Because Help Can't Wait, we're here." It cracks me up.

At last we reach the front gate. It's an Allston triple-decker with a tiny yard and an equally tiny picket fence. I have to lean way

down to nudge the gate open. The front windows are broken out, and on the porch two overturned kitchen chairs are hooked together as if mating.

James pushes the front door hard, scraping debris. Water drips from the ceiling. The house reeks of that smoky water smell. It's different than pure smoke, it's wet, too, which makes it seem ancient, the smell of water you might find dripping in primordial caves. I have grown to like the smell, it seems rank in the way of manure, and I wonder what might grow in it.

James plays the flashlight up the stairs and down. They are sandy with fallen plaster. A pair of girl's pink underwear with lace edging, soaking but improbably clean, lies halfway up. Off to the left, the living room is shrouded and dark. Someone shoved the furniture into the center of the room. The firefighters have covered what they could with a big blue tarp. Maybe some of this stuff will be salvageable.

"You want to buckle your jacket?" asks James. I like him for that. He's kind but not bossy. I do, and pull out the walkie-talkie.

"We're in," I say, and turn the volume down before Paul can chastise me for not using code.

James looks back at me. "Ready?" and he starts the ascent. His hand spiders the wall, feeling for heat. He bounces up and down on each stair. They sag but hold. I picture James bouncing hard on a waterlogged stair. It splinters and one leg crashes through. The other leg juts up at a 45 degree angle. For a second, he's a synchronized swimmer with a dirty boot, then the floor caves, and he's gone.

* * *

Once Roy asked me, "Why do this if it scares you?" My best friend says I'm counter-phobic. She's a psychologist and she says that instead of avoiding my fears, I take them on. "Let's say you're afraid of sharks," she said, "a phobic would live in Nebraska. A counter-phobe would live on the coast, become a marine biologist, specialize in man-eating sharks."

Maybe I am. I've always been drawn to disaster. Partly because I'm trying to figure out how to prevent it, as if there's some universal clue before the earth opens up, before the spark flames, before the

burglar slits the screen, before the car hits your child.

Like this morning, it was 1 AM when Paul called me in to HQ. I'm exhausted, I shouldn't have answered the phone. I teach seventh grade, and it's late June. The kids are wild, and I have piles of grading to do. And that's when Roy chimed in.

"Leaving so soon?" he said, mockingly. Roy admires and begrudges my disaster work. He thinks I like victims and danger more than I like him.

"You seen my shirt?" I yelled from the bathroom, pawing through the laundry.

"What shirt?"

"The navy one, with the Red Cross badge. Shit!" I said, and sucked my finger. "What'd you put in here?" I peered into the hamper, looking for whatever it was that stabbed me. "Shit, shit, shit." I pulled my finger out. Blood mushroomed up, I sucked it off. "Goddamn," I said, and pawed again, this time one-handed and gingerly. "There it is," I pulled out the shirt, sniffed the underarms. Could be worse.

"Find it?" Roy called.

"I'll probably go straight from the fire to school, okay?" I shoved my feet into the regulation steel-toed boots. "Shit. I'm hot as fuck already."

"What?" he said.

I clomped down the hallway. My laces dragged, making that slithery sound. From the bedroom door, I see Roy lying long and dark on top of the white sheet.

His penis lay toppled over on his thigh. I wanted to weep.

"I said, 'I'll probably go from the fire to school.'"

"What's with you?" he said.

"I have to go," I said, and turned without kissing him.

"Why don't you rescue me?" he said. I looked back, but he turned away before I could get a look at his face, before I could tell if he was serious.

* * *

The stairway to the third floor is narrower than the first and darker. It's stifling. Sweat puddles in my armpits, overflows, tickling a

wavy path down my arms. My shirt is soaked, and my feet are swollen with heat. It's hard to move. I consider stripping off the coat and the boots, it seems as if it'd be safer, but then I imagine a flame sprouting from the wall, licking my arm, flaming my hair into a lion's ruff or a halo. Better keep the jacket on. I wedge my boot sideways on the stair; it's that narrow.

Just two nights ago I'd gone to another fire. This one small, three units, only the top floor destroyed and one cat dead. The other cat, a marmalade tabby, we'd found up a tree. The occupant of the third floor and the cats' companion was a woman about my age. She had professional hair and a black leather briefcase, which when she opened, I saw was filled with pill bottles. She saw me looking, and snapped it shut. I busied myself with the 901-A and a stack of vouchers. For a bureaucratic form, the 901-A's not bad. I think of it as Evelyn Wood therapy: In 30 minutes the client describes who she is, what happened, and what she intends to do about it. It even anticipates medical needs.

"Prescriptions?" I had asked Joan. (We have a confidentiality policy, so I'll call her Joan.)

"None," she said.

I looked up. She reddened but held my gaze.

"Right," I said. And checked the "none" box. "And where will you be staying?"

She frowned, "A hotel, I guess."

"Don't you have a friend?" I said. "A friend you want to stay with?" She looked down. There was an awkward pause, which was my fault, and I was kicking myself and imagining she's an only child, her parents are dead, she has no friends because *just before* she got all those prescriptions she had a nervous breakdown, but she had been so moody, so irritable and unpredictable before the breakdown that she *lost* all her friends and maybe her job—the briefcase *is* worn.

