

Prologue.

Suffocated by car fumes, the old oak tree on the embankment by the footbridge over King Offa Way groaned under the weight of three teenage boys trying to make themselves comfortable. The boys hoped to capture death footage from one of the Juliette balconies of the nursing home adjacent to their tree. The building was one of many nursing homes on Hastings Road, a road of two halves, now bisected by the King Offa Way bypass, built before the kid were born.

The kids were attempting to film someone's demise and post it to their website, *death-row.uk*, a euphemism for the elephants' graveyard that, to them, was Bexhill. Although the town wasn't without its unsavoury elements, some of whom should have been on a real death row, it wasn't the worst place to live, at least not as bad as the bored young locals made it out to be, and was as good a place to come and die as any other.

Like most teenagers, the tree huggers suffered from boredom and would have preferred to live closer to the bright lights of London, which wasn't far away, but took an age on the train when it worked. Still, at least they weren't sitting in front of *PlayStations* all day killing zombies, although one of them would have sooner done that than be up a tree. But at least he was in the fresh air for a change, next to a dual carriageway, keeping in touch with nature, *iPhone* poised to take a picture of someone dying.

'Seriously, Karl, we can only see into one room... And he's sitting in bed eating a steak and kidney pie,' Mike said.

'How do you know it's steak and kidney?' Freddy asked.

'Fuck off, you dick... It's a fucking *pie!* Whatever it is, he's not about to peg it... It was a stupid idea. We can't see anything anyway, and I'm not sitting here all day. We'd be better off down the seafront waiting for someone to have a stroke,' Mike complained, 'Anyway, do we really want to see someone die, Karl? Seriously? The website is shit—no one ever visits it, ' Mike looked at the slope falling away beneath his feet, planning his drop from the tree and going home.

The kids were nearly fifteen years old. The eighty-nine-year-old they were filming heard them arguing and turned to see the last boy dropping from the tree a few yards from his window before shrugging his bony old shoulders and returning to the delicious steak and kidney pie, remembering when he used to climb trees. It seemed like yesterday.

Mike was a gangly six-footer who only wore white shell suits, which he thought were retro-cool. He would look back with embarrassment in later years at his fashion sense, but *retro* was a big thing when he was young. Despite his fashion sense and bad acne, Mike did well with the ladies—schoolgirls mainly—and one or two of their Mums, swapping girlfriends frequently, somehow avoiding tears. Tall and dark, his admirers filled in the rest as innate confidence minus confidence's arrogant side effects and a

lack of concern for others' opinions of him meant he was never troubled by self-doubt.

Karl was clever, an ideas man, intellectually gifted, switched on in a world-savvy way, and wore a hat.

And then there was Freddy.

When left to his own devices, Freddy watched internet porn or played video games. The others weren't averse to a bit of porn now and then but could take it or leave it. Karl watched a *YouTube* video once about porn, concerned by his friend's irritability and shortening temper. The online lecture informed him that mirror neurons in the brain could enslave individuals, making them seek even more grotesque images. The subject (Freddy) gained relief when dopamine was released into the brain, a chemical that acted as a reward. The lecture explained how the person became desensitised to the chemical, requiring more and more exposure to the stimulus to increase dopamine, creating an addiction. The video concluded with images of MRI scans of porn-obsessed brains, noting they were smaller than average. Unfortunately, none of Freddy's acquaintances would be surprised at the revelation his brain was smaller than it should be.

Although Karl was no psychologist, he'd seen enough *Ted-Ed* videos, leading him to believe he understood his friend's condition. *Porn has fucked with the wiring in Freddy's undersized brain!* It was a rational hypothesis but only partially correct because, sadly, other factors worked against Freddy, factors Karl would never know about.

Historically, Freddy had been agreeable to anything Karl suggested, which helped keep Karl's hands clean. Not that Karl was a heinous supervillain; he was just naturally cautious, dreaming up websites and other schemes, all saved under Freddy's name, using Freddy's computer and email addresses. But Karl had noticed that Freddy was becoming rebellious and unpredictable as the friends drifted apart, brought back together recently thanks to Karl's latest morbid but short-lived enterprise, which had briefly seemed like a good idea.

