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Max

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## MAX

Crows arrive heavy as always. The mid-November sky over Auburn turns from gray-blue to black-sheen as the birds by the tens of thousand settle in. Most people here hate to hear the shrill caws and the thump of wings punishing the air. It's the sound of something ending. The birds will stay until everything freezes over and they're forced to shrug off south. While the crows blanket Auburn, citizens keep their faces contorted into scowls and their shoulders and necks hunched as if they're ready to crouch and spring and extend into the sky.

140 Torrance Graff puckers his lips in worry as he climbs off the school bus and hurries home under the weight of his backpack. He is a fast boy, the second fastest in the fourth grade, and can keep up with most kids on bikes when he wants to. Houses on the sheepish county road are few and far between. The plots of land are too big to bother sculpting along the property lines where eager trees have scuttled up in clumps and pitch leaves into the above-ground pools sagging behind the raised-ranches. These trees here are not big enough to interest more than a few dozen crows at a time. One bird winks by Torrance, lands, and hops in a neighbor's driveway, pecking gravel. The boy adjusts his backpack and unzips his coat. It is not yet cold enough for the kind of thing his mother made him wear this morning. A jacket would have been fine.

The mother is waiting for Torrance at the end of the drive with five other mothers. The women are armed with rifles and shotguns and slingshots. Torrance's mother holds a hunting bow and a quiver of arrows thin as knitting needles. They are wearing new black hunting jackets with the word "MACS" embroidered in red thread on the back. Torrance's mother did the stitching in July. These are the Mothers Against Crows. Somebody had to do something after what happened to Torrance's older brother. There are still a few more mothers—Linda and Katharyn and Barb—finishing chores that the MACS will fetch soon.

"How was school?" Torrance's mother asks as her boy humps up. The mother used to be beautiful. Now she is super-thin with matted hair and fierce eyes. There are wrinkles in her cheeks from her weird, wide smile.

Torrance can't concentrate. He needs to use the bathroom.

“What did you learn today?” says another mother, a bruiser.

“I need to pee,” Torrance whispers to his shoes.

“They’re doing state capitals,” a woman answers. Her daughter Ruby is in Torrance’s class.

“What’s the capital of Nebraska?” Torrance’s mother asks suddenly in a pitch that quiets the women. The mothers hold their weapons awkwardly, waiting. They pray Torrance knows the answer. A complicated wind sneaks around a stand of fir and rattles the clip holding the semi-erect American flag at half-mast. The flag hasn’t been raised full since early January when Max passed.

Torrance doesn’t say anything.

“They’re going alphabetically,” the other mother says in order to not make this a big deal. “Only up to Indiana, from what I understand.”

“That’s an easy one,” the bruiser says.

“Yes it is,” Torrance’s mother pinches through her smile. Her eyes unwaver from her boy.

“Can I go?” Torrance asks.

“*May* I,” a mother corrects.

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“Dad’s got church this afternoon and will be home around six to make dinner. I’ll be back by seven.”

“With a bagful of crow!” a mother on the periphery hollers. The women hoot and shake their pieces.

“Stay inside.”

“May I play in the yard?”

“Nebraska?”

“It’s Lincoln, Mom.”

The Graff house has been fortified against crows. There’s razor-wire stapled on the roof tiles and fake plastic owls perched on the porch. The yard has a half-dozen scarecrows with faces the mother carefully crafted to look frightening. Torrance helped water down the ground to make it soft so the father could drive the scarecrow-sticks in. So far this season the crows have stayed away from the home. Torrance knows if they do come, the mother will turn them into pin-cushions. She has spent several hours in the backyard every morning improving her aim and can riddle a cigarette pack from sixty yards, no problem.

Torrance takes his shoes off before entering the house. Inside, it smells floral from the jars and jars of potpourri the mother puts out. He sets his backpack in the foyer and parts the living room drapes to watch the MACs situate their weapons in the back of their minivan before filing in and pulling away. Auburn's annual crow hunt runs for five days, and this is day one. Last year the mother didn't participate. Much has changed since then.

Torrance uses the bathroom, swats down a cowlick, and heads outside. He walks along the county road past the cemetery and toward the pumpkin field. In the field are hundreds of pumpkins scattered like tumors. What the farmer wanted to sell for Halloween he's already taken and won't bother with the rest. From the school bus window, Torrance has been watching one particular pumpkin grow, on the other side of the field. While the other pumpkins are in various stages of letting go, this one seems to be expanding. For two weeks Torrance has wanted to investigate, which was impossible under his mother's scrutiny. Torrance has strict boundaries that do not include here.

