

Gifts from the Crows



2023
SECOND PLACE

By Pamela Redcliff

I slip out the screen door of my grandparents' house as silent as a wisp of piñon smoke, wishing I could drift away in the morning breeze. No crows are perched on the telephone line above the alley like they usually are. Maybe they sense the strangeness of this day too and are staying away. I don't blame them. If I were a crow, I'd fly a thousand miles away from New Mexico.

I dig into my denim jacket for corn kernels and scatter them along the walk for the birds to find later. I feed them corn or sometimes peanuts in the shell. The largest one trusts me enough to glide down to the yard and land a few feet away. I call him Tonto. His feathers shimmer blue green when he zigzags sideways toward me, and his white eyes flash as he checks my hands for food.

It was Papi Ray's idea. Always eager to lift my spirits, he suggested I start feeding them. "If you give them food, sometimes they leave you tokens of their appreciation. You should try it, granddaughter."

He was right. Now they bring me gifts.

After I empty my pockets of stray kernels, I wrap my Walkman headphones over my ears, pull my jacket tight around me, and set out for school. I keep the power turned off—my crush Bryan Adams wailing me a love song won't help. Silence is my shield, today, the buffer between me and nosy classmates.

Mom left us when I was seven, so I have few memories of her. In my last one, she's a shadow floating past me in the hall, trailing a breeze of Chanel perfume, high heels clicking across the wood floor in time to "Footloose" blasting from the boom box in her bedroom as she leaves the house to meet her friends—the night she didn't return. That was five years ago this evening. My grandma Carmen, who I call Lita, will lead the annual candlelight vigil tonight to mark the terrible event and pray for Mom's return. I dread these vigils. They're like holes that can never

be filled no matter how much grief or hope you pour into them.

According to my grandma, Mom's disappearance is a cold case now, a file buried in the basement of the police department. She thinks the cops didn't try as hard to solve Mom's case because of her skin color—a brown mix of Apache and Hispano, or "mestizo" as Papi Ray calls us. My mom wasn't a blonde gringa like the girl who went missing in Colorado the same year she did. They found that girl's body quickly and even gave her murderer a nickname, "Beauty Queen Killer."

I don't know if my mom was murdered, but it's one of many theories that spin through my mind. For all I know, she's living in Albuquerque with a loving husband and more children. My hope she'll come back has dimmed over time, and the anniversary of her disappearance is always the darkest day of the year.

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The first few weeks after Mom vanished, Lita wore her suffering like a squash blossom necklace for everyone to see. She haunted the police station, teary-eyed and exhausted, begging for any word about Mom's case. Lita made fliers and plastered them all over town: "Have You Seen Dorinda?" The phone rang day and night the first couple of weeks. A few calls offered clues but mostly my grandparents endured rude comments from the other end of the telephone line.

For months after, Papi Ray and Lita lived like a cassette player repeating the same song over and over each night. I'd crawl out of bed and perch on the stairs to listen to their conversation taking place down in the kitchen, seated across from each other in the dim glow of the stove light. Papi Ray drank back then, so he'd run a finger along the rim

of his half-filled whiskey glass, while Lita rocked back and forth in her chair like a pendulum, clasping and unclasping her hands, a cigarette burning in the ashtray beside her.

"The cops can't be right, Ray. She didn't meet some guy and take off with him. She'd never do that to Rosie."

"I don't know what to believe."

My grandma would take a drag from her cigarette, then exhale and say, "Did you see the officer smirk when he told us, 'We see it all the time?'" She'd shake her head and add, "That's cops for you."

"Ah, Carmen," Papi Ray would reply. "They're doing their best, but they don't have much to go on."

"Yeah, they're clueless for sure."

"It doesn't help to blame the cops. If she'd stayed home with Rosie, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Don't blame Dorie, either. Whatever happened, she didn't deserve to be taken from us—or Rosie." Lita would tap her cigarette against the ashtray and almost whisper, "Will she ever come home?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, how I wish we had answers."

"I do too, but we may have to face the fact . . . she—" Papi Ray would stop himself and sip from his glass, as my grandma would start to cry.

The lyrics changed from night to night, but the melody stayed the same. After listening for a while, I'd go back to my room and draw in my sketchbook until I couldn't keep my eyes open—better than crying myself to sleep.

This fifth anniversary is especially heavy because I'm twelve now and understand what it means to be stuck in the white space between grieving and hoping. I'm leaving for school early this morning, so I don't have to endure Lita's jittery presence, fueled by nicotine and coffee. She stayed up late into the night working her jigsaw puzzle, worrying over the number of people who'll show up for tonight's candlelight vigil. Papi Ray left at dawn as usual to meet his buddies from the auto body for coffee and doughnuts. He prefers to ignore this day.

