

GIRL AMONG CROWS by Brendon Vayo

EXCERPT

My husband Karl shakes hands with other doctors, a carousel of orthopedic surgeons in cummerbunds. I read his lips over the brass band: How's the champagne, Ed? Since he grayed, Karl wears a light beard that, for the convention, he trimmed to nothing.

The ballroom they rented has long windows that run along Boston's waterfront. Sapphire table settings burn in their reflections.

The food looks delicious. Rainbows of heirloom carrots. Vermont white cheddar in the macaroni. Some compliment the main course, baked cod drizzled with olive oil. My eyes are on the chocolate cherries. Unless Karl is right, and they're soaked in brandy.

At some dramatic point in the evening, balloons will drop from nets. A banner sags, prematurely revealing its last line.

CELEBRATING THIRTY YEARS!

Thirty years. How nice, though I try not to think that far back.

I miss something, another joke.

Everyone's covering merlot-soaked teeth, and I wonder if they're laughing at me. Is it my dress? I didn't know if I should wear white like the other wives.

I redirect the conversation from my choice of a navy-blue one-shoulder, which I now see leaves me exposed, and ask so many questions about the latest in joint repair that I get lightheaded.

The chandelier spins. Double zeroes hit the roulette table. A break watching the ocean, then I'm back, resuming my duties as a spouse, suppressing a yawn for an older man my husband desperately wants to impress. A board member who could recommend Karl as the next director of clinical apps.

I'm thinking about moving up, our careers. I'm not thinking dark thoughts like people are laughing or staring at me. Not even when someone taps me on the shoulder.

“Are you Daphne?” asks a young man. A member of the wait staff. No one should know me here; I’m an ornament. Yet something’s familiar about the young man’s blue eyes. Heat trickles down my neck as I try to name the sensation in my stomach.

“And you are?” I say.

“Gerard,” he says. The glasses on his platter sway with caffeinated amber. “Gerard Gedney. You remember?”

I gag on my ginger ale.

“My gosh, I do,” I say. “Gerard. Wow.”

Thirty years ago, when this convention was still in its planning stages, Gerard Gedney was the little boy who had to stay in his room for almost his entire childhood. Beginning of every school year, each class made Get Well Soon cards and mailed them to his house.

We moved before I knew what happened to Gerard, but with everything else, I never thought of him until now. All the growing up he must’ve done, despite the odds, and now at least he got out, got away.

“I beat the leukemia,” he says.

“I’m so glad for you, Gerard.”

If that’s the appropriate response. The awkwardness that defined my childhood creeps over me. Of all the people to bump into, it has to be David Gedney’s brother. David, the Boy Never Found.

My eyes jump from Gerard to the other wait staff. They wear pleated dress pants. Gerard’s in a T-shirt, bowtie, and black jeans.

“I don’t really work here, Daphne,” says Gerard, sliding the platter onto a table. “I’ve been looking for you for a while.”

The centerpiece topples. Glass shatters. An old woman holds her throat.

“Gerard,” I say, my knees weak, “I understand you’re upset about David. Can we please not do this here?”

Gerard wouldn’t be the first to unload on what awful people we were. But to hear family gossip aired tonight, in front of my husband and his colleagues? I can’t even imagine what Karl would think.

“I’m not here about my brother,” says Gerard. “I’m here about yours.” His words twist.

“Paul,” I say.

“What about him?” “I’m so sorry,” says a waiter, bumping me. Another kneels to pick up green chunks of the vase. When I find Gerard again, he’s at the service exit, waiting for me to follow.

Before I do, I take one last look at the distinguished men and a few women. The shoulder claps. The dancing. Karl wants to be in that clique—I mean, I want that too. For him, I want it.

But I realize something else. They’re having a good time in a way I never could, even if I were able to let go of the memory of my brother, Paul.

The catering service has two vans in the alleyway. It’s a tunnel that feeds into the Boston skyline, the Prudential Center its shining peak.

Gerard beckons me to duck behind a stinky dumpster. Rain drizzles on cardboard boxes.

I never knew Gerard as a man. Maybe he has a knife or wants to strangle me, and all this news about my brother was bait to lure me out here. I’m vulnerable in high heels. But Gerard doesn’t pull a weapon.

He pulls out a postcard, its edges dusty with a white powder I can’t identify. The image is of three black crows inscribed on a glowing full moon.

“I found it in Dad’s things,” says Gerard. “Please take it. Look, David is gone. We’ve got to live with the messes our parents made. Mine sacrificed a lot for my treatment, but had they moved to Boston, I probably would’ve beat the cancer in months instead of years.”

“And this is about Paul?” I say.

“When the chemo was at its worst,” says Gerard, “I dreamed about a boy, my older self, telling me I would survive.”

I take my eyes off Gerard long enough to read the back of the postcard:

\$ from Crusher. Keep yourself pure, Brother. For the sake of our children, the Door must remain open.

Crusher. Brother. Door. No salutation or signature, no return address. Other than Crusher, no names of any kind. The words run together with Gerard’s take on how treatment changed his perspective.

Something presses my stomach again. Dread. Soon as I saw this young man, I knew he was an omen of something. And when is an omen good?

“Your dad had this,” I say. “Did he say why? Or who sent it?”

