

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## **Crow**

*Stephanie Burgis*

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A crow flew into Ruth's mouth one Sunday afternoon during lunch.

She'd just opened her mouth to agree with her mother when the crow launched itself through the air, shrinking to the size of a peach stone as it flew, until it popped straight into Ruth's mouth. She gagged and grabbed her throat.

Her mother didn't notice.

"You have really got to get yourself organized. Honestly, Ruth! The pins are coming out of your hair again. Can't you hold it back any better? You don't want people to think you have bag lady hair. And this garden is a mess. Look at those weeds!"

Ruth opened her mouth to say, *Yes, Mother*, but she couldn't push the words through her throat. The crow flared its wings and choked her again.

She slumped back in her wicker chair and took a long, cold sip of water. It didn't dislodge the crow. She could feel it preening under the shower.

Her mother left at two o'clock as usual, looking dissatisfied. Ruth wandered back into her house, holding her throat lightly, afraid to squeeze too hard. She stopped in front of the hallway mirror and winced at the sight.

Her mother was right. Her hair had escaped the pins again. Curly, red spirals sprang out from the bun she'd so carefully pinned up that morning.

Ruth tried to mutter, *I look like a bag lady*, but the crow stifled her words. She stared at the reflection of her face, pale above her muted gray shirt.

This never would have happened to her mother. She never would have allowed it to happen.

*I am a mess*, Ruth thought, but she didn't even try to say it out loud.

“You look terrible,” her boss, Dani, told her the next morning. She dropped a six-inch stack of papers on Ruth’s desk. “You’re all right, aren’t you?”

Ruth opened her mouth to say, *Yes, I’m fine*, but the crow opened its beak. Her voice emerged at the same time as the crow’s “braaak!” and somehow, the word that came out was,

“No!”

“What?” Dani frowned. “Uh... do you want to talk about it?”

Ruth shook her head vigorously, covering her mouth with her hand.

“I wanted you to do Marlene’s work again today. Are you up to it?”

The crow jabbed Ruth’s throat with a sharp claw, and she choked. Her mouth fell open.

“NO!” the crow shrieked through Ruth’s throat.

Dani snatched up the stack of papers, eyes wide. “Fair enough,” she muttered and backed away.

Ruth watched Dani whisper with one of the other secretaries on the opposite side of the room. Both of them snuck nervous glances at her. Ruth cursed the crow in her throat. She’d never turned down extra work before. How could she? That would make her look unhelpful, and no one liked women like that. It was one of the first rules her mother had drummed into her.

She ducked into the bathroom and opened her mouth wide in front of the mirror. When she peered into the dark cavern of her throat, she glimpsed the crow’s beady eyes staring out at her.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered. “What do you want?”

But the crow didn’t answer her.

Dani sidled up to her at 4:45, holding one of the letters Ruth had typed.

“Um... I just wanted to tell you, good job,” she said. “You’ve always done a very good job.”

“Really?” Ruth blinked. “I mean... thank you.” The crow settled back into her throat, content.

Fifteen minutes later, Ruth headed for the bus stop. Halfway there, the crow jabbed her throat, and Ruth choked.

“What? What do you want?”

She turned around. She had stopped just in front of a clothing shop.

Ruth froze. Wild colors filled the window, the kind she'd always loved but never worn. Her mother's warnings echoed through her head. Nice girls, respectable girls, wore white or black or gray, and they buttoned their blouses right up to their chins. Only loose girls, slutty girls wore rainbow colors, because they were trying to show themselves off. Respectable girls...

The crow ruffled its wings impatiently.

Ruth took a deep breath. Was she really going to listen to a crow?

She stepped through the shop's door as lightly and carefully as a ballet dancer, touching her neck for reassurance.

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That Sunday, when Ruth's mother arrived for lunch, her mouth opened wide in horror. "My God! What have you done to yourself?"

Ruth stepped back to let her mother into the house. Her emerald green skirt billowed around her legs as she moved, and her thin, peach-colored silk blouse let the breeze through to cool her skin.

Ruth's mother fumbled in her purse. "For God's sake! What were you thinking? Here, I have some pins somewhere. We'll just—"

"No," said Ruth and the crow together. Ruth shook her head, and her red, curly, springy hair shook with it, unbound, crazy and wild and wonderful. She gestured towards the back door. "Lunch is ready outside."

"Well. I don't know what you expect me to say." Her mother pursed her lips. "I hope you aren't wearing costumes like this to work!"

Ruth thought of the peacock blue suit in her closet and smiled. She opened the back door for her mother.

"You certainly haven't taken out any of those weeds, I see."

"Nope," Ruth said. She looked out across the garden, blazing with color—yellow dandelions, purple wildflowers, green climbing vines. "I decided not to."

"What?" Her mother sank into her usual chair. "Ruth, is something wrong with you? You're acting crazy today. Why on earth wouldn't you want to get rid of those nasty dandelions? Don't you want to organize your garden?"

"No," Ruth said. She felt the crow rustling in her throat, preparing to speak. *Don't worry*, she thought. *I can handle this one myself.*

Ruth looked straight into her mother's angry, frightened face.

“I like it this way,” she said.

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**Stephanie Burgis** is an American writer who lives in England with her husband, Patrick Samphire. Her short fiction has appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *Strange Horizons*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and *Aeon*. To find out more, please visit her website at <http://www.stephanieburgis.co.uk>.