Boredom kept Karl's mind looking for new initiatives while the other two drifted behind like passengers in his wake, but Karl realised the trio's interests were diverging. Moreover, upcoming events would show their differences were even starker. His latest venture had been their first get-together outside of school, *WhatsApp*, and *Facebook* for a while, and Karl sensed resentment brewing.

If not for meeting Karl on their first day of secondary school, Mike and Freddy would probably have spent the last three years in bed all day. In Freddy's case, with a laptop and endless boxes of tissues, or worse. Maybe Karl used them to some extent, but it was their choice, and until recently, they had been willing participants and shared many good times because of it. But memories can be very short.

Tumbling down the embankment and nearly ending up on the busy road, the three boys laughed blithely, ignorant to danger, the grassy verge staining Mike's shell suit green and brown. He didn't

care. It had been the first time they had laughed together in ages. Mike and Karl looked at each other in bonhomie when Freddy began shouting and waving over the traffic's din, 'LOOK, UP THERE!' he yelled, pointing at the bridge, 'There must be two hundred cats!' The other two looked up to see numerous cats' heads pushing through the bridge's railings, staring at the sky, oblivious to the boys.

'Fuck, man! Are they hypnotised? Look for cameras! It could be like some Derren Brown shiii!' Freddy's observations were cut short by the cats' sudden synchronous jolt from docility into a tense state of alert. The animals' heads had stopped looking up and began moving down towards the boys as the simultaneous contractions from thousands of muscles sent a hum through the aluminium bridge.

Consumed by the spectacle, the boys hadn't noticed how eerily silent the world had become as lights held traffic at a distant end of the road. Life felt freeze-framed, except for the cat falling from the sky and the explosion of movement, as the cats' shoulders crashed into the metal uprights and heads clattered through the bars as if the cats attempted Hara-kiri. Then, as bodies piled into tightly packed columns, oblivious to pain, the bridge clanged like a bell as the boys leapt back a step, shocked.

The sight of cats piled one on top of another with their heads pushed through eighty feet of railings, bodies stacked seven deep in some places like multi-coloured furry-faced totem poles as the cats

watched an object drop from the sky, mesmerised the boys and the arriving car drivers until a body hit the road.

The speed camera on the opposite side of the road seemed to encourage the drivers to race each other on the boys' side, mocking the speed limit, their attention returning to the road as one of the cats fell in front of them, sending the melee of cars, all travelling too fast, careening beneath the bridge as the drivers sawed at their steering wheels with ivory knuckles.

The cats hurriedly withdrew from the bars to restack on the other side of the bridge as the thing they had tracked from the sky was taken by the cars underneath them.

'Fuck me, Freddy!' Karl shouted, smiling in disbelief, staring at Freddy, 'I got the whole thing!'

Upon Freddy's outburst, in the perfect location, Karl had instinctively turned his *iPhone's* camera on, capturing the cats staring at the sky. But although the footage caught some excellent close-ups of the cats charging the railings, their facial expressions, the gruesome aftermath, and finally, the cats beginning to leave for home disconsolately, confused and needing a belly rub, the cat in the road's cause of death would remain a mystery because the action had all happened so fast.

Absorbed by the chaos of his phone's screen as he filmed, Karl was only vaguely aware of an object landing on the road as he ran towards the action, lucky not to be killed by cars swerving all over the road. Heading under the bridge as he filmed the cats pulling

their heads from the railings, he sprinted to the other side, emerging to discover the fallen thing was a mangled cat.

Awestruck by the image of cats on the bridge, no one, including Karl, had suspected that the cat in the road had fallen over three thousand feet. The camera's lens had never angled above the faces of the cats on the bridge to reveal the truth, so Karl, the boys, and the car drivers trying desperately to avoid crashing assumed the cat had fallen from the bridge.

As the tailback cleared and the clacking magpies moved in behind them, the boys climbed impatiently up the bank, desperate to get back to Freddy's house to watch the film on a big screen for forensic examination.

