

The Crows

Pauline stood above the dead body of her lover and took a drag of her cigarette. It was Thursday.

Damn it, she thought, dropping the cigarette to the floor and grinding it with her heel. Above Pauline, the rising sun was beginning to phase in through the mucky skylights. A ceiling fan churned lazily through the thick summer air, doing nothing to dispel the heat.

Pauline swatted at a fly. What a terrible Thursday.

Last night, after buzzing him in, Pauline had opened the balcony door to light a quick cigarette. The humidity of the day had condensed onto the metal railing, making it sweaty and slick. The flock of crows appeared, expecting their traditional dinner of birdseed and smoke. *How many were there again?*

They had watched each other, Pauline and the crows, in the light coming from the kitchen and through the glass door. By now she recognized the pattern; she knew what it meant. When would it come?

“You know him?” Pauline’s partner asked, doing his best not to look at the body. Even after 10 years on the police force, the stout detective had no stomach for death. It made his job a bit difficult. Last year, on Pauline’s two-year anniversary with the force, Pauline had held his hand as he vomited over a bloody finger in a paper bag. *It was one Goddamn finger.*

Pauline shook off her reverie.

“We’ve fucked,” she said. They had fucked last night, but of course everyone would know that by now. This was her lobby. She made the call, had to explain to the Captain. Apparently, Pauline’s lover had barely made it out the door of her apartment last night before he croaked. Pauline had never been so lucky as to have work come to her.

Mechanically, Pauline leaned down and picked the smushed cigarette up off the floor. *No need to contaminate any evidence.* Bending over left her head feeling puffy and swollen. The world spun being all upside down like that.

“Captain says you can take the day off,” her partner said. Pauline shrugged in response. The Captain was a woman of great hypocrisy and few boundaries, often insisting Pauline go home for the slightest inconvenience while all her male colleagues slaved away. The Captain poked and prodded into Pauline’s life with a similar intensity of her mother, wanting to know all the intimate details of Pauline’s sadness over a man she barely knew.

But Pauline didn’t want pity. She wanted a distraction from the experience that had left a bitterness in her mouth. It wasn’t that she missed him. But she had liked the way he tasted, like peppermint and weed, and it seemed a pity to never taste that again.

When she got home from work that night, Pauline stood directly at the center of his dead spot on the floor as she fumbled for her keys. Around her, the once gray and yellow laminate shone black and white, cleaner than it had ever been before. Nothing like a dead body to instigate the first mop job in fifty years.

In front of the stove, Pauline stared off into space a beat too long and burnt her sausages. *That’s going to be a bitch to clean.* It wasn’t that she couldn’t stop thinking about him. But she had liked the way he smelled, like cologne and the moments before a thunderstorm. It seemed a pity to never smell that again.

You knew it was coming. Why didn’t you stop it?

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Last Sunday morning, Pauline was awoken by a call from her mother. It was 8 o’clock, church time. Her mother never missed church.

“What?”

“Your sister dropped out of college.” Her voice wavered. Guilty.

Pauline left bed for the balcony. She smoked a cigarette.

“Finally.”

“Don’t say that. I am very upset.” Her mother’s sorrow seeped through the phone.

“I’m sure you are.”

“I could use a little bit of sympathy here, Pauline,” her mother said. “She’s thrown away her future. Now she’ll come back home and live in the basement and I’ll be doing her laundry and cooking her meals until the end of time and she’ll never get married and I’ll never have grandkids and—”

A crow landed on the railing. Pauline startled as its black eyes watched her. The crow cocked his head and together the pair stared at one another in curiosity. Pauline mimed offering the crow a drag from her cigarette and it almost took it.

“That’s my cigarette fucker. Back off,” Pauline said.

“Pardon?” Her mother sounded genuinely offended.

“No, not you. Don’t worry, she’ll come around.” To what, Pauline wasn’t sure. *I need to go*. She hung up.

“What? I need to go,” Pauline said to the crow, defensive suddenly. *Fuck off*, she thought.

It was still there after work, or at least it had come back, so Pauline gave it a stale cracker and went to bed.

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Bad idea. Two the next morning. Pauline wagged her finger at the crows, as if they understood that telling friends about a stranger’s kindness was taking it too far. *Honey don’t feed it; it will come back*.

At the precinct, her partner offered her a donut. "Saved the one with sprinkles just for you," he said. Sometimes he was too nice.

"I really shouldn't." Secretly Pauline was pleased. *Maybe I'll take two. Will he notice?*

"You seem... happy?" she said.

Her partner was standing up straight, hair combed, shirt ironed. He even smelled nice, which was bizarre. Not that he smelled bad most days. He just generally didn't smell any type of way at all.

"You got a problem with that?"

"It's disgusting, actually," Pauline said flatly. "Is that cologne?"

"Yes. I'll have you know I have a date with my boyfriend tonight."

Pauline took a big bite of the donut, letting sprinkles crumble straight onto her desk. It was a bit stale, but she ate it anyway as she watched her partner go about his work with a smile.

Wanna give me some of that Goddamn happiness?

...

Monday evenings were for groceries. Once a week, at 7 p.m., Pauline would drive her Honda Civic two blocks to the nearest grocery store and buy more than she could eat. Experience had taught Pauline that a single person couldn't consume avocados fast enough to justify buying four of them. By Saturday they would be mushy and brown, but she did it anyway. *Maybe I'll have company.*

After hitting up the produce section, Pauline would walk aimlessly, pushing the cart in a zigzag up and down the aisles, until finally, there was nowhere left to go. To the left, a concrete brick wall. To the right, 200 brands of birdseed.

