



Corn and Crows

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IT ALWAYS AMAZED FINLAY how much noise corn made in afternoons when the wind came up and the leaves clacked together, sounding like the rustle of quiet applause. He stood at the northern boundary of his family's field, separated from the Barkley's spread by a shared farm road. He'd been waiting for more than an hour.

A hundred yards down the dirt track, a young woman stepped from the cornrows, disturbing a murder of crows, their voices clear and complaining. She moved toward him, her long brown hair blowing forward. Claire struggled to keep it out of her eyes as she approached, stopping a few steps away from Fin.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry I'm late. But Mama made me drive into town to pick up her meds at CVS. I couldn't very well say no."

"It's all right, Claire. Come here and give me a kiss."

The young woman looked over her shoulder at the circling crows. "Damn birds, they're loud enough to attract my pop. He likes to shoot them."

"Figures. Sometimes I think they're smarter than we are." Fin laughed and took Claire in his arms. They kissed, and kept kissing.

"Just hold me, Fin. You're going away and I'll be stuck here on the farm, taking care of Mama and working in town."

"I'll always come back between semesters. You're my girl. When I graduate we can be together always—go somewhere away from field corn, crows, and harvests."

"I'd love that. But you're gonna meet all sorts of people in college. I'm afraid of losing you."

"That's crazy. Nobody's losing anybody. Come on."

Fin bent and picked up his knapsack, took Claire's hand, and pulled her into her family's field. After a short time pushing into the green mass, they stopped at a patch of stunted stalks, a spot where the ground squirrels or maybe rootworms had gotten the better of the plants. Fin mashed what was left and spread a heavy woolen blanket on the ground. The couple sat

in direct sunlight, the field swaying all around them.

"I've brought some wine and snacks," Fin said. "I thought we could have a late picnic."

Claire took the bottle of wine, unscrewed its cap, and took a long pull. "I thought maybe we could do more of what we've been doing."

"Really? And what exactly is that?"

"You want me to spell it out for you?" She giggled and began struggling with buttons, her skin porcelain-white under her dress, a two-toned body with brown legs, arms, and face, the rest blinding in the sunlight.

Afterward they lay face up and stared at the crows riding the wind above them, their calls faint but still angry, at what Fin couldn't tell. Maybe the couple acted like live scarecrows, or maybe the birds had been enjoying the view of their lovemaking and got mad when it ended too soon. Claire pressed against his body, her breathing slow and deep, signaling sleep.

From the distance the rumble of a tractor competed with wind in corn. Fin shook Claire and they both scrambled to put on clothes and gather their things. The tractor sound drew near. The couple hustled into the dense foliage. The tractor stopped. Fin held his breath, stood, and looked toward the road. Claire's father sat in the Deere's high seat, scanning his field. A shotgun lay across his lap. He looked skyward at the circling birds.

"I've heard of shotgun weddings, but this . . .," Fin whispered.

Claire giggled. "He's after the crows." "Better them than us."

"Ah, come on. This isn't the nineteenth century. I was probably conceived in a cornfield." Claire dug him in the side and he winced.

On the farm road, her father continued to scan the sky. Finally, he shook his head, turned the tractor around, and disappeared over the rise. Motor sounds faded. The wind continued its concert with more applause. The couple recovered and resumed their lovemaking, this time gentler, more deliberate, and more satisfying. Fin talked about marriage and how he loved kids. He wanted to start a new life with her on the west coast where ocean breezes would keep them cool in the summer. She stayed quiet and let him ramble on.



Claire moved stealthily through the field toward the two-story ramshackle house, tractor shed, and the row of grain bins. She started work at the Dollar Store in about an hour, and she needed to shower and change. But she didn't want to. The scent of Fin on her body made her tingle, and their time spent under circling crows filled her mind.

She pulled back the screen door and stepped inside the dark living room.

Her mother sat in her wheelchair,

watching TV. "I tried to call you but it went to voicemail."

"Sorry, Mama. I forgot to turn it on."

"Yeah, sure. Every time you go trouncing into the fields you forget. I know what you're doing."

Claire felt her face burn. "I'm not doing anything you haven't done," she said, defiantly.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Her mother laughed and took a deep drag on her Virginia Slim. "It's that O'Connor boy, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Okay, play it that way. But if you get in trouble, you're on your own. You know what I'm talking about."

"Sure, Mama, sure. Sometimes I feel that I'm already on my own."

"Hey, that's no way to talk to your Mama."

"We don't really talk, do we?"

"I suppose not, my fault. You shouldn't have to take care of me, being so young."

"It's okay, Mama. I don't mind."

"Sure you do. I would. Does your boyfriend know about you and me and the problems with . . . have you told him?"

Claire sighed. "Of course not. It would kill any relationship before it really gets going."

