

**Clever**

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"Why do you suppose they called us *Corvids*?" Tips of Trees asked the relaxing gathering. Almost everyone was smoking the usual, Florida imitation Cuban cigars. "Oh, I don't think they knew enough to ask us," Flew High responded. "Yeah, or really cared to," Blackfeather added. "It's not a new story, by any means" said Dreams He's White. "I mean, how many times have we tried to cross over to the settlers, to get a dialog going so that they might know what we could do for them, and, of course, how they might make our own lives better. And, huh, where are we with that effort? They still think the only thing we do great is road kill. Period. That's it!"

Slate, listening, tossed his head and moved in closer to the group. "Hey. Just look how long it took the note takers to figure out Chargogagogmanchogagogchabunagungamog. The Wampanoags had some fun with that one. Finally, the natives pitied the unknowing settlers and told them. The lake was named to keep the peace; *You fish on your side, I'll fish on mine, and no one will fish in the middle*. That was too much of a mouthful for the Yankees. They called it Webster Lake.

"You know, this old Copper Beech is not a bad meeting place", Blackshine said. "Really great location, certainly high enough, comfortably roomy, and has a damn nice smell. Spicy." "It's really strange that we've never met here before. At least I don't remember ever using it," Little Cawcaw observed. "I would have remembered the color . . . and certainly the size."

"Was it, maybe, six years back when we had the Caw Conference near Bristol, Rhode Island, in that ancient Elm right on the Narragansett water?" Black Rain remembered. "Then, the big surprise when the whole tree went down and we all panicked, surprised . . . and it turned out to fall from a lot of "Dutch" elm fungus that didn't show."

"Who can part with one of those hand rolled, imitation Cubans?" Dark Eye asked from over on the breezy side. Tail Points moved over to him with his offering, without a moments hesitation. Dark Eye lit-up, blew a big cloud through his nostrils, and nodded, "Thanks!"

Dreams He's White said, "Figure it out. The white folks saw themselves as so much bigger, and lots stronger. I think they felt that there wasn't any reason to look us up. I don't think they felt that they needed any truck with us in order to make it." "Well, there was also the language barrier that wasn't easy. I mean, they didn't have any computers to help, back then," Pink Leg offered.

"Who's got the guard duty this afternoon?" Sombar asked, eyebrows raised. Jett, who had handed out the assignment, said, "No problem. Inkman, Pitch and Darkback are covering—and they'll need some grub soon." "No jackdaws for sentries," someone called out, underlined. "Let's not forget last year." Many at the meeting nodded, recalling last year's sentries going crazy after finding a patch of big Concord grapes that were by then mostly fermented, and then falling asleep in the tree, until the farmer's 12 gauge birdshot blasted through the branches. It was so unnecessary to see bodies falling and hitting the ground.

While the political discussion bounced around, Tar, the youngest member of the meeting group and someone with a naturally introspective, scientific bent found himself musing about the origin of things. This afternoon he found himself wondering about when Caws developed the ability to perch? What must it have been like to be able to reach all the way to the tops of trees, and not be able to perch? How much falling down had to happen before a sense of security became "natural"? How many broken bones? He knew that Caws had been in the world for thousands of years, and that every generation exhibited some aspect of developed change. That kind of transfiguration fascinated him, even though he would admit that trying to understand enormous time spans left his brain weary, making him give up before the picture became clear.

Abruptly, without intending to, in his mind he began to focus on the idea of cleverness. Everybody said that Caws are "clever," but what did that really mean? What is "clever" anyway? Were Caws smart? Were they quick to solve problems? Could it be said they are "successful"? Well, are we "successful"? And how am I to know if we are? What would be a realistic measure?

These excursions always tired him. Beyond that, when he came up for air he always felt that he had fallen behind in the logic of the discussion and, worse, he looked rather dumb for not contributing something that added a bit of insight to the group archive. *Survival*, that's what everyone said when the group met, and again before they broke up. Survival was the watchword

In a brief lull, when most of the group were being thoughtful, Black Water piped up. "Mischief. Where did *we* pick up that tag? Mischief—or worse—is what I call what settler's corporations do, like world wide price fixing or buying politicians or commodity manipulation that threatens survival, the scandal behavior that comes out in the newspapers. Selfishness is another way to spell fraud." That brought a round of nodding assent.

Half hidden by dark, coarse-toothed Beech leaves, Caw Ha-Ha Remembered how the Sky Boss had appeared to be on the side of the human settlers, blaming Caws for everything, including bad weather. "Who of us is willing to say that Sky Boss is plain wrong?" Caw Ha-Ha

cried, to murmurs of 'Yeah', 'Amen, Brother.' Many of those gathered were picking at Beech nuts, and seed husks were raining down through the twigs and branches. With all the wrongs, and misplaced blame, and the ongoing scapegoating, the Caws often compared themselves to the sad fate and history of outsider Jews.

"Mischief, they say. . . that's another thing we're supposed to be good at, as if it's a profession" Almost Black wailed. "Do they really have any sense of what it takes to just keep going? Well, I say we have to take a stand. And I've felt that way ever since I read Orwells story, the *Animal Farm*, where the farmer is finally made to realize the truth. But it's important to say that I don't go along with his 'four legs good, two legs bad' sweep. That's just too divisive. No real good can come out of thinking like that."

Black Water spoke, "We have to find a way to establish a better reputation. We have to get out from under the idea that we form our habits early, and then our habits form us. It's time that folks knew who we really are. I mean, aren't three thousand *years* time enough."

Softly, Ebony Shine, an old timer who had turned quite grey, spoke up from the very outside edge of the Beech top. "How many of us have met unlooked for problems only because their feathers are black? In my lifetime, I have found that to be one of the hardest put downs to cope with. Because of its ingrained subtlety, folks don't want to admit it, or then actually deal with it. The problem of being a black-feathered sort is going to take all of us, all of us with the most smarts to find a way out. A lot of schooling over a long time.

"Does anyone know about our Road-Kill for Shut-Ins Program . . . the ongoing highway cleanup work, or the singing camps for kids?" someone asked. "Yeah, and all the public speaking classes" Caw Ha-Ha added.

"Are we now talking about public relations, about campaigns?" Black Water asked. "Public Relations? Isn't Public Relations just a nicer way of saying the 'Engineering of Consent' Caw Caw asked with a sense of sadness. "Isn't that what the big bad guys do, with lots of moolah, just to cover their tracks, to make the horse a cow? Is that where we're headed?"

Caw Ha-Ha broke in. "It seems to me we have to begin to set a different example, an example of Caws on a really wide scale, so that it will be noticed . . . and admired. I mean, when folks think of Caws, they have to think positive, maybe even bring smiles to faces—like with Rudolph the deer. Look at his reputation!"

"Now, there's a reasoning that's positive. And you can't knock positive!" Blackest Black fairly yelled.

Startlingly, two intensely loud reports exploded below. As three Caws fell out of the nearest beech every other black wing rose in a furious sound of rhythmic beating. The air above the old Beech was filled with dark birds clawing for altitude.

Two more shotgun blasts, followed by whooping and wild laughing chilled up from below. The cloud of panicked wings turned North and from nearby trees other parts of the flock frantically joined the flight.

The greenish afternoon sky, filled with loud screaming Caws, looked like a painted background for the big birds, their frenzied energy aiming for the northern horizon as if locked on a magnetic course.

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