

As the Crow Flies

By Mike Hood

It wasn't that Doris had anything against crows, in fact, quite the contrary. She admired their capacity to eat almost anything, even if that did include other birds and carrion. They were survivors who could grab a meal at any spot up or down the food chain. She often observed them on the front lawn going about their noisy blackbird business. Nor did she look down on young people in general, or young women in particular, especially if they were experiencing a dark night of the soul from some unfortunate romantic contretemps. But put them together—a dozen crows or so and a forlorn-looking young woman dressed in black robes with windswept black hair—against a fading green pea-soup background, put them together on a greeting card and that was just trouble.

What could she do with such a card? It wasn't suitable for a holiday, a birthday, a graduation, a christening, and certainly not to express sympathy. It seemed to have only one possibility: "I'm sorry to learn about your irreconcilable difficulties with your intended, so best of luck with your suicide. I'll be thinking of you." Now she would have to delay an already overdue thank-you note to her quirky Aunt Martha for the Christmas cheese ball, which came on a lead-gray plate that said on the bottom: "Avoid all contact with food." She discovered the warning, of course, after eating the cheese ball.



Artwork by Susan Hood

In disgust, she thrust the card back into the empty card box and returned it to the bottom drawer of her desk.

That night Doris dreamed of being pursued by crows. At first, she thought they wanted to eat her as they waddled awkwardly toward where she was standing in the front yard. But that was not the case at all. They were enchanted by her long blonde hair, flowing in the breeze behind her. When she turned and began to run, she loosened her arms from her side. The faster she went, the longer her hair grew until there were

birds riding and undulating on its beautiful waves. She wasn't sure, but maybe there were as many as fifteen. Looking down, she could see the rooftops of the houses in her neighborhood and then off in the distance purple mountains which she had painted with a one-inch flat brush, but now the birds were gracefully holding her hair as if it were the train of a wedding dress.

Next morning, she took the card out of the box and looked at it again. This time she counted the birds. There were fifteen. Some were in flight, so she counted again, still fifteen. When she left it on the desk to fix coffee, she saw a crow clinging to the kitchen windowsill. It startled her at first, being so close to the glass. Then she noticed it was following her movements, cocking his head this way and that. Was he admiring her hair, which at this point in the day dropped below her shoulders, like in the dream? She thought of her own wedding, her husband now deceased, and their marriage that had settled into routine and held together over the years. When she looked up from her reverie, the bird was gone.

These images quickly faded as she made preparations for the day. Doris was meeting with her art group at eleven. For a while they called themselves "The Gallery Girls," but as Paula pointed out, they weren't exactly "girls" anymore. Donna, who was Catholic, objected because galleria was the Italian term for a church porch, derived very likely from "Galilee." And Rose said it sounded like they were advertising themselves as pinup girls. So for now, they referred to themselves as "The Art Ladies," but nobody liked that either. The email negotiations for meeting time and place, which were never fixed, could go on for days. One time Doris counted thirty-eight separate

emails. For this meeting, the negotiations had lasted for the better part of a week. Paula wanted to meet at her house because she would be getting in from a cross-country trip the day before and couldn't face the drive across town. Donna preferred her house because the heating-and-air man was coming at some point after one. Donna also wanted to go to morning mass at ten, so she couldn't possibly meet before eleven. Rose didn't care where they met. She offered her house as well to complicate the choices, but she had to pick up her dog, J. M. Hopkins, from the vet's at two, so she wanted to begin by eleven or sooner if possible.

And so it went. Doris always kept their art days open, so time or place didn't matter much to her. She also had the lesson for this meeting, which she had carefully put together. Even though her favorite subject was architecture, having recently drawn a series of Palladian buildings with dozens of lightly ruled vanishing points, she was doing perspective for this lesson. It was a simple mountain scene in watercolor, which involved the components of sky, mountains, tree line, and foreground. While the composition was straightforward, the techniques...well, that was another matter. "Practice is one's only hope," she would tell the group.

Paula, though, wasn't much for practice. She was blessed with an aptitude for caricature and could have been one of those artists who work state fairs and make the rounds at fraternities sketching giant heads of the bros atop tiny bodies. Instead, she was an academic, who taught post-modern literature at the local liberal arts college, Dunster-Wibb. What she lacked in preparation, she made up for in presentation; so along with the "cool" nature of her specialization, she was

wildly popular with undergraduates. One of her drawings, “Day of Rest,” was framed and hung in her crowded living room. It showed a family sitting on a blanket in a bucolic setting having a picnic. When Doris first saw the drawing, she thought of a sanitized American family from the fifties. The father wore a tie and the mother a dress. The smiling children, a boy and a girl, scrubbed and pressed, were just too good to be true. But on closer look, there was something not quite right about the sky. In fact, it wasn’t the sky at all, but a giant meteor about to hit the earth precisely where the family, completely oblivious to their fate, was sitting, enjoying a Sunday meal after attending church. There was a bible on the corner of the blanket.

