

Thirteen Starlings

Bob Burnside was first to waken at half past four. He roused the flock from their roost in the abandoned stable near the Dreel Tavern.

Cummoan, yoos lazzit buggars, waken up. Let's gang along tae the Dubs. The tide's still oot and the seaweed ah'll be hoaching wi' juicy wriggly flees and wee crabbies.

The flock of starlings skimmed along the shore, flying energetically inches above the waves, skirting Anstruther Harbour and Marina, onward past Cellardyke Harbour where they landed on the scruffy, rocky foreshore beyond the old swimming pool.

The rain was falling softly, a smirr blown on a cool, light breeze.

Heads down, pecking and probing the seaweed along the tideline, the next few hours passed in a feeding frenzy until the woman with the sturdy young spaniel came along, flinging sticks and stones into the rising tide. Then she spotted the red ball surfing in the brown foam.

"Bella, over there look! It's a ball. Go on, Bella, get it. FETCH, BELLA, FETCH!"

The dog sailed high over the flock which scattered in panic. Bob soared highest, screeching and spiralling upwards.

Cummoan, oot o' here. Let's gang up tae the Silverdyke gress fur the worms. Naw, Harry, ower this way ye daft auld buggar.

Bob's squadron flew in close order behind him then fluttered down onto the bright green lawn near the reception building of the caravan park, scattering like animated dark origami confetti, heads down, pecking, probing, pulling up worms from the rain sprinkled grass.

An elderly man approached, heading to the showers. In his youth in Glasgow, starlings had been commonplace but nowadays at his home in Bearsden, they were a rare sight.

He stopped to count them. Thirteen. An odd number, he thought.

Smiling, he remembered a time nearly thirty years ago, earwiggling at a family birthday gathering where his sons, nieces and nephews and their consorts were chatting about how many children they would like to have when they married. One gauche girl from Northern Ireland said:

"You want to have **three** children? That's an odd number!" This response had caused an explosion of laughter.

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Over the years the phrase, "Three? That's an odd number!" had become a family saying.

Skirting the feeding birds, the man moved on to his early morning ablutions, noting the sheets of rain approaching on the gusting wind.

Linda trailed Bella back up the steep flight of steps from the beach to the memorial park. When she caught up with the dog, Bella was chasing a mixed flock of birds feeding on the wet grass, hunting worms. Thankfully, with the ball in her mouth, Bella was constrained to silence. Mindful of the sleeping occupants in nearby houses, Linda called in a low voice to her bounding and leaping dog.

In the gusts, the rain turned from a light, misty smirr to a heavier drizzle and the surf wheezed and sighed as the tide ran up the beach and slid back again.

"Bella, come here and get your lead on. There's a good girl. Come on, let's go and see if George has our breakfasts ready for us."

The dog raced past her, heading off at top speed along the access road towards the sleeping occupants in their caravans and motor homes, breaking the strict rule that all dogs must be on a lead inside the grounds of the site.

The man left the shower block and caught sight of the Isle of May glinting in the sun seven miles offshore, like a battleship riding at anchor.

This image sparked a memory from nearly sixty years earlier, aged fourteen, lying in bed in the attic of his grandparents' house near Cellardyke harbour, under mounds of blankets, snuggled into a hot water bottle, reading with a torch. It had been late December. For three days thick fog had shrouded the entire Firth of Forth with a dense sea haar. Only yards from his room, the restless dirge of the heaving waves played quietly in support of the long, regular warning blasts from the doleful foghorn sounding from the sentinel rock.

A decade earlier he had taken a boat trip to visit the bird sanctuary and saw the derelict engine house which had produced the compressed air to sound the warning, an alarm deemed to be no longer required in these days of GPS navigation and radar.

Had there been starlings on the island that day? He could not remember. He would ask his wife, Mrs Google.

Picking up her pace, Linda set off in pursuit, hoping the ball would keep the dog silent and the misdemeanour would remain undetected.

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Bella charged round the corner of the reception building and surprised the flock of feeding starlings. For a second time Bob and his cohort rose and circled before landing on the ridge of the building, unwilling to give up on their harvest of small juicy worms brought up by the rain.

From this vantage point, Bob Burnside spotted another closely mown area beside the ranks of permanent holiday homes. Feeding on this patch was a mixed flock of blackbirds, thrushes, wood pigeons and a single starling.

Staring up at the birds out of reach on the roof, Bella remembered she was with Linda, turned to look back up the track, sat on her haunches and waited in the centre of the reception lawn.

Bob made his decision.

Right, yoos, cumoan, ower there.

He landed near the lone starling and saw she was a girl. He hopped closer, raised his head, exposing his throat, standing tall on his strong legs and burred an endearment.

She responded with a soft cheep and hopped closer, dipping her head and fluttered her wings, begging. Bob probed and extracted a worm, passing it to her, beak to beak, sealing their love match.

An aggressive wood pigeon flew across and pecked viciously.

Bob soared up.

Cumoan yoos, back tae the big gress.

The man headed back to his caravan. It was just after seven o'clock. In the distance, he spotted Linda with Bella on her lead entering the awning attached to their motorhome.

Rounding the corner of the reception building the man stopped and counted again.

Fourteen starlings.

The germ of a story idea crept into the corner of his mind. A strong coffee beckoned. He headed back to his sleeping wife. If he was lucky, he might get the first draft finished before she wakened to take charge of the day ahead.

Two blackbirds, full of worms, competed for the dawn chorus prize.

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The rain stopped, the sun came out, the breeze dropped. Although it was still cool, it felt more like early Summer.