

A Cautionary Study of Phobia

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Spring equinox: night time dark hours gradually diminish.

Time: 18.30

All serve to bring together a singular event only recognised by a solitary crow who, at this exact time and place, surveys the street below, secure on his much fought-for site on the lee of the abandoned building.

It's a quiet time. The few remaining shops have been closed for nearly two hours, school club runs are all completed, early drinkers have left the pub. The only light from the supermarket indicates any form of possible human life.

A young man turns the corner, stops, moves one step forward, hesitates and then ventures along the street, one hand touching the rough walls.

The crow's eyes droop. He is exhausted from his arduous search for food now the takeaways have closed. In the distance the cacophony of a motorbike approaching. Annoyed, the crow ruffles his feathers, casually picks a small insect that has unwisely landed on his belly and again prepares to sleep.

A revving of engines, then possible gun shots, a scream of tires and the motorbike roars into the street. Shadows dance. All perspective is lost as headlights weave through obstacles. Silence. Only the crow is aware of silence and considers whether the young man is hit, lying unconscious, or better, dead. There might be rich pickings. In a slow and wary flight the crow descends.

Footsteps approach. A voice calls out,
'You alright mate.'

A groan, a mutter, 'Just missed me.'

'Bloody kids. You look rough mate, can you make it to the supermarket? The cafe's still open, get a cup of tea. Call me Frank, right? Look I can see you're unsteady, put your hand on my shoulder, we'll take it slowly, OK?'

As they move along the street, the young man feels a warmth, a joy to have found at long last a friend.

The crow returns to his perch watching, thinking,
'There still exists good men, but be careful my friend,' he caws in the silent night, but those that hear him cannot understand the warning.

The two men approach the supermarket. Frank says,
'I'm not one for pubs now. Course I used to be, back in the day, you know a quiet pub, different from you young people, all noise and all them lights flashing away.'

They make their way to the cafe. The young man begins, whispers,
'Don't like pubs, not my scene these days. Before it was different.' He pauses,
'Too many mirrors...

He sees a look of concern.

'No worries, I just had a nasty turn, feeling better now, just got out...'

Frank steps back,

'Oh right.'

A smile.

'Not prison, therapy.' A pause, 'This is my first day out,' he leans forward but with a shudder,

'I've got spectrophobia, don't like reflections. It's rare, the doctors are writing a book about me. They say I'm cured, but I'm not so sure.'

Frank nods uneasily and takes his time stirring sugar in to his tea.

Ten minutes later an elderly woman joins them.

'Hey Frank, how's you doing?

'Not so bad, and yourself?'

'Mustn't grumble.' She turns and without pausing for breath starts,

'Now who's your young friend here? You alright son, you look a bit pasty.'

Without lifting his head he seems to be searching for words,

'They told me it could be like this when I get out, its been so long, so very long while I was in therapy.'

'He's got phobia,' Frank begins. 'Can't stand mirrors, or shop windows you know that reflect.'

‘Huh phobias, don’t we all, have them’ she replies, ‘me, can’t stand garlic, got to take a detour round the back to the newspapers to avoid the fruit and veg.’ In a motherly way she turns to the young man,

‘Oh your poor soul, and you so cold and shivering.’

‘He got nasty shock Maisie, got nearly hit by one of them kids on their motorbikes.’

A second round of tea is ordered, Frank offering to buy one small packet of shortbread to share. The store is peaceful, save for the odd panic shopper, their times so predictable. The cafe staff are long gone and only the shelf-packers move silently along the shelves.

‘Must be off,’ Frank announces, struggling reluctantly to his feet.

‘And have you got a room for the night young man? Maisie asks, ‘Because I have a room spare, no trouble nice to have some company.’

‘You’re so kind, but no mirrors, not quite ready for close encounters just yet.’

‘Oh you poor love, well I have no mirrors and no garlic in the house.’

As they walk together out of the supermarket, leaving what bright lights behind them, the old crow stirs and looks down, as they pass by shakes his feathers, utters a croak, ‘Danger young man, danger there are monsters in this world and they are not all men.’

But no-one hears and no-one understands.

The world seems full of good men, even if there are monsters in it. (Bram Stoker: Dracula)