Despite noticing the cats gathering on the bridge on its ascent, the bird had ignored them. Having released its victim and using the cat's slipstream to dive, it landed effortlessly on its usual perch, the handrail of the bridge, to survey the scene unnoticed amidst the chaos and confusion. Basking in the madness of its making, the bird's entertainment was interrupted by the familiar pops from a *Dominos* delivery scooter threading through the cars beneath it, reminding him of his hunger. Leaving his perch to pursue the bike when it emerged, with the imaginary scent of BBQ sauce tickling its senses, the seagull wasn't noticed coming or going.

Chapter 1 - Losing innocence.

Driving through Bexhill on the way home from a family outing to Brighton, Mr Watson became distracted by a decoration on the bridge, swearing to himself it hadn't been there when leaving that morning. The nearer he got, Watson realised the colourful display consisted of columns of cat heads poking through the bridge's railings. *How strange*, George thought. *Had a local school done it? Was there some meaning to hundreds of cat heads staring into the sky from a bridge?*

Then, just as he thought the furry faces were turning slowly in his direction, something fell in front of the car. Yelling, he gripped the steering wheel tighter as he tried to swerve around the thing in the road, temporarily losing control of the vehicle. 'Shit!' George shrieked, sawing at the wheel with whitening knuckles, the car jerking its occupants violently from side to side as it bucked from one lane to another, forcing the car next to him to veer onto the hard shoulder, nearly hitting three kids at the foot of the embankment as other cars hooted angrily.

'George?' his wife screamed, terrified, clutching the armrests on either side of her seat as she tried to check on their daughter behind. The little girl pressed her cheek against the cold glass to see what was happening, 'Mummy! Daddy!' she cried, spotting the remains of a cat, its tongue hanging from the side of its shattered jaw, its tagged collar and blood everywhere. Falling back into her seat, she sobbed uncontrollably before bouncing back to grab her

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mother's seat, shaking it as hard as she could, imploring, 'We have to stop, Mummy! We have to go back!' as tears streaked her cheeks.

Daddy was still clutching the steering wheel in a cold sweat, trying to calm himself down, wondering if parts of the cat had got into the car's grille. Had they hit it? He didn't know, not after losing his mind temporarily. Now, nerves settling, he was just grateful that, by some miracle, he hadn't collided with the other vehicles. And there were kids at the side of the road, too. *What in the hell were they doing there? Was it a prank?* George thought it was a bloody, dangerous prank, his anger rising as he considered turning back.

'Mummy, Mummy, we have to go back!'

'We can't, darling,' her mother said tenderly, 'It's... It's just too dangerous. There's so much traffic! I'm sure he didn't suffer,' Mrs Watson grimaced askance to her husband, not believing a word she was saying.

George didn't want to turn back now, anyway. The short-lived anger had broken the cycle of fear and recrimination as he relaxed his hands on the wheel, returning his focus to the state of his car. *I'll take it to the Albanians*, Watson thought.

The little girl slumped back into her seat, tightly squeezing her Frozen Snow Glow Elsa doll to her chest. *Elsa's* dress lit up blue as she sang, 'Let It Go!' The little girl gritted her teeth but couldn't let it go. She thought of Joseph, her blue Abyssinian on his back in raptures as she rubbed his belly. He wore a collar with a name tag,

too. She fought against seeing him at this devastating scene with his tongue hanging onto the road. Overcome by the image of her cat, she cried the rest of the way home.

Don't think about it, George. Don't think about it! The road will clean the mess from the tyres before we get home. God, I hope there's no damage to the grille. I'll take it to the Albanians; they only charge a fiver, and cat chunks won't bother them. They probably eat cats. Don't even look at it; leave it with them after you've dropped the girls home. George wondered if he had a fiver. He never gave the Albanians a tenner because they always made out he'd given them a fiver, offering him a shrug and a free air freshener instead of the change. Even though ten pounds was cheap for a carwash, George never liked to pay more than necessary. Having voted for *Brexit*, he wondered whether the Albanians would be around for much longer. *Are they Europeans?* He didn't know but always threw the air fresheners away, suspecting them poisoned.

