**BIRDS FLY SOMEPLACE**

The crows always left in December, after the other birds had up and gone. They were impossible to miss, sitting in the trees—by then, the leaves had all fallen, leaving black clumps the size of baby raccoons balanced on branches high above Achran’s tiny downtown. When I was little, I would go with my father to the IGA and stick my head out the car window to see them. Even then, I knew it was pointless to ask where they were going. My father had an arsenal of impressively unhelpful answers when it came to my questions; some of his favourites were “Hi Hungry, I’m Dad” and “Oh, I’m sure it’s someplace.”

I got that the other birds went to Mexico or something, but crows were different. They hovered over us with all-seeing eyes—murders upon murders upon murders. And they all left at the same time, as if one sounded the alarm and all the others reacted by spreading their wings to take flight.

Brodie used to draw them using charcoal he nicked from the school’s art room. Within seconds of the caw, the crows would be gone, but he always managed to retain the image in his mind’s eye until it could be scratched down on paper. He drew black wings smudged across a manila sky, the movement of hundreds of them alluded to with nothing more than his simple dexterity.

Birds. That’s all he ever drew.

Around the time I finished sending in all my college applications, I arrived late to our lunch spot, rammed my old beater into the curb and found Brodie slumped on the park bench by the pond. From the street, I could tell it was him; he always wore the same red coat, so bright it was offensive to the eyes.

I headed over and pulled his hat off his head. “What’s up, buttercup?”

His whole body tensed up, and when he spun around, his eyes were empty. It was like he didn’t know me—didn’t know that I came in peace.

“Whoa,” I said. “Your dad piss in your Cheerios or something?”

Brodie jerked forward and stuffed a sheaf of papers into his knapsack. I sat next to him, staring into the partially unzipped black hole that had greedily gulped the sheets. “You okay?” I asked.

“Fine.” His voice was coming apart at the ends, like a fraying thread.

I fished my thermos out of my bag and unscrewed the top. Leftover spaghetti and mozzarella. Yum. “What’s that paper thing?” I asked.

“It’s for school.”

I damn near spat out my pasta. “Shit! I haven’t finished my Trudeau essay.”

“What? Not that.” He didn’t laugh. Didn’t smile, or roll his eyes. For the rest of lunch, he just stared out at the half-curled leaves that sailed like ships on the pond, grunting an occasional response to my ramblings. I couldn’t keep myself from studying his face for clues to his thoughts; there were shadows under his eyes and crimps at the corners of his mouth. This wasn’t his usual melancholy—something was definitely wrong. Wrong enough that I couldn’t help, no matter how much I imagined just zapping his problems away with magic healing powers.

But I couldn’t read his mind, and he didn’t clue me in. Not during lunch, and not during our history class. Just before last period, he stood awkwardly outside his biology classroom before giving me a weak wave and ducking into the world of plastic skeletons and the promise that we wouldn’t see each other for the rest of the day. Maybe that was for the best. No matter how much he said nothing was wrong, I knew I’d done something to piss him off. What else could it possibly be?

On my way to my truck after school, I found him sitting on a bench by the parking lot. I almost missed him, actually, because by that point Brodie didn’t look like Brodie anymore. He wasn’t at band practise, and the Christmas concert was coming up. He had a stack of binders in his arms, sheaves of paper spilling out the sides like flightless wings. And he wasn’t wearing his coat.

Brodie, who knew every single paint colour available at the hardware store, who could remember a phone number after reading it once, who’d be hard-pressed to make a commitment without some sort of legal document, was skipping rehearsal and forgetting his coat.

That was it.

I jogged over to him and dragged him upright, his shirt bunched up in my hand. He made this awful sound—like a cat being garrotted—and tried to fight me off, but all he succeeded in doing was dropping some papers into a pile of slush. “What the hell?” he yelled.

With my free hand, I fished into my pocket for my keys. “You. Me. Dinner. Now.”

“It’s, like, four-thirty. I have to go home—”

“There’s no law against eating early.” I loosened my vice-grip and gave his shoulder a punch. “You’re sad and I have money. If you get in the truck, I’ll let you pick the music.”

