

Each Morning I Conspire With A Murder Of Crows



One of the murderers Drawn by Joyce Eakins

04:40, I am unceremoniously yanked out of a very pleasant dream by the insistent yowling of my hateful cat. He wants his breakfast. The 0 in 04:30 stands for, oh my God it's early. I get up and crack open a can of cat food. I tell him, "No more cats." He doesn't care. I sometimes threaten to go online and offer to give him away, free to a bad home, but he knows I won't do that. He was a momma's boy. He adored my late wife, Jackie, who often referred to him as her only good boy. I promised her that I would take good care of him. So now, I am stuck with this pain in the ass cat.

I get back into bed and recite Poe's *The Raven*. All 1125 words of it. I do this every morning to ensure that my brain is still in good working order. I figure the ten minute, forty-four second daily recital provides some cranial workout. I am convinced that the brain, like any other muscle will atrophy if not vigorously exercised on a regular basis. I have recited this poem at least once a day since March 1980. Well over 14,000 times mostly to myself, sometimes to the poor people trapped in my cab and occasionally, to my long-suffering wife. She claimed that I made the word, raven, into a verb and that I "Ravened" people, She further maintained that once anyone caught my delivery, they were never quite the same.

My Jackie was a very funny lady and she got my off the wall sense of humor. This of course, only served to encourage me. I remained the guy working for her smile

for the entire forty-one years that good woman put up with my sorry ass. Yep, 41 years and, on occasion, she would actually be seen in public with me.



November 27, 1975, the day before our wedding

Image captured by, Vince Longo.

It took about five years of occasional storm and strife for us to figure out how to become low impact partners and for the next 36 years I was blessed by a marriage to a no drama momma. Oh, while we're on the subject of domestic tranquility; the two most important words a husband can learn are yes and dear. Practice them often and let them be your default answer to your better half. Alternative phrases such as, "Anything you want sweetheart" will work as well. Happy wife=happy life. Guys trust me on this; if you can keep your wife happy, you know you're on the right path. Over the years I have come to realize how important having a partner in life can be and learned to value that partnership highly. Even after my Jackie grew old and big, she remained the undisputed love of my life. It has been difficult and strange walking my path, at this stage of the game, without the benefit of her adult supervision.

At 05:00, I light up my computer. I scope out the weather to help plan my day and then I check my financials. After that I peruse the headlines on Google News and investigate any interesting stories. I am a news/political junkie and the internet feeds my addiction. I am so very happy that I have lived long enough to take advantage of some of today's technology.

Then comes The Beast. The Beast waits for me every morning at 05:40 and claims 20 minutes of my life. The Beast is a three-way (upright, recumbent and elliptical) exercise cycle. Following a five-mile ride, I reward myself by cleaning my hateful cat's litterbox.

After breakfast I get dressed and strap on 22 pounds of serious photographic equipment. I haul all of this between six and 8 miles on a typical day. Between 10 and twelve miles on what I call, my lazy days. I often get some breathtaking shots with my heavy and capable cameras and lenses, but I always get my exercise. I round out my daily workout routine with between 100 and 150 pushups. It's important to keep myself in top physical shape. I carry some very expensive gear in a lot of different settings and I need to present myself as someone who can take care of himself. At 72 years of age, losing my physical edge is a steep and slippery slope dumping into the precipice of feeblity. When I am no longer capable of stomping on the terra firma, I no longer want to inhabit the terra firma or anywhere else for that matter. I haven't minded getting older, but I refuse to become feeble.

I walk down my driveway and encounter a crow sometimes two, sometimes more patiently waiting for me. Soon more gather. I surreptitiously drop pieces of bagel, attempting not to draw the attention of any watching gulls. Gulls bully the crows, especially if there's a lot of them. So, each morning I find myself conspiring with a murder of crows. We develop new strategies. They work with me on this. I am often surprised by their cleverness. They will hide in a tree and as I walk by, I'll throw a bunch of bagel pieces as far away from the tree as I can and while the gulls are chasing after them, I toss some bagel bits to the waiting to swoop crows. It's great fun. I stop by the Safeway, a two-minute, seven second walk from my front door and replenish my supply of bagels.

Seaside is a target-rich environment for an earnest photographer. I really do love it here.





