



# The Raven

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*The capacity of an animal to cause damage is proportional to its intelligence*  
—Konrad Lorenz

WHEN GEORGE KOKOWSHKA FIRST MOVED to the Southwest nearly twenty years ago, he relished visiting Santa Fe: its restaurants, its atmosphere, and especially its art. These days, the Wyeth Hurd Gallery is still worthwhile; and there's the Pushkin, which showcases modern and contemporary Russian art, as well as a few intriguing examples of Russian Impressionism—birch trees in winter and the like. But for the most part, Santa Fe's galleries have gone downhill, catering now to a group of moneyed, sun-burned Americans who parade up and down Canyon Road in expensive white sneakers or those hideous mountaineering sandals that ruin even the most beautiful woman's legs.

George is thinking precisely this as he stands before a gallery called Eco Cool, a gallery that was not here the last time he came to visit his daughter. Occupying a small but coveted space on Canyon Road, the gallery seems to be exclusively devoted to brightly-painted wooden chickens wearing cowboy boots in its turquoise-bordered windows. Hundreds of them. There are blonde chickens and Japanese chickens and chickens with afros and chickens in nurses' uniforms, even a chicken done up to resemble Betty Boop in western gear.

"Do you see something you like?" a female voice asks.

George looks up at an attractive blonde in purple velveteen pants and what looks like cross-training shoes. "No," he says. "Nothing at all." And then meeting the woman's mascara'd gaze and remembering his manners, he nods and adds, "But thank you."

Although he hasn't seen his daughter Maggie in nearly four months—a development leave having sent him out of the country in this year before his retirement—George takes his time as he makes his way down Canyon Road.

He and his ex-wife Alex may have fought virulently over their only daughter during the long years of their embattled marriage, but these days their mutual concern for Maggie is a point of connection, perhaps the only remaining one. When George telephoned Alex to say that he was driving up to see Maggie, she encouraged him to try to convince Maggie to take the assistant's job at her Israeli friend Yossi's gallery in Chicago. "Thirty thousand a year, George," she said, "and Maggie could rent a refurbished studio just down the street at a great price. It would be a chance to start over, and we both know she would benefit from the stability."

Alex's words brought back Maggie's last breakdown some fourteen months ago—two weeks in a psych ward, twice-daily pharmaceutical cocktails. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

Maggie is already waiting for George at El Farol when he arrives, the garish memory of the wooden chickens, but also his ex-wife's concerns, still whirling through his mind.

He'd hoped that tonight, their first meal together, Maggie would have left Hugo at home. He will have to deal with the creature's obstinance and demands throughout the next four days: the greeting rituals, the cajoling, the mischief, the need to be center stage.

Instead, when he catches sight of Maggie, her long dark hair twined into a messy chignon now streaked with the first hint of gray, a heavy necklace of turquoise beads making her long neck look even longer, Hugo is perched on her shoulder, his black feathers as sleek and well-kept as always. "Daddy!" she says before the hostess has a chance to stop him.

"Maggie." He strides towards her, as several of the outdoor diners' heads turn in their direction. Despite her ill-fitting peasant wear, Maggie is a beautiful woman, as her mother was and is even now that Alex has come into her middle sixties. His ex-wife's beauty had always been George's undoing, the reason he put up with her demands and her criticisms for too many years, even going into far too much debt on the San Antonio house with the garden that they sold for a loss after the divorce, a circumstance that still eats at George more than thirteen years later.

Maggie has none of her mother's will, and sometimes George believes a little bit of Alex, just a sprinkling, the way a dash of cloves or cinnamon enlivens a bread recipe or a stew, would have done Maggie a world of good. At the very least, it would have made her tougher, gelled that self-preservation instinct he fears she lacks.

"Hello, magpie," George says, all too aware of the painful irony of this nickname, inherited on a very early trip to New Mexico when she was a child, then leans forward to kiss her, only to have his efforts thwarted by Hugo, who greets him with harsh quorks and flares his feather pants and begins to flap his wings violently, all the while retaining his tight perch on Maggie's shoulder.

"I'm amazed you can bring an animal into a restaurant," George says, "even in Santa Fe."

"We're sitting outside," Maggie says. "You're allowed to bring animals if you sit outside."

"Ah," George says, noticing a drowsy dachshund sprawled beneath a nearby table.

"Besides," Maggie adds, "they know Hugo here. He's a bit of a celebrity."

