

# 13 Crimes Against Love, or, the Crow's Confession

*by Alexander Chee*

6.

He had a name everyone had. He was my friend's boyfriend and in the dark on my bed as I held him he was like a poem about a beautiful naked boy in the dark. Very pale, easy to see. All the light in the room ran to be on him. There wasn't much, as it is very dark inside the crow's wing.

He'd needed a place to stay the night as he lived out of town, and I don't remember why he couldn't stay with my friend, but he couldn't. Something about roommates.

We shouldn't do this, he said, inside our kiss.

You're right, I said, against his mouth, and turned it into the kiss again. We went on with it. He was afraid and so was I, but somehow we felt it was brave to do something wrong. Outside, the screech of the night wind on the glass that I know now to be the Fates, yelling at all the work we were making for them. Asking us for a rest.

He of course told my friend the very next day, who came to find me at work. He had the look of someone who'd been stolen from, which I thought odd of him at the time. I am pretty sure I apologized, but it wasn't with any of the sorrow I feel now. I lost them both, of course, and they lost each other. And now the former friend is a friend of Crime 3's ex-boyfriend (yes, ahead). I ran into them once together and after they left I wondered if they compared.

1. & 2.

How did the crow become black? He saw Apollo's lover cheat on him and repeated news of it to him, and Apollo, listening, grew angrier and brighter, and burned the crow black. He was white before, like a page can be. Black after the story.

Apollo is the god of poets.

Think of California days dusty with waiting, spent casing the joint, the shiny blue-eyed poet serving cup after cup of coffee to me at the cafe where he worked. Freckles spot the smooth planes of his hips as he leans and his shirt rides up. I am very young, in love with a poet who is in love with a scholar. The scholar has a boyfriend, a nice man I know, and sees the poet on the side, and I hate him for doing both. The poet works at this café to be near the scholar. I go to the café to be near the poet.

He is a boy with a taste for something sweet, and I am a boy with a short supply of sweet, a motorcycle, and a wide streak of anger. A long time ago something burned out the middle of me, something someone else had set on fire and set down in me. That crime is a matter of public record, court transcripts, etc., all available. These are not, until now. See the police map, the pins marking victims, the search for a pattern.

The poet accepts my courtship in the hours free when the scholar is with his boyfriend. I know now we're not particularly compatible but I am obsessed with the idea that the scholar is in my way. He tells me the scholar's name, thinking we'll never meet, perhaps, or because it's modern, or both. And then at the gym I see someone who looks like an underwear model speaking to someone trying to bench-press. His name comes out. He looks at me and smiles, and I know what he wants.

A short while later, after I had dragged him around my apartment, taking him even on my backstairs so the neighbors could see, so that even the sky might know that I had won, I told him who I was as he lay under me in my bathtub, shiny from what we'd done. He looked up, and smiled with those underwear model teeth, improbable, untouched.

We can't ever tell him, he said. He shifted around and tried to take me back inside him. I pulled back, like he'd flashed a knife. Right then I knew we'd both lost, had all lost, in fact.

Everyone broke up with everyone by the end of the year.

3.

A man loved me as his first love, but my inability to clearly remember or speak of the crime committed against me kept me resisting his efforts at lovemaking. The senses on my body would wink out at the touch of him and his love.

I understood sex and love as fear at this time. The problem: I didn't fear him, and so couldn't, at the time, have sex with him. But I wanted to. With him, I felt like a blind man in front of a painting.

He went to others. Meanwhile, I met someone visiting town with his boyfriend. Thunderclap of something, love, I think, me unable to look at him for how much I want him. Burning. The black fell off my eyes. Why him and not the other? The first-lover watched it happen from across the room, as did the boyfriend of the new love. Sheets of light surround most of what happened to us and between us, and prevent it from being told, but one thing I do regret: I still spent nights with the first man, both of us clueless, stuck, all that love glaring, glaring, stuck in place, bodies still, minds moving. On one of those nights, I write a letter to the new love, while the man sleeps. I write, explain how I would do it to him, what I would show him, what I would use to clean him with afterwards, and send the letter to him. He sends me what I told him I would use. I tie it to my motorcycle handlebars, my prize. I drive with it, fluttering, proud as a crow. Keep the new love for three years.

Other things happened between me and the new love, but those weren't crimes.

The boyfriend, his, is left behind. The first-lover also, goes on to do over what was done to him by me many times, crisscrossing the city like a fire I'd set and left untended.

4.

