

Black Drongo

by Garry Kilworth

SO what you want to do is take Marcia's personality and put it with the body of a bird?" said Steve. "What are you trying to create, some monster freak? Some creature that'll think, like ... like Marcia?"

We were at dinner, just the three of us, in a small restaurant off Mody Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. My brother Steve and his girlfriend Marcia were flying out of Hong Kong the next day. They were going on a business holiday, to some remote place in the Philippines, which was incidentally Marcia's homeland.

I explained patiently, "I'm not transferring her psyche, Steve; there are laws against that. All I want to do is copy Marcia's persona and superimpose it upon that of the drongo's."

"Okay Einstein, what's the difference?" he said.

"Her persona is simply her personality. A psyche is someone's conscious and unconscious. someone's mind or self, if you like. I'm not allowed to screw around with psches, although it is possible to make a transfer under controlled conditions. Only the GRL, the Government Research Labs, are pemitted to dabble in that. This won't hurt her in the least, and she'll have the satisfaction of knowing she's furthering my studies of behavior patterns in wild birds."

"What if I don't want you to mess around with my girl's persona?"

"Steve. . ." said Marcia, in that soft voice she has, but he cut her off with, "No, wait; I want to hear what Einstein here has to say about it. You just keep quiet for a minute. No, I'm sorry Marcia; this is for me to decide whether it's right for you to do this or not. You don't understand these things like we do."

Steve can be a real pain in the ass when he wants to be, which is most of the time, but he is my brother and I put up with him because I love him. He is unbelievably insecure, and this manifests itself in hostility and agression. Tonight, he was being nice; any other time he would have blown his stack and started throwing things around the room. He always mellowed a little prior to trave;, gradually becoming as pliant as he would ever be with Marcia, or any woman.

Men could take him better than women: They recognized the apprehensive hunter-gatherer in him as something they had within themselves though often not to the same extreme. Steve was one of those people who believed you had to prove yourself all the time, against the competition. If you didn't, you would be taken advantage of, and eaten alive. They would fall on you like jackals while you were exposed to them. You had to keep your defenses up, show them you were a man to be reckoned with, never let them see your vulnerability.

He played squash as if to lose would mean the guillotine. He was merciless against business rivals. My older brother was still living in a world where you clubbed a man senseless and took his meat and his woman and made sure you felt damn good about it. Any weakness in you would be exploited, and you would become carrion for the vultures.

I did not consider Steve a bad man, and most other men liked his company, many women too if they were the kind who preferred being told what to do, but there were others who considered him an aggressive thick-skinned bull.

I hadn't told Steve that the reason I wanted Marcia's persona, as opposed to any other, was because of my observations of their relationship. Steve had always been the bully, and the person who took the brunt of his obnoxious behavior was Marcia. She, on the other hand, had soaked up his abuse with not a flicker of annoyance or retaliation. I used to sit and watch her being verbally attacked, Steve imposing his will on her with unbelievable insensitivity, and yet she took it all calmly, letting it all wash over her, leaving her unmoved. She wasn't submissive, not in a way that was visible; she just allowed it to happen while seemingly unimpressed.

"I think it's for Marcia to decide, not you Steve. I'm not asking you for your persona, and Marcia is a grown woman. She doesn't need your permission."

"Yeah, but she's my girl, Pete. I got to look after her interests."

"You don't need to do anything of the sort. She's a capable person."

Steve was typical of many expatriates living in a Far Eastern enclave consisting mostly of other expats. He was conservative, thoroughly conventional, and about a hundred years behind the times. His passport said he was an Amer-european, but in truth we had long since left our original nationalities behind and had become something else. I'm not sure what. Gwailos I suppose, which is the Cantonese term for all Caucasians living in their society. Literally it means foreign devil, but language is dynamic and it has become a quick description of a Western businessman living on the China coast, out of touch with reality, holding on to out-of-date values, talking in cliches.

There are Chinese to businessmen like Steve who exploit the local labor, but they don't make excuss for the poor pay they offer; they simply do it. Steve thought the Thatcher-Reagan years of the last century were wonderful, but of course he only went to Britain and America for business conferences, a few days, nothing more.

