

As The Crow Flies

Years ago, Andy had molested his six-year old son, Zoe. He stood now, surefooted, on the edge of the cliff looking out over the Pacific Ocean. White foam assaulted the rocks far below him and the vast curve of water, as it received the setting sun, swelled a vivid red. The ground beneath his feet was solid and unbreakable and stubbled here and there with green tufts of grass. He stepped forward another few inches so his toes wiggled over the edge and shifted his weight backward onto his heels the way his Uncle Jake had taught Andy when he was a child. “You want the center of gravity to always weigh in your favor,” his uncle would say. “That *weigh*, ha, you’ll never lose your balance and fall off.” Andy leaned back, held out his arms to the side, as if he were a white crane, and rotating his wrists and arms gracefully, he stood on one foot. Since the incident with Zoe, long ago, it always made him feel better to push his life to the edge. It invigorated his body and mind. When he stood on one foot in this way, toes dangling, the wind in his face and the abyss below, he always heard a tiny ancient voice echo through the dark chambers of his memory, “Daddy, don’t.” The caw of crows crowded the air like old men being strangled. Large as bowling balls, the crows sat in organized rows, bending the branches of the conifers. Overhead a pelican had circled round, interminably, since that morning. Andy sat down on a nearby slab of granite.

When he retired from his job at the bakery, his friend Barbara invited Andy to come live with her in New Mexico. But that did not work out. In the end she didn’t want him around—another downward spiral in the awkward string of events that stitched his life together. His sister, Laura, and brother-in-law allowed him to settle on their property. They owned a few acres of land in a remote region of the North Pacific coast, where no children lived for miles around, so his sister was comfortable inviting her brother to stay. When Andy registered with the county as a sex offender, there were no objections.

Andy was handy. In fact, his hands were overly large like puppy paws. He was tall and big boned, and as fit as a Marine—unusually trim for sixty-seven. Able to fix anything broken, or improve efficiency in existing structures, from plumbing to pistons to planting a garden, he became a valuable asset for Laura and her husband, living there as a permanent tenant in exchange for repair and maintenance services. His needs were simple. He had converted the leaky old barn into a large tool shed and storage facility with a loft at the back end for his lodging—a small bed, closet, bathroom and kitchen were enough. The solar panel attached to a generator provided heat and electricity.

In his spare time, Andy walked through the redwoods to sit on the cliff edge and think about his long and twisted past. What could he have possibly done differently, given his own childhood circumstances, and lacking the necessary skills, as an inexperienced twenty-six-year old, to have avoided that consequential moment? The moment when he attempted to sodomize his little son.

The pelican had made several attempts at breakfast, lunch and dinner without success. Andy knew that climate change and acidic pollution reduces the abundance of ocean snacks and that a seabird like a pelican has only so many hours to find food before it dies of exhaustion. Life is hard.

When Andy was eight, his favorite uncle, Jake, whom he loved so much, had taught him everything about nature along the northern coast—the relationship between hummingbirds and wild meadow columbines; redwoods and the giant network of underground mushrooms; swimming and ocean currents (Andy surfed the coast daily). Andy's father had abandoned him, and his mother was a workaholic, emotionally absent and physically reticent, so his uncle took over the responsibility for raising him. Uncle Jake slowly primed him with gifts—a Swiss Army Tool belonging to his grandfather, extended camping trips, and lots of physical affection. Andy got used to his uncle's touches, kisses on the top of his head as he sat on his uncle's lap. He could feel the hard thing under him—the thing that would eventually enter him from behind. Uncle Jake was always gentle and spoke sweet, tender words in his ear. It felt good and wrong. Afterwards, Andy would lie on the bed in his uncle's mirrored room staring at his sore, red bottom, not quite understanding *why* it was wrong.

Years later, during a private session, his high school counselor had slipped a hand down Andy's pants. It's true that, for months, he had unconsciously flirted with his counselor. So maybe Andy had been responsible after all, had led him on. He always felt a guilty pleasure whenever he thought about the incident.

