

*Edgar Allen*  
*by Sarah Richards*

I met Edgar when I came to live with my grandparents. After two years of dragging me kicking and thrashing to one doctor or clinic after another, my mother tearfully detailing all the ways in which I was “not right,” she at last received a diagnosis for me, an explanation for my behavior or lack thereof. Autism. Having a label that she could apply did nothing to improve the living conditions for me in her home. At five years old, I barely spoke, which infuriated and embarrassed her, as did my tendency to wander off, sometimes miles from my starting point. I could easily become over-stimulated from too much noise, bright and flashing lights, and crowds of people. I would drop to the floor, eyes slammed shut, hands over my ears, and rock vigorously back and forth. In my calm moments, I would sit for hours looking through a scuffed magnifying glass I’d found in the kitchen junk drawer. Blades of grass, rocks from the driveway, the daisies in the overgrown back yard, the skin-like bark on the beech tree across the street—I gazed at these things, extending my small finger into the circle of the glass and watching it grow big as I stroked the textures. Until it was all confiscated from me.

“That’s not yours,” she said, snatching the glass from my grasp.

So it went, no different than before there was a word for it. Finally, when I was seven, my mother could take no more and sent me to live with my grandparents. In a lengthy phone call to her father, which I heard from a post crouched at the bottom of the stairs, chewing on one of my brother’s old teething rings, my mother pleaded.

“I just can’t deal with her,” she said, her voice hushed and urgent. “She’s too wild, and she antagonizes her brother and riles him up too. She scares off anyone I try to have a relationship with. I can’t do it anymore Dad. I can’t take care of her.”

Two days later, my grandfather drove down to Grand Rapids to fetch me, an 840-mile roundtrip from his home in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. My little brother cried, and my mother comforted him while making a concerted effort to not look at me. My grandfather was cool and efficient, loading my bags into the trunk of his car. As he was situating me in the backseat, my mother came out carrying a quilted tote bag containing my books, which my grandfather wordlessly took from her. When we were a safe distance from the house I would never return to, I opened my clenched left hand with relief. I had taken the small jade owl that I had been forbidden to play with but had done so on many occasions without being caught. I had liked the way it felt in my hands, smooth and cool to the touch.

The following morning my grandfather introduced me to Edgar.

“There’s someone I think you would like to meet,” he said, gently guiding me with his hand on my shoulder. He led me to the dining room where, on a rattan plant stand in front of a large window, sat a wooden box that I later knew to be my grandfather’s cigar humidor, minus the lid. He took the box and placed it on the table. Inside was bird. My breath left me as it opened its eyes.

“It’s a raven,” my grandfather said. “I found him on the lawn down the hill two weeks ago. He was pretty little and needed some help. So I’ve been feeding him, and real soon we’ll show him he needs to fly. I named him Edgar Allen, but I usually just call him Ed.”

The raven was beautiful with glossy blue-black feathers that shone in the light and deep indigo eyes like marbles. I reached out to touch him, and my grandfather said, “Only his head. Not his wings.”

“Wings,” I repeated. My grandfather startled, then smiled.

“Not the wings. Just his head.”

“His head.” Thus began my echolalia and my love for Edgar. Every day I watched him, fascinated. I was allowed to feed him blueberries and beef jerky. Flexing my burgeoning linguistic muscle, I chatted with Edgar who would respond with cork-popping sounds or a resounding CRONK. I carried the jade owl with me everywhere and often showed to him. I would stand it up in front of him, and he’d tap at it with his beak before knocking it over. It became a game.

Recognizing that Edgar should be fledging around his fourth week, my grandfather rigged up a large tarp on the side of the house, anchoring it on the gutter, the other end onto the pedestal bird feeder nearby. He took Edgar in his hands and tossed him gently into the air over the suspended tarp. Edgar sank like a stone, and I pleaded with my grandfather that this was a bad idea. To no avail. They repeated this exercise for the better part of two hours. Toward the end, Edgar seemed to grasp that he needed to do something with his wings. The next day he made some progress and could flap a bit in the air before softly descending onto the tarp. By the third day, Edgar could fly to the white pine twenty feet away and effect a clumsy landing. We cheered, and after fifteen minutes of navigating between the branch and the deck steps, he crash-landed onto the lawn, hopped over to where we sat, and feasted on fat cashews.

“You know kiddo,” my grandfather began, “now that Ed’s figuring out how to fly, he will probably leave us.”

The cashews turned to jagged stones in my throat.

“No,” I said, looking at my grandfather and shaking my head. “No, no.”

