

The Impossibility of Crows

The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy heaven.
Doubtless it is so, but it proves nothing against heaven, for
heaven signifies, simply, the impossibility of crows.

--*Franz Kafka*

The cabbie put his arm on the seat back and turned to ask for an address. Then he touched the rosary hanging from the rear-view and pulled out into traffic. August did his best to say as little as possible; he sat back and looked out the window, watching cars splash down the street, taillights aglare. Rain beat steady on the glass. August checked his watch, forgot the time, and checked it again. For a moment the second hand ticked in time with the wipers.

The cabbie coughed. "You know," he said. "You're the second guy tonight wanted to go to this place. Is it new?"

"What?" August asked. He looked up at the bushy mustache and tired eyes floating in the mirror.

"The Moon and whatever....that's the pub you're going to, right? It's new?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, I never heard of it before tonight." The cabbie coughed again. "All the sudden I got two fares wants to go there. Coincidence, I guess, huh?"

"I don't believe in coincidences," said August.

"Must be exhausting." The cabbie laughed.

August sat back, fiddling with something in his pocket. They passed by a park. A wrought-iron fence bounded its perimeter. August counted sycamores, drenched in color. Rust-red and autumn bright.

At a stoplight, something darted across in front of the tires. Leaping from shadow to shadow, it disappeared down an alleyway.

"What was that?" asked August.

"Black cat." The cabbie laughed again. "Superstitious?"

August checked his watch. "Just let me out here," he said.

"Jesus, really?" The cabbie pulled over. August got out and paid and checked his watch again. He opened his umbrella and crossed the street.

"Wrong way," the cabbie yelled, cranking down his window.

August kept walking. He rounded the corner and came up a parallel street. He kept his eyes on the sidewalk and counted his steps, ignoring some women he passed. They were huddled in a doorway out of the rain. They looked cold in their short skirts and lace stockings.

The rain had slacked off by the time he found the pub. A gust of wind shook the sign, a pale-horned moon drowning beneath a blue wave, and sputtered the gas lamps ensconced either side of the entrance. The door said, *The Moon Under Water*; he pulled it open and went in.

August shook out his umbrella, set it by the door, and looked around. It was one of those mock-old pubs; the aesthetic was decidedly Victorian. The curving mahogany bar was inlaid with antique-looking scrollwork. The frosted mirrors on the wall were trimmed in gold etchings. First edition Dickens packed the bookcases, alongside the most recent issues of *Forbes* and *Men's Health*. *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the spring of long-term bonds, it was the winter of six-pack abs; capitalism will save us, lose your gut, dress for more sex.*

August's pocket buzzed. He pulled out his phone and read the text: *By the fire*. He made his way toward the back, past tables of university students, discussing Marx, past tables of

university professors, discussing their salaries, past empty tables and tables empty save for one lonely man or woman. He found Sylas at a table in the corner, by the fireplace. The man was in his fifties, podgy and bald, with a round red face and cheerfully dour eyes. When he saw August, his smile was positively sanguine.

"Didn't know if you were coming," Sylas said. "Glad I didn't wait to order." He was tearing through a roasted capon, washing down chunks of flesh with a glass of tawny port. "Can I get you anything?"

August ordered a Coca-Cola and sipped on the fizz while Sylas finished his meal. Finally, Sylas looked up, sucking grease from his fat fingers. He swilled wine round his cheeks and ran a pink tongue across his teeth. He plucked out a bit of gristle and flicked it into the hearth. The fire popped hungrily. For a moment, August lost himself in the flames. He was just a shadow on the wall.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" Sylas finally asked.

"Ghosts?" August said. "You said you had something for me."

"The dead, I mean." Sylas wiped his mouth clean with a linen napkin.

"Dead is what you make someone so you don't have to be afraid of them."

"I *have* seen your work." Sylas smiled and called for more wine. "This should be right up your alley."

"What sort of work is it?" August asked.

"The sort that pays," Sylas said. "Upfront." He pulled an envelope from his coat and thrust it toward August.

August opened it and read the amount on the check inside. He folded it and tucked it into his coat, feeling its comfort there against his chest.

Lightning flashed; thunder rattled the windows in their panes. The door opened and August jumped, knocking over the salt, and almost spilling a decanter of wine a waiter had just set down. A man came in, shaking water from his coat, and hanging it on the rack by the door. A draft of cold air sent a shiver down August's spine.

"What do I have to do?" August asked, pinching a bit of salt between his thumb and finger and tossing it over his shoulder.

