

# ALARMED

Without a doubt, my crow, Alfie, was the reason I managed to get a college degree.

At this time in my life, I was living at home and commuting to Rutgers University, which perhaps is the root of my life's desire never again to be stuck in traffic. What should have been a twenty-minute drive turned into an hour of stop-and-go traffic thanks to every car in New Jersey being on the road at the same time every morning. Needless to say, an eight o'clock class was murder.

Eight o'clock classes meant getting up at five in order to feed the horses, change clothes, drive, locate a parking spot in some remote lot and hike to class. I tried taking the park and ride bus, but I missed them more often than not, which made me repeatedly late for class. This became exceedingly tiresome, so I started developing ways to shave off a minute here and a minute there.

I decided to skip changing my clothes from the barn after feeding my horses in the morning. I was an Ag. Major and in barns at school anyway, so what if I got odd looks in English class? I researched every route to school, the back roads actually offering ten minutes less of driving time. I knew every traffic light, how many times it changed before I finally drove through said traffic light, as well as becoming an expert at parallel parking my car where no one else dared. Half of my studying time occurred in my car, with my notes on the dash, so I could review them while waiting out a traffic light.

All of my manipulations, however, did not improve my attendance record. Whatever time I had squeezed out of the commute was converted to sleep-in time in the morning. My biological clock was not set for early mornings. No matter how hard I tried to discipline myself, my ability to sleep through an alarm clock was remarkable. There was not an alarm clock made that I could not outwit.

Then I acquired Alfie.

One does not acquire a crow that easily. This particular crow had misfiled his flight plan, and that resulted in a broken wing, a benevolent bystander, and a visit to the vet. My willingness to adopt any creature in need was common knowledge, and the vet knew my phone number by heart!

Alfie understood his plight beyond what any wild creature should have. He accepted human help without panic, without fear, without hostility. Despite our efforts, the wing did not heal well enough to allow for sustainable flight, and Alfie was grounded forever. He did not seem to mind.

Alfie shared my room on the third floor of my father's house. It was a renovated attic which I loved as it gave me both space and privacy and a terrific view of the backyard. Growing just as tall as the house was an old apple tree, one that I had climbed many summer days as a child. The branches were still worn smooth from my childhood grip, and it stood as a welcome old friend just outside of my window. Which was, also, Alfie's window.

Jammed against the window screen, his cage was but a few feet from the nearest branch of the apple tree and another world. In one direction from his cage was my attic room that offered shelter and food. But in the other direction were wind and rain, birds and squirrels, and all of the scents and sensations a wild bird was attuned to. Alfie made an admirable blend of his two worlds and managed to fit into both.

Crows greet each other with a big, healthy "CAW!" Me included. I would not quite have reached the front door of the house open when I heard the greeting from three stories above, "CAW!" Not content with a "Hi, Alfie" response, he would continue until I "CAWed!" back. A lot like a Tarzan movie, we worked out a dialog, somewhat limited in vocabulary, but a dialog nonetheless.

"CAW!"

"CAW!" said I.



“Caw”

“Caw back, be right up.”

“Rrrrrrruppp!”

My father, not a man who ever spent much time with animals, and one who wondered how he spawned a daughter who had conversations with them, truly got into the “CAW” thing. I caught him coming through the door “cawing” when he did not expect me at home. Regular visitors also got into “cawing” as there was no relief until one answered, conversations being quite difficult under such circumstances.

Having trained me to greet him, Alfie tutored me further on crow-speak. He taught me that even with a

limited vocabulary, one could communicate. Imagine having but one word, “HA”, with which to express yourself. “Ha!” (pretty funny!). “Ha,” (ah, I get it). “Ha.” (gotcha). “Caw” had that many times ten meanings in which Alfie instructed me.

Spending his daylight hours at his window, he was well aware of what was going on in the bird world from his exposure to the many wild creatures that visited the top of that old apple tree. His visitors surely found it odd that he could not come out, but they spent time with Alfie anyway which, I am sure, helped him considerably in dealing with his captivity.