Then came the Summer of Love, 1967. He grew his hair long and became a Hippie, baked Hobbit seedcakes, learned to write in the Elven alphabet, and celebrated Bilbo Baggins birthday, every year, in Griffith Park. But Hippie Heaven wouldn't last long for that generation. It was shattered one night, only two years later, when Charlie Manson smeared the walls of *peace and love* with bloody handprints, as his assassins ate the beating heart of Sharon Tate's baby, cut open C-section with a kitchen knife. The dream was over.

But Andy was a peacenik and a love bunny. So when he got drafted, he decided to apply the remnants of whatever Hippie philosophy he had absorbed and become a conscientious objector. At first, as part of his mandatory community service, he joined up as a forest ranger and fire fighter. Once, while combatting a raging blaze that scorched the entire valley, a giant pine tree, whose internal blood—its sap—is a combustible oil resin, exploded a thousand feet in front of him. The heat seared his eyebrows and bangs and melted the wire-framed goggles off his face. Eventually, his eyebrows grew back—in full. But he had barely escaped.

Months later, on his time off, as he sat in his bunker overlooking newly planted trees, he read with admiration Walt Whitman's participation as a nurse during the Civil War. So on a whim, Andy decided to volunteer his services in Vietnam, not as a killing machine, but as a non-combative paramedic. He cut off his beard and long golden locks and allowed the dense, unforgiving jungle to swallow him up. Since he didn't have enough time and training needed to become a true paramedic, he helped out by carrying wounded soldiers from the rainforest depths to waiting helicopters—the loud, rotating menace above them drowned out the cries of the wounded. And when the number of wounded exceeded the number of medics, they put Andy to work sowing up soldiers. His Swiss Army Tool came in handy. The suffocating, rainforest air exposed limbs and organs and guts to infectious micro-organisms, and skin, split from thigh to groin or belly to chest, needed to be stitched in time to save nine. He threaded the needle while looking up instructions for the procedure in the medical field manual. His stitches were on time and he saved more than nine.

When he came home from the madness, he met Rachael, the daughter of a five-star general. They fell in love and moved to a commune in Joshua Tree. The five stars on the general's shoulders sputtered hydrogen rage. Soon, Rachael was pregnant. For the first few years, life was good. Rachael rode out her full term in a kind of naïve, ideological heaven: financial support from the men and emotional stability from the women. Not a care in the world. Plates of organic fruits and vegetables and homemade pies and ice cream appeared as if by magic. Andy had lots of time to play with his new son; take long walks through the Dr. Seuss-like forest of Joshua Trees; spend hours observing the oddball cactus, the tiny, Horton-Hears-A-Who spring flowers and the unique insects belonging to this delicate micro-climate. He taught Zoe all the interdependent relationships in nature that he had learned from his uncle.

By the time Zoe turned 4, the boy had become a protégé of his dad and an inquisitive little scientist, curious about everything botanical and zoological. Andy had taught him many ways to categorize plants. For instance, Zoe knew that trees can be grouped into water based, like Aspen, which are slow burning, or oil based, like Pine, which are fast burning. He knew that all birds are descended from dinosaurs and that they are prehistoric. And Zoe pronounced every syllable equally. *Pre-his-tor-ic*. He knew that ravens were twice as large as crows and that ravens soared along the air currents, while crows flapped their wings in flight.

“As the crow flies, daddy.”

“Very good, sweet one. Some day you'll know more than your dad.”

Andy's gentle laugh was contagious and delighted everyone in the commune. At any time of the day or night they would hear father and son exploding to fits of laughter. He would sit Zoe on his lap, pleased with his son's ingenuity, and kiss him on the top of his head. But he was not going down the same road he had traveled with his uncle. No thank you, sir. Andy had integrity. He instinctively knew the difference between physical affection and inappropriate sexual behavior. He wanted Zoe to grow up healthy and happy and curious about everything around him, safe from the unthinkable things in the world that happen to children. He loved his boy so much that sometimes Andy would sit for hours, as any proud dad would, just staring, enchanted by Zoe's facial features and expressions, expecting at any moment to lose his balance and fall head over heels into the translucent depths of his son's skin, so delicate, vibrant, vulnerable and needing protection. He wanted for his son what he never had— a caring father.

