

VOICES OF THE RAVEN



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He might have come in through a window left open or slipped in when the door was ajar. He might have snuck down the chimney. One can't be sure, because the whole world was dark. All we know is that Raven was able to get into the dark cabin. He opened the box within a box within a box and took the treasured item out and flew off before the old man guarding the box could stop him.

Raven flew fast and flew far, laughing the whole way. He did loops in the wind and soared higher and higher. Then he released the precious cargo high into the sky. The light illuminated the cold world below, chasing away the darkness. That is how Raven brought light to the world.

The sun coming through the open kitchen window barely warmed Michael and he knew this was not going to go well. Michael sat at the kitchen table with a half-eaten sandwich in front of him, dreading what was about to happen. Michael's mom walked into the kitchen with a smile on her face. She stopped suddenly when she saw it was missing. Her smile fell and storm clouds seemed to move across her eyes.

She looked up at Michael and snapped "You lost it, how could you be so careless?"

Michael's eyes welled up with tears. He loved his mom and didn't want her to be hurt or yell at him. "I, I, I didn't lose it" he started.

"Well young man, my necklace didn't just disappear by itself. You know how much I loved that. It's the only thing I have left from your father." Her voice was cracked and tears started dripping down her cheeks. His father had given her the necklace before his final deployment. She had been polishing it on the kitchen table and had stepped into

another room for a moment. “What did you do with it?” she said with a wavering voice.

“But I didn’t do anything.” Michael choked out between his tears. He pointed to the open window. “A bird came through the window and took it.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. That is even worse!” his mom’s voice rose in anger

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” he tried to choke out between his tears. He rose from his chair and went to hug his mom. She pushed him away, turned, and he heard her crying grow fainter as she went into her bedroom and closed the door.

“I didn’t do anything.” he whispered after her. He stumbled back to his bedroom and crawled onto his bed. He saw a blurred world outside his window through the tears in his eyes. “It was the bird.” he whispered to himself.

#

Michael was exploring the woods with his friend John Henry the next day. He liked their new house better than the

one on the army base. They had woods to play in which were much better than the playgrounds on the base. On his way out the door, his mom had told him to “Stay out of her hair, stay safe, and I love you”. So he was outside and out of her hair. He looked around for dangerous stuff to stay safe from, but the trees in the forest looked normal. The boys were seeing who could find the most mushrooms and flip them over. Michael liked the red-spotted ones the most, so he was picking as many as he could and piling them up on a bed of moss. He was concentrating on getting the pile as high as he could without tipping it over.

John Henry had slowly crept up behind him, trying not to make any noise. “Bark!” he shouted.

Michael jumped and knocked over the pile of mushrooms. “Why’d you do that?” Michael complained, then started laughing.

“I am a fox!” John Henry stated proudly. “I am sneaky and smart!”

“Why are you a fox?” Michael asked.

“My grandfather told me that the fox was my spirit animal. I was real young, but I still remember. That was back in the village before we came to Fairbanks.”

“Do you miss the village?” Michael asked.

“Not too much,” John answered. “There is more to do here and a lot more stores.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here John Henry. You are my best friend!” Michael smiled at him. He looked at the pile of mushrooms but realized he had lost interest. He wanted to run a bit. “Let’s play tag!”

“Sure,” John Henry replied, “but first, what is your spirit animal? Did your grandfather tell you?”

“No, I don’t think I have a grandfather,” Michael replied. “I remember my dad a bit, but I just have my mom.”

“Yeah, that can happen” John Henry replied. “But everyone has a spirit animal. Sometimes they come to you in a dream.”

“Huh” grunted Michael. “I guess I don’t have one yet. I’d like to be a lion or a tiger though!”

“No, no, no.” John Henry replied. “You don’t choose your spirit animal. Your spirit animal chooses you.”

Michael pondered the idea. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. It sounded like a big responsibility to have a spirit animal. That would be cool, he guessed, but it might take a while to learn. He hoped it would be a lion or tiger though.

