



A parliament of owls,  
a knot of frogs,  
a skulk of foxes,  
a gaggle of geese,  
a host of sparrows,  
a murder of crows...

In ancient times, flocks of crows were known as 'murders.'

To Sebastian, that seemed strange, indeed. He thought perhaps that had to do with the ominous and sinister image that

crows carried. It was a shame, he thought, that crows were not more associated with happier things, like a charm of hummingbirds, for instance, with their ability to hover and reverse direction, flying as if powered by jubilant, enchanting spirits. But he sighed and shook the curiosity off and away from his thinking as he pushed higher into the bright blue morning sky in search of lift. He hoped that the Elders had not seen him slip away this morning.

He was looking for the red-headed turkey buzzards. They always found the lift. Most days, as the sun rose higher and the earth reflected its heat creating thermals, invisible columns of warm air that extended high into the sky, the turkey buzzards could be found within the thermals circling, propelled by the rising hot air and soaring lazily on their expansive wings. Within the thermals, they not only sought the lift, but they also hunted the aroma of death's decay that rode the warm air upwards from the earth's floor below; and finding it, their sense of smell would guide them to the next meal.

But Sebastian, a crow of one season's age, was not concerned with eating. He was focused on his flying. And that is why he worried about the Elders seeing him leave as the sun came up.

The Elders had berated him time and again for taking to the air before sunrise. Their grating cries when he returned to the roost in the evenings had gotten irksome and maybe dangerous. Many a yearling had been banished and worse, even attacked, by the Elders for not following the rules. According to the Elders, a crow only possessed the ability to fly in pursuit of the murder's interests, chiefly that of stealing food and finding carcasses or anything that could be caught and swallowed such as mice, frogs and lizards. And they complained constantly that Sebastian was lazy for not participating in the harassment of the buzzards and the eagles that fed on the morning's cache of unfortunate opossums and deer that had haphazardly roamed the roads at night and had met untimely fates.

But for the moment, Sebastian tried to forget all about that and focus on practicing stalls. And this morning, he also felt ready to attempt spins. As he rarely ever ate, he was considerably lighter

than most crows and weighed only a fraction of what the buzzards did. That also made him a little weaker sometimes - a condition that did not work well in his favor. But this morning, he felt strong and ready; a meal of red worms at dusk last night had bolstered him for this morning's practice.

He knew, because they were heavy, the buzzards above him were confined to lower altitudes. And, they did not have the lung capacity Sebastian had. He could soar to heights much further up with little effort. This morning, he could feel the heat under his outstretched wings and it was strong. He easily soared past the buzzards and left them circling far below. It was time to practice intentional stalls and spins. Not the swooping head snapping turns and loss of control that other crows experienced, but a graceful, controlled slowing of flight until his wings no longer made lift.

He visualized what he wanted to do in his mind over and over as he slowly rose to altitude. He envisioned himself raising his head very high and extending his legs completely to act as drag; then as his airspeed slowed, he would use his tail feathers in small twitching motions, left and right, to stay on heading. Using his peripheral vision to monitor horizon references, he would fly straight at a chosen point.

As his airspeed slowly bled off and the air around him went silent without the rush of speed in his ears, he would keep his head high and locked and just feel the air currents at the ends of his wing tips. When his wings stopped generating lift, he would curve his left wing downward and he would drop his head and dive into that wing in a slow graceful arc and hold that as he completed the first head down rotation. But instead of trying to break free of that and return to flight in panic as other crows did, he would keep his head tucked under his wing and complete another spin and another and another until he was ready to recover to normal flight; the recovery being a part of the maneuver he had not much considered yet.

The idea was to keep the spin under control and poised. Other crows did not practice intentional spins and having accidentally stalled, an event accompanied by wild screeching and small

explosions of lost feathers, they found themselves flailing at the air until, somehow, they got their wings straight and they recovered back to normal flight. When it happened, which was often, it was never pretty or graceful to watch. Sebastian thought it embarrassing.

