

Crows at the Farm

by Vincent Rupp

“You taking the truck out?”

“Yeah, saw a couple crows yesterday. Gonna make sure there isn’t a roost in the woods.”

Billy gasped and looked at Rose. Quietly, she whispered “The Crow Man!”

Margaret turned the dough in the pot and looked briefly over her shoulder to ask “Who’s the Crow Man?”

Rose spoke quickly, with excitement. “He’s made of crows and can disappear and then come back anywhere.”

“He’s not MADE of them.” Billy, exasperated, corrected. “He’s a man who BECAME a crow and he flies with them and keeps them safe.”

Margaret understood: The long bus ride, the endless speculation, a story embellished across decades of children. George was lacing his boots, shaking his head. She set the rings on the towels, blotting the extra oil. “Hush, children, the doughnuts will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Why didn’t we just buy them at the store? A dozen was only four dollars.”

“We don’t have money to waste on something your mother can make herself.”

Margaret agreed, but she’d have been less harsh. The other children had newer clothes and their parents’ truck tires weren’t bald.

She listened to the engine noise dwindle while she put on the glaze and let it set. Hours to make the treats, and they’d be gone in minutes. It reminded her of their new existence here; so much work, and it could be gone so quickly.

“Momma is that a crow?” Rose pointed out the window at the yard. Margaret wiped her hands and came to look. A jet-black bird poked its beak around in their waste heap with quick motions.

“Yes it is, sweetie.”

The crow looked up, unmoving. Billy pointed “Look, there’s two more.” Margaret saw them, further from the house, close to the field. The sweet sprouts of corn had just appeared the previous morning. The bright green dots in the rows had brought her immense relief, but now a low dread crept back in.

There was a rush of feathers and flapping against the glass; they all drew back, startled. A large crow had landed on the windowsill, black toes and black claws gripping the ledge. It took a few steps and cocked its head.

Billy peered closely at the crow’s black eye. “Is it looking at us?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s just a bird.”

The crow took another step and jammed its beak at a spider web, coming away with a large brown spider.

“Ewww crow don’t eat that!”

“Look there’s even more now!”

Another three birds landed on the grass, looking around in the dirt.

“We’ll tell your father later. For now, go scare them off.”

They ran for the door, four arms flailing. He charged the birds, cawing and flapping his arms. Rose shrieked and laughed as the crows scattered to the wind.

“Damn birds are everywhere. Woods are crawling with them for miles.” He scrubbed his hands in the sink. “Another section of fence came down too. Never should have hired that kid.”

Margaret rubbed his shoulders. They knew the first years would be difficult, but they’d work hard. They’d pay down the debt, find good help, and buy more land.

“We’ll make it work. We’re doing better than most new folks.” He nodded; weather, illness, pests: stories of ruin were everywhere. He rinsed the dirt out of the sink.

“Mommy the crows are back.”

“What?” George rushed angrily to the window. Two crows had landed on the apple tree; its branches were still bare from winter. “Why didn’t you tell me you’d seen them?”

“George, it’s okay. The owls are keeping them out of the fields.” The old-timers swore by real owls, expertly stuffed, mounted on five-foot stakes, and repositioned every morning. These owls eat crows, they said. George had fumed at the cost, but protecting the fields wasn’t optional.

He wouldn’t wait and hope. He grabbed his gun from above the door, a Winchester 1873 carbine, handed down from his father before the infection took him.

“George, stop!” She pulled on his arm, but he jerked it away.

“They’re gonna get bolder if we don’t scare them off.” The seeds had gone in late; there wasn’t enough growing season left to replant.

The crows didn’t react when George banged the door open and stormed down the steps. When he fired a shot into the air, they stopped and looked at him, sideways, one black eye each.

He pulled the action and leveled the gun. Both birds stepped off their branches and took to the air. He lined up carefully, and fired at the closer bird. The crow jerked hard, but didn’t drop. He’d hit its wing, near the body.

For minutes, it tried to fly. A species never known for graceful soaring, this specimen beat its mangled wing against the air, climbing at first but then losing altitude as it lost blood. Its light lifeless body struck the ground nearly soundlessly.

Crows nearby peered at the corpse, saw it motionless, began to caw and croak. Others picked up the call, flew to investigate, and within minutes the crow funeral was underway.

