

David Caldwell

Granpa Henry's Raven

They knew that Granpa Henry was going to die, and they had known it for about six months. The doctors were very sure of this. Doctors are very sure when it comes to such things. There was nothing wrong, at least not the usual stuff that killed you; cancer, AIDs, anything like that. No, for him it was simply old age. Granpa Henry was in his death bed. He was a frail old man who barely left an impression in the mattress. His eyes were sunken down into his head and glinted like sunlight off the water at the bottom of two very deep wells. His head lolled from side to side; dry, wrinkled lips moved, but no sound came out.

Henry was surrounded by his family. There was his younger brother, James, who stood to the right of his bed, and could have passed for Henry had he been ten years older. His wife, Mary, sat on the bed to his left. She held his skeletal hand as she dried her eyes with a handkerchief that was embroidered with his initials. She did not weep or sob; she made no sound. They had shared sixty-five years together. The tears that she missed with the handkerchief rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the soft plaid of the flannel sheets. Their two children Nathaniel and Elisabeth were there at the foot of the bed. Nathaniel's son Jack stood in front of him, his hands on the boy's shoulders. Jack was the only grandchild. The family was bigger, but only blood relatives were allowed in the room. Elisabeth wept for the children that would never be at her death bed. Nathaniel cried to show his son that it was natural for a man to cry. Jack cried for his kindly Granpa, though he hardly knew him. He also cried at what happened after, even though he knew it had to happen. Jack didn't care much for ravens.

Anyway, because the Jacobson family knew that Granpa Henry was going to die, and that left them plenty of time to prepare. They picked out the nicest cage they could, that would still be covered by Henry's health care. It was a roomy enough cage, but they hoped that it wouldn't be needed for very long. The cage was for Granpa Henry. For his Raven. No one was sure if the recently deceased were the Ravens or if they were simply guides, but they did know what the Ravens came to do. The Raven would choose a blood relative, and guide them in completing any unfinished business that the deceased had.

"How long has it been now?" asked Jack. The longer they waited for Granpa Henry to pass, the nervous Jack became. *What if Granpa's Raven chooses me?* The question ran rampant in his mind; played havoc with his ten year old imagination.

"It's been a couple of hours," said Nathaniel. He squeezes Jack's shoulders. He had stopped crying. Everyone had stopped.

"Shouldn't be long now," offered James. He sat on the bed, and rested a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Please move on, dad," Elisabeth said. She held herself tightly.

"He's... he's passed," said Mary. She wiped drool from his mouth with the initialed handkerchief. Granpa Henry's eyes were already closed. James took a pale hand and took its pulse. "Goodbye, brother."

"How long before it comes?" Jack asked. *They eat dead things. They eat death.* Jack had seen a raven only once that wasn't on television or in a book. He was only five at the time. It wasn't one of the Ravens of course, just a wild raven that lived at the local zoo. He had felt

sorry for the bird at first, trapped as it was in its small habitat. He thought the raven was beautiful. The blackness of its feathers, and the way that it flapped its wings. Then it cawed. The sound terrified the boy. It was a violent sound. It cawed and flew at him, and flapped its huge wings. Jack ran to his mother and cried. The raven haunted his nightmares for a week after; he never forgot the fear he felt, or the image of that huge black sound.

“They usually come pretty soon,” James answered.

There was a tapping at the bedroom window. Everyone looked, though they knew what it was. Jack’s whole body shook. There it was, Granpa Henry’s Raven. Jack looked away, at the wall opposite the window. There the sunlight cast the Raven’s shadow. The shadow flapped its huge wings, eclipsing the light. Jack fainted. His father caught him, and laid him on the floor. Henry’s Raven tapped the window again with its long black beak. James picked his way across the room, and opened the window. Elisabeth opened the cage that sat on a dresser in a corner of the room. The bird poked its large black head in through the window. It carefully stepped inside. In turn it locked eyes with everyone in the room, until its gaze came to rest on Jack’s unconscious body. The Raven hopped down from the window seal and crossed the floor to Jack’s head. The Raven gently tapped Jack’s forehead with its beak, leaving a small, black mark. Jack opened his eyes, and saw his fear towering above him. “No,” Jack whispered and fell back into unconsciousness. The Raven tilted its head, then flew to the cage that would be its home for a time.