For a while, I figured it was my grandpa leaving the gifts, not the crows, even though he denied it when I questioned him. The first gift was a Zuni bear fetish carved from white stone with black speckles. I found it on the porch step beside the potted geranium. My mom has a collection of the animals on her dresser, each one with special meaning. The bear represents protection and healing.

The next gift, a strand of turquoise beads, I discovered dangling from the opening of the clay horno oven Lita uses to bake her old-fashioned bread. Since Papi Ray knows my

favorite stone is turquoise, just like it was my mom's, my suspicion increased. An arrowhead left on the sidewalk between the house and the carport convinced me, for my grandpa has told me stories about the mountain where his ancestors found the flint to make them.

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But then one day, I watched Tonto land on an overturned bucket near the edge of the garden with something in his beak. The bird peered around like an admirer who wants to remain anonymous, and he flew away when I approached. Left behind was a Pueblo pottery sherd with a kiva step design. Like a kid who stops believing in Santa Claus then finds footprints in front of the fireplace on Christmas morning, I've now put my faith in the crows and the strange connection we have. Their gifts are a mysterious trail of breadcrumbs I follow—where to, I'm not sure.

Throughout the school day, I keep to myself, and I've made it through unbothered until my cousin Estella traps me at my locker after last class.

"Mom says Grandma's still going through with the vigil tonight," says Estella.

"Yeah," I say. "It's important to her."

Lita holds the candlelight vigil in front of Roscoe's Lounge, where Mom partied with her friends that night five years ago. They didn't even notice her leave. It was like she dissolved into the air.

Estella leans against the locker beside mine, twisting one of her braids. "Hardly anybody shows up anymore. Mom doesn't see why we even bother."

I grab my jacket and clutch my textbooks tighter. "You don't have to come, you know."

"I was supposed to go roller skating with my friends, but Mom says I have to come." Estella rolls her eyes. "To show my support."

I fight a mighty urge to slap her as I close my locker and brush past. "Guess I'll see you there, then."

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This day can’t be over soon enough.

When I get home, I spy a coin on top of the mailbox. Ah, a new gift! I turn it over in my palm. Faded and tinged green, the coin is engraved with a Native American on one side, a buffalo on the other. I pull the chamois medicine bag I’ve fashioned to hold the crows’ gifts from around my neck and add the coin. When I get the chance, I’ll ask Papi Ray about this unusual treasure.

The Chevy Cavalier isn’t in the carport, so Lita’s probably running errands. Papi Ray bought her the car in the spring of 1984, a few months before Mom went missing—another reminder of the year time stood still.

Behind the carport, Papi Ray’s working his beehives. He resembles a skinny polar bear in his white bee suit, its protective veil covering his face and head. Clouds of smoke billow all around him as he pumps the metal smoker he uses to keep the bees calm and makes it easier for him to inspect his hives. I wave to get his attention, and he waves back with a gloved hand the size of a bear paw, clutching a metal hive tool that flashes in the sunlight.

He became a beekeeper a year after Mom vanished when he decided he’d better stop drinking. At first, I didn’t understand why he’d want to be a beekeeper, of all things, especially after I read Native Americans called honeybees “the white man’s flies.”

Then he explained, “Europeans introduced the honeybee to America, but Indians have always understood the importance of bees. The Cherokee were the first tribe to take up beekeeping, so they could enjoy honey from the hive too, which is almost as sweet as you, Rosie.”

Papi Ray says the sound of bees buzzing in the hive soothes him like music. I steer clear of them since I don’t want to get stung. Most afternoons, from late spring to early fall, he’s either working his hives or puttering in his bee shed. I spend time in the shed as well, especially on afternoons like this one when autumn sunlight filters through the window, perfect for doing artwork. It’s peaceful, like I’m safe inside my own cozy beehive. As I enter, I breathe in the delicious scent of beeswax and pine.

I keep the bee shed organized and clean equipment for my grandpa, scraping extra wax and propolis off the empty

bee boxes I stack in the corner. Everything appears in order today, so I sit down with my sketchbook and start drawing to keep from thinking about the candlelight vigil, now only hours away.

When Papi Ray enters, the odor of sweat and pine smoke drifts in behind him. He taps my shoulder and sets his toolbox on the shelf. “Rosie, my girl, how was school?”

“All right, I guess. I don’t think my classmates remembered.”