As always, the Albanians did an excellent job. *Spick and span!* George felt good with a clean car even though it had cost him a tenner. It even seemed to drive better. Upon ditching the 'free' air freshener into a seafront bin, pausing to look at the sea, George suddenly thought he remembered the cat appearing from above the bridge.

Don't be ridiculous, George. Don't be ridiculous.

Chapter 2 - Mrs Crick.

Bexhill-on-Sea acclaimed itself as the home of British Motor Racing, a contradiction to modern times because most cars that weren't racing up the bypass were driven slowly and erratically by the town's predominantly elderly population.

Mrs Crick, an elderly lady who knew her limitations, gave up her car long ago, admitting to herself, 'It's time to let go, Franny.' Franny had had to let many things go.

Her bungalow was semi-detached with a sweeping gable roof that shared a double chimney stack with her neighbour. The chimney crook provided shelter, a windbreak, and a convenient spot for a family of seagulls to build their nest.

Mrs Crick spent much of her time shooing away Mr Friedrich as he stared hungrily at the sparrows flitting in and out of her ornamental bush in the garden. Mr Friedrich was her cat. As much as she loved him, she didn't trust him, sometimes flinging windows open wide to shout things like, 'No, Mr Friedrich! No! Leave them alone!' whenever he approached the sparrows' bush. Mr Friedrich always pretended to ignore his owner, but, fortunately, the sparrows didn't, taking her cue and erupting from the bush and every other conurbation in synchronised flight with rapid muffled thuds from their wings against their sides, hundreds of beats per minute. Mr Friedrich would give up mid-stalk, settling on the lawn to lick varying parts of his anatomy as if he were about to do that anyway, frustrated but used to their game.

Martin maintained the front and back lawns once a week as arthritis prevented Mrs Crick from attending to the garden as she had before. Damp and cold weather made her a virtual hermit in the winter, only braving the cold to melt the ice on the birdbaths with water from the kettle and to feed her beloved garden friends.

Pottering when she could, she was proud of her little patch of England, treasuring the harmony of the sparrows, chirruping to each other with merry interplay as they cut through the air like tiny airborne clowns, which was a fitting analogy, Crick thought whenever a hapless fool would crash into a window rendering itself non-compos-mentis or even dead. No, it was not funny at all and a most upsetting downside to the relationship between windows and birds. However, this was not an everyday event, so compared to the amount of joy, happiness, and laughter the wildlife brought to her solitary life, gritting her teeth when required, she could weather the occasional bad incident.

Spending hours giggling in clandestine observations of her wildlife family, the pensioner also compared the sparrows to naughty children, their little heads bobbing in and out of the cotoneaster bush under the spare bedroom window, her bird hide. The window ajar, she basked in sweet and delicate scents from her tropical garden and the sounds of her friends playing together as the reflection from the glass and darkness of the room meant Crick had a better view of the birds than they had of her, affording Crick perfect close-ups of their faces as they wondered what was behind the mysterious hard substance that contained other birds.

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The tick-tack from their tiny beaks on the glass made her feel like she was one of them as she knitted, read or fell asleep to the sounds and a glass of sherry or gin, careful not to move as even the slightest motion sent the birds fleeing, too fast for the human eye in a burst of nervous energy that kept them all alive. But they always returned. She felt at one with how they looked out for each other in a permanent vigil, wary of danger, constantly looking for predators, food, or friends, busy heads and necks, never concluding their protective exercises. But no one looked out for her anymore.

Wondering if the birds chatted about their days, knowing they didn't, she humanised them constantly, which was strange for a woman who didn't like people. Or at least, she wanted to believe she didn't like them, insulating herself from the world, a world that felt like the deck of a ship riding mountainous waves that made her cling on for dear life.

