

Nothing To Crow About

That fall the war was still on television, but we had come home to Flagstaff, Arizona and didn't watch it anymore. In the mornings we walked to college along the highway past Ruff's Liquor where hunters hung their deer carcasses by the horns to weigh, so the dead animals, dusted with snow, swayed stiffly in the wind.

It felt good to walk in the cold with the wind whipping across Route 66, crowded with tractor trailers and hunters down from the Uncompaghres and the Sangre de Cristos. Gray ice stained the pavement beneath the railroad underpass as freight trains roared past the bars and the curio shops, the windblown gas stations, the cheap motels and the empty hamburger joints.

The sidewalks were deserted except for a lone Navajo in a ragged black coat; he was collecting trash blown into the chain link fences around motel pools with logs thrown in the ice to keep the pool walls from cracking.

Under the neon mess of signs at Five Points, we crossed 66 with cinders grating under our feet. Then we walked through the red sandstone gates and into the College Union. We found our table near the fireplace and drank coffee and watched the C-U lawn turn white until the snow quit and the wind blew drifts off the spruce and the aspen.

There were three of us: me, big Durk, who had been an L-T, and Claver, a flat-faced guy with a bushy mustache and a purple scar on his neck from Hue, where his fire team went hand-to-hand with North Vietnamese regulars. If anyone asked about his scar, Claver

always said, “Got overrun, outa ammo, scared shitless. This dink fell on me and cut me badass so I greased him.”

“What’s our mission today, L-T?” Claver asked.

“Shoot down the Command and Control bird, Sergeant,” Durk said.

“That’s a rog,” Claver said.

“Then business as usual,” Durk said, as a tight grin crept across his face. “Kill dinks. Kick ass and take names.”

Claver’s eyes glittered and the scar on his neck throbbed.

“Hey, Claver,” I said, “Remember. We’re back in the world.”

“Like anyone fucking cares,” he said, dragging his cigarette and sipping his coffee.

Durk pointed outside at crows huddled on a snow-covered spruce.

“Looks like your bird escaped,” he said.

“What do you know, L-T?”

“Gotta be your crow,” Durk said. “Second from the left. I heard him talk.”

“Yeah? What did he say?” Claver asked.

Durk sipped his coffee.

“Nevermore,” he said, laughing.

Claver fingered his scar and squinted hard at the tree.

“For your infor-fucking-mation, Lieu-tenant,” he said, “That ain’t my crow. Top’s way bigger than them.”

My coffee was cold, so I got up and left. Durk caught up with me outside. The ground was hard under a thin layer of snow. We walked into the wind to an ugly brick building with no trees. Durk studied engineering with an English minor so we had this rhetoric class together on the Sophists. Sometimes this blonde with a deep voice and an Afghan coat would smile at me. She had bright blue eyes and beautiful hands.

Claver always wore Levi's, a field jacket, and scuffed jungle boots. He collected his green VA checks and rarely went to class. You could usually find him in the C-U lounge playing somebody’s guitar. Claver wasn’t bad, but his habits were. He could consume anything until it was gone or he fell down, whichever came first. His girlfriends rarely could take him for more than a couple of weeks. “Don’t mean nothing,” he always said. Claver couldn’t imagine anything turning out worse than Vietnam.

The three of us shared an old shepherd’s cabin beneath a grove of ponderosas on a ridge overlooking Flagstaff and the mainline Santa Fe tracks. We never spoke directly about the war; we communicated through a shorthand of gallows Vietnam slang. I was a medic with the engineers, and Durk had been an artillery forward observer. Claver’s ground war was written in his hard, watery eyes that never missed a thing. Like that crow Durk had pointed out.

At night we lounged on an old brown sofa in front of our fireplace and watched the records go around until the beer and the tequila and the weed killed our dreams, which was all right. We had seen our share of bad dreams. All we wanted to do now was watch the fire burn down.

Sometimes there were women and sometimes there weren't. Eventually the blonde with the Afghan coat showed up at our cabin and broke my streak of bad luck. Her name was Debbie Jarvis. Her laugh was quick, and her hair and her legs were long, and her deep, musical voice almost made me forget all those dead faces. If it wasn't for Claver's crow, things might even still be the same.

Claver really did have a crow. Every morning it perched on a dead pine limb outside his window—the first thing he saw in the morning. Not that he slept all that much. Claver called the crow “Top” after his first sergeant, and fed him with raw hamburger. Eventually, he lured the crow into the house and it hopped up on our brown sofa.

