



"Crows" by Marissa Huddy

THE HARD PLACE

SYDNY LONG

The scream punched through the jaundiced haze of the sun-baked afternoon like a shooting star. It collided with Mae and blasted the virtual dream from her day in a sunburst of brassy light; she blinked once, twice, her interfaces scrambling to place the sound. A silver curd of synthetic saliva—Mae came outfitted with only the most realistic amenities—blitzed from her gaping lip and struck a nearby stone.

Then, in neon cobalt across her field of vision:

KATIE IN DANGER

“Katie?” Mae twisted around, suddenly unable to place her surroundings. Grays and greens streaked hazily past her as she scanned the path with an urgency that starkly juxtaposed the manufactured calm of her plastic face. More silver water bubbled from her gaping mouth, spattering the rocks beneath her boots. “Katie?”

Upon hearing nothing but the plink of falling gravel and the din of chattering voices further down the mountain, Mae dismounted from her perch. She had been standing on a little stone parapet that overlooked the mountain’s shadow, which purpled the greenery below like a shiner. Now, she quickly climbed back down the path. It swooped down into a depression that was sheltered by a massive outcropping of scraggly rock and dimpled with enormous stones. Mae crouched down, squinting against the gush of wind, night-vision flickering uselessly. Her system core whirred hysterically; and an exhausted, heavy smell like smoke prickled her olfactory sensors.

In the darkness, something hissed.

Mae stepped back, fell, and landed heavily on her pack-clad back. The nozzle of her hydration bladder caught her shoulder blade painfully. Before she could right herself, something dry rasped past her shin, causing the delicate sensors that studded her soft-pink exoskeleton to chime in disgust—the mechanical equivalent of gooseflesh.

A rattlesnake glided past her, trawling the rocks for a suitable perch and dragging its sun-gorged body across Mae’s legs with slippery, sinister insouciance. She made a soft sound of disgust. As it squeezed itself through a crack in the mountainside, Mae tried to expedite the process of controlling her fear

response by holding her breath. Her core heaved a waspish screech before finally buffering and restoring her higher functions.

“Katie?” she asked dustily. “Katie?”

“Mae!” A slim, callus-studded hand parted the curtain of shadows and groped the ground for support. Mae made a sound that might have been a scream, then lunged forward to

recover the drowning hand. She latched both hands around Katie’s wrist, ignoring the bite of her owner’s fit bracelet, and gave a mighty tug. Katie moaned lowly—the moan of the dog dragging itself under the porch to die—but made encouraging progress out of the depression.

“I am here,” Mae said. There was nothing else she could think to say. She extended one arm and hooked it under Katie’s armpit; with the other, she reached up to brace herself against a rocky protrusion.

Mae stood suddenly. She levered Katie out of the depression and onto the path, where the rescued girl immediately buckled on her left leg. As Mae

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recovered her balance--noting for the first time the sheerness and hazard of the mountainside--she traced Katie's grounded form with wide, voltaic eyes. Katie had sustained several rips and smudges to her Junior Mountaineer tee-shirt, as well as to her compression shorts; her hydration pack hung precariously from one shuddering shoulder. Her black, curly ponytail, which Mae had often likened to a calligrapher's "S," was limp and laminated to her head with sweat. Mae was clandestinely glad to see that Katie's face had not been harmed in the fall: a visage of such symmetry and splendor was a rarity and should be protected from injury. Her programming didn't allow for ill thoughts towards Katie, but Mae was capable of some degree of free thought and had deduced independently that her owner was beautiful.

"Oh, God," Katie kept saying, her shoulders pumping. "Oh, God."

Calmly, dreamily, Mae sat down on the gravel and looked at Katie's legs. They were sun-bronzed, rigid with muscle. Her right leg had been tented up so she could prop one arm against her knee as a sort of reassurance that her physical form had not been swallowed up by the depression. Her left leg, however, had a hiatus in its form: two little commas, cushioned by swollen, bruised tissue. A tributary of blood ran down the side of her shin.

"You are bleeding," Mae declared, and she tried to swipe the blood away.

"No! Don't touch it! There could be venom." Katie batted Mae's hand away, then caressed the inflamed bite.

"I can not be harmed by--"

"I've been bitten by a rattlesnake, Mae. I... I got bit."

Mae furrowed her brow at the sensory memory of that horrible snake's scales rasping against her skin. "Do I call for help?"

