

# Listen

by Jon Aretakis

The boy stood surrounded by large trees with twisted branches in a dark forest. Hundreds of large crows with beady eyes and yellow teeth flew above him. The birds squawked, clacked their teeth and stared. The boy felt their stares like a thousand little arrows piercing his fragile frame. He tried to run but his feet were tangled in tree roots that moved like snakes. The birds landed and hooped all around him. They squawked, clacked their teeth and stared.

A large white bird descended from the night sky. The bird transformed into a beautiful lady dressed in white with long golden hair. She floated down, landed next to the boy and smiled. A warm wind blew over him. The lady in white waved her hand through the air. The crows and the forest disappeared. The boy stood in a large meadow filled with tall green grass. The lady in white put her arms around him and held him like a loving mother holds a young son. The boy sat down in the meadow and the lady in white sat next to him. She handed him a bowl of Lucky Charms covered with lots of sugar. Together, they stared up at the blue sky and watched his favorite cartoon, Scooby Doo. He scooped a giant spoonful of cereal and raised it to his mouth.

The boy opened his eyes, looked around his bedroom and listened to the sounds of Mom and Dad yelling at each other again. Sadness poured through him as he realized the lady in white was just a dream. She had vanished deep into the depths of his mind. He missed her.

Mom and Dad always yelled at each other in the morning. They yelled loud. Really loud. **He wished they'd stop screaming. He wished he was still dreaming. He knew he had to get up** and get dressed for school but he did not want to get out of bed. The boy stuck his head under his blanket and thought how good a bowl of Lucky Charms would taste for breakfast. He knew there was no Lucky Charms in the kitchen. Only Cheerios. No sugar and no milk either. The boy tried to go back to sleep but Mom and Dad yelled so loud he knew he would not be able to find that place where the lady in white lived. He knew he had to get up and catch the school bus or his mom would rip open his door and scream at him. Still, he did not get up. He stayed under the covers and listened.

**“God damn it. We don't have the money. Why do you buy that crap? It's too expensive. We can't afford it. There's no food in the house and you spend what little we have on an expensive piece of meat.”**

**“We could afford it if you didn't waste all the money at the tables and on those worthless lottery tickets. I'm tired of being broke. I want better. Your gambling costs a lot more than a beef loin. What about your D.U.I.? How much did that cost?”**

**“Hey, God damn it. I work. I earn the money in this house. Not you. If you're so unhappy, get a job. Earn some money. I'm tired of you whining all the time. Especially, when all you do is sit around, watch soap operas and drink. How about cleaning the house every once in a while. I**

work all day. What do you do? Nothing, except get drunk and whine. If you are so unhappy, leave. Get the fuck out. All you do is tear me down. I'm sick of it. ”

“You know what, if I had the money I would leave. I hate it when you do that. You know damn well the plan was for you to work and I would stay home and raise our son.”

“Raise our son. Ha! When is the last time you washed his clothes? When is the last time you bought food for him?”

“What about you? You said we would be fine. We'd have plenty of money. That's what you said. What a fool I was to believe that line of crap. I should have married Larry. Last I heard, he was doing well. Two story house with a pool. I married the wrong man. What a fool I am. Here we are, still renting. Can't even afford to buy our own house. “

“See? See what I mean? Goddamn it. Larry! Larry! Larry! You make it sound like he would have married you. Like he wanted to. You forget. He dumped you because he knew you were nothing but a free-loading drunk. I work like a slave and this is what I get. Fucking cunt! I swear to God you're a fucking cunt.”

The boy knew Mommy did not like to be called that word. That word made Mommy mad. Really mad.

“Don't you talk to me that way.”

Mom threw something at Dad. Sounded like a plate. It shattered against the wall. Dad's chair screeched against the wood floor and fell over. Dad was mad. Really mad. The boy tightened the blanket around his head.

“Don't you touch me. You hit me again and I'll leave for good this time.”

“Don't you ever throw something at me.”

The boy heard a giant crash. He knew Dad had thrown Mom like Mom had thrown the plate. Mom screamed, gasped for air and cried. The boy listened as Mom ran down the hall passed his room. She slammed her bedroom door and locked it. She would stay in her bedroom until Dad left. She did that, always. The boy heard Mom cry through his bedroom wall. He didn't like it when Mom cried. It made him sad.

The front door slammed. Dad left for work. The boy heard Dad say that word Mom hated again as he passed by his bedroom window. He heard Dad's footsteps on the red bricks. That sound always scared the boy because that sound meant Dad was close and when Dad was close, Dad was mad. Always.

The boy crawled out of bed and walked into the kitchen. He was cold and wished he had put on a T-shirt. His stomach growled. He had not eaten the night before because Mom had knocked him to the floor and sent him to his room without dinner for not combing his hair the right way. He had to hurry and eat before Mom came out of her room. He poured himself a bowl of cereal, filled the bowl with some water, grabbed a dirty spoon from the sink and started to make his way back to his room.