“So what's your opinion of that son-of-a-bitch Nixon?” Claver asked the crow.

Top cocked his head and flapped his wings. “CAW! CAW CAW!”

Claver laughed like hell and gave the bird the meat.

One night, in the darkness of my small bedroom, Debbie Jarvis stiffened in the crook of my arm and woke me. Out in the living room Claver muttered as Top's sharp claws clacked back and forth across our stone mantle. Sometimes it got so bad for Claver that even the beers and the shots and the joints didn't work.

Claver's dull voice rose above the crackling fire.

“Remember Hue, Top? Hue. Fucking Hue. We should be dead. Maybe we are dead, Top. Maybe all this is just a bad motherfuckin' dream. Just like Hue.”

The crow rasped and cawed once quietly, then paced those bony feet back and forth across the mantelpiece.

“Who's Hue?” Debbie whispered.

“It’s a place. In Vietnam.”

Outside, an icy wind rattled our windows.

“Just you and me now, Top,” Claver droned. “Pinocchio bought it on Dak To airstrip. Calhoun—greased, *friendly* fire. Minh Thi Tanh, *xin loi*, sorry ‘bout that. Fremo, blown clean away—ambush out on Highway 14, dumb shit. And Delta Roger sucked away by malaria...”

“What’s he talking about?” Debbie whispered.

“Nothing.”

I ran my hand across Debbie’s cheek and traced her sweet full lips with my index finger. The wind began to howl.

“Joyce, poor sweet fucker, that was one bad-ass tree line. Fuckin’ Perfume River. Jesus—rocket-propelled grenade right in the chest. K-I- fuckin’ A, M-O-U-S-E, *MICKEY MOUSE*. Then dip-shit Thomas got himself sniped taking a dump up at LZ Lincoln. ‘Member that, Top?’”

The crow croaked long and deep.

“Nobody left in first platoon. Not one swingin’ Richard. And all them fuckin’ new guys after 8-6-1? Even you didn’t have time to learn their names, Top. Don’t tell me you did. I seen you tryin’ to match up body bags and dog tags. Oh man, man. And then the Cake flamed out with all them silly-assed officers in the C and C bird two clicks west of An Khe, and freaky Newman had the brass goddamn balls to *cheer*.....”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP, CLAVER!” Durk shouted.

Claver shut up, but the crow panicked. Wings fluttered the air and scraped the walls, banging and thrashing all over the living room, horrible sounds like men when they're drowning in their own blood. Beer bottles crashed down and the fireplace screen fell over, as Debbie Jarvis wrapped around me like a snake, but that crow kept on squawking.

Claver walked over to Durk's door. Over the crow, we heard him say, "Hey. L-T. You know, I fragged me an officer once."

The horrible cawing stopped. The crow's wings fluttered a few times then went silent. Claver's footsteps walked past my bedroom.

We sat up in bed. We could see the crow perched on Claver's shoulder as he opened and closed the front door with a rattle of glass. As they crunched across the frozen ground, Claver whispered to the crow. Debbie Jarvis shivered uncontrollably, until the shrieking wind rose and drowned out everything, and she threw herself all over me.

In the morning Claver was gone, but the crow was outside, sitting on that dead limb, picking at his feathers. When Debbie Jarvis and I left for class, the crow swiveled his head around, gave us a long, slow look, whistled once and slowly flew off. He flapped up from our tree, sailed out from the grove of ponderosas and over the snowy rooftops, soaring down the steep ridge toward the railroad tracks until he became a hard black speck in the sky above the college.

After class, I went into the Union. Claver was drinking coffee. He hadn't shaved and his eyes were red and wild.

"You ever been in an Indian bar, man?" he asked.

I shook my head.

“Them Indian dudes know how to party. They live the true worth of ‘don’t mean nothin’,” he said. He spread his hands to include everything around us.

“Plus, most Indian’s done honest grunt time in the green killin’ machine.”

Claver stared at me with those bad watery eyes he usually reserved for Durk.

“You need anything, Claver?” I asked.

“Naw. Them bars open at six a.m. I’m feelin’ goood .”

“Your crow was waiting for you.”

“Fuck that crow,” Claver said. “This Hopi dude told me stay away from that crow. Says it’s a bad-ass spirit.”

“Well, he’s still there.”

As I walked to English class, a line of blackbirds perched on the roof of the Union building silhouetted against the gray sky. When the noon sawmill whistle blew, the blackbirds lifted as one, soaring and wheeling in a thin feathery cloud that grew smaller and nearly vanished. Only three blackbirds came back to settle on the roof.