I meet a couple out one night near the end of my time in San Francisco. I know them both, one I hate, one I like. They are newly in love but also want to have sex with me. I go home with them and find myself with condoms on my fingers, while they 69. I feel like I am attending a surgery on Siamese twins, oddly non-erotic. The one I like falls asleep after they come, and I stay, fucking the one I hate

beside him. For the reason of the crime, during this part of my youth I can stay harder with hate.

I went back for more from the one I hated, called him a few months or weeks later and told him I was coming over. I took him all over his floors--bathroom, kitchen, bedroom. Scuffed his back in doing it. Why did I need so many angles? As I dressed, he looked at me from the floor where he lay, still breathing hard. You're a sociopath, he said.

Perhaps, I said. And left. I had started to have a feeling of some kind when he said that. But his enjoyment had been thorough. It's dangerous. To try and reform thieves. Only when they want something they can't just take do they stop.

5.

Why do thieves start? Because they feel they are starting with less than nothing. And that this will never change. A black crow with a memory of having been white.

At work at the bookstore, a boy at the counter stands with a copy of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*. He had read my letters to his friend and fallen in love with the writer of them. He knew as a result my favorite book. This is the trap he set for the crow, a book in the snare. He is a Missouri Rimbaud, fox-faced, tall and athletic. When he tells me later of his Chinese grandmother, brought to Missouri by his missionary grandfather, I understand why he looks so familiar to me and me to him. You remind me of an uncle, he tells me. Fox, he is. Fox meets crow. Two thieves. Who will win?

We sink into each other, stabbed through by with what we find later in my bed. It feels like the first time ever with a boy, he says to me. All my burning no preparation for this cutting. He said this and I watched it cut into me but would not feel it until later, when he returned to his NY boyfriend.

Years later I meet the fox's boyfriend. He didn't know about me but remembers that the fox returned changed. They didn't last the summer after. Did you know how much damage you did in NY from

San Francisco, he asks. For he also, it runs out, knows the letter-recipient's boyfriend from Crime 3.

No, I say to him.

7.

An astrologer with a son. Meets me at his front door in sweatpants, no shirt, no underwear. Summer drone, cut-grass smell everywhere, air thick, the swing of his dick in his shorts, skin the color of tobacco, all hypnotize me. He dreads his hair small and pulls it back. He reads my chart down in the basement while his young son watches television, his girlfriend, the mother, at work. He tells me that in a past life I was a temple whore who was also a spy and betrayed many men to their deaths, and that in this life I have to meet them all and help them on their way.

This seems both completely understandable and unfair. And, a come-on.

Weeks later, I meet him out at night downtown. He is housesitting for his mother, asks me to come over. On his mother's bed in her apartment I take off his clothes and do what I want with him, he is oddly pliable, as if by obeying me he's not at fault. He has done only what I wanted and not what he wanted. He asks that we not come, so as to make a tantric bond between us. I agree at the time, and then go home and jerk off about him after. The crow doesn't wear a leash. I don't want his cord on my soul.

8.

Infidelity is violence. At this point I am a hardened criminal, headed out to do more. I am walking through the parking lot of other people's love with my car key out, cutting into the painted exteriors. I don't know what I cut anymore or why, just feel the clean scrape along the side right in my teeth as I smile.

I find myself at a party, after the astrologer. Making out with a boy who I'd thought was straight. He is known for getting drunk and taking his penis out, walking around and asking people to touch it, other men especially. If you ignore it, sometimes he puts it in your

beer. It's very large. He often gets what he wants. We're on the stairs and a girl comes up behind him. She puts her hand on his shoulder, eyes wide with disbelief. Uh, you have to go outside RIGHT now, she says. Or Crystal's never going to speak to you again.

I'll be right back, he says. One minute, and he holds his finger up for emphasis.

He returns. I have to go, he says. Here's my number, call me.

Crystal, of course, is his girlfriend. He had the same name as Crime 6. Literally, so many people have that name.

9., 10., & 11.

Having done what I could to New York from San Francisco, I move there to get closer.

A short-story writer in a long-distance relationship. He tells me when we meet, I have a boyfriend. So, I ask. His boyfriend gets so upset when he hears about us that he gets into a car accident. He survives just fine. The story-writer hops away. Still doesn't like to see me. A designer with a friendly smile laughs when I tell him I like him but am emotionally unavailable. Perfect, he says. So am I. I have a boyfriend. Okay, I say. We have many nights of incredible sex that summer, and he opens to me in ways that move me. But we never speak of it. Then, he tells me one night that he has a present for me. I can see the crack right down the middle in the air as he says it. I break it off shortly thereafter, and don't get the present for years. We run into each other and he mentions it here and there, and eventually I have lunch with him, a confirmation that we won't have sex again. It's a hardback of *Franny & Zooey*, J.D. Salinger. I'd told him it was my favorite book. It still is one of them. I now think of it being akin to the trap the fox set with the Passion, back in Crime 5.

