

CRYING OUT TO CROWS

wishing she could fly away

By KiKi Walter

“Life’s Sweetness”

I still remember
Trips to my Grandmother’s house
Over the river
And through the woods, I believe
Is the song we used to sing

Smoke from chimneys near
Bright birch trees and snowy roads
Grey clouds hovered high
Bubbling brooks trapped beneath ice
We’re closer now, Grandma dear

Crisp winter silence
An Irish Setter runs free
The crow calls us in
Apple pie and cinnamon
Nothing ever smelled so sweet

Over the river
And through the woods, was the way
To Grandmother’s house
Snow, smoke, pine, bread, and pie
Recall the sweet visits there



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How vivid my memory is of our wintery travels there over frozen dirt roads surrounded by endless trees — some covered in snow, some deadened from time or disease, and some of my favorite — the Dalmatian-styled birch sprinkled throughout, especially as we edged closer.

We were a large family. As Adirondack folks go, typical of the area and time period. Thanksgivings were almost always spent at my grandmother's house in the woods. Her home was nestled deep in the Adirondack pines.

How vivid my memory is of our wintery travels there, over frozen dirt roads surrounded by endless trees — some covered in snow, some deadened from time or disease, and some of my favorite — the Dalmatian-styled birch sprinkled throughout, especially as we edged closer.

The dirt road seemed to last forever when we were kids. I haven't any idea how long it actually was but like a long-lost scene out of a Bizarro World Brady Bunch, my family would burst out in song.

Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go....

As our car finally reached the big blue house in the middle of the woods, the vision of white puffs of smoke reaching up to the sky was broken by the excitement of the most beautiful Irish Setter running to greet us. Brandy's deep orange fur billowed behind her seemingly in slow motion as she charged toward our car, with King the black lab following close behind.

Cars and prints of various boot sizes were scattered around the plowed-out enclave in front of the home. As Dad unpacked our car, Mom carefully balanced the Pyrex casserole dish she'd been nestling between her feet as she maneuvered into the brisk air, careful not to slip on the ice. My brother and I tumbled through the snow to get inside.



Opening the door of my grandmother's house in winter was like what I'd imagined opening Pandora's Box would be. Standing in temperatures that were double digits below zero, the chilled air was quiet and still, so cold that the snow was iced and crunchy. As I placed my iced knitted mitten on the frozen brass it stuck a little bit; I tugged a little harder and it grumpily edged through the previous tracks it made earlier in the day.

As I opened the door, I was immediately met with the contrast of the frozen bright, blue-white outside to the technicolor carnival warmth inside. The heat blasted into my face — radiator heat that was almost too warm — the sounds of men yelling at football on the television, children running and playing, women laughing, glasses clinking, and the smells — oh, the smells! The scent of cinnamon, bread baking, pie, and on this day, of course, all of the Thanksgiving foods.

As children, we had very little to do with the adults. We had our own tribe. We would play outside, play in the basement, run and yell, and feast at our own table — it was the 1970s, and we were pretty much left to our own devices.

Family get-togethers at my grandmother's house were always looked forward to as children. I had a ton of cousins to play with, our tribe was a big one.

Spring offered different activities and wonders to behold.

Mud and melting dirty snow, deer, and tracks to follow. Little birds

pecking at the feeders in front of Grandma's window. Playing in the woods for hours. Finding huge branches to walk with and eventually use as Lightsabers.

But this spring was the most magical of them all. That's when I met Jasper.

Jasper

It was the spring of 1977. We arrived at my grandmother's blue house in the middle of the woods to celebrate Easter with our family — cinnamon, bread, pies — of course — and ham and easter foods like that. But most importantly, playing with my cousins. The snow and ice were still melting, as was normal in an Adirondack spring. It made for a lot of mud and mess, but we kids didn't care.

There was something different today when we approached the house. Usually, all was still until we opened the door and made our entrance into Wonderland, but on this day there was a crowd of my relatives around the door.

Brandy and King didn't even bother running to us. Something was definitely odd.



But this spring was the most magical of them all. That's when I met Jasper.

We walked toward the circle of our relatives when someone yelled toward us, "come 'ere you have to see this!"

We edged our way in, and there on Grandma's shoulder was a shiny black crow. "This is Jasper!" she chirped. "What?!" responded my mother. "He's a tame crow!" someone else tried to explain.

