

Black Crow

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Tom squeezed his hand across the rifle barrel, wiping the rain from it. He breathed warm air into his curled fingers and thought, Jesus, it's cold. Bracing the rifle into his shoulder, he aimed it directly at Father Brozek, who stood at the edge of the slough, with his back to the twelve year old, and his own rifle pointed toward a flock of crows perched in a tangle of birch trees that fringed the meadow.

Tom tilted his head against the stock and narrowed his right eye, sighting down the black muzzle to a point just above the priest's shirt collar. He strained an uneven breath in through his teeth and held it as his finger squeezed the trigger.

But nothing happened. No click of the trigger. No pop from the barrel.

He backed his head away, staring at the rifle. Stupid boy, he thought to himself, and in one movement, yanked back the bolt action and cocked the weapon.

At that moment a shot fired and Tom flinched, thinking his rifle had gone off by mistake, thinking maybe he had shot the priest, thinking he wouldn't be lying now when he told the police there had been an accident. But then he realized it was Father Brozek who had fired, sending the crows airborne in a flurry of squawks. The priest lowered his rifle from his shoulder and turned back with a bewildered look on his face. Tom's mind flooded with confusion. The only thing he could think to do was point his .22 into the air and fire three quick rounds at the hovering black birds.

"You'll never hit them in the air," the priest chided. "Crows are too clever for that." Tom crouched to pick up his spent shell casings from the ground.

"What did you wait for?" the priest said stepping over the fallen tree that lay between them.

"I forgot to cock it," Tom said.

Father Brozek snorted and patted the boy on the head. Tom ducked out from under his hand.

"Let's stick with the small prey," the priest said walking into the thicket. "They're easier to hit."

It's just as well, Tom thought as he followed the priest through the dense underbrush. I don't think I could have killed him with one shot. I would have maybe dropped him but I would've had to pump him full of bullets once he was down, to make sure he was dead. I don't know if I could do that. Not up close anyway.

Despite the promise of clear skies to the west, the morning drizzle had turned into a steady rain in the afternoon. As they trudged through the tall grasses and damp weeds, any protection the trees gave them from the rain was lost. The weeds added a sharp trace to the air and the freshness of the scent appealed to Tom but his jeans and the bottom of his jacket were sopped.

Father Brozek fired off two shots, and out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw something drop from the branch of a large cottonwood to his right.

"What was it?" he asked.

"A sparrow I think," the priest replied pushing aside a low branch and continuing through the brush. "When you can't find partridge, tweety-birds will have . . ."

The branch snapped back into Tom's face and he let out a cry that made the priest stop and turn.

"The branch hit me," Tom whined, rubbing the stinging ridge below his right eye. The priest held the boy's head still as he examined the injury. Tom's eye filled with water and blinked rapidly.

"It's hardly anything to make a fuss about," Father Brozek said touching the welt with two fingers.

Tom glanced up at the priest's puffy face. Father Brozek's complexion paled oddly against his indian-black hair. His eyes bulged slightly from their sockets and gave him the appearance of engaging in a stare-down whenever he looked at anyone.

When their eyes met Tom saw something that frightened him: a glint in the priest's eyes he had seen many times before

and one that meant Father Brozek had more on his mind than Tom's injury or partridge hunting or anything else. Tom jerked his head away.

"I'm okay," he said, wiping his eye with the back of his hand.

The priest straightened up, surprised, and looking as if he expected an explanation but Tom knew better than to say anything more. He knew enough to leave it alone.

"Be more careful," Father Brozek said walking away. Tom rested his rifle military-style on his shoulder and followed after him.

A swirl of leaves, knocked into the air by a sudden wind, spiralled down from the treetops and settled onto the forest floor around them. Tom goosestepped behind the priest, saluting and kicking up the ground cover with his wet tennis shoes. Beneath the cottonwood, they searched the underbrush for the fallen bird but found no sign of it.

A drenching rain came up behind the wind so they called it quits and tramped back in the direction of the priest's car, parked a mile or so away on a gravel road near one of the stone bridges that arched across Amity Creek.

Walking through the trees, Tom's mood went hollow. Not because he was chilled and soaked clear through, and not because he had actually tried to kill Father Brozek—in regard to that he felt nothing. Weeks before he had decided it would be easier to kill the priest than himself. But the moment his plan had been bungled, the courage to go through with it began to drain from him like blood from an open wound and it left him with nothing in its place.

At least we're heading home now, he thought. That was something. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out an apple, a remnant from his sack lunch, and ate it as they walked. He watched the priest stumbling through the woods and couldn't help but giggle. Father Brozek had suddenly struck him as a sad and awkward character, clumsy and out of place in his worn-out corduroys, left over from the priest's university days when he was a heavier man. He wore them too high and bunched up around his waist with a belt that was too thin for the loops and a gold buckle that was too fancy for the trousers. Father Brozek stopped and cocked his head, and wanted to know the reason for all the laughter.

