



It was very hot and humid. The sweat rolled down his arms onto his hands as he leaned the brush hook against the oak tree. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead, the back of his neck, and his hands. He stretched, took a deep breath, and listened to the noisy silence of the woods.

The sun was well past its peak and from the angle of the shadows he felt it must be near three o'clock. North of him, through the deep second-growth underbrush, he could hear the steady rhythmical thunk of Joe's brush hook. They were

to be working toward each other, cutting a swath along the easement so that a dredge would be able to come and deepen the stream that gurgled to the east. The stream would then be able to carry off the lowland water and enable the bulldozers and other earthmoving equipment to prepare the land for industrial development.

It was Billy's second summer working for this construction company and he liked the work. It was a pleasant change from school and the physical nature of the work—clearing land, digging ditches, laying sewer lines—appealed to him. It was hard work but it paid well and—perhaps most important of all to someone interested in athletics—it was a good conditioner.

He leaned back against the tree, having decided to take a break. He didn't feel guilty that Joe was still working because he had worked construction long enough to know that, over the days and weeks, the breaks evened out. Soon, however, Billy became aware of an additional reason for pausing to listen. While he had been working he had sensed a more than normal level of crow noise

in the woods and had, he now realized, half consciously made a note of it. Now he looked above and in the direction of the natural clearing some two hundred yards away. He could hear Joe steadily hacking away. He could also see and hear, in the breezy and sun-dappled green of the tree tops, a great deal of swirling and raucous activity on the part of the crows. This in itself wasn't unusual, for the crows had been noisy ever since the men had begun work in this section the previous week, as if they were establishing their rights to the property. But, at the moment, the boy noted, there was a certain almost frantic quality to their cawing.



While he watched, they rose, flapping in a loose circle and glistening in the sun, only to plunge down and flutter over an area not far from where Billy estimated that Joe was working. The crows repeated this wild flight cycle again and again.

He smiled to think of the contrast between the birds and Joe, who was stolidly and methodically working along, either ignoring the noise or—more likely—accepting it impatiently.

Joe disliked crows, said they were “no damn good.” Billy recalled how futile his efforts had been to explain to him how beautiful and intelligent they were. Just yesterday, sitting at the foot of a massive sycamore tree, eating their lunch in its shade, they had had another argument about the crows. Afterward, Billy had decided to say no more on the subject because it did no good and was a source of friction between the “school boy” and the laborer. Any arrogance on his part could well destroy the good relationship they had developed over the past two summers. Besides, the boy had the good sense to realize that Joe’s experience hadn’t exactly prepared him to be a nature lover. He had been in Nazi prison camps for six years and had been forced to devote all his energies to staying alive. Billy therefore could understand how the admiration of pests such as crows might strike Joe as frivolous.

Suddenly, he heard Joe's heavily accented cry. "Beely, Beely!" Startled out of his reverie, he jumped, listened—the crows seemed to be going crazy—and heard Joe call again. He quickly picked up his brush hook and made his way as rapidly as he could through the underbrush.

Joe called twice more while the boy made his way and Billy yelled in response: "I'm coming! I'm coming! Are you alright?" Soon he burst into a small clearing and saw Joe standing over something in the underbrush at the base of a swamp maple. The crows were cawing and fluttering wildly overhead. In fact, some were coming quite close to Joe as they swooped down. He saw him immediately and called out. "Hey, looka dis Beel! One of your friends." The last was said with something like a smirk on his face. The boy couldn't see what he was gesturing at with his brush hook until he was nearly next to him. There, flapping in the underbrush, was a young crow. About half grown, Billy guessed.

He clearly could not fly but it was not for lack of trying. His bright beady eyes were frantic as

he banged into the brush. Just then, Joe took a swipe with his brush hook at one particularly daring adult who swooped overhead. Although he missed the bird by a wide margin, his enthusiasm was upsetting to Billy who by now was concerned for the panicky crow on the ground.

“Hey Beel, whadda you think?”

His response was automatic. “Well, we’ve got to see if we can help the bird.” He deliberately avoided the word “crow.”

“Help him? Are you crazy? Help him?” Joe was incredulous. “Hey look Beel, we got work to do! Jackson will be back soon and how we gonna tell him we ain’t finished the day’s work? Let’s just give him a crack,” he said, pointing toward the bird. “He’s no good in the first place and anyway, we’ll be doing him a favor . . . outa his misery.” He looked expectantly at the boy.

Billy couldn’t speak. Joe nodded as if his silence was to be taken as approval. A breeze through the grove felt chill on his bare skin though it must have been ninety-five in the shade. The shadows,

the wild cawing of the crows, the helplessness of the injured bird, and the look on Joe's face all served to keep him from speaking.

Joe started to move toward the bird, and Billy said, faintly at first, "Don't do anything Joe . . . I mean it. He didn't do anything to you."

Joe looked at him sideways with an ironic smile, "Okay smart guy, whadda you gonna do?"

Billy hadn't had any ideas and didn't have any now, but the sarcastic tone of Joe's voice and his own feeling of silliness at getting so involved that he couldn't speak—he felt very young and vulnerable—forced him into a decision. "I'll take care of the bird. I know birds and I'll fix him up," he said with bravado. "Besides," he continued, growing more sure as he spoke, "I know what is the matter with him. I'll bet he flew into a tree or something while he was learning to fly and got a concussion. I'll bet that's it."

