

I was out in the cotton-soft dusk. Nearby, a dozen shadows loomed against the shutter-stall trees. It grew darker. Night-scopes and lenses flashed in the torchlight. Ready for something in the steadfast gloom.

They moved slowly. One man passed within touching distance and I murmured a query. His head-torch swung to me, startled, bright and brittle-glinting. He tipped his chin towards the path into the trees.

I followed. Pausing as they did. Listening.

A wood-dense trill excited the line. Then a spit-sad mutter reached me, just a common starling. We waited again.

The man accepted tea from my flask, offered me a nip from his. Hoping for a nightingale, he muttered. He'd heard one in his childhood, and had been waiting seventy years since. Now he tipped along with this bunch, hoping and hoping and hoping against hope. The torchlight gave him a dedicated gleam.

At 3 a.m. regret rippled through the group. Enough. Some had work to go to. Up with the lark as well as out with the owl. They drifted away, the torchlight bobbing through the wood into the silk-slubbed dawn.

The man shrugged. Maybe the starling had learned the song from a nightingale. Maybe there was one to hear. If the night was right. We listened again, but everything was still. He sighed, shouldering his rucksack.

I asked why this wood in particular? Why here at all? Only because of gossip on a birder forum, he told me. Only because of a rumour of joy.