"Why such a fancy belt, Father?" Tom asked him with a mouthful of apple. It always felt funny calling him "Father" when he looked nothing like a priest.

"It keeps my pants from dropping to my ankles," the priest said, smiling. Tom smiled, too, though he didn't feel like smiling at all. As they continued their trek through the woods both Tom and Father Brozek were aware that the belt made no difference whatsoever.

The forest declined into a wide clearing, revealing a wood-framed house falling to ruin in the middle of nowhere. The building's front door was missing and its porch and steps lay collapsed in a heap of lumber beneath the opening. Approaching the house, they came across a rusted junker obscured by the undergrowth which had reclaimed the yard.

"It's a Ford. Looks like a '58 or '59," Father Brozek said.

All of the vehicle's windows had been shot out, its headlights and plastic taillights smashed, and pieces of bottle glass covered the roof. The car's tires were long gone. An odd pattern of rusting bullet holes riddled the side of the driver's door, forming what appeared to be the letters "W" and "B".

Tom leaned his rifle against the rear quarter panel and pulled at the front door handle. The hinges shrieked stiffly, and at first were unyielding, but Tom tugged hard and it opened. He jumped inside, bouncing back against the seat, both hands gripping the steering wheel. The priest remained outside in the rain, running his fingertips across the bullet holes in the door.

"I'm going up to have a look at the house," he said wiping his hand on the back of his trousers. "Maybe we can wait out the rain in there."

"I'm fine here," Tom said tightening his hands on the steering wheel. He caught a reflection of himself in a surviving corner of the rearview mirror and raked his fingers through his wet and matted hair. He could see beer cans and pieces of safety glass littered across the backseat.

Father Brozek took a hesitant step back toward the house, lingering as if waiting for Tom, but the boy stayed put in the car with his eyes kept forward. Drops of rain drummed loudly against the hood, spraying into Tom's face through the glassless windshield. He watched a rivlet of rainwater dribble its way along the seam of the hood. He didn't want to look at the priest. His stomach ached from the thought of it.

"Do what you want," Father Brozek said heading toward the side of the house. Tom watched him as he climbed over the loose boards and shingles to the base of the doorway. There, the priest placed his rifle inside and despite his well-fed appearance, displayed no problem in lifting himself up and into the open threshold. He braced himself in the door frame, careful to test the floorboards with his right foot.

"This will hold us, Tom," he called out before disappearing inside. Moments later, he reappeared at the window that faced the car.

"Come on, Thomas," he commanded.

Whenever Father Brozek called him 'Thomas' it served as clear warning that he was nearing anger, and Tom rarely pushed him any closer to it than that. Past experience had taught him not to pry open that collection.

"Thomas!" Father Brozek repeated with raised voice. "Come in out of the rain. Now!"

Tom wanted to scream: "Shut up, priest!" like one of those Mexican bandits in a cheap Hollywood western. Instead, he crawled out of the car, picked up his rifle and meandered slowly toward the house, certain his dawdling would annoy him. He knew what Father Brozek was waiting for and he knew how relentless he could be about it. Before he rounded the corner to the doorway Tom glanced up at the window. In it stood the priest, as still as a statue, his hands gripping the top of the window's frame, hanging like some great orangutan, waiting for Tom to come inside so they could do that tiresome thing again.

Father Brozek appeared above him at the entry. He took Tom's rifle and placed it next to his own in the corner then gave the boy a hand up across the threshold, into the building.

Tom stood in the doorway brushing the rainwater off his jacket. There wasn't a piece of glass in any of the windows, and the walls, stripped bare of nearly all wallpaper, were filthy with graffiti and pitted with craters the size of grapefruit. Above him, the ceiling looked like a road map of cracks. One long break serpentine from one corner to the other, spawning three or four small streams of water that dripped onto the trash and broken windowpane which littered the floor.

"It's okay back here," Father Brozek said grabbing Tom by the hand. He led him through a hallway past a wooden staircase, into the next room. It was less cluttered and drier but

across the floor, at the base of the opposite wall, Tom could see the remnants of past fire. The small pile consisted of burnt wood, curled chunks of wallpaper, and junk food wrappers. The floorboards beneath it were also burned and a black tongue of scorched wallpaper ran up the wall, nearly to the ceiling. A charred odor dominated the room and it made Tom sick to his stomach.

"I can't be in here," he said breaking from the priest's grip. He ran back to the first room where he dropped to a dry spot on the floor next to the stacked rifles.

"Just leave me alone," he said not looking up.

Father Brozek stared back at him from the hallway, then with a disgusted sigh disappeared up the wooden staircase.

