

The Raven of Oz

Julie eased down on the bed, face first, so exhausted and sore she couldn't even lie down fast. She lay sprawled out for some time, her mind going over chores accomplished and more still to be done. The horses were taken care of. Carl had the truck running, a bad starter solenoid, he said. He was still working on the mule and when that was ready she'd clean out the corral. She really had to get to the raking. She'd slid and sat down hard on the path to the shed, twisting her ankle first thing this morning, the pine needles were so deep and slick. Carl thought that big jack pine should go and she was thinking he was right. She'd worry about that later. Other matters to deal with. The well was up and running again, one good thing. Carl was a lifesaver. Julie worked in town at the hospital, 12 miles away, doing clerical work. She boarded horses for extra money so she could hire out the heavier work she couldn't handle herself and some of the mechanical chores. Carl worked for her several afternoons a week, working around his school schedule. She didn't know what she'd do without him. "Who ever called weekends days off." She wondered as she drifted off.

She dreamed she was swimming in the ocean, floating, suspended, muscles relaxed, and it was warm. The air was thick and she savored its heavy saltiness. The clanging of a buoy out in the fog somewhere made her smile - she had missed the sounds and smells of living on the coast, things she had taken for granted until she had moved away and they were no longer part of her life. Why had she left? She couldn't remember and it didn't matter now, she was swimming and drowsy and warm.

When she woke up it was almost dark, the faintest hint of dusk outside. She was still dressed, curled up in a ball on top of the bedding. Great, she thought, I've messed up my sleep for the night. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed, groggy with sleep, trying to remember what leftovers might be in the frig to make a quick dinner.

Coming out of the bathroom a few minutes later she was shocked to see it was brighter out. Glancing at the clock she saw it was 7:45 - she'd slept straight through the night. She was stiff and sore and certainly didn't feel rested. She slipped her boots off, deciding to lie back down for just a few minutes, then she'd get up and feed the dogs and horses while coffee brewed. She wondered about moving back to the coast. Maybe she'd go look at the condo later that Sally had told her about. No wood splitting or corral cleaning, someone else could worry over maintenance. She could sleep later every morning.

"Get up. You need to come."

Julie opened her eyes, not sure if she'd really dozed off or not.

"Get up!" she heard again. She didn't recognize the voice. The clock showed 8:00. She rolled over and looked toward the door but no one was there. She rubbed her eyes.

“Let’s go.” she heard. The commanding voice sounded like it was coming from the deck off her bedroom. She got up and slid open the glass door and there on the railing was a huge raven, head cocked, looking at her. She stared at it for a moment and looked around to see who was calling.

“I called you.” the raven said, seeing the question on Julie’s face.

“You!” was all Julie could say. She stared at the raven, not believing this was happening. “You seem like a very real dream, raven.” she said.

“You are not dreaming, Julie. Can you feel that breeze? Can you hear it in the trees? That warm pine scent, can’t you smell it? This is not a dream.”

“I must really be tired, I’m going to go make some coffee and then I have to feed the horses.” Julie muttered to herself. “I must be exhausted.”

“No.” the raven said. “Come now so I can show you.”

“I don’t know what’s happening here, raven, but I have work to do. I can’t go with you anywhere.” Julie was questioning her sanity.

“It is not a day to work. Don't worry about your ranch. Come.”

Julie gave in to the dream. Horses and dogs didn’t need fed in dreams. She’d go to town after she woke up and pick up hay. She'd take Mrs. Wilkens' bay out for a ride like she’d promised, when she was rested and could think clearly.

“Okay, let’s go.” Julie said. The raven led her across the property to the west, up a little rise that crossed into the neighboring ranch. He waited on a fence post for her to catch up. “Where are we going?” she asked again.

“This is far enough.” the raven said. “I just want to show you something. I think it will be easier if you can keep up with me.” Before Julie could ask what he meant she too was a raven - it seemed the most natural thing.

“This is a great dream, better than swimming in the ocean.” Julie thought. She often dreamed of flying, of making big swooping dives over the landscape, pushing through the air in a sleek body. She longed to make a flight out over the lake, to soar off the ridge, the ground dropping away, to see the valley from a great height.

“Let's do some flying.” Julie said. She was wide awake, ready for an adventure. But the raven didn’t take off.

