

Excerpt from THE PROPHET JOAN

My land forms a long diamond, like a compass needle pointing north. The diamond's bottom point is my house and meadow. This is good meadow, the best, and if you do not believe me you can look it up on the New Hampshire state soil map. My meadow glows in the middle, a rectangle of bright yellow. Only a "legacy soil," rich and rare, gets the yellow. The farmer keeps the hay while I get the glory. In summer, my land grows some of the most nutritious and best-tasting hay in northern New England. Now in winter it grew fools.

On the east side of the diamond: woods, beavers, and the Jumper Mountain Forest, which is eight thousand acres. Mother never cared about the woods, but Daddy loved them and he built the trails.

On the west side of my land: my best skiing trails, bordered by an ATV-riding Masshole who comes up from the Boston area to shoot his guns. My home is a frontier, between paradise and everywhere else.

I skied down to the newest beaver lodge, which in the winter is a round white dome. Then I headed up the frozen brook to my campsite. This really is my campsite, since I made it myself and slept in it three times. I stepped out of my skis, dropped to my knees, and yanked a folding chaise out from the snow. I had to dig for the small pine logs I left for firewood. Beneath my tent platform—I made it out of a few old logs and boards—is a metal tackle box that holds matches and strips of birch bark. Everything here has to be metal or wood. The bears think anything plastic means food, so they will eat anything inside a container no matter what. They drink gasoline from plastic tanks. Bears are kind of stupid that way.

Taking matches and strips of birch bark from the metal tackle box, I got a fire going. I pulled the chaise as close as I dared, and took my damp clothes off to dry, lying in my

underwear. “Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward.” I said this aloud. Bible quote. Mary said it to me once, she teaches Sunday school, and I liked it.

The north wind blew along the brook and swirled the fire, sending embers shooting to the tops of the pines. Like the Lights were listening. Everybody hears voices once in a while. It might be a part of getting older that adults keep a secret. I had night terrors when I was little, and still do now and then, which the Psychologist thinks is very significant. Hearing voices, same thing, right?

I picked up a stick to poke the fire and spotted a raven standing close to the flames. Ravens do things like that. They show up out of nowhere and look at you like you are a fool. But I like ravens. All of them are individualists. “Hey,” I said to the raven, putting my stick down carefully so not to startle the bird. “Know the difference between a crow and a raven?”

“Not really,” the raven said.

Wait.

“I like jokes,” it said.

My breath stopped.

“Yes, well.” It straightened up and spread its wings. “I bring you tidings.”

I pitched forward like I was ducking a bullet and jumped behind a tree. Somebody must have snuck up. Gabe? He does not do that sort of thing. I remembered to breathe, and then got angry. “Where are you? Not funny.”

“Here,” it said. “Standing before you.” It hopped closer and then spoke in a louder, church-like tone: “I am Gabriel, come to appoint you humanity’s most sacred voice.” This did not sound like Gabe. Some kind of app?

I stood up. “Okay, cut it out, Gabe!” I looked around to see where he was, then ducked for my clothes. “Don’t look!” I lay back on the chaise and pulled my pants on then grabbed my shirt and held it in front of my chest.

“Arise.” The voice seemed to be coming straight from the bird. Then it said, “Oh do get up, Jonah. Move closer to the fire. You’ll catch your death.”

I sat up. “Gabe, how are you doing this? Is it a, what, a Bluetooth thing?” I stared at the bird.

It sighed like a door hinge. “Why do humans assume every visitation to be a trick? Do you know, the Prophet Moses was no exception. I came as vegetation, a flammable creosote bush just for variety, and it took an *eon* to get the man to pay attention. In his defense, he had been raised by Egyptians, a notoriously tricky lot— always pulling items out of their clothing, turning sticks into snakes—and Moses had spent his own childhood entertaining friends with Egyptian card tricks. It took all my polemical skill to convince him that I am what I am. He kept pouncing on the other bushes, shouting, ‘Aaron, you dog, I know it’s you!’”

Gabe did not usually talk so much. I leaned closer to see how the thing worked.

“I bring you tidings,” it said again. “Lovely fire.”

I said, “Gabe, that’s enough. Show me how this works.”

“I will tell you why I am here. Finish dressing, if you like.”

“Don’t look!”

The bird turned its back, and I laughed. “I meant you, Gabe.”

The bird looked around. “Pardon?”

How was he doing that? “How are you doing that?”

The bird faced me again. “Doing what, dear?”

I was maybe imagining this bird robot thing. Hypothermia maybe, which does weird things to your mind. I got hypothermia once when I swam Weimar Pond in early October. The water was really cold, and it was foolish to ride my bike to swim there that late in the season. It was a time for bike riding, not swimming, but I could not bear the thought that summer was really finally over with winter so far away. After swimming for a good long while, I crashed into a dead man. I saw a face and everything. I screamed into the water, which emptied the air from my lungs and made me sink to the bottom. Sort of swim-running underwater, I pushed my feet into the mud of the river and came up to the air. I gasped and turned over onto my back, not wanting to put my face in corpse-infested lake water. Next day, I rode my bike back to the pond and saw that the corpse was a log. Just a log.

Here is the thing: Sitting by my campfire, I was not that cold. This raven-robot had to be Gabe's trick, not hypothermia. But why would Gabe leave ski practice and ski all the way into the woods to set up this robot?

And here is another thing: The robot had a croaky sort of English accent, or maybe Australian. What voice app would speak Australian? If this was a delusion, then I needed to do two things: One, get closer to the fire. I scooted the chaise closer. Two, play along. If this really was Gabe, I did not want to give him any satisfaction.

I said, "So. You are Gabe."

"Gabriel."

"Mary's son."

The bird gave a croaky laugh. "You have your biblical characters confused, dear. I am the one who brought tidings to Mary. Of her son."

Wait. Sometimes I go to Mary's Bible study, because she is a really good teacher and the stories are interesting. I have learned enough to know about the Gabriel in the Bible who brought glad tidings to Mary.

"So you are an angel?"

"If you like."

"How many ravens are angels?" I laughed saying this. Gabe the son of Mary, meaning our Mary and our Gabe, is a serious person. He is very kind and considerate and does not have a jokey sense of humor.

"Ravens? Oh." The bird looked down at its own feathered breast. "Right. I dressed in rather a hurry. Truth be told, this is far more comfortable than, say, a man's frame. You should try something feathered in your next life." The raven groomed with its eyes closed. "Besides," it said, "an angel getup, the full festal raiment, would be frightfully intimidating, don't you think?"

"Why are you..." I tried to think of another question just to keep the conversation going. I was kind of enjoying this. "Why are you here?"

"I told you. Tidings. You have been chosen a prophet by the Higher Order..."

"God?" I looked behind me to see if Gabe was coming closer, with a video camera or smartphone, but again he was not somebody who posted embarrassing things on TikTok.

"If you like. Or gods. Something of a committee, or to be frank, a rather unruly organ."

I asked again: "Why are you here?"

The bird hopped a little. "I am preparing the way; preparing you, rather."

"Why me?"

The two of us watched a chipmunk shoot out of a hole in the snow and dash in front of the fire. It caught sight of the raven, then turned tail and dove back into the hole, looking embarrassed.

“Nobody tells me anything.” The raven said this quietly and then flew—flew!—upward with a great and clumsy flapping of wings.