

## QUID PRO CROW

PAULA PHILLIPS

The two women sat motionless on the front porch, watching the black crow as he hopped up the manicured sidewalk towards them. He paused to look around, the stick-like object in his beak glimmered as it caught the sun's rays. The crow hopped to a point several feet short of the porch steps and dropped the odd-looking object onto the ground. Cocking his head to the left, then right, he turned and hopped away, back down the path and into the grass.

The old, wooden porch boards creaked as Sara stood up and made her way to the top step to sit down. She tossed a few peanuts out into a grassy area near the crow and said, "Thank you Carlo for the gift, now here's your treat."

As if on cue the crow hopped over to the peanuts, snapped them up in his beak, and flew away.

Sara's mother got up from her seat and asked, "What did he bring you this time?"

Both women looked down at the stick with the shiny object around it, but couldn't quite make it out. They stepped closer to inspect it. Sara staggered backwards and gasped, "Oh my god Mom! It's someone's finger! With a ring still attached!"

"Oh my word," said Donna as she leaned in for a closer inspection. "What hideous nail polish. Blue is never attractive."

Sara's eyes widened as she stared at her mom, "Honestly Mother? That's what you see here?"

Donna crouched down closer to view the finger from a different angle and continued with her speculations, "I wonder if it's that Jackie lady's from Hillsdale? The one that went missing a few days ago. It's been all over the news and my ladies group at church just can't stop talking about it."

Ugh, Sara thought. "You need another hobby besides gossiping," she said as she felt the blood drain from her face. Sara looked down at the finger once more as a burning sensation began to bubble up in her throat, "Oh no, oh no..."

Sara ran towards the porch, leaping over a small flowerbed and grabbed at the railing in an attempt to steady herself, but she couldn't stop the contents of her stomach from coming up. After taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, she glanced back towards the sidewalk and noticed her mother placing a bucket upside down on top of the finger, as if giving it the proper respect it was due.

Still feeling a bit queasy she said, "Mom, how are you not disgusted by that?"

Donna shook her head, a little disappointed in Sara. "A southern lady is only soft on the outside. Now you really need to get a grip honey." Donna stepped over the flowerbed making her way towards Sara. "And honey, I don't know how you're ever going to make it through nursing school with a weak stomach like that. I hope I'm not throwing my hard-earned money down the drain."

Sara had the urge to roll her eyes, but instead, her stomach churned once more.

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Detective Carlson stopped typing on his laptop and looked up at the two women sitting across from him. He made a quick mental note of the living room - neat and tidy, a few antiques, feminine and flowery - then he continued his questioning.

"Now let me get this straight. You say that the crow frequently brings you small objects, and you thought this was just another shiny trinket to add to your collection there?" he said, nodding towards a Mason jar on the coffee table.

Sara eyed the Detective. She guessed that he was a few years older than her. He had a strong jawline, his hair was neatly parted and slicked back. He looked like a modern-day TV detective she thought. His repeated questioning, however, was starting to get on her nerves. With a little too much agitation in her voice she said, "I'm not lying you know. Carlo brings me gifts, like marbles and buttons and shiny things. Then I toss him some peanuts or crackers and he flies away. That's our routine."

"You named the crow Carlo?" the Detective questioned.

Sara snapped back, "What's wrong with that?"

"Just trying to get the whole picture. How long has this been going on?"

"I've already told you, a couple years or so."

"And this is the first time he's ever brought you anything like this?"

Donna jumped into the conversation, "Look Detective Carlson, we've told you all we know. I don't see why you keep asking us the same questions over and over. There's really nothing more that we can add. We'd like to help, but we have no idea where Carlo got that finger, in fact..."

Two officers interrupted the conversation as they stepped into the entry way of the living room, their shadows dimming the natural light. The senior officer addressed the detective, "Everything looks fine Sir."

Detective Carlson nodded and asked them to wait outside. Turning to Donna he said, "All right ma'am. If you think of anything else, please call me." He handed his business card to her and grabbed the Mason jar. "I'll need to take this for evidence. I'll bring it back when we're done with it."

Donna and Sara escorted the Detective to the front door. The door barely closed behind him and Donna blurted out, "I think he likes you. He's quite

handsome, don't you think?"

"Mom, you're impossible. There's some poor, dead woman out there - or at least a woman missing a finger - and you're playing match-maker?"

"Well, you need to keep an open mind."

"Mom, he thinks we're making this whole thing up. We're his number one suspects."

"Honey, that's ridiculous. Besides, how else are you going to find a husband if you don't take advantage of every opportunity? Why, when I met your father....."