"I can only imagine," George says, relieved that he is not usually here to witness his daughter's jaunts around town with a raven, the largest bird in the crow family. Would she become a bird lady in her old age? Was she a bird lady already? How long did ravens live anyway? Hugo has already been around for eleven years, and from the glossy looks of his wings and his sharp, bright eye, it seems as if he has as many years ahead.

They look over the menu, and Hugo, still glued to Maggie's shoulder, tugs at her loose strands of hair playfully, almost as a lover would, reminding George of what he knows about ravens. Creatures of fidelity, they bond for life. As far as George can tell, Hugo views Maggie as his mate. And Maggie? George wonders, for the bird is far more than a pet and less a child than a companion.

A waiter passes with a platter of something smoky and red, and George is disturbingly reminded of those early days with Hugo when Maggie was still living at home in San Antonio. On the chance that she would return him to the wild, Maggie brought home road kill, then chopped it up with a special knife and cutting board—George forbade using their own tools. It was a neighbor who spotted Maggie scouring the four lane highway at dusk and said something to George, who had no idea of how to begin to explain. Thankfully, Maggie now feeds the raven canned dog food and chicken and fish.

It's almost as if Hugo understands that George is thinking about him, for he hops down from Maggie's shoulders and approaches George, stopping to cock his head and look him in the eye. "Do you think the old boy wants to be friends after all these years?" George asks suspiciously.

"Maybe," Maggie says, then chortles to Hugo.

When George laughs, his guard momentarily relaxing, Hugo draws back his beak, a sign of impending attack, and George swats at him with the menu. "Oh no, you don't."

"Daddy!"

Instantly, Hugo is protesting violently, his squawks turning loud and plaintive, as if George was the one to attack him.

A few of the other diners turn to stare, and more than a few glare at George.

"That bird of yours is going to bite me before the meal is through," George says, after the waitress brings over a basket of bread and a bowl of olive oil.

"Don't be ridiculous," Maggie says. "He just has to get used to you again. He's very protective of me. You should be glad. He's as good, better, than any guard dog—and smarter, too."

No one would disbelieve that Hugo, who has learned to open cabinets and doors and even sticky gates with his nearly three-inch beak, is not intelligent. Yet how much good is a bird who buries bacon in a neighbor's yard, only to return later to recover it, a bird who steals shiny objects—buttons, coins, even a ring left on some kitchen counter—hoarding them in his cage? More precisely, how much protection can such a creature offer against an intruder who could climb through one of Maggie's shakily latched windows or jimmy the equally flimsy lock on her front door?

George is reminded of his best friend Mori's daughter, Hannah, a divorcee who lives in their neighborhood along with her two-year-old son and a one hundred and ten pound Great Pyrenees named Monty. When Hannah goes for a walk, her son tucked into his stroller, Monty walks at their side, alert, regal, and always on guard. A dog like Monty, this, George can understand, for he himself grew up with German shepherds, but not this absurdly demanding bird whose nest was toppled in a summer storm just over a decade ago.

Hugo begins ripping off a chunk of bread, and it takes everything in George's power to hold his peace. "Miss," he says to a passing waitress. "Could we—could I—have a separate basket of bread?"

“Of course,” she says, smiling indulgently.

When Maggie first brought the injured fledgling home to San Antonio, she had just broken up with Jacob, for the first time. The day before Maggie returned from working at a camp for underprivileged teens, Jacob actually drove across town and deposited her things in sloppily-packed boxes on George’s front porch. It was during the workday when George was at school. “The coward—if I’d seen him, I would have bent him in ways he didn’t know possible,” George told Alex over the telephone.

Alex, who had abandoned west Texas and their marriage for her native Chicago three years before Jacob came onto the scene, just said, “Poor Mags. Well, it’s good riddance in the end, but for a while it’s going to be rough. Are you sure you’ll be able to pick up the pieces?”

As it turned out, George didn’t have to, at least not this first time.

When George fetched Maggie from the airport, she held Hugo in her arms. The bird still had his pinfeathers then, and resembled a bizarre miniature gargoyle, with his hideous gray-black head and that large beak that somehow reminded George of a smiling elephant tusk.

“Who, I mean, what is this?” George asked, as she tucked the bird into a little box on her lap.

“This is Hugo,” she said. “Isn’t he incredible?”

“A crow?” he said.

“Hugo is a raven, Daddy. They’re the largest members of the corvid family.”

As if to confirm his future alpha male status in Maggie’s life, little Hugo squawked in agreement, nearly causing George to rear-end a Mercedes on the way out of the airport.

