

Raven

Donald Little sat with his back against the shady side of a stone wall, the remnants of what had once been a small Iraqi business in Fallujah before it had been reduced to a pile of rubble. The heat from the sun beating down on the other side of the wall leaked through the stone making him feel like he was sitting in front of a blast furnace. He had no way of knowing what kind of business it might have been or what had happened to the owner, and frankly he didn't give a shit. He was hot, he was miserable, and after six months in Iraq all he wanted was to go home to the Reservation.

He had graduated from the Lummi Nation High School, if you could call it a graduation, and not on the honor roll. He had played basketball for the Black Hawks, but mostly he kept to himself and was an average student.

He worked a couple of crappy jobs flipping burgers in nearby Bellingham after getting out of high school, but that sucked. With no other job prospects other than working at the Silver Reef Hotel & Casino where he just couldn't imagine the idea of waiting on all these rich white people who probably didn't think they were rich, but they sure as hell were by Indian standards, he decided maybe the military would be an option; if nothing else, he might get in some school that would help him when he got out. So he had joined the Marines two years after leaving high school.

The military was, and probably would still be an option after Iraq, but he didn't have a clue what a hellhole Iraq could be. He was on a couple of lists to get in a school to learn a trade, but that was all he knew. When they told him, he was being sent to Iraq after basic training, he thought it was cool; he'd get to put all that training to use.

Well, he was right about the training part, but cool didn't happen. Not only was it not cool climatically but it also was not cool in terms of an assignment; gathering up body parts in a plastic bag is not very cool and probably not a skill that would serve him in civilian life.

His full name was Donald Little Squirrel. His people were from the Lummi Nation in the far reaches of the Pacific Northwest, near the Canadian border where for centuries they had fished salmon, harvested shellfish, and gathered berries and other edibles in the forests.

His father had given him his name because he thought Donald reminded him of a baby squirrel when he was born, all pink and wrinkly. Maybe it was the cheap wine his father drank that messed with his eyesight; for sure it messed with his brain.

Donald was okay with his name when he was on the reservation; it was normal to have names of animals and other spirit stuff, but when he went out into the white man's world they laughed at his name, so he had it legally changed to simply Donald Little.

That pissed his father off and he still wouldn't talk to him hardly at all, but that wasn't really so different from when he wasn't mad when Donald was growing up. His father was not exactly a wordsmith.

His mother, who had born five children, was tired and sickly when Donald was young and didn't have the energy to worry about stuff like a name change. Shortly after graduating from boot camp, his mother had died. The Marines had flown him home for the funeral but his father was drunk the whole time he was there so there was really no talk between them. Afterward, he returned to duty, feeling very alone.

Two Humvees rolled past on the street in front of him, covering him with even more of the fucking dust that seemed to envelop everything in this shit-hole. God, he hated this place. Back home, it rained a lot, but at least it was cool and green. He used to curse the rain and dampness but he would never do that again.

His platoon sergeant popped around the end of the wall as Little watched a scorpion creep across the dirt a short distance away like a Marine doing the belly-crawl. He hated those little bastards, too, but his instincts were to respect all that nature put in his path.

You had to put your socks over your boot tops when you went to bed at night to keep the little fuckers from crawling inside and then stinging you the next morning when you put your foot in your boot; there were no scorpions in good old rainy Washington.

"Hey, Little, any news from your secret Indian shaman or whatever? Will we be okay if we go in and clear that building?"

Donald looked at Sergeant Daft as he pointed to a two-story structure about fifty yards away. It was hard not to laugh at his name, but Daft seemed to take that in stride. He was a huge, muscular man who could break most men in half, but took the ribbing about his name in stride. Everyone assumed that after spending some part of his childhood fighting every kid that teased him about his name, he just accepted the chuckles and bullshit when people first heard it spoken. Little knew how he felt about being teased over his name.

"My sources tell me that it's okay, Sarge."

"Good, I'll take Parnell's squad in and verify it's clear of any Muj. You stay here with your squad and watch for snipers."

"Okay, Sarge." Staying outside, as hot and miserable as it was, was better than wandering into buildings with little or no light, and with a hundred hiding places for people who wanted to kill you and drag your sorry ass through the streets of Iraq.

His source that the Sarge had joked about was an Iraqi Pied Crow, or Mesopotamia Crow, or a Raven as Little thought of him. Of course, he had never told anyone he was listening to an Iraqi Pied Crow. They would have Section-eighted his ass out on the next chopper with him flying higher on anti-psychotic drugs than the air-jockey lifting him out of there.