The kids are considerate about my situation, generally, but a few bullies still take their shots. No one has messed with me since last spring, though, after I gave Billy Cross a black eye for calling Mom a “slut.” I couldn’t help it. Who’s he to judge my mom? The punch earned me a three-day suspension, which was fine with me, but it brought shame to my grandparents—the last thing I want to happen. Since the incident, I steer clear of troublemakers.

Papi Ray sits down beside me. “Anniversary day is always difficult, I know. Do you want to talk about it, granddaughter?”

“No,” I reply. Sometimes I’m like him and keep my feelings to myself. Instead, I pull the coin from my medicine bag and hand it to him. “Look what Tonto left for me.”

“Tonto? You’ve named the crows?”

“Just the old one with white eyes. I named him after Tonto in Lyle Lovett’s song, ‘If I Had a Boat.’ Do you know that one?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s about the Lone Ranger who thinks he’s smart and makes his Indian sidekick do the dirty work, but Tonto proves he’s smarter when he quits his job and sails away in his boat. Sometimes, don’t you wish we could do that, Papi Ray?”

“Sail away? I don’t think so.” He turns the coin over in his fingers. “An Indian Head nickel. Haven’t seen one of these in years.” Pulling his reading glasses from the shelf above the workbench, he takes a closer look. “A 1921 S nickel. Interesting.”

“Why is that?”

“Just a coincidence, I’m sure.” He rubs his chin whiskers. “Your mother received a coin like this from the Tooth Fairy for the first tooth she lost.”

I wait for him to say more, but he hands the coin back, then pulls his bee journal from the shelf and begins writing notes. Is he holding out on me?

I press him. “Tonto gives me a gift exactly like something you gave my mom, and it’s just a coincidence?”

He doesn't stop writing. "Pretty sure it is."

I can't believe Papi Ray's dismissing this gift's meaning. He's the one who told me how intelligent crows are and said one time he heard a crow in a tree bark at him like a dog. According to him, they're important to Native American culture, too. Some tribes believe crows are the guardians of secrets and can shape-shift into other beings. That'd be pretty cool to see.

I try again. "Doesn't it seem like there's a pattern? Could the crows be trying to tell me something?"

"Tell you what?" he asks.

"Are they . . . leading me to my mom?" I want this to be true, but I hope by saying it out loud I haven't jinxed it.

He puts down his pen and wipes his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Oh, Rosie. I wish they could."

"Grandma Lita says they give me gifts to keep their bellies full, but there's got to be more to it, right?"

Papi Ray leans toward me. "Maybe the gifts are just meant to bring you a little happiness."

I put the coin back in my medicine bag. "I guess so," I say since I don't want to argue with him. Dealing with grandparents can be frustrating sometimes.

We both hear a car door slam.

"Sounds like your grandma's home."

As we leave the bee shed, we see Lita wrestling a suitcase-sized carton from the trunk.

"Ah, you got the green chiles," calls my grandpa. "You're a good woman." He ambles over to help.

"You better get busy, Ray. We can't be late for the vigil." Lita turns to me. "He sent me on a mission to find green chiles to roast. As if I don't have enough to do."

Soon after, I'm in the kitchen dodging my grandma—a whirlwind flinging open cupboards and slamming drawers while she talks on the telephone. She repeatedly tangles herself and me in the phone cord as she crisscrosses the room, rallying friends and family to attend the candlelight vigil. I hope for her sake there's a good turnout.

After another conversation, she hangs up and says, "How does your grandpa expect me to deal with green chiles and prepare for the vigil?"

"I don't know, Lita, but this day is difficult. Maybe he's trying to keep your mind off it."

"He's making me lose my mind, but at least I got the phone calls made."

Papi Ray has already brought in two batches of roasted

chiles. He's preparing them out in the yard inside his chile roaster a welder friend made for him. Once the chiles cool, Lita and I pack and seal them in plastic bags. We store them in the basement freezer until she's ready to use them in her stews and other recipes throughout winter.

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I place another bag of chiles next to the pile already on the counter. "Lita, please tell me something about my mom." I have my grandma do this from time to time, since I have so few memories.

"Let me think, *nieta*." She takes a long drag from her cigarette and turns to exhale away from me. The line of smoke sways like a dancer as it rises above her head and disappears. "Dorie was wild from the start, maybe because she's the youngest. As soon as she learned to ride a bike, she wandered off. Found her at the park on the swings. And when she was old enough to get her driver's license, she was always on the go, pushing boundaries. That's why I'm strict with you, Rosie. I'm trying to do a better job."

Without thinking, I joke, "So, it's my mom's fault you keep me on a short leash." I regret it as soon as I say it.

My grandma's face scrunches up like I've pinched her. "No, Rosie. Your grandpa and I just want you to be safe."

I look away. "I know, Lita."

