

# European Birds

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**An extract**

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## Eighteen months ago: plagued by absence

*cormorant*

Statistically speaking, there was a good chance of me seeing a cormorant with widespread wings sitting on a lamppost next to the River Lys on my way to work on Monday morning; the quality of Flemish rivers has improved, so there is a striking number of eels and perch pike swimming around in the inland waterways of Ghent. On the other hand, the probability of a man on a bike with a little boy behind cutting in front of me, making me brake sharply, my back wheel slipping and a cry escaping my lips, to which the man responded with, ‘Bloody idiot,’ while two small eyes looked at me bewilderedly from beneath a cycle helmet in the form of a white shark’s head, now the probability of that happening was zero, but it did. It occurred. And that occurring continued uninterrupted...

I stood absently in the lift, sat absently at my desk entering data, was miles away in the canteen at lunchtime and failed to answer a single email. I had a swollen feeling the whole time, as if my stomach was constantly yawning, and, according to my colleague, I was humming and whistling. At two o’clock on the dot, I went to my boss’s office, told him I wasn’t feeling well – ‘I’m feeling a bit...’ - asked him for an indigestion tablet – ‘Have you by any chance got a...’ - and drove home. At home, I took a long shower and lay on my back on the bed. Around half five, the phone rang; I’d forgotten I’d promised to look at my daughter’s washing machine.

It wasn’t until nearly a week later, when my daughter’s washing machine was whirling round again and my wife and I were sitting in front of the television, that the absence that had been drifting around in me all that time, like an empty lifeboat, explained itself:

‘Eddie,’ I cried, perplexed, when a picture of a man appeared on the screen after the news. ‘We used to sing in the choir together... Eddie Hughes...’ An uncontrolled, drawn-out belch ripped out of my mouth.

‘You used to be in a choir?’

I laid my index finger against my lips and gestured to my wife to hush.

'...Mr Hughes is six foot tall and of average build. He is slightly balding and has a scar on the biceps of his right arm. When last seen, he was wearing painters' trousers with kneepads, white industrial shoes, a grey sweatshirt and a khaki body warmer. If you have any information, then please contact the missing persons team on freephone 0800 30300...'

'Fuck, he's gone missing...' Another belch followed; I pressed my lips together, waving my hand apologetically.

'Want a cup of tea?'

'One time, he fell through the roof of a rabbit hutch... at his birthday party, his mum was making apple fritters and he was standing on the corrugated iron roof with a referee's whistle up his nose, whistling and dancing away, when he went through, crash... right into the middle of his granddad's rabbits... Jesus, Eddie, but after that...'

'After that what?'

'It's incredible! I mean: what's the probability of seeing a picture of someone you know in a missing persons announcement, it has to be...' My wife took a little orange-handled knife and went into the garden to fetch some mint. After the announcement, zapping through the channels with the daft idea of finding more news about Eddie Hughes, I sang:

*As springtime rolls the winter up*

*Fair Flanders then awakes*

*And meadow, moor, and heath and hill for sun and summer ache.*

*The woods exude their frankincense, la la la la la...*

*My Flanders, fairest fatherland*

*All paradise and pleasure ground*

*May you be always mine!*

*It plovers, doves and chaffinches ,*

*it quacks in pool and pond*

*la la la la la la la la la la la...*

### *button quail*

After the weather forecast, I went upstairs with a cup of fresh mint tea to look at the police site, read the missing persons announcement and search for information on Eddie Hughes' disappearance. I still couldn't believe that someone I knew had disappeared, it seemed impossible, it was something like winning the lotto. I typed in 'lotto' and 'chance' and, a second later, got three hundred thousand results. I read that you were more likely to drop dead after buying a lottery ticket than you were to win the jackpot. Eddie, I kept saying to myself, Eddie Hughes, and I took out my guide to European birds. Dreamily, I let my thumb slide over the pages like a pack of cards, and a familiar breeze wafted my face. My fingers recognised the tatty dog ear on page 13, where, long ago, I'd underlined something, in red, in the chapter 'Various factors that play a role in identification: *Identification is generally the result of a process of elimination; few birds are identified on purely positive grounds. The place where a bird is spotted is important. This book excludes all birds that have never before been observed in Europe. There is also a great deal of variation in the distribution of species throughout Europe, so there is no need to check whether every quail is a button quail, for example.* According to the European red list, there are just five to ten pairs left in Europe, but searches in and around Cadiz, for example, have produced nothing. The button quail is quite possibly extinct. It would be the first time since 1840 that a species of bird has disappeared in Europe, but that was less important than the disappearance – the absence – of my old friend Eddie Hughes.

