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From the collection [One Day Your Memory Will Destroy You]

A Raven Arrives

You might think that white crows are uncommon but, in the wild, more are born albino than you'd expect.

So why aren't they seen more often? The answer is that the mother crow lets her offspring with white plumage die—which might be the best fate they can suffer, for if such offspring survives its cruel childhood, it has to spend the rest of its life alone, as no other crow will mate with it.

Awah was a white crow, and his mother hated him enough to peck him out of the nest before he had even learned to fly. He tumbled down the side of their tree and landed on an exposed root, where he lay sprawled, waiting for his time to die, crumpled in the jaws of some dog.

But it was Max instead who found him. Max had been strolling through the park when she came across a fledgling on the ground, and when she squatted to take a closer look, she saw that it was a crow, a white crow...

Max took him home and raised him in the attic, in the little room beneath the ceiling. She named him Awah, a word that means "marriage" in a faraway land, and which she thought sounded pretty, sweet to the ear. Max taught Awah not to caw loudly lest he disturb her neighbors, and the obedient crow did as he was told; she taught him to peck food from a plate, which he did without making a mess; she allowed him to relieve himself only on a sheet of paper, and it was some time before he understood this; she taught Awah to perch beside a lamp in winter, and he learned to do this in no time at all.

The leaves on the trees outside fell and sprouted again, and Awah gradually grew up, though he was never very big and, most importantly, he couldn't fly. No one had ever taught him how: Awah lived his life in the attic without ever going outside and knew no other birds—no one else but Max, in fact, who came to bring him food and talk to him each evening.

You might already know that crows that reach a certain age can change into people. For Awah this was also the case—he, too, became a human when he came of age. He would always remember the first time Max saw him like this: she was carrying a plateful of food into the room when she spotted Awah sitting beside the window, knees drawn to his chest. He had the body of a boy draped in a baggy white shirt and trousers; he had long, white eyelashes and white eyebrows, and on his back, between his shoulder blades, were two white wings. These were small and flimsy, their feathers thin and fine. The boy looked at her with big, round eyes, half hidden by his droopy lashes; and she found his little nose and mouth adorable. Awah was stroking his toes with his fingertips, exploring the body that was newly his.

Max had thought that white crows couldn't become people, that only black crows and their bigger cousins, ravens, could shape-shift. And she certainly never suspected Awah could become a human, for he had always seemed, well, underdeveloped, in a way...

But when she saw him like this, Max felt like a mother whose child had just taken his first steps. The young woman dropped the plate of dried, salted beef to the floor and ran to Awah, taking his hands as if she wasn't certain this was truly her pet crow.

"Awah?" she asked. The boy nodded in response. Max shouted with joy; she pulled Awah to his feet and spun him around and around, inspecting his body and wings.

Max tried speaking to him, but Awah still couldn't form words. He teetered away from her and over to the overturned plate on the floor. Pieces of beef were scattered everywhere. The crow bent over and tried to pick them up with his mouth, but to no avail—his nose kept knocking painfully against the floor. Max walked over and scooped the dried pieces onto the plate again. Awah watched closely and tried to imitate her: carefully he pinched a piece of salted beef between his thumb and palm; the other four fingers flailed about. He then brought his palm to his mouth and tried to swallow the piece whole.

"You're going to choke yourself! You're not a bird anymore," Max warned. "You've got to chew."

Awah didn't understand. He stared at her with big, round eyes under long, white lashes.

Max picked up a piece of beef and placed it on the right side of her mouth, opening wide for the bird to see. From there she began chewing slowly, looking Awah in the eyes. He followed her example, placing a piece of meat in his mouth and chewing it softly, looking at Max.

From that day on, Awah began learning how to use his human body bit by bit. After several months, he was able to use his fingers to undo the lock on the window; he could walk in a straight line along the wooden floorboards of the attic; he chewed every bite of food before swallowing, though he never quite mastered the spoon and fork; but best of all, he could finally speak with Max after only being able to listen for a long time.

"Max," he would say whenever she appeared.

She'd smile when she heard his voice and respond in the same way.

"Awah."

