

In 1971, we moved again, this time to Playa del Rey—another section of Los Angeles. For obvious reasons (the nightly gunshots began sounding awfully close) our parents believed it was safer for us than Inglewood.

I'd started kindergarten by then, but given the year separating us and the fact that Los Angeles continued to bus my brother, Micah and I found ourselves in different schools. While the students in my class resembled students that might be found in an Iowa suburb, Micah was bused to one of the schools in the inner city, and was the only white child in his class. Still, in the afternoons, we were together, and we spent our time as we had in Inglewood, a couple of little kids with no fear of the world. We'd leave our apartment complex and spend hours going anywhere we wanted—we'd walk a couple miles down to the marina where we'd look at the boats docked in their slips or climb up the underside of highway bridges or utility poles looking for bird eggs, or explore vacant, decaying, or burned-out homes in search of something interesting that might have been left behind. Other times, we'd head behind our apartment complex, cross a few avenues, and hop a few fences to visit the high school. In the late afternoons, it was usually empty, and we used to love the wide-open fields, which were much larger than the ones at our elementary schools. We'd race or hide, or simply walk the hallways, looking into the classrooms.

One day, we spotted a raven in the trees, and were instantly captivated. We began following it as it moved from tree to tree. After that, whenever we went to the school, we'd look for the raven, and surprisingly, we'd almost always find it. After calling to it for a while, we'd head off to do something else. Yet, soon enough, we'd see the raven again, in one of the trees near where we were playing. Pretty soon, we weren't able to go anywhere near the school *without* seeing the raven. It was *always* around. The raven, we soon realized, was following us.

We began to feed it. We'd toss some bread on the ground; the raven would swoop down and eat it, then fly away. Gradually, it stayed long enough for us to approach. From there, we moved to feeding it plums, and the raven grew more comfortable with us. We got to the point where we could hold the plum outstretched on the ground and the raven wouldn't hesitate to fly close and begin to eat. It struck us that it was becoming something of a pet, and we began to refer to it that way. Borrowing the camera from mom, we were even able to take up-close pictures of it, and we proudly showed them off when the photos were developed.

We named the raven Blackie. Blackie was great. Blackie was cool. Blackie, we eventually discovered, was a monster.

As interested as we were in the bird, we found out that the bird had become far more interested in us. Particularly our hair. Because we were blond, our hair gleamed in the sunlight, and ravens, we came to discover, love shiny things. Ravens also build nests. Put one together with the other, and you can imagine what happened next.

We were at the school one afternoon when Blackie suddenly came swooping toward us, diving at our heads over and over, like a fighter plane attacking a ship. It was cawing at us, and we scrambled away. Blackie followed. His wingspan seemed to have grown exponentially overnight—and soon we were running and screaming for our lives as Blackie buzzed over our heads. We hid for a while near some Dumpsters, trying to figure out how to get back home, and finally ventured out again. With the coast clear, we took off running.

Keeping up with Micah was impossible, and gradually I slowed. In that instant, Blackie

swooped down and landed on my head, which was quite simply the most terrifying thing ever to happen to me in my young life. I panicked, unable to breathe, unable to move a muscle. I could feel Blackie's claws digging into my head, and—as if to amplify the horror—Blackie began to peck *hard*, its head bobbing up and down like the oil pumps in Oklahoma. I screamed. Blackie pecked harder. And that's how it went. Peck, scream. Peck, scream. Peck, scream. Peck, scream. It felt as if the raven was doing his best to drill a hole into my skull in order to suck my brains out.

I vaguely remember my brother receding into the distance—he was oblivious to Blackie's return—until the first scream. Wheeling around, Micah ran back toward me, shouting at me to push the bird off. My mind, however, was blank, and I was frozen. All I could do was stand there while Blackie killed me, one peck at a time.

Micah, of course, knew what to do. Screaming and waving his hands wildly, he was able to dislodge the evil demon bird from my scalp. Then, as Blackie continued to swoop at us, Micah took off his shirt and waved it around like a flag. Finally, Blackie retreated to the safety of the trees.

On our way home, I was embarrassed by how frightened I'd been. Micah hadn't been frightened. Micah had taken on Blackie while I'd panicked. Micah fought while I froze. I came to believe that Micah, unlike me, could do anything. And as I struggled to keep up with him, I wanted more than anything to be just like him.