Growing up on the Lummi Reservation, Donald had heard all the old stories and legends about Raven from the elders in the tribe, not to mention his father's ramblings after a night of drinking.

Raven was a good guy with a mischievous streak, sort of the practical joker of birds. He was much revered in most First People's lore and was credited with as many miracles as Jesus Christ.

Donald dismissed the stories of Raven bringing the sun to the world, being a trickster, and all the other bullshit stories about the beginning of the world. The same way he dismissed the bizarre stories that the Christians told about burning bushes talking to people, and a never-ending fish and bread supply from one tiny basket. All the religious voodoo and the silliness about the origins of the earth and humans the white people talked about were just as crazy as anything the Native Americans had dreamed up.

He figured these myths were the ravings of simple-minded old men thousands of years earlier when everyone thought the world was flat and they didn't understand shit about stuff as fundamental as a solar eclipse, the tides, or anything else.

When something they didn't understand happened, like an eclipse, earthquake, or even thunder and lightning, they must have all run to hide in their caves, or wherever they thought they would be safe from a savage world. They lived in a world full of fear and invented wild tales about spirit-animals, and gods to explain what they didn't understand. They needed someone or something to be responsible for what they couldn't personally comprehend or control.

Little had been in Iraq for just under a month when he first saw the Raven that he didn't think was a Raven. It had the body shape of a Raven, the cocky little walk, or more accurately the crazy little hop of the Raven, the head shape, and those all-seeing and all-knowing sparkling ebony eyes of a Raven, but its color was all wrong.

Its body was the color of gray ashes in a fire, and it had a black head and black patches on its wings. He had asked one of the guys in his platoon, a nerdy sort named Nigel who was into birds and was always talking about them. He had told Little they were a species of crows indigenous to the area.

The next day as they left their personnel carrier to clear a building suspected of being an insurgent hideout, he could see a Raven sitting in a nearby tree, watching everything, as Ravens are apt to do.

Something about this bird caught his attention; it seemed to be looking directly at him. That was when he heard a single word – "caution", but no one else seemed to hear it, only him.

He knew it wasn't the voice of any of the men around him – he knew their voices. You had to know your group's voices because the enemy often tried to trick you by speaking English and trying to get you to make a mistake. Your life and the lives of your friends could depend on knowing the voices of your fellow Marines.

He decided it was his imagination playing tricks on him, some frigging heat stroke thing. He mopped the sweat from his face and began to move forward with the rest of his squad when the word "caution" invaded his brain again. This time, he knew it wasn't his imagination.

He looked in the direction of the Raven since he was confident that was where the sound, or the thought, or whatever the hell it was seemed to have come from. The Raven was still staring intently at Little, bouncing its head up and down, squawking, and then looking directly at the building and then toward Donald.

"Sarge? I don't have a good feeling about this place. My gut tells me there's a trap waiting for us inside." Little wasn't sure how the Sergeant would respond, and there was no way he was going to say a bird told him to be careful.

"What the hell are you talking about, Little? Our Intel says the building should be clear, that the bad guys have boogied. We're just going in to look for explosives and clean the place out."

"I know Sarge, but I sort of have my own Intel, and it says to be careful."

"Is this some of your spirit shit again, Little?" Little had made the mistake of telling some of the guys about Indian beliefs, and he had gotten nothing but crap about it since.

"I guess you could say that."

While Donald had changed his last name, he couldn't hide his distinctive Native American looks. His five-foot-six frame, straight black hair, moon face, and Asian features gave him away, and everyone knew the first time they met him that he was an Indian. Most white people didn't have a clue what tribe you might be from, or even how many Indian nations there might be; but if you had the look, you were an Indian.

They teased him about beliefs in spirits, sweat lodges, shamans, smoking peyote, and sniffing glue, most of which they got from bad movies, and were always asking him to do a rain dance to break the smothering heat of Iraq or some other similar shit.

Some people would see that teasing as a kind of discrimination or hazing, but his buddies knew he didn't subscribe to the old ways any more than he believed the Christian religion they had tried to force on him as a kid on the reservation. Besides, Little understood teasing. Indians had a great sense of humor and liked to tease each other all the time.

Most importantly, these were the guys who had your back when the shit hit the fan, and you had theirs, so you didn't take this stuff seriously. In the Marines, it was a brotherhood of the highest order. What happened when you went home to the United States might be a problem, but here you were all brothers.

Daft spoke to the squad he was getting ready to lead into the building. "Let's be on our toes. Even though Intel says it's clear, you never know. Little has a Indian-style bad feeling about this place." A couple of guys chuckled, but you could see the squad tighten up.