But in the bird’s defense, when she got home and saw her sweaters and books and shoes and the bits and pieces of dishware and other bric a brac that Jacob had so sloppily packed up, she didn’t cry. No, the fledgling gargoyle’s needs—his bi-hourly feedings, his daily and most rambunctious bath—pulled Maggie through, a point that was difficult for George to communicate to Alex when she telephoned.

“What looks good?” Maggie asks, slicing up a sardine for Hugo, who is now sitting on the white linen tablecloth and making a soft mewling sound that reminds George of a cat. Obviously, it reminds the dachshund at the next table, too, for the dog is now focused on the raven, ears cocked in bewildered attention.

“The potato saffron soup, I think, and the grilled octopus, but no,” he says, “the oysters. They’re not from the Gulf, are they?” he asks the waitress, who appears at their side.

“Canada,” she says.

“Ah, good.”

“I’ll have the same thing,” Maggie tells the waitress whose name is Giselle, and who, it turns out, is a massage therapist at the same studio where Maggie teaches yoga. “And a side dish of stuffed olives for Hugo.”

George manages to hold his tongue, for the olives are six dollars a plate.

“Of course,” Giselle says, stroking the bird’s head.

“He tolerates you,” George says.

“The little fellow’s a lady’s man,” Giselle now says.

“We come here often, Daddy,” Maggie says, winking at Giselle. “I told you.”

A sudden breeze sends a napkin to the floor, and George twists around and down to snag it.

“You’re really fit,” Giselle tells George. “Do you practice yoga, too?”

Maggie splutters with laughter, momentarily looking so much like the little girl she once was, the happy little girl, that George isn’t sure if he is relieved or concerned. She is a thirty-three-year-old woman after all with a messy knot of hair, a purple peasant blouse that keeps slipping off her shoulder, and a history of mental instability.

“You couldn’t get my dad to practice yoga if you paid him,” Maggie says now.

“No?”

Giselle, George thinks, is looking at him almost flirtatiously.

“My father plays tennis,” Maggie says. “At least he used to play tennis. He studied, literally studied the techniques of the professionals like John McEnroe.”

“McEnroe, huh?” Giselle says.

“I never studied McEnroe,” George says, defensively. “Arthur Ashe, Björn Borg, those were my teachers. I’m self-taught, you see,” and here he knows he is preening. “And for your information, I still play tennis,” George says, both to Maggie and to Giselle, “every Saturday afternoon with Mori.”

“His best friend,” Maggie tells Giselle. “A history professor.”

“Ah,” Giselle says, winking at George, as she turns away.

Her ass, George realizes, is shapely and full, not a skinny woman’s ass. He looks away, meets Hugo’s beady gaze.

“Watch out for her,” Maggie says, and beside her, Hugo, more relaxed now that he has had his bread and sardines and asserted his proprietary role over Maggie, squawks his agreement.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“She’s checking you out. She’s a man eater, Daddy,” Maggie says, sopping up the olive oil with her bread, “and a very expensive one at that.”

“Magpie, my dear,” he says, “I have no intention of getting involved with a woman of your age.”

“She’s five years older than me,” Maggie grins, so cunningly, that for the moment George wonders if he’s misjudged her.

Is she shrewder than he or Alex believes? And if so, what is she doing teaching yoga three evenings a week and working as a nanny for some absurdly rich people who moved here from Los Angeles? The man makes violent action films, George recalls, and the woman is some sort of Thai botanist from Seattle who eats a great deal of seaweed.

Nevertheless, after dinner, George leaves Giselle an ample tip.

“Come back for lunch one day this week,” she says, as they’re leaving, “my treat.”

“Man eater, Daddy,” Maggie whispers, all the while smiling at Giselle and waving goodbye.

Maggie takes George’s hand, and they make their way back down Canyon Road. She’s already offered, twice, to let him sleep on her pull-out sofa, but they both know that would never work out. By the time George was forty, he’d reached a point in his life where a good double bed with a firm mattress and cotton linens in a clean, tastefully furnished room, mattered as much to him as sex. It’s been half a decade since he’s had sex, much to his dismay, but he always sleeps in good hotels. And then there’s the fact of his insomnia, which always worsens when he comes to this high altitude, thin air town.

They near Garcia Street and pause before the Selby Fleetwood Gallery, which George admits he likes, though he cannot imagine any of these pieces—a collage-like painting of a red dress, a semi-abstract composition filled with musical notes and words from philosophy, a faux primitive landscape—in his home.