For Awah, the days passed with ease; each time he learned something new, Max would be proud of him, and he was happy. But then, one day, a dark shadow fell over his life. One morning, as the golden sun poured into that little room beneath the ceiling, as Awah in human form was kneeling on the wooden floor before the window, both hands gripping the sill and looking outside, he saw something fly by.

It wasn't a mere crow, but a raven—lustrous black and nearly two feet tall, a bird so large that hardly anyone had seen the likes of it before. The raven had just arrived in that territory and defeated its previous lord; now it was flying here and there, in search of the best food his new domain could afford.

Awah couldn't take his eyes off the bird's magnificent flight. Typically, ravens are found in pairs, but this one was striking in its solitude; its color was as black as pitch, its body big, intimidating, as it flew in circles above the trees in front of Max's house. The little wings on Awah's back began fluttering out of rhythm as he tried to match the raven's even, well-timed beats...

When Max went to see Awah that evening, she found the boy twisted up on the floor, sobbing beside the window.

"What happened?" she asked.

"A black raven flew by," Awah answered through sobs and gasps. Max couldn't understand why Awah was suffering so; she tried to comfort him in every way she could, but the

boy refused to calm down. In the end she could do nothing but leave, letting Awah cry himself to sleep that night.

The following morning, Max returned to the attic, thinking she'd get to the bottom of things, but found Awah in crow form. He was hopping around the room, trying to fly: he was flapping his wings, but couldn't get off the ground; or, if he could, it was only for a few seconds before he crashed to the floor again. After the eighth such crash, Awah didn't bother getting up, but lay sprawled like that, cawing miserably, and wouldn't even touch the food that Max had brought him.

At last Max understood: Awah had seen another bird flying and wanted to do the same. She had taught Awah a lot of things, but she couldn't teach him this. Max lingered over this the whole day at the bakery where she worked, until even her coworkers could see it in her face. When she returned to the room beneath the ceiling that evening with a loaf of newly baked bread, Max saw Awah once more in human form, lying in a fetal position on the floor, fingers clutching his toes. His tears had stained the floorboards in a circle around him.

"I can't fly," he said.

"I don't see what the problem is," Max responded. She went to sit beside him, placing the loaf in her lap. "You're with me. You don't have to be able to fly."

"But I want to be like the other crows," Awah said slowly, crying again. "I'm not like the other crows. I have white feathers. And I can't fly."

The bird flipped onto his belly, staring at the wall with a blank expression. "But why would I want to fly...ravens usually fly in pairs. Even if I could fly, I'd have to fly alone. That black bird was also flying alone...it was such a beautiful bird. But that bird would never choose to fly with me."

Awah broke into a fresh round of tears; he sobbed so hard his body shook, his wings shuddered, and when he turned to look at Max, biting his lower lip, his eyes quivered. He was scared. "I'll have to live alone."

"Nonsense, Awah. Don't cry. You have me," Max said softly.

But the boy shook his head. "You're not like a bird...and neither am I. Every bird has a female for his mate."

Awah let his hair fall across his face, even though it bothered him. Max reached across and brushed it away, but the crow pressed his face against the floor, lay still, and would say nothing more.

*

One day, Max went to the room underneath the ceiling and slumped herself next to Awah, the marks of exhaustion etched onto her face. He was in bird form and had been pecking the wooden floorboards in play but looked up when she appeared and cocked his head at her.

"What's up, Awah? Did you have a nice day?"

Didn't you? Awah wanted to ask. He leapt to perch on her knee as she sat cross-legged on the floor. She stroked him gently. That was when the crow noticed that his owner's arms were streaked with purple bruises. He cocked his head again before leaping into the corner of the room. There lay a ring that Max had given him because Awah loved to play with shiny things. The bird fetched this and dropped it into his owner's lap.

She petted his head. "I always choose the cruel ones, Awah. Or maybe all men are cruel." Max looked outside the window. She spoke slowly, her voice shaking, dejected. "Or, if not, maybe women are meant to be abused by men."

Tears ran down her cheek. Awah became human again and wiped them away for her.

“Don’t cry,” he said, comforting her the way she had comforted him.