“Daddy, tell me the story again. Of the oil tree. The one that blew up in your face. Did it really melt your goggles off?”

And each time, Andy would retell the story with increasing embellishment, adding new words to Zoe's expanding vocabulary. “Yes, it was the tallest, fattest pine tree I had ever seen, dripping with amber resin. It was as far away as that crow over there. But when the fire got so hot and the oil in the trunk began to boil, the whole thing just exploded like a gigantic sun and the flames shot forward and licked my face and burnt my eyebrows and melted my goggles.” Zoe's jaw dropped in astonishment as he stared up at Andy—happy to know his daddy was such a wonderful hero.

Then, things slowly began to change. Life on the commune became unbearable for the young couple—playtime with Zoe got replaced by long hours of physical labor as resources diminished and the cult-of-personality disputes among the leaders not only divided the community, they precipitated financial burdens.

Having no other recourse, they moved back to Austen, Texas, where her parents lived. Here, Andy got a job at a popular bakery. His specialty was Hobbit seedcakes. The cycle of life returned. But the money wouldn't stretch, even with both parents working. To provide equal care for Zoe, they split their responsibilities in two. Rachael worked days. Andy worked the night shift, baking pies and wonderfully strange looking seed breads. He twisted long strings of unbleached dough into braids, added an egg glaze, and let it ferment overnight with natural yeasts. In the wee hours of the morning, as everyone was just waking up, he peddled the long way home on his bicycle and arrived deeply exhausted. He ate his dinner at breakfast and then fell into profound sleep.

But on his days off, Andy always had energy for Zoe. They went for walks in the morning around the neighborhood, where he pointed out which berries, flowers and plants were edible, like the pepper tree and the dandelion, and which ones were dangerous, like the Azalea and the Poison Oak. Then, they spent the rest of the day sharing books and ideas. Andy taught Zoe, not only how to read, but how to learn. He showed her that anyone, no matter what age or education, could learn anything easily, given enough time and repetition.

"You want to know a little secret, Zoe?" He picked up an illustrated children's book from the pile on the table. "If you just start with a very simple book, like this one here on dinosaurs, and keep reading it over and over, as many times as it takes to know what every word *means*, the next book you read on dinosaurs will not be so difficult to understand."

Zoe beamed. "Daddy, I forgot to tell you. I'm the best reader now at school."

"Hum, really? But you told me you're in the B reading group."

Pulling his shoulders back and straightening his spine, Zoe said, "Yeah, but I'm the *best* of the B reading group."

Andy smiled at his son's healthy self-image. "And so, by the time you read your twentieth book on that subject ... well, you'll know as much about dinosaurs as a college student."

Again, Zoe's eyes brightened confidently. "Guess what daddy, in France they found the fossil of a pelican. The *whole* pelican! And it's 30 million years old. Did you know that?"

"No, son, I did not know that. See what I mean? You already know things I don't know."

"But daddy, it's *pre-his-tor-ic*. But it looks just like a *today* pelican." His big eyes grew even larger in the excitement.

"Good observation, Zoe. The reason it looks exactly the same, is because, at a certain stage in its development, it no longer needed to evolve. It's perfect the way it is. In nature things change only when they need to, for survival. A pelican has all the balance and skill to catch a tasty meal. Why should it change?"

Zoe thought about this, his eyes looking over to the balsa wood pelican model they had built together. "Because it's ugly?" The boy said.

Andy had a good laugh. "That's not nice, nothing in nature is *ugly*. Just different. Only humans need to change."

"Why, daddy?"

"So they can evolve. Because their *behavior* can sometimes be ugly."

"So they can be perfect, like the pelican?"

“Yes. And beautiful, like you, my sweet one.”

“Hey daddy, can I have a Swiss Army Tool like yours for my birthday? I have enough books.”

“Uh, sorry Zoe, you are too young yet for this kind of equipment. I’ve cut myself sometimes when I was in a hurry, just opening one of its tools.”

