

When the Loon Laughs

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“ ‘Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend?’
I shrieked, upstarting—
‘Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s
 Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy
 soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust
 above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy
 form from off my door!’
Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore.’ ”

—Edgar Allen Poe

Every night since January thirteenth had been very, very hard. Nick Prescott had suffered through countless nights in a state of delirium, turning thought over thought trying to come to terms with the fact that the accident wasn’t his fault; but he would always watch as the sun rose, undecided. He had started going to a psychiatrist in April, but nothing Dr. Melville could have said made him feel any better. His wife, Julia, said she held that same deep love for him and would aid and abet throughout the months, but he didn’t think that he deserved it. Every time his little boy, Mikey, looked up at him, he couldn’t help but feel his stomach drop.

A toddler was dead because of his lack of decision that day, and he didn’t know if he could bear that truth much longer. It had been nearly seven months—they were exiting August now, when the dark crept back into the evenings and fall loomed over the horizon—since the accident, but he hadn’t even gotten behind the wheel since then. Everyone, from the victim’s family to the police to the judge and jury, told him the little kid’s mother had been stinking drunk at the wheel and had done it to herself, but *he himself knew* he could have done things different. He had hardly made his way into the intersection of Broadway and Pine when she had come into his vision going easily forty miles an hour. He had started to lay off the gas, but he had still been going maybe ten when his front bumper hit against the rear driver’s-side door and sent the Buick whirling into the Monticello Domino’s. Plenty of time to swerve, to brake, to do fucking *anything right*, but all that came to his mind was to let off the pedal and chance at coasting to a stop.

This poor little girl, only four years, three weeks, five days old—he had counted it and calculated in his head sitting in the bathroom one sleepless February night—hadn’t been put in her carseat and was thrown out of her seatbelt. He hadn’t wanted to know what, explicitly, happened to her after that, but he’d regretfully seen the pictures from the scene enough to piece it together, images displayed on the court television as echoing, disconnected voices mulled over them. He could still hear the drunk woman’s wailing as she crawled out of her car and the feeling of hot urine running down his leg for the first time in two decades, since he was about thirteen-years-old.

Going into public had become a rarity for him, something done only out of bare necessity. He had completely stopped going to work and ignored all the calls he'd gotten from family until they bitched about it to Julia; and as for the calls from work he'd sat and watched, stoned, as they rang for two weeks until his boss dropped the effort and texted him, *Come back when you're ready, Nick. We'll welcome you with open arms. God bless. —Drew.*

As he stared at the ceiling, even now, the question looped in his brain as to if he should have said something back. Julia had watched him clear the message without responding before wrapping her arms around him. The pity in it had been palpable and he had broken down. For months, she had gone to work, come home, cooked dinner, and fell asleep beside him as he just lay there and *thought*. He had done absolutely nothing with his life for the past half-year while she tried to provide everything. As he had made sure she'd known, he not only felt that he was no longer a good man but an absolutely worthless one. One time he had even proposed the idea of a suicide—one that looked accidental enough that insurance would pay out—but she had struck her hand across his lips as if to cleanse them of the idea before rocking him like she did their son.

Then, about two weeks ago, Julia had proposed coming to this Air BNB on Bear Lake. He had feigned a smile and told her sure, he would love that. Whatever enthusiasm he lacked, though, Mikey made up for tenfold, which made Julia happy. Crow's feet and smile lines becoming pronounced for the first time in ages. They had gotten to the mammoth of a cabin at about ten this morning, and Mikey went swimming from eleven to seven, breaking for lunch and dinner for a sum of maybe thirty minutes. Nick and Julia only sat on the dock, holding hands as they dipped their feet in the water and watched. He couldn't help but see the look she gave him out of the corner of his eye. He thought, *Why don't you tell me? Up and leave me. Take Mikey with you and never see me again. Do yourselves a favor.*

