

Crow Season

One for sorrow, two for mirth, she says.

Sorry?

It's an old rhyme. Three for a death and four for a birth. Any more than that, and it's roadkill.

It's the second thing she's said to me after *whereya headed* and a nod. Superstitious, but we all are. Me, I prayed to Ned up in heaven that I'd make it out, and I'm alright so far.

She drives past the carcasses of long-dead vehicles, the scrub and spinifex, kicking up a dust I see change from red to white in the mirror. Passenger side. I've never met this woman before, but she seems like she can take a joke.

You a witch or something?

Maybe. She grins and there are holes where teeth should be. *My mother used to say it, she explains. Back in the day. You see so many this time of year, it goes round in my head.*

There are worse things to circle your brain, I think, than crows.

The upturned cars that punctuate the track have all been stripped down to their bones; they're pretty, in the way of skeletons. There are no more hills. There are only these relics of old accidents to look at.

What possessed you to come this road, she asks, by way of conversation. *Quicker by the highway.*

I tug my sleeve down over the warm steel bracelet and tell her I've always wanted to see this country.

Not much to it, she says. *Like this for another ten hours.* Her hand waves at the termite mounds that stand up out of the grass like tombstones. My eyes shake with the road's corrugations. I wonder when I last had a decent sleep. She glances at me then, and her look takes me in. I shed the greens days ago but you can still see the shadow of prison bars against my skin.

So what do you do out here anyway, I ask her.

Oh, this and that. I ran away from a bad marriage. Bastard broke my arm twice. Would've killed me if I'd stayed. Been back there working on the mine but I'm over it. Headed for the coast for a bit. See what happens.

She looks about fifty, and I wonder about her, cruising around like this. I can see the hint of an old tattoo on her forearm, disappearing into the sleeve. Looks like a home job.

Me, I've been running for years, she says. You look like you just started.

I stare straight ahead, try to fix my eyes on the horizon. It disappears into a heathaze, you can't see where it goes.

The outside is like this. It has no edges.

You come far?

I shrug and drop the cuffed wrist down beside the seat.

Don't talk about it if you don't want to.

We drive in silence for a while. The road gets worse, whole sections of it dropping into banks of red sand. At one point there's even a tree in the middle.

No radio out here is all, she says. S'why I always pick you guys up. Get jack of talking to myself.

Four states, I say. Four states in a week.

Shit, you're caning it. Must be some trouble.

I nod and stare and pray quietly to the Kelly gang. It doesn't work, because I feel her foot lift. The vehicle slows to a stop. She gets out of the car and I grab my plastic bag, ready for the kick, but she's only going for a piss.

I get out and walk a way up the road to relieve myself. A tiny trickle, I'm dehydrated again. Yesterday I walked so far in the heat I nearly shat myself. I glance up at the horizon ahead.

There on the road is a fetid carcass, an old cow bursting its skin. A cluster of crows – a murder – going at the guts. I feel nauseous as I button my fly and return to the car. Sitting there strapped with jerry-cans and spare tyres, it looks ready for the end of the world.

When I open the door I do it with the wrong hand. As we drive past, the crows leap up into the air and swim around in the dust.

You gonna tell me what you were in for, she asks quietly. I tug at my sleeve, but it's too late. She's already seen. I rack my brain for an explanation. The satellite phone's sitting in its nest on the dash, the coppers waiting at the other end. I should roll myself out of the car and onto the roadside, but those dark birds are waiting. There's no way out.

Murder, I want to say. I want to scare her into driving me all the way. If I had a knife I could, but something tells me she'd fight back. Stuff it, I think. You gotta trust someone sometime.

Armed robbery, I say. *Three years for aggravated.*

She raises an eyebrow. *What with?*

Kebab skewer.

The woman laughs then. Her laugh is harsh and dry like the country and it fills the car. She bangs her wrist on the wheel and reaches for the dash. My hand creeps up towards the doorhandle, ready to roll. She fumbles under the satphone for something. I press the seatbelt open. She hands me a bobbypin.

Can you manage with that?

Maybe. I'm not much of a burglar.

Obviously. Hands up, this is a barbeque!

I almost smile then. I almost inhale. I remember that somewhere at the end of this road is the ocean, waiting there, cool and blue; and on the other side, who knows? Another country maybe. Another shot. I'm not gonna stuff it up this time, I think, as the lock slides open in my hand.

A little later, I toss the broken cuffs out the window. As they fly through the air, a couple of crows snap at them. Two for mirth.