“But daddy, you let me play with it all the time.”

“Nope. That’s not accurate. I supervise the scissors tool when you have a project. Not for you to play with alone. But when you’re older, I’ll pass it on to you as an inheritance, just like my Uncle Jake did for me. And by the way, there is never *enough* books.”

Rachael was now always too tired to have fun, in bed or otherwise. The five-star-general upbringing had begun to parade out of her personality in step to the loud marching band that embodied her father. She was harsh and impatient with Andy. He could never do anything right.

“Why are you still a low level baker after two years?” She lay in bed with her back to him.

“What are you talking about, Rachael? Are you being sarcastic? I’m not a low level baker, I got promoted to head baker months ago, uh ... remember? And I got a raise to boot?”

“*Groovy*, a fifty-cent raise. Let me just jump up and down and *trip to the light fantastic*. I ought to give *you* the boot. You should own your own bakery by now.”

“But honey, we’ve gone over this. You know I have no interest in managing an entire bakery. I don’t know the first thing about it. And where am I supposed to get the money, land a government contract selling Hobbit seedcakes to the Marines?”

“God, how pathetic.” She pulled the covers over her shoulders. “You hire people to manage it for you, homo. Besides, I told you I could get my dad to front you the money. But you’re too much of a panty waist, you have no self-confidence.”

“Look sweetie, can’t we just talk about this on our day off? We haven’t played in months, not since I got my promotion, not even a snuggle.” He kissed her neck gently.

She wriggled away from him. “Ooh, stop it, your beard feels prickly, like an old Joshua cactus.”

Whenever the bakery was shorthanded, Andy worked a double shift, usually once or twice a week. He came home one morning, ate, set the alarm for four hours before returning to work, and tried to fall asleep. It was Rachael’s turn to care for Zoe but she got delayed at a hair appointment, so Andy asked Zoe if he would take a nap with him. They cuddled up together and tried to doze off, Andy protecting his boy in his big arms, which always helped Zoe fall asleep. But Zoe wasn’t at all tired and kept waking up his exhausted dad by jumping up and down on Andy’s rock solid stomach. At first he was grumpy and annoyed, being woken up, but as Zoe insisted on this kittenish scrambling, Andy began to laugh.

“Stop that, sweet one. Daddy’s tired and needs his rest today. We can play some more on the weekend.”

“But we never have fun anymore, daddy, I hardly see you.”

Zoe had slipped down off his dad's tummy and began to rock and bounce over Andy’s groin area.

“Quit that!” Andy said, uncomfortably, as now a natural morning erection manifested out of his control.

But Zoe was in high-spirits and kept up his impish child's play. In the beginning, Andy continued to push him off. But as Zoe persisted in this jolly fun, Andy began to enjoy it, laughing along with Zoe. It felt good. It felt loving.

Then, something happened to him. Something strange and thoughtless and unconscious took over him. A feeling he didn't have time to reflect on as *good* or *bad*. It was a feeling from his childhood and it was overpowering. In a blind moment, he pulled down Zoe's shorts and unzipped his own pants. Zoe stared at his dad's erection and looked up frightened to see the strange look on his father's face. It was like another man was in the room.

"Daddy, don't."

Those words would haunt Andy for the rest of his life—because those words stopped him in his tracks, petrified him from committing the vile act. He quickly restored their decency, zipped up his pants, pulled up Zoe's shorts, and covering his face with his puppy paw hands, he began to weep. Andy begged his son's forgiveness.

"It's okay daddy, you didn't. I understand."

At this, Andy sobbed even more intensely, an exhausting, bottomless cry. For he knew in his heart, that at six-years old, Zoe already had the capacity to *understand*. That someone could *see* him, for the first time.

Andy never mentioned this heart-breaking trauma to Rachael, but they hadn't been getting along for some time, therefore, shortly after it occurred, and entirely unrelated to it, they got a divorce. Rachael insisted on it first and Andy went along with the idea, reluctantly. He got his own place, a small, one-bedroom in a converted garage. Although there was still bitterness between them, they did not end on ugly terms and so still shared equal time with Zoe.

