

PERSEPHONE OF THE CROWS

Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. She's written literary, contemporary, historical, and science fiction. Her most recent novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, won the 2013 PEN/Faulkner, the California Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker in 2014. The author lives in Santa Cruz, California. *Asimov's* has been publishing stories by Karen since the eighties, but it's been ten years since we've seen a new tale from her. We're glad she's returned now with this haunting look at . . .

PERSEPHONE OF THE CROWS

Isabelle Winters once saw a fairy. For real. It was little, like a hummingbird, with a hummingbird's frantic wings, and it was moving through the garden, shaking the rosebuds open for the bees. She's just told this to Polly, though not exactly in those words. The sarcastic for real, for instance, is all Polly. If there was ever a girl primed to see fairies, Isabelle Winters is that girl. If there ever was a girl who was not, that girl is Polly.

Polly is three years older than Isabelle, ten to Isabelle's seven, and they wouldn't even be friends except that Isabelle's father and Polly's father work together. Tonight they all had dinner at the Winters' house, and the girls are now in Isabelle's bedroom.

Isabelle has many things Polly wishes she had. Mr. Winters is not just a professor but also an artist. He and Isabelle have been making a pop-up map of Oz. The Emerald City is done, rows of glittering spires, and also the yellow brick road. Polly and Isabelle are sitting on the floor, the map opened between them. If Polly and her father tried to make a pop-up map, it would come out childish, not like this, not like something you might buy in a store. Polly's father would be game; he would do his best, but he's not an artist.

In the corner of the bedroom is a unicorn, large enough to ride though you'd feel pretty silly doing so at ten years old. The unicorn has golden eyes, a golden horn, and a golden carousel pole through its back, stretching from floor to ceiling. Mr. Winters made it from the old spring horse Isabelle had when she was little.

Mr. Winters has framed the closet door with turrets and banners and painted a portcullis on the front, so Isabelle walks into a castle every morning to get dressed. Tonight she's dressed for company, puffed sleeves and a sash. She looks a little like

Alice in Wonderland or maybe Wendy in *Peter Pan*. Something in a storybook.

Polly would like to be wearing that dress. Polly would like the map and the unicorn and the closet all to be hers. Polly would like to believe in fairies. Since she doesn't, her only choice is to find it funny that Isabelle does. Isabelle sees this in her face and tries to take it back. "It was kind of far away," she tells Polly, to suggest she isn't really sure what she saw.

Polly feels bad about making Isabelle do this. "You're so lucky. I wish I could see a fairy," she says, just to be nicer. Later, she'll remember making that wish. It seemed harmless at the time. She didn't believe in fairies.

Out in the living room, the adults are laughing. Polly makes another wish, but not out loud. She wishes that her father wouldn't get drunk tonight. She doesn't think that this wish will come true either and, if Isabelle has made the same wish, neither will hers. Getting drunk is what Mr. Winters and Polly's father do when they get together. Polly can't remember a single time when they didn't.

Of the two wishes, this second is the one that bothers Polly. Why make it? Her father is only having a good time. It would be great if he could paint castles in her room. It would be great if he didn't get drunk. But Polly feels guilty about wishing him different. She knows he would never wish her different; he loves her just the way she is. "Why do you think grown-ups never see fairies?" she asks Isabelle who, it turns out, knows the answer.

"It's because they don't believe."

So Isabelle thinks that it's Polly's *fault* that she doesn't see fairies? Polly is suddenly cross about it all—how she doesn't see fairies and doesn't have a unicorn, how she wouldn't look like something out of a picture book if she wore a dress with a sash, how her father and Mr. Winters are getting drunk in the living room together. She makes Isabelle play gin rummy, a game Polly will easily win. And then she makes Isabelle play again, trouncing her even more mercilessly the second time. And then she wants a third game, but Isabelle goes and gets a cloak from her dress-up chest. She puts it on with the hood up, and tells Polly it's a magic cloak that makes the wearer invisible. Polly has to pretend that she doesn't see Isabelle now, which gets boring fast, so Polly takes *Half Magic* from Isabelle's bookshelf and reads a bit. While she's doing that, Isabelle falls asleep on her bed with her shoes on and the cloak fallen to the floor.

Polly has already read *Half Magic*, and more than once. She puts on the invisibility cloak. Now that Isabelle won't see, she climbs onto the unicorn. She rides for a while, then there is nothing else to do, and she wants to go home. It's very late, way past her bedtime.