“*NO NO NO NO NO!*” We both looked at Edgar, stunned. Already his voice was resounding. He bounced over near me while twitching his wings. I leaned in to touch him, and he headbutted my open palm before continuing his chant.

After Edgar figured out how to fly, my grandfather moved his box onto the deck, saying that he'd be better able to escape a predator now that he had the means to get protect himself. Two mornings later, he was gone. I searched the deck, the yard, the woods, and my grandmother's garden, frantic and crying, calling his name. At dusk, I was exhausted and heartbroken, collapsing on the front steps and lying my head on the cool cement. I promptly fell asleep, only to be woken a short time later when my grandfather picked me up to carry me to my bed.

"I think he'll come back to visit once he gets a place of his own."

"This is his place," I mumbled into my grandfather's arm.

Edgar returned one week later, looking none the worse for wear and bearing in his beak a shiny leaflike curl from a child's pinwheel which he dropped at my feet. Thus began Eddie's penchant for thievery, though he never stole from us, he only borrowed. The most significant example of this was my grandmother's diamond watch. Her recollection was that, after doing the dinner dishes, she went out to the back deck to enjoy a cup of tea and watch the autumn evening. As was her way, she removed her watch, set it on the table next to her, and applied hand lotion. It wasn't until the next morning that she realized she didn't have her watch. We exhaustively searched the house, the deck, the front porch, and her garden. To no avail. The watch was nowhere to be found.

Some days later it appeared on the railing of the deck next to a pink peony head, obviously pulled from her garden as no one else in town grew peonies. She gave Eddie, who stood on the back of a nearby chair preening his wings, a stern look as she snapped the watch back into place and went into the house, carrying the peony head to float it in a bowl of water.

Eddie pilfered small items from neighbors and brought them back to us. This was a regular occurrence. Once he arrived with a man's leather wallet containing three twenty-dollar bills, a weathered drivers' license, and a snapshot of three awkward-looking children. My grandfather returned the wallet to the man, who lived in the next town over, and said he had found it in the road, which the man didn't seem to believe.

I always enjoyed the trinkets: bits of ribbon and strands of plastic beads, coins and wads of crumpled foil, smooth stones and lost earrings. I kept these treasures in a music box that my grandmother had given me, placing them carefully beneath the spinning ballerina in the center, while a tinny rendering of Beethoven's "Für Elise" issued forth. Even decades later, when Eddie and my grandparents were long gone, that particular tune would send me into reverie like Proust's madeleine.

Among Eddie's presents to me was a hard, pink rubber ball. I would throw it down onto the pavement in front of the garage and watch it bounce high into the air. Eddie like to catch it, flap around in circles above me, and drop the ball a short distance away for me to catch. It became our favorite game for several years, though the original ball had to be replaced by my grandfather several times due to wear. I placed the presented one in my music box.

Every summer, over the Fourth of July, the family would gather at my grandparent's house which swelled with aunts, uncles, cousins, and my mother and brother. These were raucous events with plenty of food, games, quarrels, and Manhattans, the latter likely adding to the propensity for quarrels erupting. Each evening of the festivities, both before and after dinner, the family would lounge about on the back deck, talking and laughing. Eddie typically stayed in the trees, but occasionally he observed the goings-on from the far end of the deck, flicking his wings and moving his head up and down as if he were smelling the air. When I would see him, I

would sneak off to join him in his distant vantage. One year, my Aunt Jane, a miserably unhappy woman with a ski-slope nose and close-set eyes caught sight of me scratching the top of Eddie's head.

"She shouldn't be touching that nasty bird," Aunt Jane said, her face pinched in judgment. "Who knows what diseases it carries."

All eyes turned to me. I prickled and burned and looked at my hands, the hands she thought were vectors of disease. And then I ran at her with my disease fingers outstretched, shrieking, "Why are you always so mean?!"

Her eyes were wide with shock, and her mouth hung slack in surprise. Before I could reach her, my grandfather caught me up and quietly said, "That's enough of that," as he turned me loose in the yard.

Jane continued, "I see that she's been cured of nothing. You ought to put her away somewhere."

Then, two things happened at once. My mother leaned forward and told Jane in a crisp voice of disapproval, "No more Jane. Shut. Up," just as Eddie came hopping aggressively along the deck railing directly toward Jane, chanting at his loudest, "*NO NO NO NO NO! KIDDO MAD! KIDDO MAD!*" Jane yelped and vanished into the house, and after a few moments of the family verbally processing what has just occurred, the cheery conversation resumed. But I remained in the yard, my brother and Eddie joining me. I could not concentrate on instructing my brother not to touch Eddie's wings, and he was soundly pecked for attempting to do so. He said, "Stupid bird," and left to join the others, while I kept looking from my mother to Eddie and back again. They seemed such unlikely allies, and in that instant, I decided that Eddie was my very best friend of all time, and my mother was perhaps not as awful as she once was.

