

OTHERWISE KNOWN AS POSSUM

Maria D. Laso

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..... Chapter I

CROWS ALL FLAPPY

Around here, when folks die, people cook.

Fried chicken, corn chowder, sweet potato pie.

Trouble is, then they put on their Sunday clothes and take that food to the home of the dead person.

'Course, the dead person can't say boo, much less eat.

The family of the dead person can't talk nor eat neither. How could they, on account of all the sorrow storming inside that drowns out every noise? Plus the big rock stuck in their throats, the one that keeps down the howling, but that's hard to get food or words past.

So what happens is, the people in their Sunday clothes stand around visiting with other people in their Sunday clothes, all of them eating that food they brought.

Dredged catfish, potato soup, ambrosia.

They talk about things like Mister President Hoover and the sad state of the country and will that Mister Roosevelt set things right. Everyone

talks about the election coming and the drought going and where there might be work. Everyone talks about things that won't matter to the dead person. Things that shouldn't matter to the dead person's family.

Eventually, the people in their Sunday clothes get tired of standing in their Sunday shoes, so they leave. Every one of them hopes at least this many people will do the same when he passes.

With the last of the Sunday-clothes people gone, the house hushes past silence. The dead person is still dead. And the people left behind have to find the way and the will to crush the quiet before it crushes them.

That's why I was sitting under Momma's tree, shooting windfall pecans at the crows with my flip. I knew Momma, most of all, would expect me to smarten back to usual in no unhurried way, even if the crack in my heart would never heal.

As a rule, I do not shoot at birds, but crows are trouble, a nuisance that will eat crops and gardens. Crows don't even sing for supper.

I put another pecan into the band, pulled tight, and aimed, squinting right between the Y and one tick to the left.

Traveler whuffed.

I could see the crows' beaks move, but they sounded like old biddies minding someone else's business.

Trav snorted, lifted his head, and gave a grinding sound from his deepest parts. He stood rigid, peered over my shoulder, and then pulled on my coveralls.

The Town Ladies were back: It was them Traveler'd heard. They'd swooped onto the porch, all black wings and beady eyes like giant crows, beaks fixing to stick into our business.

I considered taking a shot. After all, a crow is a crow, and I have dead-keen aim, on account of I am naturally gifted for such things. Plus, I have the finest flip a person can have, made by my daddy, who is a wonder with all kinds of wood. He's good at everything he does; he just doesn't do everything.

Instead, I pushed my glumpy pigtails out of my eyes and followed Traveler to see what had been in the Town Ladies' claws. Our noses told us covered dish. Smelled like creamed corn 'n' onions.

Momma and Baby died in June, and it seemed like every week in the two months since, anyone who came calling brought black-eyed peas or *pileau* or crawdad fritters. Only, the more people who came by, the lonelier I felt.

Used to be I was never lonely. Even when I wasn't with my best dog friend or my best person friend, my days were filled with the music of creek splashing and idea hatching and life living. But it got quiet when we lost Momma—she was the music Daddy and I danced to.

Now birds sang, hens still cackled their fool

heads off each day, as if nobody ever laid an egg before. Yet always I seemed to be waiting for laughter, for crying or calling. Everything felt cottony. At times, I feared breaking apart from aloneness, but other times, I needed to get alone quick for fear of bursting.

In all that haze, there were only three things I could be certain of:

- 1) Trav is the best dog ever.
- 2) I can count on my best human friend, Tully, till Kingdom Come comes.
- 3) Daddy needs me to keep us keeping on. Momma would be counting on me from Heaven to keep any more change from ripping apart what's left of our lives.

I peeked in the front window. The curtains were drawn, so I couldn't see in, but I could picture those pink-powdered Crows perched around Momma's front room with the creek-mud walls and hand-sewn pillows and the company chair.

I could hear them well enough too, thank you kindly, chattering things like, "Surely the girl . . ." or "For LizBetty's sake . . ." and "... neighbors in your time of need."

They were all-fired fixed on telling Daddy what to do. And not just what to do, but what to do with *me!* “Mister Porter, that child needs proper schooling.”

Talking like I wasn’t there. Never mind that I wasn’t.

“Why, we have this lovely young teach—”

Whose voice was that? I strained to hear.

“I’d say she’s young. I wonder why she didn’t marry but left kith an’ kin to come here. One of those Roosevelt Reds, I imagine.”

“Ladies, please,” came a new voice, stronger and louder, Miss Nagy’s. “We agreed to present a united front for Mister Porter. The fact is, a young girl left without a mother, particularly in these, um, rustic circumstances, why, she’s going to need someone to see to a proper education.”