“I’ve thought of modeling for one of the artists they represent,” Maggie says, cupping her hands over the glass and standing on tiptoe to peer inside.

“Model?” George says. “And will you?”

“Maybe,” Maggie says casually. “He’s working on a series of reclining nudes.”

“Heaven help us,” George says, thinking of Modigliani’s nudes and not Titian’s. “How do you know this artist?”

“He takes my vinyasa class.”

George trembles, fearing that the beautiful daughter for whom he once cherished such high hopes, will add nude modeling to her resume, but before he can pursue this train of thought to its dangerous conclusion, Hugo, perched on Maggie’s shoulder, lifts into flight. Within seconds, Hugo is high, high above their heads, a Japanese ink drawing of a bird against a palette of purple-rose sky. “Aren’t you concerned?” George says, looking up at the brilliant creature.

“No,” Maggie says, following his gaze. “If we were in the mountains, I’d be worried about eagles or owls, but he’s safe here.” She cocks her head in his direction, troublingly birdlike. “Don’t tell me you’re worried about him?”

“No, no, of course not,” George says. “How could I worry about a bird that’s always ready to stab me?”

Still, watching Hugo’s sky dance, as he spirals up, then barrels down, George understands, or believes he understands, for the space of those elastic moments, a space not unlike the distance between the planes of color in one of Rothko’s canvases, part of the raven’s allure. Who would not want to fly like that?

“So,” George asks, as they stand there together, both of their eyes fixed on Hugo, who is flying overhead, a circus performer, a daredevil, tuned into their attention. “Have you given any thought to what your mother said?”

“About what?” Maggie says. “Mom says a lot of things.”

“Chicago,” George says, “the position at the gallery.”

Maggie meets his eye, her eyes the pale blue of Modigliani’s gypsy woman or the shadows beneath Monet’s water lilies.

“The salary, the whole opportunity, would be excellent.”

“Yossi’s an Israeli,” Maggie says, “and he’s been divorced twice.”

“So?”

Maggie laughs. “So he’s going to talk my ear off about politics, and he has a history of disastrous love affairs.”

“She would never recommend a bad situation to you,” George says, though he himself isn’t wild about the gregarious, chain-smoking Yossi.

“How does she know what’s good and bad for me?” Maggie asks.

George doesn't answer. After all, Alex did leave when Maggie was in her first year of college. Suddenly, the woman who had always been in the next room, or at least just across town, was several thousand miles away. By the time Maggie followed Jacob to Santa Fe some four years later, Alex was in Rome working on her book.

"You would at last be able to do something with your degree," he says finally.

"Oh Daddy," Maggie says, and sighs. "I am using my degree, just not in the conventional way. Art is a daily part of my life."

George groans. How can he possibly buy this when he knows how she lives, has seen what she wears, and that ridiculous, demanding bird? She should have released the raven into the wild years ago. Instead, she spent months getting a permit. Of course, were he to bring up Hugo now, she would remind George of that pastel drawing by Picasso, the one of the Paris barmaid and her pet raven that hangs in the MOMA. The pastel had been one of George's favorite works by Picasso, whose semi-abstractions he'd found overrated, until Hugo came into their lives.

"Besides," Maggie says now, "I thought you understood how much I love it here, how hard it would be to leave."

But you don't even have health insurance, George feels like telling her, or a lease on a decent apartment, much less a house. In six years you'll be forty, and I'll be seventy-four. The men in my family are lucky to live past seventy. Who's going to look out for you then?

And no one, not even Maggie, could deny that she does not need looking out for. Not a week goes by, at the most ten days, when she calls wanting reassurance, advice, and all too often in tears over something as routine as a traffic ticket, an electrical storm that toppled a scrubby mesquite tree, or the yoga studio director who occasionally flips out and berates Maggie after her class.

George meets Maggie's eye, and the fullness he finds there is just too much, as if he can see the years of disappointment, the sadness he cannot quite grasp or understand. Didn't we—didn't I—give you everything I had? The best education, endless opportunities to train as a dancer, a pianist. Surely it's not Jacob, gone from your life for three years, who's still pulling the shades down, hiding the light behind your eyes? And yet, something about her face—the trace of violet shadow beneath her eyes, the fine frown lines rimming her mouth—tells George that it is.

Just then, Hugo comes whooshing down from the sky and alights on Maggie's shoulder. "Hi, hi, hi," he says. "Pretty bird, pretty Hugo."

