

Kate McQuade
From "Helen in Texarkana"

Claire has been dreaming of crows. Shiny black rumbles in the back of her brain. Dark feathers twitching against her skull. They've been keening every night outside her bedroom window, the same rhythmic caw again and again, and she's beginning to think she almost understands it, their guttural, back-of-the-mouth language. Sometimes she rolls it in her own mouth just to have a say in the matter—quietly, into her pillow, so she doesn't wake the baby. The words feel foreign and sticky. *Caw*. Like toffee on her tongue. She wants to suck on the sounds, hard enough to hurt them.

Dark, winging thoughts. Not the thoughts of a mother, she thinks, then unthinks it.

Meanwhile, the baby is speaking French again. This is the third time in a month. When it first happened, Claire thought it was a fluke—a funny story, one to share with her husband over dinner. "*À demain*," the baby kept calling from her crib. "*À demain, à demain*," pointing her chubby fingers toward the window. Claire remembered the phrase from eighth-grade Intro to French: *à demain, see you tomorrow*. But in the mouth of her one-year-old, it sounded so close to *animal, animal* that Claire thought the baby was just pointing at the crows. They had already begun to cluster in the neighborhood, though spring was still raw then, had scarcely cracked the ice.

At dinner all her husband said was, "Now you're putting words in her mouth too?"

The baby loved the crows. Back then, even Claire could muster up an appreciation: if nothing else, they carried with them an eerie beauty. On the power lines, they settled and grew still, folded their wings, spaced themselves evenly in rows like bright black pearls. Claire would hold the baby and they would press their hands together against the window glass, point and echo each other's words. *Crow, animal, yes, fly away, yes*. Their fingerprints left gauzy patterns, pointillist blurs that

reminded Claire of the paintings she had made once, before her studio became a nursery. She was often tempted to leave them there, these ghost-hands marking the glass like small, breathy spirits pressing in from the outside. But her husband polished them away, and after a while the crows migrated from the power lines to the roof, where their talons scuttle and tap invisibly: dashes and dots, a code she can't interpret.

The town has sent notices. We are aware of the issue; the crows are attracted to vermin; this street has not adhered to county waste-management protocols; are you sure you haven't brought this on yourself?

Claire is not sure. Most things feel like she has brought them on herself without knowing exactly how. The emptiness in her bed. The craggy scar on her stomach. The baby chips a tooth (a stumble, a chair leg) and she feels the neighbors side-eyeing her at the swing set, looking for bruises, thinking: *What kind of a mother*. The baby's head is scabby with cradle cap, molting dandruff that glows in her dark brown fuzz, and every person Claire meets knows just what she's doing wrong—the nannies at library circle, the grocery bagger, even the crusty grandmother with dementia at the park—all of them full of wisdom and correction. Use this oil, leave it alone, comb it out, rub it in, give it time, don't wait, time is of the essence. She remembers strangers' hands reaching out to touch her round belly: the sudden claim the world had to her body, a body that had become alien to her.

Even the French—this is another fluency she lacks, which embarrasses her, since she was an artist (perhaps, in her finest moments, an intellectual) before she was a mother. Her husband, a professor of ancient Greek, has no such lack. He can translate six languages and has published in all of them. In the hospital he spent most of Claire's labor exchanging French jokes—which went literally over Claire's head—with the obstetrician, who was from Marseilles; if he wanted to, he

could speak French to the baby at will, without hesitation, and with a perfect accent. He may very well have done so in those dark, lost hours before Claire woke from the anesthesia.

Perhaps this is why she finds a secret comfort in this: the baby refuses to speak French to her father, to anyone else. Only to Claire.

The second time it happened was a week ago. The baby was in her high chair eating grapes, whole, chokeable grapes Clare hadn't cut in half because already she could see a certain worn path within the landscape of this new life—always cutting things in half—and it was becoming clear to her that what was at stake was only partially her sanity. It was also about her child becoming a child of the world, a world where any number of dangers lurked around sudden corners (the wall socket's black eye, the hungry mouths of staircases, plastic bags, bottles, boredom, the sudden corners themselves), and how would her daughter survive if she didn't end it somewhere? Didn't stop this trickling down of danger, hidden deaths even in this, a mere grape? Plus her husband had just left her. Plus all the knives were dirty, and who knew if she could wash another knife without cutting something?

So: whole grapes.

It was a fragile morning, spring having recently split Ohio's gray to a tender yellow-green. Sun coming through the window made slippery patterns of light on the kitchen table; the breast milk in the baby's cup would look the same if Claire reached out and spilled it. That's what she was thinking about, light that seemed milky and cruel, when she heard the sound. Guttural, a foreign threat. Like a marble skittering, or a crow. Claire felt something soar into her throat as she looked up (the baby's dark eyes bugging, the clenched fear of her tiny lips), and she was moving before she told herself to move, she was pounding on the baby's back, trying to lift her, all of this without thinking. But the straps were fastened and the buckles were complicated, so Claire lifted

the whole thing into her arms instead—the wooden high chair, the baby strapped, the milk flying—and she shook everything upside down until something flew out of the baby’s mouth.

Claire expected a grape. It was not a grape. What flew out was a sound: “*Je suis désolé, maman. Je suis désolé.*” Claire didn’t know the words—she would look them up later—but there was a shape to the sound that was like a shadow, both there and not there, an outlined absence she could recognize.

The baby was crying desperately. Claire put the chair down and unbuckled her, lifted her close. She felt a splintering love. Or maybe, even more deliciously, its aftermath: she felt something coming back together. “It’s okay.” She said it out loud to the baby, and also to herself. She said it so many times, it lost its meaning. “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.” The baby’s breathing slowed, but her wrists stayed clamped around Claire’s neck, fingertips cool as pearls. Out the window, Claire could see crows sweeping purple shadows across the yard. Her arm muscles began to shake, a gorgeous ache coming gradually into color as she looked down at the high chair. Antique, a gift from her mother-in-law. Solid wood. Impossible that she had just lifted it, yet alone turned it upside down. Impossible that the baby was fine, was in fact laughing now, tickling Claire’s neck as if it had all been a game. And yet this was true: she had known exactly what to do, an instinct let loose from inside the cage of her body. She felt the door still swinging.

Little fingers pecking at her skin. Sweet pink voice still babbling: “*Désolé, désolé, désolé.*”