

The Blue Wings

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p 20-21

We were now sleeping right next to one another. In my room there was precisely space for two mattresses, a chair to hang our clothes on, a little shelf for my school books and a cupboard. Whenever Jadran waved his arm in his sleep, he wacked me in the face. He also made weird noises, rasping and rattling, as if experiencing every dream out loud.

Still, I liked having him in the room with me. When I slept alone I sometimes had nightmares. I would dream that I got up in the morning and everyone had disappeared off the face of the earth.

‘You’re Jadran’s guardian angel,’ mum had told me when I was just eight. When I was writing my first book review, Jadran was still floundering with his pointy block capitals. ‘If your brother’s having trouble, you’ve got to help him.’

‘Jadran’s a giant,’ I said. ‘How can I help him?’

‘You’re a giant too, Josh. A little giant, but a giant on the inside.’

‘He’s the strongest in the whole neighbourhood, he beats everyone at arm wrestling and I...’

Mum just smiled and said I should take good care of him.

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That night Jadran got up twice to check Spreet was still there. He pressed his head against the balcony door and blew little clouds on the glass. It was a great deal of effort to get him back into bed.

In the morning he ate his cornflakes on the balcony. It was a terrible mess out there. The newspapers had been torn to shreds, Spreet had kicked over the drinking bowl and bird poo was splattered metres up the wall. But Jadran didn’t care about that. He knelt by the door, his breakfast bowl and spoon on the ground in front of him. The crane stood trembling against the balustrade.

‘Leave him alone,’ I said. ‘He’s scared.’

‘He needs to eat, otherwise he’ll die.’ Jadran tossed a flake towards the bird with his spoon. Spreet didn’t bite. But he did look up, and that was a start.

Jadran stayed on the balcony all morning. Mum didn’t even try to convince him that we had to take Spreet away. At least Jadran wasn’t getting under foot this way.

'Well then,' she said, putting on her coat, 'that crane can stay this evening.' She linked arms with Murad and they set off to buy new bed linen.

I looked it up for Jadran online: cranes are omnivores. When they're incubating their eggs they eat insects, worms or frogs, but rarely fish. And during migration they scratch around the empty fields for leftover wheat and maize.

'Cornflakes are maize,' Jadran grinned. 'Now for the worms.'

We put on our shoes. Jadran grabbed a wooden spoon and I took an empty jam jar from the cupboard.

I ran down the stairwell. Jadran took the lift. Mum didn't really allow him to do that alone. Certainly not as a race. But when she wasn't home we did it anyway. I leapt and slid the last part with my buttocks over the bannister.

He stood pleased as Punch waiting for me in the hallway.

In front of the block of flats was a flowerbed with Japanese roses. Jadran immediately started digging between the plants with the wooden spoon. Clods of mud flew in all directions. We collected woodlice, centipedes and earthworms among the dry leaves. Jadran found a load of tiny beetles under a loose paving stone. The glass jar was soon writhing with creepy-crawlies.

But when we wanted to go back up, the door was locked and we hadn't brought a key.

Jadran held the doorbell down far too long.

'Yes?' croaked the intercom. Above the row of doorbells was a loudspeaker and a camera. That way Yasmin in the flat upstairs could see on a little screen who had rung the bell.

'We can't get in!' I called.

Jadran pressed his nose against the lens.

'Go a bit further back, then I can see you better,' said Yasmin.

'Spreet's hungry.'

'You're filthy.' It didn't sound friendly, nor was it.

'Open up!' I hid my black fingers behind my back.

Jadran proudly raised the jar of wriggling little beasties.

Yasmin was not impressed. 'You've done your coat up wrong, Jadran.'

He lowered the jar again and looked at his tummy.

'Leave him alone,' I hissed. 'What does that matter?'

'And your hair is a complete mess.'

I undid Jadran's buttons and pushed them through the correct holes. Then I ran my fingers through my hair. 'Better?'

Yasmin burst out laughing as if it was all a joke. The heavy door clicked off the latch.

I found feeding Spreet live worms gruesome. They struggled in his beak. He bit a centipede in two before eating it. Jadran placed a gleaming beetle on the palm of his hand and allowed it to tumble onto the ground in front of Spreet. Not one of them was given the chance to escape.

After twenty insects Spreet clearly felt more at ease. He ruffled up his feathers, scratched at the blanket with his feet and dozed a little.

Jadran copied him. He stood on one leg and hunched his neck down.

'Wake me up when mum gets back,' he said.

'Shall I bring you a few worms too?' I asked.

But Jadran had already started his crane nap.

I crept back inside on tiptoes.

Murad and I were playing *Flying Zombies*. I drummed away on the keyboard and mowed down ten zombies before Murad could even manage a single click of the mouse.

'The last one's for you,' I said.
Murad blasted the entire zombie city to smithereens.
'We should do this more often,' he said.

Jadran didn't like the new sheets mum had bought. The smell alone made him uneasy. It made him sneeze and he tossed and turned until the duvet came off.

'Come here,' I whispered, and I patted the space next to me on the mattress.

