

Crow



Trish Graham

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Crow saw them first which was to be expected because Crow saw everything; from the first breath to the last Crow was there.

He'd seen quite a lot of changes from one millennia to the next, but he hadn't changed much himself because there'd never been any need.

There would always be bones to pick, the big cats and wolves were wasteful with their meat, and they liked it fresh.

Crow watched. Sooner or later every living thing must die, even the big cats, the wolves and the hominids.

The hominids weren't as fast as the cats, and had no natural attributes to help them with their kills, but they were clever and ingenious and from Crows point of view the hominids were very welcome, they killed a lot and left plenty of rotting corpses for Crow and his tribe.

Crow began to follow the hominids, and when a hominid died Crow was there to clear the remains.

Crow noticed that the hominids changed very quickly, unlike Crow whose form was perfectly fitted for its purpose they were constantly

changing; always learning how to make better killing tools of stones and sticks.

They hunted deer, rhinoceros, and mammoths. They were in their way as wasteful as the big cats, so that there was always food for Crow.

The rhino had been grazing beside the lake for too long, Crow thought. Even though there was plenty of food about it was breeding time, the young cubs and pups were not yet independent enough to hunt for themselves.

The young hominids, Crow had observed, were a long time reaching maturity, it would be at least ten hunting seasons before they could hunt for themselves and in the meantime the hominids must keep them safe from other predators, and he must admit from scavengers like himself who didn't necessarily need their meat dead.

Young animals were vulnerable but most of them could at least move independently of their mother fairly soon after birth, whereas the hominid mother must carry her infant with her for at least one hunting season, and guard the others for several more seasons.

Following the hominids as he did Crow came to know them very well, and eventually he formed a kind of attachment with a particular hominid. He chose him mainly because he was the most

successful hunter in his group; he was fleet of foot, his eye was keener, his ear sharper, and his tread lighter.

He could squat, still and silent as a stone, watch his prey until he was sure that his path to the animal was certain, and in one concentrated action, flawless as Crow himself in flight, he would bring it down.

Crow recognised this hominids superiority even within his own group and there were clear advantages to be gained from following him.

There were of course ways in which the hominids were vulnerable, they had a very distinct odour, and as Crow knew from his observations, the big cats and the wolves could smell prey long before they saw it.

He had watched them, seen the sudden stillness, the way their snouts quivered as they sniffed the air, paused, sniffed again to determine the location of the prey.

The hominids were not as fast as the big cats, and if they were unaware of their foe they had very little chance of escaping.

For preference, Crow thought, the big cat was the better option because generally they killed their prey almost instantaneously; the wolves on the other hand would consume their live prey as

it ran, making no attempt to bring it down until it dropped of exhaustion, shock and blood loss.

In truth the mode of an animal's demise was of no particular significance to Crow, and only became so once he had become attached to the hominid.

Within their own group the hominids were very different from each other and they communicated with each other by making noises and hand signals.

Crow came to realise after a long time following the hominids that their faces were very expressive, so that by watching their expression he could predict what one might be planning to do next.

His own hominid, whom he called Crow's One rarely varied his expression; if he was stalking prey his face was empty unlike many less skilled hunters who must pause, and in that pause a frown, a licking of the lips betrays uncertainty and the air around them quivers so that the grazing or dormant animal, wise to its own instinct bolts and in that moment of flight the smell of fear and chase alerts the other hunters.

Then came a long, hard winter and the hominids disappeared altogether.

Even for Crow that winter was hard and on the day that Young Crow first saw them he had

almost forgotten the hominids Old Crow had spoken about.

The crows were building their nests low down in the oak tree as they did when the springs were cold, although on that morning it was warmer than it had been since the last of the hominids disappeared.

The small group were first seen by Young Crow, the sentry who perched high in the oak tree surveying the woodland landscape where he could observe the other creatures in their fight for food and survival.

He had been watching the rhino grazing beside the river and knew that it was only a matter of time until one of the big cats discovered her and the recently birthed calf.

The scent of blood would quickly draw every hungry, breeding predator in the vicinity, and the rhino had little chance of escape.

Young Crow was congratulating himself on being a crow, with nothing to do but watch the kill and note where it fell.

When the cats had finished with the carcass the crows would be waiting to pick clean the remains which was why Young Crow perched in the high oak tree.

He watched and waited for the moment when the cat lost interest and it was safe for the crows to approach the remains.

It was a still morning; there was not even the whisper of a breeze to hide the noise the Rhino and her foal made.

Young Crow saw the silent ripple in the tall grasses moving steadily closer to the river's edge and knew his wait was almost over.

Sometimes, if there was an abundance of prey, Crow might decide to stretch his wings and alert the prey to its imminent danger but it had been a long hungry winter and it might not be over yet. He remained still and silent on his perch.

The rippling grass continued its silent advance until at last, certain that she would not fail, the lioness emerged and in one swift leap fell upon the grazing rhino.

The rhino roared and bucked but the lioness was hungry and so it was a short contest. She ripped and tore the dead animal with her paws, her snout buried in a bloody mess of entrails.

There would be plenty left for the crows when she had finished.

Young Crow was ready to take flight and carry news of the kill to the rookery when he saw the hominids on the far bank of the river.

The river was low for the time of year, the overhanging trees not yet in leaf provided only limited cover, but the lioness was fully occupied with the carcass of the rhino and so Young Crow thought it unlikely that the hominids were at risk.

He had known immediately that they were hominids because he had heard Old Crow tell of his own hominid, Crow's One and what a successful hunter he had been, about the life of ease the crows had before the hominids left.

Young Crow knew of no other animal that walked upright on two legs and so he was certain that they were the same as Crow's One, he kept his wings furled and watched as the leading hominid stepped into the river and leapt silently from stone to stone, his dark hide almost invisible between the bare trees.

The others followed; equally silent they walked stealthily out of the river and followed the path the lioness had taken when she was stalking the rhino, circling as she might do herself, weighing up the best possible approach, until they had her surrounded on all sides.

The leading hominid emerged from the scrub in a rush, plunging the weapon into the neck of the lioness that had been unchallenged all her life and had never needed to guard her kill.

Young Crow was astounded, he had been inclined to dismiss Old Crow's claims as fanciful and now he saw that if anything he had not done full justice to the true cunning of these hominids. Knowing that it would be some time before they had finished with the carcasses he took to the air and sped to the rookery where he told of the astonishing sight he had seen, the hominids that had killed the lioness at her prey.

There was a good number of them, he said, but there would still be pickings for the crows.

Old Crow shifted on his arthritic legs and spread his ancient wings, commanding Young Crow to lead him to the hominids.

They arrived at the scene of the kill, expecting that the hominids would still be feasting on the rhino, of which a substantial part remained when they surprised the lioness.

Old Crow cast his watery eye over the assembled hominids, wondering if Crow's One would be among them, immediately he saw that they were hominids but they were very different to the old hominids.

Young Crow pointed out the one who had carried out the initial assault upon the lioness, inquiring whether this was Crow's One, but Old Crow shook his head and said that these were not like the old ones.

They stood taller, their limbs were longer, their backs were straighter and they were almost hairless.

Most worrying of all was the creature they brought with them, a wolf but unlike any that had ever been seen. It was kept tethered to a length of hide, but it was not entirely captive, being unleashed to pursue small prey. The most astonishing thing they witnessed was the wolf bringing its kill back, untouched to the hominid. It was the taming of the wolf which sealed the reputation of the new hominids; any creature clever enough to persuade a wolf to surrender its meat was to be feared.

In the time that Young Crow had gone to share his news the hominids had made their mark upon the site that they would continue to occupy for the next ten thousand years.

