

Fly Away

by Jason P. Henry

It was a brisk September morning on the bad side of town. Most of the stress from the evening before had been washed away by a good night's sleep and a new day had started. I watched my breath billow out in front of me... and felt renewed.

The previous night's affairs were nothing new in this little apartment complex. I knew before I took the job, before I took residence in the complimentary apartment, that it was a dangerous place. Most of the residents wore blue. The few who didn't wore fear like an uncomfortable suit jacket at an office Christmas party. The complex lacked many things that would make it feel like home: The sound of laughter, the joyful rants of playful children. Those were in the top five. It was, for all intents and purposes, a prison without bars. In this penitentiary the Crips are the guards. I guess that makes me a Trustee.

I have lived and worked here for a year now. It took me a few months to earn the trust of the gang-bangers who lived here with me. I proved I knew how to keep my mouth shut and we came to a mutual understanding; they let me live my life, do my job, and I kept my nose out of their business. There are only a handful of times in the past year that things have gotten a little edgy, last night was the worst:

I had finished my day and settled into my cozy little one bedroom with a scenic view of the pot-hole infested road. I was full in to my post work routine: In the door, tool belt on the floor by the closet, shirt over the back of the couch, open beer in hand and Guns & Roses in the CD player. When the first beer was finished, Welcome to the Jungle faded out and Night Train cued, I popped the top on number two and ran the water for my shower. It takes forever and a day to heat the water here so the shower ran through the duration of my second bottle before I pulled the shower curtain back and stepped in.

My showers were always long, always hot. My skin was sun-blister-red and the bathroom was a sauna when I shut the water off. The steam was so dense I could not see the water dripping from my own body. That's why I didn't see the gun (or the man pointing it at me) until I was in the doorway and the barrel of the 9mm was six inches from my forehead. The face on the other side of the handgun was a new one. He wore blue, like the others, but he was not one of the South Side 6's.

"Where's the gold, Kracker?" he snarled.

"The Smithsonian? California?" I replied.

"Do I looks like a Comedian? This ain't no Comedy Club, Bitch. Give me the fucking cash!"

My reply is irrelevant since I never got to finish it. I heard the second gun before I saw it. The deafening blast seemed to put the exclamation point on the end of You're Crazy and the gold seeker's head exploded all over the door to my linen closet. Once crazy eyes went blank and rolled back as the corpse's knees buckled. The thug fell to the floor in a lifeless pile of gangsta bullshit. I reached down for his pistol but was stopped before I could get to it. The boot on the gun was followed by a familiar voice.

"I wouldn't do that, Bro Bro. Gots ta be a lotta blood spilled by that gun. You really want your prints on it?"

"Who the fuck is this, Darnell? And what the hell is he doing in my house?"

"Man, there you go with that 'Darnell' bullshit. That is privileged. I told you to keep it on the down-low. My name is, Pookie. And this fool here . . . not one of ours."

"Alright . . . Pookie . . . as if that name is less embarrassing than Darnell, if not yours, who's?"

"East Side. Showed up last night wantin' to cross over, he was tired of rollin' with his punk-ass crew. We thought he was 5-0, so, we played him. Later on, our snitch tells us East Side was looking to push us out and this Bitch was their set up man, not Po-Po. You never leave your door open. He did. So, here I stand, there he lay. Now, put some clothes on and stop embarrassing yourself. It's true what they say about you white boys, huh?" He laughed hysterically as he put his gun to rest behind his back.

Darnell, or Pookie, was the closest I had to a friend. He was trigger man for the 6's, did all of their wet work. We shared many a beer in my little apartment and he acted as middleman between me and his 'Homies'. He was a big boy: six three, two-fifty. He coulda been a baller till he fell through the cracks. He was a good kid without a support group. He had been jumped in to the Crips when he was fourteen, now at seventeen, he was a kid who grew up way too fast. He was the product of poor parents who didn't care and a system that couldn't, or wouldn't, provide what he needed. With nowhere else to turn, he fell into a group of friends who seemed to appreciate him more than anyone else ever had. The South Side 6's became his family, his solace, his sense of self-worth. His choices were wrong, though most were made due to fear for his own life. Only one way out of a gang: It is not an easy road, nor a long one.

