

Bird Hide

By Jackie Mitchell

Tel: 01372 465041; e-mail: jackie@jackiem.com

Word count: 1,262

I see dad every other Sunday, but today he reached an all time low. How could he bring me to the Wetlands Centre with all these frigging birds? He's getting more desperate for places where we don't have to talk. He usually asks me to go for a pizza afterwards, but I always refuse. What would we say?

I tried to get out of it, but mum insisted – she was seeing that creep again. Dad kept pointing out ducks and swans – like I couldn't spot them myself? I played games on my new iPhone – typical he didn't even notice.

He bought us some bags of bird seed. That was a big mistake because once you throw it in the water, the birds get out and come really close. One swan stood in front of me and when I tried to feed it, it nearly bit my hand off! So I dumped the rest. I needed to cheer myself up, so lunch was the perfect opportunity. The café was packed and this sappy young mum was gooing and gaaing at her tiny kid, who started throwing food on the floor. Nice one. I rushed to help, fetching paper napkins and picking up food. Dad was proud of me. I wanted to laugh at that.

Feeling the weight in my pocket, I wanted to see what was inside. Telling dad I needed to go to the loo, I sauntered out of the café. There was a huge queue – typical. I strolled on until I found a bird hide.

It was dark and silent – perfect. All these morons with their binoculars watching silly birds through the slits. How pathetic is that. I suppose that’s how old people get their kicks. The minute I walked in, several old boys toddled off, giving me funny looks. Probably time for their tablets. I sat on a bench in one corner pretending to watch. As if! It stank in there – probably bird shit!

Looking around carefully, I had a nose at the purse. It was a typical mummy’s purse – pink and furry, but inside it had £100 cash and a few credit cards. I was hoping for a bit more. Still better than nothing. I quickly put it back in my pocket. I wish that woman would stop looking at me. Silly cow. Oh no, she’s coming over here. She was about mum’s age, maybe a little older. Her hair was cropped short and her makeup looked heavy, even though it was dark. The bright lipstick stood out making her lips look like a duck’s beak – well, she was in the right place. She was weird. You’d have to be to come here.

“Can I sit here?” she asked.

“Free country.”

“It’s lovely here, isn’t it?” she said. “My daughter suggested it – she wanted to bring my grandson.”

“Won’t they be missing you?” I said.

“You’re going to hand it in, aren’t you?”

I looked at her with disgust and kept stumm.

“Someone like you would never come here on their own accord,” she said, offering me a cigarette which I took eagerly. We both knew it was against the rules

and blew the smoke out through the slits. Awesome. Some old boy grunted, coughed loudly and left, giving us daggers.

“Why would I want to come here? My dad dragged me,” I said.

She smiled revealing dodgy teeth. “You don’t know what you’re missing,” she said and handed me a pair of binoculars. At first I didn’t want to use them, then I thought if I did, perhaps she would bugger off. Sighing, I took the binoculars – all I could see were sodding birds, then a nest of young black birds with red on top on their heads. Dad was with them and the other adult, the mum I suppose, kept diving into the water and coming back to feed them. It was hard work, as the chicks were almost the same size as she was. My mum never carries on like that – she can’t wait till I leave home.

The woman smiled.

“You don’t need the money, do you?” she said eyeballing me. “Hand it in,” she added.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. So that was her game! Soften me up with baby birds, then come in for the kill. I’d show her. Giving her the binoculars back, I almost stood up, but something stopped me.

“I bet you’re from a wealthy background – private school, that sort of thing. You do this for kicks.”

“How can you know that?” I asked, trying to pretend this wasn’t happening. If she carries on like this, she’ll get a slap in the face like I gave to that stupid cow when she wouldn’t hand over her iPhone.

“Your accent, your clothes,” she said. “It’s clever because you fit into places like this. No-one can imagine you stealing. I saw you in the café pretending to help that young mum, then taking her purse.”

This time I did stand up, she was scaring me and I didn't trust myself.

I sat down again. "You're mad – stark raving mad," I said.

"What would your dad say if he knew?" she asked, stubbing out her cigarette, then picking up the fag end with a tissue.

"He doesn't care – he left us five years ago."

"I think he does. If you can't give it back, give it to charity. Go on – do it.

Don't do what I did."

This made me stop and look at her carefully.

"If I had my time again, I would've found another way, even though I enjoyed it. But crime doesn't pay, believe me."

"I don't know," I said holding up my iPhone.

"Prison isn't a glamorous place," she said. "It's depressing – we're cooped up like chickens. It's dark and frightening."

She rolled up her sleeve to reveal this zig zag scar all up her arm, which stood out against the pale white flesh.

I swallowed uneasily.

"My cell mate did that to me with a rusty nail because I said I was too tired to read her daughter's letter to her as she couldn't read or write. I couldn't scream with the pain otherwise the screws would have put us in solitary – and the blood went everywhere."

The woman's eyes watered.

I wanted to throw up and covered my mouth with my hand. We sat there for several minutes in complete silence.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said. “Please don’t make the same mistakes I did.” She looked at her watch. “I must be going, my daughter will be looking for me. Remember what I said. Do it.”

I watched her leave the bird hide. It was time to get out - the smell was horrible. I couldn’t block out the image of her scarred arm. Where was dad? It was ages since I left him.

As I approached the information desk, the young mum was there asking if her purse had been found. The expression on her face when I handed it to her, she couldn’t stop thanking me. I heard my dad’s voice. I turned round and he looked delighted to see me.

“Glad I’ve found you,” he said. I let him give me a big hug.

“You’d better give me your new mobile phone number in case you go wandering off again,” he said.

“It’s not my phone, it’s a friend’s – I’ve got to give it back. Aren’t you going to ask me to go for a pizza?”

“You always say no.”

“Ask me.”