

Joyce Carol Oates

Mudgirl Saved by the King of the Crows. April 1965.

In Beechum County it would be told — told and retold — how Mudgirl was saved by the King of the Crows.

How in the vast mud-flats beside the Black Snake River in that desolate region of the southern Adirondacks there were a thousand crows and of these thousand crows the largest and fiercest and most sleek-black-feathered was the King of the Crows.

How the King of the Crows had observed the cruel behavior of the woman half-dragging half-carrying a weeping child out into the mud-flats to be thrown down into the mud soft-sinking as quicksand and left the child alone there to die in that terrible place.

And the King of the Crows flew overhead in vehement protest flapping his wide wings and shrieking at the retreating woman now shielding her face with her arms against the wrath of the King of the Crows in pursuit of her like some ancient heraldic bird-beast in the service of a savage God.

How in the mists of dawn less than a mile from the place where the child had been abandoned to die there was a trapper making the rounds of his traps along the Black Snake River and it was this trapper whom the King of the Crows summoned to save the child lying stunned in shock and barely breathing in the mud-flat like discarded trash.

Come! S'ttiss!

Suttis Coldham making the rounds of the Coldham traps as near to dawn as he could before predators — coyotes, black bears, bobcats — tore their prey from the jaws of the traps and devoured them alive weakened and unable to defend themselves.

Beaver, muskrat, mink, fox and lynx and raccoons the Coldhams trapped in all seasons. What was *legal* or *not-legal* — what was listed as *endangered* — did not count much with the Coldhams. For in this desolate region of Beechum County in the craggy foothills of the Adirondacks there were likely to be fewer human beings per acre as there were bobcats — the bobcat being the shyest and most solitary of Adirondack creatures.

The Coldhams were an old family in Beechum County having settled in pre-Revolutionary times in the area of Rockfield in the Black Snake River but scattered now as far south as Star Lake, and beyond. In Suttis's immediate family there were five sons and of these sons Suttis was the youngest and the most bad-luck-prone of the generally luckless Coldham family as Suttis was the one for whom Amos Coldham the father had the least hope. As if there hadn't been enough brains left for poor Suttis, by the time Suttis came along.

Saying with a sour look in his face — Like you're shake-shake-shaking brains out of some damn bottle — like a ketchup bottle — and by the time it came to Suttis's turn there just ain't enough brains left in the bottle.

Saying — Wallop the fuckin' bottle with your hand won't do no fuckin' good — the brains is all used up.

So it would be told that the solitary trapper who rescued Mudgirl from her imminent death in the mud-flats beside the Black Snake River had but the mind of a child of eleven or twelve and nowhere near the mind of an adult man of twenty-nine which was Suttis's age on this April morning in 1965.

So it would be told, where another trapper would have ignored the shrieking of the King of the Crows or worse yet taken shots with a .22 rifle to bring down the King of the Crows, Suttis Coldham knew at once that he was being summoned by the King of the Crows for some special purpose.

For several times in his life it had happened to Suttis when Suttis was alone and apart from the scrutiny of others that creatures singled him out to address him.

The first — a screech owl out behind the back pasture when Suttis had been a young boy. Spoke his name *SSSuttiss* all hissing syllables so the soft hairs on his neck stood on end and staring up — upward — up to the very top of the ruin of a dead oak trunk where the owl was perched utterly motionless except for its feathers rippling in the wind and its eyes glaring like gasoline flame seeing how the owl knew *him* — a spindly-limbed boy twenty feet below gaping and grimacing and struck dumb hearing *SSSuttiss* and seeing that look in the owl's eyes of such significance, it could not have been named except the knowledge was imparted — *You are Suttis, and you are known.*

Not until years later came another creature to address Suttis and this a deer — a doe — while Suttis was hunting with his father and brothers and Suttis was left behind stumbling and uncertain and out of nowhere amid the pine woods there appeared the doe about fifty feet away — a doe with two just-born fawns — pausing to stare at Suttis wide-eyed not in fright but with a sort of surprised recognition even as Suttis lifted his rifle to fire with a rapidly beating heart and a very dry mouth — *Suttis! SuttisSuttisSuttis!* — words sounding inside his own head like a radio switched on so Suttis was given to know that it was the doe's thoughts sent to him in some way like vibrations in water and he'd understood that he was not to fire his rifle, and he did not fire his rifle.