Billy saw the flocks first. They came quickly from the woods past the horizon, and then from all directions. There were scores of flocks, hundreds of birds to a flock, a million ink-black feathers moving and so many voices cawing incessantly. The sound filled the fields as the shadows raced over them.

Rose held Margaret’s leg tightly. “Mommy, are they mad?” She pressed her head into Margaret’s dress.

Margaret held Rose’s head with an almost steady hand. “I don’t know, sweetie.”

An hour later, the crows still called from the distance, but the family had gone back inside. Out of sight of the house, a solitary figure approached the fallen bird. His ragged black clothes fluttered behind him, his black hair shook in the breeze. The ten

thousand mourners quieted as one. He kneeled near the bird, took it gently in his hands, and spoke very softly, under his breath.

He rose slowly, his gaze fixed on the distance, in the direction the crow had come.

George woke early, even before the pre-dawn light. He'd not had enough food or enough sleep, but it'd be better in a few hundred days, if he put in his time. He went first out back to feed the chickens, then into the barn to tend to the horses and milk the cows.

Sometimes he woke up Maggie to help, but he liked to watch her sleep; she'd gather the eggs and have biscuits ready before he went back inside anyway.

It was barely light when he left the barn. That's when he saw them, filling the fields, standing a dozen per yard along the length of every row of barely-sprouted corn. He froze, stuck between rage and terror, but slowly he calmed; the corn shoots were still there, still green, as far as he could see in the indigo light.

The crows all shook their wings. Dozens alit into the air, flapping furiously before diving onto the owls, thrusting beaks through the feathers and tearing off bits of carefully preserved skin.

If he'd had his gun, maybe he'd have tried to shoot them. Instead, he watched, helpless and awed, as a large portion of his inheritance was destroyed by the blades of tiny mouths. In under a minute, as a mass, the thousand crows took to the air and dispersed in a hundred directions.

George went to the nearest owl; he took it in his hands and knew the loss was total. Looking up, choked with powerless rage, he saw a black figure far on the horizon. He shouted and ran, heedless of damage to the crop he was so desperate to protect. He ran hard for minutes, stumbling across the soft ground. But the figure turned and walked away and disappeared in the darkness.

Margaret noticed the owls and found George loading the truck. He'd siphoned five gallons from the tank and was hefting the canister into the bed. He didn't wait for her to ask. "He did this. I saw him."

"They didn't touch the corn. Just leave it alone."

He shook his head adamantly and got in, slamming the door. "We gotta protect what's ours, Maggie. No matter what." He wrenched the truck into gear and sped off, leaving her helplessly watching his trail of dust.

When the road ended, he drove into the trees until the brush was too thick. He pushed the canister off the bed and rolled it deeper into the trees. All around him, every bare branch was covered with dense black feathers and inquisitive little eyes.

"Come out!" he yelled. He uncapped the canister and pushed it over. Gasoline spilled out with a slow glug-glug. He took out the matches. Louder, he shouted "You better come out!" The trees fluttered darkly, casting deep shadows on a figure dressed in black tatters a hundred yards away.

"You leave my fields alone!" Crows leapt from the trees and took to the air, circling overhead and through the branches behind him. They began cawing at once, tens of thousands of overlapping threats.

He shook the matches. "You think I can't kill them all?" The noise drowned out his words, and he knew he couldn't. He put the matches away and pulled his rifle from the truck. He braced it against his shoulder and pointed at the still figure in the wood's depths. The birds changed course; they flew densely between the men.

“Damnit!” He threw the gun into the truck. Whether he tried to kill the birds, their habitat, or their master, he would lose. “What do you want?!” he screamed above the shrieking of the crows. At his words, they fell silent, stopped their insistent flapping, sat gently down, and all was still.

George looked around, confused at first, then felt the enveloping peace. Surprised, he said “That’s it? That’s all you want?” A single caw pierced the silence and hung in the air. “And you’ll leave my fields alone?” From a different direction, another caw sounded.

The early sun glinted on a million shining black feathers as George loaded the half-full canister back into the truck.

It’s a cold winter morning, with frost on the panes. A black bird brings a stick to a garbage can, pries the metal top open, and nudges the lid onto the ground. The clatter attracts a girl to the window. Excitedly, she says “Mommy a crow opened our trash!”

The mother knows the land’s generations; she doesn’t look over, just simply says “Better leave it alone, sweetie.”