"Ha, ha," laughed Joe. "You're really a dope of a kid. Whadda you gonna do when Jackson come around?"

Billy hadn't thought of that. He checked his pocket watch, three-ten. What was he going to do for the next hour and a half until quitting time? Go back to work? Leave the crow here alone? Near where Joe was working? Joe was laughing out loud now and the boy blushed. He was no longer as worried for the crow as he was annoyed at Joe and embarrassed for himself.

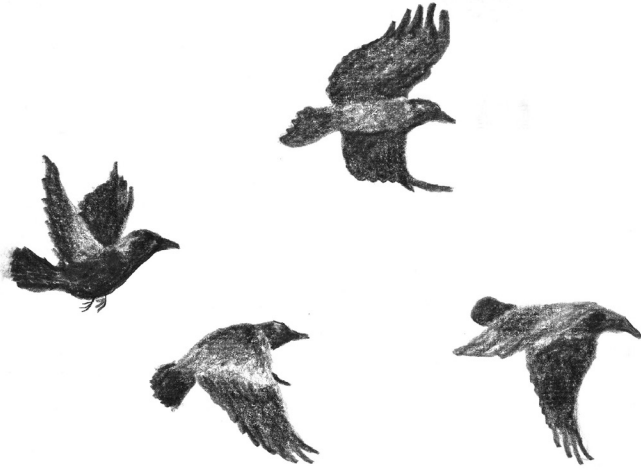
He blurted out, "I'll take him right now and bring him home."

They looked at one another for a long time.

"You're nuts. I'm not going to cover for you." He turned away. Picking up his brush hook, he went back to work. The crows were still whirling overhead.

Billy looked at the crow. It had all sounded so simple and correct before. He had all the answers. He knew all about birds. After all, didn't he say he did? The boy felt more than a little silly as he remembered his brave words, for although it was true that he had always loved birds and had spent much time watching and reading





about them, it was also true that he was no specialist in the care and feeding of sick ones.

In addition, what would Jackson say if he came around? Billy thought of the foreman with distaste. He was a harsh man who always spoke roughly to him and made it clear that he didn't think much of summer help. It would be great if he lost his job, he thought ruefully, over a crow! He looked down at the pathetic flapping of the bird with something less than affection. What a fine fix his big mouth had gotten him into. Well, it was too late now. He had made his stand.

The crows, about ten or twelve of them, were, if anything, louder than before. Joe kept working, his back to the boy.

“Well, I’d better get started,” he said half aloud and squatted down next to the crow who was at the moment quiet, his head cocked to one side as he gazed at the boy balefully. Billy gingerly extended his hand. The crow cawed, lunged forward, and gave him a sharp nip on the forefinger. This drove the crows above into an even greater frenzy. He knew Joe was watching him out of the corner of his eye. Made bold by that fact, he moved quickly—if clumsily—and surrounded the bird with his hands, although one wing flapped free and the crow was darting his head wildly about. He stood and with a quick motion smoothed the errant wing in against the wild body.

All the while he spoke softly and rapidly to the bird. “It’s all right, I’ll take care of you. Everything will be all right.” This seemed to quiet its struggling somewhat, although shock or fright were really the more likely reason.

Joe turned around, looked at Billy with a wry expression, probably wondering what he would do next. What of his brush hook, his lunch box, the foreman? The boy had his hands full in more ways than one. His car was about a half mile through the woods and it was clear that he'd have to get his equipment later on.

He turned and started for the car to a chorus of caws and a derisive look from Joe. Only the crows followed as he made his way clumsily through the thick underbrush. Because both hands were occupied and because he had to keep an eye on the crow's darting beak, it was very difficult to make his way over the uneven and tangled terrain. He kept talking to the bird softly and rapidly but beneath the glistening softness of the feathers the crow's heart pounded wildly. As he moved farther and farther from the clearing some of the pursuers began to give up the chase. Still, by the time he reached the shoulder of the road where his car was parked, there were two big males in swirling and noisy attendance.

With some difficulty he freed his right hand by

pressing the crow to his chest with his left. He groped for his keys and after dropping them once, finally opened the car door. A blast of hot air hit him, for the car had been locked up in the sun all day. Billy knew he couldn't open the windows very wide and resigned himself to a hot trip. Not that that's a big problem, he thought ruefully.

He laid the bird down gently on the front seat and started the car. The crow, though quiet, lay awkwardly on one side, the opposite wing spread for balance. Billy wondered why it didn't stand or perch and it was then that he noticed that the right foot and leg were bloody. The leg feathers were matted down with it and the foot seemed contorted as well. He looked at his left hand and saw a little blood on it. "Oh great, he's got a bum leg too."

Now the boy began to wonder just what he was going to do. Was he going to simply arrive home early with the injured bird? Surely there would be questions from his well-meaning but concerned grandparents who were staying with the family while his parents were in Europe on

business. They had a big job and Billy knew that it wasn't fair to worry them. What was he going to do? For an instant he thought of leaving the bird in the woods, going back to work, and telling Joe that the crow had been only momentarily stunned and, given the opportunity, had flown off with the adults. He knew immediately, however, that that would be both ridiculous and cruel. Joe wouldn't believe him in the first place and the bird would be worse off than when he was found.

As he sat watching the crow, Billy realized that he would have to do what he could. It was then that he thought of the veterinarians; there were two of them on the way home. "That's it," he said aloud. "I'll have the bird examined and get some recommendations from the vet."