**Extracts from Grief is the Thing With Feathers (Comparison for H is for Hawk)**

Once upon a time there was a demon who fed on grief. The delicious aroma of raw shock and unexpected loss came wafting from the doors and windows of a widower’s sad home.

Therefore the demon set about finding his way in.

One evening the babes were freshly washed and the husband was telling them tales when there was a knock on the door.

Rat-a-tat-tat. “Open up, open up, it’s me from 56. It’s … Keith. Keith Coleridge. I need to borrow some milk.”

But the sensible father knew there was no number 56 on the quiet little street, so he did not open the door.

The next night the demon tried again.

Rat-a-tat-tat. “Open up, open up, I’m from Parenthesis Press. It’s Paul. Paul … Graves. I heard the news. I’m truly gutted it’s taken me this long to come over. I’ve brought a pizza and some toys for the boys.”

But the attentive father knew there had been a Pete from Parenthesis and a Phil from Parenthesis, but never a Paul from Parenthesis, so he did not open the door.

The next night the demon ran at the door, flashing blue and crackling.

Rat-a-tat-tat. BANG. BANG. “Open up! Police! We know you’re in there, this is an emergency, you have five seconds to open the door or we will smash our way in.”

But the worldly grieving man knew a bit about the law and sensed a lie.

The demon went away and wondered what to do next. He was tabloid-despicable, so a powerful plan came to him.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat. Knock. Knock. Knock. “Boys? It’s me. It’s Mum. Darling? Are you there? Boys, open the door, it’s me. I’m back. Sweetheart? Boys? Let me in.”

And the babes flung their duvets back in abandon, swung their little legs over the edge of the bed and scampered down the stairs. The chambers of their baffled baby hearts filled with yearning and they tingled, they bounded down towards before, before, before all this. The father, drunk on the voice of his beloved, raced down after them. The sound of her voice was stinging, like a moon-dragged starvation surging into every hopeless raw vacant pore, undoing, exquisite undoing.

“We are coming, Mum!”

Their friend and houseguest, who was a crow, stopped them at the door.

My loves, he said.

My dear, sorry loves. It isn’t her. Go back to bed and let me deal with this. It isn’t her.

The boys floated their crumpled crêpe-paper dad back up, one under each arm steering his weightlessness, and they laid him down to sleep. Then they sat at the window looking down and watching what happened and they liked it very much, for boys will be boys.

Crow went out, smiled, sniffed the air, nodded good evening and back-kicked the door shut behind him.

Then Crow demonstrated to the demon what happens when a crow repels an intruder to the nest, if there are babies in that nest:

One loud KRONK, a hop, a tap on the floor, a little distracted dance, a HONK, swivel and lift, as a discus swung up but not released but driven down atomically fixed and explosive, the beak hurled down hammer-hard into the demon’s skull with a crack and a spurt then smashed onwards down through bone, brain, fluid and membrane, into squirting spine, vertebra snap, vertebra crunch, vertebra nibbled and spat and one-two-three-four-five all the way down quick as a piranha, nipping, cutting, disassembling the material of the demon, splashing in blood and spinal gunk and shit and piss, unravelling innards, whipping ligaments and nerves about joyous spaghetti tangled wool hammering, clawing, ripping, snipping, slurping, burping, frankly loving the journey of hurting, hurting-hurting and for Crow it was like a lovely bin full of chip papers and ice cream and currywurst and baby robins and every nasty treat, physically invigorating like a westerly above the moor, like a bouncy castle elm in the wind, like old family pleasures of the deep species. And Crow stands thrilled in a pool of filth, patiently sweeping and toeing remains of demon into a drain-hole.

His work done, Crow struts and leaps up and down the street issuing warnings while the pyjama-clad boys clap and cheer – behind-glass-silent – from the bedroom window. Crow issues warnings to the wide city, warnings in verse, warnings in many languages, warnings with bleeding edges, warnings with humour, warnings with dance and sub-low threats and voodoo and puns and spectacular ancient ugliness.

Satisfied with his defence of the nest, Crow wanders in to find some food.

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**Crow**

Once upon a time there was a babysitting bird, let’s call him Crow. He had read too many Russian fairytales (lazy boy burn, Baba Yaga howl, decent Prince win), but was nevertheless an authorised and accredited caregiver, much admired by London parents, much in demand of a Friday night. On his newsagent advert it was written:

“Nappy Valley: And Beyond!”

The telly went off and Crow suggested a game.

“You two boys,” he said, “must each build – here on the floor – a model of your mother. Just as you remember her! And whichever of you builds the best model will win. Not the most realistic, but the best, the truest. The prize is this … ” said the Crow, stroking their shampooed hair … “the best model I will bring to life, a living mother to tuck you up in bed.”

And so the boys set to it.

The one son went for drawing, furiously concentrating like a little waist-high fresco painter scrabbling hands and knees on the scaffold. Thirty-seven taped-together sheets of A4 paper and the full rainbow of crayons, pencils and pens, his front teeth biting down on his lower lip. Heavy nasal sighing as he adjusted the eyes, scrapped them, started again, working his way down, happy with the hands, happy with the legs.

The second son went for assemblage, a model of the woman made from cutlery, ribbons, stationery, toys, buttons and books, manically adjusting – leaping up, lying down – like a mechanic in the pits. Clicking and tutting as he worked his way around the mosaic mum, happy with the face, happy with the height.

And, “Stop!” said the Crow.

“They are both extraordinary,” he said, admiring their work, “you’ve got her smile, you’ve captured her posture, her shoulders were hunched to that exact degree!”

And the boys couldn’t wait to find out who had won; “Which one?! Which Mum?!”, but Crow started hopping, avoiding their gaze, suppressing a giggle and turning away.

“Crow, which one of these fake mums has won us a real one?”

And Crow was quiet, laughing no  more.

“Crow, don’t be funny, let’s have our real Mummy.”

And Crow started crying.

And the boys cooked Crow in a very hot oven until he was nothing but cells.

This is Crow’s bad dream.

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**Boys**

Dad has gone. Crow is in the bathroom, where he often is because he likes the acoustics. We are crouched by the closed door listening. He is speaking very slowly, very clearly. He sounds old-fashioned, like Dad’s vinyl recording of Dylan Thomas. He says SUDDEN. He says TRAUMA. He says Induced … he coughs and spits and tries again, INDUCED. He says SUDDEN TRAUMA INDUCED ALTERATION OF THE ALERT STATE.

Dad comes back. Crow changes his tune.