Now he looked over to her side of the bed and sat upright against the glossy log headrest. Her back, covered with freckles, was turned to him as she took in deep, slow breaths. Her strawberry hair spilled over her shoulders and between her breasts. *God, she's beautiful. I was so lucky to find her*, he thought now, without the hateful eye, but it still came: *I wish she'd never even met me. I've ruined our lives.*

He shook his head and looked beyond her at the full moon and canopy of stars that reflected off of the lake. He could see as the breeze in the night shifted the waves toward the opposite shore and stroked his unkempt beard. Then he heard *it* again. The loon that had disturbed his slow drift off to merciful sleep. He peered out to the lake and tried to find it but couldn't. *Chuckles McGigglefuck over here*. Had that been a saying of his mother's? He looked back down at his wife, her hips defined even under the thick quilt that covered them. He looked at the alarm clock, the bright red numbers reading out 3:13. He had been so *close* to sleep, and this little bastard had—

The loon laughed again, and his eyes darted to the lake. What was he laughing about? What could it think was so funny it just went *on*?

He isn't really laughing, Nick, calm down. Keep a cool head, Julia's slight snores said.

But he *was*. Oh, he *was*. This wasn't any ordinary loon call, he knew that much. He had heard hundreds of loons throughout his life on thousands of fishing trips. No loon he had ever heard sounded like *that*, so full of ribbing glee.

The laugh came back again. But this time it seemed to carry a hidden message in the notes: *Kid-killer*.

Nick drew into the headboard some, as if the words had really been uttered. He felt his eyebrows raise and his mouth drop open a little bit. He drew his eyes and glared out and imagined himself as John Wayne and in his mind's eye he had a big ball-and-cap revolver and donned a silly Texas cowboy hat. He only mouthed it but his head heard the southern drawl—*Wouldja like tub rub-peet that, pil-grum?*

It turned out it did. Loud under the penumbra. *Kid-killer*. And as a follow up: *Your fault*.

Nick took in a sharp whiff of pine-scented air and carefully removed the quilt from his lower half. He placed his bare feet onto the cold floor and raised himself up off the bed slow enough to make sure it didn't creak and shift. It only made a squeak as Nick stood erect, and Julia responded with a groan. Nick watched as her shoulder jerked and she shifted slightly, straightening her right leg out. After she had settled, he heard the loon call out: *She hates you. Your fault*.

“No,” Nick denied, although he had already convinced himself of these things. “Shut up.”

Perhaps ten seconds passed before he heard, *Make me*.

He began to make his way to the door, tip-toeing as fast as he could. He *would* make it.

Nick, you're being ridiculous, his mother told him from six feet below Sunset Memorial Gardens, all the way in Bismarck. *Stop this playing around and get back to bed*.

“I can't,” Nick whispered when he entered the hallway. “It wasn't my fault.”

Another laugh, this one more distant, echoed against the pine-paneled walls: *Your fault. Kid-killer*.

It's just a trick of the brain, hon, Julia spoke up now. *Please come back to bed. Let's talk*.

“No. This can stop it. I know it.”

Stop what? Julia asked.

He couldn't muster up a reply, but it seemed he didn't need to, as the loon gave its own.

Gone off the deep end, it cried out. *Kid-killer*.

Nick cut through the kitchen and went out the side screen-door to a walk that branched off either to the driveway or to a stone path down to the dock. He took a right onto the stone path and was dumb to how his fists clenched and unclenched, rapid with anxiety. The loon's laugh was louder now, and it overcame the echo of the screen door slamming behind him. *Kid-killer. Monster. Hates you*.

“Shut the fuck *up*,” Nick spat at the lake. “I am *not* what you say I am.”

He marched down the hill and made it past the deck before his mom came back and said, *You're being a fool*.

The loon reinforced her point: *Deep end*.

Come back to bed, hon.

“Can you all just shut up?” Nick asked them, faltering for a moment and staring at the lush grass. “I need to be decisive, for once.”