After some of the men had covered all the escape routes, Daft stepped to the front door, kicked it in, and lobbed a grenade inside, peeling back against the wall to shield himself from the blast. The back-blast coming through the door produced more than dust, it also produced a man's hand

that rolled to rest at Daft's feet. The Sergeant and two others moved in, and then Little heard one of the men yell, "Clear!"

Later, Daft told Little that there had been two bad guys in there with Soviet-made SKS automatic weapons, grenades, and rocket launchers. They were ready to die for the cause, but thanks to Little they had gone in looking for trouble and had prevailed.

"Thanks for the heads up, Little. That's two Muj that are on their way to collect their virgins. If your Intel, whoever or whatever the fuck it is, gives you any more advice be sure to pass it on."

That had been the start of what was now going on five months of him getting "Intel" from a Raven, and he was pretty sure it was the same Raven although it was hard to tell them apart.

Donald had thought he'd imagined that first event, or was reading some bullshit into a crazy bird hanging around. But time after time, either in a dream or out on patrol, Raven, who was very real and not just another bird, either talked to him or gave him a sign to guide him as they went out on patrol.

There was the time when one of their guys was hit by sniper fire from a nearby collection of buildings. No one had seen the flash or was sure where the fire had come from. Everyone was covered up wondering how the hell they would flush out the sniper.

Little heard Raven's call – he was sitting in a nearby tree. Once he had Little's attention, Raven flew from the tree, circling casually overhead, and then flew straight toward a window on the top floor of one large building, swerving at the last second before going through the window. "Hey, Sarge. See that window on the top floor, the third one in from the left? I think that's where our sniper is at."

They put the glasses on that window, and sure enough, they spotted the enemy sniper. A few minutes later, one of their snipers took the guy out as he leaned out to try to get a shot.

Another time, they were driving outside of town in their Humvee, along with three other vehicles. Suddenly, Raven appeared, flying in front of the lead vehicle that Little was in. He flew close enough to the windshield that the driver started cursing the bird. "Goddamned crazy fucking bird. Get the hell out of here before I frag your ass!"

Little wasn't sure what Raven was up to, but he convinced the Lieutenant to stop the convoy. They got out and carefully walked along the road with Little keeping an eye on Raven who moved along with them, then started telling Little, "Here, here." That's when they found the wires to an IED with enough explosives to turn a Humvee into a pasta colander.

These experiences caused Little to reassess his attitude toward his tribe's legends, at least the one about Raven, and others. One Raven event in Iraq could have been written off as a coincidence, even two or three occurrences, but for whatever reason, this bird had chosen Little as its contact. Raven had become his and the unit's guardian angel and was helping Little to guide the platoon away from trouble and to survive in a world where it seemed everyone wanted them dead.

Over the next few months, Raven continued to either appear in Little's dreams with information or would appear physically and provide signals to help him and his platoon to avoid trouble. It wasn't perfect, and sometimes their guys got hit, but Little's squad had a significantly lower casualty rate than any squad in Iraq that was regularly engaging in firefights.

They were clearing a block of houses one day, looking for reported insurgents, when all hell broke loose. There were four well-armed insurgents on the upper floors of one of the buildings who had them pinned down. Little saw Raven sitting on the roof of another building, watching the firefight.

Little watched Raven closely and saw him lift off and come flying toward where he was located to get his attention, and then flying across the road toward where they were taking fire. Little couldn't make out where Raven was going or what he might be trying to tell him when he heard a shot and saw feathers explode from Raven's body. He watched as Raven spiraled to the ground in a crazy falling leaf pattern like a stunt flyer at an air show.

Little froze as Raven's body hit the ground, kicking up a small cloud of dust, then bouncing a couple of inches upward and coming to rest in the settling dust. Little's first reaction was to dash to Raven to help, but he knew that meant almost certain death. He looked around, and up at the windows that he was sure the insurgents were using. He knew they weren't good enough shots to hit a Raven on the wing with a rifle and concluded it must have been a stray round that took Raven from him.

His heart sank, but the first order of business was to clear that building of the bad guys, and especially the asshole that had shot Raven. The Lieutenant had called a grenade launcher forward, and a well-placed round rendered the building quiet. Little's squad was given the go-ahead to check that the building was clear. Inside they found the four insurgents, or what was left of them, and a cache of weapons. Little had wanted to be the one to kill the bastards who had shot Raven.

Once the area was secure, Little went back down on the street and picked up Raven without anyone noticing what he was doing. He put the bloodied bird gently inside his shirt and returned to their barracks in an old building where they bivouacked; it was close to time for evening chow.

