

The Raven

He held the shotgun tightly under one arm and surveyed the field with keen eyes, oblivious to the harsh easterly wind buffeting his face. Earth, made crunchy by the frost and snow remained solid beneath his heavy boots. High in a tree and hidden by branches heavy with snow, sat a raven. She had learned to remain still and concealed; too many of her family had fallen as they'd entered the field, the loud crack of a gun ricocheting across the landscape and heralding their end. Her mother, her sisters and her partner had all been shot dead, landing with a brutal thud on the cold earth. She had watched their killer turn them over with his boot and, once satisfied, reach down to pick up their corpses by their feet and hurl them into the bushes. Her memory held her fast, motionless.

He looked to the trees in the distance. Every bone in his body was cold, every organ and every cell had been chilled by the wind and the passing years. For generations, his forebears had chased away the black-feathered ravens - those harbingers of misery and misfortune - for fear their harvest would fail and they would starve. To kill the birds they had created slings from leather and twine, loaded them with rocks and flint and fired them high into the air. Some birds had fallen but most had flown away, untouched. Over time, slings had given way to guns. Cawing loudly, each time the ravens would regroup high in the trees that speckled the landscape and quickly learned the way of humans. The balance of nature endured.

But he knew nothing and cared even less of this; his history belonged to other men. Only *now* bothered him. Only *now* did anything matter.

He blinked as the bright sunlight reflected across the remaining snow and the chill of the bitter air seeped through his threadbare coat. Tightening his grip he continued walking. The wind dropped and the air became instantly biting cold and still. Beneath the remaining thin icy blanket that covered the land was his crop of winter wheat seed; tempting food for those creatures brave enough to try and dig it out. He paused to nudge the frozen ground with his boot, trying to dislodge a clod of earth to check what remained. But the ground was solid, unyielding.

He scoured the horizon once more but the trees seemed empty. Void of leaf and life, he stared a few moments more before returning to his Landrover. The air inside was as cold as the air outside. Pulling himself heavily up onto the seat

and laying the shotgun across his lap, he rubbed the windscreen with his dirty cuff to see better the land as it rose to a hill in the distance. In places where the sun's reach had fallen short slithers of snow still clung to the shaded field edge like children clinging to their mother. The hedgerow was silent. As white-grey clouds began to billow across the horizon he knew that more snow was coming. Soon his entire field would be knee-deep in snow and completely white again.

She tilted her head slightly; the man had paused before turning back to the thing that had brought him into her field. She watched him climb in, and then, like her, wait.

The farmer rubbed the windscreen again in an effort to prevent the opaque breath of winter crystallising on the glass. He moved the gun to the seat next to him; he had no need of company - for years his only passengers had been his gun and his haphazard, infrequent thoughts.

As the sun dripped over the horizon he pulled away.

In the failing light the raven floated noiselessly down into the field. She dug deftly and quickly, her axe-sharp beak driving through the chilled soil to the wheat seeds beneath. With her long thin tongue she tucked what she could into her slender mouth, before abruptly taking flight: a single sweep of her great black wings lifted her into the sky as though she were made of nothing but air. And slowly and silently it began to snow.

Still wearing his crumpled coat and slumped in a chair, the farmer stared at a smouldering log in the fireplace as he contemplated the coming day. A few wisps of acrid smoke escaped into the room adding another layer of pungent odour to the cramped cottage. In one corner of the room a lamp standard bearing a lopsided and frayed shade leaked weak light, and faded flower-print curtains, stiffened by age, remained open to the dark night. He looked up to see the snow once again on the thin glass. Despite the cold, he resolved to rid his field of the last thieving raven; if his wheat crop was eaten before germination he would finally be bankrupted. It was all he had left and his determination set hard through him. As he leaned back in his chair he pulled his shotgun across his lap. The weight of it comforted him and sanctioned his loathing of the world. Eventually he fell asleep.

She was already perched in the snowy hedgerow and looking for a place to dig more seed by the time the farmer woke abruptly from a dream. In it, he had

been walking miles, across the contours of the land that took him up hills, through copses, along dirty tracks that ran like rivers with Spring rain yet baked hard like rock under the summer sun. He had been panting, gasping for his breath, hot, cold, shivery. A woman's voice had called his name - he knew the voice, knew the woman, knew there was no reason to stop and talk. He often dreamed of her, of the child she held at her side. Above them, the raven had been wheeling high on the thermals, her wide black wings casting a shadow that grew and grew, spreading across the land until everywhere was dark.

He rubbed his eyes and slowly stood. His aching back gave way to stiff legs and arms and he shivered. The grate held the remains of the charred log that had been so unwilling to burn and everywhere was cold. In the untidy kitchen he stood at the sink and rinsed a mug quickly and disinterestedly in cold water then made himself some tea. As it cooled, half-drunk, he checked a small box he had left on the table: inside were the cartridges he needed. He tipped the contents into his coat pocket, took his gun and left the cottage. Through the thick crunching snow he steered the Landrover once more toward his field.

From the safety of criss-crossed tree branches the raven saw him coming. In his absence she had worked swiftly, digging deep through the snow at the field edge, finding loose seed that she had gathered up and taken away. As the Landrover drew closer, she effortlessly took to the air, her wide black wings lifting her high and far within seconds. She left nothing but her mournful call echoing in the empty space behind her.

He braked suddenly and swung the Landrover door open, snatching up his gun. A split second to focus and he fired twice, blasting out the cartridges as if they were shooting stars, determined this time to kill the raven. The shots rang out through the snow-muted air and from the shelter of a small copse a flock of starlings suddenly took flight.

He blinked. Held his breath. Waited for her to fall.

When saw her squat black shape alight in a tree he spat angrily on the ground. Obsession, his wife had once called it: a fixation that had grown into mania. *You'll end like the rest of them*, she'd said. *Six foot under and no mourners*. She'd taken their son with her when she'd left.

He pushed his rough hand across his lips and climbed back into the Landrover. As frustration threatened to overwhelm him, with shaking hands he clumsily shoved two more cartridges into his gun. But his fury was not enough to keep

him warm; he hunched up his shoulders, fruitlessly, against the cold. He shivered, he wheezed, and with the door left just open, he waited.

Dusk, early and bitter, soon fell. By dawn, the raven had returned to her tree. Coated in the smoothest, blackest feathers and protected against the weather, she also waited. Two days passed before she flew down to the silent field, skirting close to the stationary Landrover. Head tilted, she saw the door slightly open. A dexterous leap and she was on the bonnet. Nothing stirred inside the vehicle. She hopped to the top of the open door, then down inside, landing on the farmer's lap. Her sharp black eyes observed his ashen face, his open lifeless eyes, and his blue useless hands.

For all her ancestral family that had flown these fields before her, for her sisters and brothers and parents and partners, she opened her beak and began to eat.

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