Four more Crips were in my apartment, guns drawn, before I had a chance to get my pants past my knees. They had heard the gunshot and come running. Like Pookie said, I never leave my door open, so, my place was the first logical guess. Pookie waved the four men down and pointed at the body. Before my belt was through the third loop, they had all converged to pick up the corpse.

"You okay, Whitey?" One of them asked.

Whitey, that's what they all called me, affectionately I hope. I couldn't really take offense; after all, I

am white. So, since day one of being 'a trustee' I have answered to the simple, colorless moniker.

"I'm cool." I replied.

"That explains the shrinkage, huh? Too cool." A second replied, followed by all five men exploding with laughter.

"C'mon, get this P.O.S. outta here." Pookie ordered between chuckles. "Let Damien know what went down."

Damien was the head of the South Side 6's. The Warden if you will. He was old-school, what they called an O.G. He had been around a long time, had so many battle scars that he joked about being half white.

"We could be half-brothers, Brutha." He had said to me once.

I had only spoke to him a handful of times. He stayed locked up in one apartment or another, changing locations regularly. He was a marked man; not just by the police, but also by rival gangs. There were many targets painted on his back, so he kept it wisely against a wall.

I grabbed two beers from the fridge and threw one to Darnell. Shutting the stereo off, somewhere in the middle of Paradise City, I joined Pookie on the sofa.

"Man, I don't know how you listen to that shit, Bro. That girl singing has to chain smoke or hit the pipe to sound that raspy." Pookie jested.

"That girl singing is Axl Rose. He's a dude, Dumb-ass."

"They love'em a long haired red-head girl in the joint. They'd have her hittin' notes twice that high." He said with a smile.

We sat in silence for a while, about two more brews each, before I noticed the new ink on Darnell's arm. It was a big, black bird of some sort.

"When did you get that?" I asked.

"Couple days ago. My Cous' hooked me up. You like?"

"Sure. But isn't it kinda redundant to get a black bird on a black arm?"

"It's a crow, and why you gotta hate?"

"Why a crow?"

"Man, Whitey, some days I wish I was one. They fearless. When shit goes down, I see them in the trees, on the fences, and they don't move. They stay until they ready to go. Then they just fly away. No cares in the world."

"You better put that beer on your head and cool off, Freud. That was almost philosophical. You

wanna lie down?"

"Screw you. I ain't no fraud." He replied with a grin as he slumped into the couch.

"Hey, this ain't no prison and I don't have red-hair. Don't get me fucked up."

"You ain't my type, Slim. I'd break your skinny ass. I like some junk in the trunk."

"Hey. Thanks for savin' my 'skinny ass' tonight. I owe you."

"You owe me, huh? Then pay me back by getting your ass outta here and making something of yourself. Why you stay here anyway?"

"It's a job. Free apartment. I'll go as soon as I've saved enough."

"Wish I could leave. Getting tired of all this. Can't have a Shorty or a bunch of little Mes running around if I'm living like this. Know what I'm sayin'? No place for a family here."

"You'll find a way, Bro." I consoled.

As I said, the stress of the night before was washed away by a good night's sleep. I woke up this morning and my apartment was clean. No corpse. No blood. No Pookie. If I didn't know better, if the event had seemed at all uncommon, I may have thought I dreamed it. It was real, it did happen, and Darnell had saved my ass.

So, I started my morning feeling alive and renewed. I put on my work clothes, grabbed my tool belt, and headed outside. Every morning started with trash detail. I grabbed my grabbers, trash bag, and began my circuit around the complex.

The 6's managed to keep most of their debris in one area. A concrete porch overlooked the parking lot and the only entrance to it. The area around this porch was littered with empty forty-ounce bottles, cigarette butts and tossed roaches. I left this area alone. I didn't pick up their trash, did not clear away their graffiti and never replaced the busted out porch light.

Unless I was asked, I never entered the door at the back of the porch. This was their hall, their world. I minded my business. If something needed my attention, they let me know. The rest of the complex was mine. I had free run to do what I needed to do and they left it alone. No trash, no graffiti and no busted lights. Occasionally they made rounds through it, but that is all. Again, a mutual understanding.

My rounds this morning were different. I felt more aware of my surroundings; what had become the norm in the past year now caught my eye a little more. Perhaps my life being threatened had made me a little more cautious, I was simply looking over my shoulder a little more. I knew that it was unlikely for anything to happen in the light of day, but I was still leery. Shadows made me jump. Noises turned my head. The sound of a crow drew my attention skyward.