"Is that what you think?" said Steve, his tone belligerent. "Well, okay, I'll leave the decision to her, but I'm going to come along. I only have her best interests at heart."

Marcia was the immovable object who took all he had to throw at her and remained intact, without reprisal, without going under. She was a small woman, even for a Filipino, with a gentle smile. She withstood the storms and remained

undaunted. The Filipino maids, fifty thousands of them in Hong Kong, were an accommodating group. Most of them considered a little abuse worth pursuing the romantic dream of marrying out of the terrible poverty which was their cultural heritage. Even if the man be a boorish old fart like Steve, twice her age and with a body ravaged by too many gins.

“That’s what I think, Steve. . . .”

In the end, I had my way, and Steve even drove us to the lab in his new Mercedes, chatting quite amicably on the journey under the forest canopy of neon branches that grew from buildings either side of the street. The night watchman was a little surprised to see us, at eleven in the evening, but he let us in, and stood by the lab door in that guarded manner of the Cantonese security worker dealing with the unusual, wondering whether he is going to get into trouble for allowing someone to enter the building after hours, even if that someone was perfectly entitled to be there. The Cantonese like to live lives of complete order, within a vast sea of chaos.

Marcia went into the scanner cubicle a little nervously, though it is one of the newer devices produced by Walker and Quntan, in which the subject stands upright, rather than one of the more common horizontal coffin affairs of Stebling, Inc. Steve chatted to the night watchman, while I took the reading, then when everything checked out, proceeded to take a facsimile of Marcia’s persona on disk.

When I had finished with Marcia, I asked Steve to step into the cubicle.

He stuck out his jaw.

“Why? What do you want my personality for? I thought you considered it pretty shitty?”

“Don’t make a fuss, Steve; I’m not going to hurt you.”

This struck at the core of his manhood, as I knew it would. He went straight into the cubicle to prove he was not afraid of anything, even if his brother was a mad scientist.

“Okay,” he growled, from within, “but if I start growing hairs on the palms of my hands, Pete, I’m coming looking for my little brother to eat.”

It was all over by twelve, and we went for a final coffee at the glitzy Peninsula Hotel on Nathan Road, with its string quartet.

I saw them off at the airport the next morning, Steve grumbling at the taxi driver most of the way, because he wasn’t driving fast enough, and Marcia talking to me in that soft tone quite unlike the voice she used when talking in Tagalog to her fellow Filipinos. Steve was definitely more mellow now. In the old days he would have taken time out to snap at her and ask me what I found so interesting in her “drivel,” but that day he simply gave her one or two side glances, not without a trace of fondness in them. They were to be gone for the whole of July and August, the

terrible months in Hong Kong.

A week after they had left I began my experiment.

The Chinese government had employed me as a lecturer on Animal Behavior at the University of Hong Kong, but I was permitted, even expected, to carry out my own research. Any findings would of course be credited to the university as well as myself, thus gaining face for my Chinese employers.

My specific interest at this time was animal aggression. What I wanted to do was to superimpose a placid persona on an aggressive wild creature, in order to study the reactions of the creature's own kind and to see whether there was any change in their behavior toward the subject, and indeed whether the subject showed any signs of reverting to type.

The creature I had chosen was a black drongo (*Dicrurus macrocerus*), a bird about the size of a jackdaw. It is a quarrelsome creature, known in India as King Crow because of its habit of mobbing the much larger members of the Corvidae family. It fights amongst its own kind, for scraps of food, though there are no recorded combats ending in fatalities. The black drongo has an unusual catlike hissing call, which is quite disturbing to other birds.

I had three black drongos, caught on the Mai Po Marshes of what used to be the New Territories, when Hong Kong was a colony. The marshes, founded as a bird sanctuary in the last century by a man called Peter Scott, is a resting place for thousands of migrating birds on their way to and from SE Asia. The black drongo and hair-crested drongo are summer visitors, however, and stay in the area of breeding. The other birds must breathe a sign of relief when the drongos leave for other parts, at the end of the hot season.

