

# A VISIT FROM NIVEN AND FLYNN

## DOROTHY LAWRENSON

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Charlie wasn't sure what woke him – the noise of the birds outside, or Zak stirring beside him. Being careful not to knock over the wine on the bedside table, he reached for his glasses and put them on, then raised himself on one elbow until he could see. Without them, the scene outside the open window was a tantalising blur of fluttering and chirping, and a rapid tapping sound indicated an unseen visitor pecking at the far side of the wire cage. Now, he watched as a blue tit alighted on a perch and switched its head rapidly left and right, checking for the all-clear, before darting its beak into the hole to extract some seed. Its flickering, jerky motions reminded Charlie of an old silent film. Looking down at the sleeping form beside him, he felt momentarily guilty that he was keeping the sight of the birds to himself. But he didn't want to wake Zak this early – and anyway, the birds would keep up their antics throughout the day.

When they first got the bird feeder, Charlie had waited by the window, and Zak laughed at his eagerness. The feeder was of sturdy metal construction, with a roof to keep the rain off and a base that collected fallen seed. They mounted it on the windowsill and filled the three containers with different types of food. The black sunflower seeds, which Zak said the birds would go crazy for, were held in a tall perspex tube punctuated by perches and feeding holes. There was a wire-mesh cage for nuts, and another cage with more widely spaced bars for the tasty-looking fat balls.

“Now what?” Charlie peered expectantly down at the trees in the communal garden.

“Give it time. I bet we'll see a blue tit first.”

Since Charlie had moved in at the start of lockdown, they had both been out of a job. Zak joked that they should be used to 'resting' – actors had a lot of practice at it. But as it became clear that theatres were to remain closed indefinitely, the novelty of the situation waned. Eventually Charlie picked up some occasional admin work. He liked, in any case, to maintain a semblance of busyness by putting on clothes and shoes and going to the makeshift desk he had set up in the kitchen, whereas Zak was happy to spend all day in bed in his dressing gown. At first, Charlie worried this behaviour was a symptom of depression – but he

soon realised it was Zak's normal routine: he only showered and dressed when he had to leave the house and was otherwise quite happy to spend his time idly looking through the window.

Charlie had always believed he possessed plenty of patience, but disenchantment gradually set in as days, then weeks, and finally nearly a month passed without any birds apparently noticing the feast laid out for them on the windowsill. He stopped spending afternoons in the bedroom and instead went back to his computer, to update his blog or to tinker with his CV. Zak stayed in bed, listening to the radio and scrolling aimlessly on his laptop.

In the evening, they would cook dinner together, then take a glass of wine back to bed and search for something to watch online. At first, Charlie had been keen for them to tune in to live broadcasts of plays, but they soon abandoned even this connection to the theatre world. No matter how convincing the performances, it made them both feel despondent to watch actors addressing an audience of empty seats. Instead, they sought out old war movies and thrillers, and took turns curating miniature collections on different themes. Zak favoured films about aerial combat: *The First of the Few*, *The Battle of Britain*, *The Blue Max*. Charlie moved sideways from the war genre to plan what he called the Things Could Be Worse season: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Papillon*, *Scott of the Antarctic*. It was Zak who suggested adding *Birdman of Alcatraz*. "I think I wouldn't mind being imprisoned," he reflected, "as long as I could see the birds."

One morning, a blue tit finally, fleetingly, touched down. Smiling, Zak nudged Charlie, who gasped and stifled a shriek of joy.

"How did you know the blue tits would be first?" he whispered.

"That's what they're like: cheeky, cocky – inquisitive. You must have heard how they pierce milk bottle tops to get at the cream."

When he was a child, an earnest aunt had tried to interest Charlie in ornithology. He had enjoyed copying the drawings from the books she sent, but real birds hopped and flew so rapidly they were hard to recognise and impossible to draw. It had never occurred to him they might have personalities, that they could be recognised by their behaviour.

The blue tit grew braver and its visits more frequent, and before long it was joined by a mate. When the restless little coal tits arrived, and shortly after that the big bullying great tit, there were flurries and skirmishes over the best perches. If the great tit was involved, it would always win, but the blue tits were more in evidence, their aerobatic skills making them appear

reckless and swashbuckling, “like David Niven and Errol Flynn in *Dawn Patrol*,” Zak said.

He had predicted that the finches would come next, and Charlie hoped eventually to see a goldfinch. This morning, there were only the usual suspects, but they made a lively enough cast of characters. One of the blue tits took off from the lowest perch and was immediately replaced by the other. Another flash of blue and yellow, and it too was replaced, this time by a coal tit. Charlie smiled. So far, the coal tits were his favourites, their tiny sleek badger-striped heads peeking around the nut-cage as they spiralled up it, never staying still for more than a second. Lately, they had discovered the fat balls, but the sunflower seeds were still everyone’s favourite. In fact, the seed hopper could stand to be refilled... Charlie checked himself before getting out of bed, realising that would disturb Zak, then decided it was high time. He leaned over and ruffled the overgrown head of hair he could see half-buried in the pillows.

“Cup of tea? I’ll put the kettle on after I’ve refilled the seed.”

“You treat those birds better than me!” Zak laughed, struggling into an upright position.

“Those birds are stars of the first rank. Look – here come Niven and Flynn.”

“Aye-aye, here comes trouble, right on cue.”

The men watched as the two blue tits swooped in from opposite directions and engaged in a brief mid-air negotiation before landing on opposite sides of the seed container. Charlie knew he could now get up and go to the kitchen without scaring them away, and that when he returned they, or some other birds, would be there. And who knew, perhaps a goldfinch might be one of them.

“I’d better get going,” he said and made to get up, but Zak pulled him back.

“What’s the hurry? Let’s just watch the birds for a while.”

They sat for a few minutes, commentating on the birds’ comings and goings. But Zak could feel that Charlie was anxious to get the day underway, so he released him.

“Don’t worry,” he promised, “I’ll let you know if the goldfinch comes.”

*Originally from Dundee but now based in Edinburgh, Dorothy writes in English and Scots. Her poetry and paintings can be found at [dorothylawrenson.com](http://dorothylawrenson.com).*