After breaking up with someone else, I am in his friend's apartment, having sex with him one more time. He has another boyfriend now, someone I resent enough that I am here having sex with him again. I have to go to the bathroom. On the way there, the door to his friend's bedroom is open, where the friend is having sex with someone else. I watch them from the door, go back to my ex,

sinking back into him again and again, feeling like a nail that won't stick. It isn't the right way to say goodbye to what we had. But it's what we do.

12.

This one was the most dangerous.

He's kneeling on the floor of his West Village apartment, by the door, asking me to leave. He first said he saw someone once a week. But what he means is that they sleep together every night, as they live together, and spend their Sundays together. We're in the apartment he shares with his lover, a chef, who has just called asking him to come down to the restaurant for dessert. I know I have to leave. But I know why he's kneeling. He'd changed into these flowing meditation pants and then from just how I looked at him, he got an erection. We both watched it rise until it was sticking straight out, pulling his sheer pants up his ankles. Now he is kneeling to hide it. He's a sweet 23-year-old boy, looks younger, even, and he's irresistible in pain.

I walk over to stand in front of him. He turns his head to the side. I kneel down, and I say, What is this? Reaching for what I know is there. I lay my hand gently along the surface of it. I can feel his pulse racing there against my fingertips. It's large enough to scare a great many people. I am pretty sure it's larger than his heart. This on a boy who's as tall as my shoulder.

Please don't, he says.

I'll leave, I ask. But, what is this? I ask him with my mouth right in front of his, his breath, shallow, crossing my lips. I breathe it in. His cheek trembles against mine. I'm sure it belongs to me, this thing in my hand. Sure of it. If you can't hold their heart, you can hold this and hear the heart.

He was a student of Alexander technique, a theory of dance movement. He'd volunteered to give me a lesson and so I'd come over. Taught me that the spine ends inside the head, not underneath it, that skulls are firmly mounted on the neck, the top vertebrae behind your eyes, inside you. Taught me that a repeated pattern of

wrong movement, while not painful at the time, can create greater damage than a single catastrophic injury. A shoulder that breaks heals. A shoulder worn away by wrong use must be replaced.

I can hear the Fates screaming again, stop, stop, stop. And for perhaps the first time, I do.

I let go. I stand and he looks at me from the floor, sad, and then looks down. I kiss the top of his head.

I remember on the stairs how I had once before tricked myself into thinking I was brave, which is what I felt, holding his dick, him unable to stand for shame, desire. But this wasn't bravery.

On the street, later, I thought about it. I didn't want to meet the chef at some party a year later and hear from him how his lover had broken his heart by cheating on him with some guy. And I felt, if I went on, this would be ahead of me. I wanted to heal what hurt in me. It couldn't be replaced except through death and rebirth, really. And apparently I'd done that many times. I didn't want to have to see the astrologer again, in some other lifetime. So, healing. How?

Things can burn black. And then white again.

13.

With twelve you get one free.

He worked in flowers. Argentinean, green eyes you could see through windows, and would watch me from inside his store with an expression that suggested I had something he'd never eaten but had always wanted to try. We met up some weeks later, he was drunk at a bar, newly graduated from college. He checked his messages. Ten, he said. I'll be right back.

Ten messages suggested to me that somewhere was a boyfriend anxious to speak with him. I sat and waited. He returned and we left, him asking me to walk him home. You ought to, he said. I'm very drunk and we don't want anything bad to happen to me. He sat down on the Brooklyn sidewalk then, in someone's stone garden and he pulled me onto him. We lay there, kissing. He tried to undo my pants. No, I said. So we stood and went to his front door, where he

kissed me again, and his dog from inside began to bark as if he knew there was a crow in the hall.

Won't that wake your neighbors, I said.

It'll wake my boyfriend, he said.

Instantaneous anger. My heart. Awake, it turned out. Right there. Is this what it's like to feel, I asked myself, and went down to the sidewalk, deciding it was. He followed me up the street with his dog on a leash and then under a streetlight a block from his house I let him kiss me one last time. He reached into my pants and pulled my dick out. I put it back in. No, I said. And left.

I can't steal again if I don't know how to put back what I stole. If it leaves me once I steal it. Shake out the nest, dump all the shiny things in the road to be found by whoever wants them.

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The crow is white again, salt-white. Hang this in the wind, ask the sun to visit me.

