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Opening Extract from...

The Burning Soul

Written by John Connolly

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THE BURNING SOUL

JOHN CONNOLLY



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For Joe Long, secret agent

Excerpts from ‘The Dead Girls Speak in Unison’
by Danielle Pafunda have been used with the kind
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1

Put the case, Pip, that here was one pretty little child out of the heap, who could be saved; . . . the legal adviser had this power: 'I know what you did, and how you did it . . . Part with the child . . . Give the child into my hands.'

from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

1

Gray sea, gray sky, but fire in the woods and the trees aflame. No heat, no smoke, but still the forests burned, crowning with red and yellow and orange; a cold conflagration with the coming of fall, and the leaves resignedly descending. There was mortality in the air, borne on the first hint of winter breezes, the threatening chill of them, and the animals prepared for the coming snows. The foraging had begun, the filling of bellies for leaner times. Hunger would make the more vulnerable creatures take risks in order to feed, and the predators would be waiting. Black spiders squatted at the corners of their webs, not yet slumbering. There were still stray insects to be had, and further trophies to be added to their collections of withered husks. Winter coats grew thick and fur began to lighten, the better to blend in against the snow. Contrails of geese arrowed the skies like refugees fleeing a coming conflict, abandoning those forced to stay and face what was to come.

The ravens were motionless. Many of their far-northern brethren had headed south to escape the worst of the winter, but not these birds. They were huge yet sleek, their eyes bright with an alien intelligence. Some on this remote road had noticed them already, and if they had company on their walks, or in their automobiles, they commented on the presence of the birds. Yes, it was agreed, they were larger than the usual ravens, and perhaps, too, they brought with them a sense of discomfort, these hunched beings, these patient, treacherous scouts. They were perched deep among the branches of an

ancient oak, an organism approaching the end of its days, its leaves falling earlier each year, so that by the end of every September it was already bare, a charred thing amid the flames, as though the all-consuming fire had already had its way with it, leaving behind only the smoke smudges of long-abandoned nests. The tree stood at the edge of a small copse that jutted slightly at this place to follow the curvature of the road, with the oak as its farthest point. Once there were others like it, but the men who built the road had cut them down many years before. It was now alone of its kind, and soon it too would be gone.

But the ravens had come to it, for the ravens liked dying things.

The smaller birds fled their company, and regarded the intruders warily from the cover of evergreen foliage. They had silenced the woods behind them. They radiated threat: the stillness of them, their claws curled upon the branches, the bladelike sharpness of their beaks. They were stalkers, watchers, waiting for the hunt to begin. The ravens were so statuesque, so immobile, that they might have been mistaken for misshapen outcroppings of the tree itself, tumorous growths upon its bark. It was unusual to see so many together, for ravens are not social birds; a pair, yes, but not six, not like this, not without food in sight.

Walk on, walk on. Leave them behind, but not before casting one last anxious glance at them, for to see them was to be reminded of what it is to be pursued, to be tracked from above while the hunters follow remorselessly. That is what ravens do: They lead the wolves to their prey, and take a portion of the spoils as payment for their labors. You want them to move. You want them to leave. Even the common raven was capable of disturbance, but these were not common ravens. No, these were most *uncommon* birds. Darkness was approaching, and still they waited. They might almost have been slumbering were it not for the way the

fading light caught the blackness of their eyes, and how they captured the early moon when the clouds broke, imprisoning its image within themselves.

A short-tailed weasel emerged from the rotted stump that was her home, and tested the air. Its brown fur was already altering, the darkness growing out of it, the mammal becoming a ghost of itself. She had been aware of the birds for some time, but she was hungry and anxious to feed. Her litter had dispersed, and she would not breed again until the new year. Her nest was lined with mouse fur for insulation, but the little pantry in which she had stored her surplus of slain rodents was now empty. The weasel had to eat forty percent of her own body weight each day in order to survive. That was about four mice a day, but the animals had been scarce on her regular routes.

The ravens seemed to ignore her appearance, but the weasel was too shrewd to risk her life on the absence of movement. She turned herself so that she was facing into her nest, and used her black-tipped tail as bait to see if the birds were tempted to strike. If they did, they would miss her body in aiming for her tail and she would retreat to the safety of the stump, but the ravens did not react. The weasel's nose twitched. Suddenly there was sound, and light. Headlights bathed the ravens, and now their heads moved, following the beams. The weasel, torn between fright and hunger, allowed her belly to choose. She disappeared into the woods while the ravens were distracted, and was soon lost from sight.

The car wound its way along the road, traveling faster than was wise and taking the bends more widely than it should, for it was hard to see vehicles approaching from the opposite direction, and a traveler unfamiliar with this route might easily have found himself in a head-on collision, or tearing a path through the bushes that lined the road. He might, were this the kind of road that travelers took, but few visitors came here. The town absorbed their impact, the apparent

dullness of it dissuading further investigation, then spat them back the way they came, over the bridge and toward Route 1, there to continue north to the border, or south to the highway and on to Augusta and Portland, the big cities, the places that the peninsula's residents strove so hard to avoid. So no tourists, but strangers sometimes paused here on their life's journey, and after a time, if they proved suitable, the peninsula would find a place for them, and they would become part of a community with its back to the land and its face set hard against the sea.

