



DONN, TX

1952

There can be
no rest once
the harvest begins.

ERIC BUTLER

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BY
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SOMEWHERE IN TEXAS, 1952...

"Jerry, pull over," Debbie said with a groan.

"Not again," he growled but came to a stop on the side of the road.

She fumbled with the handle as her stomach clenched. Sweat ran down her face, stinging her eyes. Debbie tumbled out as the door swung open. She crawled away from the car, the sand hot to the touch, until she made it to the dying grass. Her stomach heaved as her fingers clenched at the ground.

The dry wind blew the stench back towards her, forcing her stomach to heave once again. A sense of relief washed over her as nothing else came up. Jerry's hand rested on her shoulder. She patted it, thankful he was with her.

"Okay?"

She nodded, afraid speaking may cause another wave. His hands slipped under her arms, lifting her to her feet and holding on until she offered another nod. He stepped to the passenger door of the car, then returned to her with an open bottle. Debbie grabbed it, filling her mouth with the warm liquid before swishing it around and spitting it out.

"Thanks," she murmured, her stomach settling down.

"Maybe we should stop now," he suggested, pointing to the top of the rise. "I see a motel sign. We could get some sleep, and hopefully, you'll feel better."

Debbie bit her bottom lip. She was anxious to get to her mother, but the doctor did say she had a few weeks left. She glanced at Jerry and sighed. His worry was plain. Reaching to place her hand on his cheek, she offered him a grateful smile.

"Okay, honey," she said. "Some stationary rest might just do the trick."

He led her to the car and helped her in before hurrying to his side and pulling back onto the lonely road.



"So do you think it's open?" Jerry asked as they pulled into the parking lot.

The motel was a simple one-story structure. He counted nine doors, but he was pretty sure only six or seven led to actual rooms. *Only need one.* He tapped the steering wheel, studying for any signs of life.

"Oh God," Debbie mumbled, her left hand coming up to cover her lips as her right gripped the handle.

Jerry sighed as his wife scrambled from the car and began vomiting again. *Last time I agree to stop at just any roadside diner.* He slid out and started around the car.

Debbie held up her arm, waving him off.

"Okay... I'll go check if anyone is here," he called out as he hurried to the first door.

Jerry paused, his hand holding the doorknob. He stared at the sign in the small window to the side. The sign itself was dark black, but it was the words that held his attention. *Welcome weary traveler. Your journey nears its end.* He studied the red letters a moment before shaking his head. *God, I wish.* They'd only been on the road a day, and he expected, after this break, it would be another day before they arrived at Debbie's mother's house. *That's when the fun really begins.*

Jerry turned the knob and entered.



Debbie leaned against the car. The sun beat down on her, but she welcomed the distraction. At some point, she assumed her stomach would simply run out of contents. *Hope it's soon.* She studied the door Jerry left open but couldn't make out anything past the frame. Debbie crossed her fingers. *Please have clean sheets and running water.* A cold shower was just what she needed.

A loud caw grabbed her attention, and she glanced around. Three of the largest crows she'd ever seen stood on the arm of a scarecrow across the street. Debbie stood straight, shielding her eyes to see clearer. The crows hopped around the scarecrow, moving from arm to arm, occasionally resting on its head. They turned to stare at her, offering more cries as if calling her over.

The scarecrow was on a pole towering over the cornstalks that filled the field across the way. It wore all black, bits of graying hay sticking out at the collar and waist. A burlap sack covered the place its head would be; shiny black eyes sparkled in the sunlight. *Are those onyx?*

Debbie shuffled towards the road, pausing long enough to check both ways before continuing to the other side. The crows grew agitated, hopping up and down and crying at her approach. She paused, hesitant to leave the safety of the road. She stood on the shoulder and shielded her eyes once again.

The crows settled down, returning her stare. A chill ran through Debbie, causing her to shiver. The largest crow jumped into the air, spread its wings, and floated to the ground. It landed in

front of her and clawed at the ground. Dry laughter floated on the wind. Debbie's head snapped up, searching through the corn to find the owner. Her eyes fell on the scarecrow and froze.

Its head was turned, both dark eyes locked on her face. A wicked smile decorated the burlap skin as the laughter grew in volume. A sharp jab of pain tore through Debbie's leg, and she looked down with a gasp. Blood glistened on the crow's beak as it moved to peck at her once again. Her foot slammed out, connecting with the bird and sending black feathers into the air.

Debbie spun to run back to the car when an eighteen-wheeler rushed past, its horn blaring a warning. She stumbled back, losing her balance and tumbling to the hard-packed soil. Blinking against the dying sunlight, Debbie struggled to raise her hands as a shadow passed above her. The laughter began anew as the crow landed on her chest with a caw. A sob slipped from her lips as she watched her blood drip from the beast's beak.