An angry look crosses Gerard’s face. “My dad’s dead,” he says. “So’s Brother Dominic. Liver cancer stage 4B on Christmas Day. What’d they do to deserve that, huh?”

“They both died on Christmas? Gerard, I’m so sorry.” First David, now his dad and Dominic? He stiffens when I reach for him, and, of course, I’m the last person he wants to comfort him. “I know how hard it is. I lost my mom, as you know, and my dad ten years ago.”

The day Dad died, I thought I’d never get off the floor. I cried so hard I threw up, right in the kitchen. Karl was there, my future husband, visiting on the weekend from his residency. I didn’t even think we were serious, but there he was, talking me through it, the words lost now, but not the comfort of his voice.

I looked in his eyes, daring to hope that with this man I wouldn’t pass on to my children what Mom passed down to me.

“Mom’s half-there most days,” says Gerard. “But one thing.”

The rear entrance bangs open, spewing orange light. Two men dump oily garbage, chatting in Spanish.

“Check the postmark, Daphne,” says Gerard at the end of the alleyway. He was right beside me. Now it’s a black bird sidestepping on the dumpster, its talons clacking, wanting me to feed it. I flinch and catch Gerard shrugging under the icy rain before he disappears.

The postmark is from Los Angeles, sent October last year. Six months ago, George Gedney received this postcard. Two months later, he’s dead, and so is another son.

What does that mean? How does it fit in with Paul?

Though he’s gone, I keep calling for Gerard, my voice strangled. Someone has me by the elbow, my husband. Even in lifts, Karl’s three inches shorter than me.

“Daphne, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Colquitt. I need Sheriff Colquitt or . . .” Voices argue in my head, and I nod at the hail swirling past yellow streetlamps. “Thirty years ago, Bixbee was a young man. He might still be alive.”

“Daphne, did that man hurt you? *Hey.*”

Karl demands that someone call the police, but I shake him.

“It’s fine, Karl,” I say, dialing Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office. “Gerard’s a boy I knew from my hometown.”

Karl’s calling someone too. “Some coincidence,” he says.

Though it wasn’t. Here I am trying not to think about the past, and it comes back to slap me in the face as though I summoned it. Paul. The little brother I vowed to protect.

The phone finally picks up. “Berkshire Sheriff’s Office.”

“Hello,” I say, “could I leave a message for Harold Bixbee to call me back as soon as possible? He is or was a deputy in your department.”

“Uh, ma’am, I don’t have anyone in our personnel records who matches that name. But if it’s an emergency, I’d be glad—”

I hang up. Damn. I should’ve known at nine p.m., all I’d get is a desk sergeant. I’d spend half the night catching him up to speed.

“Daphne.” My husband lowers his phone, looking at me as though I’ve lost my mind. “I asked Ed to pull the hotel’s security feed. You’re the only one on tape.”

“What? No.”

“It shows that you walked out that door alone,” says Karl, gesturing, “and I come out a few minutes later.”

The Door must remain open.

Dread hardens, then the postcard’s corner jabs my thumb. I’m about to show Karl my proof when I realize that now there are only two crows in the moon.

“How’d he do that?” I keep flipping it, expecting the third one to return, before I sense my husband waiting. Distantly, I hear wings flap, but it could be the rain. “Gerard wanted me to have his dad’s postcard.”

“So this boy Gerard comes all the way from Springfield to hand you a postcard,” Karl says. “And he can magically avoid cameras?”

“I’m not from Springfield,” I say, shaking off a chill. Magically avoid cameras. And Gerard can turn pictures of crows into real ones too. How?

“You seem very agitated,” says Karl. “Want me to call Dr. Russell? Unless . . .” Karl’s listening, just not to me. “Ed says the camera angles aren’t the best here. There’s a few blind spots.”

“I said I’m not from Springfield, Karl. Any more than you’re from Boston.”

My husband nods, still wary. “Boston is more recognizable than Quincy. But how does your hometown account for why Gerard isn’t on the security footage?”

I lick my lips, my hand hovering over Karl’s phone.

When we first met, I wanted to keep things upbeat. Me? I’m a daddy’s girl, though (chuckling) certainly not to a fault. In the interest of a second date, I might’ve understated some things.

“Here,” I say, “it’s more like I’m from the Hilltowns. It’s a remote area.” My lips tremble, trying to force out the name of my hometown. “I was born and raised in New Minton, Karl.”

Somewhere between Cabbage Patch Kids and stickers hidden in a cereal box, the ones Paul demanded every time we opened a new Crøonchy Stars, is recognition. I can tell by the strange flicker on Karl’s face.

“The New Minton Boys,” he says. “All those missing kids, the ones never found.” Karl is stunned. “Daphne, you’re from there? Did you know those boys? God, you would’ve been a kid yourself.”

“I was eleven,” I say. And I was a kid, a selfish kid. I came from a large family. Brandy was seventeen, Courtney fifteen, Ellie nine, and Paul seven.

The day before my brother disappeared, I wasn’t thinking that this night was the last time we’d all be together. I wasn’t thinking about the pain Mom and Dad would go through, especially after the town gossip began.

No. I thought my biggest problems in the world were mean schoolboys. So I ruined dinner.

“Daphne?” Now Karl looks mad. “That’s a big secret not to tell your husband.”

If only he knew.