

Clatter

by Sean Lovelace

The next morning I woke early and had a cup of coffee the size and strength of an oil tanker, the type you apply the brakes to and it glides to a stop fourteen miles later. I used Jangly Creek water for the brewing, as was my way.

I woke up early to show my friend I was a serious person.

I saw him in the bathroom mirror, preparing for work as a mint thinner, slicking hair, moisturizing skin, applying toothpaste the color of Jangly Creek moss. I thought of complimenting Eugene, of comparing Eugene to mockingbirds, the beauty of crows, but I knew the reply would be, "Get real" and "If you clean food from a bowl now, it won't stick so much later."

I studied my friend's cheekbones. Their harmony. Eugene turned to me, pointed with a tube of ChapStick, and said, "You have a meeting with the mower."

"It won't start."

"Then choke it!" Eugene's eyes flashed. Then softened. "Look, I don't mean to get angry, but I'm really, really, really, really beginning to doubt this situation. I mean I respect your sketching and all, but it-has-to-be-cut."

"My sketching? What does this have to do with my crow sketching?"

"The yard. It's becoming a world of its own. It's driving me crazy. Understand?"

I said I did.

Eventually, the mower had enough of choking and roared to life, blades whirring like hummingbirds trapped beneath an iron skillet. I pushed it forward, at least four inches, and then heard something, a purring whine, so shut the engine off and listened.

It came from beneath my crow-sketching shed. A kind of growling.

A deep growling. A stomach gurgling. A rust-holed muffler. A nine year old kid dragging an oversized coal shovel across a gravel driveway. A kind of growling.

Determined, I paced around the shed's perimeter, stopping to lean down at every corner, listening to the rumbling pulse. On impulse I grabbed a fallen hickory branch and stuck it under the shed, into the heart of the growling. The branch rattled and shook, and when I pulled it free the tip resembled the shape of a tooth-marked head, a face, a top hat, a tiny carving, delicate and exact, with a nameplate like a playing card beneath its chin. It read: THOMAS WOODROW WILSON.

Thomas Woodrow Wilson?

I shook my head and went to find another branch, a twisted limb of pear. I nudged it under the shed and then further back toward the growling, right into its esophagus.

BZZZZ! The branch hopped and shook, turned and bobbed about like I'd stuck it into the innards of a taffy machine. I reared back hard and pulled, pulled and pulled until something let go and I flew backwards and tumbled over and landed on my ass in the overgrown weeds.

The stick had a head and a face and a swirling robe, all etched in wood.

It was the 14th Dalai Lama.

This is a remarkable thing, I thought to myself.

I lined the 14th Dalai Lama neatly alongside Woodrow Wilson, both leaning against the shed like a pair of walking sticks sold out of pickup trucks on the winding roadway shoulders of national parks.

Wading through the knee-high lawn, nostrils full of pollen and spore, I collected two armfuls of sticks, hickory and pear, fig and oak. One at a time, I slid each stick deep into the dark interior, like I was sharpening giant number 2 pencils. Mindfully, one could say reverentially, I removed each stick and placed it alongside the shed.

There was: George Marshall, Andrei Sakharov, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Jean Henri Dunant, Lech Walesa, Jane Adams, John Lennon, Mahatma Ghandi, Joseph Rotblat, John Muir,

Lord John Boyd Orr of Brechin, Nelson Mandela, and finally, created out of pine and with a birthmark of yellowish sap atop his head, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Wow, I thought, and then said, "Wow."

The final stick, a gnarled cedar, rattled in my hands, an angry vibration that made my teeth clatter. It spun and shrunk further into the shed, and for a moment I thought I'd lost my grip. Finally, with a dogged grunt, I braced and pulled, stumbling back while plucking the wood free.

In large letters along its length: I AM THE WORLD'S MOST TALENTED WOODCHUCK. LEAVE ME IN PEACE.

Whoa, I thought, but didn't say a thing.

Bewildered, and feeling a bit guilty, I went inside and sat at the kitchen table. I had a late lunch, a beer and a bowl of dried figs. Seventeen dried figs. The figs tasted dusty, though they were fresh. The beer tasted stale. I wasn't hungry. I felt low. I wasn't one to needlessly harass wildlife, especially not of the world famous variety.

A car pulled up in the garage.

Gathering myself, I returned to the shed. There they leaned, the important people.

Mother Teresa had a look on her face. The look was deep and froggy. It said, "We're hungry."

"What should I do with my life?" I asked. I'd always wanted, if ever around important people, to ask the question.

"Make something," her look said.

I held out my arms. "I do make things."

"Then you're fine," Mother Teresa looked, apparently for the group, "but make something now. Black beans and white onions, diced. The beans improve the onions, and the onions the bean. Go fix beans and onions, for all of us, if you can."

Surprised by the request, I turned to the house. I stopped and thought a moment. Did I even have black beans? (I had onions.) How would I explain this spontaneous late-night cooking to Eugene? And what about the yard? He would demand a sign of progress. My hesitancy turned to doubt, and the doubt asked me just exactly what

I was doing. I mean with a backyard full of important people and me worrying about black beans and long grass.

The wind fell asleep. The sun turned off its television, brushed its rays, and went to bed below the horizon. A mourning dove cooed in the distance, a ghostly sound at nightfall. At the backdoor, my left hand extended for the latch, I stood in silence, trembling. I turned around.

Dark. Too dark to see. Narrow lines, lumpy shadows, a black box of a crow-sketching shed fading into the smear of darkness. My thoughts were: Important people don't know what to do with my life. Now do they?