Jerry stood in the lobby. There was a counter splitting the room in half, and on his side was a coffee table and two dusty chairs upholstered in a flowery pattern he vaguely remembered his Grandmother having years ago. A few issues of *Life* sat on the table, and he made a note to see if the owner was okay with him taking them back to the room. *Debbie may need some rest, but I'm wide awake.*

The counter was bare except for a dull metal bell. Next to a curtain of dark fabric, a cubbyhole box decorated the back wall with eight open spots, though only six were numbered. Glancing around,

Jerry hoped the actual rooms' upkeep was better than the lobby, but he doubted it. *Beggars can't be choosers.*

Stepping closer, he popped his hand down on the button, happy to find it at least worked. He waited a moment before striking the bell again and glanced back at the door. *I hope Debbie is okay.*

"Help ya?" a voice called out.

With a start, Jerry returned his attention to the counter. He placed his hand on his chest as he forced a smile on his lips.

"Wowzers, you really gave me a scare. I need a room...just for the night."

The man was beyond old. The only word that Jerry could make fit was *ancient*. *How is this guy still up and about?* The motel manager seemed to be bending in on himself, and Jerry thought he might have been extremely tall when he stood straight. *Whenever that might have been.* His skin was paper-thin and stained an off-yellow color, and there was no evidence of muscles or fat on his body.

The man reached down and, after a moment, heaved an oversized book onto the counter with a bang. He opened it to the center and began to flip the pages until he arrived at the first blank one. Spinning the book, he produced a pen and held it out for Jerry.

"A night is going to cost you ten dollars," he said in a raspy whisper.

"Ten dollars?" Jerry asked, the pen stopping in mid-stroke.

"Y'all are more than welcome to continue on, but there ain't another place out here for quite a while. Dinner is included, if it helps."

Jerry released the breath he held in an exaggerated sigh. *I guess dinner does help.* He finished filling out the book and reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. He counted out ten dollars and laid it on the counter next to the book. The old man offered a toothless smile, and Jerry began to wonder just what passed for dinner in these parts.

He opened his mouth to ask when Debbie's cries sounded from outside. He turned to rush out when the old man called out, "Room 3 ... door's unlocked."

Jerry nodded his thanks and hurried out to the parking lot. He spun around, searching for Debbie when he realized she wasn't by the car, and froze when his eyes hit the scarecrow across the road. The two outsized crows sitting on its left arm glanced at Jerry before returning their attention to the ground. A chill rushed through him, forcing the Texas heat from his body.

The scarecrow's head was angled as if it studied the ground with wide black eyes, which sparkled in a way that made Jerry think of excitement. His stomach clenched when he noticed the large grin stitched on the burlap face.

"Debbie?!" he called out as he started to run across the road.

A wordless cry answered him, and then the crows began to imitate it with their caws. He skidded to a stop as he left the road and found Debbie on her back, her bloody arms between her face and a third crow attempting to peck her eyes out. Between failed attempts, it cried in frustration.

Jerry rushed forward, kicking out and striking the bird with the point of his shoe.

"Get!" he cried, waving his arms to scare the crows away.

The two on the scarecrow sat unimpressed as they waited for the third to land on the opposite arm. It let loose a violent cry of displeasure before pecking its beak against the scarecrow's open mouth. Jerry bent over and picked Debbie up, pulling her tight to his chest. He glared at the scarecrow before turning to carry his wife to the motel.

"You really suck at your job, pal," he called over his shoulder.

His only answer was the cries of the crows.

Bastards are laughing at us. He shook his head, turning to look once more at the group when he was safely on the other side of the road. Jerry's stomach dropped as they locked eyes and he realized the scarecrow now stared straight ahead.



The door swung open, and Jerry carried Debbie to the closest twin bed to set her down. He gently took her arms and held them straight, inspecting the damage the bird's beak had inflicted. Her skin was torn and slashed in a number of spots, but nothing appeared too deep. He moved to her leg and let out a hiss as he studied the wound there.

Debbie's sobs shook her body as Jerry finished his inspection. She kept her head down as if afraid to make eye contact. He slipped his finger under her chin and raised her head, then kissed her on the forehead and stepped back.

"I'm going to see if that old man has a first-aid kit. Sit tight."

She offered a slight nod and laid back onto the bed. He slipped out, closing the door behind him. Rushing back to the front desk, he glanced at the corn. The scarecrow watched him with dead, black eyes.

What did you expect...it'd be gone?

Jerry spat in its direction and shook his head. *Trip is messing with my head.* He gripped the knob and pushed the door open, hurrying to the counter to ring the bell. After the third attempt grew quiet, the man appeared from behind the curtain.

"Help ya?"

