

Corvids

by [Armando Simón](#) (October 2024)



Moon Mad Crow in the Surf (Morris Graves, 1943)

"A murder of crows?"

"Yes, that's what it's called," Joshua confirmed with a smile, enjoying the reaction. "It brings to mind Edgar Allan Poe and his poem *The Raven*, doesn't it? They're both related, you know. Ravens and crows, I mean. Both corvids. They belong to

the same genus but are different species.

"A murder of crows," Jeremy mused. He chuckled.

"Well, you know, there's a pride of lions and a pod of whales, a raft of penguins, a dazzle of zebras, and so on."

"Who conjured up these labels?" Jeremy's wife asked. "And why? Why not just call them a group of lions or whales?"

"I've asked myself those same questions." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

Zelda stood there, gritting her teeth. She was Joshua's wife.

Zelda had invited the Nillsons over for dinner to get acquainted; the Nillsons had bought the house next to them. Both couples were in their thirties, and both retained their good looks. He had a trim beard and she was sporting henna on her hands and arms, recent too.

Just before the couple arrived, Zelda had warned her husband. "Don't start with your damn crows. There's plenty of other topics of conversation. Talk about anything else, for God's sake. I'm sure they don't want to hear you talk for hours on end about those vermin."

Joshua felt bad about being chastised. Or perhaps a better word would be emasculated. Either way, he agreed.

So, when Jeremy and Sharon came over, the discussion began about the neighborhood, things to do in the city for entertainment, the city where they had moved from, schools for future children.

And inevitably, the discussion turned to what the men did for a living.

Jeremy was an engineer at a local petroleum company.

"And what do you do, Joshua?"

"I'm a researcher at the university."

"What's your research on?"

"I'm an ethologist."

"What's that?" asked Sharon.

"That's the study of animal behavior, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"That's interesting. Which animals?" Jeremy asked. He seemed to be genuinely interested and was trying to draw him out, which made Zelda tense up.

Oh, no.

"My specialty is corvids, specifically crows."

"What about crows?" he asked.

And that did it.

He was up and running.

"It turns out that they're very intelligent—as intelligent as apes! They can use tools to get food, usually some grub they can't access, that's hidden, as a spear. If you put sticks of different sizes, they'll choose the right size and, if necessary, they can shape the stick, like a hook. In fact, if you place a transparent tube with food in the middle of it, they'll pick up a stick with their beaks and push it to the very end where they can eat it. Mind you, without prior training. They figure out what to do."

"That's amazing!" Sharon was truly impressed; she was not just being polite.

"Oh, there's more!"

Oh, please. Shut up!

"If you place a piece of food that they really like and which floats in a vertical container filled halfway up with water, they'll start dropping pebbles into the tube until the water goes up high enough that they can reach the food with their beaks, and then they'll eat it."

"No way!" exclaimed Jeremy. Joshua's enthusiasm was contagious.

"If I tie a piece of a favorite food at the end of a rope and place the food and part of the rope in a deep container, some crows will pull up the rope with their beaks, press down with their feet on the rest of the rope that been pulled up until the food finally becomes accessible."

"No!" uttered Jeremy.

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"You said, 'some,'" asked Sharon. "Not all crows can do it?"

"No. Some crows are not smart enough. Others are. It's just like dogs or cats or horses. Some are smart, others are as dumb as a doorknob. Same with crows."

"And humans," Jeremy inserted.

"But you know the thing that I find most fascinating?"

"They recognize individual person's faces *and ... and ...* they hold grudges! If someone throws a stone at one of them and hits it, it'll squawk. And anytime that person shows his face, it squawks again, continually, and all other crows will do the same, following the person as they raise a racket."

"That *is* weird!" exclaimed Sharon.

"But the opposite is just as weird. If you're consistently nice to one of them, it remembers you. There is a crow on campus that I leave food for him fairly regularly. He follows

me around campus. One time, he followed me in my car when I went to the mall. He was there waiting for me and followed me back home. Then, one day, he started leaving me stuff in the same spot where I put the food. One day it was a button, another day it was a paper clip, another time it was a dollar. Sometimes, he hands it to me."

"Hey! Maybe you could train them to steal money from a bank!" Jeremy joked, and they all laughed.

All but Zelda.

"You know what else? Crows hold funerals."

"That's enough, Joshua, enough with the crows." Zelda tried to sound reasonable, though her facial expression betrayed her. "I'm sure they're tired of listening about your crows. I know I am."

"You're not interested in his studies?" Jeremy tried to sound diplomatic.

"It's all I hear! Crows, crows, crows! I've mentioned it to him several times, what Oscar Wilde said: 'Like all people who try to exhaust a subject, he exhausted his listeners.'"

"And why couldn't he have picked some other bird to study, one that sings instead of squawks or a bird that's pretty to look at instead of a bird that's dressed for a funeral?"

"Then you'd be complaining about that."

"Two years ago, we visited Yellowstone, with all the geysers and bison and elk around and all he was doing was scouring the trees with a binocular for crows. At the store near Old Faithful, we had to wait almost two hours while this dope watched a crow near the entrance waiting for people to drop food."

Sharon and Jeremy glanced at each other without moving their

heads as Zelda kept berating her husband.

"Something smells great!" Sharon said.

Zelda snapped out of her diatribe, and the conversation quickly steered toward other areas. Later, she would tell her husband insisting their visitors "had been bored with all that talk about crows."

When they first met, as is usually the case, Joshua and Zelda were physically attracted to each other. She enjoyed his conversation, including his research. She was impressed by his obvious intelligence, and they enjoyed mutual hobbies, such as hiking, swimming, volleyball, and dancing.