Both George and Maggie laugh, and George knows they will not speak of Maggie's future again tonight. No, they will walk on together in semi-silence until they reach the St. Francis Hotel, where he will kiss her goodnight, then sit down in the big mauve reading chair beside the window, and read the latest biography of Kandinsky, written by a distant colleague. He will read deep into the night and drink a glass of the Hennessy he bought at the liquor store two blocks from the gallery with the wooden chickens.

In the end they do not go directly to the hotel, but stop at Maggie's place on a rather seedy dead end street off San Francisco. The reason for this stop is to fetch the tattered volume of her friend Stanley's poetry that George will certainly not read before the Kandinsky.

"It's his first collection," Maggie says, as George takes the slim book in his hands, disturbed by the cover photo which depicts a naked woman running past a large wooden settee, her figure a soft blur, as light from some unknown source falls on her body, illuminating her lean buttocks, her legs, her slender feet. The title of the collection is *Italy*, and so George assumes that the photo was taken there, especially given the stonework in the background.

"Is Stanley a boyfriend?" he cannot help but ask, unsure if he's eager to hear "yes" or fearful.

"Just a friend, Daddy," Maggie says. "I've been celibate for the last two years. You know that."

"I've tried not to," George says, trying not to look too hard at the low, cracked ceiling, the lack of decent furniture—only a futon in the bedroom and a makeshift table complete with four brightly-painted but un-matching chairs. The wood floors alone, scrubbed clean and bare, give the place a quality of grace, for the windows are all in need of repair, and the front gate seems perpetually jammed.

"Most fathers would be glad to hear their daughters aren't sleeping around," Maggie says.

"Celibacy is a far cry from sleeping around, Mags. This celibacy," he says at last, "is it still tied up with Jacob?"

Maggie frowns, and the furrow between her eyebrows deepens. She's a worrier, like me, George thinks, despite the way she tries to hide it.

"Well?" he asks, picturing her, a diminished figure sitting in her childhood room, a few weeks after Jacob left.

“I don’t know,” she says.

George leaves it at that for now, though he knows that her mother is right. Maggie should not be living in the town where Jacob’s presence still lingers. So much of this place—from the Georgia O’Keeffe Gallery to the hiking trails off Bishop’s Lodge Road—is filled with his memory. How is it possible for Maggie to get over that man here?

Realizing that the locks on several windows are not only loose but broken, George decides he will bribe Maggie to take the job in Chicago, if necessary. A new car, a week in Bali to attend that phenomenally expensive yoga retreat (though who will care for Hugo while she’s gone?). After all, Alex may be selfish, but she is organized, efficient, a go-getter, as Mori likes to say. Surely, Alex could help to get Maggie back on track.

Sitting in his hotel room two hours later, these are the thoughts swimming through George’s mind as he stirs the brandy around in his glass and breathes in its scent, fighting the desire to telephone Alex, an insomniac like himself, though it’s past midnight in Chicago, and she has that job now as an events coordinator for the Art Institute, the career that she never had during her years in Texas.

Maggie, Margaret, Magpie, Magwitch, Mags—their bright star who exerted such a strong will from the time she was born, the nurses and then the pediatrician all said that she would be a handful, a child of real determination.

For a long time, that had been true.

For a long time, Maggie had taken both ballet lessons and ice skating, despite the fact that ice skating was a rarity in Texas, but Alex had been a skater, and she wanted her daughter to follow in this path.

And when Maggie tired of ice skating—for the practice required a forty minute drive each way—she stayed with ballet, adding painting and piano to her repertoire.

“A cultured young woman,” George’s own mother said, approvingly, the last time she saw Maggie, more than eighteen years ago now, in June, the summer before the old woman died. Maggie had played Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake” for her Babushka on the piano, and George’s mother, dignified in pearls and a violet dress, her silky white hair coiled in a braid around her head, a relic from her own time as a dancer, had sat in the armchair beside the terrace windows, her eyes closed, a smile on her fine lips, as she listened to the music she had loved since her girlhood in Moscow.

And Maggie was—is—cultured. She holds degrees in English and Art History from Baylor. She can talk for hours about Jacques Louis David and especially Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, for it's the female Impressionists whom she most admires. She is familiar with the works of Tchaikovsky and Schubert, and is able to improvise a piece of music with the same ease with which she once pirouetted around the tiled living room in her childhood house in San Antonio.

When was it that she first tilted towards the edge, that dark blur of blue-black, purple-black color that seems to hold back or simply hide the chaos of so much modern art? George asks, pouring himself another Hennessy.

Long before Jacob, George has to admit.