Back in the compound, the guys were talking about how the bird had exploded. "Talk about one unlucky fucking bird. Man, that bird took a wrong fucking turn today."

When Corporal Hannon told him they were cooking some frozen burger patties, Little said no thanks and sat for thirty minutes trying to recall some of what his father had told him about the Lummi burial customs. He needed that old drunk Indian now more than he wanted to admit.

He went to the water buffalo, put some water in his helmet and walked to the far reaches of the compound inside the razor wire. He sat down, and using a rag wetted in the water; he carefully

washed the body of Raven. He then wrapped Raven in a clean, dry washcloth, dug a small hole with his Ek knife and laid Raven in the bottom with his head pointed to the east.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he wished Raven a quick journey into the next world, then covered him with dirt, carefully tamping it down. Returning to his barracks, he looked at the bloodstain on his tee shirt, took it off, and folded it up and put it in his locker.

He then joined the others who were already eating, silently acknowledging to himself that this was the funeral feast for Raven, though he couldn't share that moment with anyone around him.

The next day, Saturday, they were getting the day off, so Donald decided to call his dad. He'd gotten his friend, Jeremy, to buy his dad a cell phone so they could talk. His dad had at first refused, saying a cell phone "is too white for me", but when Donald called, Jeremy answered and then handed the phone to his dad. The excitement in his dad's voice was obvious.

"Hi, Dad?"

"Is that you, Donnie?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's me. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, I guess. Not much new here, ever. It's spring, so there are lots of flowers and trees with buds. How come you called? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, more or less. Dad, I'm changing my name back to Little Squirrel."

The phone was silent. "Dad, did you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't say anything."

"What should I say? It's your name. I gave it to you."

"Dad, something happened over here that has made me have more respect for the old ways. I know I gave you a bad time about that shit, but well . . . It's just that something happened. Maybe I'll tell you about it when I get home."

"I send up a prayer for you every night, Donnie."

Little paused as he choked back a sob. He couldn't remember his dad ever talking to him like this. "Thanks, Dad. I guess I'll say goodbye for now. I know you're not one for phone talking."

"Bye, Donnie."

The phone went dead. Little sat for several minutes with the phone up to his ear as if he could still hear his father's voice, then folded the phone and put it away in his jacket pocket.

He was nearing the end of his twelve-month deployment in Iraq. On Monday, they were going out on another patrol, his last. Little felt uneasy. Everyone was superstitious when they were short.

"Any Intel today, Little?" the Sarge asked.

Donald winced. "Nothing today, Sarge." He feared, not for himself, but for his buddies and the Sarge. Without Raven, he felt helpless, almost deaf and blind, and scared shitless.

They began walking down a street in Amariah, known to be a favorite area for insurgents to place roadside bombs, or drop explosives from cars. They spotted one roadside bomb that was taken care of by the OED boys.

Further along, they came across a car with three young Iraqi men inside. They searched the car but found nothing but some textbooks.

Turning down a side street, Little was sweeping the windows of the buildings when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Whirling on that movement, he brought his M249 Squad Automatic Weapon, simply called a SAW, around to where he'd seen the movement. There in his sights set an Iraqi crow as if it was perched on the end of the barrel. Little couldn't believe his eyes. It looked just like Raven, but he knew Raven was dead.

Common sense told him there were millions of crows in Iraq that looked just like Raven, but his heart wanted to believe that this one, if not Raven, was a relative. The bird was looking straight at him through the hooded front sight. He felt his heart quicken. Lowering his weapon, he looked at the bird. Raven bobbed his head up and down, squawked, and flew off and away from the troops the way Raven used to do when he was signaling that all was clear.

The rest of the patrol was uneventful. On the way back to their vehicles, some Iraqi families emerged from buildings, and the Marines gave them packets of MREs, and candy for the kids.

Little thought about what would happen to the unit when he left. He had to find someone who might understand about Raven. He decided to take a chance on the Sarge. At first, Daft thought he was daft, or had been doing drugs, but Little explained everything to him and made Sarge promise to look for the bird when they were on patrol. The Sarge promised, and Little knew there was nothing more he could do.

After eating his dinner, Little was wiped out, crashing when he returned to his barrack. In his dreams that night Raven came to him and told he would be safe until he rotated back to the states and going home.

As the chopper lifted off from the compound grounds, Little saw Raven sitting on a nearby roof, and he saw the Sarge look at the chopper then at Raven on the roof. He waved and Sarge waved back.

He could not hear Raven over the thump-thump-thump of the chopper blades, but he could see his beak open and close as if to say goodbye. Little hugged the blood-stained tee-shirt that was folded under his outer shirt.

The End