Proper education? I took their squawking to mean schooling and that steamed me, it really did. I am past eleven and a half, working on twelve, and never been to school on account of I know everything my momma taught me, and she knew more than anybody.

In the pause that followed, I pictured the ladies rearranging skirts and strategies. I figured the bid-dies were, as usual, ruffling the air with their words.

Daddy had yet to say a word, but of course he had no more mind to send me to school than he’d ever had. And why would he? Momma was clear

on the subject. She said knowing comes from every kind of person and place, and she believed in learning over schooling. To me, who's been learning up and down the holler my whole life, school'd be as wasteful as a bath on Wednesday.

Besides, Daddy and I had an understanding: No more change. I wanted things like when they'd been perfect. I wanted to hear Daddy's hammer out back so I could picture Momma taking him cool spring water, her about to walk back into the kitchen, where the smell and sound of her was more than a soft pinching at my heart.

But he was all but gone, that Daddy who'd pick up Momma and spin her for no reason beyond air is for breathing. A shadow of a stranger who looked like him had been put in his place. He'd been spending more time than ever in his shop, and though woodworking is his language, I wasn't sure what he was trying to say. And I sure wasn't going to figure it out by spending all day in some *schoolhouse*.

But life lately seemed frailer than morning webs, and everything seemed sideways. Maybe this new-thinking Daddy would be flapped by those old Crows into turning against Momma and toward Town Ladies and teachers and all manner of Trouble with a capital T.

I couldn't sit around waiting to see. I had to get

the old biddies to leave before they turned Daddy's head.

It was high time they got a taste of their own medicine—tea as sweet as those salted old biddies.

I sprinted down to the creek to pull two cool jars of pale amber tea from the creek cooler. I ran one across each cheek and then carried them around back to the kitchen door.

My eyes lit on Momma's favorite apron still hanging from a wooden peg. From the parlor Daddy's voice floated in—the same voice he used to reason with GrandNam when she would not be reasoned with. "Noralee took schoolin' serious," I heard him say. "And she had her own ideas about it, that is for sure."

I pulled down jars and glasses that hadn't been used since the funeral and set one on each flower of Momma's painted Chinese tray like they were blooms of glass. Then I poured cool tea into each like I was a Robin Hood bee returning nectar to each blossom.

Daddy continued, "Point is, ladies, meanin' no disrespect—by my mind, the decision's made—and not like to be altered by you. And it has nothing to do with her learnin' so far. Possum does sums in her head faster'n me—you all too, probably. She read to me and Noralee by the time she was four."

Truth. We only had a Bible, catalogs, and tired magazines from Newcomb's, the general store on the county-road side of town, but I read it all. That was a big part of Momma's idea about schooling versus learning. Momma explained more than once, "In a school, you learn everything between four walls. I want you to learn the world."

Often I'd read to Momma and Daddy by kerosene lamp while they snuggled up on the porch, her back fitting into his chest, his arms around her waist. 'Course we made up lots of stories too. Through stories and pictures, we saw worlds on worlds.

With the contents of the second jar poured, each container on the tray held about three fingers' worth of two-day tea, which is made by adding boiling water to used leaves and setting the jars in the sun. Two-day tea is just right for pulling the steam out of you after a long walk or a fast run.

From the second shelf by the stove I took down the pink glass sugar bowl, its handles stuck out like Connie Harris's ears. I used both hands, like Momma showed me, and took it by the bowl. I held it up to the window and marveled, like I always did, at the way the light goes through the bowl's feet and makes tiny rainbows on the walls.

I added to the tray a stack of napkins hemmed by GrandNam and ironed into fierce fourths by Momma. Finally, I took down the tin shaker that

sat next to the sugar bowl, listening for the rustle of the rice grains.

Daddy said, "I'm not sure now's the right—" But he cut off when I backed into the room with the tray of refreshment.

The ladies looked real surprised, Daddy even more.

I managed not to look at him while I set the heavy tray on Momma's good library table and offered around tea, each glass delivered with a napkin to catch its damp ring of sweat.

"Why, thank you, dear," said one Town Lady.

"Aren't you thoughtful?" chimed another.

I studied Momma's rug, hoping to seem lady-like, but, church-truth, it was so I wouldn't bust a gut. Long as Mister President Hoover had us Americans Hooverizing for the good of the country, wouldn't I be downright unpatriotic to waste good sugar on the likes of those old Crows?

The oldest Town Lady, Miss Nagy, raised her glass first. She was sitting on the davenport—well, really, it's a daybed with pillows—so she did not have the angle to notice that I had neglected to serve Daddy.

I snuck a look around one pigtail at him. His eyebrows were shot to the top of his head, asking me something.

