

“Under One Sky”

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12-C

Stepping out into the February morning, Alice folded her arms tightly into herself, her small, soft hand clasped around a Ziploc. The yard that stretched beyond her patio was spotted with green, but as she exhaled, wisps of the winter that was coming to pass still came with her breath.

She stepped off the porch and pressed her shoe onto the first green spot like a first-time swimmer testing the water. It wouldn't be long until spring starts.

Alice searched skyward for them, her scrunched up eyebrows the result of not only the sunlight that shone brightly despite the dark-grey sheet of clouds that covered nearly every bit of sky—but also of worry.

While winters in the area were never terribly freezing, each day of winter she had worried that the feed she brought out for the neighbourhood crows wasn't good enough for them to survive the cold. Each day they weren't already there waiting upon her regular morning arrival she'd imagine they had fallen ill cursing her name, accusing her of poison or some other treachery. Each day, then, that she'd catch a glimpse of their small black figures lowering from the sky or perched atop her beech tree she'd breathe a sigh of relief, beaming.

Today was no different. This time, she barely had time to conjure the horrifying image of a sea of perished crows before the first swooped in with a caw and her thoughts gave way to a toothy smile.

She trudged towards the tray she and her mother had set up months ago. A light layer of ice had covered its surface, where some of the previous batch of feed remained and there sat another small gift.

It all started with a crow which she had fed with some leftover of her lunch from school, in a panic that her mother would scold her for not finishing it. The next morning, the same crow seemed to be back. Although she couldn't be sure of its identity, she fed it with cat kibble from the family cat's food bowl. Soon enough, she received her first gift: a button. It was a small thing, and if Alice hadn't seen the crow leave it behind on the front porch herself, she probably wouldn't have thought anything of it if she even noticed it on the floor. But once she realised what it had been doing, her heart melted. After that, the number of crows that visited her in the mornings and afternoons increased, and so did her gifts.

This time, they had left her another button to add to her growing collection of tiny treasures, which Alice hid under her bed for safekeeping. It would fit nicely along with the other blue buttons, she thought.

The crows kept their distance, looking expectantly at the girl who held their breakfast in her tiny hand.

“Here you go, friends,” she raised her opened Ziploc to the tray and doled out the cat kibble until all that was left in the bag was red powder, taking care to form an evenly thick line across the tray.

Alice stepped back so that the crows wouldn’t be shy to approach their breakfast and watched as they hopped towards the kibble and pecked.

She started back towards her house when she heard a cry from somewhere to her side. It was the same agonized caw of a crow, except the sound curiously came from opposite of where the feeder was. Alice’s eyes searched for the source, though at first, she had looked along her eye-level when it turned out what she was looking for was on the ground.

It was, indeed, a crow.

It was smaller than most of the other crows that were eating at the feeder, but something else was peculiar about it. Its wing was pointing in an odd direction, and when it hopped, it looked as though there was a weight attached to the odd-pointing wing making it difficult. The sight tugged at Alice’s heart.

She crouched to get a better look. “Hi, little crow.”

Startled, the injured crow flapped its uninjured wing.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise,” she cooed. She wanted to reach out to the bird, though for one, she was worried it would only get more frightened by her; for two, her mother had had Alice agree that if she was to help her set up the feeder and regularly buy the feed, Alice wouldn’t get too close to the birds. Being a doctor, her mother had been able to verbally list a considerable number of diseases that birds spread, which to Alice had mostly sounded like a jumble of something-something-sis and worms and bugs and unpleasant-sounding things like that. Although she would

surely never remember exactly what salmonellosis was, she understood the warning in her mother's tone of distress.

Thinking of what to do instead of petting the bird and potentially contracting a disease, Alice realised that the little crow must have been hungry. In its state, the bird wouldn't have been able to fly its way to the feeder.

"You wait here," Alice instructed the bird.

She skipped back inside her house, and within a few moments, she came back out with a handful of red cat kibble.

"Here," she laid out the kibble about a foot away from the bird, careful not to startle it again. "So that you won't miss out."

It hopped its strange hop towards the pile of kibble, seeming to investigate the little round things before taking measured pecks. Was it a new visitor? Alice decided she had to come up with a way to help with the crow's injury. She'd tell her mother, she thought.

"My mother will know what to do. She'll patch you right up," she said, and with that promise hanging in the air, she bolted back inside the white colonial house.

Alice ran upstairs to find her mother putting on her work shoes.