Now, though, with the crow hunt, there is a window.

142 With a rush of excitement, the boy dashes out into the field. He leaps over pumpkins and dances around grappling vines. The ground is dry with the exception of occasional pockets of water where the earth dips dramatically. Clods of dirt shake loose in Torrance's footfalls.

A few non-crows peck at one or two of the seeping gourds and snatch the seeds. Crows won't trouble themselves with the thick rind and, until the pumpkins are ready to concede defeat and spill their guts, they'll stay away. Two big jays tussle in the drainage ditch. Torrance reaches the pumpkin sooner than he thought he would. Up close, it is not as big as he thinks it should be. From the road, he was imagining tractor-tire size, something he could hollow out and hide within. What he's standing next to is the size of a medicine ball. It barely reaches his waist. Slumping against it, Torrance puts his hand to his chin and puckers his lips. On the other side of the field, beyond the drainage ditch, a high fence circumscribes the dump. The city has planted trees around the fence line in an effort to block the view, but the trees are still young and Torrance can see the soft mound of trash rising up to the sky. Between the implacable clouds and the waste, buzzards and gulls circle and dive and fight. Sometimes a flock of pugnacious crows will fly over to push the bigger birds down the hill.

Most of the time the wind blows westward at the setting sun and keeps the stink of the place off the houses.

Torrance turns back to survey the field for the possibility of something larger than what he's got here. He's old enough not to get his hopes up. It really is too late for anything to grow. Now is the wilting season, which is a shame. Soon all the pumpkins will droop back into the ground. For Halloween, the mother had dominated the single pumpkin they carved, leery of a blade in her son's hands. Torrance is not a baby and resents being treated as such. He is a trooper. He can handle a knife. He can take care of himself after school. He is not frail like his older brother had been. He's fine—maybe too often anxious—but mostly all right.

In a huff of dirt comes a brown sedan down the county road. It is his father's car. Torrance drops to his knees and hides behind the pumpkin. He should not be home so soon—it is not six yet. The father comes on. Torrance knows the old man is listening to gospel on the radio because he is bobbing his head. He's got his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel. He's wearing his dusty-brown hat, which he believes he looks good in. He's of the mind that people trust a man in a good hat, and since he is a real estate agent, trust is his business. The hat is part of the uniform. Lately there haven't been any houses to sell. This is the dead season.

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When the father has passed, Torrance bolts. He cuts through the field and flies over the small graveyard—staying clear of Max's headstone. It is a miracle he doesn't trip. By the time the father is in the drive, Torrance is midway through and in full stride. All the boy needs to do is skip over a few more graves, scale a shoddy retaining wall, and wiggle through the bushes.

Then he's in his yard.

And the father is there waiting for him, a smirk stitched across his face, among the scarecrows, arms folded.

"Go on and catch your breath," the father says.

Torrance puts his hands on his hips and gulps at the air.

"You're fast when you want to be," the father slides his hands into his jacket pocket. "Get you onto the track team."

"I'm fine," Torrance breathes.

"I saw you."

"Don't tell Mom."

"I came home to change, not to check up on you. I didn't expect this."

"I'm fine, Dad."

"You're surprised."

"Winded."

"I normally keep a change of clothes in the trunk, right?"

"How would I know?"

"You know more than you let on, boy."

Torrance feels a wave of heat pass beneath his collar. Running in this coat is all wrong.

"I need a change of clothes," the father states.

"Congratulations," Torrance offers.

"Don't."

"What do you want?"

"Get in the car."

"Mom will freak."

"I won't tell if you won't tell."

"It's going to be like that?"

The father offers his palms. "Get in the car."

The streets of downtown Auburn are lined with churches—Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Greek Orthodox. The tallest and most ornate among them is the Catholic Church with its spires and stained glass and golden trim. Outside the church, a congregation of volunteers has gathered, and Torrance and the father join them.

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The priest is glad they could make it. This is good, honest work, he says. He pats a shrinking woman on the shoulder and backs into the church.

"OK," the woman says. "There are goggles and face masks and gloves. Wear these items at all times. Cory has already filled the wash buckets—thank you, Cory—so let's get started."

