

Shiny Things

The rusted International pickup bumped over potholes and Emmett wondered, as he had for two decades, if it was worth it to keep it running. Desiccated ears of corn rolled back and forth inside the bed, all the strays he'd picked up from his neighbor's field after the thresher came through. He didn't really have a choice about getting a better truck, or boiling up some other man's crop for dinner. He watched Juniper out of the corner of his eye, arms folded across her chest in the passenger seat of the truck, refusing to look at him. He'd wait for her to tell him it was a lie, what she'd said. "Crows" wasn't any kind of answer to the question "who gave you them cigarettes?" She'd stuck to it, though. They drove on in silence. If he'd had a son, this would be easy.

The August heat hummed with cicadas. Windows down, they made their way further out of Greenville.

"Left, here," Juniper said. Emmett turned off the two-lane highway and onto an older, gravel road. He adjusted the rearview mirror. If he squinted hard, he could see Juniper's mother in her face, what he'd known of her. They'd only met once at a party. She'd shown up nine months later, stayed long enough for him to pay the hospital bill, and to have Juniper. Took her all of three months to hit the pills, to disappear again. He'd told Juniper cancer when she got old enough to wonder and had decided to ask.

"You sure you're sticking with crows?" Emmett asked.

"I'm not sticking. Crows is what it was," Juniper told him.

Emmett worked at the Frito plant, and the supervisor let them keep the mistakes. There was nothing like Fritos straight off the line, warm in a burlap sack, the smell of corn and salt.

Now, in the Woodlawn Cemetery, Juniper knelt beside a limestone marker old enough you couldn't read the name, and took a handful of broken chips, crumbled them in a line along the top.

“Girl, what in the world are you doing?” Emmett asked. “You know this isn't a park, right?”

Emmett jumped. A flock of crows took to the air from a stand of maples, cawed and circled, settled onto the graves. One by one, tilting their heads, they fluttered over and dropped something from their beaks, pecked at the chips. A ball of twine. A single cigarette, unbroken. A fat crow pushed a smaller one aside, dropped the dismembered head of a Barbie doll held in its beak by the hair.

Emmett didn't know what to say for most of the drive home.

“Told you it was crows,” Juniper said. “You told me not to lie.”

“I know I did, Juni,” Emmett said.

The cemetery was older than the one in town, built in a bad spot of bottomland that flooded in spring. Oldest graves in the county were there, and new graves of folks who couldn't pay in town. Emmett warred with himself, couldn't decide whether to ask Juniper if she knew her mother was buried there, and the other, more awful story connecting her mother to the place. If she didn't know, he didn't want to be the one to tell her, to get her started asking more questions. The International bumped back down the gravel road toward the highway.

“They tell me stories, too,” Juniper said.

“Who does, Juni?” Emmett asked. She took out her beaded purse with the cartoon cat on it, opened it, reached in and pulled out a fist of small slips of paper. Some looked torn from newspapers, from magazines. A few in the cluster looked like fortunes from fortune cookies.

“One at a time,” she said. He recognized his daughter’s handwriting, numbers scribbled in the corners. Was she serious? Was there something wrong with her? Emmett felt himself tense up as he tried to think it through.

“What kind of stories?” he asked.

“About the town,” Juniper said. She rustled the fistful of papers, flipped through them. “Did you know when the big well was built, a man drowned in it?” Locals called the water tower the big well, the only thing visible from the interstate. “Mr. Jackson who owns the café, his wife didn’t really get sick.” Juniper trailed off. She looked out the window.

“It’s been a long day, Juni,” Emmett said to her. “Let’s get home, sleep on this, and we’ll talk about it in the morning.” Juniper nodded her head.

Emmett jerked awake, Juniper tugging at his arm.

“I have to tell you something,” she said. Emmett sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes.

“Juni, it’s late,” he said.

“They’re her crows. Her stories, too.”

“Whose?” Emmet asked.

“She says we have to go tonight.”

Emmett never would be sure why he gave in. They took the International back to the Woodlawn under a pale moon, stormy sky. Juniper led him from the parking lot along the

overgrown path to the cemetery restroom, marble like the other buildings, an unlocked place teenagers had come for generations to do things out of sight, to be alone. He'd gone there with her mother once, after a party, when they'd first met. He'd found her there again, twelve months after Juniper had been born. He'd spotted her sister's stolen Datsun in the parking lot. Everyone in town knew everyone's business, and knew who to suspect when the sister put up the fliers. Her body had been cold and white as a piece of bone, Juniper's mother, folded up on the marble floor, needle still stuck in her arm.

“I don't want to go in there, Juni,” Emmett told her.

“We have to go in,” Juniper said to him. She tugged desperately at his arm. In the distance, the tornado sirens sounded.

Inside, huddled on the marble floor, Juni read him the slips of paper, desperate pleas from mother to daughter over gulfs of time. Outside, the next morning, they emerged from the last building standing in Greenville into a world gone crazy during the storm, the International peering down at them from the branches of a tree, crows, shiny things in their beaks, perched along the broken teeth of ruined gravestones.