He punched John on the shoulder and shouted “You’re it!”. Then he ran off into the woods.

#

That night, Michael thought about spirit animals as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

He dreamt. An old man was speaking softly to him, but he couldn’t make out the words. The man looked like an Iñupiaq. Like John Henry’s father, only much older. It was night, and the two of them were in front of a huge fire, deep in the forest. The fire lit up the clearing they were in,

reflecting off the snow on the ground and casting shadows onto the trees. The old man was sitting on a fallen log, and Michael was sitting at his side on a large rock. The fire blazed up higher than Michael's head, throwing sparks up into the sky making new stars. "I don't understand you," Michael told the old man.

The man was silent for some time watching the fire. He switched to English. "When you are in the forest, you must listen." He said very softly, though Michael could hear him clearly. As if the man was talking directly into his head. "Listen for Raven." The man continued, "Raven speaks many languages, but you have to pay attention to understand. Listen carefully." The man seemed to concentrate for a moment then pointed to the ground beside Michael.

Michael looked down and jumped to his feet in surprise. A large raven was standing not a foot in front of him, staring straight into his eyes. "Gulk, gulk, gulk." the raven chanted to Michael as its throat pulsed with the sound.

The raven side hopped once toward Michael, let out a single mighty “Caw!” and flew off into the forest.

“Listen.” Said the old man, “listen for the seventeen voices of Raven.”

Michael came awake suddenly and sat up in bed. It was still dark out, and his clock said it was 7 am. The winter night lasts a very long time in Fairbanks.

“That was the bird. That was the bird that stole mom’s necklace.” He whispered.

#

After the sun had finally risen from its winter slumber it was close to noon. It sat low in the sky and cast long shadows around Michael’s house. The sun provided no warmth this time of year, but his mom was cheerful and had made him a breakfast of pancakes, then sent him out to play. Michael bundled up in his coat, boots, and mittens and went over to John Henry’s house. He was excited to tell John about his dream.

After John Henry had bundled up and they were outside playing in the snow, Michael told him briefly about his dream. “Do you think that was a vision? Did I get a spirit animal?”

“Could be.” John Henry answered. “What the old man said was powerful. And the raven is a powerful animal. Did he give you a quest or any advice? Or did he just point at the raven?”

Michael looked into the dark trees of the forest and thought back to the dream. “He said... he said listen for the 17 voices of the Raven.”

John Henry yipped in delight and clapped his hands. “Wow! That is a powerful dream!! That is your spirit animal! Your spirit animal is the Raven”

Just then they heard “Caw! Caw! Caaaaww!”. A raven swooped down toward them. It flew so close they could hear the wind on its wings. It powered past them and flew into the woods. John Henry pointed to where the bird had

disappeared. “The Raven is powerful but he is a trickster,” he said with authority.

“What does that mean?” Michael asked as he picked up a rock. He aimed at a tree and threw it, but he missed.

“A trickster is someone that does things that hurt people—he likes to laugh at other people. But he also does things to help people. They are really smart, but not like our school teacher is smart.”

Michael wasn't entirely clear on the spirit animal thing. Would he have to play with them? Would ravens follow him to school and learn math? Would he need to learn how to fly? He flapped his arms a few times but didn't seem to move from the ground. He guessed he would have to practice a lot. He would love to swoop through the air. That sounded cool.

#

Not quite a year earlier, a man and woman in dress uniforms had come to their house on the base and asked for Michael's mother. Michael went to get her from the

kitchen. When she saw the man at the door she started crying.

The man and the woman had come in and helped his mom over to the couch. She told him to go to his room for a minute, so he did. The man and woman sat with his mom for a while, talking in hushed tones. Michael could hear his mom's sobs and earnest words from the man coming from the living room. His mom called him back after some minutes had passed. In a broken voice she told Michael "Honey, your dad won't be coming home." She pulled him into a hug and held him tight as she took gasping breaths. The man told Michael that his dad had died with honor and helped his country

Michael wasn't sure what had happened, just that his dad was never coming home. He was confused and didn't understand why his dad didn't want to come home anymore. Michael didn't care about honor or the country and felt abandoned and numb. His mom hugged him and cried into his hair as she held him. "Oh my God, oh my God."