When topping up the birdseed and water in the garden, Mrs Crick occasionally heard petrified people screaming obscenities at the mother gull who lived on her roof. *Well, why shouldn't a mother protect her family?* Crick regretfully thought. Her home saved her from people and the world. And she extended that shield of a brick wall, wooden fence, and Leylandii to any wildlife who cared to shelter there.

All non-humans were welcome to Crick's home, including the seagulls on her roof. The baby sparrows melted her heart, their fluffy feathers ruffled by the wind to reveal soft, downy ones beneath, making Crick wonder where her babies were now. She'd

failed to protect them. She hoped the feeding, bathing, and other bird entertaining paraphernalia accumulated from *Amazon* would ensure the wildlife's continued patronage and company.

Online shopping had only intensified the internet-savvy pensioner's reluctance to leave the house. Although she knew there were good and bad sides to the worldwide web. Good: watching her beloved Sir Cliff Richard perform or interview at any time of day or night on *YouTube*. Bad: debauchery and the evil *BBC*, *a wicked, lying institution that ruined lives, like when they slandered poor Sir Cliff*.

Fortunately, Crick was past the licence fee age but lamented the tyranny that forced people to pay for the so-called *service*, even if they never used it. Her neighbour had opted out of television completely. But despite no longer owning a box, they had harassed him to the brink of suicide with threatening red letters and visits from official-looking types promising to send him to prison if he didn't pay the tax. *The British Brainwashing Corporation, full of paedophiles and communists, grooming the weak and vulnerable*, Crick thought, wishing one day everyone would stop paying the rotten licence fee. *Make a stand! Talk about Russia and China—they've got nothing on us! Licences for things like guns make sense, but televisions?* Okay, she had to admit that she watched *Blue Planet*, *BirdWatch* and a few other animal-related programmes, but she was sure someone else would have made them if the *BBC* didn't exist.

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Although she was determined the *BBC* would never get their claws into her birds or thoughts, she let herself down every time she scrolled through their website, six or seven times a day.

Chapter 3 - The bird.

Bemused by its wife's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, the bird watched her return from another wailing attack on innocent victims for the misbelief they would hurt her chicks. Ordinarily, mother and father are meant to be nurturing and protective parents; the male knew this but didn't feel it like his wife did.

Even so, when the chicks were very young, he took turns incubating their eggs, feeding and attending to their needs, and sharing the workload with his partner, knowing it was what he was supposed to do. But rarely did he follow tractors or mimic falling rain. Although he could do those things, he never did. Instead, he preferred the bins along the seafront for his meals.

Recognising the sound of pizza delivery mopeds miles away, he followed them for inevitable scraps thrown onto lawns, hoping enough of the sauce remained. Always first to scraps, taking all he wanted, he left the rest for the other birds and assorted creatures who waited patiently nearby, pretending not to look until he had gone.

The family on Mrs Crick's roof were Great Black Back Gulls who would be partners for life and could live into their forties. Knowing a threat to their family could come from anywhere at any time, they guarded their brood fiercely. At least the mother did. Although seagulls have little fear, she was perpetually worried, while the enormous male didn't seem to care.

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When homeowners come face to face with seagulls sitting on their car roofs, the seagull looks at them as if to say, 'Yes? ...Is there something I can do for you?' And while most drivers testily steer around or stop for the birds wandering blasé in quiet streets, some don't, running the seagulls over.

Although primarily scavengers, seagulls can and do kill other creatures. Nothing is off their menu. Ducklings, which the big male feasted on frequently at his local delicatessen, Egerton Park, were a particular favourite of his. Sometimes, when the mood struck, he even attempted catching fully grown ducks in mid-flight, failing every time to a sound like mocking laughter, although they never laughed whenever he ate their chicks.

Plucking a three-stone cod from the sea once, he fought to hold on to the powerfully writhing fish but had to let go despite a vice-like grip. Unfortunately, seagulls don't have talons like birds of prey, and he would have landed that one if only he had been closer to shore. It would have been a tasty meal, too, but he quickly forgot the cod after finding half a discarded pizza on the promenade; famished by the exercise, he didn't linger on failure.

