Michael Backus

Distant Smoke

Crows. They're crows! I thought it was a plume of smoke rising out of a distant field, which was the initial fascination. It's one week before Christmas, and I'm standing on the balcony of my mother's assisted living facility in La Porte, Indiana, where I grew up, and I have the thought that much of my life here was spent in sight of a ribbon of dark smoke: a pile of burning wood or leaves, a dumping of old Christmas trees, a dilapidated barn on fire. Once some farmer, looking to make two fields into one, bulldozed an entire fence row of mature weed trees and multiflora rose into a line hundreds of yards long, soaked it with gasoline and set it aflame. Volunteer firemen kept watch, cars pulled over, people sat on the hoods or stood in the beds of their pickups. The smoke, black and impossibly dense, rolled out in great barrels the size of office buildings. But these are birds, a swirling column of crows rising to the sky, now boiling above the tree line, then slowly spreading in my direction, as though drifting on the wind.

I've been in Indiana for almost two weeks; my sister Em has been here a month, keeping watch on our aging mother, who is trying to decide whether to have surgery. We both live in New York City, though it's easier for Em to take long periods of time off. I work in the administration of a small liberal arts college on the Upper East Side and teach one class a semester as an adjunct, so I had to wait until I'd submitted grades before I could leave. I drove out with Ky, Em's long-time boyfriend, in my father's Jeep Cherokee, which we kept when he died. Ky flew back two days ago and the two of them talk several times a day on the phone, something I'm all for in general (Ky is a good friend who lives above me in my East Harlem apartment), though I sometimes wish there was someone I could call. There is a woman who I was involved with before she fled the city in October because she couldn't find a job, and we've tried to talk, but she's much younger and has shown little interest in bucking up the spirits of a man whose mother might be dying essentially from old age. We've had a couple of halting, difficult phone conversations with long silences where it's clear neither of us knows what to say. Her

mother is my age and her grandmother is not only alive, but younger than my mother, and I understand it's not right for me to burden a young woman with a middle-aged man's problems. But still …

I'm outside now because we're on break, one hour into the three-hour-long process of signing my mother up for hospice. It's the first halting step towards putting her under their care, which will eventually lead to her going off dialysis and dying (goes the theory) without pain and with dignity. What prompted this crisis is a bowel obstruction, which will soon require surgery. She doesn't want any more surgeries and believes dialysis is her "golden bullet," should she need it. All she has to do is stop and, within a couple of weeks, she'll pass. By most accounts, death from a lack of dialysis is relatively pain free, physical pain in all its forms being what she fears most (having lived a life full of it), and, with hospice caring for her, they promise they'll be able to alleviate any side effects. Em believes Mom is doing something heroic, opting not to live a reduced life simply because she can.

I'm less sure. I want what's best for my mother and, in her place, I can only imagine going for the golden bullet years before. But the doctors also say she is a good candidate for the surgery and, while recovery might be rough for a few weeks, she'll feel better in the end. And I'm not ready for her to be gone, maybe I never will be but not now. Not yet. My father died a year ago and it scares me to think of my life without her, scares me in the way a child is frightened of the dark and just wants to be reminded there still exists a higher authority. And I don't believe she's ready either, no matter what she says. When her kidneys first failed, and she had to go on dialysis, our father told us (again and again, repetition being his favorite move by that point) no way would he ever submit to such an indignity just to stay alive. We believed him and even partly agreed with him, even if he was saying it to diminish her, as if her decision to keep on living betrayed a central human weakness. In the year since he died, if she talks about him at all, it is to complain in a tone suffused with exhaustion, confusion, and resignation.

"I married your father," she said one night unprompted when the three of us were out at the one restaurant in La Porte where you could get a glass of wine with your meal. "Because I wanted tall blonde children and because he seemed to be crazy about me."

For a moment, the crows appear to turn into a swarm of insects just beyond arm's reach, and I stretch out my hand as if to disrupt them, then the first birds are overhead and are so obviously crows, the illusion dissipates. I'm freezing in the twenty degree air wearing only a short-sleeved t-shirt, but can't stop watching this incredible venting of birds. It feels significant in context, though I can't say how. Hundreds, even thousands, continue to lift out of the field, and what's wonderful beyond the obvious is they are officially and absolutely a gaggle, a rowdy bunch of drunks weaving their way up a hill, squawking and snapping.