He went on wading over the grass and onto the dock, which jittered underneath each step. The loon waited until he was untying one of the bobbing kayaks before it laughed: *Get me. Monster. Coward*.

Nick, clad only in blue-striped boxers and a white shirt (LEAKESVILLE, MS, BBQ, it read, SWEET N' SAUCY VENISON RIBS—"JUST KILT"!!), flipped the bird off and returned to unknotting the rope with an odd, fluid swiftness and threw the it back onto the dock before dipping both feet into the plastic blue raft, rocking it violently. He grabbed the oar off the dock and pushed off and began to row with the tide. The waves lifted his back up and caused his front to tip forward some, but it was hardly any issue. His face had screwed itself into a look of deep concentration and determination, which the loon only mocked. *Get me. Kid-killer. Your fault. Indefinite bastard*, from somewhere in the dark.

Nick rowed with an unmatched veracity out to the middle of the lake, correcting every bump that threatened to overturn him, until he saw the loon twenty yards to his right, its red eyes clearly visible tonight, a hellish reflection of the universe within them. Eyes as red as the blood in the back of that Buick. He opened his mouth and moaned with grief. He shifted the direction of the 'yak towards the loon and it seemed to almost tip over as he started to row faster, the water splashing up and catching in his beard. The waves seemed to be more aggressive out here, but he could not care. All he cared to acknowledge was the instinct to whack this fucker in the neck and let it sink down dead.

How hard is it? I have a weapon in my hands, and what does it have? Taunts?

Coward.

"Cocksucker!" Nick growled, and rowed faster to the bird, which only drifted with the tide and look at him with those beady red eyes—

What the hell are you doing? both Julia and his mother begged him, their voices indecipherable from one another in their harmony. *Are you insane?*

"Not after I get 'im," Nick told himself shortly before he closed in on the bird. "All will be well then."

And, as the bird shifted its head towards him, directly acknowledging its opponent, he brought the oar up like a golf club and brought it down in a wide arc, his grin growing wider when a sense of reassurance and hope for not only himself but the whole *world*, for he had killed the Devil incarnate. It would all be well, indeed. He saw that in his mind's eye, the image overlaying what was happening right in front of him. He would be happy again. He would smile genuinely again. He would make love again. He would—

He only realized the loon was flying over the bow of the 'yak when the oar slammed into the water and was sucked out of his hands. His grin lost all humor and inverted into an open-mouth frown under wide eyes, stricken by a dumb, non-understanding horror. Like the water on his arms, shirt, and face, his blood grew cold. Through the arc, he had brought the kayak to tip almost entirely to one side. He tried to remove his eyes from the spot where the oar magically disappeared to the loon and was unable to prepare for the fierce wave that tipped the lakeward side and began to flood the craft.

"Oh, God damn," he wheezed, goosebumps popping up from his submerged feet all the way up to his groin.

He tried to correct the vessel by holding both sides with death-grips and pushing down on the left, which stuck up at the sky. *Help me!* he thought.

As he felt the kayak tip to the left side, he heard the loon laugh from overhead. *Your fault.*

Nick felt the muscles and veins in his neck stand out and he looked directly up at its silhouette against the full moon. “*You BASTARD!*” he shrieked at it, forgetting the kayak entirely. “*It was NOT! Get back he—*”

He was cut off by a horrible sensation when a wave hit the left side of the kayak and made the earth flip ninety degrees. He took in breath and stared straight into the abyss he was careening into, void of any light. His last thought before gravity finally pushed him under was one he had eons ago, when Dad had brought him night fishing for the first time: *Looks like oil.*

Up above him: *Kid-killer.*

The blue Lifetime Pacer capsized and threw him under the tumultuous waves. He opened his mouth to scream when he began to sink, but only got a mouthful of water. His eyes shot open and he saw a wavering spotlight above him, slowly starting to reveal more of itself while the kayak started to truly get pulled down. He quickly propelled himself up to the surface as the Pacer slowly fell beside him, and when he brought his head above water, he shook it like a dog and began to tread. Almost as if to mock him, a wave struck the side of his head and he choked on it and spat it up. “*Dammit!*” he coughed.

