

## Don't Touch

Cassie hadn't always liked birds.

When she was younger, she had worked at a pet store. It was a far cry from the idealistic pet utopia she interpreted it as years before she landed the job. The animals were angry. More than one screeching tropical bird had taken out its anger on the hand that fed it – which in several cases was Cassie's.

Unsurprisingly, these events had left her with both physical scars and an uneasiness around caged animals

Her pet store memories had faded after had her children and focused on keeping them alive instead.

The years passed quickly, and as Cassie celebrated her son's acceptance into college, she realized that she would be truly alone for the first time in her life. Relationships had been difficult for her. She was a nurturer for her children, but struggled to connect romantically for more than a few years. That was alright with her. She was proud to have raised her children to the point where they could feel independent enough to leave the nest.

Cassie had taken a single ornithology course in college and, though not helpful from a career aspect, she found that she enjoyed watching mockingbirds angrily assert their dominance over holly trees. She was enamored with the crows that flew overhead like oil slicks with their glossy feathers. These birds were different than the monsters she had encountered at the pet store. They seemed more intelligent, and their aggression with others was usually logical.

While on one of her many birding excursions at Riverside Cemetery, Cassie noticed a crow digging feverishly near an unusual headstone one cloudy morning. As gravel crunched under her old tennis shoes, she noticed the line of trinkets on the headstone. She recognized the inscription as well. Edgar Cayce had been a famous psychic in the early 1900s, if she recalled a museum display correctly. As she surveyed the small array of gifts, she noticed a glint in the disturbed ground where the crow had been digging. Brushing away red clay, she slowly revealed a curved metal edge with glass in the center.

When she pulled the edge gently, the item freed itself. Cassie turned it over in her hand, and did not

recognize the piece. She placed the lens gently in her pocket to revisit when she could contact Andrew, the local antique store owner and her old friend. As she headed back to her car, the crows started cawing furiously, as if she had stolen something from them. Feeling uneasy, she made it back to her car just as the rain began pouring down.

When she returned home, she emailed Andrew images of the lens, hoping to discover its purpose. A few hours later, she received a response. *It's a vintage camera lens*, Andrew wrote. *Could be worth some money if you'd like to send it my way.*

Cassie considered this. She could use the money, but the lens was ominous and enchanting. Small golden text surrounded the black frame of the lens. The glass portion of the lens was cloudy and still a little dirty. *I'll hang on to it for a few days*, she thought. *What could happen?*

The next day, Cassie was sitting at her kitchen table rolling the lens on its edge. She raised the lens to her eye and saw a man with tattered clothing sitting at her table and staring back at her. Startled, she dropped the lens, but saw no one else in her kitchen. *Strange, my imagination is in overdrive.*

As she set out for her daily birding outing, she tried to recall details about the man she had seen. *Was he missing an arm?* Surely not. She was just seeing things.

Cassie walked briskly past her favorite black cat statue toward the forbidding building in the center of the cemetery. She was hoping to see a cerulean warbler in the surrounding trees. She shifted through the contents of her pocket, looking for a pencil to write in her field guide. Her fingertips slid across the old lens she had forgotten about.

She withdrew the lens and looked around the cemetery. Nothing. Just shifting branches and leaves.

She continued looking around and stopped when she had rotated a quarter turn. The same man she had seen in her kitchen was here. *At the cemetery?* He staggered closer. She backed up and looked through the lens again, and the man was not alone. The people all looked gaunt and tired. They moved slowly and purposely toward her. Crows watched from a distance, rattling concernedly.

It finally clicked – the figures were ghosts, and she had taken something from one of them.

“I’m so sorry, please forgive me!”, Cassie said as she returned the lens to the soil near his grave.

Maybe being alone wasn’t so bad.