I was soon to learn the “grateful dance” when a bird was offered food. Fresh meat was always greeted with a quick gulp and a gesture for more, but once the initial feeding frenzy was over, Alfie would bow his head and purr, “rrrrrrupppp - thank you.”

Alfie ate raw meat and fruit with no special favorites. He got breakfast and dinner, as my college schedule did not allow for much more. I soon discovered that any food he could not eat he would wrap up in newspaper, from his bedding, and stick in the bars of the cage facing the window. Should he get hungry during the day, he could retrieve a tidbit, unwrap it and have a pleasant little snack. I had to be careful not to overfeed him, as the wrapped up balls would accumulate, and decompose, to the point that my father would notice a foul odor whiffing down the prevailing winds from my window to his.

Intrigued by crow behavior, I dove into the Rutgers Ag Library to learn as much as I could about crows. There was a lot about how to get rid of crows, everything from timed explosions to picking them off with a gun. Crows, historically, were not terribly helpful to man. Finally, I found a published research paper on crow behavior and sat down to several hours of fascinating reading. Alfie obviously had collaborated on this paper!

Our most out of the ordinary, and intimate, communication was in the spring. No doubt the birds in the old apple tree heralded the breeding season and Alfie caught right on. I was the only “girlfriend” he had and so he took to courting me. Always his free time in my room was supervised for fear that my pet rats might get the bad end of Alfie’s exercise time. They peered with wonder from their little cages as Alfie hopped and flapped around the large room. Well, the flapping was pretty sad considering his damaged wing, but he never gave that up.

Starting with a series of “rrruppps”, Alfie hopped onto my hand and started a little dance. Gently taking a finger in his beak, he “rrruupppppp” and hopped and shuffled his feathers in a most delicate and entertaining way. He would repeat this courting dance every chance he had. He would even offer me food that he had put aside to take the opportunity to tell me what a lovely hand I had. Would I consider starting a nest with him? At times, it was a bit embarrassing!

I communicated the fact that my hand was dating a crow to one of my professors at school, and received a raised eyebrow in response. "Imagine," he said, "if that got around campus!" He really was very interested so I kept notes of the events up on the third floor of my father's house. I suppose my failure to build a nest was enough for Alfie to give up on me but he repeated the courtship every spring for three years. We had a seasonal relationship.

I later learned of an owl that performed the mating ritual with his handler's hand and felt camaraderie with her that few people could share.

Back to the alarm clock and getting to class on time. I had one of those electric ones that buzzed. It had a nice set of buttons on top marked "on", "off", and "snooze." I knew those buttons by heart and could tap them from a semi-comatose state to snatch a "few" more minutes of precious sleep. In other words, I rarely made it to class on time. My sheepish appearance at class was getting old for my professors, and I was dangling my grades over the great abyss of failure.

Then, one early dawn when, after hitting all of the buttons with no result, I pulled the cord out of the wall in desperation to stop the noise.

"BUZZZZZZ!"

Staring blankly at the pulled cord, buzzing continuing in my ears, I searched my sleepy brain for the source of the noise. The sound, coming from the direction of the window, was from my crow who was buzzing gleefully away.

"Stop!" I said.

"Caw?" he responded, all happy to see me up and available to feed him breakfast.

However, it did not take long for me to ignore not only the buzzing alarm clock, but also the buzzing crow.

In this seemingly hopeless state, I would never get through college. I launched a search for the most obnoxious alarm clock I could find. I tested countless at stores, annoying plenty of clerks as I did. I finally obtained a clock with a bell clangor with the voice of Hades, "Clannnngggggg!!!!!" I bolted straight out of bed that first morning, and Alfie hit the side of his cage with his beak in alarm.

It did not last. I surprised myself in my ability to find that clock with my hand, turn it off and still remain asleep.

But the crow would figure it out.

"Clannnngggggg!!!"

Ah! I cried, as I slapped the clock, until I realized that the sound was ticket to breakfast, and that alarm clock was the ticket to me. I could turn off the clock, but the crow kept it up until his little beak was busy with food and by that time, I was totally awake. Even if I did not set the alarm, the crow would go off, "clannnngggggg!" at dawn. I was utterly outwitted.

Alfie got me to class for four years of college and proved to be a veritable feathered friend.