Max hugged Awah, crying on his shoulder. The boy’s slim white hand stroked her red hair softly. He picked up a gold chain that was lying on the floor nearby, another toy that Max had recently given him to lighten his mood. Awah held out this chain to her, hoping that it would make her feel better too.

Max cried as Awah slipped the chain over her hand. His owner’s voice shook as she said, “You’re probably the only nice guy out there.” She pressed her face into his chest and, together, they both wept, wept as if all the sadness in the world had been piled inside that room. Then, suddenly, Max looked into Awah’s eyes and he kissed her cheek. No one had ever taught him to do so. Even Awah didn’t know why he did it.

But what happened next confused Awah even more. Max lay him on his back so that he was resting painfully on his wings. Then she stood up and removed her shorts, which she tossed on the floor, slipping her underwear off at the same time. Awah looked at Max’s exposed skin; it was something he was seeing for the very first time, so he stared at her intently.

Max sat on top of his thighs, her legs spread, straddling him. From this position, she pulled his pants down from his waist. Awah felt his skin revealed to the air, and it was strangely chill. Max grasped a part of his body that he himself had never touched before. At first, he didn’t feel anything at all, but once she began moving her hand up and down over it, Awah started to relax, like he would fall sleep; stretching himself out across the floorboards, he tilted his head so that his hair fell back from his forehead, and he moaned softly in his throat.

What happened next, Awah couldn’t explain. Resting on his lower belly, there seemed to be a stick, a bar of some sort. Max sat on him and the stick slid itself inside of her.

“Does it hurt?” Awah asked, but Max made no response. She lifted herself up, then after a pause sank onto Awah’s thighs, taking that bar inside herself, then lifted herself up again. She did this repeatedly, penetrating herself over and over. She cried as if in pain.

Awah didn’t understand—Max was hurting herself; she was piercing herself with something. Her body quivered and grew flush; Awah reached up to touch her face. It was hot.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he begged.

“It’s alright,” Max replied. Her voice shook as if on the verge of tears.

Seeing Max hurt herself, a sadness fell over Awah. It occurred to him that, though she never wanted to hurt herself, by choosing cruel mates, Max was effectively doing just that—the end result was the same. And once he thought this, he started crying himself, this time out of pity.

*

Max, having broken up with her boyfriend, cut her hair almost to the scalp—cut it herself in the bathroom, not caring whether or not it looked like rats had tattered it. And she told Awah, “I’m starting a new life now.”

From then on, the days and nights changed in that room beneath the ceiling. It took a while before Awah understood how that stick, that stiff bar, was a part of his body—that it was, in fact, what made him male, and as such it had only one duty: to enter a female, even if doing so seemed painful.

Awah never understood, however, why mating should have to resemble hurting each other at all—why he felt like his heart might burst each time they did it, and why she made noises like she was about to cry.

Max would laugh when he asked and say that he was looking at things the wrong way.

The crow told himself that he probably didn't know enough about such matters, whereas Max understood everything. Well, almost everything. There was one thing that Max didn't know, but that Awah felt with conviction and even tried telling her once.

Each time they had sex, they would do things the same way: Awah would lie motionless on the floor, and Max would take charge. And almost every time, Awah would be brought to tears. Max never understood why Awah cried each time that she allowed him to enter her body.

"Because I don't want anyone hurting you," Awah said.

"No one is hurting me."

"I am."

These were the only words that he could summon. He felt sorry for Max, but couldn't express exactly why—he could, after all, only think like a child.

*

"Sometimes it makes me happy when you cry," Max said while stroking Awah's face one day. She had just got off him. The two were lying side by side facing each other; both were naked. The final light of evening was shining through the window, and the shadow of Awah's wings fell over Max's face.

"Why's that?" the crow asked, his face still flushed. That day he was more exhausted than usual.

"Because it feels like I'm hurting you." She was stroking Awah's white shoulders, running her fingertips down his scrawny body, more like a girl of fourteen's than a man's. The crow lay motionless as usual, letting his master do as she pleased. "Before, I was always the one getting hurt, and when I get to do the hurting for a bit—deep down, it satisfies me. I know now I like it when boys cry during sex."