I chose a female for the subject (for no other reason than Marcia was a female) and called her Yat Ho, or Number One. The other pair were of course Yi Ho and Sam Ho-Two and Three. Marcia's persona overlaid that of Yat Ho's, and I introduced the subject back into the aviary, while my students put themselves in charge of the video cameras, ever eager to record experiment and pore over the results. They are a good bunch, this year. Some undergraduates spend much of their student life in the gaming halls of Wan Chai district, risking failure for the sake of glitz, but then many of them are from remote villages in the north, and the bleeping and pinging of the gaming machines in the neon-lit halls act like sirens on them.

At first, the expected happened. Yat Ho's strange docile behavior kept the other two birds at a distance. The unusua was distrusted, and it was doubtful whether they actually recognized and identified her as a drongo. It's possible they thought she was some other kind of bird, and it puzzled them that she looked, sounded, and smelled like one of them. They fought amongst themselves and were wary if she approached.

Then suddenly, as if working in concert, they began to attack and bully her,

shouldering her out of the way of food, pecking, hissing, and treating her with disdain. Sam Ho was particularly vicious and treated Yat Ho with utter disdain, as if she were some kind of traitor to her kind.

She did nothing. True to Marcia's persona, she took everything they had to give her and remained unmoved. The students were terribly excited by this, never having witnessed anything like it before in their golden days of learning. They could talk of nothing else but the drongos for the next six weeks, as Yat Ho continued to survive, simply by showing no reaction to the bullying--simply by being.

I must have been pretty boring too, as a date. My girlfriend, Xia, a Han Chinese from the north, is normally fairly tolerant of my enthusing, but I think those first few drongo weeks strained even her elastic patience.

Then something remarkable began to happen, which I should have expected, but which actually surprised me. The resilience of Yat Ho began to wear down the energy of the other two birds, especially Sam Ho, the main contender for bully of the season. She simply took what they had to offer in the way of violence, but when she remained seemingly unaffected by their aggressive behavior, they gradually ceased to attack her. They still fought amongst themselves, but in their dealings with Yat Ho, they were almost nauseatingly friendly.

"They even bring her bits of food," cried Penny Lau, one of my students, "and she takes the pieces as if she deserves them."

It was true. They were courting her friendship, trying to get her to like them, forgive them for their earlier treatment of her. I was fascinated. What on Earth was going on here? I couldn't get my notes on tape fast enough.

One evening, about the seventh week, I was sitting outside the aviary on my own, idly watching my three drongos. The students had all gone out for the evening. It was a holiday, Liberation Day, and they were out celebrating. Suddenly, something horrible occurred in that artificial world behind the glass screen.

Sam Ho was perched next to Yat Ho, their scapular feathers touching, when she turned and deliberately pecked through his right eye, into his brain. Sam Ho fell to the ground, fluttering and convulsing, but instead of flying off to some other part of the aviary. Yat Ho dropped on him like a hawk, and proceeded to peck the wounded bird to death. Yi Ho came up to find out what the fuss was all about, and Yat Ho fell on the second bird, who was killed even more quickly than the first. When she had finished her murders. Yat Ho calmly wiped her beak on the mossy branch of a tree, and took up her position on the original perch.

I was shocked. This was something quite out of the scope of my studies, even amongst aggression in carnivores. There was a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. I could hardly believe that my bird was capable of such terrible violence. Black drongos might be aggressive, but they did not to my knowledge kill each other. The responsibility for those deaths resided with me. I had altered the normal

relationship, by introducing unusual behavior patterns into the equation.

It was only in the taxi, on the way home, that another, more terrible thought still, came to mind: a nightmare in fact. There were another set of personalities in play, in a relationship that I had well-meaningly tampered with. That night I slept very little, and went through vast amounts of material, looking for reasons. I believed my concern was very real.

The following day I took a rain check on my lunch date with Xia, and instead went to the University canteen looking for Professor Chang Yip, the resident psychoanalyst. I sat down next to him and immediately launched into a description of the previous night's events, telling him what I had set out to do at the commencement of the experiment, and what had been the final result. He stared at me throughout my explanation, a blank expression on his face, as if he was wondering why the hell I was telling him all this.

"My question to you, professor, concerns human behavior. Is there a . . . a personality disorder that you are aware of, in which the subject is docile while under attack from an aggressive person, yet explodes in sudden violence when that aggression is no longer in evidence? I'm wondering whether, once the aggressor becomes docile himself and apparently vulnerable, the subject takes the opportunity to attack . . . ?"

