

9:15 a.m., Nov. 5.

**Posset's Natural Foods and Vitamins, 724 Polonius Way
New Stratford, B.C., Canada.**

Giant baskets of bulk food items are snuggled up against the windows of the store, tucked under the thatched awnings.

From the corner of Polonius Way to the alley in the east, baskets propped up at convenient angles for human browsing show off assorted squash, dried beans, peas and lentils, potatoes and other, less popular tuber. Flanking Polonius Way are baskets full of walnuts, whole peanuts, Brazil nuts, pecans and hazelnuts. At the far end is a remainders shelf holding fruit and vegetables past their prime, all sharply discounted. The only nuts kept inside are the cashews and macadamias. Pilfering has never been a serious issue for Posset's.

A full-grown raven sits high up on the brick chimney of Aye There's The Rub, New Stratford's only massage parlor (Full Service May-Sept after 8 p.m.), across the street. He looks down upon the bushels of nuts and produce with a round, angry eye. The all-black bird hops around the four square foot perimeter of the chimney in awkward excitement and lets out a hollow *kaugh* before taking wing and following the seashore to the north. From the angle of the

street, the raven looks like a spy plane as he flies in front of the sun, massive and silent.

David Posset, proprietor, absent-mindedly watches the bird leave his neighborhood and continues to gently pile more russets into the potato bin. They are over-stocked for November – especially on vegetables. The winter population here is very small. A lot of them eat out by what he can tell. He has enough bleeding potatoes to feed an army of Irishmen.

The intersection at which Posset's and the massage place occurs is a busy one, the site of one of four traffic lights in the Resort Municipality of New Stratford. This time of the year though, cars are pretty scarce. A block to the north is the beginning of the pedestrian-only zone, so cars finding themselves this far down Polonius face a difficult U-turn in front of the Municipal Security Complex. Pretty easy ticket for the munies to write if they're in the mood, and it's easier for most folks to park at the Globe or in the harbormaster's free lot.

Within the hour, six ravens have converged upon the ersatz thatch roof of the massage parlor. The original raven, blacker and bigger than the others and with a noticeable

chip in his bill, is hopping in place on the chimney, watching the croakfest below disinterestedly. He can't stay still. He brought the info, just as another raven did yesterday (re. a "fresh" coyote carcass in the gravel pit), so he is technically responsible for safety. His nervous jig makes his talons scuff the hollow brick with a sound similar to sandpaper on pvc piping.

The other birds all turn and look at him at the same time, a conductor who has dropped his baton. He jumps down off the chimney and approaches the edge of the building for a better look. The other birds hop out of his way as though he is a prizefighter making his way to the ring. He springs up onto the edge.

Standing on the precipice of the five-storey building, our lead raven surveys the bulk food, paying particular attention, it would seem, to the nuts. He cocks his head to the side and then straightens it, an avian Coppola envisioning a shot. He cocks his head the other way and waggles his head back and forth comically, like he's trying to balance an egg on it. Satisfied with his recon, he hops a quick 180 so his back is to Posset's and he now faces the five other birds.

Immediately, he croaks two short, deep notes from deep inside his breast and points out the immature female raven at the back of the group with his imperfect beak. She looks down at her feet. He croaks again, the same note more urgently, and she looks up at him. Slowly, the young female, very smooth and not much bigger than an adult crow, makes her way to the edge. She grips the metal, near the corner and in a manner suggesting fear, and stares down at Posset's. Her skinny black legs look mismatched against her powerful talons, as though she hasn't yet grown into her feet.

The big male stares at this female, clearly hoping not to have to repeat his earlier admonishment. The female isn't moving. Our male croaks a heinous *kou-agh*, the loudest one yet, and she takes wing immediately, swooping off the building without so much as a wing beat. She glides gracefully down to the corner of Polonius in slow motion, her wing tips splayed like black fingers to arrest gravity's surety. Her tail is spread out like an old-fashioned ladies' fan. The other birds peer over the edge like delinquent children.

The angle and size of Posset's awning prove only a minor obstacle to our young bird. With perhaps a foot to

space between her left wingtip and the overhang and another eight inches on her right before the plate glass window, she rolls her body and grabs a walnut in each talon without alighting. Posset is behind the other window watching the cricket from the West Indies—*Dawson is out for a duck!*— so he is oblivious to the dark thief. She makes it back up to the massage parlor's roof and scatters the two nuts like jacks at the feet of the large male. He hops in place contentedly. A happy, gargling sound comes out of his closed beak.

Two nuts for five ravens will hardly do. The walnuts look like tiny brown brains sitting on the roof, brains made of cheap wood. Another croak from the leader and she is off for a second sortie.

The other birds start in immediately on the walnuts. One scruffy-looking male with kinked and missing throat feathers tries breaking the larger nut open by holding it still with his right talon and pecking at it. His tough black beak doesn't even dent it. Two females try ganging up on a nut; one holds it while the other pecks away at the obvious seam around the nut's equator. Again, nothing. The daredevil young female has returned, adding three more walnuts to the equation. The ruffian male tries holding a

nut in his beak and flinging it in the air, obviously hoping its fall to the roof will split it in two. It bounces with a muffled *thwock*, wholly intact.

The lead bird is back on the chimney, surveying the pathetic scene four feet below him. There are five new nuts on the roof that no raven has ever tasted. The humans must really like these ones to even bother with them. They have to be good nuts with a shell this hard. His fellow ravens look very foolish trying to crack them open. They look like they're playing a game that nobody gets. They're no better than magpies right now. It's embarrassing. He takes charge, grabbing a nut in his beak from the feet of the scruffy, smaller male.

Hopping to the edge of the building again, all the birds turn to watch. The big male tosses his walnut down to the street. They all peer over the edge and watch as it bounces like a ball, unbroken. Without a word, the immature female swoops down to the street and grabs the dropped nut. She drops it behind the leader, who is still staring at the pavement in awe.

A pickup truck is coming up Polonius Way with a dirtbike anchored inside the bed. There are no other cars; the truck stops at the light anyway. When it turns green,

the truck gets up to the Municipal Security Complex before having to turn around. Posset doesn't even get up to look. He knows the sound of an angry U-Turn: the squeal of the power steering, the slight squeak of the tires. The truck speeds off, back in the direction it came from. The ravens all watch its tail lights recede.

The lead bird grabs a nut in each talon and soars off the corner, down to the empty intersection. He places one nut on the stop line and the other six feet further out on the same line. The other birds start croaking down at him. A car is coming. He looks up at them over his shoulder and they all hush up. He hops into the gutter and up onto the sidewalk, across from the bulk food store.

The car coming is an old 4 X 4, a black Jeep from the fifties or sixties. It slows down slightly for the red light and then keeps going through. The large, knobby tires crack the nuts open perfectly, *crunch, crunch*. The portly driver looks out his window to see what he's run over, but decides these knobby tires can handle an acorn or a pop can. He speeds into the pedestrian-only zone and his jeep bounces comically over the giant speed bumps, like a fat lady jogging up stairs.

The raven on the sidewalk hops out into the intersection, now completely free of traffic in all three directions, and starts pecking into the walnut meat. He takes tiny pieces into his mouth, chucks his head back, savors the exotic flesh and the jealous stares of his fellow birds up on the roof. He looks like he could do this all day. He looks like maybe he will.

From Hudson: of Cascadia, a novel by Colin Whyte