He had been good at letting go, like the crab he'd let go after it had grabbed him with its giant pincer, nearly breaking his leg and making him limp for weeks. The bird never forgot about that. At least the crab had shattered on the rocks. But once bitten, twice shy, or at least, that's how it had been for him so far. Despite the setbacks, though, he was still a hunter on whom nature had

bestowed great strength, size and a small amount of guile, and those hunting instincts were never far from the surface.

Typically home in time for sunsets to watch his shadow stretch across his land, the stooped and rugged silhouette etched black into the sky projected an unnatural physical force to everything around it. Although duty-bound to protect his family, he never tried too hard, intrinsically knowing no harm would befall his family as every creature of opportunity, which included other gulls looking to grab the young and vulnerable, sensed the no-fly zone surrounding Mrs Crick's bungalow. The bird felt indestructible.

Stretching his wings that spanned six feet from tip to tip, a colossal apparatus enabling a fast and effortless ascent without considering how complicated the procedure was, he yawned and surveyed the roof. He never wondered about tomorrow, but tonight, casting an eye over his tightly packed, sleeping brood, he realised they were getting too big for the nest. Soon, they would have to learn to fly and fend for themselves.

Unfortunately, that time was closer than his wife could have imagined. Thanks to him.

The mother seagull had been watching her three hatchlings preen behind the chimney stack on top of Crick's 1960s bungalow when she had sensed a threat to her babies. Turning to watch two figures approaching her house, the husband realised it was that time again.

Despite an absence of original thought, the seagull wasn't stupid. On the contrary, considering the size of her brain, she was a

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genius. Mimicking the sound of falling rain by pattering her feet on the ground, she fooled earthworms to the surface. Dropping molluscs from great heights with pinpoint accuracy onto jagged rocks, smashing their shells, she extracted their delicious meat, and following the farmer's plough, she knew there would be plentiful wriggling food in the fresh furrows.

Her knowledge came from generations of seagulls, passed down through DNA, and the most overpowering trait hardwired into her DNA was distrusting others, especially those who approached her home. Staring at the oncoming creatures, she wondered what was in the bag swinging at the man's side and if it would be good to eat. But that could wait. For now, the priority was protecting her young. Zero teaching had been required for that, despite her actions being entirely irrational because she knew neither beast would scale the building to take her children. They never did.

Distracted by another bag of faeces hanging from a tree branch, the man shook his head in disgust, not noticing his dog tugging harder against its lead. Infuriated and perplexed by those who picked up and bagged their dog's doings only to discard them in trees, on fences or on the pavement instead of putting them in the designated bins, he sucked air in through his teeth, hoping the perpetrators were somewhere watching his disapproval, feeling ashamed. Debating whether to take the bag from the tree to dispose of it properly, he concluded what he always did. No, it wasn't his job.

Steven Ryan

As well as the strange phenomenon of poo bags littering the area, the increasing amount of the un-bagged variety added to the gradual despoilation of the town, making what should have been pleasant evening strolls through Bexhill's many unlit twittens (alleyways) a lottery. Rapists lurking in the shadows were nothing compared to the fear of slipping in dog turds. Torches on phones had become priceless. *Society has gone to the dogs!*

And now, as usual, the seagull was taking to the sky, making the dog lean against its owner's leg, feeling safer the closer he could get to his bigger, more exposed friend. The man had felt the bird's beady eyes stalking them before it launched from the roof. Forgetting his disgust with society, he lengthened his stride.

With pride at stake, he was intent on passing the house with dignity as they headed towards a blooming, tree-lined twitten directly opposite the bungalow. The dog looked over its shoulder at the bird, stumbling as the almost running man, feeling the twitten's leafy embrace reaching to him like a mother's arms, dragged the dog, failing to ignore the seagull's screams from the sky.

Despite his determination to hide his weakness from the world, with only ten yards of open and desolate pavement and the road left to cross, the man broke into a fevered sprint across no man's land, fixated on the twitten's verdant opening as the bird's cries closed in. His pet turned to the front and ran, too.