"Would you like some wine?" asked Sylas. "I can get you a glass."

August shook his head.

"It'll help you relax," Sylas said.

"Just tell me what to do."

"It's not hard," Sylas said. He handed August a folder from his briefcase. Inside was a thin stack of paper. On the cover was a list of names.

August felt a familiar pressure at the back of his eyes. He blinked twice, then again, flipping slowly through the pages, counting them under his breath. He looked around. Suddenly, the pub was too loud. The fake laughter, the ringing clatter of glasses, the screech of steel on porcelain; it set his nerves afire. August looked up at Sylas, his anger smothered by disappointment.

"But, you'll have something next week," August said. "Something real?"

"Obituaries aren't real?" Sylas asked. "The snuff you write, I figured you'd be tickled."

"My novel--"

"Still working on it," said Sylas. "Shopping it around."

August picked up the folder and walked out into the rain.

"Just see these ones stay dead," Sylas called, chuckling.

August was a block and a half away before he remembered his umbrella. He did not go back. It was raining harder now and the rain was cold. August turned up his collar and walked faster, his eyes fixed on the wet-dark sidewalk. He skipped over every crack, not daring to step on one. Lightning struck shadows in a doorway and August ducked inside. He sat down on the step, taking welcome respite from the rain.

August reached into his pocket and pulled out a small brass key. It wasn't a good luck charm. August didn't think of it that way. Such implied chance. And nothing happened by chance. No, it seemed to August more a fulcrum, against which he could lever circumstance back into its proper place.

He hadn't known it was special when he'd found it, hidden in the ashes of his grandmother's house. The house had burned when he was five, with his grandmother in it. He still remembered the fire trucks blinking in the cold morning air. Years after that memory had set, he would sneak away to play in what remained of the house. Afternoon sun would cut through gaps in the warped tin roof. Dust would congregate in bright daggers of light, swirling around the charred, skeletal beams that still somehow supported the structure. And August would creep across blackened floorboards and up creaking stairs, counting each one to avoid those he knew could not support his weight.

He had found the key in his grandmother's bedroom, on the floor beside her melted mattress, its springs coiled like rust-burnt snakes. The key was buried in a midden of ashes that smelled faintly, still, of cedar. As his grandmother's wardrobe has smelled, where she had hidden his Christmas presents, year after year, and where, one year, he had found them, but pretended he hadn't. But, that memory was lost, worn smooth by time.

The key had been tarnished by flame, but it was always cool to the touch. It didn't hold heat; August assumed it had had its fill. He squeezed it tightly now in his palm, remembering the fall morning when he was nine when he had discovered the key's true power. He was waiting for the school bus; It was November and he stood there watching his breath flash-freeze on the cold air. He played games with himself to pass the time. *Two more cars*, he would say, *and then the bus will come. Two more red cars, and then it will come. Two blue cars, and a white one.* He never won these games.

That morning he had forgotten his key. He had left it under his pillow, where it often stayed when he was sleeping. He thought about running back to get it, but the bus could come while he was gone. And his mother couldn't take him to school; she had left early for the hospital to visit August's father.

The bus was late. He should have run back when he had the chance. It was certainly too late now. August bored of counting cars, so he unzipped his backpack and pulled out a book. He read, shuffling in place to keep warm.

But something rustled in the brush across the road and he looked up. It was his cat. He closed his book and called to her and she answered and came bounding across the road toward him. And then the bus rounded the corner, its tires zipping on the frozen asphalt. The little cat died with a crunch of bone. Its skull popped like a blister. All that was left was a smear of blood steaming in the cold air. And August knew that it was his fault.

August started toward the cat's broken body, but the bus was already stopping in front of him, its air brakes wailing like a mother who had just lost her child. August stopped. He looked back at his house. His mother would be mad if he missed school. She would have to leave his father and come get him. The bus driver was looking down at him.

So he got on the bus. He climbed the steps quickly.

“Was that your cat?” the bus driver asked.

“Yeah,” said August. He went to the back and sat down. He heard the bus driver try to apologize, but August didn’t answer. It wasn’t her fault. It was his.

“Was that your cat?” a girl asked beside him.

“Yeah,” said August.

“Aren’t you even going to cry?” she asked.

August tried. “No,” he said at last.

His mother picked him up from school that afternoon and they spent that night at the hospital. And the next night. And the next night his father died. They woke him, told him that his father had gone to be with Jesus, and led August to where his father lay, still warm. August’s mother still held his father’s hand. August clutched his key and hugged his daddy and cried.