### *blue tit*

My wife thought I'd gone mad - 'Have you gone mad?' Three weeks unpaid leave to go and look for someone I'd sung in a choir with thirty-five years ago. My boss tried to convince me to postpone my request. 'If you're after a raise, then just say so'. I wasn't after a raise and I didn't want to postpone it. Okay, I said to myself on my first Monday morning off in years, standing with a cup of coffee in my hand watching an acrobatic blue tit in the garden. Actually, I might have said, 'Olé'.

After I'd wiped the whiteboard in my office, on which I made calculations for work – I work for the Directorate General for Statistics and Economic Information – I printed out the photo of Eddie Hughes that I'd found on the police site under missing persons and, using a red magnet, fixed it to the middle of the board with a click. It must have been a fairly recent picture. Eddie was smiling. I wrote his name in block letters under the picture – I had to smile, too – and, getting no further than that, I decided to call the police.

'Could I speak to the Missing Persons Department, please?'

'Hello, Missing Persons Department, can I help you?'

'Hello, this is Martin De Ridder'.

'Good morning sir, now what can I do for you?'

'I think I can help with the Eddie Hughes case'.

'Eddie who?'

'Eddie Hughes, I saw the missing persons appeal yesterday on the television and I think I can help if you...'

'Just a moment, sir...'

There followed a nervous tapping on a keyboard. 'Eddie Hughes, you say you have information on Mr Hughes?'

'Well, not directly, it's a long story... He's an old friend and I think I can help you find him. If you can let me know if he's married, and who to, then I can...'

'That's confidential information, sir. But what makes you think you can find him?'

'I don't know, we were friends, I... He might be in the Netherlands'.

'The Netherlands? Are you sure?'

'No, no... I've got an idea he's ... well, maybe he's in the Netherlands, on Texel...'

'Texel?'

'The Wadden Islands...'

'And why do you think that, Mr De...?'

'De Ridder... Because a long time ago... Look, if you can give me his wife's number or email address then I'm sure I can help... I'm serious, inspector, I mean what I say, I just can't believe...'

'We're taking this case very seriously, too, sir, just like every case, believe me, but we can't just go giving out confidential information; you must understand that, too, if you're serious. The only thing I can do is take your details and ask the missing person's wife if she's willing to let you contact her'.

'Yes, please'.

I did nothing all day: I checked my in box, went downstairs, went up again, checked my in box again, read the news and an article on a peregrine falcon chick that had fallen out of its nest and glided down smoothly onto a pergola, from where it had fallen into the courtyard of a dentist's practice, checked my in box, went downstairs, pumped up the tyres on my bicycle, spun the front wheel to make sure the headlight was working, filled a little dish with peanuts and went upstairs again to check my in box. In the afternoon I went out to buy some tea.

'Well? Solved the mystery?' asked my wife when she came home from work.

'There was no linden tea'.

'I know, I bought some'.

It wasn't until around half nine that evening that I got a mail from Eddie's wife, in which she briefly introduced herself before making a desperate cry for help. It was that voice that shook me out of the reassuring statistic that last year, of the sixteen hundred files on suspicious

disappearances in our country, ninety-five percent were closed, nine out of ten with a happy ending. That white, soundless voice told me that Eddie Hughes was not a case, but a person. I read the mail a couple of times and wrote her name on the whiteboard to the left of Eddie's. After that, I answered her mail with difficulty. I got another message straight away, asking if I wanted to come round, she would really appreciate it. I drew a plus sign between Eddie Hughes and his wife's name; it was ten thirty in the evening. Ten thirty-three. Thirty-four.

I parked the car in front of the drive where a van stood, a white Volkswagen, with, printed in purple letters: PAINTER AND DECORATOR and, below that, written in a cursive script: *Colour your walls with Eddie's Hues*. I took a quick peek into the cabin, went up to the front door, pressed the bell, counted to three, then let go. Eddie's wife cautiously opened the door, her head bowed, and gave me a lukewarm, limp hand, like a timid little girl hiding a piece of chocolate behind her back. She turned on the light in the hallway and let me in; she smelt of French cigarettes. I wiped my feet on the doormat, which said WELCOME, cleared my throat and followed her. In the living room, she turned down the sound on the television, preferring to leave it on in case there was any news about her husband, and asked me if I minded if she smoked and whether I would like coffee or wine. Still watching the screen, as if I were following the stock market news, I told her who I was and where I knew Eddie from.

'Was Eddie in a choir?'

'Yes, well, years ago... oh, forty... thirty-five years ago...' I said, turning my gaze from the television.

'So why do you think he might be in Holland on that island?'

'Texel... I don't know... It was the first thing that came to mind when I saw his picture on the telly. I still can't believe...'

'Neither can I'.

'We went there together once... in the summer holidays... to a seagull colony... Well, the seagulls had already left, but...'