Sara put up her hand, cutting off her mom in mid-sentence, "I've heard that story a thousand times. I don't need you to play match-maker."

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Donna and Sara sat on the front porch enjoying the quiet afternoon. Beads of sweat dotted their foreheads while a gentle breeze made an attempt to chase the humidity away. A grey sedan rolled up to the curb, breaking the silence of the afternoon.

Donna's face lit with excitement, "Oh, look honey! It's that cute Detective Carlson!"

Sara frowned and shushed her mom. For the tenth time that day she thought to herself that she really must move out on her own.

The detective walked with authority along the cement path leading to the porch. His laptop in one hand and a Mason jar full of the crow's treasures in the other. Setting the jar down on the table he said, "Nothing there. No evidence of blood or tissue. You can have your jar back."

"Um, thanks?" said Sara, not sure if there was disappointment or pleasure in his voice.

Donna stood up to greet the detective. "Oh that's wonderful news Detective. But we really didn't think you'd find anything," she said with a big welcoming smile. "May I get you some sweet tea?"

The detective looked over at Sara who was twirling the Mason jar in her hands, examining the baubles inside. He glanced back at Donna and replied, "Yes ma'am, that'd be real nice. And I have a few more questions for your daughter."

Sara looked up at the detective, already annoyed with his tone. She'd been following the news, although not much had changed. Jackie was still a missing person. The news talked about the finger but they didn't disclose who found it, or how, or if it was even Jackie's. Of course, her mother's church group knew all about the finger. You can't stop the Baptist gossip circle she thought. And who knows, maybe the detective could give her more information. She decided it wouldn't hurt to turn on the charm a bit.

Sara smiled at the detective, tossed back her hair, and motioned for him to sit down. "You know Detective, I've been thinking... There's a small farm stand a few blocks from here. I always see a bunch of crows out there on the telephone poles. Maybe we could try and follow them to see where

they go?"

Raising an eyebrow with amusement the Detective said, "We? When did you become a cop?"

"I'm just trying to help," said Sara, wrinkling her brow and looking away.

The detective ignored her pouting and opened his laptop. "So, I find it pretty amazing that a crow brings you these gifts don't you think?"

"And yet he does," said Sara, looking him straight in the eye.

The Detective continued asking questions about Carlo and the finger. If she knew Jackie and do they have friends in common.

Exasperated and not feeling the charm anymore Sara interrupted him and blurted out, "Detective Carlson, is the finger Jackie's or not?"

"I don't know yet. It's still going through forensics and DNA testing."

"Oh come on, you should know by now. It's been two weeks!" Sara rolled her eyes and flopped back in her chair.

The detective smiled at her agitation, "These things take time."

"Yeah. Whatever," Sara said with a wave of her hand.

Donna stepped onto the porch balancing a wooden tray with iced-tea and a plate of cookies. Sara shook her head at her mother's proper southern manners and then looked away as something caught her eye. In an urgent, but softened tone, she said, "Hush, don't move. There's Carlo."

They all froze, not wanting to scare the crow as he hopped up the little sidewalk carrying something in his beak. Detective Carlson shifted his gaze from the crow, to Sara, then back again, not believing what he saw. He leaned towards Sara and very faintly whispered "He's real!"

Sara smiled but didn't reply. As the crow neared the porch steps, he dropped the object onto the ground and hopped away into the grass. Sara broke off a piece of cookie and carefully walked over to the top step and sat down, gently tossing the cookie towards the bird. The crow, pleased with the exchange, snatched up the cookie and took flight.

Everyone ran to the sidewalk. Sara said, "I think it's a piece of leather, with a rhinestone attached."

The detective kneeled down, took a pen out of his shirt pocket and flipped the object over. After a brief study he said in a monotone voice, "It appears to be an ear, with an ear-ring attached. Looks like it's been weathered and dried out by the sun."

Donna brought her hand to her mouth and shaking her head she started to ramble, "Poor Jackie, that poor thing. It's the ex-husband. It's always the ex-husband." She caught the questioning expression on the detective's face and added, "Well, that's the way it goes on those TV murder shows you know."

Sara felt a burning lump in her throat and tried to distract her thoughts so she wouldn't throw up again, especially not in front of the detective. She looked over at her mother whose face was bright with a smile and eyes lit up with an idea. Oh no, she thought, her mom can be so embarrassing.

Donna's southern accent poured out thick and sweet as she invited the detective to stay for dinner. Looping her arm into his, she led him back to the porch, "And you know Detective Carlson, there are times when the crow comes back a couple times a day..."