August woke with a start. He’d nodded off. The rain had stopped. His eyes strained for focus. He wasn’t alone.

“I said get up,” a man said. He reached down, grabbed August by the collar, and hauled him to his feet. “Let’s start with the wallet.”

“What?” asked August.

“Your wallet, give it to me.” He punched August hard in the gut. August cried out and doubled over. The man’s friends laughed.

August clenched his teeth and screamed, swinging wildly at the man. He missed and fell down the step toward the others. A few of them kicked idly at him as he lay there on the wet sidewalk.

They took his wallet. They took his watch. They even took the folder with his assignment of dead people's names. He lay there for a long time, tasting the blood in his mouth, feeling the dull metallic ache in his stomach, and willing himself to cry. But he could not. So he got up and walked home.

Wind howled down the empty streets, driving brown-gold leaves before it. A beer can clattered wildly across the pavement. Clouds raced across the sky, revealing a thin sliver of moon and what stars the city light let pass. Across the street, a cat was neck deep in an overturned garbage bin. It started when August got near, and froze, looking at him with bright green eyes. The cat was black from head to tail.

August stopped. The cat crossed the street in a few bounds and froze again. It took a few steps toward him and August knelt down and let the cat rub its head on his knees. When August reached out to pet it, the cat jumped away and disappeared between buildings.

When August got home, the sky was edged in purple, like a bruise. The sun would be up soon. He went to the bathroom and sluiced cold water on his face. It burned. He washed the blood down the sink and examined himself in the mirror. His left eye was black. His nose was oozing blood but didn't feel broken.

August was aching and tired; he thought of calling the police, but didn't. They'd never find his wallet. He put his hand on his wrist; he could still feel the impression the watch had left on his skin. The police wouldn't find that either. So, instead, he sat down at the old manual typewriter he kept on his desk (a gift from his grandfather) and began pounding the keys. He'd lost all of the names he'd been assigned, so he improvised; he wrote his own obituary. When that didn't satisfy him, he wrote one for the man who'd mugged him and one for each of the man's friends. He wrote one for Sylas. And he fell asleep at his desk.

August dreamed he was a child again and looking down into his grandmother's well. Every weekend until she died, he would go to his grandmother's and toss pennies down that well. He would kiss the penny and close his eyes and wish as hard as he could. But the wishes never came true. He learned that for sure when he crept down to his grandmother's one day after school, when his mother was still at the hospital with his father and he was supposed to be locked up in the house. He wished hard that day. But his wish didn't come true. Now he knew why. If you buy a wish with pennies, you only get what you pay for.

He pulled out his wallet and threw it down the well. But nothing happened. He ripped the watch off his arm so hard the band broke; he threw it down too. Nothing happened. So, he reached deep into his pockets and searched for something more valuable. His pockets seemed to go on forever. He reached down through layers of pocket fluff, past all the pennies he'd ever saved, past faded movie tickets and old sticks of spearmint gum. Then he felt it, the cool brass key at the bottom of his pocket. He pulled it out and tossed it down the well before he could stop himself.

Dark ripples troubled the bottom of the well. And something round and livid bobbed to the surface. It was a head. The scalp was wrinkled like August's toes when he stayed in the bath too long. The cheeks were sunken. The lips and nose had sloughed away, leaving only bone and sharp glinting teeth. It looked up at him out of the hollows of its eyes and smiled. Sanguine.

"August." It gurgled his name. "Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"Dead is what you make someone so you don't have to be afraid of them," August said.

"Would you like some wine?" Its words were cloyingly sweet, overripe to the point of rot. The water around it turned the deep red of wine. Or blood. "I can get you a glass."

A storm of dark wings rushed up from the well and August fell back onto the ground. A dozen crows took to the sky, their wings clawing the air for purchase. They hung for a moment in silhouette against the bright-full moon. August tried to stand, but couldn't. He could hear something climbing up from the well. Its slimy appendages smacked against the wet-dark stone as it clawed its glutinous way toward the moonlight.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

August woke in a cold sweat, his heart throbbing in his ears and a strange word stuck to the inside of his brain: *murder*. He got up and showered, letting the water scald his skin pink and clean. He dressed. He scrambled three eggs, burnt some toast, and washed it all down with orange juice straight from the carton.

Then he sat back down to write.

There were too many complications to the real world. So many variables to keep track of, he felt he could drown in them all. But when he wrote, the only things that mattered were the things he said mattered. His characters could step on cracks, walk under ladders, and break mirrors to their hearts content. He envied them their carelessness.