Something on the floor near the rifles caught Tom's attention. He leaned over on one hand and discovered the half-eaten remains of a small rodent, crawling with yellowjackets. It startled him to see so many wasps in one place. Why couldn't I hear that before, he thought. The buzzing seemed so loud and distinct to him now, even with the racket of wind and rain outside. He watched the insects swarm over the carcass, each pushing and crowding the others, as if there were nothing else in the universe to devour but that mutilated rodent.

Tom reached over for his rifle then slid across the floor to another dry section of the room. He placed a handful of cartridges from his jacket pocket on the floor next to him and began reloading the rifle. Overhead, he could hear the priest's heavy footsteps creaking across the upper rooms.

He pointed the .22 at the ceiling and followed the sound of the priest's movement with the gun barrel, listening for the tiny crackle of glass under the footsteps. A gust of crisp air rushed through the room from outside and Tom pulled his legs in close to his body, dragging his jacket zipper up to his throat. He kicked at some of the litter on the floor in front of him and righted a torn page from a magazine which showed a black and white photograph of a woman dressed only in jeans, and with her body arched in what he thought looked an odd and uncomfortable pose. He stared at the page for a long time, both fascinated and puzzled by the woman in the picture. He was fascinated by her nakedness, but it was the seemingly heartless expression in her eyes that he found so puzzling.

"You're a little young for that kind of thing, aren't you Thomas?"

Tom's head remained lowered but his eyes stared upward at the priest standing in the shadowy hallway at the base of the stairs.

He had used "Thomas" again.

"Yeah, right," Tom said pushing the page away with his foot. The priest gestured upward with his thumb over his shoulder.

"It's not so wet in the backroom upstairs," he said. "We'll be more comfortable waiting out the rain up there."

"I'm fine here," Tom said quietly.

The priest stood muddled. Then he walked over to Tom and pointed to the rifle.

"What's with this?" he said.

"I just reloaded it," Tom said. Father Brozek held out his hand and Tom handed over the rifle. The priest returned it to the corner then moved to the window next to Tom. After brushing away bits of broken glass from the sill he sat down and slumped against the window jamb. A torpedo-shaped sash weight yanked from the window's frame lay at his feet, against the baseboard. He leaned down and lifted it by the frayed cord attached to it and began tapping it lightly against the wall between his legs.

"Let's go upstairs," he said nodding his head toward the stairway. Tom shook his head.

"I don't want to do that anymore," Tom mumbled, huddled against the wall.

"Do what?" the priest fired back. "Why is it you think you have to do anything?"

"I just don't want to."

The skin around the priest's eyes tightened but his face settled into a concerned, thoughtful look, like it did whenever parishioners approached him with their problems.

"When did all this start?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," Tom said, "and it just doesn't. . . ." He stopped himself, sensing there was something wrong and forbidden in even talking about it.

"I'm just tired of it," he said. "That's all."

The tapping of the weight stopped suddenly and a terror

showed itself in the priest's eyes. His face became as ashen as the sky outside.

"You haven't told anyone, have you?" he said. He was almost shaking.

"No."

"Do you know what kind of serious trouble you'd get into if anybody were to find out?"

"I didn't tell anyone," Tom said.

"People would never understand," Father Brozek said. He spoke softly, almost in a whisper. "They'd never understand how . . . how . . . important you are . . . the special friendship we have. . . ." His voice disappeared under his breath.

Tom gasped quietly in frustration. "I didn't tell anyone," he insisted.

The priest's eyes darted about as if his mind raced in calculation. But all concern suddenly vanished from his face and he began to laugh loudly.

"My God," he said finally, "why in the world would you think anyone would believe you, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter," Tom yelled. "I didn't tell anyone!" He felt more anger welling up in his throat but he swallowed it. "I won't tell anybody," he said softly, "I'm just tired of it, that's all."

A sudden and raw uncertainty chilled Tom's insides. He's right, his mind told him. Who would believe him? Certainly not his mother. Since the very beginning, when the newly arrived priest had first telephoned with an invitation for her eight-year-old to join him at an upcoming church outing, she was both proud and delighted. "It will be good for Tom," she'd said, pressing her narrow lips together. "Ever since my divorce, he's kept too much to himself." Tom in his usual display of uneasiness at making new acquaintances, had dragged around the house mumbling between frequent yawns that he didn't want to go, but his mother had insisted. "Father Brozek's a gift sent from the Good Lord," she'd told him. "That's not something you turn down."

A crow shrieked in the distance. Tom watched as Father Brozek silently rocked the weight into a slow pendulous motion again. Tom knew the discussion was far from over; it was only over when the priest got what he wanted.

"Look," Father Brozek said finally. "Perhaps if we prayed

together then maybe God . . ." he caught himself. His hand drifted up toward his mouth but stopped short of touching it. Tom even noticed the mistake. In the four years of their "special friendship" Father Brozek had never spoken God at times like this. He seemed to consciously avoid reference to Him.

