

CLARE OWEN

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# ZED AND THE CORMORANTS

ARACHNE PRESS

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and the  
Cormorants

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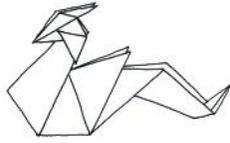
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Zed  
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For Tom, Esme, Edie & Ted



# One

There was a huge bird glaring down from the roof.

It wasn't pale sea green, like the metal sculptures on the Liver Building near where Nanny Pam lived, but it had the same long neck and the same wings, angled like coat hangers. The birds in Liverpool seemed friendly though. They kept watch over the sea and the city and the football club, but this one was only watching them. And it was black.

The colour made all the difference.

Zed lifted her phone and took a picture. It turned its head, in a series of tiny jerks, like the CCTV cameras at her school. *Correction. Her old school.* She zoomed in on its profile, the hooked beak and snake-green eye, the warning flash of yellow on the side of its head.

Maybe she'd send it to Bethany, if she ever found a signal, with a caption like, 'A warm welcome from the locals!' She could see her best friend's lopsided smile, that one dimple appearing just below where her freckles stopped. She could see her so clearly, typing her reply while twisting a lock of thick dark hair around her finger, the way she always did when she was focused on her phone, that it was impossible to believe she was over two hundred and fifty miles away. Two hundred and fifty miles! She was probably doing that now. Sitting cross-legged, her elbow resting on her knee, sending endless messages out into space, into the huge blank space between them.

Messages that couldn't bridge the gap.

Zed walked backwards across the lawn, trying to fit her new home into the screen. It looked better from this side. From the road it was too close and too wide and seemed cobbled together, as if bits kept being added whenever another room was needed, but from the back garden Tremelin House was big and square and framed by trees. It had three large sash windows along the top, and two on either side of a lead porch with wrought iron posts. Up close you saw that the paint was peeling, and the windowsills were beginning to rot, but

from a distance at least, it didn't seem quite so run down. 'A project,' was how Dad described it.

'I hate it here!' Amy was screaming. Again.

They'd opened all the windows to try to get rid of the musty smell and Amy's voice seemed to bounce off the wide, deep stone steps that led down from the drive. They were perfectly designed for such a purpose, like a Greek amphitheatre.

'I promised Luke I'd call at six-thirty. He'll be waiting for me. How can there be no internet? How can there be no phone signal? Why are you doing this to me?'

'Right now, the internet's not my priority,' said Dad calmly. 'Right now I want to make sure everyone has something to sleep on for the night.'

But this seemed to wind up Amy even more.

'I don't want to sleep here! I don't want to stay in this hellhole! It's the middle of nowhere. You're doing your absolute best to ruin my life!'

Dad put the vacuum down on the path and stood awkwardly in front of Zed.

For a moment she wondered if he was going to ask her what *she* thought of it. *As if*. Instead he said, 'Do you mind taking the bedding up?'

Mum was in the kitchen, if you could call it that, leaning against an old butler sink that looked more like a bath. She was clutching a large glass of wine. There were no fitted cupboards, just a filthy cast-iron range under the window and big slate flagstones on the floor. Zed had never seen a range before their holiday down here last Easter. The one in the rented cottage was dark green with shiny polished lids over the hot plates. This one was rusting and coated with a thick layer of grease and dust.

Dad came in, bouncing up and down on his toes and running his hand over his bald patch.

'Isn't it great, Lucy?' he said. 'There is so much potential. So many things we can do—'

'Well, why don't you start by putting the beds together?' said Mum. 'I'm proper shattered.'

Zed was shattered too. They'd been up early, really early, and driven all day. And Dad had gone on and on about their 'fresh start' the entire way.

'No more tasteless, cellophane wrapped, pesticide-infused vegetables for us!' he said, banging the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. 'We'll be growing our own! This is all about choosing a better way, a simpler life, breathing fresh sea air and living off the land.'

'Sea air? I thought you told us we were five miles from the beach?' said Zed.

'Five miles is nothing! Besides we're only a few hundred yards from the river.'