There was that year when she was sixteen and wouldn't eat, winnowing down to a frightening one hundred and ten pounds because, she told her parents, her calling was to be an angel. "I'm waiting for my wings to shine through," she said of her protruding shoulder blades.

The hospital psychiatrists wanted to diagnose anorexia nervosa, but the starving disease of high-achieving teenage girls was quickly replaced by an even more terrifying diagnosis. Maggie, the psychiatrists said, had all the signs of manic depression: grandiose visions, paranoia, a feeling of the divine. Had she shown such symptoms before? And what about long bouts of silence? Did she suffer from that, too? Crying spells? Insomnia?

There followed a year of experimenting with medications that plunged Maggie into depression before finally balancing her out. Balancing her, yes, that was the word the psychiatrists used, but she was flatter, too, and even though she regained the weight, and more, she became less than herself, diminished.

Some nights George lies in bed and wills the God in which he can no longer truly believe to grant his daughter a husband or at least a career in which she could take refuge and build a productive, respectable, secure life. She doesn't need a traditional family, George reasons or tries to reason with this God, but she does need a retirement plan, a good dentist, a reliable car.

The constants in Maggie's life now, as far as George can tell, are Hugo and yoga and the four-year-old twins of the L.A. couple: an amber-eyed boy and girl whom she ferries around Santa Fe in an absurdly expensive double jogging stroller, attracting the oohs and aahs of numerous people, George has no doubt, who must wonder if the children are her own, for the mother of the twins is

from Thailand and the father, half black and half Russian.

It is after two a.m. before George finally climbs into the comfortable double bed with its sturdy mattress. The moon is full, and the gauzy curtains in his room do not shut out the light. He covers his head with a pillow and eventually slips into a dream in which he is back in those caves in Lascaux, France, with their prehistoric paintings, caves he and Alex visited, ironically, on their honeymoon. There on the wall is an ancient drawing of a bird-headed man. The bird is believed to be a raven, and the drawing itself, a manifestation of the soul. But what sort of manifestation? Even then, ravens were associated more with the afterlife, with the dead, than the living. They may be spiritual guides for many peoples, the Native Americans particularly, but they are dangerous, too, tricksters. Rather like that God who looked on as the Germans bombed George's native city. His parents once spoke to him of the people eating the bodies of the dead.

The following afternoon, George is late meeting Maggie, who is caring for the twins for the day, because he has run into Giselle at Sage Bakery on a side street off Guadalupe. He has come for the good, chewy peasant bread that reminds him of the bread his mother baked during the wintertime, and for a bowl of hot soup—tomato is today's special.

He has just sat down with his meal when a female voice calls out to him.

"A good lunch for a tennis player," Giselle says, not even waiting to be invited before she joins him, carrying a bowl of the very same soup, and alongside it, a foot-long baguette and a chunk of butter.

"You have a healthy appetite," George says, as she spreads the bread thickly with butter, then plunges it into the soup.

"I have a fast metabolism, and I do a lot of physical work during the day," she says.

"Ah," says George, wondering if she will elaborate.

She does not.

"On your way to see Maggie?"

I am meeting my daughter and the twins shortly," George says, curious as to just how much this Giselle knows about Maggie's life, and whether or not her knowledge might prove useful. He is aware, too, of how attractive she is, though not beautiful, for there is a meatiness to her build that he does not entirely like,

being of slight frame himself, and not overly tall, unlike the Amazonian but slim Alex who towered over him physically during their marriage as she towered over him in so many other more insidious ways.

Giselle's fingernails, he notices now, have been lacquered a deep red. They were not red last night; of this he is sure. Did she do her nails herself or go to a salon? His curiosity startles him. Normally, he would be appalled by such garishly-painted fingernails.

"You have known my daughter for a long time?" he asks, simultaneously recalling the lovely shape of her full ass.

"I've known her, casually, for at least five years," Giselle says, dunking more bread in her soup, for she seems to eat it this way, soaking it up, rather than taking it in spoonfuls. "We've only been friends, not close friends, mind you, but friends, for the last two, since," she looks down at her soup, "you know, Jacob left—."

"Then you knew Jacob?" he asks, just a little worried that he is opening up a Pandora's Box.

"You could say that. We were lovers for a little while," Giselle says, holding George's eye. She has outlined her own eyes with kohl, giving her a slightly Egyptian or exotic look despite her hazel eyes and brown hair, which she wears loose today and shoulder-length. "It amounted to little more than a few nights of pleasure, and it didn't happen while he and Maggie were together."

