

Here Comes Success

Fiction

Cara Hoffman

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Just before 1998, he started taking advice from the talking crow.

It started like you might have imagined. The crow was perched on a spindly branch near the hospital parking lot. It quietly assessed him.

He was getting his car keys out of his pocket, and the crow was drawn in by his smooth knuckles as they slid into the denim of his jeans and then slid out barely concealing something shiny.

The crow smirked and shifted from one claw to the other. It cocked its head to the side slightly to get a better look at the youth. A light dusty snow covered the asphalt and the cars.

“Are you allergic to Cipro?” the bird asked.

The young man, still almost a boy really, looked up at it with calm disbelief, already thinking what a great story it would make—that he thought a crow had asked him if he was allergic to Cipro in the hospital parking lot.

He stood looking at the crow’s body. It blinked. After a moment it asked again. “Are you allergic to Cipro?”

“Holy shit” the boy said quickly to himself outloud, “This crow has lived near the hospital so long it asks those questions doctors ask.”

A student at the local university, he wanted badly to catch the crow. Someone at the hospital must know about it—but if he could only catch it.

You see—the boy was still naive about things like this.

“Well?” the crow asked “Have you Jolisted the pincheti-mole sorrel?”

“Ah!” the youth thought. “He just puts sounds together!” And he was delighted.

“Out in the Christmas-ridden stream beds,” the crow said to him seriously. Now he was just having some fun with the boy. “Hmmm? Housecat?” the crow prompted blinking twice.

“Are you really talking?” the boy asked. He was still holding the keys in his fist.

“Yes,” said the crow. “If you are allergic to Cipro, taking three pills a day will kill you in no time.”

The boy pulled a brown prescription bottle with a white sticker label from his pocket and looked at it. “I’ve never taken this before,” he told the crow.

“Well, it could be overkill. Don’t risk it.” Cipro was something the crow didn’t like—he would rather people did not take penicillin at all. “Get some over the counter stuff instead,” he told the boy.

And the boy did.

His father was not happy about the crow.

“Son, why would you listen to that crow? Now you know the kinds of lives they lead give them a certain perspective that is—hey lookah, I’m serious. I’m telling you they live their lives without regard for others. They just. They just do not have the same capacity for moral judgment.”

Several months after shaking his respiratory infection, he graduated from college. And the crow was there, perched in the sunshine, on a folding wooden chair outside a red and white tent. It looked a little fatter than it had in winter.

The boy had come to like the crow because it gave him advice that was practical and seemed to work immediately. The crow could see beyond all the petty superficialities that normally hold people back. It had an otherworldly voice, a look of keen reflective intelligence, and best of all, it could fly.

There were, in fact, many crows at the graduation. Because of course that coming of age is when crows begin talking to men.

His father had never been spoken to by a crow, despite his serious opinion on the topic. "They're opportunists," he reminded his son again on that bright and windless day. "They prey upon those of us who are having difficulties."

His father could not reconcile that a child of his would listen to a crow, a bird that would have no trouble picking the organs out of another animal. He did not think, as many did, that the deer, woodchucks, turtles, raccoons, foxes, and possums would be dead soon anyway—and that crows provided a valuable service by removing their remains. He didn't like the idea of eating the dead.

The crow did not know the boy's father and did not care. The crow knew what it liked and didn't like.

The boy's stepfather had been talked to by crows. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course." He said. "You know people seem to like crows because of their voices and naturally we as humans are impressed with flight—but after a while this predictable pattern emerges in what they tell you. You just get tired of it."

The boy's brother had spent his entire adult life in proximity to crows but none had ever spoken to him. At one point—curious and feeling slighted by the birds he attempted to capture a crow's voice—by leaving a tape recorder next to a dead squirrel in the yard. But no luck. The crows did not speak to him. They saw there was no need for speech. Their connection to him was more direct

"I wouldn't buy that Volvo," the crow told the boy that next summer. "Buy a Gremlin."

Later in the week, the crow stopped in to tell him to buy some lighter fluid and a pack of navy-cut cigarettes, and to apply for work at all the major pharmaceutical companies—or maybe with the state department.

When the boy asked why, the crow simply said "Ver-gunk," cocked its head to the side, and shifted its weight from one claw to the other. Enamored by the crow's sense of humor the boy went and bought the lighter fluid.

That fall, the crow suggested the boy accept the job at Merck. "I see the fools who don't take those jobs all the time," it told him. "I mean flying around, I see them. They're piss-kittens. Not like you." It meowed like a cat. Then it laughed for the first time, a strange sound like choking.

"Yeah," his sister said. "They talked to me. All through the 80's mostly about how bad birth control is. And how I should buy a motorcycle, and always this shit about walking home after late shift through the alley way. Oh! And the big smoking campaign—why just smoke cigarettes when you can smoke cigarettes and inhale End-dust? And some major deal about hitch hiking—always pushing for hitch hiking, never wear the life jacket. Only drink well gin. Stay in school, sleep outside. Work for General Electric. Preach, preach, preach, preach, preach. I thought they'd never shut up."

"And I was lucky too," she continued "Usually they start talking to girls when you're like around eight years old. Fuck, man. What a fucking distraction."

"I didn't know they talked to women," the boy said. He was skeptical of her characterization. She was prone to saying things like "to succeed is to fail" which never quite sounded right.

"They talk to women," she said, seeing his belief. "They have to. Ask mom I read somewhere they were obligated to under contract."

Once the boy had an office of his own, the crow would perch on the ledge outside his window saying things like "chicka-chicka-chicka," and "How many kids did you kill today?" It also sang. The hollow otherworldly voice possessed a kind of matter-of-fact menacing cheer.

Every morning it would peck sharply at the window and wink at the boy. It would fly next to him after work was over, chanting something unintelligible or reciting the daily Nasdaq report, punctuated by a choking laugh.

Its strange voice would ring out from the corner of the bar, or at the grocery store, over the sounds of traffic as it flew next to the cab.

"You are my song," it said to the boy, "my song of hunger. And I am going to eat the world. I am going to eat the world, now that you're here to digest it for me. With you in my belly, I am a god."

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