And you can swim there. I spoke to the farmer about renting the little boathouse by the water. We can store things in it, towels, sun cream—'

Zed glanced at her sister, poised to roll her eyes, but the days when they laughed at Dad's random enthusiasms seemed eons ago. Most of Amy's face was hidden behind a curtain of super straight, blue-black hair, but the white of her one visible eye, was pink, and the thick kohl circle she'd drawn around it, even more smudged than normal. She was facing the window, but staring at nothing, lost in the lyrics of another tragic song.

'He's the one that told me all about the house,' said Dad. 'Built by a miller, apparently. Got the original bread oven too. Hasn't been used for years, but I'm going to get it started and—'

Zed shut her eyes and did her best to zone out.

\*

Beth, Kabir and Caitlin understood. They were shocked and outraged when she told them. They actually saw it from her point of view.

'So, he's dragging you away, just like that? Without any discussion?' said Caitlin. 'That really sucks!'

'What? You're going for good?' Blotches of red appeared on Beth's neck. Zed watched them merge together and lurch towards her cheeks.

'Why did they even bother to let Amy sit her exams?' asked Kab. 'It's not as if she's done any work, or is going to pass any of them, she's too busy hanging out with that bunch of miserable freaks.'

'Well, I guess they needed some time to get things sorted,' replied Zed. 'And Amy did actually start doing some work. Finally. That's why they didn't tell us until now, in case she stopped again.'

She was so relieved that she'd told them, so glad she hadn't wimped out and messaged them instead, that she talked way too fast.

'Apparently, they've known since Easter, when we were on holiday down there. They sneaked off to see the house one afternoon, then sat up all night debating whether it was the right thing to do. Didn't think to talk it over with us, obviously, decided 'yes', and Dad put in an offer the next day.'

'It's about everyone else except you, isn't it?' said Beth. Zed loved the way her best friend always got it. Straight away. No messing.

'So as soon as Amy was done, they wanted to get her away from the evil Luke, and you can see their point,' said Caitlin, 'but Cornwall? It's a bit extreme isn't it?'

'Wow!' said Kab grinning. 'She might get a suntan! She might eat a pasty! She might even,' he did a drum roll on his lunch box, 'put on a pair of shorts!' He was always going on about how white and skinny Amy was. And how he'd only ever seen her wearing tight ripped black jeans. Even when she was allegedly in uniform.

‘You know my dad. No half measures. Now that he’s accepted redundancy, he wants to change his whole life. It’s not really about him or Amy though—’ Zed paused and took a deep breath. ‘He’s trying really hard to make Mum happy again. She had some really nice holidays down there, as a child and—’

‘But do you think she’ll actually go? Amy, I mean,’ said Caitlin. ‘Don’t you think, like, she’ll try and run away or something?’

‘Yeah, didn’t Luke want her to go and live with him in his uncle’s caravan anyway?’ said Kab. ‘He’s got big plans for them, ooooh yeah, a life hanging out in a trailer, smoking spliffs and spending his dole on getting their backs tattooed!’

‘And what about you?’ said Caitlin. ‘Just say *no!* It’s really simple. They can’t make you, Amy won’t go, and neither should you.’

‘They have to go!’ said Beth. She locked eyes with Zed and the other voices faded into white noise. ‘They can’t risk disappointing her mum, not if it’s what she wants, not after what happened. What if she tried to do it again and—’

She didn’t need to finish the sentence.

Yep, as always, Beth had got it. Straight away. No messing.

\*

Zed left her parents searching for a screwdriver in the kitchen, and found two pillows and her duvet in a ziplock bag by the front door. She dragged them across the wooden floor and up the stairs. There were boxes piled at the bottom, leaning against the wall, the flaps taped up with gaffer tape. There were boxes half way up, on the wide ledge under the big, arched window, and more boxes on the top landing.

Zed’s room was at the far end. It was L-shaped and overlooked what the estate agents’ particulars had called ‘the kitchen garden’, presumably because once upon a time something edible had been grown in the greenhouse or in the beds that were now a tangle of nettles and brambles. She looked at the mattress on the floor. She couldn’t be bothered to go searching for a sheet, so just dumped the pillows and duvet, threw herself on top of them and stared at the ceiling. It was the same dirty yellow as the walls. There were two exposed wooden beams, bare and grimy, perfect for hanging things, though, a row of paper butterflies maybe.

