

## BAD CREE

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It starts with a book. I wake up from my dream and feel the weight of it still. Run my fingers across the paper edges. At first, I don't even question why it's in bed with me, held against my chest under the covers. I know it's there, before I look down and see my hands empty. The static feeling fills the space, like when a dead limb fills with blood again.

The memory of holding the book stays with me all day. Sticks to the back of my eyelids like molasses. I can't shake it, so I call Mom. She asks what I was dreaming about.

"It's boring," I say. "I was putting away some books. When I woke up, I was still holding onto one."

She clicks her tongue. "As a kid, you used to freak me out. Sometimes when you'd wake up in the morning, your eyes wouldn't see me. Like they hadn't left the dream yet."

Mom tells me maybe I should move home. I laugh as a way of telling her I'm okay and say I'll call her back tomorrow, though we both know I won't.

It's been two years since I left High Prairie, my home, the town where I was born and raised with my two siblings. When I moved, Mom came out to the back of the house to find me putting soil into a bottle. She just shook her head and said that it was my body that carried home, not the land. It's a Cree mom's worst nightmare to have her family split apart. Now here I am, a thousand miles away in Vancouver. A bottle of prairie soil on my nightstand.

A few days later, I dream I'm drowning in a sea of sticks. I keep grabbing and shoving them aside, trying to wade my way through. I wake up to my alarm with a stick in my hand. I blink until I'm sure I'm completely awake. I grip the wood so hard the bark cuts into my fingers. I breathe in the wet pine and sprinkle the needles around my body. Then it's gone, disappearing as I lean over to turn on the light. I feel for the pine needles in my sheets and find nothing. But I can still smell the fresh bough as I trace the half-moon cuts on my palms, throbbing and hot.

Mom tells me to ask Auntie. When I ask which one, she says the most ndn one, but I don't know what that really means, so I call Auntie Marleen. She works and lives in Keg River and knows more Cree than all the other aunties combined. She's at bingo when I call and I say it's important.

“More important than a ten-thousand-dollar duo dab? I don’t think so.” She hangs up and I wait for her to call me back, because I know she will.

“What are you calling me for, my girl?” she asks. “Text me like a regular person.”

I tell her it’s hard to explain over text, and then I get right to it. She’s quiet for a while and I almost think she’s hung up again when she sighs. “Did you think I’d have an answer?”

It’s my turn to be silent now.

“My girl, I might be an old Indian, but I’m not a goddamn dream oracle. This is all really fucked up.” She laughs her loud laugh and I laugh with her. It’s all the medicine I need. When we’re quiet again I ask if she believes me. She says of course.

“Kisâkihitin,” she says. “Call me if it happens again.”

“I love you too,” I reply.

When we hang up, she sends me a praying hands emoji and a shooting star. I respond with a thumbs up.

In Vancouver, I don’t have anyone I can talk to about the dream thing. When I first moved to the city, Mom reached out to Jo, a friend of a cousin who worked as an instructor at the Native Education College.

“So you aren’t alone,” Mom said, but I knew it was more for her than it was for me.

Jo was big and warm. Five minutes after meeting them, they wrapped me in a hug so tight I forgot myself for a minute. Jo was Haida and loud. Could call across the ocean and still be heard, I was sure of it. They helped me find a place to live—not an easy thing to do in Vancouver where most homes are unaffordable and empty. We walked the back streets of Kitsilano together and found furniture for my apartment. They told me about their family, filled alleyways with the echo of story. They showed me all the good grocery stores, introduced me to people my age. They could read the city like my kokum used to read the land. Could tell from the cracks on the sidewalks how far we were from the butcher where they bought their stew meat. What neighbourhoods to avoid because of cops, surveillance. When I moved into my place, they brought me sage and an abalone shell. Said even if I didn’t smudge, it was always good to have it just in case.

Once I got settled, I stopped going to see Jo. They asked me to help out at a couple craft shows at the Friendship Centre to raise money for Indigenous students’ college programs, but I had gotten too busy. I started working at a bar down the road and nestled into a new life, with white friends who wouldn’t go to craft shows at a Friendship Centre. Jo also reminded me of the home I was

missing, and sometimes that was hard. They kept calling, though. No matter how many times I said I'd show up and didn't. I can't call Jo now. Not after a year of silence. Because it isn't right to call only when you need something. I know in my heart it isn't right.

I wake up in my dream, home again on the prairies. So far from the west coast, I can't smell salt or see anything in the distance except clouds and snow-tipped trees. The sky always looks bigger back home, like I'm standing on a plate instead of in a bowl. It's loud. I can hear the voices of everyone I know, because kinship carries through the prairies like a wave. I can hear the crash of them like it's happening right in my head. My sister, Amanda, starts screaming. She's laying under a pine tree in the backyard of our childhood home. Crows cover her body like she's on fire with them. It's fall, so death is everywhere already. The ground is wet with leaves, when I run my feet can't grip the ground. Like I'm running on sand, slow no matter how hard I push. I can't see my sister's face, just her brown hair streaked with blood, and I hear the scream that never stops, not even for a breath.