Torrance halfheartedly slides into the gear. The father grabs a ladder and holds it for Cory's father to climb high. Two other ladders are erected. Torrance sullenly grabs a brush and begins scrubbing a portion of the wall the woman points toward.

The walls of the church are splattered with crow shit—like Cream of Wheat—all up and down the building. At night, the birds clamor to the top of the church to sleep. In the morning they desecrate. A group of parishioners gathers each year to try and stop the crows from roosting. They've tried ringing the church bell every five minutes. They've cranked the organ. They've asked the choir to chip in. They've given altar boys extra-long hoses to spray the roof with holy water. None of this works. Crows aren't nitwits. The church is willing to do anything short of killing the critters. Still, there are dark rumors that a poisoning conspiracy has been hatched, and there are

whispers of electrifying a line. That's all talk. For now, the Catholics turn the other cheek and scrub every afternoon.

Deep down, everyone in Auburn understands that the crows won't change. They've been doing the same thing as long as anyone can remember. After the birds spend the day around the lake eating or by the dump fighting, they all gather in Morrowbie's field to socialize. The Morrowbies can't do anything about it. People say the Morrowbies don't really mind, and people are not wrong. It's free fertilizer. In the early evenings Mr. and Mrs. Morrowbie sit out on the back porch drinking and watching the hypnotic wave of loud birds bend. Hunters have pleaded with the family to have access to the field, but Mr. Morrowbie will not yield. So the hunters congregate on the property line between the Morrowbie field and the Jukes field where a good number of crows weigh down the boughs in an oak cluster. Mr. Jukes is an avid huntsman and an active member of the Auburn Hunting Association. He boasts that he'll eat anything he kills and that munching crow once in a while is something everyone should do. The hunters will pick at the pocket of birds in the oak and bide time. Then, when the birds decide it's time—based on some bird logic—platoons by the hundreds lift from the Morrowbie field and fly over the Jukes field on their way downtown. And that's when the hunters really have at it.

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Torrance makes sweeping concentric circles over an area of bleached stone. If his mother only knew. The droppings are infested with bacteria. The mother's sure the crows are to blame for shoving Max over the edge. Someone, she's sure, stepped in the mess and tracked it into the house where her oldest son was paying the price of chemotherapy. With a weakened immunity, psittacosis in the crow crap infiltrated Max's system to give him pneumonia, which he would combat, with the help of modern medicine, for nearly seven weeks. This is how the mother sees it. She has since been anxious for the birds' return.

The father sees it differently; he has to. If anyone tracked crow shit into the house, it was him. He's the one most exposed. He's been scrubbing the church walls for years. So he cannot believe it was his doing. He talked to the priest and the priest backed him up and offered absolution just in case. The truth is, anything could cause pneumonia. Doctors agreed. It was nearly winter, after all. People carry more germs in that season, don't they? All cooped up. And Torrance around so many dirty kids at school—who could blame him? It was just Max's time to go, that's all. It's sad, it sucks, it will

always hurt, but it's over now. Blaming the birds, the father reasoned, was the mother's way of grieving. He didn't envy the crows any.

Torrance, at the wall, keeps circling the same spot well after it's clean.

The mother arrives home late. Dinner's cooling on the stove. The father has already made Torrance say his prayers. The boy has been allowed to nibble on a butterless roll.

"Ha," the mother says, entering the house and removing her shoes. "Who wants to guess how many I got?"

"You're late," the father says.

"Torrance?"

"Five?" Torrance asks.

"Oh, no."

"Do you need to gloat?" the father asks.

"Eight?"

"Nope."

"Not a dozen," the father says.

146 "And it's only day one!" the mother exclaims.

"Any in flight?" Torrance asks.

"Two. And I clipped one good. It still has my arrow."

"It's egregious," the father states.

"Hey, they're big birds. They don't have to come here and kill our children."

"Would you clean up for dinner?"

"Where are they?" Torrance asks.

"Wanda's got a full-size freezer in her garage. We're going to keep them in there until it's over. All told, the MACS took forty-two. We even beat the American Rifling Club. I think the only group who bagged more than us was the VFW. But they'll tire as the week goes on, mark my words."

"We're eating."

"I'll just be a sec," the mother says. She whistles into the bedroom.

The father ladles stew into bowls. Torrance swings his legs under the table and rubs his eye.

"Tell me about school, son," the father says.

Torrance doesn't want to talk about it.

"What are you learning?"

"I don't know."