After that day, the house turned somber. The military support group brought food over and helped with their house for a few weeks until the funeral. Mrs. Henry, John's mom, had helped out by taking him to school and back.

The day of the funeral came around. His mom had worn a dark dress and the necklace from his father. The necklace was finely braided gold, and she had put her wedding ring onto it in remembrance. His mom had dressed Michael in an uncomfortable suit and he had to sit outside while a minister read a boring service and everyone cried. His feet were getting cold and he complained to his mom, but she told him to hush and to be respectful. He fidgeted a bit.

At the end of the service, some men with guns lined up near the grave and aimed up into the air. Crack! Crack! Crack! They fired off three volleys in quick succession. Michael heard a ruckus from a tree at the far end of the cemetery.

A flock of birds rose as one from the tree. The flock flew high over his dad's grave and started circling. There were more birds than Michael could count, he had never seen so many. As the people below watched, the birds circled high over the grave in silence. "I'll be damned!" one of the men said, "I've never seen so many ravens, it is like they are mourning his death." After a few minutes, the birds broke their silence and started cawing loudly. The ravens split the formation and went in the four directions of the compass.

#

It was nearing Christmas, just about nine months since his dad had not come home. The first time it had snowed this season, his mom had smiled for the first time he could remember since the funeral. Every time it snowed, she seemed to smile more. The house seemed to be getting used to his dad not being around. The mood in the house lightened with each snow, even with the darkness of winter.

This morning, Fairbanks was draped in ice fog. Chain link fences had so much frost that you couldn't see through them anymore. On the frozen-over street, car exhaust drifted lazily over the roads, adding even more thickness to the fog.

Michael and John Henry were out exploring. Michael thought that the trees, with their fine layer of frost, made them look much prettier than in the summer. He blew at one of the chain link fences as they passed it, and the frost gave way to his breath, making a hole he could look through. Michael was all bundled up and had a hard time moving his arms through all the layers, but that was not going to stop him from going out and playing with his best friend.

They walked across the field behind their houses and up to an abandoned set of railroad tracks.

“I bet they used to carry gold on trains through here!” John Henry stated. “Let's see if they dropped any.”

This sounded like a brilliant idea to Michael, so he and John sifted through the snow between the tracks looking for treasure.

“What does gold look like?” Michael asked.

“It’s really shiny. And yellow I think.” John Henry replied.

“I don’t see anything shiny, and most of these rocks are black,” Michael answered.

“Keep looking” John Henry replied. “My dad says you have to work hard sometimes to get rich.”

Michael liked the sound of rich, but he wished his dad was around to tell him things like that. He kept sorting through the rocks in the train bed.

“Caw! Caw!” he heard from behind him. Michael turned and saw a raven standing like a statue on one of the tracks. My spirit animal! He thought. “Do you think he is here to help us find gold?” he asked John Henry.

“Gulk, Gulk, Gulk.” said the raven. Then it stretches out its wings and started hopping along the track, balanced perfectly as if on a tightrope. Michael noticed some feathers missing on its left wing.

“Caw!” John Henry yelled back at the bird. The raven cocked its head a bit and then looked up at the sky.

Michael looked up to see what the bird was looking at. He saw another raven flying high overhead.

The raven from the tracks took off. Woosh, woosh, woosh, they could hear his wings beating through the stillness and silence from the snow. The raven launched up into the sky to meet the other raven.

Michael watched as the two ravens hooked claws and pointed their beaks straight down toward the ground. Claws intertwined, they circled down toward the ground, spinning round and round each other and going faster and faster. Just before they got to the ground, they released each other. With a high-pitched “Awwwwk!” they flew away over the forest until the boys could not see them anymore.