After that single episode, Andy never repeated it. Never had even one inappropriate sexual thought about his child. Everything was forgotten and the routine of daily drudgery regained its numbing equilibrium. But one morning Andy received a call from a police detective, asking him to stop in. Andy's heart sank and his nauseous gut told him immediately what the call was about. Apparently, Zoe had been acting out at school. He kept exposing his genitals to other children. He slipped pepper berries into girls' sandwiches and whipped the boys across their legs and arms with poison oak. Andy immediately understood. He broke down in front of the detective and couldn't stop the sobbing. He admitted, openly and honestly, what had taken place that day between father and son. The detective was impressed with Andy's candid transparency and full disclosure, and set him up with a state appointed, highly respected child psychologist. They scheduled a court date. He continued sessions with the pediatric psychologist and met with the female judge. In the end, after carefully examining the circumstances and reviewing the incidents of Andy's childhood, the court decided this was a special case, an isolated, unintended anomaly in Andy's overall character and not a pattern of behavior in Andy's makeup. He was not a pedophile. He did not have sexual thoughts about children. Based on these unique conditions, instead of the usual two-year prison sentence, that meant Andy couldn't support his family, they allowed him to continue working at the bakery. But he had to undergo mandatory rehabilitation and he couldn't see Zoe again. Not ever. Not until Zoe became a teenager and they both partook in State assigned counseling and reconciliation procedures. This bled all the joy from Andy's heart. Since

the state had nothing to offer for his peculiar situation, they forced him to attend Alcoholic's Anonymous. That's where he met Barbara.

There was never any sexual energy between them, but they became instant hangout buddies and did everything together. Andy knew all about Barbara, and she knew every detail about his tragic story. They attended the thriving Austin music scene, dressing up in somber velvet and leather to go see their favorite gloom-and-doom bands. It became a lifelong friendship. Barbara had planned to retire in New Mexico in a newly developed, high-tech retirement community. She bought a boxcar home and invited Andy to come live with her.

One Saturday night, shortly before his retirement, while he peddled home from the bakery, a truck slowed down along side him as he rode in the bike lane. With a head nod and a friendly smile to acknowledge them, Andy looked over. He saw four angry young men glowering. He knew their type and what he could expect. The one sitting shotgun lowered the window. His fresh blond crew cut revealed a squeaky clean ring of white around the ears and back of the neck, where the hot Texas sun had not yet branded it red.

"What the fuck you looking at, dirty faggot."

"Just being neighborly, that's all." Andy raced along the bike lane now picking up speed, his eyes looking straight ahead as he spoke.

"Listen up, dirty faggot, I don't *want* neighbors like you."

Andy hit the brakes and came to a sudden stop. The truck, which had been following along at a perfect pace, continued to roll forward before skidding to a dead standstill. He heard the gears grinding into reverse. A gas driven thrust of tires recoiled the large vehicle until it stopped on a dime exactly in front of his face, as if some invisible and antithetical magnetic force within him had yanked on a yoyo string attached to the back of the truck. Andy braced himself.

"Look, I'm sorry I bother you." Andy said, calmly. "It wasn't my intention. But if you're looking for a fight, there's nothing I can do about it at this point. So let's get this over with."

Andy felt a painful slam against his whole left side as he flew off his bike into the wet gutter. The young passenger had purposely jammed the door into Andy's still firm and agile body as he stepped out of the truck, his cropped blond hair glowing in the moonlight like a haloed angel. Three other men got out and began to kick and beat Andy as he lay on the ground in a stupor.

"You're sorry to bother me, are you? said the *angel*. " Well, I'm sorry to bugger you."

They pulled down Andy's pants as the angel unzipped his and then flipped Andy over onto his belly. Andy felt the initial painful thrust, the same pain he had felt from Uncle Jake. But now, in the gutter, the foul water licking past his face, it only took five urgent thrusts and it was over. The angel jerked Andy onto his back and began to pound heavily into Andy's face, pronouncing a monosyllable with every fist. "Dir ... ty ... fag ... got."