And most recent in January 1965 making early-morning rounds of the traps, God damn Suttis's brothers sending Suttis out on a morning when none of them would have gone outdoors to freeze his ass but there's Suttis stumbling in thigh-high snow, shuddering in fuckin' freezing wind and half the traps covered in snow and inaccessible and finally he'd located one — one! — a mile or more from home — not what he'd expected in this frozen-over wet-land place which was muskrat or beaver or maybe raccoon but instead it was a bobcat — a thin whistle through the gap in Suttis's front teeth for Suttis had not ever trapped a bobcat before in his life for bobcats are too elusive — too cunning — but here a captive young one looked to be a six- to eight-months-old kitten its left rear leg caught in a long spring trap panicked and panting licking at the wet-blooded trapped leg with frantic motions of its pink tongue and pausing now to stare up at Suttis in a look both pleading and reproachful, accusatory — it was a female cat, Suttis seemed to know — beautiful tawny eyes with black vertical slits fixed upon Suttis Coldham who was marveling he'd never seen such a creature in his life, silver-tipped fur, stripes and spots in the fur of the hue of burnished mahogany, tufted ears, long tremulous whiskers, and those tawny eyes fixed upon him as Suttis stood crouched a few feet away hearing in the bobcat's quick-panting breath what sounded like *Suttis! Suttis don't you know who I am* and drawn closer risking the bobcat's talon-claws and astonished now seeing that these were the eyes of his Coldham grandmother who'd died at Christmas in her eighty-ninth year but now the grandmother was a young girl as Suttis had never known her and

somehow — Suttis could have no idea how — gazing at him out of the bobcat's eyes and even as the bobcat's teeth were bared in a panicked snarl clearly Suttis was made to hear his girl-grandmother's chiding voice *Suttis! O Suttis you know who I am — you know you do!*

Not for an instant did Suttis doubt that the bobcat was his Coldham grandmother, or his Coldham grandmother had become the bobcat — or was using the bobcat to communicate with Suttis knowing that Suttis was headed in this direction — no more could Suttis have explained these bizarre and improbable circumstances than he could have explained the “algebra equations” the teacher had chalked on the blackboard of the one-room school he'd attended sporadically for eight mostly futile years even as he had not the slightest doubt that the “algebra equations” were real enough, or real in some way that excluded Suttis Coldham; and so Suttis stooped hurriedly to pry open the spring-trap fumbling to release the injured left rear leg of the bobcat kitten murmuring to placate the spirit of his girl-grandmother who both was and was not the elderly woman he'd known and called Gran'maw and the bobcat bared her teeth, snarled and hissed and squirmed and clawed at his hands in leather gloves shredding the gloves but leaving Suttis's hands mostly unscathed and raking his face only thinly across his right cheek and in the next instant the bobcat kitten was running — limping, but running — on three swift legs disappearing into the snowladen larch woods with no more sound than a startled indrawn breath and leaving behind nothing but a scattering of cat feces and patches of blood-splattered silver-tipped fur in the ugly serrated jaws of the trap and a sibilant murmur *S'ttus! God bless.*

And now it was the King of the Crows summoning Suttis Coldham unmistakably — *SSS'ttissss! SSS'ttiss!*

Suttis froze in his tracks. Suttis stood like one impaled. Suttis could not hide his eyes and refuse to see. Suttis could not press his hands over his ears and refuse to hear.

SSS'ttissss come here! Here!

The King of the Crows was the largest crow Suttis had ever seen. His feathers were the sleekest and blackest and his wingspread as wide as any hawk's and his yellow eyes glared in urgency and indignation. Like a hunted creature Suttis made his way along the river bank, as the King of the Crows shrieked in his wake, flying from tree to tree behind

him as if in pursuit. For it would not be true as Suttis would claim that he had followed the King of the Crows to the child abandoned to die in the mud-flat but rather that the King of the Crows had driven Suttis as a dog might drive cattle. Suttis could not hide, could not escape from the King of the Crows for he knew that the King of the Crows would pursue him back to the Coldham farm and would never cease harassing and berating him for having disobeyed him.