"Alice, what are you doing still undressed? You'll be late for school." Alice's mother was a fashionable woman, and Alice always thought her doctor duties must be quite tame if she could wear such clothing and work in them. It was her mother who had always told her not to soil her clothes doing certain rough activities.

"There's a crow that's been injured," Alice declared pointedly.

There was a beat before Alice's mother said, "So, what do you want to do?"

"I want to help it," Alice's voice was patient, "but I'm not really a doctor."

"Honey, it'd be best if we just leave it to naturally heal on its own. Remember what I said about touching those birds?"

Alice huffed. “Yes.”

“I let you feed them, but you can’t get too close, right? Because you could get all kinds of sicknesses if you do?” Alice’s mother repeated the condition they had agreed upon. “Well, the same goes for me. Get dressed and hurry on to school now, okay?” Alice’s mother’s eyes darted out her window, which faced the road along which the house was. As quick as the glance was, Alice’s forehead was kissed lightly, and her mother was gone.

Alice was in disbelief, but since she wasn’t the doctor in the situation, she couldn’t really argue against her mother’s advice. She would have to settle for feeding the little crow, then.

But then it couldn’t really go anywhere, not while its wing was broken. It seemed that the best thing she could do for the bird was to give it a cosy home for a while. Alice scoured her room for a suitable makeshift bird house until her eyes landed on a box a little bigger than the crow. She turned it upside-down over her bed and out fell a selection of crayons and coloured markers. She would gather them up later.

On the way out she ripped up a newspaper to use as a nest and uttered her apologies to her mother, the newspaper boy, and all those concerned with its conception. She hurriedly set up the box outside and tried to get the crow to make its way inside, but it simply cocked its head around for minutes. Never mind. Alice would try again later.

She got dressed, almost putting her shoe on the wrong foot in her haste. Then, she bolted out the door towards the direction of the school. Upon seeing the figure of the boy in her class who lived in the house across hers, however, she slowed to a brisk walk, shallow breaths making her relief seen in white puffs of air. She didn’t usually see him, as he always got to school later than she did, but as she had been set back by her crusade to help the little crow, it was she who was later. As the boy travelled parallel to her and paces ahead of her, she kept her distance so as not to be seen, but walked almost in step to keep up.

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When Alice got home that day, she found the crow already cosying up in the box she had set. A few more days later, and several various pet foods later, the crow had started to show signs of healing. One day after school, she’d found it hopping, seemingly in circles, around the backyard.

Now, as she sat in her English class with Mr. Robinson, she couldn't buckle her mind down well enough to think about verb tenses and subject-verb agreement. Instead, her mind wandered off to thinking about whether the little crow will have already flown away by the afternoon. She hoped that it would at least wait for her to get home if it was ready to say goodbye.

Alice was amid pondering this when Mr. Robinson announced a pair activity. The entire class groaned as he declared that he will be randomly picking partners for everyone. If Alice had been paying attention, she would have groaned, too, because it was almost certain that the "random" picking wouldn't result in Alice being partners with her closest friend in the class.

True enough, when Alice was paired off, it was with a different girl who she didn't know very well. As the girl approached Alice, she gave a tiny wave that was reciprocated.

Off to the other end of the classroom, one of the loud boys in the class was shouting his complaints. When Alice looked over, she saw that he had been paired with Alice's neighbour from across the street, and he didn't seem to be interested in making his distaste subtle.

"Mr. Robinson, my father said—," the boy protested at the teacher's table as Adrien, Alice's neighbour, stayed silent behind him.

"My pairings are final," Mr. Robinson said. "It's just one activity, Roland."

And that was that.

Throughout the class, Alice's gaze would often drift towards the two boys. Roland's face was in something of a scowl the entire time while Adrien seemed to be diligently working on the whole thing himself. She thought about what he had said in his protest and remembered that Alice's own mother had requested that she keep a distance from the house across the street. Alice had barely listened as her mother droned on about its unruly appearance and the impression she held of the mother who lived there. As an extension, she had been told to be careful around her son, too.

She had merely shrugged at the time, but now she wondered what it was that had her mother make this request. She thought about her crows, and the condition her mother had set. What disease did this boy and his mother carry that led others to see a warning sign hanging over their heads?

Alice continued her work in a daze.

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The mother across the street was outside. Alice slowed her pace to see she was frantic, head to the floor as she searched her front porch. As she got closer, she saw that Adrien was there with her as well.