When I get to her body, I tear at the crows. I beat them off her with such ferocity that feathers fly into the air, fall onto my skin and stick. I beat them so hard I lose myself in a swarm of black and red. I tear at a crow digging into Amanda's heart and snap its neck like it's a twig. Her scream stops and I wake up, the feeling of a beak still in my palm and eyes boring into the back of my head. The sharp smell of pine and blood in my nose.

I don't look down for the beak because I don't want to see it. I think about my sister covered in blood and her scream. It's been two years since she died. I wish I fought harder in my dream, that I could have at least saved her from the crows.

I can't ignore this any longer, so I call in sick for work and start bingeing superhero movies and taking notes—it's the only research I can think of. By the end of *Superman*, *Spiderman*, *Batman*, and *The Avengers*, I've written down *with great power comes great ???* I've drafted one clever tweet during every fight scene, and I've made a list of possible reasons for acquiring a power:

1. bitten by a bug
2. parents died/i get a bunch of money somehow
3. non-consensual scientific experiments
4. industrial accidents
5. aliens/gods (what's the difference?)

I know I can rule a few things out. My parents are still alive and I have no money. I haven't been in any accidents, and I can't recall any experiments done on myself, scientific or otherwise. A bug bite is the only thing that could

have happened without my knowing. I grab the magnifying glass I drunkenly bought on Amazon and hop in the shower, start a meticulous search of my body.

I feel every fold for a stray bump or scratch. I stare at my armpits and the lines on my hands. Press on the parts that still hurt. The underneath hurt that you can't see. I think about my dreams and wonder why I started on research that points to the answer being something outside myself. Something that happens to me, not because of me. I divide up my skin into imaginary sections and survey each part with the magnifying glass. I have never seen my body up close. I stay in the shower until the water turns cold. I feel bigger with each minute I spend looking. I'm shocked when I recognize nothing. I find freckles and beauty marks that I didn't even know I had. I don't know how to distinguish what has been there for years from what has been there only a few days. When I get out of the shower, I list everything I've found, so next time I have to look I won't be surprised again.

After the crow dream and my failed research, the murder forms outside my apartment. I feel the trouble coming. The crows come cawing from all directions, from the city and the sea, taking over every limb. They black out all green. Colour in the leaves and branches with their bodies. If I didn't know any better, I would swear it was the reckoning. A swarm of warnings.

A man from my building, who I only know from seeing in the laundry room, comes out the front to watch them too.

"Must be an owl close," he says.

I don't answer but he clarifies anyways.

"They'd only get together like this for an enemy."

I want to tell him that nehiyawak have an enemy in ôhô, owl. That they mean death for us, too, but I already know the white man reaction to information like this.

"Don't they crowd like this if one of their own dies?" I say.

"Yeah," he says. "But not to mourn. They gather for revenge. To find who killed their friend."

As if on cue, all the crows' heads turn to look at me. The man doesn't seem to notice. In the quiet of their eyes I see myself, aware with a knowing as deep as my history that they see me. Another way nehiyawak are crow-like: we live with love and revenge in our bodies too.

More crows start to follow me everywhere. They watch me from alleyway garbage bins. Stare at me while I rest on beach benches. Swoop past me smelling like pine and rust. Sometimes, when they're close, I can hear them talking. Low

and soft, like how they whisper to their lovers.

I call Auntie again. This, she'll know something about. "What do the crows want?" I ask her, hard and serious. I hear her readjust the phone against her ear. Know her hands are holding more than just me: a bowl, knitting, a smoke.

"You remember the scar on your mosum's side?" she asks. "His animal was maskwa. He was a trapper and knew every trail by Keg River, every body of water, every tree. He never killed maskwak, though. When things got rough for us, he started taking moniyawak hunters through the bush. They paid him well and killed whatever they wanted. Maskwak too."

I nod into the phone as if she could see me.

"Maskwak started to follow your mosum. One day, one got him," she continues, talking low into the phone. "They didn't kill him, just took some ribs. They just needed to tell him something."

"Am I a bad Cree?" After I ask, the words suspend through telephone wires. I can see auntie's kitchen where she sits: the stool pulled up close to the phone on the wall; the laminate floor, patterned and sticky. I can smell the bread rising in the oven.

"He was a good trapper," Auntie says. "But he wasn't living in a good way. If he was, he would have been as good as Kokum." She laughs her big laugh into the phone and it sounds like a crow caw. One of the big, loud ones they use to call to their kin from far away.

I start to keep myself awake, to stop the dreams from happening. I set my alarm so I wake up every ninety minutes, before the deep-sleep cycle—before dreams can set in. I wake no matter how tired I am. Auntie said she taught herself to do the same thing as a young iskwew. She said she wanted to stop dreaming altogether because her dreams were always bad and true. I wonder if this is now our tradition, our matrilineal coming-of-age story. Stamping out dreams before they have a chance to take shape, cutting off a part of ourselves before the hurt can set in.