"You've got to do better than that, Tory."

"They're studying state capitals," the mother says, returning to the kitchen. She's put her hair in a ponytail and slipped into a sweatsuit.

"What else?"

"I don't know, Dad. I don't want to talk about it."

"Not good enough," the mother says.

"Mom."

"Look, I'm in a good mood. I'm happy. Don't blow it," the mother says through her upturned lips. "Pass the rolls, Hank."

Reluctantly, Torrance says, "I'm worried about tomorrow."

"Why?" the father asks.

Torrance spoons his stew.

"Do you have a big test?" the mother asks. "Look at me when I speak to you."

"No."

"We can't read your mind," the father says.

"I can read his mind," the mother says. "It's all cloudy tonight. What's eating you?"

Torrance finds it difficult to keep things from his mother. He feels like a marionette under her gaze. "Tomorrow is Scoliosis Day," he admits. It feels a little better to get it off his chest.

"Oh, don't worry about it," the father says, "your spine's fine."

"How do you know?" the mother asks.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Sit up, Torrance. Keep your back straight. You slouch too much, like your father."

The father sits upright.

"It's not my spine I'm worried about," Torrance says.

"I've never noticed anything wrong with his spine, is all I'm saying," the father says. "Slouching doesn't make it crooked, anyhow."

"Stand up," the mother gestures with a hand. "Take your shirt off and turn around."

"Mom!"

"Don't fight me, boy."

"I don't want to take my shirt off."

"I'm your mother."

"Tomorrow. In front of everyone."

"Don't be silly," the father says. "Guys go shirtless all the time."

"I just don't."

"Practice now, in front of us."

Torrance feels constriction in his throat threatening to choke tears out.

"Mom, I don't want to."

"Just close your eyes; it won't hurt," the mother softly hums. This refrain comes easily to her. She has said it too often.

"Max told me about it. He said it was horrible. Kids teased him. They said he looked like a bag of sticks and stones."

The mother purses her lips.

"All right," the father says. "I see what this is about."

"What is it about?" the mother says, swiveling.

"Dear, this is a hard time for all of us."

"Hard time?"

"I caught Torrance in the cemetery this afternoon."

Torrance feels the constriction in his throat relax and surprise pop across his brow.

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"Torrance?" the mother asks.

"I told him I wouldn't tell you—he didn't want to get in trouble for leaving the yard."

"You went to see Max?"

"Don't push him, Hun."

"How do you think he came into this world?"

"Don't rush, now," the father coaxes. "Tory, I'll call the school nurse tomorrow and get her to view you in private. Your brother was sick, but he was strong. He was better than them, not made for this world. Everything here was beneath him. Don't forget that."

"That's true," the mother agrees, leaning back in her chair with her eyebrows arched. "Now eat."

Torrance is wearing his brother's jacket. It's a little tight, but more appropriate for the temperature. He hops off the last step of the bus and onto the pavement. His backpack is lighter than usual this afternoon—the teacher, a crow hunter, was in good spirits and decided on little homework. Just memorize a half-dozen Midwestern rivers.

The clouds are where they always are, above. Torrance can't remember when he last saw the sun. The gray makes sense to the boy; it's all part of something big.

A crow in the neighbor's drive rolls a stone around in its beak and nods. Torrance nods back. They share a secret.

The mother is waiting with the other MACs. Torrance takes his time walking up to them. He practices whistling as he comes. The flag on the pole is dying for attention.

"How did I let you get out of the house with that on this morning?" the mother asks.

"I don't know," Torrance answers.

"It's a nice jacket," Ruby's mother says.

"We could stitch a MACs patch on it," the bruiser chips in.

"Don't," Torrance's mother hisses through her teeth and cuts her eyes at the bruiser.

"I'm sorry," the woman says with arms outstretched. "I just meant for support."

"This is Max's jacket."

"I know, Tory. It's not yours. Go inside and take it off."

"Can I play in the yard?"

"May I," a mother corrects.

"You going to stay in the yard?"

"May I go a little further?"

The mother stares hard at her boy. She has thought about this all day. Torrance hasn't done much in the way of grieving. She knows. She watches him closely. Going to the cemetery yesterday was big. Maybe he just needs a little room. And now the jacket.

"In a coat, maybe," the mother acquiesces.

Torrance removes his shoes, uses the bathroom, and spies from the window for the women to leave. He pulls a black magic marker he took from art class from his backpack, puts his shoes on, and heads out. He keeps the jacket on. It is red and silver and has a hood for the wind.