Claver didn’t show up for two weeks. One afternoon I drove Debbie Jarvis to buy art supplies near the mainline Santa Fe railroad tracks.

“Jack,” Debbie said, gripping my arm. “There’s Jimmy Claver.”

He was leaning against a derelict brick building beside the tracks, passing a green bottle of applejack wine back and forth with three Indians.

We parked in the train station lot and crossed the double set of tracks. Claver's field jacket was ripped in three places and his greasy hair was plastered to his skull. It was so cold we could see our breath, but at least they were out of the wind. Claver's mustache was frozen and his eyes were on fire, darting every which way.

"Hey, brother," he said.

"How 'ya doing?" I asked.

"Fine, man, really fine."

Nobody gave Debbie Jarvis a glance. The three Indians stared straight ahead, their large brown faces pudgy with bruises, their deer-like eyes flecked with red.

"Hit?" Claver asked, tilting the bottle toward me.

"No thanks."

Claver wouldn't look at me.

"Anything I can do?" I asked.

Claver hooted a laugh, and said, "Not unless you got the codes to call an arc light in on this place."

An arc light was a B-52 bombing strike. Claver grinned viciously, and then his eyes lost themselves in the distance, like he was dismissing us. I said good-bye, took Debbie Jarvis's hand, and walked back across the tracks to my car.

We left them drinking beneath a big red circle painted on a wall with peeling yellow letters that said: CHEW REDMAN.

The one-ten freight train roared in from Gallup and blocked our view. Flocks of swallows off the train station roof soared and wheeled together, their tiny fluttering shadows streaking black against the snow-capped San Francisco Peaks.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” Debbie Jarvis shouted over the passing train.

I started the car. My eyes felt like ice.

“What?”

“Bring him home.”

“Home? He is home.”

“On the railroad tracks?”

“He’s back in the world.”

“What does that mean?” Debbie demanded. “You always say that. What does it mean, ‘back in the world’?”

“As opposed to Vietnam.”

“What are you talking about, Jack?” she said.

“This is a great country. Nobody’s shooting at you. We’re back in the world. It’s wonderful to be home.”

But when I kissed Debbie, her whole face went rigid—the tip of her nose, her flushed cheeks—even her lips. When the freight train was gone, the tracks were empty. Claver and his friends had moved on.

A week later, after the snow had been plowed into muddy banks overflowing our yard, Claver pounded on the front door. His unshaven face was cut and he was broke, and dirty, and stank, but he was back. The crow was perched outside on that widowmaker pine limb dripping with icicles, but Claver didn't look at it as he marched into the bathroom for a shower. I was frying him some eggs when Durk came back from class.

“Sergeant Claver! Your bird wants a word.”

“I ain't got nothing to say to no bird,” Claver answered.

“You could shoot it,” Durk said.

“Not me, Lieutenant. I've done all the shootin' I'm ever gonna do.”

“Then request yourself a fire mission, Sergeant,” Durk said. “I got a new four-ten shotgun.”

All that winter, the crow perched outside his window. Claver discovered some uncashed VA checks in a drawer, so he was flush. Nearly every afternoon for two months, Claver camped out on our brown sofa, so I guess he'd given up on school. Every afternoon, he played the Doors and Led Zeppelin over and over, while he burned a fire down to coals, then roasted hot dogs and buns and marshmallows on coat hangers.

He grew his hair into a ponytail and somehow acquired a girlfriend. Marina Marie Silver was a skinny girl with stringy hair, who wore black and only showed up at night. Neither

Marina nor Claver talked as much as they drank, but things were better than before. Marina claimed to be a poet, so Durk took to mouthing “Nevermore.”

In the spring, Claver bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and two black leather jackets. Marina and Claver were gone for days, camping on the Indian reservations, at the Grand Canyon or down on the Mogollon rim. When they came back, the crow was always waiting outside on the dead pine limb, but Claver never had anything to do with him.

For Durk’s graduation, we threw a party with two-pound Mormon Lake Lodge steaks, a keg of Michelob, and plenty of good dope, so the cabin overflowed with people and smoke. Durk wore his cap and gown and leaned against the mantle, beer in hand, telling stories. He mentioned to somebody who told somebody else how Claver had tamed a crow. Somebody else called bullshit, so Claver snorted once, got that glint in his eye, set his wine down and stomped outside.