"Yeah, you're right about that. But you'll have to pick a time to tell him before—"

"I know, I know, Mama. Just drop it."

Mrs. Barkley leaned back in her wheelchair and sucked in a lungful of smoke, blowing it out her nose; she looked like some crouching red-haired dragon. “So what are you gonna do when he goes away to school?”

“You know about that?”

“Of course. Farm mothers know everything. He’s gonna find some beautiful coed and leave you in the dust.”

“Maybe so. Don’t worry, Mama. I’ll be here to take care of you.”

“Yeah, but what happens when you can’t?”

“We’ll solve those problems when they come.”

“Sure you will, honey, after half your life has been wasted.”

Claire turned and headed upstairs. “I gotta get ready for work. Pop will be in to fix your supper.”

“You think about what I said,” her mother called after her.

Claire had been thinking about little else for days.

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Fin checked his watch, walked outside the bus station, and boarded the waiting Greyhound. It was the end of his first semester and the first time home since he started at the university in Iowa City. He’d phoned Claire every other day and they talked. It had been difficult, the same ole same ole was happening on the farms, and Fin felt nothing at the university would be of

interest to either Claire or his parents. The phone calls became short.

As the semester break had drawn near, Fin grew excited, remembering the cornfields, the crows, the wind, naked Claire, and their dreams for the future. But the combines had cleared the fields and they lay bare under a winter sun. And for the past three days, Claire hadn’t picked up his calls.

His hometown bus stop was three miles from his family’s farm. In the clear cold December afternoon, he decided to walk, eager to stop at Claire’s place first before going home. Everything looked the same, except the strange car parked next to the house. He quietly climbed the front steps next to the handicap ramp and rapped on the screen door.

“Who is it?” demanded a strong voice.

“It’s Fin O’Connor. Claire’s friend.”

“Come in, come in.”

He entered the dark room; the only light came from a flickering TV showing *The Price is Right* with the sound muted. Claire’s mother sat in her wheelchair. An IV stand and medicine bag dripped clear liquid through a tube into her arm. Fin knew Claire’s mother was sick. But no one had volunteered what was wrong, and Fin was too chicken to ask.

“How are you today, Mrs. Barkley?”

“Why, do I look bad?”

Fin took a step back. “No . . . no, just being polite.”

“I’m loving my new care worker. She does everything for me.”

A brown woman came to the kitchen door and smiled at Fin. “Would you like something to drink?” she asked.

“No . . . no thank you. I’ve just come to see Claire. Is she here? Or maybe at work?”

Mrs. Barkley tapped the glass in its wheelchair cup holder, and the woman poured some rum and coke into it and added ice.

“You sure you won’t join me?” Mrs. Barkley asked.

“Too early for me. So . . . I’ve tried calling Claire but she doesn’t answer. Is something wrong?”

Mrs. Barkley sucked in a deep breath. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“You know, down the road and not coming back.”

Fin slumped into a wing-backed chair and stared at Mrs. Barkley. “Why? Why the hell would she leave? Where did she go? How long ago?”

“Don’t know, don’t know, and about three days ago. I woke up in the morning and yelled for my coffee and got no answer. She didn’t write a note. She even left her car here, took hardly anything with her, not even her cell phone or the credit card we gave her.”

“Have you talked with the Sheriff’s Office?”

“Why would we do that? Harold and I knew she would leave someday. She’s not cut out to be a farmer’s wife. And

she probably got tired of taking care of me, and with you gone . . . she got the ole wanderlust. I had it at her age. Good times.”

“But . . . but she didn’t even say goodbye . . . to me!”

“Yeah, young people do that.”

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Fin returned to the university. He kept in touch with Mrs. Barkley, waiting for any news about Claire. Near graduation he returned home to attend the poor woman’s unexpected funeral, hoping in his heart that Claire would be there. No luck. With a degree in civil engineering, he joined the Army and spent a tour in Afghanistan, helping to rebuild villages destroyed by war.

After his discharge he moved to Denver and got a job with a major construction company, designing new residential subdivisions. He met Linda, got married, and they quickly had three children. But all the while, when he saw a murder of crows flying overhead or perched on buildings, heard their raucous voices, his mind returned to the cornfield, to Claire, and that damned unanswered question—WHY?

The years flowed by. The strong emotions in their lives, including love, flattened until everything felt two-dimensional, and the winter of their discontent extended year-round. Divorce, child support payments, and long workweeks became his routine.

He also became an avid mountain biker, riding the many trails surrounding the city or extending into the towering Rockies where he could ride for hours, his lungs and heart having grown used to the altitude, to the solitude of back canyons with circling birds.