She decides to test the cloak's powers on the grown-ups. She moves down the hall, keeping her shoes quiet on the stone tiles. She passes through the dining room, where the dirty dishes are still on the table along with the chicken carcass, and the room smells of meat.

No one notices her. Mr. Winters has brought a painting up from his workroom, and they are all busy looking at it. Polly hears that it's not a new painting, but something he did some time ago. She never learns why they are looking at it now.

She moves to where she can see it, too. A naked woman with greenish skin sits on a beach. Her mouth is open; her hands are raised, and she's playing a game, something like cat's cradle. A complicated web of string and shells hangs from her fingers. Mrs. Winters doesn't have green skin, but she was obviously the model. It's as if they are all looking at Mrs. Winters with no clothes on and all pretending they aren't. The woman in the painting has large nipples and round breasts. Individual grains of sand have been carefully painted into her abundant pubic hair. It's a terrible painting.

"It's so beautiful," Polly's father says. He's shaking his head; he's so impressed, and maybe moved, that words are failing him.

"No one's ever liked it," Mr. Winters tells them, and Polly believes this. She goes and stands by her mother who puts an arm around her, rests her cheek on the top of Polly's head. Polly smells her mother's green apple shampoo.

"That's just crazy," Polly's father says. "It's so beautiful! I can't imagine why *anyone* wouldn't like it." When he makes the s sound or the t, he spits a little. Polly's mother holds her more tightly. Mrs. Winters hasn't said a word since Polly came into the room.

When she's older, Polly will read *The Odyssey* and realize that the woman must have been a siren, that the string game had something to do with fate. Some man's boat was about to hit the rocks.

But at ten years old, she's never heard of sirens, and isn't curious what the painting is about. She only resents being made to wonder if Mrs. Winters really has so much hair between her legs.

"Take it," Mr. Winters says. "A gift. Please. You're the only one who's ever liked it."

Polly's father empties his glass. He sets it down on the arm of his chair, but carelessly so it falls, landing silently on the thick rug. Polly's father doesn't seem to notice. "Like it? Like it?" he says. "I *love* it. But it's too much. I can't possibly accept."

A string of urgings and refusals follows. It all ends with Mr. Winters triumphant and Polly's father overcome. He has just the place for the painting, Polly's father says. It will go up above the fireplace, where everyone who visits can admire it. It will make the room.

Polly sees instantly that she will never be able to have anyone over again. "Isabelle's asleep," she tells her mother, and this is the cue everyone has been waiting for. Coats are fetched and Polly sheds Isabelle's cloak. The painting is conveyed with great care to the car, where it shares the backseat with Polly and the pillow her mother put there so that Polly can sleep on the way home. The Winters stand under the light of the porch to see them safely away.

"I can drive," Polly's mother says.

"So can I," her father answers. "Don't insult me, I'm perfectly capable." His words are slurry, but his tone is sharp. He takes his place at the wheel.

Does Polly's mother hesitate? If so, it's brief. Perhaps if the Winters hadn't been watching, she would have tried harder. Perhaps if Polly's father had been jolly or grateful and moved, the way he'd been not five minutes before, she would have tried harder. The Winters live up the mountain. It is a long way, with a lot of vacant fields, woods, twisting roads, and almost no houses between Isabelle's home and Polly's.

The sky is dark but clear and starry. The pavement is wet from an earlier rain, and it's cold enough to make Polly shiver, so there's probably ice. Her father starts up the car and the heater comes on, blowing cold air and a stale smell. Polly's mother gets in.

For five or ten minutes, no one says anything. The car warms up. Nobody else is on the road, not coming up behind them, not heading toward them. A curve presses Polly against her door. The painting bangs her knee. "Don't drive so fast," says Polly's mother. Her father responds by speeding up.

Polly is nearly asleep. Her mother is speaking quietly, her voice far away in the front seat, so Polly hears that she's talking without hearing what she says.

"You're imagining things." Her father isn't speaking quietly at all.

Her mother speaks again.

"I don't have to keep my voice down in my own goddamn car," her father says. And that's the last thing Polly hears, either because he is keeping his voice down after all, or because they aren't talking anymore, or because she falls asleep.

She's sleeping when they go off the road. She's in the air with the painting floating beside her. The car sails down a slope and through a bramble hedge that mercifully slows it considerably. And then they crash down, the painting landing hard on Polly's foot. They're in a black and muddy field from which they cannot see the road. There is a woods not twenty yards back. Twenty yards earlier and they would have hit the trees. "Are you all right?" Polly's mother asks her. She's turned around in her seat. One lens from her glasses has fallen from the frame, which is bent. There is a cut on her face, a little bit of blood. She's holding on tight to the seatback.