“Look there.” he said. Julie hopped around and looked back. There was her little ranch, as she liked to call it. It was snowing hard.

“What do you see?” the raven asked.

“I see it’s snowing. How did that happen?”

“What do you see?” the raven asked again.

“It’s snowing.” Julie wasn’t understanding. “I’ll have to get a path shoveled out to the barn, and dig out the heater out for the trough. I haven’t cleaned the chimney yet this year.”

“No!” the raven practically shouted at her. “Tell me what you see.”

“Alright,” Julie said a bit angrily herself. She looked at the raven for a moment, then turned again and looked down. “I see snow is starting to pile up on the horses backs. The trees are getting white and it’s calm now, so quiet. And I can smell wood smoke.”

“Good.” the raven said. “Now we can move on.”

The two ravens took off. If ravens could smile Julie would have been grinning from ear to ear. Certainly this was the best dream ever. They flew into the woods on the east end of the ridge and suddenly it was foggy. Julie had a hard time keeping the raven in sight.

“Wait.” she called but the raven disappeared into the mist. She landed on a pine branch, not seeing the raven anywhere. “This is just like living on the coast, one of the things I hoped to get away from. Agh, and here it is again, this smothering fog!” While Julie sat grouching to herself about the fog she heard the raven’s voice.

“And what do you see?” he asked her.

“I don’t see anything,” she snapped, “and I’m getting cold.”

“Tell me what you see!” the raven ordered, so Julie tried to focus.

“Okay, I see hoar frost, it’s starting to prick up on the pine needles. It’s forming little stars and flowers along the bark there! The fog is pretty the way it moves through the tops of the trees.”

“Ah.” said the raven. “You think that’s pretty?”

“Well, sure!” Julie replied.

“Then we can move on.” And the raven took off, making a wide turn through the trees, heading back to the west once again, racing across the fence line and lighting on a big stump where Julie could join him. It had started to rain and still Julie felt cold.

“Now, tell me what you see.” The raven motioned again down toward her house and outbuildings.

Julie concentrated through the rain. “I see a lot of mud that the horses will roll in and the dogs will track through the house. Dandelions will be taking over the corral. I’ll bet that’s not what you want me to see.” She turned to the raven but his expression didn’t change. “Okay, okay, I see the edges of the pasture are starting to green up. I think I see fritillaries over by the fence. That means the shooting stars should be coming up soon. The sun is warm on my back.” Sure enough, it had stopped raining and the sun was out.

“Say,” Julie turned to the raven, “do you know a girl named Dorothy?” The raven looked hard at her a long moment. “Goodbye.” was all he said. “Okay, so I want to thank you for this raven day, for the chance to fly and to see my world this way. Can we do this again?” Julie was sure she saw a little glint in that black trickster’s eye. He cocked his head and took off in a flash of black feathers, disappearing over the east ridge line.

Julie stretched her wings and felt their strength. She rose from the log and zoomed across the field. The balsam root was glowing in the summer sun, reflecting yellow light off the bottom of her wings. Lupine was just starting to show lavender through the bunch grass. She headed toward the barn, circling it once out of pure joy.

“Ravens may not be able to laugh but they can still have fun!” She felt the warmth on her wings. She flew around the front of the house where again the maples were blazing in autumn colors. She swooped around the back and landed in the big jack pine and sent needles raining down on the path below.

“What a magnificent tree this is! It’s been here a long time - what a view!” She fluffed her feathers and thought she’d just sit there a few minutes. She’d get to the chores later.

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It was 8:00 when Julie woke up. “Wow, what a dream, what a great dream!” She jumped out of bed feeling great. She slid open the glass door on the deck and stepped out. A big black feather was stuck in between the boards of the railing and she pulled it out, smiling. “What a great dream.”

Carl came by later and found Julie working in the barn. “You’re working on your sign, huh?”

“Yep.” Julie said. “No more chores today. I finally decided what to call my little spread here. It’s going to be Raven Day Ranch.”

“Oh, that’s different. I like it! How’d you come up with that?”

“Let’s go get a cup coffee and I’ll tell you about it.” Julie put down her tools with smile, taking Carl by the arm and walked up the path over the fallen needles. In the distance she heard the faint cry of a raven, catching thermals out over the ridge.

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