

Crows

by Judy Loose

“Nana, birds talking to me.”

“What are they saying, Jason?” Sara sat on the back steps of the townhouse deck with her three-year-old grandson. He had quite an imagination. The clatter of the crows was so loud she could hardly hear herself think. The noise irritated her, plucked at her nerves. The birds always congregated in the woods behind her home, but nothing like today. They must be migrating. Did crows migrate? Hundreds, maybe thousands of blue-black wings filled the sky, landing in the woods behind the condo complex. Some were huge, maybe ravens. Did ravens and crows hang out together? The way they were gathering was creepy. It made Sara nervous.

Her grandson was talking. “I’m sorry, Jason. Nana wasn’t paying attention. What did you say?” The din of the birds was distracting.

“They say, ‘come...come...come with me.’” Jason cocked his head. “Can’t you hear, Nana?” He almost looked like a bird. Thin and pale with dark hair and eyes. When he ran, his little arms flapped in the breeze like a baby bird trying to fly.

She listened to the cawing, and it did sound like *come...come....* “I hear it, but they’re probably calling to each other. It looks like they’re having a big crow party.”

“We go to party, Nana? My birthday. Jason’s three.” A Halloween baby. Tonight was Halloween.

“You’re having a party tonight, baby. Everyone will be here. Mommy and Daddy, all your cousins and friends. Everyone’s going to dress up.” Too bad Jason’s birthday landed on

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Halloween, hard to distinguish between birthday and holiday.

“Let’s go in and get ready.” She stood and took his hand to lift him to his feet.

“No, Nana. Birds talking to me.” Jason pulled away. He still had some of that terrible-tuos attitude and disagreed with everything.

“OK, Jason. But let’s listen to them from inside. Nana has some cooking to do.”

“I wanna stay here.” He plunked himself down on the steps and folded his arms tightly against his chest.

“You can stay but don’t leave the deck.” Sara didn’t want to argue; she could see him from the kitchen.

As she stirred batter for a cake, Sara watched Jason through the window. He turned and looked at her every few minutes, grinned, waved, then returned to concentrating on the birds. She mixed orange and chocolate frostings, washed dishes, put things away...stopping now and then to peek out at her grandson.

Finished with her chores, she opened the door to call him. No Jason. Her heart squeezed and her breath stopped. He couldn’t have wandered far. He’d waved at her only minutes ago. Sara scanned the yard and spotted him sitting in the grass by the trees. The air escaped her lungs like an explosion.

He was surrounded by birds. So many birds. What were they doing? Silence, no cawing. Sara panicked and stumbled down the steps. As she ran toward Jason, the crows flew, blackening the sky, the whirl of wings so strong her clothes swirled around her. Sara’s heart drummed against her ribs, banged in her ears. She thought it would burst by the time she reached Jason and grabbed him.

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“Nana, you scared them.” He started to wail, and the crows wailed with him, screeching all around...in the trees, from the roof...as Sara hurried to her house and slammed the door behind her. Jason yowled in her arms.

By the time they’d dressed for the party and the guests had arrived, Jason was happy and playing again. He joined the children and a few adults trick-or-treating. Sara felt silly about her reaction to the birds that afternoon. She told no one. The birds must have landed in the grass, and Jason couldn’t resist. But why didn’t they fly away? They only flew when she ran from the house.

The doors were open to the warm night air. “Do you hear those crows?” She could hear them cawing, calling out, *Jason...Jason....* What an imagination she had, worse than her grandson’s. But weren’t crows usually quiet at night?

Looking out, she could see their black bodies flying, covering the sky, blocking out the moon. She shivered and returned to the warmth of the party. Where were the trick-or-treaters? She wished with all her heart they would return with their candy.

Noise at the front door drew her attention and the children piled in, grinning and chattering and comparing their take. Jason sailed by her and out the back door before she could stop him.

“Jason!” she screamed. “Don’t go out there!” Everyone stared as she sprinted after her grandson.

No Jason on the deck or in the yard. She flipped on the outside lights. Nothing. No child, no birds... no noise. The emptiness chilled her.

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“Jason!” Sara was frantic. Adults carrying flashlights poured into the yard, searching, crashing into the woods.

No Jason.

Sobbing, Sara sank into the grass. “The crows took him,” she said over and over.

Someone called 911. When the police came to organize the search, they sent Sara to the hospital in an ambulance.

A mild stroke, the doctors said. When she told people about the crows, they thought she was hallucinating, her mind scrambled. Sara knew better.

She returned home two weeks later, Jason still missing. The official opinion: kidnapping. Easy to take a child with crowds of children in the streets. No one would notice a stranger enticing a child into a car and speeding away.

Sara brooded around her house, seeing Jason in every corner. He would never visit her again. Her heart was broken. She pictured him sitting in the grass surrounded by crows, talking to them. No Jason, no crows. Silence.

A year passed, and the crows never returned. Not even the few who usually hung out in the woods during the summer. Halloween came, Jason’s birthday. No party this year. Sara had no treats for the youngsters ringing her bell. She turned off the front light and slipped out the door to her deck.

She stared across the lawn to the spot she remembered seeing Jason. Why was she torturing herself? She should move from this place. But something kept her here, some illogical

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hope that he would return. The night carried the voices of children as they skipped from house to house.

Sara sat on the steps. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

And then they came. Thousands of crows glistening in the moonlight descended on the lawn in front of her. What were they saying? *Nana?* No, just cawing. So loud she couldn't bear it.

As she stood to go inside, a giant crow landed on the railing. "*Nana?*"

Sara collapsed on the rough wood floor. The sky filled with crows and ravens... cawing...calling her...*Sara...Sara...Nana...*and the air from their wings lifted her...lifted her into the black night...floating...flying...with Jason flying beside her.