

Two Notes

By

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An imminent death. I felt it the way I always feel it, in my talons and rising up to my shiny black head, one thick, syrupy note of music. I woke one morning, twisted my head in the way that I'm sure you've witnessed, and I heard it.

It's strange, of course, as mythic moments usually are. But I'm enough in tune with them now that I recognized that this note's volume meant nearness: the doomed one was close. I haunt the branches of a pine tree near a hospital. I find that this gives me easier access to my patients. (Yes, I call them patients, for who's around to object?)

It didn't take me long to figure out who was marked for death. The feeling the note left in me intensified, thrumming as I neared a room with a wide window, across from and about fifteen branches up on my pine tree.

I'd noticed the girl months ago, far before she came to that room. I'd noticed her specifically, walking through the hospital's sliding doors. Her hair caught my eye. It was like my feathers: shiny and black but rippling with other muted colors that just needed the sun to describe them. I'm arrogant enough to find this pleasing, and it gave me an interest in her that only broadened when she took up residence in the room fifteen branches up.

By that time the hair was gone. It was just her skull, no eyebrows, the slight flicker of an eyelash. I watched her sigh through the days, just as I watched the Whitecoat who often stood across from her, with a stethoscope that gleamed directly into my eye if I wasn't careful.

Hairless Girl shrank, and the wires and tubes around her multiplied and grew, as if they were taking up her missing space. I didn't know what they were, nor the purpose of the snow-white machines. I didn't care to know. I watched her eyes instead. The day I heard the note, they changed. The brightness in them—a brightness I saw in my mate's eyes, and in the huge, beady eyes of my first chicks—flashed off, like leaves suddenly falling off a tree.

I wasn't surprised or disturbed by the note's thrumming. I perch near a hospital, and so does Death. That part didn't fluster me. If anything, I felt a strange relief. I'd been waiting, through many suns and shadows, for this time. I certainly hadn't wished for Hairless Girl's death, but now at least I could do something about it.

But I had to admit that there was something special about this Hairless Girl, a dearness that I felt for her, that I didn't want muffled by some other, more prosaic death. I was tired of being so accustomed to the process.

I was thinking this as I gripped my tree, tightening my talons around one winter-fragile branch, waiting for Hairless Girl to be alone. It wasn't long before Whitecoat left that morning. She'd recently been coming in for shorter and shorter spells.

Then it was my time. I spread my wings, enjoying the unfurling and the warmth of the sun on feathers, and soared to the window. I tapped the glass. Three times at first, so as not to startle, and then three more times, to be deliberate. At first Hairless Girl ignored this. Perhaps she was in too much pain to notice. Then her face set, and something flitted through the corner of her eye. Annoyance. This was promising. I tapped again.

"I can't get up!" she snapped. "So whatever you're doing, stupid fucking bird, it's not going to work!"

That was enough of an invitation. I blinked and passed through, into her room. It's one of our tricks, inherited from Great-Grandfather, who learned it from Odin himself.

Her eyes lit up again, this time in fear. She clutched the bedclothes. "What the fuck—"

"I'm here to inform you," I said, "that you are about to die."

She blinked, her eyes wide. Her skin was almost translucent, like a brook in sunlight, and her bones poked through. "I must be dreaming--"

"You must," I agreed. I tilted my head and hopped to her bedside. I proffered one silky wing. "And in that case, this must be taken seriously."

She reached out, fingers trembling, and stroked my wing. I have always loved the feeling, and I relaxed into it. The thrumming of her soul was impossible to misinterpret from this close: she was the source of the note. I felt a brief flicker of pain. "So soft," she murmured. She sagged and fell back on her pillow, closing her eyes. "I pet a crow in a park once, when I was little," she said. "My mom stopped me, told me they were dirty. Its feathers were oily, dusty, not like yours. Yours are like a feather bed."

"I am a raven," I said politely.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Not at all." I waited. Her eyes slit open again.

"Why are you here? Why am I dreaming you?"

"I regret to inform you that—"

"I'm about to die—I know, I know. You don't think the doctors told me that already? Look at me. I'm wasting away." She fluttered her blankets like a dancer's skirts, exposing a

gown and her thin, pale legs. “At least I don’t have to shave anymore,” she said, laughing weakly. “Not that you’d know about that—you’re a crow. A raven, sorry,” she added quickly, as she caught my head tilt. “You’re oddly comforting for an angel of death.”

I blinked. “I’m not an angel of death,” I said. “I belong to the old gods.”

“Fuck,” she whispered. She closed her eyes. “I either need more morphine or way less.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” I said gently.

“So what do you know about?”

“I’m here to ease your journey into the next world.”

That got her attention. She sat upright, almost yanking out the tube in her nose. “What? What’s it like? Do you know—“

“I don’t know where you’re going,” I said calmly, “or how you’ll get there.”

She sank down again, and the eyes flashed with a dark brightness I hadn’t seen yet. “Great,” she said. “Wonderful.”

“I’ve never been,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

It was a phrase I used often—every time, in fact, until it no longer even seemed like words but rather just another sound I made. But this time especially, I meant it. I tried to make it as thick and sweet as the note I’d heard, telling me she was about to die.

She was quiet for a long time, her eyes closed and her head sunk deep into the pillow. I waited. Tears beaded behind her exhausted eyelids, then spilled out and sideways, tracing their way across her cheek and onto the pillow.

“Get out,” she said. “Now.”

