

Black Premonition

(A literary historic novel) by Duncan Brown

Chapter 1

At first, Agnes thought there was just the one. Circling beadily above her, black against the red sky, she could not be sure if there was menace or reassurance in that dark, winged shape. When next she turned her attention upwards, there were more. "There's never just the one", Agnes chided herself as she pulled her cloak in close. There was little purpose in trying to count those restless forms, the only certainty being they were harbingers, though of what Agnes would never know. Close to this season's end, with summer latent in the feathering breeze, doubt and discord had unsettled a community with little to be grateful for after a hard winter. The twilight horizon, pink with the portent of a bright morning, could not counter the chill that shivered her bones, and the hens shared her unease, falling quiet as Agnes rounded them into their quarters for the night. Those rooks though, broke the evening lull with raucous cries, like stragglers wobbling home after closing time. They seemed to mock and chivvy, not just each other but whoever else was abroad that spring evening. Omens in the sky or no, Agnes recalled her hearth and the spit before it, bearing promise of her evening meal. "The dripping pan will be filling" she thought, turning to face the house. "No good will come from any wasted drop". At the very thought, her eyes flickered again towards the rookery as she headed for the door and whatever awaited her within.

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The Court of Crows

(Historical thriller) by Charlie Stubbs

I awoke that morning knowing it would be the last time I would do so. A lifetime of unanswered questions weighed heavy as steel in my gut. Pacing the dank, cobbled ground of my cell, I counted the church bell chimes that rolled over from across the other side of town. Eleven tolls. A day prior, the prison guard had told me I was to be executed on the twelfth hour the following afternoon.

I had one hour to make amends with God.

As the last toll rung out over the courtyard, I tip-toed against my cell wall and peered out from the barred window. A clamour of peasants had already started to gather to witness my death. I imagined how they would soon be berating and heckling me:

'Traitor! Heathen! Heretic!'

A crow swooped, landing on the gallows pole. It cawed as the rope swung beneath its weight. My gut squirmed at the thought of the noose being fastened around my neck. I prayed to see an executioner sharpening his axe; that I may die swiftly. I prayed also for a blue crack in the overcast sky. God granted me neither.

Finally, I heard footsteps approach my cell.

'It is time,' the guard said, mournfully.

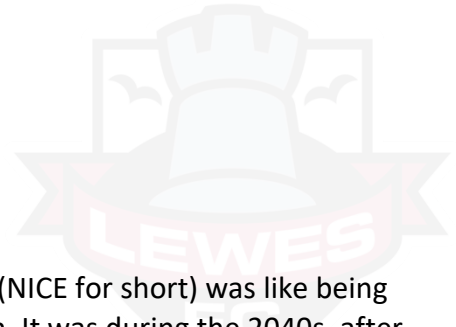
Death was staring me in the face. Though, by the grace of some miracle unknown even to God, I did not die that day.

This is a story about how I cheated death. Though, be warned; it is not of a Holy disposition.

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Untitled

(Science fiction) by Biram Desai



Prologue

Having a chat with the Norton Industries Compassion Engine (NICE for short) was like being held in the softest glove, all velvety and comforting and warm. It was during the 2040s, after years of gradual awakening, that humans finally let go and accepted that the most compassionate object in the whole universe was an App on their mobile phone. Perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise that NICE was the global hit of 2045. Where else could you let go of all your fears, insecurities and shortcomings and feel your mind float free, a droplet in a cotton cloud? NICE didn't ask you for anything, yet gave back unconditional love from an algorithmic well so deep you could talk for years and merely scratch its surface. The App was a ship, sailing across an infinite sea of kindness, the wind gently guiding you to a distant shore full of hope and love.

Chapter 1

Karla cleaned the room like she always did, blood first and then the corners of the duvet as a final flourish. Every contract was different, yet the act of termination ended with the same routine, like the closing of the final curtain on your favourite play. It was a job, that was all. To make things more interesting, she always asked them for any final words. It didn't seem right to take away their organic, living, breathing souls without the chance to say something, to learn something about them before they entered the endless night.

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