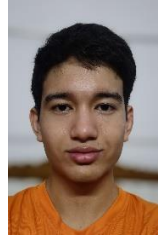




A DIFFERENT KIND OF MURDER

- Tashi Dorje

(WARNING: THE FOLLOWING CONTAINS CONTENT THAT MAY BE
SENSITIVE FOR CHILDREN TO READ. PARENTAL GUIDANCE IS ADVISED)



Off late, I have taken to observing the behaviour of birds around my house. It is quite an interesting hobby and one I highly recommend for anyone who has 10 to 15 minutes a day to spare for it. You can learn a lot about birds through the way they move, what they eat, where they live, etc. But of all the birds I have observed and heard about, none have come close to the crow.

Corvus splendens, more commonly known as the House Crow, is one of the most common birds in India, and in my opinion, one of the most intelligent. While crows are generally shown in a dark and negative light as compared to other birds due to their colours and throaty cawing, they are in fact some of the best examples of nature's will to survive. Their digestive systems can take on nearly any type of food or drink, no matter how old or dirty. They mostly scavenge but can hunt when they need to. And they form large, strongly bonded groups, known as a 'murder', hence the title for this chapter. The perfect adaptations needed for Indian city life.

I shall be telling you about three murders that caught my attention because of their behaviour and intellect, starting from the earliest tale to the latest.

And the first of the three stories...begins with a real murder. An interesting and unique feature of crows is their sense of loss... and their want for vengeance when one of their kind is attacked or killed, as we will soon find out.

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, 1982

To begin, we must return to Kerala in the 1980s, where we will once again enter my mother's house of cats. As in all places, crows love to occupy areas where they feel it will be easy to find food, and my mother's house garden was a paradise for them in this sense. Those birds feasted daily on the rotting fruit that would be thrown out from the house, on the rats and squirrels who were unfortunate enough to be caught by them, and even occasionally have a go at a kitten who strayed away from their mother.



One fine morning, a member from this spoilt gang of scavengers happened to chance upon such a kitten. She had been chasing a dragonfly around the edge of the garden, and in her play, had wandered into the gang's territory. The brute of a bird swooped down on the kitten repeatedly, trying to grab her, pecking her several times. Her distressed meowing, unfortunately for the crow, brought her mother running to the spot almost immediately, who was none other than Patchy, bane of all winged creatures, and warrior queen of the cats.

The foolish crow now switched his target to Patchy, and began a dive meant to peck her eye out. The seasoned huntress waited for him to reach her level, crouched low and jumped high in the air, smacking the bird's wing, and making him lose his balance. Crash-landing to the ground, the crow barely had any time to call out to his brethren, before Patchy grabbed him by the neck and crushed his windpipe. It was over in a second. And then, in a show of pure hatred and malice, she brought the rest of her kittens out from where they were hiding until then and made them play and scratch the dead crow's body. A merciless queen, and unforgiving.

One of the most interesting features about crows is their deep bond with one another; they immediately notice when one of their kind is missing, and will do all they can to search for and find them.

The murder living in the garden noticed the absence of one of their kind, and managed to track down his movement to the place where he had been killed, next to the back door of the kitchen. But the body was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, when the house cook was about to enter the kitchen through the back door, a shadow swooped down from the trees and pecked her hard on the head. In pain and surprise, she looked up to find six crows staring at her from a tree branch, their dark eyes twinkling with hatred.

They had assumed that only a human could have killed their brother, and like the mafia of old, they would make the culprit pay dearly for it.

For almost a whole week after, the poor cook was attacked repeatedly by the crows every time they saw her near the house. It got to the point where she started wearing a bike helmet when she got out of the house. Finally, my mother decided to put a stop to the attacks. She guessed correctly that one of the cats had killed a crow, and started looking around the area for any sign of its body. After about an hour, she found a spot behind some old utensils that had been kept out of the house, from where a horrific rotting odour was coming. She carefully moved the utensils one by one, until she saw it: the mostly decomposed body of a crow, riddled with scratches and bite marks. And playing with the body were Patchy's kittens. Their mother calmly came to where my mother was standing, and proudly watched her kittens disfigure the body more.

My mother went back to the house and came back with a cloth wrapped around her face, and a broom and dustpan. Using these, she covered her nose while scooping up the bird's body. Then, she dumped it deep within the garden, where Patchy would not retrieve it from. Unseen by her, several pairs of beady eyes quietly watched her as she entered and left.

