

Lofty Justice

2492 words

Daryl tugged an overall strap loosely over one shoulder and his old rifle over the other as he shuffled from the cabin to the clearing. He squinted and aimed at the querulously chattering raven. The bird dragged a wing as it hopped and shrieked excitedly at the sound of an approaching vehicle still out of sight down the incline to the southwest.

“Shut up you blamed creature!” Daryl spluttered his usual curse and aimed the gun but couldn’t distinguish between afternoon shadows and the bird. Still, he kept aim in the direction of the sound, somewhere between the outhouse and the old dredge. He widened his stance and waved the end of the gun as if tracking a ghost.

The bird squawked from atop the wood pile as the old pickup eased forward. The driver turned off the key and sat still with eyes trained on the welcome. The engine continued to sputter. The cab and bed of the truck, both an indeterminate color somewhere between rust, mud and green, shook for several moments.

Gradually the driver eased the door open with a squeak and stepped down. “Sokay, Daryl, it’s just me, Will.” The considerably younger man kept his hands down, waiting.

“Will? Right. Where you been? I worried you wouldn’t come back.” Daryl lowered the rifle and spit nervously hitting his boots.

The raven hopped forward greeting Will with a chortle.

“Devil creature!” Daryl’s face reddened and eyes squinted as he raised the gun again. Ravens rarely appeared at this altitude. Its size, color and clatter spooked Daryl who, lately confused, was suspicious of many things.

“Daryl, It’s just a bird. Put the gun away.” It had been weeks since Will found the injured bird in the truck bed after a trip from town to the mine – one of the few in the Willow Creek Mining District that still produced from both hard rock and placer mining. Will had rendered the bird the same kind of help he’d promised his father for Daryl. He advanced slowly, palms open. The bird, quieted and watched.

“Where you been?” Daryl repeated louder, stance unchanged.

“Town, shopping, getting supplies like we planned.” Will spoke clearly and slowly gesturing toward the truck bed filled with totes of goods.

Daryl’s eyes softened briefly, then his posture stiffened again. “Took you so long?”

“I ran into a little trouble. Nothin’ to worry about. Come on, let’s unload.” After Daryl made no move, Will added, “partner.” He watched Daryl absorb his words and continued, “Put the rifle up and come help unload this stuff before it gets dark.”

The partners unloaded in silence. The bird settled under the steps while Will began cleaning the kitchen area and preparing dinner. Crusted remnants of three day’s meals without his attention had to be removed first, most tossed into the clearing for the bird.” Looks like you made do alright.” He admitted aloud, relieved.

“Course I did,” Daryl slouched in kitchen chair and played with the tableware while Will worked.

Will selected some potatoes from a tote on the floor and queried his partner's progress.

"Get any further along the stream bed while I was out?"

"Little."

"Look encouraging?"

"What?"

"Does it look good? Any color? Did you bring back any samples?"

"In that box over there. What ja think?"

That explained what was in the cardboard box – a first. Will knew that in years past Daryl would be meticulous about his findings, cataloging each and placing them in appropriate containers. He also knew that criticism only led to more confusion, then denial and finally violence. Besides, what was in the box looked useless.

"I'll work the new adit tomorrow. I'll make up my absence. Promise." Will took responsibility for the more dangerous shaft work, while Daryl worked the stream.

The evening progressed as Will discussed town changes and acquaintances but omitted explaining his delay.

By the next day Daryl had forgotten the delay. After breakfast Will walked toward the mine followed by the limping raven, lured by bacon and toast bits. When they were out of Daryl's sight, Will knelt on one knee and the bird allowed itself to be picked up. Will moved the damaged wing ever so gently. "Better every day. Keep up the exercise and for heaven's sake stay clear of Daryl." The bird chortled and hopped after him as far as the portal.

The two partners kept the same schedule for three days. Daryl ran the rocker while Will entered the shaft. The bird followed as far as the decline. Every day the bird strengthened in

Will's care. Every evening Daryl dammed the creature. In the late afternoon of the third day Will wrenched out a cart of ore. The raven perched atop the cart and occasionally tested its strength by taking short flights.

“Raraak, raraak,” it seemed to revel at its own progress. The noise drew out Daryl. He burst out the door shouting obscenities.