"Maybe it would help us," the priest said.

"You want me to pray with you?" Tom said, surprised.

"Yes, I do," Father Brozek said. A detectable thread of remorse snaked into his voice as he added: "It might help me."

"I don't think so," the boy said, flatly.

Father Brozek had suggested this once before on a bright April morning, four years earlier, in the sacristy of St. Martin's church after Tom had served Mass for him. Beneath the slender gold crucifix on the sacristy wall, the priest, dressed in his black cassock, had asked Tom to pray with him.

"I need to pray, Tommy," he'd said then. "Will you join me?"

Tom cheerfully agreed but as they knelt in prayer opposite each other, Father Brozek leaned forward and, cupping Tom's head in his hands, he kissed him on the forehead. Tom yanked his head back but the priest's thick fingers curled into the boy's hair and pulled him toward him again. Then he pressed his mouth hard against the boy's and all the confusion in Tom's mind was suddenly replaced by a jarring fear which crawled up from his stomach and made him shudder and squirm. But the priest's grip never loosened.

Outside the abandoned house, the rain began to let up.

Father Brozek sat hunched over the floor, his eyes following the swinging sash weight beneath him, each tap of it against the wall growing louder.

"Tell me what's wrong, Tom," he said at last. Tom pulled his knees up tight against his chest and said: "I just want to go home, please."

"This isn't you," the priest said shaking his head. "It's not like you at all and I want this nonsense to stop, right now."

"That's not what you want," Tom said to the floor. When he looked up, the priest was suddenly standing over him, his legs straight in a wide stance.

"Goddamn it!" he screamed, striking the wall above Tom's head with the weight. Pieces of shattered plaster flew every-

where but the priest raged on, purple-faced and spitting.

"You think it's something I can just turn off at will? How can you do this to me, goddamn it!"

His face relaxed into a strange distorted gape and his speech became more controlled.

"Now look what you've got me doing," he said. He suddenly bashed the weight against the wall again, this time just inches above Tom's head, leaving a deep oblong depression in the plaster that exposed the wooden laths behind it. Tom sat terrified, unable to move or speak.

"Tell me what's wrong," Brozek demanded. He swung the weight repeatedly, with a force that shook the wall each time.

"What did I do?" he screamed, his words more enunciated. "You're upset about something and . . . I . . . don't . . . know . . . what!" He punctuated each word with another blow to the wall.

Tom's hands covered his head against the flying chips of plaster. The priest slammed the weight rapidly above him, and Tom trembled with each bash of the wall until the pounding finally stopped and the plaster dust settled to the floor.

Father Brozek teetered over the boy, blinking and licking his lips, with sweat draining down the sides of his face. The weight dropped from his hand with a loud clank, then he fell against the wall, weeping as he sank to the floor next to Tom.

"You know what you mean to me, don't you, Tommy?" he asked in a low cracking voice. "I don't want us to grow apart."

Tom, fighting back a flood of tears, slowly dropped his arms from over his head and wrapped them around his raised knees. His heartbeat fluttered rapidly, countering the short and jagged breaths of the priest.

After a moment, Father Brozek gently placed his hands on both sides of the boy's head and smiled reassuringly.

"I'm so sorry," he said. Then he leaned forward and kissed Tom on his forehead.

The path came out onto a gravel road that divided the woods. The rain had ended and Tom was glad to be on solid footing with the hard gravel under the soles of his shoes. He picked up his pace, leaving the sullen Father Brozek to himself.

Up ahead, beyond where the road curved sharply to the

right, the sun broke through above the hilltops and its light fringed the overhanging clouds with an orange glow.

Rounding the curve, Tom came upon a wounded crow hobbling along the roadside. The startled bird darted quickly away, dragging a bent wing through the gravel. Tom chased it off the road and across the ditch through a thick patch of hawkweed, where dozens of grasshoppers leapfrogged into the air ahead of them. He trailed the crippled bird back to the edge of the road where it finally dropped, exhausted.

Tom stood over it with legs apart and his rifle at his side. The crow stared up at him as Tom brought his rifle to his shoulder and aimed down the sight. The bird's head twitched once and Tom squeezed the trigger, letting go a single shot point blank that penetrated the crow's breast and punctured the silence of the countryside.

Tom knelt on one knee over the bird. It surprised him to see its body still heaving with breath, so he stood up and fired three more quick shots into it. But when he lowered his rifle to look, the crow again seemed unaffected by the violence to it.

With his right hand, Tom hovered the barrel an inch above the bird and fired four more times. After the last shot echoed back from the hills, he watched a thick line of blood run out of the bird's neck and mix in with the mud and gravel of the road. This time he saw the crow shudder, saw its beak snap open and closed in quick spasms, saw its black eyes staring back at him, moist and alive and blinking in its feathered head. ❷