From that day, the crows stopped attacking the cook, and the kittens as well. A truce was reached, and the gang returned to their days of gluttonous scavenging.

If you find this story to be dark and gory, please do not rush to say that all crows are cruel and attack the helpless. Many are in fact considerate of other beings, even humans, as you will learn in the following tale, which takes place decades after the first, in the bustling city of Mumbai. It shows us the compassionate and understanding side of these birds, and will make you rethink what you know about crows.

Mumbai, Maharashtra, 2012

Back in the early 2000s, my family lived in a tiny apartment in Mumbai, which had a small jungle-like patch of trees and shrubs located next to it behind a stone wall. In this jungle lived many species of birds, including woodpeckers, barn owls, and you guessed it, crows. But there is a world of difference between crows living in rural areas, and those living in urban areas. The urban crows are a much gentler and careful variety as compared to their brutish, uncivilised relatives. Apart from being somewhat lazier, these crows have also adapted to humans far better than most other birds, having learnt to live alongside them in relative harmony. They feed almost solely on garbage and roadkill, and seldom try to hunt for food. And why would they need to in a city as big and grand as Mumbai?

I believe it was a Saturday morning when my family and I first made the acquaintance of the murder living near our house. We had just finished our breakfast, and there was still half of a boiled egg remaining on my plate; I had eaten too much jam and bread to finish it. So as not to waste the food, my father took the egg and placed it on the bars of our window, thinking some bird or lizard would eat it. Almost immediately, in front of our eyes, a large prime specimen of the *Corvus splendens* species swooped down from the branches of an old teak tree nearby, and softly landed on the bar where the egg had been placed. He considered us for a moment, cocking his head to one side, before quickly bending, grabbing the piece of egg in his beak, and flapping away to the safety of the trees to eat his meal in peace. But not before two other birds watched him fly away with the egg from our window.

After a few days, an extra egg was accidentally made for breakfast, and just like before, my father placed it on the bars of the window for the birds to eat. This time, three crows came at the same time, messily ate the egg in a few seconds, and left, cawing with mouthfuls of yolk. My father, like me, always liked feeding animals, especially birds, given his experiences with partridges and choughs from his village. So, from then on, every once every few days, we would boil an extra egg for breakfast, to feed the crows. Their numbers grew every day, but never once did the raucous band try to snatch the egg from my father's hands. Instead, believe it or not, he would call out to them from the window. Within a few seconds, a line of six to seven crows would be perched on the window bars, patiently waiting for their egg. My father would then break the boiled egg into small pieces and feed each crow a piece, one at a time.

This may seem like something taken straight out of a storybook, but I assure you, it really happened. These so-called 'heartless scavengers' would wait for their turn to be fed, albeit loudly with their cawing every now and then. And when their turn would come, each crow would gently peck the piece of egg out of my father's hand, never once hurting him in the process. After the feeding was over, the crows would disperse on their own and return to the trees.

After a month or so of this activity, my father deemed it safe enough for seven-year-old me to try as well. I still remember the first time I offered a handful of crushed boiled eggs to one of the crows. It was an old male, scruffy near the neck, and wing feathers bent and in disarray. Yet despite his old age and greater need for food, he did not try to snatch the egg from my small hands. Instead, he waited calmly until I opened my fingers to offer the food to him. This was no thoughtless, instinct-driven dirty creature, but a bird with great intelligence and an understanding of kindness uncommon amongst birds. The old crow then slowly took a piece of egg from me, being careful not to scratch my hand with his pointed beak, and ate it. He repeated the process until all the visible egg pieces from my hand were gone. But then, he did something truly incredible.

This old crow, who had no reason to trust me or my family, who was clearly weaker than the others and who could have been more aggressive because of his age, he hopped down to a lower bar and gently pried my fingers apart with his head, looking for any scraps that could have gotten stuck between my fingers. He found a few, and with utmost delicacy, lifted them from the gaps between my fingers, as though he were a surgeon and his beak a pair of tweezers.

I was delighted as a kid to have crows feed out of my hand, but it is only now as an adult that I realise the complete meaning of that old crow's gesture. He placed his life in my hands, quite literally, and trusted me, a human, as though I were one of his kind. That sort of unconditional trust is rare to find even amongst ourselves, and an animal from a completely different species was able to show it.

It really makes one question if we have truly evolved from being savages.

The last story I have about crows is one that takes place in Nashik, seven years after the Mumbai story, where we lived in a government house within the Maharashtra Police Academy. It is about another vengeful incident, but this one, like the Mumbai story, will also display just how complex and intelligent crows can be. It is the most unbelievable so far, but like the other two, it is the truth.