Everyone was talking over one another and all the kids were asking if they could touch him — and Jasper just sat there calm and proud. Kind of smug. As if he liked all the attention. Thinking back, I think this crow had a bit of a narcissistic streak.

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He's a tame crow!

At almost seven years old, I was in awe. While my other cousins were shouting and begging to touch him, I just stared — as if I was connecting to him. I felt like I was. Grandma told me to hold out my arm and Jasper quickly jumped on, softly gazing into my eyes. To me, he and I shared something. He took my breath away. I stayed behind while my grandma fed him his favorite dinner — macaroni and ketchup — and just kept silently watching.

She had commands for him as well that he'd follow like a trained dog.

He'd fly around the yard, come back, land on her arm, her head, her shoulder — and she got Jasper to do the same to a couple of us who were on the calmer side. All I wanted to do that Easter was watch and play with Jasper.

At one point, my cousin Jon and I started to go for a walk. We were headed down a path from the house when we saw a snake directly in front of us. Now, this poor thing was

nothing more than a grass snake the size of a large earthworm, but I screeched my little girl screech and within seconds a beautiful black streak swooped down and grabbed the evil threat out of my way. *Jasper saved me.*

I was so sad to leave that day. As we drove away, grandma waved with King the black lab on the right side of her and Brandy the Irish Setter with Jasper the Crow on her back to the left.

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We visited my grandmother a few more times throughout the summer and each time I was so excited to see Jasper.

When Thanksgiving rolled around, I ran to the house — my heart racing with anticipation — but he was gone.

*Jasper was gone.*

He flew away when winter neared. My grandmother was sad. I was heartbroken.





“Tell Kristi I have a surprise for her.”

A message from my grandmother just before we celebrated our next family Easter in 1978.

When we arrived and headed toward the door, he swooped down to greet us. Jasper came back after winter. *He came back!*

My heart was mended.

My friend was back and he would understand me. He would follow me around, protect me, and be my friend.

Everything continued as our new normal. At Thanksgiving, he was gone again. And by the spring of 1979, he was home. Jasper belonged to us and we belonged to Jasper. No. Jasper belonged to me and I belonged to Jasper. He just had to stay at Grandma’s is all.

In the late autumn, when I’d see the birds flying south in formation, I would lay down in the grass and watch them — imagining Jasper was with his friends going to hang out in Florida and have fun. Hoping though that he would see me and pop on down to say goodbye.

He never did though.



### **Kristi**

That summer, my parents separated. Everything changed.

I was only nine years old, but somehow I didn't know who I was anymore or who I was supposed to be.

I hated the changes. I missed my dad. I hated what my mom had done. I wanted to be with my dad. I didn't understand, of course. How could I? I was a child. I oscillated between rage and burying my pain deep inside of me. Shoveling the pain seemed to be the most acceptable route. But it was the beginning of that deep silent sorrow. The kind where your whole body hurts and your eyes sting. And you've gone from someone bright and bubbly to dark and closed. No one understands why. No one cares.

I moved schools. I suddenly had no friends. I lost myself in books. Many, many books. And music. I cried a lot. I cried so much that sometimes I couldn't cry when the crying was expected of me.

That fall when Grandma mentioned Jasper flew away again, my heart couldn't take it. She kept saying he'd be back again like before. But I already lost everything. I didn't want to lose Jasper again too.

Visiting my dad at our old house, I heard the sound of birds overhead. I ran outside and lay down in the grass yelling his name with tears trailing down my cheeks.

"Jasper!"

"Jasper!"

"I want to fly away too! Please take me with you!"

"Jasper!"

*Jasper.*

But he wouldn't come.

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*I want to fly away, too! Please take me with you!*

What was it about him? It's not like he was an eagle or a hawk or an elegant bird like that. Oh, but I thought he was perfect. It was like...he was this smart, free, wild thing with a heart and an attitude that people admired. Well, that I admired. And he protected me. Was it that he protected me or that I wanted to be a free, wild thing that people admired as well? Or maybe it's just that I imagined that he was there for me when I needed it. Like a silly girl.

*Silly, silly girl.*

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*I want to fly away, too! Please take me with you!*

When the spring of 1979 rolled around, Jasper was nowhere to be found.

He never returned.

And for a couple of years, a devastated young girl was crying out to crows, calling his name up to the sky. Wishing she could fly away too and never return.

And sometimes she still does.

