

Something in the Air — Paul Blake

The midnight black crow flew over the tops of the immature trees which poked through the broken roofs of the terraced houses. Its path was erratic as it followed the air currents. Its black eyes searching. The crow swooped down, wings flaring as it spied its treasure. An oval stone with a polished gleam to it lain between patches of long grass and weeds. The crow landed beside it. It cocked its head to the side, listening for a moment. Satisfied that there were no immediate predators it pecked at the stone. Once. Twice. The stone jumped with each peck but did not open. The crow lifted a foot and picked the stone up in its claws. It flapped its wings and bunched its thigh muscles and pushed off from the ground. As it did a black cat leapt from its hiding place, claws extended and landed where the bird had been. The cat followed the crow until it passed over the remains of a church, windows smashed, roof beams exposed to the elements. The crow flew on, carrying its prize. In the distance, it spied a structure glinting in the sunlight. It turned its tail feathers to head towards it. Once over it the crow unfurled its legs and dropped the stone, it circled following the stone down eager to gorge on the contents once exposed.

Dean wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm, avoiding the wet mud and manure was on his hands. He'd spent the past two hours planting rows of seeds for the upcoming winter season's crop of vegetables for the community. It was humid under the giant Perspex panels of the football pitch sized greenhouse. Condensation ran down the yellowed acrylic walls in rivets. It had been over a decade since the overhead solar-powered fans had worked. In order to maintain ventilation and reduce condensation the windows in the ceiling, at the end of every shift after the airlocks closed, would automatically open to let air in and a three per cent hydrogen peroxide solution sprayed from sprinklers in both the ceiling and the floor, preventing the spread of bacteria and fungus among the crop. Dean crouched back down, trowel in hand. Dig, plant, cover, shuffle over, repeat.

The stone followed the laws of gravity and fell to the earth, spinning and turning, turning and spinning. The crow's beady eyes tracked its motion. It struck the centre of one of the acrylic panels with a thunk and then a crack. The years of weathering, well past the manufacturer's generous warranty period, had taken their toll on the plastic material. It had withstood over fifty years of brilliant and not-so-brilliant summers, bitter winters, and the hot day—cold

day—hot day variations of half a century of early springs. The crow’s stone broke the greenhouse’s back. The crack widened, and the panel fell.

Dean faintly heard the stone hit, not enough to turn his head though, but he heard the sound of the panel shattering and falling, and heard the scream from Catherine as the panel hit her. He looked and his body moved before his mind evoked the lessons drilled into him from the youngest age. An automated voice blared from Greenhouse’s announcement system, “Breach in Greenhouse 1. Breach in Greenhouse 1. Airlock doors are closing.” Following the message, a siren sounded through the same system. The siren froze Dean in mid-step and he turned towards the nearest airlock. The doors hissed and began to close. The automated voice repeated its message. He looked back to Catherine, laying on the ground, a jagged shard of Perspex panel sticking up from her midsection. While he was still looking at her, his feet moved on their own accord. Slowly at first, then faster, trampling on the sprouting crops, as he finally looked away and sprinted towards the closing doors.

The crow eagerly jumped down to where the stone lay. It pecked around, looking for its exposed feast. Upon realising the stone was intact, the crow took it up in its claws and launched itself to find a stronger surface to release the stone’s treasure. The crow flew over the hole in the greenhouse and over the series of tunnels that connected to it. It picked out a structure in the distance, half a bridge leading to nowhere, its cousin collapsed around its immense feet. The crow flew towards it.