Her slightly swollen face contorted, she wiped the corners of her eyes with the sleeve of her dressing gown, looking all the while at the carpet. I sipped my wine. After a brief pause, we both started talking at more or less the same time.

'Do you know if he took a pair of binoculars with him when he...'

'Why would Eddie have taken a pair of binoculars? I don't understand why you... I don't even know if we've got any binoculars. As far as I know, we've never had any. What would Eddie want with binoculars...'

'Or a guide to European birds, have you got a bookcase, maybe he took the guide...'

'European Birds? I don't know what you're talking about, Mr... He knew a lot about birds, but...'

'Martin, Martin...'

‘Okay, Martin, Eddie’s disappeared and that’s not good, Eddie always comes home, he calls me every day at lunchtime. I don’t understand what this business with that island...’

‘Texel’.

‘...Texel and binoculars has got to do with it’.

I was only giving her false hope. I’d do better to turn my thoughts back to the cut and dried statistics.

‘I’m sorry, this is a mistake, I shouldn’t have come, Eddie’s picture reminded me of something from the past, and in my... I thought I could... help,’ I stood up, ‘Again, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have bothered you with my...’

I couldn’t find the right word and while I was rather awkwardly and embarrassedly shaking her hand and thanking her for the wine and wishing her good luck – I wished her good luck – a young woman in a light-blue tracksuit and just-washed hair came into the living room with a towel round her shoulders, like a boxer.

‘Are you from the police?’ she asked. ‘Have you found him?’ ‘No, I...’ and I pointed to the door, ‘I was just about...’. The word ‘quest’ sprang to mind.

‘This is an old friend of your dad’s,’ said Eddie’s wife. ‘He thinks he might be in Holland’.

‘Holland,’ said the daughter, drying her hair.

‘Yes, Texel’.

‘Where?’

‘Texel, an island in the Wadden Sea, the Netherlands, known for its... spoonbills’.

The daughter walked past without looking at me and took a shiny red apple from the fruit bowl, still drying her hair with one hand. I rocked back and forth on my feet, struggling with the world ‘quest’ and wanting to get outside as quickly as possible; I was dying for a pee. Ice-cold rosé.

Four days later, my mother called. She’d had a blood test and the doctor had prescribed a course of vitamins. ‘Iron, dear, an iron deficiency. Oh yes, and yesterday your father read an obituary in the paper for thingummybob... Eddie Hughes. Weren’t you in the choir together? Daddy says they fished his body out of the canal. Nice looking lad, sporty...’ I still had two weeks unpaid leave. Shit, Eddie Hughes!

### *jackdaw*

The undertaker’s neon sign flickered on as I stepped out in the drive. I walked up to the spartan building along a damp gravel path; a couple of young jackdaws were running amuck on the flat roof, their white eyes dancing like raindrops on the big window on which was painted, ‘wide selection of artificial flowers’. While I was looking inside like an ibis, the entrance door

automatically slid open. I cleared my throat and went inside, wringing my hands. On the brick wall, above three majestic wooden coffin lids ranged side by side like Egyptian gods, wreaths of wild flowers hung like crowns above the gods. Next to them stood a Japanese-looking rack, displaying various decorative urns. On the other side was a whitewashed wall, hung with more subdued wreaths and bouquets of artificial flowers. A silent row of coffins ended by the counter, where a woman with a cup of coffee was standing in front of the computer. She apologised wordlessly when I announced myself and clicked a couple of things on. From one moment to the next, her face fell into a mask of sympathy and obsequiousness, and the mechanical voice that issued from her slightly crooked mouth enhanced the theatrical hand gesture with which she led me to Eddie Hughes. I followed the grey suit in high heels until it opened a pair of curtains and let me in to where the deceased was laid out, after which it closed the curtains again. I began to laugh quietly. They'd stuck Eddie in a blue, tailor-made suit. He was wearing a white shirt, black tie and black, shiny shoes. On his chest, between his fingers, a wreath of roses lay like breadcrumbs and raisins waiting for sparrows. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a brass chandelier glinting on the ceiling above him. *So much room, Eddie, and they have to go and stick you under that chandelier. If it comes crashing down... a gift from Admiral De Ruyter, no doubt... the linden tree... Lieutenant Harmanus Lindenhoff van Zwol...* I took two photos of the body with my mobile phone, clearing my throat to camouflage the sound. High heels. Was everything okay, did I need any tissues, a glass of water? I was fine, I said, didn't need anything, I just wanted to be alone with Eddie for a moment and watched until the grey suit was quiet again behind the counter. Putting my phone away, I noticed that my flies were wide open. *Yeah, Eddie, ha ha, she saw... but I'd rather you told me what you're doing here, man. Come on now, we're alone, I won't tell anybody...*