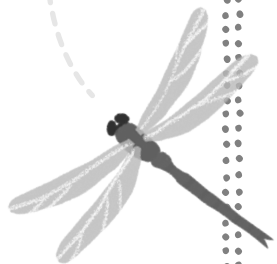


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Otherwise Known As
POSSUM



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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."