I looked up and saw one sitting in a tree and a few others circling overhead. The large, black feathered bird in the tree seemed to be calling to the others, telling them it was okay to land. I watched as one crow in flight was chased by a smaller sparrow. It seemed odd that such a large bird was fleeing from something that could be his snack, but it was the way of things. The second crow could not be bothered and made his way to a tree branch.

I thought of Darnell and began to make noises and flail my arms. The crows just looked at me, heads cocked to the sides, and did not budge. Without a care. No concern. He had been right. Soon, they would probably just fly away. Watching the crows became a morning ritual. They were always there, always carefree, fearless, and always flew away on their own time.

Over the few weeks to come, I only saw Pookie a few times. He stopped by my place once and had a couple of beers. He said he was checking up on me, seeing how I was holding up after being held up. He didn't seem himself and kept looking at his tattoo, rubbing, almost petting the black bird on his arm. It seemed that flying away was on his mind more than ever.

The second time I saw him was outdoors. Break of dawn found me with my grabber and trash bag and, as usual, staring up at the crows. There were over twenty birds scattered through the tree and sky that morning. I couldn't remember what they called a flock of crows but I knew it was an odd term. I racked my brain for a few minutes until I was interrupted by a noise coming from the 6's porch. I turned around and saw Pookie, who had cawed at me, like a crow. Now he was laughing as he flapped his arms like a bird and looked at the sky. 'Fly away' he seemed to say. He raised a beer towards me and nodded his head. With that, he tipped the bottle, pouring a little on the ground, took a drink and went inside.

A couple of mornings after that, a Friday, I was picking up trash on my side of the complex. It started normally. I used the grabbers to pick up paper, cigarette butts and the like and then placed the debris in my garbage bag.

About fifteen minutes into my routine, I had the feeling of being followed. I took a few more steps and stopped. Behind me, I heard the 'ticka ticka ticka' of tiny steps. I turned and ten feet to my back was a crow. I turned to face the bird and stepped backwards. With every step I took, the crow followed. Step. Ticka ticka ticka. Step. Ticka ticka ticka. Watching the crow closely, I used my grabbers to pick up another butt and place it in my sack. The crow cocked his head and hopped closer.

I picked up another, and the crow came closer still. With my grabbers, I picked up a piece of paper that a breeze had blown in front of me. I had no sooner lifted it from the ground and the black feathered bandit tore the debris away, winning a brief tug-a-war match. I swung the grabber towards the bird slowly

but he only side stepped and stayed close. Fearless. I pulled back my 'extend-a-arm' and the crow looked towards the grass-line along the sidewalk. He then hopped over to a cigarette butt and picked it up with his beak. Curious, I opened up the mouth of my sack and rattled it a little. The crow hopped closer and I lowered the bag to the ground. When the sack was low enough, the bird with the coal-black feathers hopped over and dropped the cigarette butt inside.

I was speechless. I knew that all reports said they were smart animals, capable of being trained and even becoming pets in some cases. Still, I was dumbfounded and thoroughly amused. The bird became my companion that morning, helping me pick up trash as I went along the complex grounds. More focused on my new friend than on what I was doing, I looked up and saw the graffiti covered porch in front of me. I stopped but the bird did not. I called to him, urging him to cease and desist, but he didn't listen. He began picking up debris around the 6's porch and bringing it to my bag.

I heard the door open. Damien and 5 other South Sides walked onto the concrete pad. There were looks on their faces that I wasn't accustomed to. It was one of the rare times that I felt in fear of the 6's. I nodded to the scarred man, my half-brother, and offered my apologies. He held up his hand, said nothing, and looked at the bird. The gang members watched the crow for ten minutes. With a look from the Warden, they all raised a forty and tipped it over the porch railing. Without a single word spoken, they walked back inside and left the crow and I to our work.

When the last bit of garbage was off the ground, the crow flew up and lit on the porch rail. He looked at me and cawed. Then, he flapped his wings and looked to the sky where other crows circled. He faced my direction and cawed once more before taking to the skies and joining the others.

On my first break that morning I went back to my apartment. There was a news paper in front of my door with a brief note attached to it.