Professor Chang shook his head and looked down at his half-eaten fried noodles and prawns.

"I don't understand why you ask me this? What have birds got to do with the psychoanalysis of people?"

"It's just something I'm interested in," I replied. "It's not really relevant to my studies, but I would like to know."

"Birds are not people," were his final words, and then he got up and left, leaving the remainder of his lunch.

This is the kind of thing that can happen in a university with no tenures. The staff are suspicious of one another, and they like to keep things close to their chest. There are a lot of politics, always in the wind, and people are insecure. You can be indispensable to the faculty one term, and out on your ear the next. So if someone from another department comes to you with a request, suggestion, idea, anything, you listen, but give nothing whatsoever in return.

I remained very worried about the situation in the Philippines. Steve, once terribly aggressive, had been tamed by me. When he was in the scanner cubicle the night before he left with Marcia for the Philippines, I had superimposed the personality of a dove over his own. He was now, to my way of thinking vulnerable. He had in effect been transformed from a drongo to a dove, and I wanted to make sure that everything was all right, for Marcia's sake as well as my brother's.

In the evening, I telephoned Steve. It took three attempts, but I finally had him on the line.

“How are you?” I asked, guardedly.

“Me? Couldn’t be better, why?” he said in a pleasant voice. “Anything happened?”

“Nothing, nothing really I just hadn’t heard something about rebels in the north.”

Steve laughed.

“There’s always some trouble with the north, you know that. Look, I’m due to meet someone, Pete--business, you know. Was there something specific . . . ?”

“No. Maybe I could have a word with Marcia, before I ring off. Is she there?”

“What about?”

“Mind your own goddamn business,” I said with mock aggression. He laughed again and the next voice that I heard was Marcia’s.

“Hello?”

“Marcia, how--how do you feel?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Good, good. How’s Steve. How are you getting on with him over there?”

She said in that calm voice of hers, “Well, the Philippines must be good for him. He’s so nice to me. I can’t believe it really. . . .”

“You don’t mind that?”

“Of course not,” still no real expression in the tone.

“You don’t find it . . . irritating, or anything?”

There was a long pause, then, “No. Look Peter, I have to go. Steve’s calling me from the lift. Bye.”

“Marcia . . . ?”

she had hung up on me.

I bit my nails. well, they sounded all right, I supposed. Steve was docile of course, but otherwise okay. And Marcia? I just don’t know. Yat Ho had exploded all at once, without warning. How could I tell? Marcia might wake up in the middle of the night and realize that this aggression beast who had tormented her in the past was now at her mercy, look down at his yes, vulnerable, exposed find a pair of scissors,

and plunge them . . . It just did not bear thinking about.

How could I tell her that it wasn't Steve I was worried about, but her---that there was a potential murderer, locked up in that sweet personality she showed the world? How could I explain she had a demon inside her, waiting for the moment when Steve no longer psychologically presented a frightening formidable monster to her, but instead revealed the pathetic creature underneath, the real Steven, who required reassurance, support, love. How could I tell her that there was a strong possibility she would then regard him as her victim?

Two months ago, when Steve introduced me to Marcia. I had formed an alliance with her. Steve was at that time heading for all sorts of trouble. He was up on an assault charge, for punching a toilet attendant in a hotel for splashing his trousers with water. There were complaints at his club about his behavior after he had been drinking, and people were asking for him to be thrown out. There was some business about a scrape with a Porsche, the owner maintaining that Steve had bumped him from the rear on purpose, presumably because he had overtaken Steve's Mercedes on the Waterloo Road.

All this reflected on me and my position at the university, and I hit on the idea of taming him, calming him down. Of course, I would never have got him to the doctor, and even if I had, he would have refused any treatment. So I hit on the idea of overlaying his persona with that of a dove's, which would encourage the exposure of his real butter-soft self underneath. I didn't want Steve suspecting anything, so I planned to get him into the laboratory by using Marcia as an excuse.

After my phone call with Steve and Marcia, I went back to the lab, where Yat Ho awaited me. I placed her under the scanner and removed the superimposed persona, then put her back in the aviary with two more drongos.