She tamps out her cigarette and steps to the sink to wash her hands.

"How's school going?" she asks over her shoulder. "Do you like your classes and teachers?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

She comes to my side of the counter and begins flipping chiles into one of the bags, dripping juice all over. "Junior high now. You'll be graduating from high school before we know it. Have you thought about what you want to be when you grow up?"

"Probably an artist." Then I add, "Or I may go into law enforcement."

She sucks in her breath, then sputters, "After the horrible job the cops have done to find your mom?"

I'm not surprised by her reaction, and I tell her, "That's exactly why. I could be the one who solves her case. Or maybe I could help other families, so they don't have to deal with what we're going through." I wouldn't wish our situation on anybody.

She grabs a dishtowel and wipes the counter and her hands, then surprises me with a hug. "You're such a sweet girl, *nieta*. I wish you didn't have to carry this burden. I know it's hard on you."

I lean into her embrace. "Sometimes, I wonder if it's my fault. What if she left because of me?" I've never said this out loud, even though I've thought it many times.

She squeezes me harder then pulls back and grips my elbows.

"No, no. You were her reason to be. She wanted the two of you to have a happy life together."

"Or . . . what if she's being held captive?"

Lita gasps. "Oh, Rosie. What an awful thought."

"I've had lots of them over the last five years." I turn back to the chile peppers and start filling another bag, embarrassed I've said so much.

"I understand. It's easy to have those kinds of thoughts, not knowing what really happened. Each year passing—waiting, wondering. The first couple of years I held the vigil I hoped our prayers would be answered, and she'd return, or someone would come forward with information, but it hasn't happened. Now I think of the vigil more like a memorial—in remembrance of her."

"So, you don't think she's coming back?"

"I don't know—maybe I shouldn't have said it like that."

I decide to be honest, too. "It's okay. I don't think she's coming back, either." I pick at the skin of one of the green chiles, its edge burnt from roasting. "I always hate anniversary day, but it's worse this year. I feel like she's really gone."

"Oh, Rosie, I'm sorry. The vigils are supposed to be a comfort to help us through the anniversary, but I agree, this one has been more difficult to face. I'm certainly dreading this evening."

This may be a good time to ask my grandma what I've been hoping for. "Lita, can we please stop having the vigils?"

She folds her arms and leans against the counter. "Five years is a long time, isn't it?" She pauses, then sighs. "Yes, perhaps it's time to see your mother's absence in a different way—then maybe, we can start to heal."

"Really?"

"Yes, *nieta*. Plans are already set, but after tonight we'll

figure out another way to honor your mom—one that's easier on all of us. How does that sound?"

"Oh Lita, I'm so relieved. I'm glad we had this conversation—thank you."

"Me, too, and you're welcome."

Finally, a new beginning, like when I put the first brushstroke on a canvas.

Papi Ray brings in more chiles and asks, "What's going on in here?"

"Just a grandmother, granddaughter talk," replies Lita.

"Oh, one of those. Well, here's the last batch," he says. "I can't wait to taste your green chile stew, old girl—best in New Mexico."

"Well, old man, you'll have to wait until the snow flies."

He chuckles. "Since you're in a better mood, why don't you heat up some tortillas, and we'll enjoy the fruits of our labors, eh?"

Lita looks at the clock, then me, and nods. "I suppose we have time."

While she heats tortillas on the stove burner, I pull several chiles from the last batch, still hot from the roaster, and peel them quickly to keep from burning my fingers. Then we sit down to enjoy the chiles wrapped inside

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buttered tortillas. One of my favorite treats ever. A few bites in, the doorbell rings. Since we rarely have visitors, we jerk to attention.

Papi Ray goes to the door, and I hear him say, "Hello, detective."

Lita jumps up from her chair to join Papi Ray, while I hang back in the kitchen.

"It's about Dorinda, isn't it," Lita blurts. "Today, of all days?"

"I'm sorry to bother you folks. May I come in?"

Lita tells him, "Say what you need to, right where you stand."

"Take it easy, Carmen. He's trying to help."

"Some remains were found," says the detective. "I have photos of the victim's belongings I'd like you to look at."

As soon as I hear those words, I run out the back door to the bee shed, repeating to myself, "It can't be true. It can't be true."

I curl up on the floor in the corner, my knees pressed to my chest, all my strength draining away like melted beeswax. A few minutes later, the detective's car pulls out of the driveway, but I'm too scared to go back to the house. Papi Ray calls from the porch, but I don't reply. Pretty soon he opens the bee shed door and peeks inside.

"Thought you'd be in here."

"It's her, isn't it?"