I am obliged to leave when asked, a professional courtesy as well as what I understand to be a human one. I left as quietly as I came.

Once I deliver my message, my part of the journey is done. I flitted to another branch on another tree. I had news to deliver in a gray-and-mustard building down the street, populated by old humans and Green Scrubs instead of Whitecoats. I wasn’t back at the hospital again until three suns later.

I perched on a redwood this time, ideal for surveying. The crows, my cousins, were very hospitable, and kept me company with their idle gossip. They don’t think much of my

profession, but then they generally don't take well to ravens. They call us "crows in better suits," and like to make jokes—they may be a murder of crows, they say, but I am a murderer. The nuances of my profession escape them.

That morning, I heard a note. My next task, I thought, and spread my wings to seek out the next patient. But then something stopped me: this note was odd. Oddly familiar.

I listened again: yes, it was the thick, syrupy note of Hairless Girl. Wasn't it?

As it reverberated in my mind, I realized it was slightly different: slightly softer, slightly higher, like the music underneath the music. But still: it was the same tune. And I'd never heard the same tune before.

I flew back to my earlier perch, to Hairless Girl's room. There was someone new in there, a man with a thick mustache and a young child. But his soul didn't thrum—this note didn't fit him. I flew around the hospital for hours, watching and growing impatient, until I suddenly felt the note again, trying to get my attention, like a child tugging its mother's coat. I looked into the window opposite me. It wasn't a patient room at all, just a window in the hallway and standing in the hallway was Whitecoat. My Whitecoat, the same one who'd seen Hairless Girl, the one whose stethoscope had blinded me.

As I watched her, the high, soft note played again. And suddenly I understood: what I'd thought of as one note was actually two, playing together. Whitecoat and Hairless Girl were both doomed, so their notes played in harmony.

I hopped from branch to branch following Whitecoat as she made her rounds, hoping to catch glimpses of her through various windows. The note followed, her soul thrummed in response. Yes. It was her. I was certain of it.

My kind specializes, so as to share the burden. I had been gifted only with the long, lingering deaths: the ones brought on by illness, not accident. It was why I frequented hospitals. So this case puzzled me. Was this young woman—for Whitecoat was young, with bright blue eyes and thick red hair—terminal? I only heard notes for imminent death, and she was walking around, striding in fact, working full days and nights. She was certainly tired—I saw the purple half-moons under her eyelids—but she didn't seem to be dying. And the high, soft note coming from her felt unusual, a sound I'd never heard before.

With her schedule, the only alone time she got was in the dull gray room with the unwashed sofa cushions, in the middle of the night, so that was where I visited her. I tapped on the window as usual and startled her awake.

I don't need to tell you of her surprise, or my soothing reassurance that she was experiencing a dream. You've already witnessed it, and I've lived through it too many times to count. But later on, things were different.

"I'm here to inform you," I said, "that you are about to die."

"That's impossible," she said. A common response. "Unless I was going to be hit by a truck or something, and if you're just a premonition, then—" She sighed. "I would dream a premonition, probably. But let's just follow this through logically, all right? If I'm about to die from a freak accident, there's nothing I can do about it, right? So it shouldn't bother me, or my subconscious. Unless you're here to tell me I'm terminal. But I just had an exam last week. I'm in the 'pink of health,' according to my extremely obnoxious physician. So it can't be that."

She put her head in her hands and rubbed her fiery hair until it stood on end. "I am tired, though," she said, so softly I almost thought she didn't want me to hear. "At first I used to come into this place with so much energy, just bounding down the halls, armed with books and instruments, ready to, I don't know, do battle with Death. And now..." She looked up at me. "If you're a figment of my imagination, I might as well tell you the truth, right?" I tilted my head to the left, my version of a nod.

"I can't cry anymore," she said. "I used to be able to cry. And now I can't. I hear sad patient stories and it's like a brick wall comes up right in front of my eyes. When I'm in the middle of telling someone bad news, I start thinking about how much longer my shift is, or the smell of this shitty couch and the antiseptic hallways and rooms, or the fact that here I am, shoveling my life into the white coat that I was so sure I wanted...dealing with shit and blood and piss and vomit." She sighed.

"And even this doesn't make me sad. Or angry. It makes me...nothing. It makes me dull. Or duller than dull—vacant? I don't know the right words..."

She went on like this, arguing with herself, and I waited, as I always do. It was only when I saw her reach for a snack on the table, then ruffle her hair, then sigh and sink back in her chair, that I finally understood it, all in a flash: the softer note, and the different thrumming.

"You are not going to die," I said. "In the physical sense." She stopped mid-sentence and looked up at me.

"Oh, what a relief," she said, but her sarcasm wasn't breezy enough. "I was starting to think I'd need to see a psychiatrist. My dreams are getting really fucked up."

"No," I said, "what you will suffer is something different, perhaps even more terrible: a death of the soul."

“Well, that’s—“ she pursed her lips as if to blow this off, then stopped and looked at me again. “That’s just bizarre—what does that—what does that even mean—“

I’m ashamed to say that I left her there, after that. There was no explanation I could offer, no journey that I knew of. She was now somewhere completely foreign to me, a place no bridge could reach.

I flew back to my redwood, listening to my cousins chatter about the clouds and the raindrops. My talons gripped the branch as tightly as they could. I thought of my mate and my chicks—full-grown by now, and off to their own roosts. And I prayed to Great-Grandfather that I’d never hear that note again.