She quarreled with them, fighting over perches and food, but there were no combats resulting in injury or death. I stayed there for twelve hours, studying the creatures, and in the end went home convinced that she had returned to her old self, a nasty bickering bird like all the other black drongos in the world, but with no desire to kill.

There was no change in the situation over the next two days, and I waited on hot bricks for my brother and Marcia to arrive back in Hong Kong.

The day arrived when they were due in from the Philippines and I drove down to Kai Tak airport to meet them with a churning stomach. Was Steve all right? Was Marcia still the sweet lovable woman she had been on leaving Hong Kong? Was I in fact being unnecessarily stupid in thinking that the behavior of a bird might reflect the behavior of a human being? Perhaps Yat Ho was just a strange drongo, given to bursts of violence anyway? Animals and birds have their mental problems too. My mind was like a maelstrom, spiraling the thoughts round and round, and dredging them back up again.

I waited at the bottom of the ramp in the airport concourse for my brother and his girlfriend to appear. Kai Tak was, as usual, monstrously crowded with thousands of Chinese milling around waiting for relatives and friends, amazingly managing to avoid touching each other--a personal contact they dislike intensely--though I would have had difficulty in sliding a piece of paper down the spaces between them. My heart was beating against my ribs, and for the first time in many years I was smoking again. I glanced at the labels on the suitcases, as passengers came down the ramp, for Philippine Airlines' labels, and soon they began filtering past me.

Then suddenly, there they were, amongst the sea of black heads, at the top of the ramp. The relief flooded through me, and I kicked myself for being so paranoid. What an idiot. To think that a sweet girl like Marcia was capable of killing someone! Now that they were home, safe and sound, the idea seemed ludicrous, even heinous. I vowed never to tell them of my fears.

I signaled, made myself visible to Steve, then went to take a place in the queue for taxis.

Steve reached me, just as I was coming to the head of the queue. Marcia was nowhere to be seen. I had assumed, because she was so small, she had been down below the crowd.

We shook hands and I said, "Didn't I see Marcia?" Steve shrugged and smiled.

"She wanted to stay on for a few days, to see some relatives."

That sounded reasonable. Her family was out on one of the many smaller islands, while she and Steve had been staying on the main island.

On the taxi drive to Steve's club, where he intended to leave his suitcase and have a meal, I studied my older brother. He seemed calm and relaxed, and in quite a good frame of mind considering he had been through the stress of travel.

Still, so long as there was no harm done, what did it matter now?

He seemed distracted, however, so I did not press him with questions until we were actually sitting down to a meal in the club dining room.

"How was the trip?" I asked.

"Oh, fine."

He played with his table napkin as I spoke, rearranging it carefully on his lap, although this had been done once by the waiter.

"No problems, business-wise?"

"No, everything went according to plan."

“And Marcia? She enjoyed the break?” He nodded.

“So far as I know.”

The soup arrived at this point, and I ceased probing. He certainly looked well enough, but there was something about his manner which worried me. He was too distant, even for someone who was a little jet-lagged, and I wondered if his business had really gone well. Then a thought struck me. What if Marcia had attacked him, and he, being a strong male, had prevented her from injuring him? Perhaps my concern for his safety was justified after all, but he had successfully protected himself from the kind of deadly attack I had witnessed from my black drongo, Yat Ho.

I was about to say something, when three people walked through the door. One was a small olive-skinned man with a blunt chin and determined look. He was flanked by two uniformed Hong Kong policemen: an inspector and a sergeant. They spoke to a waiter, who pointed towards our table. The trio then made their way through the diners, to stand behind my brother.

The man in civilian clothes spoke, and I knew then that he was a Filipino.

“Mr. Steven Bordas?”

Steve turned, his head, wiping his chin with his napkin at the same time.

“Yes.”

“I am Sergeant Callita. You are under arrest. . . .”

I must have heard any words that followed, but their memory is lost in the buzzing of shock that overcame me. Steve looked at me and gave me a tight smile, which said. We both knew that one day I would do something like this.

I grabbed the Filipino policeman’s sleeve.

“It’s not his fault; it’s mine.”