Max played with Awah's hair and smiled strangely. "It sounds nice and queer," she said, chuckling.

Awah didn't understand Max at times, and this was one of them. He didn't know how to respond, so he kissed her lightly before pulling her close.

Max kissed the hollow of his collar bone and climbed on top of him once more. At the last second, as Awah was lying stretched on his back, his head tilted as far back as it could go, his eyes wide open, he saw the room beneath the ceiling turned upside down, saw the window inverted...

Outside the window, the raven that had just settled in the area was flying past; its shadow fell over Awah's face, and in that instant Awah poured himself out, all that he contained; he forgot Max's presence entirely, aware only of two things: of his peak, and of that raven, utterly black, the only image he could see.

Awah was enraptured by how he had transcended the horizon this time, had broken past the sky's furthest limits. And he knew he had arrived not because of Max, but because of the magnificent sight of what he wanted to be, but never could—the sight of that black raven.

*

On one fresh Sunday morning, Awah in human form was sitting beside the open window. He had lifted it open because he wanted a breeze to enter. The raven flew past and suddenly turned to Awah, seeing him for the first time.

It cried out in the language it shared with crows, which Awah knew well.

"An angel..." the raven said before alighting on the windowsill, turning into a human before Awah's eyes: a man so tall that, sitting on the sill, his powerful legs reached to the floor. As a person, the black wings on his back were almost two meters from tip to tip; his jaw was

strong and stern, and he fixed his dreadful black eyes on Awah. The boy shivered under that gaze and tried to hide his whiteness behind his wings.

“What’s your name?” Awah asked, looking at the floor, his voice creaking in his throat.

“Don’t have one,” a deep voice responded, which parched Awah’s throat as he heard it. “Just a raven like any other. But the humans call me ‘Crowse.’ Actually, they call most of us ‘crows.’”

Awah’s head hung lower. He didn’t know what more to say, but Crowse spoke for him.

“Hey.”

The boy looked up and saw Crowse slowly flapping his wings. The man was teaching Awah to fly...

The wings on Awah’s back began doing what they saw before them. Crowse nodded in approval; his body became a raven’s again, and he nodded at the window as if giving a sign.

He was calling Awah to fly with him.

At that moment, the door opened. Max saw the black raven perched on the windowsill and, fearing that it had come to bully Awah, she came running to shoo it away. Crowse took one look at Max before cawing derisively and bounding into the air outside.

For the rest of the day, Awah practised flying in circles in that little room until he felt he had the hang of things. He waited for Max to come up in order to show her, but though evening came and deepened, she never appeared. And so, when darkness fell, the bird flew to a tree outside the attic window and perched on a branch, looking down on the house where he had always lived. This was the first time that he had seen it from the outside: the house had two stories, not including the room beneath the ceiling, and at ground level he saw a door painted red. From the second storey, where Max’s bedroom was, protruded a balcony. The sliding door that led onto the balcony was closed, as was the window beside it.

Awah thought that if he were to fly into Max’s room, he would be sure to startle her, so he leapt from the branch onto the balcony, and when he landed on the floor, he was human again.

His feet took in the texture and the temperature of the ceramic tiles—they were rough and warm, as they had been soaking up the sun throughout the day. The crow approached Max’s bedroom window and raised one hand to knock on the glass. The curtains were open, so he peered inside. That evening the moon was unusually bright and the whole bedroom was illuminated, but at the same time bathed in a peculiar gold, so that what he saw seemed like a scene from another dimension...

Inside the room, two naked bodies were lying on top of each other in bed. The body on top had a pair of wings so broad that they brushed the walls—it was a pair of magnificent, well-formed wings. Awah remembered them immediately.

Crows was on top of Max, and his bar was inside her. The black raven was doing what Awah did with his owner, but—no. The white crow peered closer, and then it dawned on him: something was different.

Crows wasn’t pinned underneath; he was on top and moving in and out of Max’s body as he pleased—it was the female’s body that was pressed in place.

It wasn’t Crows doing to Max what Awah had done to Max, but Crowse doing to Max what Max had done to *him*. All this time, he had not been the male in their relationship... it was Max who was *his* male.