"No, honey," he replies. "The detective brought photos of a jacket and shoes, but nothing like your mom wore."

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"We go on with our lives—without knowing what happened?"

"That's right. But when something's lost, maybe something can be found and held onto, like those gifts from your friend, Tonto. I've been meaning to show you something."

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Is it possible to be relieved and disappointed at the same time? I'm ashamed to think it, but maybe it'd be better if the cops found her body. Then Papi Ray, Lita, and I wouldn't have to live this nightmare any longer.

"Is Lita okay?" I ask.

"She's a little rattled, but this isn't the first time the detective has paid us a visit."

"It's happened before?"

"Yes. We've tried to protect you, so we didn't tell you, Rosie. Your grandma thinks the cops don't care, but they're still trying to solve the case."

So now, I've got to worry about cops showing up unannounced with photos of dead people's belongings—maybe my mom's? This is too much. I put my head in my hands and start to cry.

"The not knowing is the most difficult part, isn't it, granddaughter?"

"Yes, it is," I mumble.

He clears his throat. When I look up, he's staring out the window.

"After the war," he says, "I went to work at the auto body shop, and for thirty years, I drove the wrecker. Tourists sped off cliffs; drunks careened into the river. I've seen my share of death—the finality of it. But that's not what we've faced, is it, Rosie?"

I shake my head. "The in between is awful, Papi Ray. I don't know if I'm strong enough to keep going."

"You've already proven you are, granddaughter. And your Lita and I are here for you to lean on when you need us."

"You always have been."

"She told me what the two of you discussed, about tonight's vigil being the last. I'm glad, especially for you. You have a bright future ahead, and your mom would want you to find a way to be happy. Our questions don't have answers, but it's important we keep tending our bees, anyway. Do you understand?"

"We go on with our lives—without knowing what happened?"

"That's right. But when something's lost, maybe something can be found and held onto, like those gifts from your friend, Tonto. I've been meaning to show you something."

He takes my hand and pulls me up from the floor, then goes to the corner and drags out his army footlocker from under a shelf. He keeps it locked, so I've never seen what's inside. He takes out a cigar box and lays it on top of the workbench.

"I've been keeping this for when you were old enough. It belonged to your mom. She fed the crows, too, maybe even that old bird, Tonto. They live a long time, you know. She collected their gifts and kept them in there."

"She did?" I try to picture Mom at my age, leaving corn kernels on the sidewalk hoping for a gift in return. Papi Ray pushes the box toward me, but I hesitate. Do the contents hold any answers for me?

"Go ahead, Rosie. Nothing in there will bite—or sting." He smiles.

Lying on top of an assortment of items, including some beads and arrowheads, are a silver bracelet and a fetish necklace.

"The crows didn't give her the jewelry, did they?"

"No." He points to himself. "This old crow and your Lita helped Dorie buy those for her sixteenth birthday. All the other girls wanted tennis bracelets or charm necklaces from the mall in Albuquerque—you know, with tiny gold keys and hearts. Not your mom. She was proud of her heritage and wanted Native American, handmade. We took her to Santa Fe and gave her birthday money, so she could haggle with the Indian ladies along the sidewalk in front of

the Palace of the Governors. She acted so mature choosing her own jewelry." He taps his hand on the workbench. "I just wish she hadn't grown up so fast."

I slip on the bracelet, which hangs loose on my wrist. The weight of it surprises me. I hold the necklace up to the light coming through the window, studying each carved animal among the two strands of beads: horses, foxes, turtles, beavers, rabbits, birds, with a bear at the center—a smaller version of my first gift from the crows.

"It's the most beautiful necklace I've ever seen."

"As beautiful as you and your mother." He winks. "She'd want you to have the jewelry, I'm sure, and now they can be your talismans to help keep you strong."

"Oh Papi Ray, thank you."

I hug him, and when I pull away, he has tears in his eyes, but he doesn't want me to see them, so he busies himself shutting the locker and putting it back in place. "We'd better go help your grandma finish getting ready for the vigil."

"The last one," I say, placing the necklace over my head.

For the first time since Mom left us, I feel close to her again, and the only weight I feel is her bracelet on my wrist, but it's no burden. When I come out of the bee shed, Tonto is perched on the telephone line watching. I nod to him, and he cocks his head. Then the keeper of secrets lifts himself into the sky, dark feathers flashing in the sunlight—silver like Mom's bracelet.

AUTHOR

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I've been a freelance writer, magazine editor, visual artist, and beekeeper, but I recently returned to my first love: fiction writing. Although I live in Ohio now, I was born in Colorado and have deep Hispanic/Native American roots in New Mexico. My heart remains in the West.