She hadn’t known what to get for her friends, but without really planning it she started making origami dragons just like Granny Steph had taught her when she was little. She found a stash of squares stuffed into the back of her drawer. Just one, she thought, to see if she could remember how to do it, and then another, because she didn’t get the fold on the tail quite right. And another because one of the squares of paper had a design of Liquorice Allsorts (and Kab loved Liquorice Allsorts) and another because... because... Soon she had made

one for everyone in her class, well at least all the ones who spoke to her and might not immediately rip them up and chuck them in the gutter. They would have probably preferred sweets or something, but hey... She made an origami box for her form tutor too, one that opened out into a rose. Miss Pearce hadn't really got it at first and just said a polite 'thank you', thinking that was it, a square green box, but when Zed showed her how you folded back the green sides to expose the red rose underneath, she clapped her hands with delight.

No one cried before registration, but after that it was tears, snot and tissues all the way. Kab didn't cry of course. He wouldn't have done himself any favours if he had, especially with Liam Marks waiting to pounce on anything he could label as 'gay', and anyway Zed would have found that too weird. And although he had tried to kiss her that time, at Jay's party, and she'd told him she'd rather stick pins in her eyes than allow him to shove his tongue down her throat (it was a miracle they were still friends really), he'd never hugged her before, so when he pulled her to him and she pressed her face into his blazer and could smell his deodorant and orange throat sweets, that was weird enough. Weird cool, but still weird.

They'd all clubbed together to buy her a really nice ink pen and a book of stamps. 'So you can actually send us, like, proper postcards. You are going to the seaside after all.'

Saying goodbye to Beth was the hardest. They went for iced coffees just the two of them, and sat outside the café long after the waitress had cleared away their glasses, neither of them wanting to be the first to leave. They gripped hands across the table, but when their fingers softened and fell apart, Zed couldn't bear it any longer.

'I don't want to go!' she wailed.

'I don't want you to leave,' said Beth, her voice cracking again.

'But I have to. You get that, right?'

Beth nodded, but now that it was crunch time, she didn't look so convinced.

'Dad thinks Mum needs a complete lifestyle change. A new chapter. We'll have lots of space and somewhere she can make her jewellery again, you know that always cheers her up. He's pretty excited about it all, and, well I guess he's been kind of depressed too, this last year, so maybe he's right. Cornwall is—'

'A place with happy memories and together you'll make a lot more?' Beth sniggered.

'If you'd said that seriously, I'd have had to think about trading you in for—'  
Zed's eyes welled up. A new best friend would never be possible.

Beth was still laughing. She was so frickin' beautiful when she laughed. It just wasn't fair.

'Any more puke-inducing, feel-good advice?'

‘Nah, think I’m done for now.’

‘Look, it’s not like we’re not going to see each other ever again. You can come and stay.’

‘Only if it’s got a power shower and under-floor heating!’

‘And I’ll be up to see Granny Steph soon – just give us a few weeks to get ourselves sorted. And we *will*... get ourselves sorted. We have to. Let’s face it, it’s–’

‘Last-chance saloon for your mum?’

‘Well, yeah.’ Zed stared at a screwed up napkin. ‘And that’s why I’m going to do my absolute best to give it a go. She’s got to think that at least one of us is up for it. If she knows she’s making us both miserable, she’ll fall to pieces. And then–’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Do you promise?’

‘What?’

‘Do you promise that you understand?’

‘I guess...’

‘Come on Beth, pinky promise, remember?’

And the thought of linking fingers once more, even just their baby ones, for a moment, was enough to make Zed feel a bit better.

Then she got to her feet knowing this was it.

‘I’m not going to hug you again,’ she said with a wobbly grin, ‘or message you the moment I get to the bus stop. I’m just going to walk off down the road. And you’ve got to do the same.’ Beth stood up too. ‘In the opposite direction!’ said Zed. They both giggled. ‘I mean it,’ she said. ‘Please–’

‘But it’s your last night – *our* last night and–’

‘And what?’ asked Zed, a little too quickly.

‘Well, I live two streets away from you,’ said Bethany.

‘Then you’d better take the long route home!’