Dean leapt for the shrinking gap of the airlock. His fingers brushed against the double-walled glass as it shut closed and he fell to the soil before it. He pounded the floor with his fist in frustration and fear. “No, no, no,” he murmured to himself as he pulled himself up and frantically tried to prise open the door. The door didn’t shift. Dean beat his fists against it, the force fading with every strike. He collapsed to his knees and buried his face with his hands as he thought about what was to come and the family he would leave behind. He stayed like that in his despair as Catherine’s screams turned to whimpers, turned to silence. There was a splutter from around him as the sprinkler system came to life and began to disinfect the greenhouse with hydrogen peroxide, an automatic protocol caused by the airlock doors closing. The liquid from the ground sprinkler near Dean’s knees splashed on to the top of his

hand, waking him from his stupor. The liquid tingled where it had made contact. Dean remembered from the hundred or more childhood safety lectures that the hydrogen peroxide killed the virus. He cupped his hands around the closest sprinkler collecting the clear chemical solution. He closed his eyes and splashed it on his face, rubbing it into the skin. It caused a slightly unpleasant prickle around his nostrils and mouth, but he repeated the action. He removed his t-shirt and doused it with the solution. He held the t-shirt tight around his nose and mouth with one hand. Each breath sucked trace amounts of the bitter liquid into his mouth. He ignored that as he did the unpleasant vinegar smell the chemical produced in contact with his skin. He took as deep a breath as he could. He pushed his anguish down as he stood up to check on his exposed shift-mates.

The crow flew low to the ground as it reached the bridge, its treasure still in its claws, clutched tight. It circled the structure, watching for cats sleeping on the rusted cars both on and around the bridge. Seeing no prey, it flew higher, above the pitted concrete road, long grass and abandoned vehicles. It circled above the road, looking for the ideal spot to release its treasure. The crow judged the jagged edge of the bridge with the metal rebar poles sticking out like spikes to be the ideal spot. It lowered its legs and released the stone, watching as it fell. From above there was a screeching cry as the talons of a hawk pierced the crow's body. The crow flapped its wings to free itself, but the hawk's sharp claws were dug in deep. It tightened its grasp, breaking fragile crow bones. The crow went limp and died as the hawk flew off. The stone tumbled on its journey unaware of what was happening above and hit the bridge where the concrete and rebar beam met. The stone cracked and broke. Both halves fell to the ground and stayed there.

Dean hurried over to Catherine, she was lying still on the ground, her eyes open but not looking, her blood had turned the surrounding mud into a crimson bloom, the sprinklers slowly washing it away. The shard of Perspex window was buried deep inside her abdomen. Dean checked her neck for a pulse with his free hand, the other still holding the t-shirt to his face. Nothing. They had been shift-mates for the past fifteen years. She had introduced him to his wife, Hayley, and was the Godmother to his children, Maddie and George. He stroked her wet blonde hair and then closed her eyes. He felt a deep sense of loss, although the fear of the situation he was in tempered that. The muddy boots of his other shift-mate, Terry, came into view.

“Has she gone?” Terry asked, his voice muffled by the t-shirt he had covering his face.

Dean just nodded. He grabbed the Perspex sheet and pulled it out of Catherine with a wince at the noise it made. The sheet was roughly triangular, one point bloodstained. Dean threw it to the side.

“How fucked are we, mate?” Terry asked.

“I don’t know, Tel. If they can get a replacement window fitted and we’re lucky enough to not catch it, we may be all right. I don’t even know if they have a replacement in the stores. These ones have been enough for all these years and the community has expanded so much over the years. I just don’t know.” Dean put his hand on Terry’s shoulder for reassurance. For his own sake as much as Terry’s.

Night had fallen and Dean and Terry huddled by the airlock door. They still wore their t-shirts over their faces but had fashioned it so it covered their shoulders and chests to protect them a little from the chill night air. The greenhouse’s overhead lights were on and cast a welcome glow over the ground, although the danger Dean and Terry faced went unseen. Hayley and the kids were on the other side of the airlock door, the kids asleep around Hayley’s legs. The thick door of the airlock muffled Dean and Hayley’s voices, so they mostly sat there with their hands touching on either side of the glass. Eventually, the night wore on, as it tends to, and they dozed. Their hands dropped, Hayley’s first, then Dean’s. Beside him, leaning against his back, Terry was already snoring. At least he was until he coughed, and then coughed again, and again, again. A dry hacking cough that racked his body but produced no phlegm.

END

Author’s note.

I hope you enjoyed this story, thank you for taking the time to read it.

Twenty-seven of my other short stories can be found in my short story collection *A Few Hours After This* on Amazon - mybook.to/FewHoursEbook