Suttis stumbled and staggered along a three-foot-high embankment that jutted out into the vast mud-flat. Not long ago the last of the winter snows had melted and the mud-flat was puddled with water, as the Black Snake River was swollen and muddy and swift-rushing south out of the mountains. Everywhere was a buzzing-thrumming-teeming of new life, and the rapacity of new life: black flies, wasps, gnats. Suttis swatted at the air about his head, a cloud of new-hatched mosquitoes. Underfoot was the ruin of a road. Ahead was the ruin of a mill. Suttis knew the mud-flats — the Coldhams hunted and trapped here — but Suttis had no clear idea what the purpose of the mill might have been at one time, or who might have owned it. His grandfather would know, or his father. His older brothers maybe. The ways of adults seemed to him remote and inaccessible and so their names were blurred and of little consequence to him as to any child.

Come here! Come here S'ttis come here!

SSS'ttissss! Here!

On the narrowing embankment Suttis moved with caution. The King of the Crows had so distracted him, he'd left his trapping gear behind — the burlap sack which bore the limp broken bloodied bodies of several dead creatures — but still he had his knife, sheathed in his jacket which was Amos Coldham's Army-issue jacket of a long-ago wartime, badly stained and frayed at the cuffs. On his head he wore a knit cap, pulled down onto his narrow forehead; on his lower body, khaki workpants; on his feet, rubber boots from Sears, Roebuck. Passing now the part-collapsed mill with its roof covered in moss that made him uneasy to see — any building, however in ruins, Suttis Coldham was inclined to think that something might be hiding inside, observing him.

In the mountains, you might be observed by a man with a rifle, at some distance. You would never know how you were viewed in a

stranger's rifle-scope even as the stranger pulled the trigger and for what reason? — as the Coldhams liked to say *For the hell of it*.

Suttis cringed, worried that he was being observed and not by just the King of the Crows. Entering now into a force-field of some other consciousness that drew him irresistibly.

Broken things in the winter-ravaged grasses, rotted planks, chunks of concrete, a man's single boot. A shredded tractor tire, strips of plastic. In the vast mud-flat tracks ran in all directions with a look of frenzied determination — animal tracks, bird tracks — and on the embankment, what Suttis identified as *human-being footprints*.

Suttis's eye that gazed upon so much without recognition, still less interest, for instance all printed materials, seized at once upon the *human-being footprints* on the embankment which Suttis knew to be, without taking time to think, not the footprints of his brothers or any other trapper or hunter but *female footprints*.

Suttis knew, just knew: *female*. Not even the boot-prints of a young boy. Just *female* boot-prints.

There were other prints, too — mixed with the *female*. Possibly a child. Suttis knew without calculating, with just-seeing.

Not that these tracks were clear — they were not clear. But Suttis understood that they were fresh for no other tracks covered them.

What was this! Suttis whistled through the gap in his front teeth.

A piece of cloth — a scarf — of some crinkly purple material, Suttis snatched up and quickly shoved into his pocket.

SSS'ttiss! Here!

Atop a skeletal larch the King of the Crows spread his wings. The King of the Crows did not like it that Suttis had paused to pick up the crinkly-purple scarf. For the King of the Crows had flown ahead of Suttis, to bade him to hurry to that point, to see.

And now Suttis saw — about twelve feet from the base of the embankment, amid a tangle of rushes — a doll?

A child's rubber doll, badly battered, hairless, unclothed and its coloring mostly flaked off — too light to sink in the mud and so it was floating on the surface in a way to cause Suttis's heart to trip even as he told himself *Damn thing's only a doll*.

Was he being mocked? Had the King of the Crows led him so far, to rescue a mere *doll*?

Suttis drew nearer and now — he saw the second figure, a few yards from the first. And this, too, had to be a doll — though larger than an ordinary doll — discarded in this desolate place like garbage or trash.

Pulses beat in his head like spoons against some wooden vessel. A doll! A doll! This had to be a doll, like the other.

