

## **They Mate for Life**

By Karen Sutherland

Anna was in the kitchen when she heard the sharp, heavy thud on the glass. She walked to the back door and looked out to the porch. One bird lay still, the other hopped and flapped frantically around its lifeless mate. When Anna moved to open the screen door, it flew off and the dead bird was alone.

She had never seen a woodpecker up close before. They were rare in that area, and when they did come around, they usually kept a distance from the house. Occasionally, one would get close and tap a hole or two in the cedar. John would drag out the ladder to patch the siding, swearing, and promising to shoot the bird if he saw it again. Anna would scold him. This was a game that they played.

She wanted to call and tell him what happened.

“It’s big. Maybe a foot. Black with some white. And with a red crest.”

“That’s a pileated woodpecker.”

“The other one was so upset. I’m not sure which one is the male and which one is the female.”

“The male has a red patch under his bill.”

“Oh. It’s a male then. The dead one, I mean. I feel bad for his mate.”

“Yes, they mate for life, I think.”

“Oh. That’s so sad.”

“She’ll find another one, as they normally do.”

“Yes, but still...”

“It’s just how it is,” John said.

“Yes...”

When they first moved there, Anna had been fascinated with the woods behind their house. She held a romantic view of nature like many who grew up in cities and had never seen it up close, except in zoos or on television programs. John had bought her a small camera for their second anniversary. She kept it on the window ledge by the back door in case the deer came. She had hundreds of pictures that she had taken over the years. They sat in a pile on the bottom shelf of

the dining room cabinet. She took them out sometimes, pulling a few that she thought would look nice framed together, but she could never decide.

The crows arrived about an hour later. Anna saw the white and black feathers first, floating loosely on the porch. Then she heard their excited caws. She hated crows.

She wasn't sure what to do now. Bury it? That seemed silly. The act of a city girl. But she couldn't bear the thought of the crows.

Anna shooed them away then went to the cellar. She found a cardboard box half full of old photos and mementos from their trip to Spain. Lace from Madrid, and small colored tiles from Triana. Photos she had taken of sunsets and sunrises and churches and long graceful boulevards and winding alleyways. Memories of hot days and blue skies driving through the Andalusian countryside. Wandering the narrow streets of Seville into the early morning after the bars closed and the only souls left were the waiters and the last few drunks finding their way home. And the weekend in Ronda where they had spent more money than they should have at that parador on the hill. (Hemingway had stayed there, they heard.) And with so much to see and do, they spent the day in bed, until a sunset with all the colors of fire presented itself to them. On their small hotel veranda, they drank cold white wine from plastic cups, and ate a supper of olives and cheese and good bread. Her favorite photo from that trip was of John, tanned and relaxed, with the warm southern light on his lean, handsome face. They sat together and watched the sun sink below the horizon. It had been a fine day.

Anna emptied the box and went outside.

The bird was bigger than she expected, rigid, and flat on its back. Maybe it was just stunned? No. The crows knew. She slid the flat lid of the box underneath him and lowered him in. What now? She walked to the shed, placed the box on a low shelf and went back inside.

The next morning was dark and wet and Anna woke late. She stretched her arm over to John's side of the bed. The sheets were cool and empty. She put on some coffee and waited. The rain streamed down the kitchen window, but she could see that the feathers were gone from the porch and the rain had washed away the oily smudge on the glass. She turned off the stove and went back to bed.

When Anna woke again the rain had stopped and the sun was breaking through the bedroom window. It was noon now, and the sky had cleared. She got dressed, pulled on John's muck boots, and walked out to the shed.

She was starting to get used to the idea now and could look at the dead bird without flinching too much. She carried the box into the woods until, looking back, she could no longer see the house. When she reached the big oak, she tipped the box and the dead bird fell softly onto the ground. She stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. It felt wrong to leave it exposed. She scuffed a few wet leaves over the bird for no good reason except that it made her feel better, and walked back to the house.

The next morning Anna woke just before dawn. She didn't bother to reach over to the other side of the bed this time. She got dressed, made some coffee, and drank it standing at the kitchen sink. She walked out to the porch and listened to all of the noise and all of the silence of the spring morning.

Back inside, Anna pulled out the batch of photos from the pile in the dining room and began to sift through them. They were mostly of trees and sweet summer flowers. She had an eye John had always said. The photos were pretty, but they were not what she wanted to say. She wanted to say more. What did she want to say?

The sun was out now but the ground was still wet. Anna went to the cellar and dug out her old boots. She went back upstairs, picked up her camera and headed towards the woods.

There was only one path to the clearing that sat beyond the edge of the woods. She wanted to catch the early light while the mist still clung to the tall grass and cast a damp shadow through her lens.

She saw the oak tree ahead. She kept her eyes on the path in front of her hoping not to see. Not to see. Not to see what? What did she not want to see? What had she not been seeing? What did she need to see?

She stopped a few yards away from the tree and looked at the spot where she had left the bird. She got close, took out her camera and began to shoot. Anna looked back. She could not see the house. She headed on past the oak tree towards the clearing. Ahead, she could see the sun, still touching the morning mist and rising to meet the day.

Word Count: 1220