The crow hopped right up on Claver’s shoulder. They marched back through all the people and the smoke and the loud music, and everyone cheered and drank toasts to Claver and to the crow and to Durk. The bird seemed to examine every face carefully, mechanically flitting its eyes back and forth.

When Claver persuaded the crow to hop down and drink out of a saucer of beer, Marina ran outside crying. Claver set the crow on his shoulder and shoved his way through the party after her.

All that night, Marina and Claver sat on his chrome Harley-Davidson in our driveway, drinking Spañada out of a big jug and laughing and crying on each other until streaks of tears and wine ran shining down their black leather in the moonlight. When we finally went to bed, they were still there, and the crow was perched on the chrome handlebars.

Sometime during the night, the motorcycle kicked over and roared off.

The next morning, when Debbie Jarvis and I dragged ourselves awake to clean up, we found Marina sleeping on the sofa in her black jacket. She never budged while we threw away the cups and the plates and emptied the ashtrays and dragged the trashcan away.

Finally, when Debbie ran the vacuum, Marina bolted straight up, her straggly black hair like a bird's nest. She coughed once, lit a cigarette, and threw the match into the fire I had started with the trash. Then she stared into the flames like someone was in there burning.

"Where's Claver?" I asked.

"California," Marina said slowly.

"California?"

She nodded and studied her cigarette.

"L-A," she said.

"Claver went to California?"

Marina looked at me like I was crazy.

"For good?"

"For weal or woe I will not flee," she muttered into the fire.

"Oh, Jesus," a hung-over Durk said, lurching out of his bedroom wearing underwear.

"Spare me fucking poetry."

Marina grimaced, and shut her eyes tight and pulled on her boots. She stood up and pushed her hair around.

“Claver’s really gone?” Durk asked.

“Yeah,” Marina said.

“So why didn’t you go with him?”

Marina shrugged then dragged on her cigarette.

Durk scratched his stomach, ambled to the front door, wiped condensation off the glass and looked out. Suddenly, Durk whirled around, ran to his bedroom, got something, and disappeared out the front door.

A shotgun blast shook the windows.

Durk returned with a stupid grin and smoke pouring out of the gleaming four-ten’s breech.

“Done,” he said.

Nobody moved as the sharp smell of cordite invaded the room.

“I only scared him away,” Durk explained. “I have to live here all summer.”

Beer cartons roared in the fireplace. We sat on the sofa. No one spoke for a long time.

“I should go,” Debbie Jarvis said.

She got up, touched my shoulder, and kissed the back of my head. I started to say something, but she slipped quickly away and out the back door. Marina threw on her jacket, ran out, and caught up with Debbie.

“Chicks,” Durk said, coming out of his room and running a cleaning patch down the barrels of his shotgun.

It was a long summer. Debbie Jarvis went home to her parents’ house in Phoenix and then decided to transfer. I got a letter postmarked from Berkeley.

In the beginning of November, there was a letter from Hutch. I opened it as Durk and I walked down Highway 66 to school. Inside, was a newspaper clipping from the Riverside paper. The headline read: “Decorated Veteran Jimmy Earl Claver, 24, Killed In Motorcycle Accident.”

“Shit,” Durk said. “Must have been drunk. Or stoned.”

“Gentlemen,” Hutch’s letter read, “I saw Claver in the hospital after the accident. He said he was accelerating his bike out of a corner when a big bird flew up and hit him in the chest so his Harley jumped across the center divide and smashed into a palm tree. Claver only broke his leg, so everything seemed OK. But the next day when I came back, his bed was empty. The nurse returned with a doctor, who told me an embolism—an air bubble—somehow got into Claver’s veins, went straight to his heart and killed him. ‘It’s unusual,’ the doctor said, ‘but it happens.’”

“Jesus,” Durk said, “Claver had no luck at all.”

We walked through the railroad underpass past Ruff’s Liquor Store. Underneath Ruff’s big sign, a hunter stood in the bed of a red pick-up truck, wrapping a rusty chain around the hooves of a white-tailed deer.

The Riverside paper printed a photograph of Claver before the war—just a kid, grinning in a green Army dress uniform.

“That’s not our Claver,” Durk said.

“What do you mean?”

“That kid,” Durk said, “Died a long time ago.”

Snow began to fall.

Beneath Ruff’s sign, the hunter jerked the chain. The deer carcass lifted up out of the pickup bed, slowly rising and swaying stiffly in the wind, the sleek noble head and great antlers pointing down, the golden fur all dusted with snow.

Durk and I turned our backs on the dead deer and headed for the College Union.