Polly says that she's fine without really knowing yet.

She does a quick check on her body. She's been knocked around for sure, and her neck hurts, and her foot, where the painting landed, is throbbing. She starts to say all this, but her father is apologizing and he's so upset, she swallows the words. "I'm so sorry," he says, over and over. "I saw something in the road. I think there was a deer. Right in front of me."

"I didn't see anything," Polly's mother says.

"Could have been a dog. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I didn't see anything," Polly's mother says again.

Polly's father opens the driver-side door, the engine still running. He straightens each leg carefully, testing his weight before standing. He walks around the car, disappears from Polly's window as he squats to check the tires. He rises unsteadily. "We're stuck in the mud," he says. "But everything looks okay. We just need a tow. You wait here. I'll go get help."

He turns the headlights off but leaves the heater and the engine running. He comes to Polly's door, removes his coat, and lays it over her lap. She doesn't know what kind of liquor that is on his breath, but it's a smell she recognizes. It takes him two tries to slam the door, and then Polly watches him, only his sweater to keep him warm, as he picks his way through the mud. He scrambles on all fours up the slope to the road and disappears.

"Are you all right?" Polly's mother asks again, and she's crying, so Polly says again that she is. "Show me," says Polly's mother. "Wiggle your fingers. Wiggle your toes," so Polly does that.

They wait a long time. Eventually Polly goes back to sleep. When she wakes, she hurts all over. The sun is rising but not risen; there is a strange half-light over the landscape, a strange fog skimming the field. Crows are cawing. The car engine has stopped, and she's very cold. Her mother is gone.

She thinks probably her mother has just left to find a bathroom and will be right back. She thinks this for a long, long time. She gets painfully onto her knees to look out the windows. A great tangle of blackberry canes is lying across the car hood. The sky is full of crows; she's never seen so many, all arriving at once and making a commotion. There are maybe a few on the car roof. She can hear a scratching overhead.

She looks out the back window toward the woods, and that's when she sees some cloaked and foggy figures, standing beneath the trees. The light is poor and they're not moving and it's kind of far away and she can't be sure. She's more certain that she saw them later than she is at the time. She lies back down on the seat, out of sight, just in case. By now she's terribly frightened. She wants her mother and father.

More time passes, and she is angry as well as scared and cold. The sun is fully up now, the crows still cawing loudly, and it occurs to her that she is not being well looked after. Her parents are doing a terrible job.

She sits up carefully and looks toward the woods again. No parents, no vague figures. Reaching past the painting, she opens the far passenger door, pushes it open with her uninjured foot. She levers the painting out onto the ground, where it falls face down. "Good-bye and good riddance," she thinks. She hopes that whoever picks

the painting up next will find that Mrs. Winters' breasts and pubic hair have been covered in a respectable coat of mud.

* * *

"So what happened next?" Stuart asks. They are on a long flat road somewhere in Missouri.

Polly has been hitchhiking. She'd made it to Illinois, but by then it was nearly dusk. She was about to give up for the night when Stuart pulled over. She liked the look of him, a man in maybe his mid-twenties. This makes him eight or nine years older than she. Very handsome, like a pirate, with a bandana around his forehead, his black hair in a braid, brown eyes, dark skin.

Two women are in the backseat, but Polly hasn't met them yet. They were asleep when Stuart stopped, and they're still asleep. "We're going to San Francisco," Stuart had said. "What about you?"

Polly was thinking of Chicago, but San Francisco is better.

"Climb on in," Stuart told her. "You're just what I need. Someone to talk to me. Someone to keep me awake. The radio's broken."

So that's what she's been doing for a couple of hours now, keeping Stuart awake. The sky has gone black with a tiny bit of moon. A shadow landscape stretches ahead. She's keeping Stuart awake so his car won't go off the road.

"What happened next," Polly tells him, "is that I woke up in my very own bed."

"So it was all a dream?" Stuart sounds as disappointed by this as anyone would be.

"Absolutely not. But they want me to think so." Because she didn't tell him the part about the cloaked figures, Polly knows that Stuart has misunderstood who the *they* in this sentence is. She makes no attempt to clarify. If she didn't believe Isabelle all those years ago, why should Stuart believe her now?

She's been editing the story in other small ways as she tells it; probably she's already said too much. "I know it happened," she says, "because ever since, crows pay attention to me. They watch me. They give me things." She opens her bag and pulls out some bits to show him. Broken necklaces and old keys, bottle caps, pens, and barrettes.