The young crow was so shocked that he couldn’t move; he was frozen in that position, with his hand raised as if knocking on air, constrained by some invisible force to keep watching the bodies in the bed—the sight of what made Crowse male moving in and out of Max’s body,

and Max crying out like Awah had never heard before; she seemed more satisfied than she did every day, but it wasn't her Awah was fixated on...

It was her visitor.

After a while, Crowse felt himself being watched; the black raven turned to the window; he met Awah's gaze and smirked.

Awah felt his lower body pulse. He looked down in confusion and saw that he had released—a white liquid was running down his legs. He had no idea when he had even become hard; his legs shook just thinking of Crowse's gaze and, unable to stand any longer, Awah fell to his knees. But though he no longer saw the window before him, only the wall below it, that wall was like a blank canvas on which the image of Crowse and Max remained; he could still hear Max crying out, could still see Crowse's eyes, his smirk, and that which made him male, the shaft to which Awah could never compare ...

Shortly thereafter, the noise died, and the balcony door opened. Legs in long, black pants walked out. Crowse was standing above Awah.

"What's going on, little angel..." a deep voice said. Awah turned from the wall to face Crowse, but backed away on his knees. His dirty legs trembled at the sight of the black raven, who looked down on Awah as if mocking him.

"I'm sorry, but when it comes to sex, all girls will choose a demon," Crowse said, chuckling.

"You were hurting Max." Awah's voice was weak.

"No, just making her feel good." Crowse smiled. "But don't worry, little boy. I won't steal your female away from you. I don't fly into anyone's room more than once."

Awah looked him in the face.

"Or maybe you're more concerned about something else," Crowse continued. "You were only watching *me*. You weren't looking at *her* at all."

Awah felt his cheeks burn and the corners of his mouth tremble. He felt humiliated beneath Crowse's gaze—so demeaned that he wanted to disappear. Everything that Crowse said was true: Awah *had* only looked at the body with wings, hadn't taken an interest in Max at all. He could still imagine each of Crowse's movements, and when he thought of Crowse turning around to meet his gaze, Awah felt a rush in his stomach. Crowse stooped over to examine the boy's thighs.

"You're all dirty..." The black raven was close enough to touch Awah. "Did you like it? You want me to fly into your room sometime?"

Awah stared at Crowse's fingertips. They were only a few centimeters from his cheek, and he knew that if they touched him, he would come undone...

And Awah wanted to be wrung by those fingers, to be ground into pieces, right then, right there—he wanted for Crowse to do to him what he had done to Max.

"Don't...mess...with me..." the boy stammered.

Crowse smiled knowingly, resumed the shape of a raven, and flew away without a word, leaving Awah crying alone on the balcony. In his absence, the white crow began hating himself, began hating his own sticky legs. He lay with tears streaming down his face, his legs shaking, the corners of his mouth aquiver, one question going round in his mind: why did he want so badly—so badly to be the female?

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Awah cried until he fell asleep on the tiles. That night, he dreamt that he was sleeping in a nest high above the forest; in the dream he didn't know Max, for he had never fallen from his birth-nest, but lived with his mother until he was fully grown—and then, when he had come of age, built a nest of his own. He lay bundled up, warm in the middle of this nest, which he'd woven

out of soft leaves and supple branches. He was in human form, sleeping in complete peace, his knees drawn to his chest, when Crowse alighted under the eaves.

The raven became human, too, and climbed aboard his back, embracing Awah from behind; their whole bodies were pressed against each other. Awah could feel the warmth that Crowse seemed to emanate; his powerful hands gripped him close before sliding slowly to the mysterious space shut tight between Awah's legs.

Crowse stroked that narrow passageway. Awah decided to help him; he spread his legs wider so that his visitor could have a better reach. In this dream Awah was uncertain whether he was male or female—he sensed that some part of him was still male, but Crowse's fingers moved until they found a sort of opening in him. Awah moaned when Crowse inserted his long, slender fingers there, probing deeper—so deep—inside of him. He spread his legs wider, calling for more of Crowse's body.

And Awah became his—he became Crowse's female, and their love-making in the dream was more intense than any sex Awah had had in real life. He was immersed in Crowse's body, immersed in being made female; he cried for more and more and Crowse obliged, although he laughed at Awah the entire time.