“It’s just a bird,” Will tried to sooth his old partner. “Probably will fly off as soon as it’s healed.”

Daryl spat, eyed the ore and ran rough dirty hands over his bare pasty chest. Will avoided attention to his partner’s forgetfulness, but opined, “Cold out here. Glad I got on a shirt.”

Daryl looked down. “Right. Be right back.”

Will set about the task of breaking the ore down. With practiced blows he broke ore into smaller and smaller pieces, then shoveled them into the rocker. The raven flew to the wood pile and watched. While Will worked his sledge hammer he hummed and watched the bird out of the corner of his eye. When Daryl stumbled back out wearing a jacket, and picked up his hammer the bird retreated.

For two more days, the men worked together breaking up and sorting ore. When the bird showed itself or cawed Daryl shook his fists and swore, “That thing’s out to get me.”

Will could see a disturbing quiver in Daryl’s jaw, but reminded him patiently, “Only a bird,” and dumped the tailings over over the mountainside to the northeast.

On the afternoon of the third day when Daryl was still in the cabin, Will plucked a nugget the size of a plumb from the trommel and whooped. The raven shrieked in response, “Raraak,

raraak,” and fluttered about excitedly. Daryl came running, his face reddened, arms windmilling as he swore unintelligible threats at the sky.

Will diverted attention from the bird, “Look here Daryl. We did it this time. Look! We’ve struck a rich vein!” He held the nugget up in front of Daryl’s face to see it clearly. Then Will handed it to him. Celebrating their good fortune, they embraced, danced in circles and laughed until they could barely stand. The raven flew to the cabin roof and cawed loudly as if providing the music.

The partners secured the nugget in their safe place beneath the floor boards under a rug. Then next day they got it out to look at again. Will suggested they take it outside where the light was better. Daryl agreed. Sure enough, the sun enhanced its sparkle and the men were giddy all over again. “Let me hold it.” Daryl demanded. He held it up admiring its fineness and deep yellow-orange color. He held it in one hand, then the other measuring the weight casually, though they had done it the night before with the scale. The bird chortled from atop the ax handle, the blade of which was wedged into the chopping block.

“Let’s put it away, ‘till we go to town tomorrow,” Will suggested reaching his hand out. It was Sunday and the gold shop in Wasilla was closed.

Daryl maneuvered his bulk a little closer to Will. “You trying to take my gold!” He suddenly accused with a tilt of his head and eyes slightly out of focus.

Shaken, Will stepped back and tried to deescalate the situation, “What? Course not! Let’s just keep it safe. Like we planned.”

The bird flew to the outhouse roof squawking and side-stepping to and fro bobbing its head.

“You’re out to cheat me!” Daryl challenged.

“Never!” Will protested. But Daryl’s anger and suspicions grew. He shoved Will in the chest. Surprised and unbalanced, Will fell to the ground. Daryl pocketed the nugget but did not relent either the accusations or his sudden violence. “Stop! Stop!” Will wailed just as Daryl kicked him in the ribs.

Will’s entreaties continued louder, as he struggled to get up. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

The bird shrieked raspy calls sharper. This enraged Daryl all the more and he pounced on Will, punching and rolling. Will tried to defend himself and were it not for his promise to his father he might have survived. The bird joined the foray by hopping onto Daryl and began jabbing its beak into his back. When the men rolled over and over, the bird disengaged. Daryl managed to wrap his arms around Will’s neck then his legs around Will’s chest. He squeezed until Will went limp. Then he released his hold and stood. Breathless, his attention fell on the ax just a step away. He yanked it out and with a single hefty blow sliced Will’s forehead as easily as if cutting into a cantaloupe. As the raven flew away Daryl said to the corpse at his feet, “I don’t know who you are or why you came here, but you won’t be coming back.”

In the ensuing three weeks increased daylight melted remaining mountain snows widening the stream. Daryl was forced by the stench of decay to drag Will’s body to the edge of the tailings to the northeast. Out of sight, he thought. Bored, he continued to process the ore in the cart and to manually turn the trommel sluicing gravel from the streambed. He no longer remembered how to operate the generator and worked out of habit rather than intention, the repetition giving structure to his life.

