

# CROWS

## Lois Peterson

Alan knows it's time he stopped staring out across the lawn to the fence, now firm and straight. The last load of furniture was hauled away hours ago, garden chairs, flowerpots, a tangle of coat hangers balanced on top of a box of towels and coats.

He issued directions which the kids ignored, while Gina went ahead to the new place. He wasn't much help.

There used to be an upturned wading pool out there, an orange ball half-hidden under the hedge, often a book with flared pages after a night of rain. He can still hear voices through an open window, a duel of radios blaring from different rooms, the clatter of dishes.

He turns, able to keep his back to the room only so long, to the patches of dark carpet where the bird's eye maple buffet, the oak end table sat. To the wall where the piano stood.

"Put it in the garage," Gina said often enough. "We need that space."

"Need?" he'd ask. For what?"

She was wearing a green dress the day he met her, her hair flounced up into something high, lips pale, as if they were chalked. She was headed into her piano class as he was coming out.

"What's Madame like today?" she asked.

"Mean."

"Oh, great!"

"She's not so bad, really."

"Says YOU."

Only three weeks later the teacher told his parents they were wasting their money. At fifteen, after four years, if he were going to make it, she'd know. He should try another instrument; his theory was good.

His father said, "Try for something else, son."

"Have you thought about what we've given up for those lessons?" asked his mother.

"Too bad," said Gina. She quit soon after, too.

"But you're good," he told her, edging closer to her on the sidewalk. "I've heard you through the door. I could never play Debussy's *Swans*."

She shrugged. I'm starting riding lessons next week. I get to ride

Mountain. Neat name for a horse, eh?"

On Tuesdays he'd walk up the lane to meet her. He held her hand, toyed with her roughened fingers, imagined them riding across piano keys.

Six months later she joined a softball team and put an ad on the school bulletin board. *Jodhpurs and hard had for sale. Hardly used.*

After his piano lessons folded and Alan took up carpentry, his mother was always hovering. "You sure you know how to use that?"

His father would run his hands along a pine shelf, across a maple tabletop. "You should think of doing it professionally. Even if you don't, you'll make some woman happy with this."

At night Alan often dreamt of teeth, the jeer and rattle of black and white keys. Sometimes, he'd wake to find his fingers flying across the bedclothes.

By seventeen he had the apprenticeship. He was done by twenty-two, a picture of him standing beside a maple rocker in *Home Work* magazine the following year. The article used the word 'artisan'. When Alan finally had business cards made up, they simply said, 'carpenter'.

After he and Gina married, and his parents settled into their routine of Sunday visits, his mother would stand back and watch his father try out the new jig-saw, a router. "You do wear safety glasses, don't you, Alan?" she asked every time.

Other carpenters had odd bits and pieces missing. He managed to stay pretty well intact, until he tried to chop a frozen chunk of bacon one suppertime.

*A fellow could really hurt himself*, he remembers thinking, just seconds before the cleaver blade slid across his nail, through one finger. Sitting beside Gina on the way to Emergency, he shivered, gritted his teeth against a moan. He clutched his ragged hand to his chest as blood seeped through the tea towel.

After that there were regular trips to be stitched, taped, bundled in bandages. But nothing so bad that he couldn't still hold a tool, slide a piece of grit paper into the sander.

A whole orchestra of saws and routers couldn't drown out the music in his head. He still dreamt of the piano, the slide of his fingers across the keys, arpeggios soaring through his sleep. At night, walking the quiet streets after supper, the sound of Chopsticks drifting through an open window could almost make him weep.

Then, five weeks ago, out in the yard cutting new boards for the broken fence, he ran the saw over his hand.

At first he felt nothing, just a flow of warmth down his arm, something

splashing against his chin. Pouring and spurting blood, white blind with pain now, his head filled with air, light. He couldn't remember where Gina or the kids might be, only imagined them coming home to all that blood trailing into the house, on the wall behind the phone.

Slumped on the steps, leaning against the front door as he waited for the paramedics, he heard the crows rattling in the sumacs, watched them hop across the lawn as his hand paddled in his lap.

In the ambulance, as something dripped into his arm from a plastic bag, the medic asked him what he did for a living.

Without hesitation he said, "I'm a pianist."

In the man's glance to his colleague, Alan knew he would never play again. He closed his eyes and listened to the siren.

He should have learned long ago to be like Gina. "Let go and move on," she said, when the cat died, a vacation didn't pan out, one of the kids failed an exam.

Since the saw chewed up his hand, he's not dreamt about music once.

As he was driven away, the ambulance driver said, "What a racket. Frigging birds all over the lawn."

Some days it's easier to imagine that the crows stole his fingers. He still has to remind himself that he saw that blade coming, and hardly flinched.

He leaves now. Closes the front door and walks across the lawn.

The crows are gone. There's no sign of blood in the grass, and behind him, the house is dark and silent.