With such little time to think, he spun around twice before finally noticing the kayak was still recoverable. “Oh,” he moaned when he dove for it, catching the string between his index and middle finger. He kicked aggressively while both arms pried it from undertow. “Oh, oh, *oh . . .*”

If only his muscles had stayed throughout the last seven months of sedentary existence. Maybe then he would have been able to save the damned thing, but it was pulling *him* more than he was pulling *it* towards the end. He let it go and waded there as it let out a final series of choking glugs before disappearing into the depths of Bear Lake.

Nick began to weep what he’d held back all day. He looked out to the western shore he had come from, two-hundred yards away, marked only by the line of trees which bordered their rental and the main road. He wiped a hand across his face to remove the snot and tears and groaned at his absurdity when he felt the wind strike his face with a freezing chill. “*You motherfuck,*” he called himself.

Fluttering came from his right and he shot his head in the direction to the eastern shore. Sure enough, barely visible in the moonlight against that spotty black murk, was the loon. He looked at it, his face contorting into a million different expressions; fear, malice, and curiosity the most persistent among them. The loon looked to be about fifteen feet away, and was ducking its head underwater; its last sacrament. He repeated: “*You motherfuck.*”

He swam towards the bastard, his arms arching in the air and disappearing with a splash into the freezing void he’d found himself. His feet made excellent rudders; propelling him through the water at a speed he never thought possible after his days on the Amber Falls High swim team. He kept a dead focus on the loon, watching its neck twitch and its feathers flutter as it drank. *This is it,* he thought. *Stay still and let this be it!*

A woman’s drunken wails cut through the night’s aether.

“*Who?*” he asked in between breaths.

Horrid screeches and crunching metal from nowhere and everywhere at once.

The loon, now just out of reaching distance, looking up at him and laughing in warning, puffing its wings up to its sides. *Kid-killerYourfaultHates*—

Its incessant cries were cut off when Nick ended his right arm's arch directly on the fowl's foul neck and brought it down. “*DIE!*” he roared, his hairy hand squeezing tighter and tighter, turning the loon's laughs into a hoarse goose call—*hawrk, hawrk, hawrk!*

The loon's body splashed in the water and attempted to take flight three times before giving up and merely rolling with the waves. The only part of the body that remained truly alive throughout the whole ordeal was its head and neck, just above where Nick was grasping it. “*Son of a WHORE!*” Nick yelled and closed his fist even more, fingernails digging crescent moons in his palm. The loon's head, meanwhile, danced frantically, beak aimed at the stars, looking for a way out.

Finally, it seemed to think of a way. After the loon threw its head back and turned itself upside down, bashing on Nick's knuckle, it came upright again and threw it to the left, farther than before. Before Nick knew what was happening, the bird unhinged its beak and directed its teeth to the web where Nick's thumb connected to the hand proper. It chomped down with enough force to tear away all the skin and leave its mouth full of blood and flesh. Nick screamed something unintelligible, *squeezing* all the harder. The loon went at his hand again, this unlikely carnivore crunching his index finger, ripping it open and flopping with his arm. Hot pain exploded as the bones broke into an innumerable amount of pieces. “*Ohhh!*” Nick blared. “*That's not how it's supposed to BE!*”

Not even he knew what he meant by that. If he had been given more time to think about it, he might have described it as a declaration of prophecy. He might have chalked it up as another crazyman's babble. In most cases, they were the same to him. His racing thoughts were overlapped by the realization of a series of satisfying clicks that came from his fist, and the new source of pain smack-dab in the middle of his hand. He looked at the loon's mouth and saw it was slowly unhinging, sick, wet sounds coming from it as the teeth pulled out of the flesh just below the fingerjoints. He shook the neck a little bit, and felt it limp in his hand. He let out shuddering breath and threw the bird away from him. The tears that were already pouring from his eyes seemed to come a lot harder, but he didn't dare wipe them away.