Torrance walks by the cemetery to the pumpkin field. From the jacket pocket he withdraws and unfolds a piece of worn paper. The page is filled with skeletons that Max drew. Max liked to draw. It is what he did to pass the time waiting to go to the hospital, while he was in the hospital, and when he was

home recovering. Sometimes he'd show Torrance what he'd done. Many of the illustrations were really good. Torrance remembers one drawing of a snow-peaked mountain ringed by a halo of soft white cloud. In the contours of the mountain there was supposed to be a face. Torrance pretended he could see it.

*When you look at that mound of trash out back, think of this picture,* Max had said. And Torrance tries.

Most of Max's things are boxed up in the attic and off limits. Keeping them hidden was the mother's idea, so she can furtively riffle through them during the day when nobody is home.

But the jacket was overlooked in the back of the closet.

Torrance sprints across the field—a battlefield strewn with decapitated heads and occasional flaps of scalp—and to the big pumpkin. Withdrawing the magic marker, Torrance tries to copy the face of the scariest skeleton from the page onto the pumpkin. The nose is tiny and pinched to make room for the mouth, which is frozen in a wide scream. There are sharply angled eyebrows in the form of two flapping birds. It is the eyes that make the face frightening. They've got a hollowed-out vacant look and are shaped like two melting discs. Torrance sticks his tongue out as he tries to get the proportions right, and when he's done he steps back to scrutinize his work. It's all wrong. Not even close, really. This pumpkin is not frightening at all. The nose is crooked, the mouth just agape, brows too straight, and the eyes more dumb than haunted. Torrance stamps his feet and rubs his chin. When he tries to rub the marker off the pumpkin, it won't come clean.

"Hell," he says. He spits defiantly with the wind. "Let me try this again."

Sizing up a pumpkin a few rows over, Torrance does his best to make what's on the page come alive. The mouth is better, but the nose is off. Forget about the eyes. He starts on a different pumpkin, which is too soft, so he finds one still hard and sketches the face. This time it's not bad. It's passable. On the page are a dozen different skeletons. Luckily, the skulls are bald and with the right hand could look fine on pumpkins. The paper in one hand and the marker in the other, Torrance sets to work capturing the expressions of Max's skeletons on the pumpkins. He moves from the back of the field forward.

By the time Torrance is startled by a car honking its horn from the county road, he has decorated fifty or so pumpkins. Some of them are looking at the sky, others stare at the ground, and many regard each other.

Midway into a surprised-looking pumpkin, Torrance cocks his head toward the road to see what kind of trouble he's in. The woman in the car, a

yellow Mazda, calls out. "Excuse me," she says, and Torrance decides that he won't need to scamper away just yet.

"Ma'am?"

"Could ya come over here?"

Torrance straightens. He cracks his neck, caps the marker, and folds the paper back into the jacket pocket.

"You lost?"

"Maybe," the woman says. "Could you help me?"

Torrance, curious, brushes dirt off his pants and steps tentatively over to the woman. She has red hair and green eyes, and when she runs her tongue across the row of her upper teeth, Torrance is tantalized. He stands close enough to hold a conversation and far enough to bolt back into the field.

"My name is Cindy Sampson," the woman says, idling in the car. She waits a moment to see if this name registers.

"That sounds like candy."

Cindy's laugh is quick and twittering. "That's sweet to say. What were you doing out there?" When Cindy tosses her head to indicate the field, her hair shakes loose across her forehead.

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Torrance doesn't want to explain this. "I've been told not to talk to strangers."

"Your mom tell you that?"

Torrance holds his ground.

"Well," Cindy says, "you're a wise boy. But I've already told you my name. I work for the *Observer*. A writer. A reporter. I'm working on an article."

"For the newspaper?"

"Yes. I was told I could find members of the Mothers Against Crows around here."

Torrance notices black marker on his wrists. He tries to rub it away.

Cindy can't tell if the boy understands. She doesn't have any children. "The crows. You know about the crows?"

"Yeah," Torrance says.

"What do you know?"

"Well," the boy says, "a lot of people call a bunch of crows a 'murder,' I know that."

"Sure," Cindy says, "that is what they're called."

"My brother told me never to refer to them as a murder and never to trust anyone who does."

"What does your brother call them?"

