

Etienne's Voice

by Christine Daffe

I live in a studio apartment with no curtains. I name it “the nest” and I like it very much. A wall-to-wall set of windows, including one large door (or French window), allow a panoramic view over the entire city. There is only one bug: my balcony connects with the neighbor's balcony. The barrier in between is a low, insignificant, please-jump-over separation.

Speaking of my neighbor, I am not fond of the word itself. For some reason, the *neigh* part makes me uncomfortable and the whole thing does not sound appropriate for a young woman. I may name her “the mademoiselle”, but considering that she spends a great deal of time on her balcony, I may prefer “the gull” or “the pigeon”. “The crow” may be fine too.

Yes, “the crow” is fine. I do not see her, but I feel her presence. She stands very close to the trifling barrier mentioned before. With her piercing eyes, and obliquely through the window on my right, she is looking inside the nest and all over my body. I am in my bed, naked like the Vitruvian Man.

I also feel the presence of two spiders. One has settled in a corner, the other is walking on the ceiling. And suddenly, I have this crazy impulse, so crazy and so puzzling I do not possess enough vocabulary and grammar skills to describe what is invisible and what is visible about it. The reader must excuse me and be attentive. The reader has to imagine me propping up on my elbows and then staring at the crow. My eyes go round as flying saucers. Her reaction is troubling. She has a *haut-le-corps* — a short, sharp, involuntary and backward movement. Half a second later, she propels herself away, out of my sight.

Humiliation? Humiliation must be a peculiar mental state — a kind of mix with physical properties similar to radiation or sound waves. It has caused the crow to vanish; it makes me sorry for her. The kooky I am lies down again and presses his cheek deeply into the pillow. Sun-rays splash around the peach-hued bed linen.

I am fine, but I picture the crow inside her own studio now. She is standing stiff, apparently petrified in front of her own window. Her mouth gapes. Skipping and gamboling around her, a winged, joyful demon sings: “Want to yell? Want to kick off? To crash twenty floors down and spread yourself all over the sidewalk?”

Then I hope — with all my heart I hope (while presuming she is curling up on her sofa) — that I will not stumble across her in elevators or corridors, at least not before a long time. Humiliation is a very peculiar state of mind.

Spiders survive too.

A few hours later the return of the crow perturbs me considerably. Her back to me, she is having an eyeful of the entire city. But why does she stand near the useless barrier — why not in front of her door, in the middle of her balcony? I am anticipating an explicit face to face, resulting from a suggestive 180-degree turn of her head, shoulders, breast, hips, feet, altogether, slowly, in my direction. In reality, she keeps an eye on me; I also keep an eye on her, watching through my window. I must admit that I am dubious about my thinking. I am watching her very discreetly, as discreetly as possible. I breathe slowly, as slowly as possible. I behave normally, as normally as possible. I suppose that indifference kills. Sitting down at my desk, pen in hand, I try to look a bit absentminded or somehow absorbed in my work, somehow in the process of creating a document of historic proportions.

I groan and I drool afterward. I groan and I drool after the crow has left, after she finds herself back in her studio, with her imperturbability. Only after. I think I should have been rude with her and shown her an elongated middle finger (the reader understands what it means) or look at her into the eyes (as an authoritative father), and maybe precipitate myself on the French window, open it, get my head out and yell.

Of course, as I picture myself throwing rude remarks from my part of the balcony to the other part, I remember how clumsy my talking is, how poor my vocabulary is (how much poorer when I do not use a dictionary) and how manifest is my accent. I hear the crow laughing. I feel as if I am coming back after several centuries. And as I find out that each object in the nest is still in its place, exactly in the same position as it was the last time I saw it, I am amazed.

Should I believe that language is what is keeping me from protecting my territory? No. I lack arrogance—this must be the only explanation. I am a nice and kind man, too nice, too kind. I am sickeningly goodhearted. I am an idiot. I am too heavy and too numb with courtesy to be rude. I quietly abandon my chair, slowly stand up and, with no intention to toss the air around me, reach the middle of the room. There, I plunge my hands firmly down into my pockets, touch the bottom, close my fist and push thoroughly. I believe that my hands, one day, will pass through. My legs are temporarily paralyzed. I walk again, but only after I have inhaled all the oxygen that my lungs can possibly contain.

So, I am anxious after the second excursion of the crow. Now I walk in one direction after another, wall to wall with brisk, decisive footsteps, like an animal caged. Then I think that if I want to regain my territory, I must not underestimate the crow. The crow is a very intelligent woman. I think that she will not risk hearing me one day, vociferating in front of her door, raising the voice. Neighbors are curious. Our neighbors on the floor would come out and check, one

after the other, to see in the corridor what this disturbance is all about. Neighbors would understand what is happening and would blame the crow. She would become ashamed, humiliated again, extremely humiliated. I imagine her head teetering on misty shoulders, her head, a disaster area, full of tics! I call her names. I speak fast on her doorstep. I am sardonic. I command the crow to give up these promenades on her balcony and I explain to her that balconies only will connect, not us. I shout out proudly and energetically: "I do not appreciate to have a voyeur around!" Finally, I promise, yes I promise. If she comes over again to have a look in my studio, I will do it, in this corridor; I will offer her another loud and vociferous performance. Thank you, neighbors.

Relying on my imagination is a wrong move, isn't it? Hardly a few hours after the crow's second visit, a third visit is happening, and again, I have no reaction. I keep writing. Leaning on my notebook, I keep writing.