Miss Nagy swallowed, and her puckered face

got puckerier. Her eyes squinted, then opened, opened big, crossed. Tea blew out her mouth and nose. The Crows flapped in consternation and dismay, gagging, coughing, or sputtering.

Daddy, the only one looking my way, pressed his lips thin, but I thought I saw laughing eyes. "Possum!" he said in his warning voice.

Miss Nagy looked at me over her spectacles, a fierce stare. "That tea is full of salt, young lady. Do you have something to say?" Her eyes looked like they alone could brand my hide, yet I knew she believed that she believed in forgiveness.

I stared right at her. "I want to apologize for putting salt in the sweet tea." It was my humble voice.

The murmuring resumed, and Miss Nagy nodded once, almost like she believed me.

"It's just—just—" I pushed my bottom lip out a bit.

Daddy slumped like the air was punched from his lungs. "Possum? What's wrong, sweetie?"

I looked away quick. "It's just, someone musta moved the"—*sob*—"I know Momma kept sugar in the pink"—*sob*—"but salt? I don't"—*sob*—"I—"

Not a single lie.

I was backing through the room as I talked, looking with my humble face into the craggy faces of each biddy as I went. Every one looked at me like I was the baby lamb instead of the coyote. Except for Miz Pickerel, who was making faces into

her serviette. I figured she must still be trying to rid the salt from her mouth, as she was not likely on purpose making such faces at Miss Nagy's back.

"Well . . ." Miss Nagy began.

Next I covered my face with my hands till I felt the weather in the room change.

"Thank you for understanding!" I said as I neared the doorway that would be my escape. "Now, I reckon I ought to see to those delicious-smelling dishes you all so thoughtfully brought. Won't you excuse me, please?"

From the kitchen, I heard a bit more squawking and murmuring. "It's just this kind of behavior . . ." That sounded like Miss Nagy, long past hopping mad and on toward leaping. I pictured her standing, curved like a question mark so her spectacles teetered on the wart with one hair in it.

"Now, Miss Nagy, the poor creature has just—"

Then Daddy's voice came through like Preacher's on Sunday: "That child *is* a creature, ladies, a creature of God, perfect in His sight. Nor do I appreciate the suggestion that the upbringing Noralee and I have provided has failed her."

I felt my chest puff for making Daddy proud, yet I was spitting mad at them for suggesting Momma didn't teach me right.

"Oh, now, we didn't—" That, I knew, was Miz Pickerel's quiet, Karo-syrup voice. She was a young widow, her face less crackly than the others'.



As their discussion went on, I realized my trick hadn't done what needed doing. Just like crows, they'd flapped and squawked and ended up landing right where they'd been. I needed to shoo 'em away before they mentioned any more of that school nonsense.

Then something familiar caught my eyes in a new way. Daddy shaved in the kitchen, where the window had the best morning light. His strop and mirror hung on a post by the sink, cup and brush on the ledge. They gave me an idea.

I passed the brush across my lips and cheeks. I love the feel of the soft bristles and the soap smell. A couple drops of water in the cup, and I worked up a right good lather. Then I opened the screen door to Trav, who had been whimpering outside. For the piece of bacon I slipped him, I was paid in kissy slobbers. Then I set to work, foaming up his jowls till he looked like Santa Paws.

As I washed up, Traveler nosed around. I let him sniff another piece of bacon before I put it in my pocket and raced him into the hall. While keeping Trav back with one foot, I dragged my little stool in front of the swinging door. I knew Trav would get it open once he set his mind to it.

Thanks to the bacon, his mind seemed set to it.

I put my pocket against the crack and let Traveler sniff once more, for extra double-sure good measure. Then I went back in to see to the Crows.

“Ladies,” I said, walking slowly to the far end of the room. I cleared my throat.

Daddy glared me a warning, which I conveniently did not see. He had his ways to punish without using a belt or peach-tree switch. Sometimes, when I had not been the best, he would refuse me a candy treat or a nighttime story, and did *that* hurt. He’d never given me a lickin’, but I figured that could change directly.

Lucky for us, that look was as far as Daddy was able to get before a clatter pulled him to his feet. “What in tarna—”

Twitchy Miz Pickerel flapped like a jitter jack.

Then Traveler was jumping at me for bacon, his foamy beard flying every which way, and chaos erupted.

Aww, wouldn’t you just figure Tully had to be away to miss the sight of it? I sorely wished he’d been witness, because he was not likely to believe the telling of it.

The Crow Ladies ran squawking out of our lives, which serves them right for what they tried to pull, disrespecting Momma and all the learning she’d given me.

I knew Momma would be proud that I’d bested the old Crows while also giving Daddy the chance to say that Momma’s way was the right way. We had no need to change anything, especially what wasn’t broke.