Jadran pushed his pillow against mine and rolled up close to me. I didn't get another moment of sleep, whereas he snored blissfully throughout the night.

The next day we taught Spreet his name.

'Spreet,' Jadran crowed. Now he was daddy crane and he threw some grain on the ground.

Soon the bird came to us whenever we said his name. He was still too young to call like an adult crane. He replied with a plaintive cry.

Triririri trrrrie.

'Spreet! Spreet!'

I had a great time taming the bird with Jadran. It was a long time since my brother had been in such a good mood. He beamed when Spreet pecked the first crust of bread from his hand. So even mum said Spreet could stay a while longer. His wound was healing quickly. A couple more days and then we'd even be able to return him to the lake.

It wasn't long before Spreet was hopping around after us. When mum wasn't looking, Jadran opened the balcony door and he and Spreet walked majestically through the apartment. I told Jadran how to imitate Spreet. He kept his neck nice and straight, pulled in his tummy and tripped along on the tips of his toes.

The only thing Spreet couldn't do yet was fly. Or at least he didn't show any signs of wanting to. He didn't even attempt to open his wings.

'We have to teach him,' Jadran said.

'We can't fly,' I said. 'How can you teach someone to do something you can't do yourself?'

'If you *really* want to, you can do anything.'

Of course they'd drilled that into him at his special school. At The Space they gave Jadran an overdose of tips and compliments. And he was a dab hand at endlessly repeating other people's remarks.

'We're much too heavy,' I said.

Jadran mowed me down with his gaze. 'We need wings!'

And Jadran didn't mean DIY wings made of paper or cardboard. He wanted big wings with real feathers.

He wanted mum's blue wings.

She used to wear them when she performed in musicals with dad. She'd had them made specially to measure. But since dad had left, she never looked at them.

Jadran ran to the hall to grab the key hanging above the shoe cupboard. But I held him back. Mum kept her musical costumes in the basement, and even I wouldn't let him go there alone.

Mum didn't like going down to the basement. It was a kind of time machine, she said. Before she realised what she was doing she would pull the wrong box open and land in a past life. A past life she thought she'd almost forgotten.

I shoved the key into my pocket and walked ahead of Jadran downstairs right to the bottom. The basement stank of mould and mothballs. There was a whole row of metal doors, but I knew precisely which was ours.

The small basement compartment was stuffed to the ceiling with crates, boxes of yellowed paper and stuff that could have come from a second hand shop. At the back was a rail with a bunch of long, black garment bags.

'We should have asked mum first,' I said.

But Jadran approached the shelf beaming. He'd always been fascinated by mum's musicals. Before the split he often went to mum and dad's performances. He would sit at the back of the theatre and sing along with all the songs. He even knew all the dialogue by heart, mum claimed, even if he only half understood it.

Jadran ran his fingers over the hangers.

'Do you know which one they're in?' I asked.

Jadran hesitated a moment, then grabbed a lumpy bag from the rail. I opened the zip for him. The ends of the wings burst out through the opening, as if they had been waiting for years to escape. Jadran pulled the wings further out of the bag and carried them along the narrow passageway to the basement door. There he held them under the lamp.

They were dyed the most beautiful blue I'd ever seen. Hundreds of real feathers were sewn onto a wire frame. There were elongated flight feathers, shining covert feathers and underneath was a load of silky-soft down.

Jadran blew the dust off. He pushed his fingers between the thick layers of plumes and smoothed them down. Then he lifted the wings onto his back and pushed his arms through the leather straps.

It was a strange sight: my brother, tall as a tree, with those graceful wings. But somehow they really suited him, I thought. I fastened the buckles at the ends around his wrists. That way Jadran could really flap them by moving his arms up and down. And so he did. The wings beat, reaching metres in width.

He flew up the steps ahead of me. He flew through the hallway, into the living room. I didn't have enough hands to keep all the breakable objects out of his way.

'Boys, what on earth is going on?' Mum leapt up from her chair when she saw the wings. The knife with which she'd been chopping vegetables clattered on the floor.

'I'll put them back in a minute,' I said quickly.

But mum didn't hear me. She stared wide-eyed at Jadran, flapping the wings at the balcony window.

'Up and down!' he called.

At each flap of the wings mum moved her head up and down, as if trying to shake off an unpleasant memory. Then she bent down to retrieve the knife and continued chopping broccoli.

The chick stared at Jadran from behind the glass.

'Give him some food,' I said. 'Then he'll learn that it's fun.'

And so we started with the first flying lesson. Jadran showed him what to do and I gave Spreet a beetle if he raised his wings a bit. The wounded wing was more sluggish than the other, but it moved.

'Up!' shouted Jadran.

And Spreet ate up.

Yasmin stood in the doorway. Her fringe hung over the top of her glasses.

'Would you like a go?' Jadran asked. 'You're a pretty mummy bird, Yass.' He danced around Yasmin, sticking out his bum like a thick plumed tail.

'Have you both completely lost it?' She took a quick step back and slammed the balcony door. 'A right pair of morons!'

'Yasmin, don't say things like that!' Murad called from behind the ironing board, crumpled trousers in hand. 'Apologise!'