Having abandoned dignity for life, the man leaked a drop of urine as the bird swooped down, with the familiar ear-splitting shriek, lifting some hairs on the back of his head as he ducked into

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the twitten on trembling knees to safety. Incensed, he re-emerged immediately, shaking his fists and hollering, 'YOU FUCKING THING!' wanting to kill it.

Although it is illegal to kill seagulls, in his fury, the man hoped the seagull would come low enough one day to punch the 'fucking thing' in its fucking face, even though he would never have done such a wicked thing because those who go to the trouble of picking up and bagging their dog's poo and waiting for the appropriate bin to put it into don't usually fit the profile of a killer, so before even reaching the halfway point of the twitten and having forgotten about his own dog's freshly bagged excrement, which lay abandoned in the middle of the road, baking in the sun, the man felt guilty for planning the seagull's demise.

After sampling the bag's contents, tasting no different from the other times she'd tried it, the gull decided she wouldn't be dishing it up for the kids' tea.

Chapter 4 - How it started.

Panic set in as the tiny head of a beautiful kitten strained to see above the guttering of Crick's roof, clinging on for dear life with tiny forepaws. The planned manoeuvre that had seemed so simple from the ground left him flailing hopelessly in the air, hindquarters scrabbling in the void for something to grip. His mental grip was letting him down, too, as he faced the prospect of a single-storey fall that he would probably survive. Unfortunately, the kitten was inexperienced and wasn't in any condition to decide to let go as the tiredness from a desperate struggle to pull himself onto the roof began to sweep over him.

The small cat had not been on the hunt for seagull chicks, merely testing his skills and stretching his young muscles to see what his lithe body could do. So, could he jump the distance from the water butt to the roof? Almost, but he was too young, not strong enough yet and inexperienced. Ordinarily, if it had been someone else's roof, he would have got a second chance.

Feelings of acceptance can be consoling when life's worst realities are too conspicuous to ignore, but just before the kitten's moment of clarity to give up the fight and let go came, he noticed the absence of heat from the sun on his head and looked up into two unblinking pinhole eyes.

After ambling down the roof to investigate the fuss, the bird was delighted by what he found at the end of his yellow hooked beak before drawing his head back and releasing the immense

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stored energy in his neck, snapping his head forward and driving the beak between the cat's beautiful topaz eyes, plunging the dagger deeply into Mega's brain.

If the strike from the beak hadn't killed Mega instantly, contact with the hard patio on the back of his head meant he would never play the piano again. Padding back and forth along the keyboard of their Baby Grand, his owners rejoiced at the unmelodious sounds Mega made and the hundreds of 'thumbs-ups' and likes from his numerous *YouTube* and *Facebook* performances. Everyone adored Mega.

Mega's frantic owners and friends pushed notices through every door within a five-mile radius of their homes and plastered posters on every lamppost and telegraph pole. When Crick went out to top up the birdbaths the next day, she discovered the kitten spread eagle and surrounded by flies, staring sightlessly to heaven. Traumatized, she tripped back over the step into the kitchen, spilling the birds' water over the floor in her panic to escape the horrifying discovery.

After seeing the pleas for help to find Mega a few days later, Mrs Crick demurred calling the family as Martin had already disposed of the body in the rough at his golf course, reflecting that the information wouldn't help their grief, thinking it better for them to assume Mega had picked a new owner. When finding strangers who provide better food, many cats never return, which was Mrs Crick's reason for providing Mr Friedrich with *Waitrose's finest*. A worthwhile expense, in her view.

Steven Ryan

Martin was indispensable to Mrs Crick, more than just a gardener, a friend and a man for every horrible consequence of nature. He got rid of the nasty inconveniences, from the birds that flew headlong into her windows to the mysterious mutilated remains of ducklings found by her kitchen door. She knew who the culprit for the duckling murders was but wouldn't admit it to herself. Her well-practised denial was, she believed, an effective barrier to some of life's cruelty, while hoping the *Waitrose finest cat repasts* would curb her cat's nasty tendencies, eventually steering him into more civilised behaviour, which was a vain hope because Friedrich wasn't guilty of most of the crimes.