When I lost my Jackie, so many people were very kind to me. I have found a home in this pretty town by the side of the sea. As I rapidly and determinedly walk down Broadway, I adopt a “don’t tread on me” demeanor. That being said, I am quick to offer up a friendly good morning and a tip of my hat to many of the folks passing by, most of the time I get a smile and a good morning in return. Being festooned with many cameras, one of them with a very large lens gets me noticed. Some people feel compelled to comment on me and my load, “nice cameras!” someone would exclaim as we pass in opposite directions. “Nice scenery” I throw over my shoulder. I love leaving them laughing. As I cross the bridge over the Necanicum River, I spot a cormorant struggling with a good-sized bull fish. I swiftly raise the camera with the long lens, focus in on the unfolding drama and snap off 15 shots in quick succession. Here’s one of the images I captured of a happy bird and a sad fish:



I head down Broadway towards its cul-de-sac terminus known by the locals as the Turnaround, I encounter Lucky, a red Queensland Heeler and his human, Paul. Lucky perceives an eating opportunity and greets me enthusiastically. He knows

that I have a stash of beef jerky in my pocket. I extract a large bag and select a big slab of the dried meat for the not so patiently waiting dog. He gobbles it down. Jackie would say no more dogs, no more husbands and not necessarily in that order. So, now I have to spoil opp (other people's puppies.) I have made many friends here in Seaside and most of them have four legs or feathers. Continuing down Broadway, I am followed by a contingent of crows. I leave bagel bits as I go and the crows grab them up as soon as they're tossed. The sparrows see me coming, as well. A sparrow's brain weighs about a gram and yet, these clever little critters recognize me and will flutter right in front of my face to announce their presence. They too get tiny bits of bagel. Nearing the Turnaround, I am spotted and a couple of gulls let loose with their feeding calls, alerting the other gulls to the presence of plentiful bagel bits. Soon the sky is full of hungry birds:



Breaking bread.

I play my harmonica some of them gather around and pretend to be music lovers but, I know they're really only interested in my bagel bits. When I'm done playing,

I apologize to the people upon whom I have inflicted my tunes and explain to them that I can't play my harmonica at home because my cat hates it. Some of the birds will light upon my head and gobble the bits I hand up to them. On a cold Winter morning one of my regular gulls, Gracie, stopped taking the bagel bits and just stood there. I could feel her moving her feet back and forth on my head. It suddenly dawned on me that she was using the heat from my noggin to keep them warm. It's great that after all these years, I have finally found my purpose in life.



Gracie, my cameras and me.

Image by Phil Pasteris

My Jackie was never happier than when she was feeding hungry critters, I never knew a bigger heart. Feeding this flock, twice a day helps me to feel close to her. She would be a very hard act to follow. I am way too old, way too set in my ways and my daily routine is way too demanding for me to be a good partner in life. I

have decided to fly solo for the rest of my mission here on earth. Just me, my cameras and my hateful cat.

I hurry back up Broadway and stop by the Bridge Tender bar on the West end of the bridge crossing the Necanicum River. I order a glass of Clamato juice from Derek who with his lovely wife Samantha has recently purchased the establishment and they have done a really good job accommodating the eclectic group of colorful locals who haunt the joint. I love this place, it's so Seaside.

