

## AFTER CHARLIE

- a short story by Valerie Geary

Two crows, muted black like the pupils of my dead son's eyes, wait on the fence. From the window I watch them watch me. Their only movements: a quick ruffle of wings, a short snap of a beak. We wait together.

“Evan?” My wife.

The crows make no indication they see her approaching. I, too, stand unmoving.

“Evan?”

Then she is behind me, hot breath smelling of stale-sweet vomit and mint-flavored tobacco.

“How are you holding up?” She tries to put her arm around me, but I flinch and she pulls away. “I don't want to be here anymore than you do, but it'll be easier if we do this together.”

One of the crows shakes its head. I do the same.

We've been sleeping in separate rooms for three nights. She sleeps in our California King with the covers tucked around her, no room for nightmares. I lay awake in his small twin bed hugging a tattered elephant that smells of stale Cheerios. The planets we stuck to the ceiling last summer have lost their shine and won't even glow during the darkest hours of the night.

“Charlie needs a funeral, Evan.” She steps away.

I feel heat rise up through the floor and as it passes through my shoes, my legs start to shake. I’m certain that if I leave now, he’ll be waiting for me in the car playing Tetris. He’ll smile without looking up and say, “What’s next, Dad? Ice cream?” “Of course, bud,” I’ll say and we’ll drive to the Dairy Queen down the street for chocolate-dipped cones.

The crows are nodding in agreement. I turn and start toward the exit.

“Where are you going?” She says.

I keep walking, certain I can reach the door. My hand stretches for the knob and then she’s in front of me; the lines around her mouth- infinite chasms of darkness, cracking like the paint on the fence.

“You can’t leave me here. I won’t do this alone.”

My hand stays raised.

Her eyes are liquid, mascara running. “You can’t ignore this, Evan. He was your son.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the voice I hear is not my own.

“We’re ready for you now Mr. Ratcliff. Mrs. Ratcliff.”

A short bald man with a long red beard waits across the room in a shadowed doorway that leads to a staircase to nowhere.

“This way please.”

My wife sighs and follows him. As we sit at a mahogany table too exotic for the room the bald man speaks again.

“I know this is difficult.”

Near the window a curtain flutters. They are watching me, expecting me to speak. I stare at the snapping, twisting cloth and tap my fingers against my knees.

“You’ll need to choose an outfit.”

His orange water wings and green goggles.

“A coffin.”

Then they’re looking at a binder full of pictures. My legs start to bounce and I smooth my palms along the top of my pants, but still I can’t stop moving.

“Oh that’s nice.” She pokes a square on the page. “What do you think, Evan?”

I ignore her, but she nods her head, as though we’re in agreement. “It’s simple. Charlie liked simple.”

“Charlie liked Batman.” I try to tell her, but she’s not listening.

The bald man takes a notebook from his pocket and taps at it with a pencil. “And the obituary?”

“Something straightforward.” She closes her eyes and then drags them open.

“Like this?” He writes as he talks. “Charles Presley Ratcliff, son of Evan and Joan Ratcliff, tragically taken on June 12, 1994?”

“Charlie.” I scratch at a small rip in my jeans.

“What?”

“Charlie. His name is Charlie.”

“Was, dear.” She reaches out to me, her fingers giant earthworms.

As I jerk away from her, I fall and my head strikes the ground. Pain explodes through me and I squeeze my eyes shut. Flashes of Charlie: At Triangle Lake in a puffy red life vest, white sunscreen on his nose. At the carnival ready to climb onto the Ferris Wheel where he puked, but after still asked for a corn dog. When I open my eyes, he disappears and I’m staring at the ceiling. I belong here, upside down.

“Are you all right?” Hands pull me up, brush my clothes.

I push away and start toward the stairs.

“Evan? We’re not done yet. Sit down.”

I keep moving. Heel, toe.

“Where are you going?”

As I round the corner, they disappear and my head fills with a loud buzzing; the sound of a broken light bulb.

Through the window in the front room, I see the crows still on the fence, waiting for me. They know the truth: I wasn’t home when Charlie died. I was working. Always working. Charlie called to tell me about a pool party; his first. “That’s great, bud,” I told him, distracted by the girl who brings the bagels.

Delayed drowning the doctors said. Charlie swallowed water and no one noticed. He coughed and laughed and kept swimming. Everything seemed fine. But water can wait; it’s a patient killer.

When I came home, he’d already gone to bed. I crept through his shadowed room and as I reached down to stroke his head and kiss his brow, I noticed the water trickling from his nose and mouth creating a half circle of darkness against his pillow. I screamed his name. I shook him. But it was too late and now he’s gone.

When I step outside, the crows hop sideways, as if to make room for me. Crows don’t bury their dead.

Minutes pass, perhaps only seconds, then her hand is soft in mine and I do not pull away. Together we watch the crows. Without warning, they jump from the fence and wheel in the air above our heads, dodging each other and laughing until they disappear behind a cloud.