"Scientists call them a flock. Romantics call them a murder."

"You and your brother are scientists?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you think about all the crows here in Auburn?"

"It's just part of the season. No matter where you live, everyone gets shit on by a bird once in a while," Torrance says. "There's no avoiding it. It's what a person does afterwards that's important."

"You learn that from your brother?"

"There are two kinds of people, those who wipe the stuff off every time and those who go and kill the bird."

Cindy blinks. "Your mother, then?"

"It doesn't make a whit of difference what you do, in the end," Torrance says. "You're just going to get dumped on again."

"Are you scared of them?"

Torrance catches sight of the little cloud his father's sedan is creating as it scoots down the county road.

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"I like them all right so long as they didn't kill my brother. Crows help dead people make the transition into the afterlife."

"Excuse me?" Cindy says. She realizes she's taken a wrong turn somewhere here.

"It's a myth," Torrance says, "ask that man." The boy spins away and lifts off.

Torrance swings his legs under the table and drags his socks along the floor. Tonight his mind is too full for dinner. He eats the dried fish because he understands the consequences of not eating.

The mother chews deliberately and steals glances at her boy often.

"Tell me about school, son," the father says.

"School, school, school, school," Torrance sings.

"Did you get tested?" the mother asks.

"Yup."

"And?"

"I'm clear. My spine's fine."

"See," the father says.

"And you took your shirt off?"

"Of course, Mom. I thought we had to do it in front of everyone, but we didn't. I stood behind a screen. I don't know what Max was talking about."

The mother pounces. "Did you go see him today?" she asks. "Look at me when we talk about him."

"Let's not, then."

"Did you go?" The mother's sharp voice snaps the boy's neck to her.

"Yes," Torrance says.

"Then you saw what I put there."

"Sure," Torrance says with as much conviction as he can.

"Is anyone going to fill me in?" the father asks.

Torrance and the mother are silent—the mother in her smile and the boy with his lips puckered—both digesting the lie.

After a minute passes, the mother breaks the lock on her son. "You'll have to go and see yourself, dear."

"I'm intrigued."

Torrance asks if he can be excused.

"There was a reporter snooping around this afternoon—for the *Observer*. She's writing an article about the crows," the father says.

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Torrance slumps further down his chair.

"Just what we need," the mother says. To Torrance she answers through the side of her mouth, "Eat the greens."

"Asked about the MACs."

"You tell her those birds killed my boy?"

"Our boy. You know I wouldn't say that."

"What did you say?"

"The birds have a right to be here."

"Ha," the mother laughs.

"Everyone has a right to his opinion."

"Yours stink."

Torrance looks at the empty seat across from him and sees Tension sitting there toying with his broccoli.

"You want to talk about this?" the father challenges, elbows on the table.

"Anytime, Hank. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk," she clucks.

The father's weak chin sags into his chest. The mother's back is so straight it's nearly bent backward. "Let's go around and around and around."

Tension rises from his chair. Torrance wants to follow. He sighs deeply and asks, "How many birds did you take tonight?"

It's raining when Torrance steps off the bus in a mood. He's draped in a rain slicker, and the water bounces off his yellow hood and rolls down the covered backpack. Even mostly dry like he is, the boy is shivering. The cold has gotten under his skin.

Standing in the neighbor's driveway waiting under a black umbrella is Torrance's father. His frowning lips are weighing down his chin, and the hat covers over his charcoal-colored eyes. Dwarfed beneath the wide umbrella and with his patient legs neatly tucked together, he looks foreboding to Torrance—a dark messenger.

Reluctantly, Torrance greets him. "Guess God's cleaning the church today?"

"Cute," the father says.

"Mom?"

"Rain doesn't kill the crows."

Father and son shuffle toward the house. When they're close enough, Torrance notices the absent flag.

"Dad?" he asks.

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The father tries to keep his boy under the umbrella.

"I don't need that," Torrance says. "What happened to the flag?"

"Let's not go there. Tell me about school."

"I learned so much."

"You can always be somebody different than you are, son. I ask because I care. Do you know how much I care?"

"I think so," Torrance says, lowering his head and following the splattering rain's lead. "Then maybe you'll understand that there's something I've got to do."

"Shoot."

"I need to go to Max's grave."

"Tory, it's raining."

"I know. That's why I have to go. To get what Mom left. It will get ruined."

The father stares down at the shape of his son's head under the slicker. "Fine. Let's go there now."