As the knuckles rained down on his nose, mouth, cheeks and every available face bone like a wrath of meteors spit out through God's pursed lips, Andy spotted, in the young man's eyes, a lustful hatred gleaming with satisfaction. He recognized the standard, fun, Saturday Night distraction from the soul's weekly wretchedness that young men everywhere often feel. Just before he passed out, Andy surrendered to a long-time-coming-well-deserved punishment. Yes, he understood in a flash what a wretched act he had committed, years ago, with his dear love, Zoe. And this *mercy beating* was only

justice being served. Andy expected nothing less from any reasonable God. This was an act of kindness, his just desert. And he accepted it like a man.

The first morning of his retirement, he took a long, deep breath and started the ignition of his VW van, which he had already packed a week before. He headed for New Mexico and immediately prepared to assemble the boxcar home, paint it and plant a garden.

But the moment he arrived, Barbara forbade Andy tell anyone his past regarding Zoe and his status as a sex offender. Why, after all these years, had she never mentioned this ultimatum as part of their contract? Charlie Manson may have destroyed the Hippy Movement, but not its spirit. And not telling people, upon first meeting them, his dark story, was diametrically opposed to everything his spirit believed.

“Barbara, this just isn’t right. I like to be immediate and forthright with people. If they accept me in spite of it, then we may become good friends. If they find out afterward, they will feel cheated.”

“Well I don’t care. This is my home, my property, and my community. I don’t want that jeopardized.”

Given their geniality and strong social skills, they both began to make friends and Andy soon developed strong ties with the community. The first year, his garden was such a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables he had plenty to offer all their neighbors. Soon Andy was planting everyone’s gardens and repairing anything broken.

One year later, he got a call from Laura, his sister. Uncle Jake was found dead at the bottom of a cliff. Andy was stunned and perplexed. How could that have happened?

But rounding out the second year of their settling in to such a cozy life in a community they loved, Barbara got cold feet. Now, she was anxious all the time—imagining people would find out.

“Andrew, I need you to leave the premises.”

“What?” Andy said, in amused disbelief, used to her playful nature; although she only called him Andrew when she was being earnest or didn’t like something he said or did. Besides, *Andy* always sounded to her like a little boy’s name.

“I’m serious.” she said. She took a long, slow drag off her nicotine vaporizer, and exhaled thick ringlets of smoke that reminded Andy of a displeased Gandalf sitting in Bilbo Baggins living room. “I feel so at home and so deeply bonded with everyone here, that now, I can’t sleep at night, thinking about how they will judge me, knowing I live with a *predator*.”

Andy was crushed. He began to sob again, as profoundly as he had in front of Zoe years ago. “But I have close friends here as well, Barbara. And if I don’t tell them why I have to leave, they’ll be deeply hurt and angry with me for disappearing without a motive.”

“I’m so sorry Andrew. But I won’t let you tell them anything. And once you leave here, I won’t allow you to keep up any correspondence, no email, no text or phone calls, no handwritten letters in Elven alphabets. You can go anywhere, but I have nowhere to turn. I have an investment here, sunk all my money into this place, and I’m not going to lose it. Basically, I don’t want you here anymore. And I need for this conversation to come to an end. Now.”

“And when do you want me out.” Andy said, rhetorically, between sobs.

“Tonight.”

Andy spent that evening through to the flowing morning loading up every square inch

of his VW wagon with his belongings, hermetically sealed in tight-fitting plastic and metal boxes containing neatly folded clothes, grains, herbs, food supplies, tools, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and of course, the Beach Boys' entire collection of tape cassettes—all as mathematically aligned and color coded as a Rubik's Cube. He turned on the car engine and took another deep breath. Pulling taught the longbow of his life, he hit the highway and shot like a misguided arrow across the Plains, over the Rockies, to the Pacific edge. Andy measured every mile in unsettled thoughts and everywhere he went the crows seemed to follow. From overhead, their indelible shadows gunned down his peace of mind. "I don't want you here anymore." "God, how pathetic. You should own your own bakery by now." "Dirty faggot." And finally, the two words that would continue to frack the subterranean depths of his skull: "Daddy don't."