It seemed to Sebastian that crows took their wings for granted and used them as little as possible and only as a means to an end; that being mainly eating, stealing and mischief. And Sebastian was especially irritated by his hatred of the 'hop-flying' as he called it that the others did as they maneuvered to pilfer scraps or badger other birds down on the ground. Crows had wings, he thought. Crows were meant to fly gracefully, weren't they? Not hop-skipping and fluttering across the ground caterwauling and cawing like bewildered fools. And just because that's what the other crows practiced, did he have to do it, too? *No!* He demanded of himself. *No! I will find out what greater things my wings can do, what greater things that I can do as a flyer, even if I starve doing it.* Sebastian knew there was more to flight than just finding food, getting from branch-to-branch and committing thievery.

He also thought that learning more about stalls and spins would lead to the kind of aerial perfection and grace that other crows might want to emulate and practice. Sebastian was determined not only to make himself the most proficient and beautiful of crow flyers but maybe, by his example, he might convince some of the day-to-day scrapping and scraping crows in his murder to join him in more lofty pursuits. Some days, it did get a bit lonely practicing all by himself. Being with others who flew and thought as he did would be lovely.

But no matter. Now, he was high enough to begin the day's stall and spin practice. Today, he was determined to control the stall and begin and end the spins in the direction he chose.

With that, Sebastian lowered his feet slightly and slowly and changed his heading. He then dropped his head some to pick up a little airspeed in an attempt to move further away from the lifting effects of the thermal. In so doing, he slid into the cooler air and away. Once in freer air, he allowed his speed to increase before

raising his head and completely extending his legs to increase his drag. He immediately began to hear the wind noise diminish. The further he thrust his head back as he increased the angle of attack of his fully outstretched wings, no longer using them to propel himself, instead simply gliding now, the slower he flew.

With his head fully back, he watched the distant reference points on the horizon while sighting along the leading edge of his wings to maintain his heading. He could feel his rigidly extended wings becoming lighter and lighter and his airspeed bled to nearly nothing. The silence he heard became nearly complete now as his forward movement slowed and slowed and slowed. As the lift under his wings began to falter, using rapid twitches of his tail to stay on course, he gently manipulated the air at the ends of his wingtips to stay level. Then...suddenly, he was at a full stop in the sky.

Hovering momentarily, he ever so slightly let his left wing drop into an arch and then cupped it and he quickly moved his head as far under his wing root as he could. Keeping his right wing rigid and extended, his body snapped smartly down and to the left and into the first inside rotation of the spin. As he brought his right wing into his side, the spin tightened, and he laughed aloud as the spin continued into the three-quarter point and then became a full spin.

Now, he was completely head down and the rush of air began to build to a crescendo in his ears as he entered the second spin. With his descent speed building, he entered into the third full spiral of the maneuver. The first three spins had only taken a matter of a few seconds to complete and now the wind in his ears was thunderous and Sebastian became a little fearful.

He had never tested his wings and strength at these speeds. So, he did exactly the wrong thing. He snapped his right wing full back and the spins tightened and his airspeed increased. So, he instinctively twitched his tail feathers in the opposite direction and held them there. Then he returned his head to a level position. Simultaneously, he pushed both of his wings slowly to a more level outstretched position. Then he discovered that if he relaxed his wing's trailing edge feathers and put his head down slightly, the

spins slowed and he returned to normal flight, still moving fast but level and controllable.

Once the spins stopped, he realized that he was pointed in a different direction than when he began, but no matter. Then it dawned on him that he had completed *six* full inside spins before he recovered! The most he had ever accomplished before was two before he stopped the spins fearing too much strain on his joints. He wondered now just how much speed he could bear and how many spins he could accomplish if he had enough altitude.

It was early, so he went in search of another thermal to ride. And, now, the sun was much higher in the sky...and much warmer. "*More altitude!*" thought Sebastian.

Unknown to Sebastian, perched high in the trees below, Evie sat watching him, preening herself now and then, but never really taking her eyes off of Sebastian. Fact is, she had had her eyes on Sebastian since he first left the nest as a fledgling. What got her attention first was *how* he left. Unlike the other fledglings, he did not hesitantly jump-hop away to another branch and pause to stretch his wings before flitting off to another branch and pausing again. He soared. Once he jumped from the nest's edge and extended his glossy black wings, Sebastian deftly wove his way around and up through the trees and sought the open sky.

There was a certain authority, a boldness about the way he used his wings, his body. Evie knew that all birds possess the natural instinct to fly and it's in them because they are creatures of the air. But Evie felt some greater sense of it in Sebastian. His inspiration for flight seemed to come from another place, not just his origin as a bird.