The fight evaporated right out of him, and he looked at me with this expression of terrified hope. I don’t think I’ll ever know exactly what struck me about it, but he stared right through my eyes to the back of my skull and told me, “If my dad gets pissed, it’s on you.”

“Oh, please,” I said. “We get it. Your dad’s got a stick so far up his ass he doesn’t need a spinal column. Can we go now?” I unlocked the truck and reached across the seat to open Brodie’s door for him. Once he’d hauled himself in, I took his binders and stuffed them behind the bench.

He reached around and gave the ancient seatbelt a tug. “Where are we going?”

“Timmies, I guess,” I said. Tim Hortons was the dandelion of the urban world, but no one had ever decided to set up shop in Achran.

“Are you serious? That’s a half-hour drive.”

“I don’t have any place else to be.” I snapped the car into gear and gunned the gas. “You going to play DJ?”

He rolled his eyes and cranked up the alt-rock.

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Aside from the mellow beats, Brodie’s phone beeping was a constant soundtrack to our drive. I stole glances at him every time he pulled the thing out of his pocket to take a peek—he’d scroll through his texts, but never respond. At one point, I saw him with the paper again, but he’d tucked it away before I got a good look.

Belmont had a Tim Hortons right on the highway, by the Esso station. It was grimy as hell and hadn’t been renovated in about eight hundred years, so the floor tiles had yellowed like neglected teeth and the menu board was just a backlit piece of plastic with a sticker on it. I could have driven another ten minutes or so and found a place that didn’t make me want to drive my car off a bridge, but Brodie was getting antsy and I was hungry.

The lady who took my order, whose button said her name was Mandy, didn’t look much older than me. She still had braces on, but she also had a tattoo blooming up the side of her neck and nicotine stains on her fingers. College grad, probably, but with a degree in fine arts or whatever—one in a field that was never hiring.

“BLT with extra mayo,” I said, staring up at the peeling menu. “And a medium coffee. One cream, no sugar.”

“Anything else?” Mandy spoke without any intonation, like my order had lobotomized her. If Brodie were in a regular mood, he would’ve been standing next to me and laughing. But instead, he sat at our table and stared blankly at the donut display.

“Yeah. The happiest donut you have,” I said.

Mandy blinked. “I don’t know what that means.”

“That one. With all the colours.”

“That’s a vanilla dip,” Mandy said.

I bit back a sharp remark. “Yeah. Okay. That one.”

“That’s $7.90. Cash or credit?”

“Cash.” Sir John A. MacDonald and I exchanged a glance as I passed the tenner across the counter.

Brodie had his paper out again when I got back to the table and set the coffee down in front of him. “Are you ever going to tell me what that is?” I tried to get a better look, but he pulled it away before I could glimpse more than a scribble at the bottom of the page.

“I don’t drink coffee,” he said.

“You do now. It’ll make you feel better, even if you only hold it.” I took his hands and folded them around the cup. If coffee were any more mystic, I would’ve seen tendrils of light snaking up through his veins, filling his eyes with electricity. But instead, it worked its magic in a quieter way, visibly erasing the angry red of his fingertips.

“Good, right?” I said.

“Yeah.”

His phone chirped again. He took a hand from the coffee cup to fiddle with it under the table.

“Who’s that?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“No one.”

“*Brodie*.”

“It’s just my brother giving me shit for not coming home after band. I was supposed to help him with chores.” He tossed his mobile onto the table. “You want to read my texts?”

“No.” I pushed it back. “You don’t have to listen to him, you know.”

“It’s hard to ignore,” Brodie said.

“Then I’ll make it easy.” I took the phone and ran my fingernail under the back cover. It popped off easily; it had to have been removed a million times before. I pictured Brodie snapping it on and off when he was agitated.

The battery slipped out just as effortlessly. I tucked it into my pocket. “There. No problemo.”

Brodie pulled the husk of his phone—nothing now without its mighty mitochondria—back across the table. He wouldn’t look at me.