A feverish light illuminated Katie's dark eyes and she laughed, a harsh staccato. "Yes! Good, please, please do that."

Mae turned over her wrist and tapped the screen

"A TRIBUTARY OF BLOOD RAN DOWN THE SIDE OF HER SHIN."

embedded into her plastic skin. Six icons appeared, one of which was a green outline of a phone. She punched the icon, then twitched as her system core once again flared with frantic heat. Her cooling fans had been damaged in a fall during their last hike and although Katie had begged her parents to have Mae repaired, they had not visited a COM shop since then. It was becoming increasingly apparent that Katie's parents were hoping to replace Mae with a newer model. Obsolescence was becoming a fixture in their conversations with their daughter. Mae didn't know what the word meant, but she had ideas.

The phone icon displayed a number grid. Mae typed in the digits and waited for the confirmation ding. Katie made another noise of discomfort; above them, the world shimmered feverishly with sunlight and blood.

A cobalt message flashed across Mae's vision field: CALL CANNOT BE COMPLETED. FAILED CONNECTION.

"Mae?" Katie panted. She was not a girl who panted often and was justifiably panicked by her sudden breathlessness. In spite of the heat of the day, a shiver spidered through her body. "Mae, what's wrong?"

"Call cannot be completed. Failed connection," Mae reiterated quietly, almost shamefully. The word "obsolescence" lodged itself into her core like a thorn, like an itch that could never be scratched.

"Oh. Oh... God."

"I will try calling again."

"No, no, Mae, you'll just wear out your core," Katie said, reaching across her injured leg to grab Mae's wrist. The synthetic girl looked up at her owner

"THE MECHANISM CONTROLLING HER BREATHING, HER MECHANICAL HEART, STILLED AND OSSIFIED IN HER CHEST."

with such humiliation -- such real, visceral humiliation -- that tears surged into Katie's eyes. "Mae, you know what'll happen to you."

Mae blinked. The doleful blue of her eye seemed terrifyingly human in the clarity of day.

"Your parents will be disappointed that I have failed to serve my purpose."

A sob caught painfully in Katie's throat, and she coughed. "I don't care about them, Mae. They've

always been too overprotective anyway."

"They care about you. They programmed me to protect you."

"Yeah, right. They programmed you to raise me so they wouldn't have to worry about messing me up." She touched Mae's face with a tremulous hand, feeling the silvery caress of each individual sensor and the subsequent quiver of energy as her hand and its motives were identified.

Though Mae had been at her side since birth, Katie rarely touched the pink shell encasing her digital viscera and corbo-steel bones. It had never looked more like flesh.

"Why do you think I always climb mountains?"

"Because you enjoy it. As do I,"

Mae added, smiling dutifully. Her basic emotional faculties could manufacture marginal amounts of joy in response to certain stimuli, one of which was the ghosting of mountain wind across her sensors.

"So I can get away from them. And be with you. You're my best friend, Mae," Katie said, and she meant this. She meant this more than she had ever meant anything. Meaning had been cheapened by the COMs, with their manufactured docility and kindness, but Mae had meaning, had poetry in her heart, had sculptures in her head, had concertos in her eyes. "Please, Mae, don't be afraid..."

"I will not," Mae said. She switched off her fear sensors; they quieted with a sepulchral sigh.

Katie's pretty face crumpled around a wrenching sob, and she suddenly wrapped her arms around Mae, pulling her close. Mae's sensors sang a euphonious blue note.

"I'm so lucky. I took you for granted--all the songs and the calls and the--the hikes -- oh my God, the hikes. You learned to love hiking. They said you'd never love anything organically."

"I do." The warmth of Katie's body -- the thunder of blood through her veins, the tectonic movements of her diaphragm -- made Mae forget about words like obsolescence and

her failed connection. She felt like smiling in spite of the lack of proper stimuli.

"You did. You did, Mae."

"I did," Mae repeated and her voice died away. Her core sputtered for a moment before expiring, blacking out her external sensors. The mechanism controlling her breathing, her mechanical heart, stilled and ossified in her chest like a mountain. She blinked up at Katie, who was crying again, and it dawned on Mae that there would be other hikers soon, other hikers with better COMs, COMs with updated connection services. Katie would be safe.

Then in neon cobalt across her field of vision: KATIE PROTECTED. SYSTEM OBSOLETE. SHUTTING DOWN NOW.

"I did."