"I need a first aid kit...maybe some booze?" Jerry asked as he stared at the old man. After a moment of silence, he added, "Some damn crows attacked my wife...over by that fucking scarecrow."

The old man grew still. His eyes locked onto Jerry's face, and a smile crept upon his lips before he whispered, "Did it taste her blood?"

"Excuse me?" Jerry asked, his voice growing hot as he reached over and grabbed the man by his collar. "What the hell does that even mean? Yes, a bird cut my wife, and I need your help. Now!"

"Oh, well, if it was just the bird..." the old man trailed off as he turned to shuffle back through the curtain.

Jerry stood there a moment, his hands balled into tight fists. He glanced at the parking lot, noting the creeping shadows as the sun began to set. *I don't have time for this.* He hopped onto the counter and slipped down the other side. Pushing back the curtain, he rushed forward ...

And slammed into a wall.

Jerry stumbled back, his head striking the counter as he fell to the carpeted floor. Darkness overtook him as his final thought faded. *Where did that come from?*



Jerry's eyes opened to darkness. A single beam of light shined upon the number three on the cubbyhole. He groaned as he sat up, his hand cupping the back of his head. It came away damp, and he wondered if it was as bad as it felt. Struggling to stand, he used the counter to pull himself to his feet.

Stars flashed before him as Jerry struggled to stay upright. Clenching his eyes closed, he took a few deep breaths. His eyes reopened as he exhaled the last one.

Debbie.

He struggled to slide over the counter and get to the front door. He paused as he stared out across the parking lot.

Even with the moonlight, the property was mostly shadows. *How long was I out?* He hoped Debbie fell asleep, but worry began to grow in the pit of his stomach. Stepping out, he paused as a loud caw sounded from across the street. Laughter floated on the breeze, and his blood froze. *Is the old man out here?*

Jerry stumbled towards room three, his legs wobbling and refusing to move any faster than a shuffle. The laughter built in volume until it drowned out everything. Jerry slammed his hands over his ears, hoping to block out the raspy, uneven flow of glee.

Soft light shined around the door, and he called out Debbie's name. He tried again, wondering if he was speaking louder

than the laughter. He took a deep breath to really belt it out when the door swung open. The laughter died suddenly, and an eerie calm washed over Jerry. His hands slipped down to his side as he stepped closer to the room. The only sounds were the crunch of gravel under his steps and the pounding of his heart.

As Jerry stepped to the doorway, he paused, unable to process the scene in room three. His eyes slammed shut as a low moan of anguish slipped past his lips. He tumbled down, no longer able to find the strength to stand as images of what he'd seen flashed through his head. Debbie's clothes littered the floor, while Debbie herself lay on the bed, her legs spread open as if seductively enticing him to slip between them. Her mouth was frozen open in a wordless howl of torment, and her flayed skin now hung haphazardly over the two lamps in the room. The hot white light muted by the bloody tissue set the mood as she had on their wedding night.

"It's the little details that make nights like this so special," a raspy, dry voice whispered from behind as rough fingers gripped Jerry's hair and pulled his head back.

Razor-sharp pain bloomed across Jerry's throat as the laughter began anew.



Jerry's eyes fluttered open to the sound of a bell ding. He shook his head, hoping to remove the cobwebs that were leaving him so groggy and confused. His skin began to tingle as the bell sounded again. *Ding*. He stood, his arms outstretched as he stumbled through the dark towards the sound. *Ding*.

Light seared away the darkness, leaving Jerry's vision blurred. With each blink, more came into focus. A man stood on the other side of a counter. *No, not a counter ... the counter.* Jerry glanced around, taking in the cubbyhole boxes and the curtain before refocusing on the man.

"Yes, hello, I need a room for the night," he said in a clipped, fast-paced tone.

Jerry stared at him a moment before reaching under the counter. The oversized book felt natural in his hands, and he hesitated, relishing the weight, then placed the book on the counter. He opened it to the middle and began to flip until he found the first blank page. Spinning the book for the man, he produced a pen and offered a smile.

"You're in luck, we just had a room open up."

-END-

DONN, TX

1969

Frank is back from Vietnam but struggling to reconnect with the world he once knew. Jane is convinced a road trip to Houston will help them both find the connection they are missing.

First, they need to drop off her younger sister and her best friend at the university, and then the honeymoon the war put on hold can finally begin.

Except now they are lost on the back roads, and each mile brings them closer to Donn. If only they hadn't exited the highway ...

But now it's too late; for the harvest is nearing its end, and the scarecrow requires its due.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Butler is an Army brat who now calls Texas home. A lifelong fan of horror and pop culture, he finally decided to sit in front of a computer to share all the stories rattling around his head. He lives with his incredibly patient wife and teenage son in a house overrun with Huskies and cats.

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