But Yasmin did no such thing.

Jadran lowered the wings. 'Aren't they beautiful, though?'

'They're gorgeous, Giant,' I said.

Inside, Murad rushed after Yasmin to give her an earful. We were morons, she'd said. Both of us. It sounded terrible. It was completely untrue. Yet I felt strangely relieved.

At least she hadn't made a difference between my brother and me.

Behind the housing block was a lawn. We wanted to take Spreet there. His flapping was getting better and better so he was ready to practise outside, I thought. Jadran had the blue feathers on his back. He rattled a can and the crane followed us to the lift.

Spreet received a worm for each floor. He stared continually at the flickering of the little lamps.

The lift stopped on the third floor. I pushed Spreet into a corner and stood in front of him alongside Jadran like a little wall, as we'd agreed. No one could know that we had a crane in here.

Mrs Rafaela and her twins got in. She had a small child on each hand.

'Good morning,' said Jadran in an overly friendly manner, trying to hide the bird behind his baggy trousers. 'How are you?'

Mrs Rafaela laughed, her little daughters looked in shock at the winged giant blocking half the lift.

'We're very well, Jadran. And you two?'

Mrs Rafaela was fond of my brother. She worked at the chemist's and sometimes brought him home toothpaste samples – those mini-tubes with new flavours.

'Fine, thanks!' Jadran grinned from ear to ear, so that she could see that the toothpaste worked.

Spreet cringed against the back of my jeans. I was almost rooted to the spot.

'It's probably very busy now. I saw the removal van. That Murad seems like a friendly man. His daughter's nice too. Isn't she about your age, Josh?'

Ping! went the lift.

The little children bickered about who should be allowed out first.

'Those wings really suit you,' Mrs Rafaela said to Jadran. She pretended not to have seen Spreet.

We waited until they were gone. Spreet bobbed along behind Jadran like a dog into the hallway. He slipped over on the marble tiles and scratched his way onto the pavement.

'Good boy, Spreet. Come on, come this way!'

I ran ahead to check there was no one on the lawn.

'All clear, Giant!' I called round the corner.

Jadran was no longer walking stooped over, but parading proudly, chin in the air, over the strip of concrete by the building. I felt even smaller than usual.

Jadran handed me the can and stood up on a wooden bench.

'Crow crow crow!' he yelled, and spread his wings.

Spreet pecked greedily at a blob of mayonnaise by the bin.

'Get away from that! It'll make you ill!' I tried to drive the bird in the direction of the bench, but he'd already seen a soggy crust of bread.

Jadran continued undeterred. 'Watch how I do it!' With open wings he bounced over the grass.

Spreet dashed as fast as he could in the other direction. Jadran went into a dive after him.

'Stop!' I screamed.

But daddy crane didn't understand the word. He raced on his long stilts to the bike shed, where he cornered his chick.

'Come on, you can do it! You can do it!' he called, in precisely the tone his supervisors at The Space used with him.

I had to do something. Spreet was trembling. In a moment he would escape, and he'd be lost in the city. I stood behind Jadran and pressed my hands against his upper arms. His muscles tensed.

'You'll frighten him if you go on like that,' I said.

'He has to fly! After his family.'

'You're going too fast.' I pushed against his back and stroked his shoulders until he finally stopped flapping. 'It's like breathing, Giant. You have to do it in his rhythm.'

With the can we lured Spreet away from the bike shed. It took a long while to get him to the point that he would jump onto the bench. And once there, he didn't want to get down again.

Jadran continued waving the wings imperturbably. Sometimes he skipped over the grass, other times he skimmed the ground like a jet fighter. But Spreet didn't feel like it. Even when he toppled from the back of the bench, he kept his wings closed.

'It's not high enough,' said Jadran resolutely.

It didn't work from the bin either. Jadran lifted Spreet onto it, but the lid was too slippery and he almost fell on his head. Then Jadran wanted to clamber onto the roof of the bike shed. I only just managed to stop him.

He prowled to the side wall of the housing block. Flapping, he drove Spreet further towards it. I had a pretty good idea what he was trying to do. But that wasn't possible. No one was allowed up the fire exit ladder. That was there for emergencies only.

'There!' Jadran pointed with a wing to a metal platform halfway up the building. It hung between the third and fourth floors.

I shook my head. 'Cranes always take off from the ground.'

Jadran beat the wings until sweat dripped from his temples. The dust billowed up. He made little jumps, as high as he could with his fat calves. Spreet pranced back and forth a bit, but he didn't fly.

Jadran's mouth went tight. 'It's not working from the ground!'

'You have to be more patient, Giant,' I said. 'Come on, let's go inside. We'll try again tomorrow.'

Jadran didn't believe in tomorrow. For him everything had to be *now*. He grimaced and stepped onto the fire exit ladder. I ran after him and pulled at his sleeve.

'Stop! Mum'll be cross if she sees you there!' And I didn't just mean cross with him. But mainly with me. If I couldn't stop him, I was a useless guardian angel.

Jadran didn't care about mum being cross. He pushed me away. So I had to come up with something else.

My only option was to do the things I wasn't supposed to.