Inside, the vibe of the room has changed. My sister is in the bedroom on the phone, pacing. Mom sits reading in her huge chair, which so dwarfs the tiny, skinny old woman she's become, it looks like a movie special effect where an adult is shrunk to the size of a child and all the furniture is over-sized. As always, there are folded newspaper crosswords and three library books – two mysteries and *Pride and Prejudice* – laid out spines open on the chair's arms.

"Mom?"

"Ask your sister," she says without looking up.

Em presses the phone to her chest. "Eileen came back from break while you were outside," my sister says. "Turns out once Mom signs the paper and hands herself off to hospice, dialysis stops immediately. They're in charge the moment the ink's dry." The three of us assumed we'd sign her up for hospice while she continues to go to dialysis three times a week and, at some hypothetical future point, she'd hand herself over and start the process of dying. But that's not how hospice works, the nurse said. For reasons medical, moral and (most significantly) financial, once Mom signs the hospice papers, we will have decided to begin the process of her death.

This is not expected.

I feel a blush of panic, buried deep, but still there. I'm not ready for this. I'm not sure I've ever seriously considered this might happen, that my mother would actually choose to die. I've assumed she'll put off deciding until her obstruction becomes acute and then go for surgery, but here we are one hour and three signatures away from starting the process. Of course I understand she's at the end of her life, frail enough that even two more years at this point might be a stretch. But I want

those two years. In the year my mother has lived in Indiana, Em and I have visited regularly. And though she's always been fun to talk to, bright and prickly and interested, she's seemed lighter freed from the burden of our father, who, at the end, slept sixteen hours a day, acted erratically – including once firing a gun in the house and briefly choking my mother – and was a near-constant source of anxiety. My mother genuinely enjoys the assisted living home. She is a social creature who was married for five decades to a depressed man who mostly resisted going out and insisted on running home as soon as possible if he did. At the facility, she has friends to eat with at every meal, and it's a joy to watch her sit in a group of women happily talking away. It only seems fair – to her and to us – that she survive a few more years, that she enjoy the social existence she's always craved.

On the first Sunday I spent here two weeks ago, my sister and Ky were staying at a motel, and I had settled into the afternoon in my mother's small but cozy one bedroom apartment in the assisted living facility – a golf tournament on TV, the sun warm and bright through the white curtains, Mom doing her crossword in her chair by the windows, the soft tones of the announcers and the hyper-manicured green of the golf course conspiring to lull me to a drifting sleep. I only vaguely heard the news that golfer Kenny Perry's charity was Potter's Orphanage in Bowling Green, Kentucky, these last words cutting through a mid-afternoon haze that had settled on the sunny living room.

"I lived there," Mom said, looking up from the newspaper.

"I know, Ma," I said. "I *do* know where you grew up."

"No no, the orphanage, Potter's Orphanage," she said, obviously annoyed I'd once again assumed she was showing a touch of senility. "That's where I lived after Mama died." This was new information. I knew things had gotten rough in various homes after her mother died when she was twelve. Her father, born before the Civil War and already sixty-five when Mom was born (her mother was barely twenty), was gone before she turned eight. Once orphaned, she and her sister were separated and never really lived together again, though they'd often been a surly island of two growing up. Years later, as an adult, Mom met a bus driver who said she and her sister were "the two fightingest kids I ever met,"

which deeply embarrassed her, though we all (husband, daughter, son) thought it a fantastic detail. I'd heard the stories of Mom's life after her mother died, the whispers of grabby foster fathers and despotic mothers who treated Mom as a live-in servant. But I hadn't heard she'd been in an actual orphanage.

"We ate on tin plates. I remember peeling potatoes. A lot of potatoes. There wasn't much meat," Mom said. "One time this gangly kid ran through the halls yelling, 'We're having baloney tonight, we're having baloney!' He was so happy. I was too.

"I lived there off and on for three years. I'd go with a family for a while and then come back. I guess there was something wrong with me, I kept getting sent back."

She said this without self-pity, though it choked me up and I had to sit straight and fool with the TV remote to hide it.

My sister clicks off her phone and returns to the living room.

"So …?" she says, meaning we need to talk about hospice and the waiting nurse.