It took a day for the Jacobson’s to convince Jack to go in to Granpa Henry’s bedroom. Everyone made promises and bribes. Nathaniel tempted him with a new bicycle. Elisabeth promised him a trip to the toy store, where he could get whatever he wanted. James offered to

pay any schooling he might want in the future. But he only went in after what Granma Mary said.

“I know you’re scared sweet one, but you’re not doing this for anyone except Granpa. He chose you because he knew you were brave. He knew you wouldn’t let him linger here long. Remember he loved you.”

Jack finally relented and went into the room. He paused at the door with his hand on the knob. His hands trembled. He took a deep breath and entered. The only light in the room came from the window. The huge bed was empty. They had moved the body soon after Henry had passed. In the cage on the dresser in the corner, the Raven flapped its wings. Jack tried to swallow his fear and approached the cage. The bird sat there and looked at him. It tilted its head quizzically. Jack slowly reached for the latch. *For Granpa.* He opened the cage. The Raven hopped out, spread its jet black wings, and flapped to the chair beside the door. As Jack followed it with his eyes, he glimpsed something of its beauty that he had forgotten since that terrifying day at the zoo. It flew out of the room. He ran after it.

“Looks like the game’s afoot,” said James. “Think Jack could use a hand?”

“He’d welcome the help, I’m sure, but he has to do this on his own,” Nathaniel said.

“He doesn’t need any more help,” added Mary. “Henry’s with him.”

Jack found the Raven perched on the post at the bottom of the stairs. When the bird saw him it flew down the hall next to the stairs; its flight reflected in the pictures that hung on the wall. It stopped in front of the door to Henry’s office and private library. Jack followed to the door. He had only been inside once before. “Is there something in here we need?” he asked the

Raven. It bobbed its head, then tapped the door. Jack opened the door and went inside. The bird flew in behind him.

In the middle of Henry's office was a large globe. A massive, intricately carved wooden desk dominated one side of the room. A wall of bookshelves filled to bursting dominated the other side. The room was still as large as Jack remembered. The Raven flew up and perched on the globe. It looked about and fidgeted its wings as if it was trying to remember where something was. Jack reached a hand out to the bird. It watched him expectantly. He stroked the Ravens head, and it was visibly calmed. Jack nearly fainted again, but held himself together; remembered Granma Mary's words.

"What are we looking for?" Jack asked the Raven. It turned to the wall of books and flew to a shelf in the middle. It perched in front of a green, leather-bound volume. He approached and saw that the book was about two shelves above his reach. A tall step ladder was in in front of the shelves nearby. Jack dragged it over and stood on the very top step. He had to stand on his toes to reach the book, but soon had it in his hands. He stepped off the ladder, then sat down on the floor with the book in front of him. The Raven flew down and stood next to the book. "What now?" he asked the bird. It tapped the cover, then flipped it open with its beak. Jack flipped through pages filled with stories and poems about love. He did not stop to read any, because romantic love was not a subject that interested him at the time. He flipped until he reached the middle. Nestled there in the pages he found a small photograph of an extraordinarily beautiful young woman. The photograph was black and white. The woman's hair fell to her shoulders and there was a look in her eyes that Jack could not identify. The photograph was yellowed at the edges. He flipped it over and saw her name. "Catherine Berg," Jack read aloud. The Raven flapped its wings at the name. Jack smiled.

“Where to now?” asked Jack. The Raven flew over and landed on the desk next to an old rolodex. Jack ran over to the desk. The bird tapped the rolodex. He flipped through the cards until he found her name. There was an address beneath it. “Is she still there?” he asked the bird. It bobbed its head and flew out the door. Card and photograph in hand, Jack ran out after it.

Jack again found the Raven on the post at the bottom of the stairs. When he neared the bird flew up the stairs, and he climbed after it.