"That's so wild," Stuart says.

One of the women in the back seat sits up. "Where are we?" She yawns loudly. "Who's this?"

"Missouri," Stuart says. "And Persephone," because that's the name Polly gave him. "She's going to San Francisco, too. Persephone of the crows."

"Hello, Persephone of the crows." The woman yawns again and her tongue appears and disappears, like a snake's, as if she's sticking it out at Polly, but pretending she isn't. Her hair is short and very curly, matted down on one side from sleeping on her arm. "I'm Starlight," she says, and Stuart laughs so that Polly isn't sure if that's really her name or if she's making fun of Polly because of hers.

"Persephone has been telling me this story," Stuart says, "that just got shit crazy."

"I have to piss," says Starlight. "Like right now."

They pull over. Stuart gets out and stands by Polly's window where he lights a cigarette. Starlight squats down on the shoulder of the road. She's wearing a long skirt, and apparently no underwear. It's very dark, but the headlights of a passing car sweep over her and it's obvious from her position what she's doing. The driver hits the horn enthusiastically. "Fucking hippies," someone in the car shouts at them.

Starlight stands back up. She doesn't wipe herself and she doesn't return immediately to the car. She's combing through her hair with her fingers, fixing the matted part. Her lips are moving. She might be talking. She might be singing. Polly will have to keep an eye on her.

Stuart flicks some ashes onto the pavement. He motions to Polly to roll down her window. The smell of his smoke comes into the car. "Why are the crows bringing you

things?" Stuart asks.

"Payment. For what was taken."

"The painting." It isn't a question. Stuart thinks he has it figured.

Polly doesn't explain that no one cares about the painting. It was a terrible painting. If this were about the painting, the bill would have been paid up long ago. A couple of broken necklaces would have more than covered it.

She doesn't tell Stuart that the crows are just the middlemen.

"What happened to Isabelle?" Stuart asks. "I liked that little storybook girl," and Polly feels the old flash of jealousy. Why are they talking about Isabelle? This story isn't about Isabelle.

"Still living the dream," Polly answers, though she's just guessing and doesn't know. Only it makes sense, since Isabelle gets to see the kind of fairies Isabelle gets to see, while Polly has to see the kind of fairies Polly has to see. Probably there are different kinds of drunken fathers as well, and Isabelle, of course, would have the good kind.

To be fair, Polly once had the good kind, too.

* * *

On the morning after the car crash, when she got out of bed and went to see what was what, there was a woman who looked exactly like her mother in the kitchen only with lipstick and no glasses. She was cutting a red grapefruit, eating the sections one by one as she went. She was doing this with great concentration.

"Do you want a grapefruit?" she said to Polly as if she didn't know that Polly hated grapefruit.

"How did I get home?" Polly asked, and the woman said she didn't know what Polly was talking about. Did she have a cut on her face? Polly couldn't remember. Was Polly herself still bruised and sore? She doesn't remember that either. It's all suspiciously far off in her mind.

"Where's Dad?" she asked, and the woman said she didn't know and didn't care.

Later a man who looked exactly like her father came in with the paper as if he'd been in the front yard the whole time. He sat at the breakfast table with the paper opened in front of him, but he never turned the pages. He didn't speak to the woman who looked exactly like her mother. He didn't say "Good morning, Merry Sunshine," to Polly. He didn't tell everyone how sorry he was the way Polly's father would have.

Polly went to look for the car, which she found in the garage. She couldn't remember if the tires were muddy or the hood scratched. But there was no painting in the backseat. She did know that. She never saw the painting again.

They never went to the Winters' again either, nor ever had them over, though the families had gotten together so often before.

The man who looked like her father didn't drink.

The woman who looked like her mother didn't care.

* * *

Later, much later, when they're all in San Francisco and living in a filthy house on Dolores Street, when Persephone is sleeping with men for money, but only when she absolutely has to—she doesn't like the way crows look at her after, but if they brought her money instead of junk, there'd be no need, would there?—one day when she's working with Stuart, passing out coupons for Georgio's pizzas, putting them on the windshields of parked cars and into the hands of panhandlers and tourists, he will ask her what she thinks her parents did the day they first realized she'd gone.

"Whatever real parents would do," Persephone will tell him. "They did just exactly that."

May/June 2017

“For forty years, Asimov's has been publishing intriguing, inventive, and memorable short stories. One of my earliest stories appeared here when I was young and new on the scene. It is most gratifying to be here again now that I am none of the above.”

—Karen Joy Fowler