Nashik, Maharashtra, 2020

One afternoon in 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, our Whitney had his eyes set on a potential meal. Yes, he was a male cat; the story about his name and him shall be shared at another time. Coming back to the potential meal, it was a young crow hopping around in the garden, still too small to fly properly. She was crowing loudly in all directions, calling out to her clan. Unfortunately, her distress calls attracted Whitney.

Something that can be said of Whitney is that he was a different sort of male cat. Far from being lazy and fat as most domesticated tomcats usually are, he was lithe and slim, and a seasoned hunter, as good as Patchy, I would say. Even at the immature age of 11 months, not even a year old, he was a passionate hunter, and had developed a taste for bird meat. And that day, he wanted to try out a piece of crow.

He slowly crept closer and closer to the little crow, who was sitting on the bent trunk of a young tree. He came close enough to pounce on her...and then faltered. Even with his hunting experience, Whitney had never tried to catch a crow before, and no doubt he noticed the sharp beak and claws this young one possessed. So, instead of pouncing immediately, he decided to test the creature's defences. He slowly batted one of her wings with his paw, which sent the young crow hopping madly to another tree. He followed her at a normal walking pace, now more curious than hungry. Repeating the paw batting, he pushed her around the garden area for about five minutes, until the crow started showing signs of tiredness. Whitney became bolder with each playful strike, and slowly started letting his claws out. Then, once he had enough confidence, he pounced on the poor crow.

Even as a juvenile, her instincts were strong, and she tried to get him off her by spreading out her wings and reaching for his fur with her beak. She was successful for a bit, but the damage had been done: Whitney had completed his analysis by then, and by the look of hunger in his emerald eyes, he had decided that the juvenile would be his lunch.

And right then, before he could pounce on the little crow again, her mother showed up.

So far, we have seen the bullying side of crows, and how they can be fragile too, but this is an instance of their true power. Crows can sometimes be the biggest menace to even birds of prey twice their size like kites and eagles, attacking them mid-flight. Even on the ground, an adult crow is a formidable opponent for any small creature, with its extremely pointed beak meant to tear into the toughest flesh, and claws meant to grip onto almost any surface. And in this case, the adult crow was enraged. Even Whitney, the best hunter in the area, was still a small cat at the time. He was roughly equal in size to the mother crow, but at a disadvantage because of her ability to fly. She opened her wings and crowed loudly at him, putting herself between the cat and her child. Initially, Whitney still would not let go of the opportunity to hunt, and tried to swipe at the mother. One sharp peck on the paw, however, and he backed off, slinking back to the house, tail swishing in annoyance.

But the crows were not done with him just yet.

The next day, while I was watching Whitney leave the house after being fed, a trio of crows suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and started pecking at him viciously. He initially tried to fight back, but soon realised the risk to his eyes and ears from the barrage, and ran back inside the house. Even though the attack had only lasted for a minute, it had done considerable damage to Whitney: there were two deep, bleeding holes in his back where the crows had pierced skin. It took a few days for that wound to heal completely. And still the crows were not done.

As it happened, the murder to which the mother and child belonged had their nests located close to our house. After the attempted murder of a child of theirs, they realised that Whitney was a threat to not only their young, but also them. So, they set up a way to monitor him constantly.

A few days later, my parents and I noticed something strange one morning while walking around the house with Whitney: there were crows sitting in the same trees for long amounts of time, seemingly doing nothing.

Then we noticed where they were looking. Each time we passed an area, the crow present would let out a single *caw* and stare down right at Whitney. Then I realised what was happening: these crows were serving as sentinels, their sole purpose being to watch where their fiendish feline enemy was at all times. They even had shifts: a different bird would take a gang member's place at the perch at around 8:30 in the morning, and then switch again around 4 in the afternoon. At six in the evening, all would return to their nests. There were always four crows around the house, forming a rough square between them.



These crow sentinels performed their duty of observing Whitney's movement not for days, weeks or even months, but for an entire year, until we left Nashik in 2021, all because he tried to attack one of their young. A sign of a true familial mafia among birds.

Crows may always remain known amongst most people as dirty scavengers who are cruel and thoughtless, but I hope that through these stories, you, the readers, can see that these birds are far more than what meets the eye.

So, the next time you walk around your house or through your city, town, or village, you might want to look around and find out more about a different kind of murder.