"Ah," George says, and even though Jacob and Maggie broke up too many times over the years to keep count, he's not sure he believes her.

"You liked him then?" George asks, self-conscious.

"Liked? Jacob was alluring," Giselle says. "There's a tradition of gurus in yoga, and Jacob had that kind of power, or he could have had it, if he had gotten his life together. He was a presence, and as a teacher of yoga, as a yogi, well, he was good, inspiring—"

"But?" George asks.

Giselle doesn't answer.

"Do you think Maggie's over him?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know my daughter well enough?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'd say only that I don't know what makes a person get over someone. Look, I might as well be straight with you," she says, mopping

up the remaining soup with more bread, “I was married before I came to Santa Fe. I thought geographic distance was what I needed to forget my ex.”

“But you didn’t?” George is smiling now, though there’s a sick feeling in his stomach, too, as he realizes that he is sexually considering this woman.

“I still find myself dreaming about him sometimes. That royal wedding earlier this month?”

“Yes?”

“I dreamt it was my ex and I walking down the aisle to the salutes of Beef-eaters and the shouts of a deluded country.”

At this comment on the royal family’s power, George cannot help but smile, for he has never warmed to the English despite his mastery of their literature. “So why did you leave?” George asks.

“I wanted children,” Giselle says. “He didn’t.”

“You have children then?”

She runs her fingers through her hair. “That’s the irony or the paradox or whatever you call it. It seems I’m infertile.”

George feels himself blush all the way to the tips of his ears.

“So,” Giselle says, “now you know far more about me than I know about you.”

“Perhaps,” George says, understanding he could say something about the tennis and in the process correct her, but he no longer feels like pursuing this. Relationships are tiring, despite the gorgeous release of sex.

They talk for a while longer, until George realizes that it is after one. “I’m afraid I must go,” he says, embarrassed by his apologetic tone, for this woman joined him. “By chance, do you have a phone?”

“Sorry,” Giselle says. “I left it at the studio, but I’ll give you my number, in case you want to call me.”

It’s almost one forty five by the time George arrives in the park. He’s afraid that Maggie may have left, but no, she is there, sitting on a bench and knitting something that looks like a scarf as her charges—he sees them over by the fountain—rush the pigeons. Curiously, George feels as if his daughter is missing something. Realizing that it’s Hugo’s absence he’s noticed, he chides himself for his mistake. I’ll be goddamned if I miss that crazy bird.

“Daddy,” Maggie says, as he approaches. “I almost gave up on you.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Something came up.”

She nods, tucks the knitting into her bag, and calls to the children.

“They’ve grown,” George says, as the twins amble over. They are dressed in overalls today, green for Clara, and a blue stripe for Ben. On their feet, they sport the same hideous mountaineering sandals that so many people wear now. All George can think is how expensive those sandals must be and of how lovely Maggie used to look in her patent leather Mary Janes.

“Where’s Hugo?” Clara asks.

“What?” George asks, looking from the child to his daughter.

“I thought you’d be bringing him.” The little girl pouts.

“Clara adores Hugo,” Maggie says. “I suppose she got it into her head that you’d be looking after him today.”

“Heaven help me,” George says.

“Heaven?” Clara says.

George shakes his head. He’s forgotten how literal-minded children can be.

The children climb into the stroller, and Maggie buckles them in, gentle with them, at ease. She brushes the hair from Ben’s eyes, touches Clara’s cheek with her forefinger, and George feels a terrible stab of longing and loss.

Perhaps a minute later, they make their way down the street to the ice cream parlor where, Maggie tells him, the twins have vanilla or Krazy Colors, and she always orders a double scoop of hazelnut and honey cream.

Later that evening, back at Maggie’s casita, which George would rather not visit again, for in the dwindling light her next-door-neighbor’s collection of junked cars, crumbling furniture, and recycling appalls and saddens him, he witnesses his daughter’s greeting ritual with Hugo, one she performs, he knows, at each and every reunion, no matter how little time has passed since she and the raven have been apart.

The ritual amounts to this: as soon as they step inside, Hugo hops out of his four-by-four-foot cage that dominates the living area, and onto a perch nearby. He makes a chortling noise and bows his head sideways and fluffs out his feathers as Maggie steps forward to stroke his fuzzy head. Watching, George must admit there is something touching in this greeting, which is far more affectionate than any of his reunions with Alex ever were, even during the happiest of times.

“Hi, hi,” Hugo says. “Happy Hugo, pretty bird.”