As so much was tossed away into the Black Snake mud-flats that were an inland sea of cast-off human things of all kinds. Here you could find articles of clothing, boots and shoes, broken crockery, plastic toys, even shower curtains opaque and stained as polyurethane shrouds. Once, Suttis had found a pair of jaws in the mud — plastic teeth — he'd thought were dentures but had had to have been Halloween teeth and another time the wheel-less chassis of a baby buggy filled with mud like a gaping mouth. Mostly these cast-off things accumulated at the edge of the mud-flat where borne by flooding water they caught in exposed roots with the debris of winter storms, skeletons of small drowned creatures and the mummified remnants of fur with blind pecked-out eyes like gargoyles fallen from unknown and unnameable cathedrals while farther out in the mud-flats such objects were likely to sink and be submerged in mud.

Lurid tales were told in Beechum County of all that was “lost” — discarded and buried and forgotten — in the mud-flats.

Bodies of the hated and reviled. Bodies of “enemies.”

Humped outlines of dead logs in the mud-flat like drowsing crocodiles.

Cries of smaller birds silenced by the furious shrieking of crows.

Was this a doll, so large? It looked to be the size of a small child — Suttis had no clear idea how old — two years? Three?

Weak-kneed Suttis approached the very edge of the bank.

The King of the Crows shook his wings, jeering, impatient.

SSS'ttiss! Here!

The King of the Crows was very near to speaking, now. Human speech the great bird could utter, that Suttis could not stop his ears from hearing.

As the wide black-feathered wings of the King of the Crows fluttered wind and shadows across Suttis's slow-blinking eyes.

“Jesus!”

A little girl, Suttis thought, but — dead?

Her head was bare as if shaved — so small! So sad!

Nothing so sad as child's bare head when the head has been shaved for lice or the poor thin hair has fallen out from sickness and it seemed to Suttis, this had happened to him, too. Many years ago when he'd been a small child.

Lice, they'd said. Shaved his head and cut his scalp with the razor cursing him as if the lice were Suttis's fault and then they swabbed the cuts with kerosene, like flames too excruciating to be registered or gauged or even recalled except now obliquely, dimly.

Poor little girl! Suttis had no doubt, she was dead.

Maybe it was lice, they'd punished her for. Suttis could understand that. The small face was bruised, the mouth and eyes swollen and darkened. Blood-splotches on the face like tears and what was black on them, a buzzing blackness, was flies.

Only the head and torso were clearly visible, the lower body had sunk into the mud, and the legs. One of the arms was near-visible. Suttis stared and stared and Suttis moved his lips in a numbed and affrighted prayer not knowing what he was saying but only as he'd been taught *Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name bless us O Lord for these our gifts and help us all the days of our lives O Lord thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven! Amen.*

Suttis had seen many dead things and was not uncomfortable with a dead thing for then you know, it is dead and cannot hurt you. Only a fool would lay his bare hand upon a "dead" raccoon or possum and that fool would likely lose his hand in a frantic rake of sharp curved claws and a slash of razor-teeth.

A dead thing is a safe thing and only bad if it has started to rot.

The poor little girl in the mud-flat had started to rot — had she? For something smelled so very bad, Suttis's nostrils shut tight.

It was a wild extravagant prayer of Suttis Coldham, he'd never have believed he could utter:

God don't let her be dead. God help her be alive.

For cunning Suttis knew: a dead child could mean that Suttis would be in *trouble*. There were Coldhams who had been in trouble being in the close proximity of the dead and these dead adult men, women. And Suttis had been beaten for staring at children in a wrong way, or

a way deemed wrong by others, by the children's mothers for instance who were likely to be his Coldham relatives — sisters, cousins, young aunts. Staring at his own baby nieces and nephews when they were being bathed in the very presence of their young mothers and such a look in Suttis's face, of tenderness mixed with brute yearning, Suttis had somehow done wrong and been slapped and kicked-at and run out of the house and in his wake the cry *Nasty thing! Pre-vert! Get to hell out nasty pre-vert Sut-tis shame!*

And so now if this little girl is naked Suttis will turn and run — but it looks as if on what he can see of the little body is a nightgown — torn and grimy but a nightgown — isn't it? — for which Suttis is damned grateful.