“They were dancing.” John Henry said with authority.

When John Henry said that, it reminded Michael of a picture in his living room of his mom and dad dancing at

their wedding. He hadn't been born yet, but the thought made him sad. They would never dance together again.

#

Michael and his mom were finishing up decorating for Christmas. They had started with the manger display. Michael always got to arrange the miniature animals around the baby Jesus. This year he had put a goat on the roof of the stable. He knew that goats climbed on things, and he thought that the baby Jesus could use a good lookout, to keep danger away.

After the manger was set up, they sat on the couch and his mom read him the Christmas story. Michael was always impressed with the angels appearing. He also liked that his dad would be with Jesus now. He also wondered if Jesus still had the gold, frankincense, and myrrh with him, and what he would use that for in heaven.

After the Christmas story, they went on to add the final touches to the Christmas tree. To be honest, mom did most of the work and then Michael added a few decorations

here and there. The tree looked huge to Michael. It almost reached the ceiling and seemed to fill up the entire room.

Michael hung a miniature pair of mittens on one side of the tree and then dug through the ornament box to find his favorite. This would be their first Christmas without dad, so he wanted the special ornament his dad had given him to be in front of the tree so he would always see it. It was a miniature metal Stryker vehicle. He had loved it then, and he found it even more precious now. Something from his dad, just for him.

He asked his mom to lift him so he could put it high on the tree. With tears forming in her eyes, she lifted him so he could put the Stryker front and center.

#

Michael and John Henry had wandered past the railroad tracks and into the forest. John Henry was leading them on a quest to find a tree that would be their magic Christmas tree. The ground fog had lifted. The sun sparkled off the snow and tried its best to bring warmth to the air.

They walked one way and then the other through the forest looking for the perfect tree. Most of the trees around Fairbanks looked thin, sick, and twisted. The cold winters and northern soil were not kind to the trees. They walked for what seemed like hours through the forest, sure that the perfect tree was just a little farther.

“Do you think we are going too far?” Michael asked. “Will we be able to find our way back?”

“I don’t know, “ John Henry answered, “but we can always follow our tracks back.”

That made sense to Michael, so they kept exploring. When they found the tree, it would be special, only the two of them would know about it. Michael had brought a single red Christmas bulb with him to make it pretty. John had taken an extra gold garland from his house and was wearing it like a bandoleer. He had to wrap it around himself five times so it wouldn’t drag in the snow.

Light snow started to fall, so they stopped to catch a few snowflakes with their mouth. They laughed and

laughed. The snow started falling harder, so they kept moving.

Michael noticed that he could only see a few trees ahead now through the falling snow. “We better get back,” he said. “We don’t want to be caught out here when the sun goes down.”

“Yeah.” John Henry agreed. “Let’s head back, we can find the tree tomorrow or some other day.”

They started following their tracks in the snow back. It was fun to try to step in the same footsteps, only backward. As they progressed, the snow continued to fall and their tracks from earlier in the day grew fainter and fainter.

“I don’t see our tracks anymore,” Michael said with worry. “Do you know where we are?”

“I don’t know.” said John Henry. “All these trees look the same. I can’t see anything through all this snow coming down” he added worriedly.

“Let’s try this way.” Michael pointed off to the right and they walked in that direction for a few minutes.

“I still can’t see anything through the snow,” John Henry said. “Let’s stop and see if we can hear cars or anything.”

That sounded good to Michael, so they stopped. The forest was deathly quiet. Fresh snow on the ground seems to absorb all noise. All the boys could hear was their breathing. Michael wondered if his mom would be able to find them. He hoped he wouldn’t starve to death out here. He was getting hungry.

They listened some more. Michael heard a soft rhythmic whooshing approaching them. Out of the mist of falling snow, a raven flew toward them. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, the raven’s wings beat against the air. It landed in front of the boys and looked up at them sideways with one eye. “Gulk?” it seemed to ask them something. “Gulk?” it asked again. Then it side-hopped away from them. Michael

noticed the missing feathers on its left wing. This was the same raven from the railroad tracks!