“Does he understand what he’s saying?” George asks, wondering, for the first time, if the raven actually feels emotions.

“I don’t know for sure,” Maggie says, bowing to touch foreheads with Hugo, who chortles and gurgles, “but I’d say he does.”

The greeting ceremony—for it is that, George realizes, with a formality and an order that is both scripted and oddly beautiful in the way of some choreographed yet spontaneous dance—goes on for a few more minutes.

Perhaps it is the turning of Hugo’s head towards Maggie’s face that is the trigger, or his daughter’s caressing tone, or the way she stretches out her hand to let Hugo ropewalk up her arm. Whatever it is it jars something loose in George’s own memory: the night he and Maggie met Jacob at El Farol, and though he has forgotten it until now, it was Jacob who first introduced him to the restaurant and to the saffron and potato soup specialty that he has eaten on every visit since.

That night Maggie wore an uncharacteristically beautiful dress, a flaring sweep of crinkly red silk that brought to mind Spanish dances and heat. The dress was red, but when she moved, when the skirt billowed around her, George couldn’t help but think of Hugo’s wings outstretched in flight. So perhaps it was the gracefulness of her that night, the Isadora Duncan meet Pavlova allure that brings back the moment. She wore her hair swept up in a high ponytail that swung behind her as she walked, and there was a little golden bracelet of charms on one of her ankles—her left one, George remembers now. Jacob had brought the golden bracelet back from India, for he regularly visited an ashram there, and actually had a guru of his own.

This golden bracelet quickly became one of Hugo’s favorite playthings, and he singled it out from the other bangles and earrings and shiny things in Maggie’s jewelry drawer. When was it that George last saw her wearing the bracelet? It may be that the last time was that night she wore the glowing red dress. It may have been later. The bracelet itself is not what matters.

What matters, that Maggie told him that Hugo had carried it up into the sky one afternoon not so long after Jacob left Santa Fe. “After an overnight trip,” she’d said. “He refused to hop onto my shoulder, angry, I assume, because I’d left him behind.”

She’d left the window open, and soon, the bracelet was in Hugo’s beak, and his blue-black form had vanished into the sky. When Hugo came back from an elaborate flight display that was meant to dazzle Maggie, or so she believed—“a display meant to prove his worthiness, re-establish his place in my heart”—the gold bracelet of charms was not with him.

How beautiful Maggie looked in that twirling whirl of red on that night at El Farol. How happy she'd been, how buoyant, as she and George walked to the restaurant, talking and laughing. That buoyancy, which was Maggie's gift, her charm, lasted after they arrived at El Farol and ordered, and waned only when seven o'clock became seven thirty and then seven forty five, and Jacob did not arrive.

"You're late," Maggie said to Jacob when he finally showed up close to eight. She slurred her words a little by then, for she was already dizzy from the second glass of red wine she'd drunk, for despite George's insistence, she wanted to wait for Jacob before she ordered food.

Jacob apologized, bending down to kiss her cheek, his red hair encircling Maggie's face, the rosy muscles in his arms like the ropes of his hair.

"What kept you?" George had asked, realizing he'd been gripping the plastic-covered menu with both hands for god knows how long.

"Cynthia Reynolds," he said. "She threw her back out riding."

"Again?" Maggie said, her tone of the first syllable all George needed to know.

And George understood. His Maggie, the daughter he taught to ride a bike, to listen to a concerto, to make good Russian tea in a samovar and serve it with milk and two sugar cubes, was involved with the worst kind of man. An unfaithful one and a liar. All that night, George had sat there wishing he could kill him, wishing in fact that he could chop him up like the road kill Maggie once fed to Hugo.

George relives all of this as Maggie stands in the tiny kitchen with Hugo chattering on her shoulder. Occasionally, the raven bursts into some un-harmonic song in which George recognizes hints of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "Wild Thing," and Maggie joins in.

If the bird had ferried anything away into those purple-black mountains, George tells himself now, why couldn't it have been the memory of Jacob Benedetti that he carried? If there were any justice in the universe, Hugo would have ferried the fierce intelligence and the coiled energy that had been his daughter's lover far far into those sacred mountains. Yes, Maggie would have been out of

her mind with worry while the raven was gone. She might even have torn at her hair like the heroine of some Greek tragedy.

But what relief—what unsurpassed joy—would she have felt upon the raven's spiraling, rippling return. George closes his eyes, trying to picture it now, the brilliant blue-black bird riding an updraft across the purple mountains, the bracelet falling through the turquoise sky, lit by the annihilating sun.