While she was distributing materials for her lesson, Doris glanced at the drawing of the happy family. That’s how it ought to be, better not to know when the meteor is going to hit. They were meeting at Paula’s house after all, and Donna was late even though she needed to leave early. That was about right. Donna’s work, for lack of a better expression, possessed a certain spiritual aura. She did portraits, mostly of her family, that radiated a mystical, otherworldly quality. The colors were soft and seemed to float off the canvas, perhaps because she was able to capture the essence, the soul of the individual in a moment of unselfconscious reflection. Doris hoped that Donna would never ask to do her portrait. She was afraid of what it might reveal, and then where would she hang it? As far as she knew, Donna had never commented on Paula’s “Day of Rest,” but that was probably best.

“Oh, this looks so interesting,” Rose said, as she examined the handout and sample painting Doris had just

given her and Paula. “What a beautiful scene!” Even though Rose was just learning watercolor, her work had a vibrant, distinctive quality. Paula teased her, in part out of envy, and said it was so primitive looking she might as well be the next Grandma Moses. Donna, however, took exception to the name “Moses,” first because “Moses” wasn’t a woman’s name and then because the real Moses had been sullied by association with someone, a woman (again), who celebrated the profane in her paintings. Maybe her name was a pseudonym, Doris had suggested. So Paula dubbed Rose—Grandma Patriarch. Everyone laughed but Donna.

When Doris began the lesson, she put aside a handout for Donna and a 10in x 14in sheet of Arches paper for the practice watercolor session. She was just about done reviewing and illustrating the principles of depth—size, overlap, vertical location, texture, shading, color value, and linear perspective—when Donna, breathless, burst in through the front door.

“Sorry I’m late, but my daughter from Chicago just called. They’re the ones living in that tiny apartment, four hundred and fifty square feet. They needed something between their jobs. Now the second baby is due a week sooner than she thought. So I’ll have to be on a plane by Friday. Can you believe it?”

Everyone offered congratulations. Then there were questions about the baby: Why is it coming a week early? Is it a boy or a girl? What were they hoping for? How long would the daughter be staying home? Followed by questions about the tiny apartment: How could a couple with two children live in such a small space? Was it an environmental issue? Would they be looking for something else? And finally questions about their

jobs, the Chicago area, fear of crime, recent initiatives by the mayor, advantages and disadvantages of living in a big city, and so on. While she was happy for Donna, Doris felt the energy draining from her body. After all that preparation, the lesson seemed to have been blown out of the water. The flotsam and jetsam of mountain perspective were bobbing up and down beside her own downing body. But it was Rose who threw her a lifeline.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” she said, “but if we still have time, I’d like to have a go at that mountain scene, especially since Doris has gotten us on the verge of actually painting something.”

Maybe it was the hint of sarcasm from Rose who always played it straight that did the trick. Everyone agreed. The room got very quiet. “Don’t worry,” Donna said almost apologetically, “I’ll catch up.”

So they mixed their paints, and Doris began to lead them through steps in the process of creating a mountain scene. This was the payoff for her, using the hard-earned analysis to bring something lifelike into existence, to help others transform water and pigment, brushed onto a flat, one-dimensional piece of white paper, into an illusion of reality. To think that a Shakespeare play was just a literal recording of one day in the life of sixteenth-century Elizabethan or Jacobean Londoners was foolish. As someone once said, she couldn’t remember who, “Art is the lie that leads to the truth,” or something like that. She was teaching the techniques which allowed this magic to happen.

She worked along with the others, but it was a scene she had practiced my times, so it gave her space to articulate

the steps as they progressed and to answer questions. Rose’s mountains looked antediluvian as if they had just been pushed up through the earth’s crust and were still cooling. Paula’s, on the other hand, were dark and foreboding, suggesting that they were about to crumble and smother the forest below.

As they were getting ready to finish the scene by painting the lone pine tree in the foreground, Donna abruptly stood up and prepared to leave. “Can’t keep the heating-and-air man waiting,” she explained. After she gathered her things, she handed Doris what she’d been working on and headed toward the door. Rose and Paula followed. But Doris didn’t move. She was taking in what she held in her hand. It was not the mountain scene she was expecting, but a sketch of her, Doris, painting the mountain scene. All she could think of was Madonna and child. Madonna and child, but Madonna without a literal child.

When Rose and Paula came back into the room, they stood on either side of Doris and stared as well.

“Thrice removed,” Paula quipped. “The painter being painted while painting.”

“Okay, maybe so,” Rose said. “I know it’s a cliché to say this, but she’s really captured the moment. Don’t you think?”

No one said a word, Paula probably from jealousy and Doris because she felt the fatigue rising again. She just wanted to be done. “Let’s finish the pine tree, shall we?”

That night when she saw the card on her desk where she’d left it that morning, she sat down, opened it, took a pen, and began, “Dear Doris...”