"So what?" my mother says with a cold edge, meant to cut off further discussion.

We have promised each other we will not put words into our mother's mouth, we will not speak for her and will only listen to what she wants —a worthy ideal, but the problem is, in the almost two months that one or both of us have been here, our mother has shown no interest in talking about any of it. Not surgery, not the golden bullet. We aren't even sure how to begin the conversation. We have no idea what is going through my mother's head. She's always seemed terrified of dying, and of the dead, though it's not something we as a family ever discussed. Em tried before I got here, talking about her own beliefs about an afterlife and reincarnation, all heavily influenced by years of Buddhist study. And though she certainly didn't want to talk about it, our mother made it clear she thought of death as a great looming void, as empty as a starless section of space, which swallows everything you are, were and will be. More than anything, death terrifies her. When her beloved foster father died, she dreamed of choking on dirt and woke coughing. And when her foster mother passed, a woman we thought of as our grandmother,

and who was my mother's mother for much of her life, Mom couldn't be alone in the house, feeling the presence of her dead mother everywhere, always on the verge (she said) of placing a cold hand on her shoulder. What she's thinking now that we're facing the beginning of the end is impossible to figure out. It's likely she's not thinking at all, lost in a place we can't go.

Eileen the nurse knocks on the door and enters. "We ready? We're halfway there, maybe even a bit more."

My sister and I look at each other; our mother does her crossword and shows no acknowledgement Eileen is even in the room.

"Uh … " my sister says. "Ma?"

She looks up for a moment from her puzzle, like she heard a sound she can't quite identify, then returns to it.

"I don't think we're ready for this," I say, because no one else is speaking. I explain our confusion over how hospice works and say that, as a family, we want to get through Christmas and New Year's before starting. Eileen understands and gathers her things, telling us any time we want to continue with the paperwork, we can start where we left off today.

And like that, hospice sign-up is over.

I'm surprised at how happy I am about it, edging towards elation. We'll have Christmas and New Year's together at least, and surgery is still on the table. I feel hyper, talkative, and though Mom has settled her newspaper across her and Em is scooted forward on the couch, both as if ready for conversation, no one is saying anything.

So I tell them about the crows, how the birds seemed to boil up from a rough area of brush, trees, marsh and farmland my father and I used to hunt.

"The NIBDC," Mom says, clearly eager to talk about anything other than the end of her life.

"What?"

"What does that mean?" Em says, an edge in her voice. "N … I … whatever?"

"The Northern Indiana Bird Dog Club? Your father's club?" she says, overplaying her exasperation. Of course she's right; Dad belonged to a hunting club when we lived in La Porte and they leased a chunk of

land down the highway on which her assisted living facility sits, roughly in the direction of the crows' plume.

"Remember the beaver dam?" I say.

"I remember the beaver dam," my mother says, using her put-upon voice, like she's sick to death of an oft-raised subject though we surely haven't talked about it in at least thirty years.

"The beaver dam?" my sister says.

"It's a story."

"I assumed."

"Tell it," Mom says, like she's humoring me.

"It's a long story. It's just … short version, there was this time where Dad and I waded through a half-mile of flooded farmland to where beavers had dammed a creek. We took axes and hand saws and stupidly left the chainsaw in the truck."

"When they found the blockage, they chopped and sawed for hours," Mom says, warming to the subject.

"We'd get through one tree and there'd be another, and another, and it was all held together with packed dried mud, which we had to chip out. It was serious, that thing."

"Your father used to say, 'You don't really appreciate a beaver until you've spent a day … '"

"Seriously, Ma?" Em says.

" … a day chopping out one of their dams, if you'd let me finish!"

I put a hand over my mouth because I'm laughing.

"Oh grow up, the both of you," she says.

Six weeks later, Em and I are on opposite sides of our mother's hospital bed. No one has told us if she's officially in a coma, but she hasn't said anything since yesterday afternoon, when in response to a nurse's "Can I do anything for you?" she said, "Make me eighteen again." In the last couple of hours, her breathing has become wet and raspy, with a guppie on the floor look, as though each breath might be her last.