Eventually, supplies ran low and in one of his more aware states, he dressed properly and prepared to drive the pick-up into town. Fortunate, he thought, Will left the keys in the ignition rather than his overalls. He was just about to heft a large tote into the truck bed when a vehicle pulled into the open space just behind the truck. Oddly, the bird returned at the same time apparently healed, a dark flutter in the bushes. But Daryl's attention was solely set on the large Alaska state trooper walking toward him. The officer scanned the area for anything suspicious. He noticed plenty since Daryl's life was in disarray without the help of Will.

"Howdy," The burly officer greeted guardedly.

"How do, officer... You lost?" Daryl attempted to act casual and smiled, but since it had been so long since he had, his face quivered. He abandoned the effort and concentrated his attention on the officer. Combinations of fear, guilt, forgetfulness and wonder made him shake slightly.

"No. Lookin' for Will Nickolai. He said he lived here and worked with his partner. Will put this spot down as his home. He here?"

Daryl stepped back slightly but still held the tote, now shaking. "He's my partner. What you want Will for?"

"Got a warrant for him. He missed a court date. He around?"

Surprised and more confused, Daryl dropped the tote and stared blankly.

The trooper repeated his question and Daryl blurted, "No." But he recovered his sense enough to ask. "What's this about?"

"A few weeks back he got into a fight and we had to take him in."

This report shook Daryl's memory. Will had been delayed three days on his last trip for supplies. The bird fluttered closer atop a cart.

"Not like Will." Will had been the most amiable and law abiding person he knew – though he admitted inwardly he didn't know a lot lately.

"What's this really about?" Daryl could barely keep inside his skin and worried that the trooper somehow knew about the nugget and wanted to steal it.

"Well..." the trooper hesitated but continued, "A fellow at the store insulted you. Said you were... 'daffy'. Will punched him. Laid him flat. He swore no one could insult his partner, even if he did have Alzheimer's. I made the arrest. The judge let him go early because he made a good case about his partner. That you?"

"I'm Will's partner. His father's before that. But, I don't know who Al is."

"Will here?" The trooper asked again thinking that if Daryl didn't have a mental condition, he at least had a social one and was as evasive as anyone he'd encountered.

The bird fluttered to the ground and hopped forward squawking.

Daryl countered by letting loose a, "Damn bird!" but quickly followed it with, "Sorry."

"So, Will here?" The trooper repeated again stepping forward bringing his hands closer to his holster.

Daryl stammered "Wella, Wella...no, he ain't." He bent forward and began flailing his arms at the bird.

The trooper drew his weapon hollering " Hold on! Put your hands in the air!"

Daryl did. "Oh! No need for that!" Daryl pleaded, raising his arms stepping back. "I'm not armed."

While searching him for a weapon the trooper patted Daryl's shirt feeling the nugget bulging the breast pocket. Fearing theft, Daryl quickly clasped his hand over the trooper's whose heart momentarily paused.

"Here now, that's mine!" He breathed rapidly spluttering rancid breath forcing the trooper to turn his head. The officer released his hand and stepped back several feet.

"Easy now. Sure it's yours. All I'm looking for is Will. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just leave me alone and let me get on with my ...What you want anyway? You can't have this." And he thrust the nugget in the trooper's direction.

As soon as the nugget was visible, the men were forced apart by a flutter of iridescent black as the raven swooshed down, snatched it in his beak then darted back and forth around them. Enraged Daryl raced after it resolutely, flapping his own arms like wings trying to catch it. Stymied, the trooper backed away and watched the spectacle as the old man ran wildly, stumbling over equipment and splashing through the stream. Daryl grabbed a stone and hurled it at the bird forcing the trooper to duck. "Come back here you devil!" Daryl reddened and shouted breathlessly. The bird flapped its way toward the ridge of tailings and scree. Daryl followed, his entreaties muffled as he ran further away. The trooper heard a final, "You devil!" then the unmistakable sound of a rockslide and then silence.

Erie calm drifted on the spring breeze as the trooper peered over the cliff's edge and gazed at two bodies below. Overhead the raven flew higher and higher in circles before finally gliding down the valley. The price of two men's lives still sparkled securely in his beak.