So, one would think that she would take his enthusiasm for his research in stride, and she did for over three years. Then, her irritation for it steadily climbed. She would tell herself during occasional periods of being rational that Joshua was a good man in many ways, that his zest for his work was just the same as many other men's enthusiasm for their respective jobs. Except that Zelda also knew that those men's burst of conversation for their jobs was sporadic, and with Joshua, it was daily.

After the end of their fifth year of being married, she considered divorce. But there was one deterrent to seeking a divorce: Joshua had been adamant on their signing a pre-nuptial. Predictable, since he was an intelligent man.

And, it was not just that. Nowadays divorce judges were different from years past. It used to be that women who divorced their husbands stole everything that the men had: their homes, their children, their car, their savings and, to add insult to injury, the husbands had to pay them alimony,

that is they had to pay their ex-wives while they slept with one man after another. But now!

Worse, alimony was finally eliminated in several states, and paternity tests for children made legally obligatory.

As a result, if Zelda filed for divorce, she would leave with what she came in, which was virtually nothing. And she had become adjusted to her present lifestyle.

So, all thoughts of divorce vanished from her mind.

Instead, she doubled down on castrating her husband, a goal pursued by many women.

In the meantime, they continued participating together in their mutual hobbies. They joined a volleyball team which played every other Sunday. They took part in orienteering. They swam at the community pool during the summer, catching a tan. And they would go hiking.

Like now, Joshua had been told of an out of the way state park, a small one, which they had not gone to. It was where the hill country began. The night before, the couple had gone dancing and today they were hiking.

Hiking uphill is a bit tiring especially if you have danced a lot the previous night. Nevertheless, they were enjoying their surroundings, and Joshua was identifying the various bird calls as they proceeded up the dusty trail. But at the top, the land leveled out considerably for some distance. The view was fine, fine indeed. The couple were at the top of a small ravine—if it could be called that, it was deep but not overly so as the name “ravine” implies. There was no water at the bottom.

“This part must have sheared off recently,” he pointed downward. “Otherwise, it would have plants growing down the scree, like there and there.” He pointed at either side. “Be

careful. Don't get too close."

They heard a harsh cry, one they both knew well.

It was a crow.

Of course. It had to be a crow to ruin a good outing.

And the thing of it was that those infernal crows always seemed to be around, at least whenever Joshua went out with her, either in the city or hiking, or just being outside the house, there was always at least one in the trees. She knew this because he always pointed it out. And Zelda right away knew there was at least one of those flying cockroaches up in the trees and, yes, there they were, flying in and out of the trees or perched.

Joshua looked up the trees at them and for some reason burst out laughing.

This sudden laughter she took as a personal affront! She was sure he was laughing at her. It infuriated her.

"Stop it!!" she screeched out irrationally and pushed her husband in a rage. Being near the edge, he tried to recover his balance but was unable to and fell backwards down the ravine. His face was one of surprise and pain at the betrayal.

He fell to the bottom and did not move.

Zelda was shocked at what she had done and stared down at her husband's corpse. Her action had been impulsive.

That her husband was dead there was no doubt in her mind after watching his body for several minutes without it moving, and there was no way that she was going to climb down to ascertain his health. The only thing she could do, she felt, was to return to the car and seek out the authorities. Needless to say, she was not going to say she pushed her husband to his death.

As she was walking back towards the long distance to the car she had time to think. How should she comport herself? Act hysterical, or shocked? Shed tears, of course. This last was not hard. Now that he was gone, she realized that Joshua had always been a good man, a good provider. Except for his obsession with those birds, he had been an ideal husband, and she truly began to feel some regret and guilt for what she had done.

But not too much.

A pebble hit her head, hard.

Except it was not a pebble, it was a bird, a crow!

Even now, she was not rid of those vermin! Anger quickly turned to concern as she realized she had been so wrapped up on what she had done and how to present herself that she had not noticed that the vermin had been squawking, followed immediately by being alarmed from the fact that they were swooping down on her. They were flying by, in a curving strafing trajectory, hitting her with their wings or pecking at her head.

Their beaks were sharp. And strong.

She began to run. One actually perched on her hair and did not fly off but bent down to repeatedly and painfully peck her forehead before thrusting it away. Others landed briefly on her and still others were flying around her. She swirled around waving her hands over her head and around her, but they kept coming and she tripped.

But they kept attacking! Black feathers everywhere.

Zelda realized she was bleeding. A trickle of blood was running down her face and despite the painful pecks, she remembered that Joshua had once said that crows will go for the eyes of an animal they attack and with this memory she

lost her self-control. She jumped up and ran away screaming with her head down, down the trail toward the car as the winged devils kept up their unrelenting attack, even as she waved her arms to keep them away. She seemed to have hit them several times, but did not seem to injure them as the attacks kept coming.

They would swoop and peck, in rapid succession, one after the other.

Swoop and peck.

Swoop and peck.

Swoop and peck.

Swoop and peck.

One quickly after the other.

A few tried to land on her head but were swept away by her flailing arms, which were bleeding.

And then she lost her footing—meaning that there was no ground under her feet. In the confusion of the relentless attacks, she had followed Joshua's footsteps!

She screamed as she fell. In the two seconds it took for her to hit the rocks at the bottom, she hoped that she would survive.

She did not.

And she had landed next to her husband. If she had been alive she would have appreciated the irony.

The corvids flew, hovering over the scene and realized that both were dead, being the intelligent creatures that they were. They landed on her. Some pecked at her body, since after all they are carrion-eating birds while other crows pecked her eyes.

None of them touched Joshua's body.

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