There were many such communities in this state; they attracted those who wished to escape, those who sought the protection of the frontier, for this was still an edge state with boundaries of wood and sea. Some chose the anonymity of the forests, where the wind in the trees made a sound like the breaking of waves upon the shore, an echo of the ocean's song to the east. But here, in this place, there were forest *and* sea; there were rocks ringing the inlet, and a narrow causeway that paralleled the bridge linking the mainland and those who had chosen to set themselves apart from it; there was a town with a single main street, and enough money to fund a small police department. The peninsula was large, with a scattered population beyond the cluster of buildings around Main Street. Also, for administrative and geographic reasons long forgotten, the township of Pastor's Bay stretched across the causeway and west to the mainland. For years the county sheriff policed Pastor's Bay until the town looked at its budget and decided that not only could it afford its own force, it might actually save money in the process, and so the Pastor's Bay Police Department was born.

But when locals spoke of Pastor's Bay it was the peninsula to which they were referring, and the police were *their* police. Outsiders often referred to it as 'the island,' even though it was not an island because of the natural connector to the mainland, although it was the bridge that received the most

traffic. It was wide enough to take a decent two-lane road, and high enough to avoid any risk of the community being entirely cut off in foul weather, although there were times when the waves rose and washed over the road, and a stone cross on the mainland side attested to the former presence on this earth of one Maylock Wheeler, who was washed away in 1997 while walking his dog, Kaya. The dog survived, and was adopted by a couple on the mainland, for Maylock Wheeler had been a bachelor of the most pronounced sort. But the dog kept trying to return to the island, as those who are born of such places often will, and eventually the couple gave up trying to hold on to it, and it was taken in by Grover Corneau, who was the chief of police at the time. It remained with Grover until his retirement, and a week separated the deaths of the dog and its owner. A photograph of them together remained on the wall of the Pastor's Bay Police Department. It made Kurt Allan, Grover's replacement, wonder if he also should acquire a dog, but Allan lived alone, and was not used to animals.

It was Allan's car that now passed beneath the old oak and pulled up before the house across the road. He looked to the west and shielded his eyes against the last of the setting sun, bisected by the horizon. There were more cars coming. He had told the others to follow. The woman would need them. Detectives from the Maine State Police were also on their way following the confirmation of the AMBER Alert, and the National Crime Information Center had automatically been notified of a missing child. A decision would be made within the coming hours on whether to seek further assistance from the FBI.

The house was a ranch-style dwelling, neatly kept and freshly painted. The fallen leaves had been raked and added to a compost pile at the sheltered side of the building. For a woman without a man to help her, a woman not of this place, she had managed well, he thought.

And the ravens watched as Allan knocked on the door, and the door opened, and words were spoken, and he stepped inside, and there was no sound or movement from within for a time. Two more cars arrived. From the first vehicle stepped an elderly man with a worn leather physician's bag. The other was driven by a woman of late middle age wearing a blue overcoat that caught in the car door as she rushed to the house. It tore, but she did not stop to examine the damage after wrenching it free. There were more important matters to which to attend.

The two people came together and were halfway across the yard when the front door opened wide and a woman ran toward them. She was in her late thirties, carrying a little weight on her waist and her thighs, her hair flying loose behind her. The new arrivals stopped at the sight of her, and the middle-aged woman raised her arms as though expecting the other to fall into her embrace, but instead the younger woman pushed her way past them, jostling the doctor, one of her shoes falling from her foot, and the white stones on the drive tore at her skin so that she left smears of blood across them. She stumbled and landed heavily, and when she rose again her jeans were ripped, and her knees were scratched, and one of her fingernails was broken. Kurt Allan appeared in the doorway, but the woman was already on the road and her hands were at her mouth and she screamed a name over and over and over . . .

'Anna! Anna! Anna!'

She was crying now, and she wanted to run, but the road curved to the right and to the left, and she did not know which way to turn. The middle-aged woman came to her and wrapped her in her arms at last, even as her charge fought against her, and the doctor and Allan were approaching as she screamed the name again. Birds took flight from the surrounding trees, and unseen creatures burst from brush and scrub as though to carry the message.

The girl is gone, the girl is gone.

Only the ravens remained. The sun was at last swallowed by the horizon, and true darkness began to fall. The ravens became part of it, absorbed by it and absorbing it in turn, for their blackness was deeper than any night.

Eventually the weasel returned. The fat corpse of a field mouse hung limply in her jaws, and she could taste its blood in her mouth. It was all that she could do not to tear it apart as soon as she had killed it, but her instincts told her to control her urges. Her self-restraint was rewarded, though, for a smaller mouse had crossed her path as she returned to her home, and she fed on that instead before hiding its remains. Perhaps she would retrieve them later, once her larger prize was safely stored away.

She did not hear the raven's approach. Her first awareness of it came with the impact of its talons upon her back, tearing through her coat and into her flesh. It pinned her to the ground, then slowly began to peck at her, its long beak carving neat holes in her body. The raven did not feed upon her. It simply tortured her to death, taking its time over her agonies. When it had reduced her to a mess of blood and fur, it left the corpse for the scavengers and rejoined its companions. They were waiting for the hunt to begin, and they were curious about the hunter who was to come.

No, the one who had sent them was curious about him, and they watched on his behalf.

For he was the greatest predator of them all.