He heard Mom's bedroom door open. Mom will yell at me. Mom always yells at me, he thought. Always. He looked up at Mom. Her lip was swollen and she had blood on her shirt.

**"What are you looking at you little shit?"**

**"Nothing, Mom."**

He stared at the dirty floor. Mom moved passed him and opened the cabinet. The boy knew she wanted Vodka. She always wanted the Vodka. He stared at the floor and listened to the sounds of Mom. He heard her set a glass on the counter and fill it with ice. He heard the sound of the Vodka as she poured it into the glass. He heard her take a drink. The ice moved.

He felt her stare. She lit a cigarette. He heard the sound of the lighter. He heard her flick it and smelled smoke. **He didn't like that smell. She blew smoke at him. The boy felt the smoke** as he stared at the floor. He wanted to go back to sleep. He wanted to dream. He wanted to sit next to the lady in white, watch cartoons in the sky and eat Lucky Charms but his Mom stood over him. He would not make it back to the meadow. Not right now.

**"Can I go to my room Mom?"**

**"Can you go to your room? I don't know. Can you? You're as retarded as your piece of shit dad. I wish I'd never had you. I wish you were never born."**

**"I'm sorry Mom."**

**"You're sorry? Did you say you were sorry?"**

**"Yes, Mom."**

Mom laughed.

**"Yeah, you're sorry. Pathetic is more like it. Just like your dad. Get out. Get out of my sight. Get to school."**

Mom yanked the cereal bowl from his hands and threw it into the sink. It shattered. The boy ran to his room. Mom yelled. She yelled loud. Really loud.

**"You remind me of your dad. I hate you. Hear me you little shit? I hate you!"**

The boy sat on the edge of his bed and cried. He wiped the tears from his eyes. He had to stop. He had to go to the bus stop and the other kids laughed at him when he cried. He picked up dirty wrinkled clothes off the floor and put them on. He found two socks under his bed. They didn't match and one smelled. **He put them on. He put his head down and his hands in his pocket. He didn't have any lunch money. His pockets were empty.**

As he walked down his driveway, he looked at the plants in his yard. They were dead. Dad said it cost too much to water them. The plants were brown, dry and drooping. He knew how the plants in his yard felt. They felt like him. They felt sad. He walked down the hill passed the other houses. **The plants in the other yards weren't dead. They were green and had lots of water. He** wished he knew how those plants felt.

The boy reached the bus stop. He wiped tears from his eyes because he did not want the other kids to know he had been crying. If they did laugh at him, he would punch them. He felt

mad. The bus arrived. The boy climbed the big bus steps and moved toward the back. He sat down, disappeared into the big green seat, stared out the window and thought of the lady in white. He missed her. He missed her a lot.

At school, during lunch the boy played by himself with a soccer ball. He kicked the soccer ball as far as he could from one end of the field to the other. He chased it down only to kick it and chase it again. Finally, he kicked the ball so hard it flew over the school fence and bounced across the road. He did not care about the ball. He needed to run. He saw a seagull on the field. He chased it but had no chance to catch the white bird. It flew far over his head into the blue sky. He put his hands on his knees, caught his breath and watched the bird fly away. He wished he could fly. He would fly away too. He ran from one side of the field to the other and back. He ran as hard as he could run. He ran. He ran. He ran, until he dropped to the ground and his lungs begged for air.

After school, the boy climbed the big bus steps, disappeared into the big green seat, stared out the window and dreamed of the lady in white. When he got home, Mom's car was gone. Mom left, he thought. He looked in her room. Her clothes were gone. Yep, Mom left again. He missed his Mom when she left. The boy wished Mom would come home. He loved her. He went to his room, lay on his bed, stared at the ceiling and listened for the sound of Mom coming through the door.

**She didn't come home, but a short time later Dad did. The boy heard the sounds of Dad's footsteps on the red bricks. The boy didn't move. He lay in bed and listened. He heard his dad open the front door and walk down the hallway past his bedroom. He heard him say bad words when he realized Mom had left. He heard him open the cabinet. He heard the clang of the ice in the glass. Dad drank the Vodka too. The boy didn't make a sound. If he did, Dad might barge into his room and yell at him or worse. Dad might shatter him like Mom shattered the plate. The boy lay on his bed and listened to the sounds of Dad. He heard him cough and smelled cigarette smoke. Dad would sit at the kitchen table, smoke, drink vodka and wait for Mom to come home.**

The little boy had run hard and fast at school. For the first time all day, he felt relieved because he felt tired. Thank God, he finally felt tired. The boy drifted to sleep and the sounds of dad drifted away. He stood in a dark forest. Hundreds of crows with beady eyes and yellow teeth hovered over him. The birds squawked, clacked their teeth and stared. The boy looked up into the night sky and waited for the lady in white to appear.