Slowly, he turned around and looked at the tall trees which marked the shore. He noticed that a light had appeared in their bedroom window. “Julia,” he whispered. “Julia, I got it. Oh, what have I done?”

He went to swim as he had towards the loon, but found it excruciatingly painful to use his right hand. So, he began to swim with only his left. He tried to ignore the aching all over his body as he went on, he tried to not let the waves crashing into his face and over him bother or falter him but they did anyway and after an unknown but very short amount of time he began to slow. Then his muscles started to pull taut and he started to moan instead of screaming. Then he began to wheeze instead of moan.

If only he had been twenty years younger, he thought. If only he'd slept. If only he had drunk less at dinner. If only blood wasn't spewing from his hand and making him queasy at the mere thought of it. If only he wasn't so *cold*.

The *Aitkin Independent Age* would later say, "Although no man could have made it from the middle of Bear Lake all the way back to shore, Mr. Prescott had most definitely been impeded by his marred right hand and his plausible drunken state, as per the Aitkin Police Sunday morning, just six hours after the victim drowned. Nicolas Prescott is survived by his wife, son . . ."

If only he had the will, the newspaper did not say, but that is what the boy understood, looking into that casket, studying those blue lips and pale skin that no makeup could ever cover.

Just after the cramps started, he felt his mouth go underwater. He scrambled to bring it back up, was nearly successful, and fell back down again. He began to breathe heavily through his nose before it went too, never to rise again. *No!* he begged. *No! Julia! But it's over!*

From below him, deep in the depths of the grand lake, the echoes of his misery returned. A headline of the mother's suicide surfaced to the front of his mind where it hadn't in months. He used both hands to bash the water and bring himself up but his legs were useless, everything from the soles of his feet to his groin was cramping. His strength went swiftly and he began to sink, shaking with fright. His right hand pulsed with white-hot pain, and he felt the final tears he ever shed above water squirt from the corners of his eyes. As they fell under the water, turning the entire world into murk, he heard that harmony again. His mother and wife scolding him over the dead woman's babbling. Horrible, horrible noise.

Nothing's changed, he distantly realized.

He felt bubbles pop before his face when he tried to yell. He tried to take in breath, but was met with water rushing down his throat and into his lungs. His fingers waved frantically above water, and all he could do was watch. He realized with mounting horror—something that dimly surprised him, he didn't know he could be more scared than *this*—he felt his biceps start to pump and twitch before they contracted and made him pull his arms to his sides and wrap them around his torso. He took another breath in an instinct to break from the desperation. The same result met him, and he couldn't even shout in pain. He watched as the moon and stars wavered and became obscured by the sediment that floated everywhere. His hands gripped at the sides of his shirt and ripped it, although he didn't notice; he couldn't notice. Something that wasn't quite him, something from those dark depths of subconsciousness told him he'd damned not only himself, but all he'd held dear, out of his cowardice. Out of what'd killed that girl and woman. There had been so many points where he could have stop that horrible onslaught towards tragedy but he had just sat there and swallowed. *Indefinite bastard. Damner.*

One of the last things he was conscious for was the feeling in his gut. *Not my son. Not Mikey. My boy.*

Coward. Kid-killer.

Coward, he wondered, disassociating from all that was himself. As much as he had fought against it in the final minute of his life, he felt his limbs relax and return to limp as he plunged further into the darkness. Slowly, his eyelids did the same, hiding the moonlight from him. The last thing that went was his hearing. It slowly faded out, and the last thing to dissipate were those wails, the ones that had set him on this path, the ones that had been under the loon's laughing calls.

THE END

