

The Boom by Millie Mockford from Bamford, Derbyshire

It stopped her in her tracks. The dense fog smothering the lake made it impossible to see past the end of the dog lead, let alone any distance into the reedbed. There was no movement, no wind, no noise. Even her own footsteps were muted by the gloom which blurred the colours of the sunrise.

Still bleary-eyed from the early hour, Laurie wasn't sure if she had imagined it, but the spaniel had stopped too. His eyes suddenly fixed ahead, his ears poised, one front paw lifted and still.

Neither breathed while she tried to rewind the soundscape she'd just ignored. She had felt more than heard it; it had resonated like wind blowing across the top of a bottle...but there was no wind.

In the distance an engine noise battled through the grey to her ears. Hopefully that was the arrival of the farmhands, which brought a small sense of relief. Last night had been a hard one with the lambs, her parents had even woken her in the early hours for some help - normally unheard of on a school night. After three hours of deep but unhelpful sleep and a quick circuit round the reedbed with Max, she still planned to make the 8am bus.

So she really needed to move.

Max gave in first. The lead tugged in her hand as he caught a scent from further down the path. With a quick, pointless glance behind her into the murk, she followed him and picked up her pace.

The sound was forgotten. There was barely a moment to sleep in the next few weeks between lambing and studying. Her parents had tried hard to give her space to revise for her upcoming exams, but they had still needed her help most nights. The evening before her first exam, she dragged Max out to the reedbed.

She was tired, but more than that, she felt defeated. She had struggled all year to keep up at school and desperately wanted to show what she knew she was capable of. She had put in the long hours but with another disrupted night ahead, she knew she would struggle to find her seat in the exam hall, let alone write cohesively. Even if she wasn't woken on purpose,

the sudden bursts of activity punctuated her dreams. A bad birth or the dreaded death of a ewe would be a huge financial blow to the struggling farm, and the worry was palpable throughout the house.

Max stopped behind her. She suppressed the frustrated urge to tug him along and turned to look instead. Then she heard it. It was unmistakable this time. Two notes bellowing in succession from the reeds - not far from where they stood. She squinted between the waterlogged stems. In the evening light, the shades of green and yellow danced in and out of shadow, making it impossible to distinguish a source. Like a beacon, the sound radiated out, calling for attention while the messenger hid. Something crossed her mind. A melody learned years ago when her mother had the time to bring her here and teach her about the reeds, before the business started to struggle, before they had to let staff go.

Boom.

The remnants of her mother singing echoed in her memory.

The bittern booms.

Deep in the reeds when the springtime looms, all is well when the bittern booms.

There hadn't been a bittern there in many, many years. They were so long forgotten that the name of the lane leading to the farm was known now as New Road rather than the old 'Bittern Lane'. The secretive, prehistoric, heron-like birds had once characterised the area, but they had been some of the first casualties.

There had been a spill miles upstream, long before Laurie was born. A factory had emptied tonnes of chemical waste into the river - accidentally, they'd been told. Some effects were immediate. The local area round the leak was decimated - vibrant populations of fish disappeared overnight, plants withered on the banks. Bodies of creatures that had drunk the poisoned water during that hot summer were found for miles. Gradually the damage cascaded down to the reedbed and animals further up the food chain started to suffer. Birds' eggs were too weak to protect the chicks inside. A once cacophonous wetland waned and diminished until the enormous space was left to a few warblers and passing sparrows.

Of course the contamination had seeped out and over the years the soil at Laurie's farm became more and more pernicious. A lot of their neighbours had moved on but Laurie's family had stayed - their farm had belonged to the family for so many generations, they'd lost count. Instead, her parents poured everything they had into healing the soil. They moved

away from their strong crops, which now drooped and yellowed in the ground. They built up their sheep stock, feeding them on limited turnips grown far away from the water. They spent years working on patches of the reedbed, planting the species that could withstand the residual toxins while still providing habitat, hoping that the birds would return. They invested thousands of pounds into planting trees and experimental techniques to cleanse the soil and boost the microbial population to break down the chemicals. It was a brave decision to stay. It had also nearly bankrupted them.

The weight had fallen squarely on her dad's shoulders. It was his family's farm and he was the strongest voice in the decision to stay. That weight had nearly crushed him over the years, Laurie could see it. Everyone could see it. Year after year the income had dwindled with their reduced capacity to feed the flock. Year after year her parents smiled a little less and stood a little shorter.

But now there was a bittern.

Laurie stood and marvelled at the noise that was more suited to a cavernous underwater goliath than a bird. It was powerful - the call boomed across the reeds, making no apologies, dominating the airspace. This is my home. I am here.

Laurie stood taller, breathed deeply and smiled.

As she walked through the farm gate, she saw her parents sat on the old picnic table outside the lambing barn. Paul, one of two remaining farmhands, leaned against the wall; all three looked exhausted. As Laurie approached, they looked up and she could see a flicker of a smile teasing their faces.

'The last one's out,' said her mum. 'Every single lamb and mother survived; there will be no wake-ups tonight.' She smiled. 'You should get to bed - big day tomorrow!'

Laurie returned the smile and looked at her father. His expression was a mixture of relief, exhaustion and the ever-present tension that had become far too familiar. She stared at him for a moment.

'There's a bittern booming in the reeds'.

He stared back. They all did. Very slowly a single tear ran down his face, trickling down to the corner of the biggest smile Laurie ever remembered seeing on his weathered face. He stood up tall, and slowly lifted one ripped, heavy, brown boot onto the bench followed by the

other onto the table. Towering above the fields sloping down to the river, he bellowed,

'BOOM!'