The King of the Crows has been screaming for Suttis to bring the little girl to shore. In a crouch half-shutting his eyes groping for something — a long stick, a pole — a piece of lumber — with which to prod the body loose.

Suttis has it! — a part-rotted plank, about five feet long. When he leans out to poke at the doll-figure in the mud he sees — thinks he sees — one of the swollen eyelids flutter — the little fish-mouth gasping for breath — and he's stricken, paralyzed — *The little girl is alive!*

A terrifying sight, a living child — part-sunken in mud, a glint of iridescent insects about her face — has to be flies — suddenly Suttis is panicked, scrabbling on hands and knees to escape this terrible vision, moaning, gibbering as the King of the Crows berates him from a perch overhead and like a frenzied calf Suttis blunders into a maze of vines, a noose of vines catches him around the neck and near-garrots him the shock of it bringing him to his senses so chastened like a calf swatted with a stiff hunk of rope he turns to crawl back to the edge of the embankment. There is no escaping the fact that Suttis will have to wade into the mud-flat to rescue the girl as he has been bidden.

At least, the sharp stink of the mud has abated, in Suttis's nostrils. The most readily adapted of all senses, smell: almost, Suttis will find the mud-stink pleasurable, by the time he has dislodged and lifted the mud-child in his arms to haul back to shore.

Suttis slip-slides down the bank, into the mud. Makes his way to the mud-child lifting his booted feet as high as he can as the mud suck-suck-sucks at him as in a mockery of wet kisses. Above the mud-child

is a cloud, a haze of insects — flies, mosquitoes. Suttis brushes them away with a curse. He's shy about touching her — at first. He tugs at her arm. Her exposed shoulder, her left arm. She's a very little girl — the age of his youngest niece Suttis thinks except the little nieces and nephews grow so quickly, he can't keep them straight — can't keep their names straight. Lifting this one from the mud requires strength.

Crouched over her, grunting. He's in mud nearly to his knees — steadily sinking. Rushes slap against his face, thinly scratching his cheeks. Mosquitoes buzz in his ears. A wild sensation as of elation sweeps over him — *You are in the right place at the right time and no other place and no other time will ever be so right for you again in your life.*

"Hey! Gotcha now. Gonna be okay."

Suttis's voice is raw as a voice unused for years. As it is rare for Suttis to be addressed with anything other than impatience, contempt, or anger so it is rare for Suttis to speak, and yet more rare for Suttis to speak so excitedly.

The part-conscious child tries to open her eyes. The right eye is swollen shut but the left eye opens — just barely — there's a flutter of eyelashes — and the little fish-mouth is pursed to breathe, to breathe and to whimper as if wakening to life as Suttis carries her to shore stumbling and grunting and at the embankment lays her carefully down and climbs up out of the mud and removes his khaki jacket to wrap her in, clumsily; seeing that she is near-naked, in what appears to be the remnants of a torn paper nightgown all matted with mud, slick and glistening with mud and there is mud caked on the child's shaved head amid sores, scabs, bruises and so little evidence of hair, no one could have said what color the child's hair is.

"Hey! You're gonna be okay. S'ttis's got you now."

Such pity mixed with hope Suttis feels, he has rarely felt in his life.

Carrying the whimpering mud-child wrapped in his jacket, in his arms back along the embankment and to the road and along the road three miles to the small riverside town called Rapids murmuring to the shivering mud-child in the tone of one of his young-mother sisters or cousins — not actual words which Suttis can't recall but the tone of the words — soothing, comforting — for in his heart it will seem a certainty that the King of the Crows had chosen Suttis Coldham to rescue the

mud-child not because Suttis Coldham happened to be close by but because of all men, Suttis Coldham was singled out for the task.

He was the chosen one. Suttis Coldham, that nobody gave a God damn for, before. Without him, the child would not be rescued.

Somewhere between the mud-flats and the small town called Rapids, the King of the Crows has vanished.

The sign is RAPIDS pop. 370. Suttis sees this, every time Suttis thinks there's too many people here he couldn't count by name. Nor any of the Coldhams could. Not by a long shot.

First he's seen here is by a farmer in a pickup truck braking to a stop and in the truck-bed a loud-barking dog. And out of the Gulf gas station several men — he thinks he maybe knows, or should know their faces, or their names — come running astonished and appalled.