Her father, an Elder, has forbid her from speaking to Sebastian cawing incessantly about Sebastian's recklessness and lack of allegiance to the murder. She wished that she could just touch down next to Sebastian after he returned from practice in the evenings and talk about flying, but she feared her father's anger, so kept her distance. But her father could not stop her secret admiration nor her observations of Sebastian.

Meanwhile, high above Evie, Sebastian sought out another thermal and its lift. Taking cues from the buzzards, he found a particularly warm shaft of air and slipped into it. Sebastian imitated the buzzards keeping his wings far outstretched and rode the air upwards and upwards.

He used the time while gaining altitude to think back on the earlier six spin maneuver. He realized that he had not kept track of his descent and how close he had come to the ground. It did occur to him that just at the time that he decided to recover and pull out, the ground seemed to leap into his face. He felt like that was some sort of demarcation point but he just wasn't sure what it meant. But, he did decide that he would use it, if it happened again, as a signal that no matter where he might be, in the midst of a maneuver or not, that seeing it again, it would signal time to quit what he was doing and watch his altitude carefully. At the speeds he was achieving, he knew that stopping quickly would take longer than regular flight and if he wasn't careful, he might strike the ground. It gave him a small shiver to think what might happen if he smashed into the ground at the speeds he was reaching in his maneuvers.

Rising on the heated air of the thermal, he quickly rose above the buzzards which were now much further beneath him; he was gaining more and more altitude. He decided he would ascend on the lift until it ceased or his breathing became difficult. His goal this time would be to achieve ten spins before the ground rushed at him. He began to visualize his entry and he also focused more intently on his heading and recovery. He wanted to finish the spins on the same heading he chose to begin the maneuver and he wanted the recovery to be smoother and more graceful. No sudden moves and no feather loss this time. He saw it in his mind from many angles and repeated the entire sequence in his imagination over and over.

Soon, the air began to feel cooler and he began losing lift. He watched the ground and it seemed twice as far away as it did on the last maneuver. It was time to start. He clamped his beak tightly together and squinted to shield his vision against the coming speed. He eased his head back and fully extended his legs and claws.

*Easy...easy...easy...hold steady,* he told himself. His wings seemed to speak to him. He could sense by his wings buffeting and shuddering that he was on the verge of a stall. He held that, keeping his wings as level as possible in the unstable air. Just one small unexpected burble and he would stall too fast and drop uncontrolled before he was ready. He held his breath. *Easy...easy...easy...*

Then, abruptly, the stall happened. He began to drop! He held his heading, twitching his tail to maintain his course straight ahead. He let the stall take over for a few seconds as the air mushed beneath his still level wings. He controlled his wings with just minor movements of his outer wingtip feathers. Then as smoothly as he could, he tucked his head under his wing root while simultaneously drooping and curving his wing inward, cupping it. With that, his body went vertical and the first spin began.

"ONE!" he screeched loudly. "TWO!" "THREE!" then counting to himself, "four," then "five," and "six," and "seven, eight, nine..."

The ground below him was spinning, a vertigo inducing dizzying kaleidoscope of patchwork fields, green forest and blacktop roads that picked up speed and rotated faster as he dove.

"TEN!" he shouted.

Up until that very instant, during the descent of the maneuver, the earth beneath him had seemed the same high patchwork view of forest and field in every direction as it had when he had reached his exit point and left the thermal to begin the spins. At that time, he could see the far horizon in all directions around him. But now, instantaneously, explosively, the ground beneath him seemed to expand suddenly and dramatically in all directions and overwhelm him with its intense magnified nearness! It was as if he had suddenly stepped from a high cliff edge and was falling helplessly into a deep ravine, the cliff's ledges, the far horizons, now lost in his peripheral vision and replaced by the smothering tunnel of trees and hills looming larger and more distinct in his vision. That took his breath away. An adrenalin burst shocked his entire body!



With the rush of the ground into his face, it took every shred of courage he had not to panic! He stayed on course. He stretched both wings out simultaneously, stabbed his tail feathers full in the opposite direction and as he did, the spins stopped on the heading he had chosen and he resumed level flight streaking across the very top of the trees within mere feet of where Evie sat watching, praying he wouldn't die.