Captain, this is Private Ryan reporting. The situation is deteriorating. Repeat: the situation is deteriorating.

“I feel like you’re mad at me,” I said.

Brodie answered with an infinitesimal shake of his head.

“Then why aren’t you talking?”

“Talking is hard.”

“The whole process of living his hard. Take cellular respiration, for example—”

“Heather,” he interrupted. “Stop.”

I thought about maybe amusing him with something outlandish—like climbing onto my chair and shouting a fact we learned in school today. But I didn’t know how Mandy and her vanilla dips would feel about some kid horsing around during her shift, and I didn’t want to have anyone mad at us. So I ate my sandwich and split the donut with Brodie and let that be that.

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He wanted me to take him home, but I couldn’t do it. Not like this. I had no idea what was waiting for him there—a pissy brother, upset parents. But I didn’t argue with him; instead, I drove with my hazards on and kept my eyes peeled for side roads shooting like capillaries off the highway. It was all relative, really. I was technically driving him home, but if we stopped and held our breath along the way, the destination wouldn’t change.

My time machine was an access lane between two farmers’ fields. It was dusk, but I could see barren trees reaching above us, and clumps of blackbirds sitting so far up they seemed to blend into the waning blue of the evening. Just a few moments of peaceful darkness and homeostasis—that’s all I needed.

“There’s a blanket behind my seat,” I said, and ignoring Brodie’s confusion, I climbed out of the truck and shimmied onto the hood. The sky was clear above me; stars dripped through the nighttime fabric.

I could practically hear the wheels in Brodie’s head clunking around. After a few minutes, he climbed up after me, dragging my emergency quilt behind him. “I told you to take me home, Heather,” he said.

“That’s not what you need right now,” I replied.

We lay very quietly. That way, the universe’s omnipotent eye would slide right over us and we’d never have to go home. We would breathe the air and drink the rain. The night would pull us under, and we would become as we always were meant to be: insignificantly significant.

And then, finally, he spoke: “U of T rejected me.”

I shifted onto my side so I could see his face; Brodie’s eyes were wide and stretching wider. He pulled the blanket over his chin and stared off into the distance, emptying himself into the woods.

“The letter was the notice,” I said.

He nodded.

“You told your dad yet?”

He shook his head.

“You’re going to have to.”

I know that,” he said. “Just...my dad talks nonstop about him being an alumni and how he’s got ‘big hopes’ for me. And if I tell him, he’ll look at me like I’m a waste. I didn’t study hard enough and now I’ve messed everything up.”

“FUBAR,” I said.

“Yeah. Whatever.” His voice tightened, the way tearful voices always do.

“Maybe your mom can help out,” I said. But whenever I thought about Brodie’s mother, I was reminded of a ghost: shimmery, pale and never quite present.

“No.” He puffed out a breath. The vapour bled off into the dark. “I don’t even know anymore. It’s only been a day and I feel like I want to die. God *damn* it.”

“You don’t want to die,” I said. “You just want to stop existing.”

He was crying, perfectly silent. Tears rolled down the side of his face and soaked the grimy edge of the quilt. “It’s so dark,” he whispered. “It’s everywhere, all the time. I’m *made* of it.”

I slipped my hand under the blanket and squeezed his wrist. “Your left arm isn’t. I zapped it with my healing powers.”

“Your healing powers can’t fix this,” he said.

“They can if you let me try.”

Up in the trees, a crow gave a mighty caw. Another responded, first repeating the message, then adding his own—a natural sort of Morse. And when they spread their wings, the others followed, exploding from the trees and into the night.

“Where do you think they’re going?” I asked.

Brodie shrugged.

They were gone in a few seconds. I tried to keep that image in my head, but the memory distorted in half as much time. A few heartbeats more and the fragments took flight after the crows. But that wasn’t important—all that mattered was that they would be back.

I nudged Brodie with my elbow. “You should draw them.”

His eyes were still soppy and glistening, but the slightest smile now graced his face. “Maybe I will,” he said.

**TOTAL WORDS: 2484**