Andrew sat on the cliff now, thinking about his Uncle Jake. They had found him one morning splayed on the rocks with his arms stretched out to the sides like a dead pelican or an old crow—*as the crow dies*. But how could he possibly have fallen? He was an expert climber, who took painstaking precautions regarding safety—and he wasn't suicidal. At least not when Andrew knew him.

The state sponsored reconciliation with his son that was scheduled for when Zoe was a teenager, never happened. On the day of his eighteenth birthday, Zoe enlisted for duty in the armed forces and, fancying the lifestyle, made it a career. Raised and encouraged by his grandparents, Zoe had become a three star general. On leave from duty for two weeks, the son was now ready to reconcile with his father. They spoke briefly on the phone.

"Amazing, Zoe. I'm so proud of you ... wow, a three star general! Uh ... not five stars yet, like your grandfather?"

"Not yet. But I'm the *best* of the three star generals."

They both laughed nervously with the underlying warmth of tragically separated hearts. They agreed to meet the following week. Andrew had not seen his son since he was six and was terrified at the outcome of finally talking to Zoe after so many years. How could he ever explain what had happened, what had come over him in that blind moment? Could he blame it on nature? That none of us really have free will? That we're merely bio-chemical puppets manipulated by circumstance, victims of emotions, hormones, and external events beyond our control? That's what the judge had told him and what the child psychologist had tried to instill in him over the years. He only needed to believe it. Andrew would bring Zoe his Swiss Army Tool as a small gift. He didn't think he needed it any more.

The pelican, on the verge of collapse from fatigue, attempted one final desperate swoop. Its dinosaur beak opened and dove into the brush at the edge of the cliff, clamping those gigantic razor pincers around some small animal. A rodent maybe? Certainly not a fish—unless fish have legs to climb a cliff. With an unexpected burst of energy, the bird lifted itself into the sky on heavy wings. Tilting its beak upward and tossing its prey into the air, the pelican opened its gullet wide and swallowed some resistant *thing* into the prehistoric depths of its zigzag neck. Andrew could see a misshapen lump struggling within the folds, trying to scramble back up the throat pipe. Suddenly, the pelican dropped from the orange sky, as if a plane had lost its engine, and struck the hard earth a few feet away from where he still sat on the granite slab. From their perch high up in the branches the neatly organized crows scattered into chaos.

Andrew's mouth opened with a child's wonder as he watched the large bird twitch to a still death. He sat there staring back in similar deathly stillness. Above him the orange hue was turning dark rust and storm clouds gathered like a clot. Andrew walked over to the pelican. He kneeled beside its massive body, noticing a small puncture wound at the center of its neck. A drop of blood surrounded the tip of a sharp, curved *nail* that protruded from the snaking esophagus. Slowly, he pulled out his Swiss Army Tool and exposed the shiny scissors. He poked one of its points into the same hole from which the wiry claw pierced the light of day, and snipping upward, carefully peeled back the velvety skin along the throat, as if it were a medical illustration. The red-veined interior matched the color of the clouds above his head. Lodged within the throat pipe, something with a pair of very small, frightened eyes stared up at him, pleading, as its heart beat rapidly, faintly-fading.

The pelican had swallowed a baby badger. Along with the gathering storm, tears amassed and then flooded down Andrew's face, and no matter what he did, he couldn't stop the flow. They seemed to understand each other as their eyes locked in the thickening dark. Abruptly, Andrew gasped in horror. Quicker than a solitary pulse, the flickering pin-light at the center of the badger's pupils imploded into blackness, the way a TV screen shuts down. Andrew choked on the unbaked lump of pain that had been fermenting, like a seedcake, at the bottom of his heart, as the badger's precious, no longer dangerous little mouth, opened to a final dying hiss. And more jagged than the cliff, an irregular fence of baby teeth surrounded and protected the vulnerable little throat that led darkly down, down, and down into the tiniest abyss.