Before she could gasp, using the energy of the dive, Sebastian shot up into the sky and executed the first half of a loop in a long sweeping arc that left him inverted and on his back at the top of the loop; then he smoothly wing rolled upright and returned to normal level flight once again.

He was screeching at the top of his lungs with joy! He had done ten! "TEN! I DID TEN!"

The thought then raced through his mind that one more spin might have been fatal. He shrugged his wings and reminded himself that he had violated what he had said he would not. From now on, he promised himself, that he would never violate the rush of the ground again.

Evie trembled with relief as small dead twigs and leaves shook loose from the limbs above her, debris loosened by the turbulence of Sebastian's scorching low pass, which was now drifting and settling among the branches around her. She had lost sight of him as he began the climb overhead. His gleeful, strident cries fading away in the distance assured her he was still airborne and alive. In relief, she released a small breath and un-tensed her body and loosened her grip on her perch and made a decision that, somehow, in spite of her father, she was going spend time with Sebastian and learn what he knew.

No crow, *ever*, had performed such a feat! And, in her complete fixation watching Sebastian's last maneuver, Evie had not realized that there had been total silence in the trees and the rookery that surrounded her. *Everyone's* attention had been riveted to what Sebastian was doing. As Evie began to relax and even start to laugh as the tension within her eased; she then realized that there was a cacophony of cawing and shrieking rising in a steady

tide that began with first a few birds timidly applauding what Sebastian had just done and then a steady joining in of others who had witnessed it. Soon, every bird in the trees, hundreds of them, were cackling and clicking, their heads thrown back as they bobbed up and down in undulant jigs shaking the limbs in an exuberant celebration.

But not everyone took part in the ovation. A clutch of Elders huddled high within a tall oak's leafy chamber nearby, and they angrily barked squawks of banishment. At least one Elder demanded a lengthy shunning. Evie's father listened as the other Elders complained and he watched his daughter perched on a limb several trees away; her head bobbing up and down, rattling clicks of encouragement at Sebastian; and his temper rose. Evie's mother sat silent next to her mate fearing that a storm was brewing.

As the sun was setting that evening, Sebastian flew to a place on the edge of the rookery and lit on a branch with a good view of his surroundings. The afternoon had been busy with crow after crow flying past and offering their congratulations. A few whispered to him that the Elders were going to call him to appear before the Flock Council. Sebastian knew that meant trouble. He had long been the subject of the Elder's admonishments about what they called his "stunt" flying obsession, saying it was un-crow like and irresponsible.

Sebastian wondered if it might be better to just leave the murder and go off on his own in the morning. But the thought of retreating angered him at first and he felt that he should stay and fight any charge they might make against him. Nobody was going to chase him away if he didn't want to go. Who did they think they were, anyway? It was as much his flock as it was theirs.

But then, during the night, he changed his mind and made a decision. In the morning, he would begin a murder of his own. It would be a gathering for crows who wanted to do more than scrap, fight and steal. It would be a camaraderie, a brotherhood of crows who believed that the real excitement of life as a bird would be practicing and perfecting flight in its ultimate form, not just as a means for the purposes of survival and subsistence.

He decided that when the sun rose in the morning, he would announce his intention to the entire flock and to the Flock Council that he was leaving to form a new flock. He then decided that he would not wait to be called before the Council. Instead, *he* would call them out. Tyrants need to be dealt with.

But as the sun began to rise the next morning, Sebastian decided that he didn't have time for battling with the Elders. Something had happened during the ten spin maneuver that was more important to explore than giving the Elders a piece of his mind. It was a new maneuver he had envisioned that he was anxious to try. But, still, he felt that there was one thing that *had* to be done before he flew off to practice. He would make it short and sweet and would listen to no arguments.

He left his perch and in a glide, he swooped down to the small green field at the edge of the rookery and landed facing the trees. Then, as he stood, a lone figure spotlighted within a long shaft of early sunlight, surrounded by the galleries of drowsy crows perched high up in the branches, in his loudest voice, he woke the entire murder with a great commanding series of caws that were destined to wake even the soundest sleeper.

Then and there, he let it be known that the Elders could choke on it for all he cared, that he was leaving the flock. Then he issued an invitation to anyone who cared to follow him that he was going fly south after the morning's practice to begin a flock that had the common purpose of perfecting flight, and he also said that if he survived this morning's practice, he would have something even greater to squawk about.

*If he survived...?*

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