The surgery went well until it didn't. She came through it fine and spent a glorious seven days recovering in intensive care. She made new friends every day, always had someone to talk to, learned everyone's names and family histories and had, for a brief time, the kind of social

life she had always imagined, even if she was in the hospital and in pain. She blurted out to her surgeon, an over-coiffed, fake-tan fifty-year-old with a pointed arrogance who smelled good (even the nurses who rolled their eyes at the mention of his name admitted he always smelled nice), that she loved him and then told us later, laughing and turning red, "I love his skill is what I meant … his skill as a surgeon." But each day she felt a little worse and, on the frigid minus seventeen degree day Em drove her the thirty miles back to the assisted living facility, she felt lousy. She lasted less than two days before she had to return to the hospital in South Bend. I'd been home in East Harlem for a week; Em had only eighteen hours in her East Village apartment before she got on an airplane and headed back to the Midwest. Our mother was just too old; her colon didn't knit back together, and the only option left was another surgery and a colostomy bag, which she refused to consider, even if it were possible. By the time we arrived in South Bend on a prop plane from a connecting flight in Cleveland, she'd made her decision and was on her way.

Em has her eyes closed; she'll say later she was chanting a mantra over and over, the gist being Mom shouldn't be frightened to let go, it was going to be okay, just let go. I have my own version. I rest my forehead on her shoulder, and mouth the words without saying them, hoping something will get through. We're in a river of warm, warm water; she's on a wooden pyre tightly gripping my hand to keep from floating away. There are other pyres and people standing, and others floating by, like leaves pushed by a gentle current. Doesn't it feel peaceful? I speak that word out loud, "peaceful." I tell her a tree line marks a curve in the river, all she has to do is open her hand and the current will take her. Nothing more than that. I describe a line of smoke in the distance, like my column of birds; I tell her this marks her destination. Home. It's not far. Follow the crows. I lean in, my mouth so close to her ear I feel my own warm breath reflected, and whisper, "Follow the crows."

I return to La Porte a few months later to supervise the placing of a joint mother/father headstone in the Backus section of the Pine Lake Cemetery. Rumors are this lovely cemetery with rolling hills and old growth maples overlooking North Pine Lake was designed by Olmstead himself. My mother's ashes and half of my father's went into the ground

here, his ashes finally out of the trunk of their 2006 Mazda 3, where they sat for the entire year she lived in Indiana. Whenever Em and I bought groceries and popped the trunk, there it would be in the corner, a small silver cardboard box with "DAD" crudely scrawled in Sharpie on the side. I'd seen both my parents dead in a funeral home, about to be cremated, meaning neither was prepped for viewing, and, in both cases, my eyes passed over them before realizing what I was seeing. My father looked husk-ish, his face misshapen, like he was made of clay and had lain too long on one side. My mother seemed startled in a fetal position, her thin white hair pointing behind her as if in a permanent wind. I was surprised I felt no reverence for either body and no desire to do more than take a quick look. There was nothing left of them there, their bodies so obviously empty they seemed beside the point to my grieving.

The last thing I do is go in search of the crows. Workers at my mother's assisted living facility said they regularly gather in a pair of giant oak trees behind the Burger King on State Road 2. From a distance the trees look normal enough, though there is a fuzziness to them, like an impressionistic charcoal drawing of a tree. I turn off the radio, lower all four windows, cut the ignition and roll into place in neutral. There are thousands of birds in the two trees; they aren't squawking or cawing, but there's a general hum in the air, an electric buzz, like standing under giant erector-set power lines. The pressure around my ears changes, like when a dragonfly hovers too close, setting off a tuning fork shiver. I close my eyes. It's easy to imagine the air all around boils with hollow sparks of energy; there's a threat to the presence of so many animals, even as I understand there is no danger, just a sense of a single immense organism settled on top of my Jeep. Then a bird caws, and another and another, and the collective flock shifts and flaps and rises and, for a moment, I think it's all going to let loose and they'll lift en masse and head back for the fields, but they don't; they calm down and only a handful of crows circle the air above the trees, cawing. Eyes closed, it all feels so familiar, the cold metallic winter feel of a crow cawing, I could be a teenager out in late November fields, hunting pheasant with my father and our dog George, a pleasing lonesomeness to the long scrubby fields and endless woods and the sound of the crows,

knowing the truck was a forty minute walk away and home an hour's sleepy drive with George nodding off between us, my mother waiting with food, a burning fire, and a cistern of water ready to pluck the birds clean.