Suttis Coldham, Amos Coldham's son. Never grew up right in his mind, poor bastard.

Now more of them come running to Suttis in the road. Suttis carrying the little mud-girl wrapped in a muddied jacket in his arms, in the road.

A little girl utterly unknown to them, the child of strangers — so young! — *covered in mud?*

Amid the excitement Suttis backs off dazed, confused. Trying to explain — stammering — the King of the Crows that called to him when he was checking his traps on the river . . . First he'd seen a doll, old rubber doll in the mud-flat — then he'd looked up and seen . . .

Quickly the barely breathing mud-child is removed from Suttis's arms. There are women now — women's voices shrill and indignant. The child is borne to the nearest house to be undressed, examined, gently bathed and dressed in clean clothing and in the roadway Suttis feels the loss — the mud-child was *his*. And now — the mud-child has been taken from him.

Harshly Suttis is being asked where did he find the child? Who is the child? Where are her parents? Her mother? What has happened to her?

So hard Suttis is trying to speak, the words come out choked and stammering.

Soon, a Beechum County sheriff's vehicle arrives braking to a stop.

In the roadway Suttis Coldham stands shivering in shirt-sleeves, trousers muddied to the thighs and mud-splotches on his arms, face. Suttis has a narrow weasel-face like something pinched in a vise and a melted-away chin exposing front teeth and the gap between teeth near-wide enough to be a missing tooth and Suttis is dazed and excited and trembling and talking — never in his life has Suttis been so *important* — never drawn so much *attention* — like someone on TV. So many people surrounding him, so suddenly! — and so many questions . . .

Rare for Suttis to speak more than a few words and these quick-mumbled words to a family member and so Suttis has no way of measuring speech — a cascade of words spills from his lips — but Suttis knows very few words and so must repeat his words nor does Suttis know how to stop talking, once he has begun — like running-sliding down a steep incline, once you start you can't stop. Lucky for Suttis one of the onlookers is a Coldham cousin who identifies him — insists that if Suttis says he found the child in the mud-flat, that is where Suttis found the child — for Suttis isn't one who would take a child — Suttis is *simple and honest as a child himself and would never do harm, not ever to anyone* — *Suttis always tells the truth.*

In a Beechum County sheriff's vehicle the nameless little girl is taken to the hospital seventy miles away in Carthage where it is determined that she is suffering from pneumonia, malnutrition, lacerations and bruising, shock. For some weeks it isn't certain that the little girl will survive and during these weeks, and for some time to follow, the little girl is mute as if her vocal cords have been severed to render her speechless.

Beaver, muskrat, mink, fox and lynx and raccoons he trapped in all seasons. How many beautiful furred creatures wounded, mangled and killed in the Coldham traps, and their pelts sold by Suttis's father. And it is the child in the mud-flat Suttis Coldham will recall and cherish through his life.

In bed in his twitchy sleep cherishing the crinkly-purple scarf he'd found on the embankment, still bearing a residue of dirt though he'd washed it with care and smoothed it with the edge of his hand to place beneath the flat sweat-soaked pillow, in secret.

Albert Goldbarth

Induce

He searched her purse, and there it was:
enough to hurt him, finally, into leaving.
And she? . . . went drinking with his best
(but loose-lipped) friend, and the stories
she found out served a similar function
— *her* emetic procedure.

* * *

Surely there's a scientific term for this,
it's such a part of our nature. *Little purging devastation
that we seek out especially to counteract
the greater devastation.*

This is the Kansas season
when up in the Flint Hills farmers set their fields
on fire, to save their fields (this is called
"control burn"). / I suppose inoculation
is another example. / How many examples of pests
imported into a native population
(insects, rats, you-name-it . . .) to obliterate,
or at least deter, an earlier and worse pest?

When my mother forced an ugly oily swamp-green
spoon of ipecac into my pouty resistant mouth
she said, "This cure is sometimes worse
than the disease," and I remembered this

— it came back in a sad flash — when
they started her on the hellfire chemo
they used to target the spots on her lung.
"Control burn." Not that it always works.