"How about a comfort kit?" I said, "Would you like a comfort kit?" Joan looked at me with total disdain, and suddenly I was conscious of the idiotic, bureaucratic idea of comfort coming in a kit.

"It's a plastic bag," I said. "We fill it with toiletries." She folded her hands over the briefcase. I stood, all nurse-efficiency, practically clucking, (now I know why nurses do that, it's to distance themselves from the patient's loss), and I opened the overhead cabinet where we

keep the kits, and this flood of them poured out on my head, over my shoulders, onto the floor.

I gathered up armfuls of the damn things, put some on the counter next to the bad coffee, stuffed the rest back in the cabinet, and shut the door fast. "Here," I said, and shoved over the weeny kit with the weeny toothbrush and the weeny toothpaste, the weeny soap and one weeny junior tampon.

"You might want to hit a drugstore. If you look inside . . ." The bag sat white and lumpy on the polished black of her briefcase. "If you look inside," I said, reaching into the bag, "there's only one junior tampon." I fished it out. "I mean that's not going to get most women through a single night."

"Thanks for the tip," she said.

Some of our clients, they accept the purple too-large sweat shirt and sweat pants and the canvas sneakers one size too small and the comfort kit with gratefulness, surprise, even awe that someone would come to their rescue, that someone would think to give them a set of clothes and toiletries. And it is remarkable and kind.

But Joan is fierce in disaster. I like her for that.

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At the top of the stairway, a sliver of moon casts silver light. It's one of those loft apartments, all pillars and no doors. Everything is silver. Silver armchair, silver couch, silver kitchen, silver appliances, silver bed.

The carpeting is spongy as moss. It swells and dips mogul-like. I take a step. The floor sinks. A breeze, hot and sticky as breath brushes my cheek.

"Check it out!" James says.

"What?" I say attempting to pivot, but the boots are rubber and huge and with the wet rug, there's no pivoting. Every move is clumsy, as if here, there's extra gravity.

James points the flashlight at a bureau by the stairs. Once white paint is blistered and gray. The knobs are plastic and drip fantastically, Dali-esque.

"Weird, huh?" He reaches for one of the knobs.

"Don't" I say. "It could be hot."

Startled, he looks back at me and drops the flashlight. It clunks and rolls toward the stairs. He lunges, grabs and misses. The light teeters, flips over the ledge. It lands battery-end down, bounces. James dives for it again. One boot catches on the rug, and he pitches forward, arms outstretched. "Damn," he says.

The steps are slick with water and debris. He toboggans down a dozen stairs to the landing. His arms hit the wall and crumple. Then his head thuds into the wall. I close my eyes. When I open them, he's not moving.

"James," I say, leaning against the banister. "James?" He does not move. My breath is coming fast and in the distance, water drips. I grab hold of the banister with both hands and make my way down a half-a-dozen steps. His big yellow fireman coat is not going up and down. I don't think he's breathing. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," I say reaching for the walkie-talkie. "Jesus, Jesus. Oh god. Jesus."

"This is HQ," says Paul. "Identify."

"Paul," I say.

"Portable 1265, this is HQ. Code, portable 1265, code."

"Paul! James fell. It's a 190."

"A 190? Person down?" Paul says breaking code.

"I'm alright," James says, quietly not moving.

I shut my eyes, breathe in.

"Portable 1265, this is HQ. We've got assistance on the way," says Paul.

"Roger," I say.

Even though I'm completely focused on James, one little part of my mind can't believe I just said "Roger."

James lifts his head. His cheek is scratched and speckled with blood. One wrist flops.

"Did you hear that?" I say, "Paul's sending help,"

James twists around, looks back at me, "That's good," he says, "because help can't wait."

* * *

It's after 4 AM when I get home and I'm wired. I turn on the

bathroom light and examine my finger for signs of infection. Who knew what was in that hamper? I think about waking Roy, but instead I stand in the bedroom doorway watching him breathe, taking comfort in the regular up and down of his chest.

I look at my finger again under the light. It's maybe a little red, so I dunk it in PhisoHex, rinse and dry it on a clean towel. It's four thirty-seven.

In the bedroom, it's cool. Roy's opened the windows and a breeze rustles the leaves. I lie in bed seeing the flashlight tumble end over end and James reaching and falling.

Roy rolls over. "What time is it?" he says, eyes closed.

"You're awake," I say.

"Mmmm," he says, lying lumpish.

"Roy."

"Tell me tomorrow."

"Roy," and then I can't help it, I tell him *everything*. I tell him about James and the flashlight and Joan and her pills and the comfort kit, and the way they cascaded from the cabinet, and how I wondered if NASA had comfort kits for Christa's family, and if they did, did the kits have more than one tampon.

"I mean," I say, settling on what seems to be the common thread, "if you were making a comfort kit for NASA or the Red Cross or *whomever*, wouldn't you put *two* tampons in the bag?"

Roy, he reaches for me, pulls me to him, cradles my head. My nose and mouth are buried in his armpit and it's a lovely smell of grass clippings and lavender and sweat, but I have a deviated septum and three percent of all deaths in the U.S. are from carbon monoxide poisoning, and even though rationally, I know it's silly, I can't help but panic.

"Roy," I say, muffled.

"Yeah," he says.

"Could you loosen up a little?" He does, and I'm smelling grass and lavender and sweat, and through the spindles of the headboard and through the window, I hear the first birds of morning.