Twenty years after leaving the family farm and Iowa, he moved from Denver to the California coastal city of Monterey. He joined forces with a local architect and opened a small office that specialized in custom residential construction and small subdivisions. The area had plenty of folks that could afford their services and the firm prospered. The move west felt to Fin like the third act of a play— everything that had happened before it pointed west, to that coastal town where he could see the roiling Pacific from his apartment window and revisit his young adult dream with Claire. Monterey had plenty of crows.

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She left the farm before dawn. Claire's pop was already out, tinkering with something in the tractor shed. Lugging a battered suitcase full of her clothes, she trudged across the fallow fields to the county road and reached town before the Greyhound made its twice-daily stop.

With a thousand dollars in her purse, squirreled away from her job at the Dollar Store, she climbed aboard the morning bus bound for Missoula

and a new start. She didn't plan on staying there long, just enough time to let herself heal from the shock of deserting her dying mother and leaving Fin. It ended up taking five years.

She took a lover, thinking it would help to make her feel better, to again experience the deep joy of sharing. It didn't help. She fell into a routine, working the graveyard shift at Denny's and chatting up the long-haul truckers, listening to stories about their vagabond lives, the girlfriends and wives with children left somewhere along the way. Her restaurant earnings barely paid for her apartment. When she finally left, she looked like she'd aged into her thirties though she was just twenty-three.

The west coast and Seattle beckoned. She knew nothing about the city, but once there found that the rain and fog matched her mood. Her residential hotel apartment was the perfect size to hold her meager belongings. Claire didn't even own a cell phone since she had no one to call, although she dreamed about contacting Fin somehow. But those thoughts hurt more than comforted, and she buried her mind in her work, this time as an apprentice bartender at one of the trendy nightclubs on Capital Hill.

She started pulling her own shifts, learned to schmooze with the clientele— mostly young professionals and guys on the prowl. She earned good wages and tips and moved into a modest

apartment. But one early morning after closing, ten years into the latest stop on her journey, she made herself coffee and stared out the window at the fog-shrouded streets, quiet now, everyone in bed. She knew it was time to move south and find sun again, to find something and maybe . . . just maybe, someone.

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Fin worked all morning on the foundation design for a new home funded by some Southland attorney. At noon, he left their downtown Monterey office and wandered along busy streets to Fisherman's Wharf, looking to grab an early lunch before returning to his computer. But the small restaurants were overcrowded with July tourists.

He returned to his office, retrieved his Honda, drove to Cannery Row, and ducked into one of the larger places with hardly any cars in its parking lot. He'd never eaten there before, preferring the small spots where he buried his mind in the chatter from crowds of tourists. He had perfected his role as King of the Eavesdroppers and enjoyed their stories and remonstrations about their mundane lives back home. Every once in a while he'd detect a Corn Belt accent, and fleeting images of Claire in the swaying fields came rushing back. A Scotch-rocks usually took them away.

This new place sported neo-Spanish architecture with the

mandatory terracotta-tile roof, served Mexican food, and had broad windows that overlooked Monterey Bay and the dunes north of Sand City. The dark bar was mostly deserted, it being early and maybe too soon for crowds and pitchers of Margaritas. Only three other stools at the counter were occupied. He found one nearest the window and stared at the placemat menu, the bartender nowhere in sight.

But she soon appeared at the far end, lugging a case of wine from the storeroom. One of the bar patrons called for another beer, and the woman set the case down and moved to the cooler to grab the longneck and set it before him. She snatched the empty and moved toward Fin to dump it in the recycle bin. Their eyes met.

The beer bottle slipped from her hand and fell to the concrete floor, shattering. The noise sounded like the crack of small-arms fire, startling them both. They didn't move, stared open-mouthed.

"Claire . . ." Fin finally managed to whisper.

"How . . . how are you, Fin?"

"Where have you . . ."

Claire laughed, then covered her mouth, her face contorting, makeup running with her tears. She backed up against the far counter, her shoes crunching on glass, and choked back a sob. Others came between great gasps of breath.

Fin fought back the urge to jump

over the bar and fold Claire into his arms. The room disappeared and it was just the two of them. Claire looked as beautiful as he remembered, filled out a bit with age, the makeup failing to hide crows' feet around her eyes and parentheses on either side of her mouth. But the long dark hair remained with no trace of gray.

Slowly, his heart returned to its normal rhythm, and he extended a hand across the bar. She stepped forward and took it, a strong hand with no rings.

"How . . . how long have you worked here?" Fin asked.

"Five years. I'm covering a noon shift for Tommy. I wouldn't normally be here."

"I'm glad you are and—"

"You must hate me," Claire blurted and covered her face with her hands. Her sobs filled the room. The other patrons squirmed on their stools and stared into their drinks, it being too early in the day for remorse.

"No . . . no I don't. But we need to talk."

"Good God, yes. I get off shift at 3:00. Come get me then."

"I will. You'll be here, won't you?"