It was so clear to me now, not it was too late. Yat Ho had not killed because of the change in the other two drongos, but because of the unnatural suppression of her own aggression, I had overlaid her real personality with a placid one, effectively sealing it off. The drongo persona had bubbled underneath, unable to find a safety valve to relieve the pressure, and finally she had exploded. I should have been comparing Yat Ho with Steve, not with Marcia, having done the same thing to my brother’s natural aggression.

He had murdered Marcia!

Steve was taken away and I called to him that I would get this lawyer on the phone. He waved his hand over his shoulder, as if he did not really care what I did.

I sat in the restaurant, stunned by what had happened. Poor Marcia, I thought. Poor sweet innocent Marcia. I had been instrumental in her death, as they say, by experimenting on my own brother. It was a terrible thing to do. I was determined it should all come out at the trial. I would defend my brother with the truth. Poor Steve.

While these thoughts were running through my head, Marcia walked into the room, saw me, and waved. She crossed the floor and took a chair opposite me. "Something terrible's happened," she said, as I sat there open-mouthed, staring at her. "Steve told me to stay in Manila, but I caught the next flight out, after his. There are policemen after him. . . ."

"I know," I said in a shaky voice, "they've arrested him. But what's he done?" She told me then and though Steve was still in a lot of trouble, I heaved a sigh of relief. It was bad, but not as bad as I had first envisaged, thank God.

They had been in a waterfront bar and Steve had had too much to drink. Marcia went to phone a taxi, to take them back to the hotel. When she returned, all hell had been let loose. It appeared that Steve had suddenly exploded in a fit of violence and had proceeded to lay about him without warning. The clientele of that particular bar were no angels themselves and dockers, fishermen, and wharf rats began to pile into the mad gwaילו with boots, fists, and one or two knives. Steve retaliated in kind, stepping up his attacks on the opposition, cracking heads and throwing the smaller Filipinos around like dolls.

Chairs were broken, jaws were broken, mirrors were broken. There were three unconscious bodies strewn about the floor and Steve was swinging a bottle at a fourth, just as Marcia entered. The barman had pulled out a revolver and was screaming to Marcia in Tagalog that she'd better get her boyfriend out of there, or he was going to blow the fucking madman's head off. Marcia managed to bundle Steve through the door and into the taxi, whereupon he collapsed in moody silence in the corner of the cab.

"It's my fault," I said to her. "I've got to help him."

Steve stood trial in Hong Kong, there being a Far East Area Criminal Court in Kowloon. His lawyer picked off the various charges against him, but he still ended up with "Assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm." He was sentenced to a year in the Far East Central Jail, of which he would serve about eight months the lawyer said.

so now I sit in my cell, with three other convicted felons for company. I couldn't let Steve serve his sentence: I'm doing it in his place. While Steve was out on bail we extended our illegal activities to swapping psyches. I am now in Steve's body and he in mine. It's really only fair that I do his time for him, when the whole thing was my fault anyway. I'm tempted at this point to quote the words at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*--"It is a far better thing I do now . . ." but I can't remember

the whole bit.

I've taken a year's sabbatical from the university and Steve has taken my body to Thailand with Marcia for a long holiday. She was a little confused at first but doesn't seem to mind, so long as I don't care and Steve is happy. We've explained to her what we've done and have assured her that everything is fine with both of us.

Jail is quite interesting really, if you haven't got a lifetime to serve, but Far East prisons are tough. You need to be a hard man to survive in here. Obviously Steve, the old Steve, would have been in his element being an instinctive bully. His aggressive attitude and pugnacious personality would have ensured he was left well alone.

However, Steve isn't in here--I am. I am fairly timid by nature and a natural victim, my own body being more suited to an effete academic. I doubt I could survive on my own. The oriental thugs in here would destroy a mild gwailo like me in very little time at all, these Chinese triads and Vietnamese gangsters. So I borrowed another personality before I came in: superimposed it upon my own. It seems to work. I can scrap with the best of them, steal their food before they rob me of mine, intimidate them, put them in their places, establish a pecking order with me at the top. They fear me for my inherently fierce nature, my vicious character, and either stay out of my way or suck up to me.

Why not? Someone's got to be the king pin, so why not me?

With the help of an overlaid persona, of course--that of the most beligerent black drongo I could find, Yat Ho.