The light of morning opened Awah's eyes. The white crow took his first look at the day with eyes clouded over, still lost in dream. It took several minutes for him to realize the truth, and when he did he was frightened—how badly he wanted to close his eyes and return to that warm body again, to make his reality on earth disappear...

And then he noticed the moisture between his legs. Awah reached down to touch it and started when he examined his fingers again: both of his legs were coated in the sticky liquid of desire, so much that he couldn't guess how many times he had come; it was as if all that he'd pent up that night had come gushing out.

Soon Awah began to feel disgusted with himself, with being so enraptured in that dream: he hugged himself and convulsed, shaking with a fear and hatred whose origins he didn't even know; his fingers dug into his arms. He then reached to touch the appendage between his legs. It was small and flaccid, and the white crow gripped it tightly.

"I am *male*," he whispered to himself, trying to embed this in his mind. "I like females. I like Max's body."

Immediately his heart had a response for him—a response so vicious that Awah had to bite down on his lip to prevent its slipping out.

I like more that Crowse is male.

Almost immediately another thought ran through Awah's brain, and at it Awah bit his lip even harder, drawing blood. A trickle ran down his chin, but the crow didn't care: he would sooner bite off his tongue than put that thought to speech.

He likes being penetrated; he likes being forced to submit.

Suddenly Awah started choking—he didn't know from what, perhaps from his own fright; but suddenly he was coughing on the floor, unable to control himself; his entire body shook.

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That morning, Max woke to find the balcony door open. She knew that Crowse had exited that way. The raven had come to her yesterday afternoon, using that handsome human form to get her to slide the door open and make love to her. It was an intense session, like sex out of a paperback romance. Max passed out once Crowse had gotten off of her, but she knew exactly what he did afterward—he simply left. He was the type of guy who'd leave once he had his fill, and leave without returning, like an incubus in an old legend.

Crowse was an alpha male—no matter what his desire, women bent over backwards for him, letting him enter their bodies as he pleased.

In the past, Max had known her share of abusive men; she understood what it was like when a man displayed his dominance and a woman could neither object nor resist, perhaps out of fear and infatuation mixed together. But Crowse had been different from any of that trash she'd been with before—he was the epitome in some way, a symbol of unbounded virility that a woman would be hard pressed to meet more than once in life. And though Max had solemnly sworn that she would not let anyone walk all over her again, once she had come face to face with such masculinity as Crowse's, she, too, had had to succumb.

Max did regret, somewhat, how willing she'd been, but at the same time she knew that guilt wasn't necessary—that no human could have resisted such virility, and that there is no guilt in giving into your simple human failings.

The young woman walked over to close the balcony door, intending that this should be the end of the matter as well, but before she could, she heard someone choking beneath her. There was Awah, coughing in fits, his arms flailing across the tiles, still chill with the night before. He was heaving up saliva and contorting in pain; and so much liquid coated his legs that Max could make out its colour.

"Awah!" she cried, squatting to take the little crow in her arms. "What happened! How did you end up here?"

Awah buried his face into Max's chest and coughed into her shirt. "Max," he said hoarsely, "can I come downstairs and sleep with you?"

Max had no idea what had occurred, but without disgust or revulsion she wiped his face. "Who did this to you?"

"No one... from now on, please let me sleep in your room. From now on..."

"Of course—that's no big deal! But what happened?"

"Nothing happened...nothing yet." Awah's voice shook. "But he won't fly into the same bedroom twice. He won't get me if I'm with you."

"Who?"

Awah didn't want to answer her question. "Let me come downstairs to stay with you. Protect me!"

"From *who*, Awah?" the woman asked again. She gripped each shoulder firmly, scared out of her mind.

"From myself." The white crow coughed again. "If I stay up there, he'll come to see me, and I know that I'll take him—take him gladly! And if I do, I won't be able to go back to who I was again. Protect me, Max! Don't give me the opportunity!"

Awah's hand shook as he gripped Max's shirt once more and said, with all the strength remaining—"I want to stay male..."

Translated from the Thai by Noh Anothai