I see a crow on my walk to work and I feel the day spill. Later, Mom tells me about a family friend who died and I tell her about what I've seen, about the crows that follow me. She tells me to stay inside, knowing it wouldn't matter. Sometimes the illusion of safety is better than nothing. A secret iskwew tip. I start to run everywhere instead of walking, as if running will bring tomorrow faster. Get all the bad out at once. Nothing works. Every time I close my eyes, I dream. The crows come for me, I see my family in the distance but I can never reach them. The loneliness of it fills my head, rests on my eyelids and nose, stays where I can see it.

The next time I fall asleep, I wake up in a memory. I'm walking Amanda home from school. Our small hands are clasping, and we're wearing matching teal snowsuits, one size too big, hand-me-downs from cousins. Amanda wants to cut through the woods, the small patch in the middle of town between the school and the good neighbourhoods. The snow blankets sound and smells like clean sheets. It's already a little dark, because any time after 3 pm in northern Alberta is always a little dark.

If there's one thing you're taught on the prairies as a woman, it's that you never travel alone. You aren't ravens, Mom would say. You are crows. You travel together and everywhere. But I let Amanda go into the cluster of pine. I become a raven, walk the sidewalk through the lit streets and let her go in alone. I become a raven. I let her go to the deep snow that hadn't been packed down enough yet. And I don't go in after her, even when I feel it in my gut, because sometimes the sound of screaming sounds like the crunch of snow under boots, and you just keep telling yourself it's nothing, it's just snow, it's just the sound of boots running.

When I get to the other side of the woods, the only other way out, I wait and watch her walk out. Her eyes look everywhere but not at me, because that's the thing about the prairies: you can see for miles in any direction, so you don't have to look at yourself if you don't want to. We keep walking home, together again. But not really. Not together enough to be crows.

I know what happens in the years to come from this memory. How we stayed undone until I moved away from home. We spread apart even further when I flew into territory that wasn't mine. Even though that's not how nehiyawak measure love or distance. Sometimes we measure it in beats, of hearts or music or the time it takes to answer a phone call. Sometimes we measure it in our palms and aching wrists.

Amanda came to visit me only once after I moved, but she couldn't leave the apartment. She didn't like the smell of ocean, didn't know how to talk to it. She felt like she was covered up. And with the mountains all around, she couldn't see past me anymore. She really had to look. I didn't know that would be the last time I saw her before she died, four months later in Alberta. I didn't know she'd die never forgiving me.

In the dream-memory, I grab onto my sister's small hands, even though in the actual memory this never happened. I feel her fingers through her gloves. I hold on tight, so I can bring her back with me. So she can come home again. Her face looks down and her sad eyes look through me. I feel her fading away and the pull of awake starting at the back of my head, like an invisible rope tugging.

I hold on as tightly as I can, but instead of my sister's gloves, I feel

my own nails digging into my palms. The rope gives one final tug and I'm back again in my room, darkness everywhere, and a wail from my own throat fills the room like smoke.

I wake up in the shape of my sweat, like a chalk outline on my bed sheets. I'm crying and my hands hold nothing. I can still smell Amanda, can still feel the gloves in my palms, but I hold nothing. Every move I make feels slow, like some magnetic force is pulling back my arms and legs. Every thought comes delayed. I feel the sad for hours before I can cry. Like I left a part of myself behind in the dreams. I feel split in two, severed, alone.

I find a queer dance costume party on Facebook. I dress up in a black cotton jumpsuit and drink ciders with MDMA. At the warehouse, I keep thinking I see people I know, but it's just masks and the shaking line blurring what I know and what I want to see. The darkness swallows me whole. Time goes by in chunks until, looking past the bodies on the dance floor, I see the crow. Even here, they have followed me. The crow is in the middle of the dance floor, their mask and feathers hiding their face, but I know they're looking at me, I feel the pull like they're tugging on my sternum.

Their feathers stick to my sweaty skin as we dance. I ask them if they know me from my dreams, and they move in a way that says yes. I reply that kin recognizes kin, and they pull me closer so my face falls into their neck. They smell like alcohol and paint. I wish for the world to open up, and it feels like it does. I ask if they can take a message back to the crows for me and they move yes again. I say that it's okay that crows don't forget a face, but I wonder if they could forgive one. Their body moves and listens, makes a promise to relay the message. They hold my hands with their wings and lift their mask to kiss me. They taste like old clove cigarettes. With their wing on my back, we head out into the street, flag down a cab, find our way into my bed. When I sleep eventually, I don't remember dreaming. I just feel the warmth of the crow against my back, feathers covering my face.

Days later, I'm still pulling black feathers off my skin, out of my underwear. I shower and still find them in my hair. Instead of throwing them away, I keep them in my pants pocket. Proof that I was a part of something, even if it was only for a minute. That dance floors and pockets can hold things as big as forgiveness and grief.