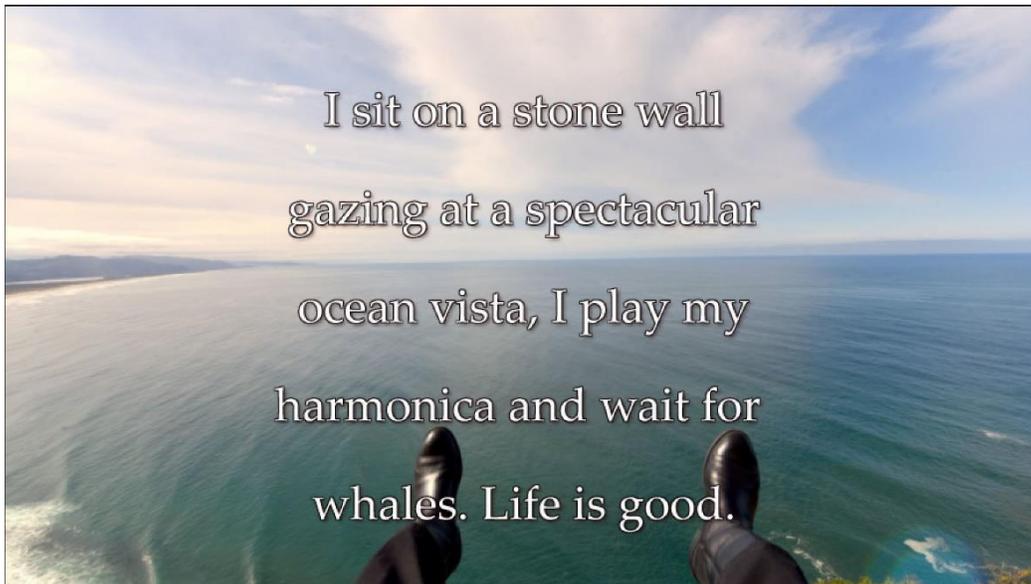


The Bridge Tender bar.

I slam down the juice, square up with Derek, give my regards to some of my pals who were enjoying a quiet morning at the bar and swiftly take my leave. I am on a mission. I come blinking into a bright morning sun and head up Broadway.

When I get home, I load my cameras into my car and head for the Manzanita overlook on Highway 101 by Mt Neahkahnie, about 22 miles South of Seaside. I am 400 feet above the Pacific Ocean and I'm hunting California gray whales. They are on their northern migration after spending the winter in the Sea of Cortez. Once

while playing my harmonica in Depoe Bay I was visited by a young whale coming close to the shore right in front of me. At the Whale Watching Center, I learned that the juveniles can be very curious about music and often will investigate the source.



Two very important components of successful whale watching are patience and persistence. I spend a lot of time perched upon that wall and every once in a while, I spot some of these magnificent creatures:



You will find my whale video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJeHHIZ9iB8>



I drive back to Seaside and take my late-morning nap. My hateful cat and I curl up together. the house is cold, so he uses me like a hot water bottle. I have no illusions that this is anything other than thermally motivated affection. We snooze for about two hours. After that, I'm good to go for the rest of my day. Absent my nap, I have been known to get cranky, the cat's cranky all the damn time.

I eat my main meal of the day. Later in the afternoon, I once again, load up my cameras and set out on my second walk. I head for the Turnaround. The birds are hungry, so the bagels are distributed in short order. As I leave, I implore the gulls to stay safe, stay warm, stay dry, stay fed and stay happy.



I play my harmonica and wait.

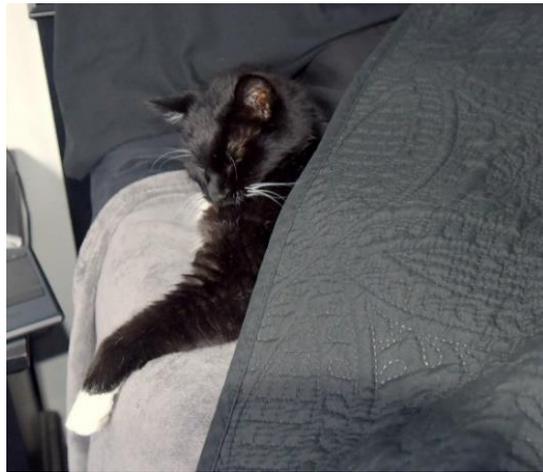


This sunset did not disappoint. It's time to head for home. When I arrive, I download the images from my cameras onto the hard drive of my heavy lift computer. I've taken 423 shots today. I'll look at each of them and work on the ones I like. Last year I captured 65,415 images I distilled them down to my 4,055 favorites and use them for my screen saver. All year I see my favorite shots from the previous year go floating by on my TV and computer screens. It takes a while to process today's harvest.

Shortly before midnight, it's been a long day and I'm ready for bed.

02:00, I am unceremoniously yanked out of a very pleasant dream by the insistent yowling of my hateful cat. It's cold and he wants to get under the covers with me. I hold them aloft and wait for him to settle. He usually takes his sweet time. He snuggles close for the warmth and starts to purr. Soon we are both fast asleep.

Images of Tucker, my hateful cat, are displayed on the next page:



Lou Solitske

Seaside, Oregon 2019