"Yes . . . I . . . I won't run again."

"Good."

Fin quickly left the bar and stood in the restaurant's parking lot, confused, wondering what his next move should be. He phoned his partner and canceled his afternoon appointments,

said it was a family emergency. It was, of sorts. He walked along Cannery Row toward the aquarium, found a tiny hole-in-the-wall bar on a side street, tossed down a few drinks to steady the shakes, all the while checking his watch as its hands agonizingly crept toward the appointed time.

At precisely three o'clock, Claire pushed through the employee entrance to the restaurant and joined him in the parking lot. She had repaired her makeup and sported a nervous smile.

"So . . . so where do you want to go and talk?" Fin asked.

"My normal closing shift starts at 8:00. So you'd better follow me to my place. I live in a condo in Seaside."

"What's your address, in case we get separated?"

"Don't worry, Fin. I won't ditch you, I promise." Claire smiled and touched his cheek, her hand warm, just as he remembered.

"Okay. Sorry."

Fin followed her green Prius through Monterey to the highway, then north on Route 1 to the adjacent town of Seaside and a cluster of sand-colored stucco condominiums with aluminum slider windows and little landscaping. The whole place looked bleak, bleak as winter fields back in Iowa, Fin thought. A sign in the parking lot advertised one-bedroom units selling for only a half-million. He felt surprised that a bartender could afford that kind of mortgage.

The couple wound their way to an interior courtyard. Claire unlocked the door to her unit, her hands shaking, and flicked on the lights. "I'm gonna have a glass of fine California wine, maybe two. How 'bout you?"

"Sounds good." He scanned the living room, everything neatly in place; a large-screen TV dominated one wall, filled bookcases another. "So you've become a reader?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I've fallen in love with stories. I go through a book a week and have read most of them twice."

She returned from the kitchenette with two glasses filled with something red and sat on the sofa, her legs crossed. She set the wine glasses on the coffee table and crossed her arms, trying to hide her trembling hands.

"You don't know how many times I've thought about this day," she said.

"Yeah, I can guess. Me too."

"Really? I heard from my pop that you had gotten married and have kids. You always wanted children."

"Yes, but as it turns out, it all depends on who you have them with. I'm divorced and my ex and her new husband have full custody."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Over the next hour they exchanged their life stories for the past twenty years, all the while Fin skirting the question he needed to ask. Finally, as they paused, he sat up straight and murmured, "So . . . so why did you leave, why did you desert me?"

Claire shivered and emptied her wine glass. "You . . . you remember my mother being sick?"

"Yes, I went to her funeral. But I never knew what was wrong. You Barkleys were so closed-mouth about it."

"Yeah, to our detriment. Well . . . my mother had MS, late onset and fast progressing."

"So, what does that have to do with you?"

"I'm . . . I'm a carrier."

"What's that mean? I didn't think Multiple Sclerosis was contagious."

"It means that I carry the mutated gene, the same as Mama did."

"So?"

"So . . . it means that if I had children, there is a good chance they would develop the disease. It can skip a generation, but I could still get it. The thought of you taking care of me or a disabled child was . . . was just too much."

Fin stayed quiet and sipped his wine.

"So are you starting to understand?" she asked.

"Yes . . . I think so."

"You were the one always talking about us having children. And even if I loved you, which I did tremendously, I couldn't take the chance."

"But we could have . . ."

Claire took his hand. "I know that now. But I was a kid, scared after seeing what was happening to Mama. I wasn't exactly thinking straight."

"I can understand that."



“And then after a while, and I was away in Montana then Washington, it seemed too late to track you down and try anything.”

Fin smiled. “Yeah. It was probably good that you didn’t. I felt angry and hurt for a long time. I thought we really had something. But as time passed I could fool myself into thinking it was just youthful ignorance. So . . . so are you all right?”

Claire smiled and shrugged. “So far, I’m symptom-free. I’m checked out every year. If I develop symptoms, there are new meds that retard the disease’s progression. But I’m pretty much past the time when I could have children safely—even if I wanted to, which I don’t.”

“Good to know,” Fin said and smiled.

“Is it?”

“Yes.” He reached for her, pulled her close, and kissed her, felt her body shudder, just like it used to in that long ago cornfield. She returned his kiss, and again. But in a few minutes she pushed him away.

“Come, I have something to show you.” She took him by the hand and led him into her sunlit bedroom.

Fin stared around the room and laughed. Surrounding the bed on the bare walls was a photographic mural of a cornfield with black crows circling high above on the cloudless blue ceiling.

“That’s not all,” Claire said, grinning. “Alexa, play corn and crows.”

In the background, the sound of wind rustling through corn accompanied by the call of crows filled the room.

“Come here,” she said and he joined her on the bed’s heavy woolen coverlet. ❁

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