"I have to pee."

"Afterwards, then."

"Dad, please. This is something between me and Max and Mom."

Torrance knows this isn't what his father wants to hear, and he also knows that it is exactly what he should say.



The father is quiet the rest of the walk home. When they're on the porch he says, "Put on different shoes."

Torrance leaves the house with a head of apprehension. He does not want to go to the cemetery but is dying to see what his mother left. More than anything he wants to wiggle his way out of the lie he slipped into last night. All day he's been wondering what she could have put next to Max's headstone. His fear and his best guess is that she put a sketch out there, something nice Max drew, and it's been falling apart since Torrance was called in early at recess. It could be something else. The mother is crafty. She quilts and sews and solders and can turn macaroni into figurines. Max used to like the silk flowers the mother made, so she made them by the dozen, and it tears Torrance up to think her roses are being punished in the weather.

At the same time, Torrance doesn't want to visit Max's grave. It's a place so close to the house that it shouldn't be a big deal. Ever since the burial, when the slim, slick, cherrywood coffin dropped down like a seed planted in front of the polished and blanched white headstone, Torrance has stayed away. He knows his parents go there regularly (the mother sometimes goes twice a day or more) to *commune* with Max, somehow—prayer from the father and a one-sided conversation from the mother—and while this may provide them with some degree of comfort, Torrance can't imagine it doing anything for him. Torrance misses his brother. He's been gone nearly a year, and most days Torrance asks himself what Max was doing exactly one year ago. Torrance has to make a lot of this up. One year ago today, Torrance knows, Max went to the movies with the mother, and when Torrance came home from school, his brother told him all about it. Torrance can't recall the name of the film, but he remembers that it was rated R. Max said he couldn't understand why it was rated that way, and Torrance couldn't understand why the mother would take him to see it.

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The falling rain has tails. The sky is reluctant to let it go. It shoots out from the low clouds like thin arrows and stings Torrance's face. The snow boots he's got on make walking cumbersome. If he has to run, for any reason, he'll be slow and certainly get caught.

The grass of the cemetery is slippery. The boy picks his way through, cold to the bone, and weighted down by dread.

Max's grave is not nestled against other plots like the rest of the headstones. The mother purchased room for four graves; she has already planned

for dying out. Eventually Torrance will bookend the family on the left, the father on the right, and Max and the mother will rest in the middle.

When he arrives, Torrance surveys the grounds. He doesn't see anything other than a few stray leaves that have blown over from their backyard. Knowing his mother, Torrance realizes that he might need to kneel down and get a little dirty in order to discover what she left. Shaking, he takes a knee and steadies himself with his hands on the ground. He stays this way with his head bent, just taking in breath and letting it out.

The name on the headstone reads *Maxwell*, which seems off to Torrance since Max was never really *well* at all. Maybe in the afterworld the name makes more sense.

Torrance can't find what his mother left. There are no flowers and no drawings. It is possible that she came out here earlier today to retrieve it. Maybe she never put anything out here in the first place. Trying to think this through, Torrance hears, over the chanting rain, a faint clamoring sound. He cocks his head and strains to hear. It's something, that's for sure, and it may have been there all along.

156 Rising, Torrance startles a crow crouching behind a headstone that startles the boy with its sudden warning call. The two flinch and try to settle—shaking off the rain and regaining composure. At first, Torrance thinks the bird has been pecking at some dead animal. There's a pile of sinewy mush the crow has been feeding on. But it isn't a carcass, just pumpkin innards. As he approaches, the crow bounces a few feet back, spitting and hissing as it does, and crests on a leaning cross near the back of the cemetery. And then Torrance sees another bird at another pile. And yet another. He wearily follows, moving toward the sound, feeling as if he's done all this before.

The mounds of pumpkin lead Torrance to the edge of the cemetery and the tree line. He wades through brambles before he is released from the graveyard, and there he is greeted by a cacophony of crow caws. In the field the pumpkins have been gutted, and hundreds of crows are feasting on the flesh. The smell of the wet birds and the gore hits Torrance in a wave he can taste. Among the triangular bird tracks imprinting the mud are many footprints, as if an army has crossed. Torrance knows that it wasn't an army. He can clearly see what's happened here.

All the faces that he drew yesterday have been hastily carved into the pumpkins. The jack-o'-lanterns sit beside their brains, accompanied by the crows. And there they wail at each other in agony and in celebration.