August loved books. Books were doors he could disappear through into some borrowed paradise. He wanted very much to be a writer, to lend out his own paradise to others.

When he was little, he would hide under church pews during sermons, scribbling picture-stories on their undersides with a Bic pen. Blue stars, green planets, exploding suns; he set whole galaxies into the plywood firmament. And he peopled his worlds with brave little stick figures wondering at their place in his tiny universe. He gave them dinosaurs with long green necks to ride; he gave them robots with laser eyes to fight; he gave them rocket ships with red ink screaming from their tails so they could travel between all the planets he drew for them.

When he learned to read, he discovered that no matter how small a book was on the outside, whole worlds could fit between its covers. One day his Sunday school teacher caught him with a small, leather-bound copy of his favorite book. It looked enough like a bible, he thought no one would notice, but she did. She took the book away and explained to him that it wasn't real. "It's just lies, August," she'd said. And he'd felt betrayed. There were not dragons, nor heroes to slay them. There *wasn't* such a thing as a tesseract. There was no world in the back of the wardrobe; it was solid all the way through.

So, the next week, he'd brought his Encyclopedia of Dinosaurs. But, Miss Ruth took him by the wrist and pulled him aside again.

"August," she said. "I thought we'd discussed this?" She took his book and flipped through the pages.

"But, this one's real!"

"Giant lizards?" She gave him a stern look.

"They're reptiles," August said. "They aren't around no more. They lived millions of years ago."

"The world ain't millions a years old," she'd said. "It's all lies. This is the only book you need." She handed him a bible. "If it ain't in here, it ain't fit to print."

August's parents returned his dinosaur book when they got home.

"Best stick to the bible for church," his father told him.

"Some people just interpret things differently," his mother said, as she spooned pot roast onto their plates.

That had made August feel better.

August tossed the obituaries he'd written the night before into the trash. He picked up the phone to call Sylas. Hopefully, he'd email him a copy of the names. He should have just done that to begin with. Instead of getting August's hopes up.

Sylas would be annoyed. August would have preferred to use email himself, but Sylas never responded when he did. August just wanted to get it all out of the way. So, he took a breath, wincing at the pain in his ribs, and prepared to explain.

The phone rang seventeen times before a woman finally answered. August had never met Sylas's wife, but recognized her voice from previous calls. Though, her voice cracked in a strange way.

She told him Sylas had had a heart attack. "At some hotel downtown," she said. "He was with a prostitute." She let out a soft sob. "He told me he was going to a business meeting."

"Is he...?" August began, but couldn't finish.

"He was always lying to me," she said.

Sylas had always prided himself on his skill at lying. *It is a skill*, he'd told August, once. *Like any other. You have to practice.* That's what made him such a good agent and critic, he'd said. He could tell the good lies from the bad. *And the good ones*, he'd told August, *are always formed around a grain of truth, like a pearl is formed around a grain of sand.*

"Is he?" August asked again.

"It runs in his family, you know."

"Is he dead?"

"And he never would go to the gym like I told him."

August put down the phone. He emptied the paper bin on the floor and found the crumpled sheets he'd tossed there the night before. Desperately, he tore them to pieces.

He ran to the kitchen, lit the gas range, and tossed the torn paper like confetti onto the burner. His chest was tight. He could not breathe. It was his fault. He had written Sylas's obituary. He had wished him dead. A shiver ran through his body. He'd written his own as well. He put a finger to his pulse and counted beats. He counted each breath, wondering if it might be his last.

August thrust his hand into his pocket, searching for the cool metal of his key. But it wasn't there. *Did they take it?* He couldn't remember. He searched everywhere. He even lifted his pillow and looked for it there. But he couldn't find it. He sat down on the bed, his eyes burning with the threat of tears that wouldn't come.

Other people could fool themselves into thinking they weren't responsible. But not August. He knew that he was responsible for everything. He shuddered at his own power, ever a reluctant god. It was too much. There was too much to keep track of. Too many cracks in the world to miss them all. He needed his key.

August didn't know what else to do, so he took a book from the shelf and sat down in the floor. He stared at the pages for a long time, hoping they would swallow him, but he couldn't puzzle out the words. He read the same lines over and over, lost his place, and started again. His head felt very heavy. His hands seemed miles away, stuck to the ends of arms that weren't his. He threw the book across the room. It landed with a flutter of pages in the corner and August went again to search for the key.