Goddamn birds, Pauline thought and grabbed the cheapest bag. At the checkout, the cashier joked that she must be feeding quite a large family. Pauline only

laughed in response. It was easier to agree than confess you were feeding your depression.

Pauline put out the birdseed that night. She didn't even bother with a bird feeder, simply grabbed handfuls of the stuff and flung it across the concrete floor of the balcony. Then she crept back in and sat quietly on the opposite side of the sliding glass doors, waiting for the crows to reappear.

Three, this time. *Are they the same ones, bringing another friend along?* Pauline couldn't tell. It was dark and quiet and late, and she had to do the dishes.

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Pauline's partner accosted her with questions the next morning. *Jesus, its only 9 a.m. Let me have my coffee first.*

"So, were you ever going to congratulate me on the exciting news?" he asked impatiently, giving her a playful shove with his shoulder. News? She had been thinking about her crows and whether or not they liked the cheap seed. *Maybe I should have gotten them something nicer?*

"What, you got a new case?"

"No, not a new case."

"Oh." *What's that song again, about the crows? One for sorrow, two for mirth?*

"It's about Brent and I."

That song, that fucking song. What is it? One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a wedding? Yeah, that's it. Pauline shook her head.

"Lemme guess, you're getting married."

"So, you did get my email. Just didn't think to say anything to me, huh. No love for your partner in fighting crime? It happened last night. I knew it. I knew he was going to propose. As soon as he booked that reservation for Pulcinella's I should

have known. No one has dinner there unless they're planning on getting married. He was acting weird all day, ya know? And then he pulled out the most beautiful ring. Look."

She hadn't gotten the email. Or maybe she had. *When was the last time I checked my email?* The ring was beautiful if you liked white gold and miniscule diamonds.

"Congrats. I'm happy for you. Have you ever fed crows before?" Pauline asked. He had not.

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Pauline's mother invited herself over for dinner that night. Pauline didn't appreciate having to cook for herself, let alone a visitor, but her mother was still in distress at the thought of never having grandkids. And she ate one of the almost mushy avocados, *thank God*, so all was forgiven.

"It's not sanitary, you know." She was talking about the crows, with a spoon dug into the shell of a half avocado and her mouth full. By this point, Pauline could recognize the three regulars gathered on the balcony, ready for their evening meal.

"Just disgusting," her mother said, watching the ritual but still hidden behind Pauline. Her head was perched on Pauline's shoulder in curiosity as she flung seed into the air. "What are their names?"

"Yeah, like the fuckers want names." *That one's Pansy. There's Petunia. And Peony.*

"Language, Pauline. You know, I think that job of yours has just turned you into a little beast. You never used to curse. Being around so many men has made you vulgar."

I've always cursed, you just never fucking knew.

"How else am I supposed to find a husband, Mom?" Her mother was starting to wipe down the counter tops and rearrange the pillows on the sofa.

“Don’t be condescending, Pauline.”

Don’t be condescending, Pauline, it’s rude. Don’t curse, Pauline, it’s unladylike. Don’t feed the birds, Pauline, it’s uncleanly. Don’t, don’t, don’t...

“I’m sure you’d find one if you just did a little cleaning up every once in a while.”
Her ideas of causality never made much sense.

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Wednesday nights were when she called him. Tradition, or something. He picked up on the third ring. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

Should I change my underwear? No. They’re coming off anyway.

Normally, in the meantime, Pauline would frantically clean the apartment. But her mother’s neurotic rampage last night had left the place spotless.

Pauline had always worried her sister had inherited their mother’s neurotic tendencies, until she dropped out of college, that was. Now Pauline realized that perhaps it was herself who had fallen too close to the apple tree.

The buzzer rang and she let him up. He would know the door was unlocked, welcome himself in, even grab a drink.

Pauline stepped out onto the balcony to wait for him to climb the stairs. She liked when he joined her, putting his hand on her waist, stealing a drag of her cigarette. On the railing alighted her friends, expecting dinner.

I see you brought company. The fourth was new, smaller, scrawny. It hopped around, unsure of what the others were expecting. *That song. One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a wedding.*

“Hi there.” It was him. Deep voice, tall frame, big hands. His thunderstorm was rolling in.

Stealing her cigarette, her lover eyed the crows, then laughed. "I heard a song once, about like, birds and bad omens. What does four mean again?"

"Four for death."

"Ha, you're funny."

Together they went inside. The crows did not get their dinner.

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Pauline stood above the dead body of her lover and took a drag of her cigarette. It was Thursday.

Goddamn it.

Pauline turned back into her apartment where police officers were already crawling around. Her partner moved to the foyer to "examine it for evidence."
Leave my life alone.

Pauline moved around him and stepped onto the balcony. She needed a distraction.

Pansy, the original, alighted by her side. No one joined her.

"You trying to fuck with me or something?" The crow watched Pauline silently.
"What do you want? I know, one for sorrow. But I'm not sad. You can't make me sad."

She paused. "Want a cigarette?"

"Sure," said the crow. Pauline lit it for her, considering crows don't have opposable thumbs. Leaning on the railing, Pauline offered up the cigarette, and the crow took a long drag.

"Did you love him?" she asked. *A bit personal.*

“Nah. But he had nice pecks. Great hairline too.”

“Hm,” said the crow. “You knew it was coming. Why didn’t you stop it?”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Feed us.”