The raven gave a loud “Krawwo-awk!” and then took off and flew a short way away from them. It looked back at them and gave another “Krawwo-awk

“I think it wants us to follow it,” said Michael.

“Or it could be tricking us” John Henry answered. “It’s your spirit animal though. What do you think?”

“I think it is trying to help,” Michael said. “Let’s follow it.”

They walked after the raven. Each time they got close to it, it would take another short flight ahead of them, land on the ground, and wait for them to catch up. The raven led them deeper into the forest.

“I’m getting cold” John Henry complained.

“Let’s keep going.” Michael encouraged.

The raven had taken off another short flight and they heard a “Gulk, gulk, gulk” through the falling snow. They headed toward the sound. They entered a clearing around a

small tree. The raven was perched at the top of the tree.

“Gurglegurglegurgle!” it shouted to them.

As they got closer to the tree, they noticed it was small, but fuller and healthier than most of the other trees they had seen. “This must be the tree we were looking for!” John Henry cried in delight. “Let’s decorate it and then try to get back home.”

The raven watched from the top of the tree as John Henry wrapped the garland around it and then Michael added his red bulb as a finishing touch. They stepped back to admire their work.

“Caw!” Michael cried out the raven. The raven tilted its head and looked sideways at Michael. It made a low “hahaha,” sound that almost sounded like a laugh. It took off silently and flew around the tree a few times then settled on the branch by the red bulb Michael had hung. It looked straight at them and announced “Gruk!”

With a flash of black feathers, it lifted out of the tree and settled on another branch partway around the tree.

“Gruk.” It said as it stared at them.

“I wonder what he is trying to tell us?” John Henry said.

The raven took off and circled the tree, landing back on the same branch again. It looked over to them and announced “Gruk!” Then it bobbed its head back and forth at the boys.

Michael approached the tree where the raven had landed. The raven took off and landed a short distance away and watched Michael. Michael looked up at the branch where the raven had been. There, on the tree, was his mother’s necklace. He reached out and picked it up to be sure. He couldn’t believe it. This was this missing necklace!

“Thank you, Raven,” Michael said softly to the bird.

“Aroooo, aroooo.” The bird answered and puffed up its head feathers. It seemed very pleased with itself.

With a loud “Krawwo-awk!” The bird took flight and led them out of the clearing. Each time the boys caught up, the raven would fly forward and wait for them. They followed it and shortly came back to the familiar railroad tracks by their houses.

“We made it out!” John Henry cried out in relief.

The raven looked back at them briefly then took flight and flew upward into the swirling snow. Michael’s gaze followed the raven until it had disappeared into the snowy sky. “Thank you raven.” He said very softly.

#

“I was worried about you Michael,” his mom said when he came in the door. “The snow was building up. I was about to go looking for you.”

“I was a little worried,” Michael replied, “but then we found a tree, and then a raven brought us home. And look what I found on the tree!” He showed her the necklace.

“Oh my!” she gasped, “I thought it was lost!” she reached out to take the necklace and rubbed it with her

fingers as if to make sure it was real. “And you found this... in a tree?”

“Yes!” Michael sang out happily. “The raven took it but then he showed me where he put it! I think he wanted to give it back to you.”

His mom gave him a dubious look. “I am so happy you found it, Michael!” she hugged him. “I thought it was lost forever.” She looked down at him lovingly. “But I am even happier that you got back before the snow got too deep. Your dad gave me this necklace and I do love it, but he also gave me something even more precious. He gave me you! I love you.”

“I love you too mom,” Michael said as he hugged her back. He was happy to be home and glad that his mom was happy. He wanted to hold onto her forever.

His mom reached down and ruffled his hair. “You know, when I mess up your hair, you look kind of like a raven yourself.” She teased.