“Where could it have gone?” Adrien’s mother exclaimed, the frustration in her voice clear.

Adrien seemed to respond, though Alice couldn’t hear his soft voice from the distance.

“I’ve looked everywhere *inside*,” his mother cried. “Believe me, this is the last place I would think to look, too.”

Adrien must have said something again.

“It’s not just an earring,” she said a word Alice didn’t know. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Adrien then looked down as if to search, but it was a half-hearted movement. Then, his gaze lifted until his eyes locked with Alice’s. She quickly looked away and walked up to the side of her house, taking the path to her backyard, as if she wasn’t eavesdropping.

When she was out of sight, she sighed. Her thoughts drifted to the little crow. Going to where she had set up the bird box, she found it to be empty.

She looked towards the feeder, and there, she saw it picking at scraps from the morning’s feed among other crows. A tear formed in her eye; Alice was proud that it had found the strength to fly up to the tray on its own. But then she saw that the crow was having trouble, and was getting squished by its fellow crows, rendering it unable to get to any food at all. She was shooing the other crows and scolding them for not letting their friend eat, too, when a glimmer of light caught her eye, by the little crow’s foot.

“What have you got there, little crow?” The crow cawed. Her hand reached out to the sparkling present that lay by the crow, and nestled the cold metal upon her palm.

It was an earring.

Alice marvelled at its beauty, noting how it was the type of earring her mother would wear when she would go out at night in one of her fancy dresses: silver and shining, designed to dangle from an ear to be shown off. Could this be the earring the mother across the street was looking for? Alice's thoughts uncontrollably swung from this probable fact to setting the earring's beauty against the unmanaged backdrop of their home. She dismissed this thought immediately.

She had to return it. There was no question about that. As it was stolen by the little crow in her custody, she felt as if she had indirectly stolen it herself.

She would have to return it, but *how* was the question. She worried that her mother would find out if she went up to the house herself and get angry with her for disobeying.

At school, she would pass the earring on to Adrien. Yes, she would do that.

She looked to her palm where the earring lay, then to where the little crow was picking at scraps on its own. She sighed.

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Alice balanced on the balls of her feet, thinking of what she would say to the boy. How would she explain the reason why she has his mother's earring? Telling him that her friend crow had found it for her sounded ridiculous, but it was the truth. She didn't want to be pinned as a liar, but at least she'd know it was the truth.

She approached him during recess. Unable to say anything, Alice simply held out her hands with the earring laid upon them. It took Adrien a few seconds, but he realised what it was.

"Where did you find this?" He didn't sound like he was accusing her of anything, which Alice hadn't expected.

"I..." Alice weighed her options, her lies and truth and half-truths, while Adrien just waited. "The crows found it."

Adrien's face was of mild bewilderment, so she quickly explained.

"So that's why I see all those crows around your house," he muttered. She heaved a sigh of relief. He believed her, and she wasn't going to be branded an earring-stealer.

They stood there, seconds passing like minutes. She didn't know what brought her to do it, but she said, "Would you like to see them?"

"The crows?" She nodded.

He thought it over. "Yeah, that would be nice."

Alice smiled, and the rest of the school day carried on.

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Later that afternoon, she led him through the path along the side of their house. The grass was nearly fully green now, and it wasn't so wet anymore. Taking out another bag, she beckoned him to come closer. He watched as she formed a line of chopped fruit on the tray.

A caw sounded from behind them. It was the little crow, emerging from the bird box flapping its wings. They seemed to move fluidly now, and the small black figure lifted one, two feet off the ground. It landed beside the tray and next to its fellow crows.

Alice laughed in glee, and Adrien joined her. She had told him all about the crow she was caring for on the walk home. While, it was nice to feel like she had saved its life, she knew that it had made its recovery all on its own, and for that she was proud. She continued to watch as they nibbled on apple bits, wondering if it would leave now that it's healed.

"Goodbye, little crow," she whispered, reaching for the crow. Adrien looked at her, then his eyes moved towards the house.

Alice's eyes followed. Her mother was at the window, watching them from inside the kitchen. Alice couldn't make out her face, but she knew it was probably scowling.

But she didn't care. For now, all she could look at or think about was how her little crow dined with its friends. She didn't think about diseases or earrings or unruly houses. She let the feeling of her mother's eyes sink into her even as the crows flew away for the night under one twilight sky, the little crow in tow—stumbling, but making it.

She would think about consequences later.