At the top of the stairs, Jack saw the bird land in front of another door at the end of the hall. The door it stood before led to the attic. He had not been in there before. He walked to the end of the hall, and the Raven tapped the door. He opened the door and the bird hopped inside. He followed closely behind.

“In, we go,” said Jack to the Raven.

The attic was dark except for two shafts of light from windows at opposite ends of the room. The Raven hopped about the room, searching. Jack watched it intently. For half an hour the bird searched, and Jack fell asleep.

Jack was awakened by the furious flapping of the Ravens wings. He went to the bird, and rubbed sleep from his eyes. “Find something?” he asked. The bird bobbed its head several times. It tapped the ancient shoe box that it was perched on until Jack reached for it. The bird hopped off. Jack blew the dust off the lid of the box, and saw a name written there. “Catherine,” he said and the Raven flapped its wings.

Jack took the box out into the hall, the Raven at his side, and shut the door behind him. He sat on the floor and opened the box. The bird looked on expectantly. He reached in and pulled out what was inside. "Letters. Addressed to Catharine Berg," Jack said. In each hand he held a bundle of envelopes bound together by a rubber band. He flipped through and counted the envelopes. There were forty in all, each one addressed to Catherine Berg. The dates on the stamps ranged from 1915 to 1920. On the back of each one was written, "For my Love." He looked at the Raven then. "Love letters," he said. "That he never sent to her." The bird flapped its wings and bobbed its head.

Jack ran down the stairs and into the living room, and the Raven flew close behind.

"Well, looks like you've been busy Jack," said James.

"I need some help," said Jack.

"Looks more like you need a bath," laughs Elisabeth. "You're covered in dust."

"He'll be fine," said Nathaniel.

"What is it you need, dear?" asks Mary. She stopped her knitting.

"I need to find out where this address is," said Jack. He holds up the rolodex card. He held the box behind his back. The Raven flapped its wings.

James walked over to Jack, and put on his reading glasses. He took the card from Jack. "Let's see," he said. "Ah, this address is very close. It's on the next street over from us."

Jack took the card back and ran to the front door. "Thanks Uncle James," he shouted as he opened the front door to let the Raven out. He followed behind it.

“Seems an exciting little adventure,” said James.

“Hopefully it will be over soon,” Mary whispered as she returned to her knitting.

The sun sat low in the sky, which was a deep blue. A lone cloud drifted overhead. Jack stopped at the intersection of the street in the address. The Raven perched on the street sign. He looked left and right, and took note of the progression of the house numbers. He turned left and the bird flew ahead to perch on the mailbox of a faded yellow house a few houses down. Jack ran after it. He saw that the number on the mailbox was the right one. He opened the mailbox, but then slowly closed it. The bird bobbed its head quickly. Jack took the path up to the front door and rang the doorbell. The Raven remained on the mailbox.

For a minute there was no answer, but then an old woman opened the door. She looked like the woman in the photograph, only seventy-five years older.

“Miss Catherine Berg?” asked Jack. He held the shoe box in his shaking hands.

“Yes, that’s me.” Answered Catherine. “Used to be anyway. How can I help you child?”

“I’m Henry Jacobson’s grandson and-“

Catherine saw the Raven on her mailbox then. “Henry’s passed, hasn’t he?”

“Yes ma’am.” Jack holds up the box. “And he needs me to deliver these to you.”

“Oh...” She took the box from Jack and opened the lid. She pulled out a bundle of letters. She flipped them over and read the back. “Oh, Henry.” A tear rolled down Catherine’s cheek. Then another.

“Are you okay Miss Catherine?” Jack asked with concern.

“I’ll... I’ll be fine dear.” She put the bundle back in the box. “Thank you.” Catherine walked back inside and closed the door.

Jack walked back down to the mailbox. The Raven flapped its wings and bobbed its head. Jack reached out and stroked its smooth, black feathers. The bird cawed loudly and Jack jerked his hand away in surprise, but not in fear. The raven cawed again. The raven had not cawed before. Jack knew it was over now. His task was done.

“Goodbye granpa,” he whispered to the raven.

Then the raven flew off the mailbox and sailed into the sky. He watched in awe as it disappeared into the deep blue.

Then Jack went back to his family.