'Be cool, Whitey.' Was all the note said.

I opened the paper and read as I drank a cup of coffee. A story on the second page caught my attention. It did not take long to figure out that this story was the reason I was given the morning edition:

Late last night, two bodies were discovered in a downtown alley as authorities responded to reports of gunfire.

The Article continued:

We are awaiting official comment but it is believed that one victim was the sister of a known felon

and gang member from the East side. The other, an unidentified black male with a crow tattoo on his left arm, also with possible gang connections. Our reporter at the scene says both bodies were found riddled with bullets, the victims of an apparent drive-by shooting. Witnesses on the scene say it was a gang hit, but refuse further comment.

A murder.

That is what they call a flock of crows.

A murder . . . the chill that ran through my spine reminded me.

I folded the paper neatly, dumped my unfinished coffee in the sink and grabbed a beer from the fridge. I walked outside, but not to return to work. Beer in hand, I made my way to the graffiti covered porch claimed by Damien and his crew. For the first time, and without fear, I walked the three steps up and stood firmly on 6's ground. I looked to the sky and did not spot a single crow. I held my beer over the railing and poured a little on the ground before taking a swallow myself. I turned to the door that led to gang territory. In the glass panes on either side of the entrance were faces. Four of them belonged to the men who had removed a body from my apartment. The other faces I had seen around at least a few times, especially the one with scars. I knew now what that look had been that I felt so unaccustomed to seeing.

I was certain my face now shared the look of sorrow that had adorned the hardened edges of Damien and the 6's. They mourned the loss of a friend. Even in what seemed to be the darkest of hearts, the hardest of souls, there was a place for remorse and compassion. The loss of a friend, of a Brother, momentarily softened the lines that seemed to trace nothing but hate any other time. A tear rolled down my cheek and landed on the graffiti painted concrete. I saw tears on other faces and as I stared in at them, I flapped my arms and looked to the skies before walking away. I arrived at my entrance and stopped. I finished my beer and slammed the bottle against the solid outer wall of the building. A shower of beer-soaked glass shards fell to the ground and I headed inside... to pack.

The following morning the skies were empty once again. I loaded what few belongings I had into my pick-up truck and left my keys on the kitchen counter when I was done. The neatly folded newspaper was the last thing I grabbed before leaving my little one-bedroom, with a scenic view of the road, for the final time.

The parking lot was full of cars. Impalas. Monte Carlos. Beamers. The 6's porch was surrounded by men in blue. Every man present was brandishing a weapon. On the porch, like a general, stood Damien. Damien stopped mid-speech and looked my way, fifty other men following his gaze. I nodded my head at

him. Then he and the other 6's on the porch, the faces I knew, all began to flap their arms like birds. I flapped mine back, halfheartedly, knowing what was about to happen.

More children were going to die. More mothers were going to lose their sons, more kids their fathers and more wives their lovers. This time it would be in memory of a seventeen-year-old kid named Darnell who could have been a baller before slipping through the cracks. A vicious circle would continue going around and around until the blood spilled over its rim. Anger would bring murder. Murder would bring retribution. Retribution followed by vengeance with anger in tow. Young men and women with nowhere else to go would continue with the only way of life they knew. Very few would get away. Even less would live through it.

I took the crow's advice, Darnell's advice, and flew away. In an old rusty truck I flew towards bluer skies and greener pastures. I left the city, and the South Side 6's, behind for good. For two days and three state lines I drove until I came to a small town that seemed to have more trees than houses. As I drove down Main St., I noticed people watering lawns, walking dogs and playing with children. Children rode bicycles down the sidewalks and laughed.

The children laughed.

I looked to the skies and saw the crows. Hundreds of them peppered the blue above me. No one seemed to pay them any attention . . . they belonged. They were as big a part of everyday life here as the mail carrier, the paperboy or the person mowing his grass.

I parked my truck next to a small general store and killed the engine as Patience came to a close. I stepped out of the truck and walked around towards the sidewalk where I noticed a crow picking at crumbs. The bird looked up at me, cawed, and cocked his head towards the store window.

Help Wanted. Apartment included.

The sign taped to the glass was a calling. A new life. I nodded to the crow. Then, as the crow flew away on nightshade wings, I walked into the general store and started my life over.

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