*Mr Jolly*

Starlings. I came down one morning for my regular dose of coffee, and there they were, gorging themselves. I watched them harpooning the tender seeds, and was filled with a curious mixture of repulsion and recognition. Because, when we watch birds, half the time we’re thinking, how like us they are, and the other half, how alien, how different. And I wasn’t sure which of these had repulsed me really, but watching them feast, it made me think how reptilian starlings are. Something of the dinosaur in them. I went out and shooed them away, and I said to myself then, I’ve got to do something about them, but you know what, I didn’t.

All over summer I thought about it, but then in September, and really this takes us up to the present, into October, my usual rich harvest has amounted to a meagre handful of kale, carrots, parsnips and a few spuds. How’s that going to sustain me over winter? I put the root vegetables in boxes in the cellar – they last longer that way. Then I took a large plank of wood and nailed it to a smaller plank of wood, so that I now held aloft a crucifix the size of a man. I had a sponge ball in the garden, about the size of a football. I think one of the local lads had kicked it over. It had been there ages. At least a couple of years, and the weather had got to it so that it was covered in a soft tuft of moss, where it had been exposed, like a little thatch of fluffy hair.

I took it and skewered it onto the top of the crucifix. Then I went upstairs and got some of my old clothes. An old pair of jeans with a creosote stain on one knee. A jumper from Next, that an Aunty had got me for Christmas a few years ago. It was still in its wrapper. I was never going to wear it. First, it was navy. Navy’s not my colour. Second, it was the wrong size. Too tight around the shoulders. Third, it was wool and I’ve never been able to wear wool. Last of all, it was a jumper and I’ve never worn jumpers. I don’t know what it is about them, I feel trapped by them I suppose. So, as a Christmas present if fell short of most of the criteria. Anyway, it suited my man better, so I put it on him.

I had some gardening gloves that were past their best and I attached them to the end of his arms with some garden twine. I used some masking tape to create a smile, and I burnt his eyes into the sponge ball with my soldering iron. Ok, it was never going to win a prize, but as soon as I looked at my work I felt a surge of… What..? Well, I’ve not been a parent, so I don’t know, but I can only describe it as a fatherly pride. I looked on my work and I wept with joy.

His smile filled me with warmth and comfort. Such innocence, untarnished by the sins of the world. He stood there open armed, smiling the smile of the guiltless. And I hugged him. There was nothing for him to do, it’s true, but I put him to work straight away. I fixed him right in the middle of the vegetable patch. Right there and then. His open arms seemed to be saying, look at all you behold, I will protect it from the scavengers and thieves of the world. I have taken all that you hold dear under the protection of my ample wings. Nothing can ever harm you now. And I went back inside, safe in the knowledge, that from now on, my autumn bounty would be fruitful. And so it came to pass, I was no longer alone.