After my first summer with my grandparents, they enrolled me in a special school three towns away which meant that every school day one of them had to drive me forty-minutes one-way to school. Sometimes I slept in the car, but usually I chattered on, pointing out the window and singing nonsense songs, eager to get home and see if Eddie was around. As the years passed Eddie would be gone for a week or two at a time, but he invariably returned, year-round as ravens do not seasonally migrate. I had made corvids my special interest and read everything I could lay hands on about them. They were a frequent topic of my excited childhood dissertations, and when my grandmother bought me an acrylic paint set and a stack of inexpensive canvases, I decorated the house with renderings of Eddie, and later, his family.

One day Eddie came to visit, and he brought a friend with him, a slightly smaller bird, more midnight black than Eddie and head feathers that resembled a mohawk. Eddie landed on the railing as he usually did, and the other perched on a low branch of the white pine a short distance from the house. Eddie hopped about, looking at me, then croaking to the other bird. I took a handful of cashews from the mason jar we kept outside for Eddie's treats. He became excited, cronking and popping and saying, "KIDDO KIDDO KIDDO." He took a cashew from my hand, flew to the edge of the deck, and placed it on the top step. Immediately the other raven came down from the tree to take the cashew. Then my grandfather came outside.

"Well, what have we here? Is this your girlfriend Ed? It's about time sir."

"HI HI KRA KRA KRA CRONK BIG BIG GUY."

"She's lovely Ed. Should we give her a name? How about Lenore? Seems appropriate."

"HA HA HA GOOD JOB GOOD JOB MORE NUT MORE NUT NUT."

I fetched more cashews from the jar, and this time the other raven came right to me, but she would not take from my hand as Eddie did. Rather Eddie would get one and place it in front of her. Between the two of them, they ate the entire jar.

I had visions of more and more ravens coming to the house, Eddie and Lenore's children. The yard would be full of them. They would all like me and play games with me, and I could name the little ones and teach them words. This more or less happened. In April, their visits were less frequent until one evening, Eddie came with a broken eggshell, dusty blue-green with brown specks, in his beak. He gently placed it on my grandmother's table on the deck, next to her bottle of lotion. The inside of the shell was still slick and moist. I called to my grandparents, and we all sat outside eating Trenary Toast and talking joyfully about Eddie and Lenore's new babies, however many there were. My grandmother went back inside to prepare a care package for Eddie to take back to the nest: several stalks of her spring asparagus, tied together with sisal twine so that he could carry the bundle.

This was our pattern for many years. Eddie and Lenore and countless young ravens came and went from my grandparent's house. All of them were, to one extent or another, were socialized to us, unafraid and often bringing presents. One, a particularly large bird that I'd dubbed Baudelaire, presented my grandfather with a crumpled hundred-dollar bill.

"Is this room and board? Baud, did you rob someone?"

"HI THERE NOW YA YA HA."

After twenty years of Eddie and his large extended family visiting regularly, Lenore stopped coming. I was in the first year of my Masters' program at the university in Marquette. I lived near campus, but I drove home nearly every weekend. My grandfather informed me that,



after five weeks, Lenore still hadn't appeared. We sadly concluded that she must have died. Eddie had not relented in his visits, yet he was slower, smaller, and he talked less.

One morning, a short time later, my grandfather called me and said that I had better come. There were no more words, I knew what this meant. When I arrived, my grandfather had Eddie in the house, on a soft bed of linen in front of the fireplace.

"He's not doing so good," my grandfather said. "It won't be long now."

I stroked Eddie softly, touching him on the wings for the first time.

"kiddo kiddo hello mwaa mwaa." His voice, once so robust was now hoarse and faint, and his deep, glimmering indigo eyes were now a muddy brown. I lifted him from his bed and placed him on my chest, wrapping him in my sweater. We sat like this on the couch for hours, and I hummed my nonsense songs until finally he slipped away. My very best friend of all time was gone. I felt the ribbon flowing back from me to my childhood constrict painfully, yet at the same time I knew that I would not be what I was, who I was if I had never known him. He taught me to be.

Four days later we buried Eddie on the same spot in the yard where my grandfather had found him twenty-two years before. Several family members came to see it done, including my mother. As we tossed clods of dirt onto the box that had once been my grandfather's cigar humidor and now contained a lifeless raven wrapped in linen and a small jade owl, I cried openly, and my mother, who stood next to me, held my hand.

My grandfather had a raven.

Or rather, a raven had me.