

Excerpt from the novel *The Crowe*, by Jacek Dukaj

Translated from the Polish by Stanley Bill

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THE CROWE

*Just then flew down a monstrous crow,
As black as a tar-barrel;
Which frightened both the heroes so,
They quite forgot their quarrel.*

“I know what you’re thinking about,” said Tweedledum: “but it isn’t so, nohow.”

“Contrariwise,” continued Tweedledee, “if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.”

Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass, And What Alice Found There*

He walked out into the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of an

intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover.

Cormac McCarthy *The Road*

Listen up, this didn't really happen:

Long, long ago there was a little boy named Addy. Addy had a mamma and a papa, he had a little sister, a grandma, as well as uncles and aunts. They all lived in a big city on a river.

Near the city stood some factories. The factory chimneys spewed out thick clouds of smoke day and night. At dusk and dawn the sky above the city was colored like candy.

Addy's mamma worked in the office at one of the factories. His papa worked in another office, in the middle of the city. For most of the day they weren't at home. Then it was grandma who took care of Addy and his sister.

Father brought files full of printed and written papers home from work. He himself, even at home, would tap away on the typewriter in the evening and at night. Until mamma had to remind him that the children couldn't sleep while he was making such a racket. Then he would stop. Muttering angrily under his breath he would go out onto the balcony. There he would smoke a cigarette before going to bed.

Some bearded men would come and argue noisily about what

papa had written on the typewriter. They too went out onto the balcony.

Addy learned to fall asleep to the sounds of the typewriter. Papa let him strike the keys himself too. Addy sat on his lap and stuck out his tongue. One after another he punched the letters very hard on the metal buttons. Papa wound on a clean sheet of paper especially for him. Addy tapped out onto the middle of the white rectangle: ADAM.

He took the sheet of paper. He always had it with him, folded up into a square. He had signed his name and so he knew how to write. He was very proud of himself.

He showed the sheet of paper to his little sister. But she only snorted and turned her eyes away. Little sister, he thought resentfully, is very stupid. She doesn't even know how to talk.

Father wrote on a typewriter because they didn't have a computer. In those days there were no computers. There was no Internet. There were no electronic games either. Black-and-white televisions showed two channels. Ugly men babbled away about boring things. In the cinemas they didn't show American films. And there was no music to listen to on iPods and mobile phones. There were no mobile phones. At Addy's house there was no telephone at all.

The downstairs neighbor had a telephone: a very big bald man with a grey mustache. Papa talked with him often on the stairs and in front of the apartment block. Half the residents from their stairwell would drop in at the bald neighbor's place and use his phone. People called him too and then he would come and knock on the door, summoning the occupants to the phone in

a booming voice.

Addy lived with his parents, his little sister and his grandma on the third floor of a concrete apartment block.

He climbed up onto the broad window sill and looked out through the window at the rows of more and more concrete blocks. Above them the great arms of cranes were still moving about. Sometimes Addy would see the workers clambering - higher and higher - up to the little cabins on the cranes. It was exciting: after all they might fall down.

He pressed his brow against the cold window pane. The workers walked across the roofs and shone their blue fire. From the fire colorful spots flew under Addy's eyelids. Grandma told him not to look there for he would go blind. Addy looked and he didn't go blind. He realized that grandma didn't know anything about construction.

Often he would simply sit for hours on the window sill and read books. Papa had taught him to read, even though Addy wasn't going to school yet.

That winter it happened that the ugly men also replaced the Sunday children's show on television. The schools were closed and some of the pre-schools too. Addy was even more bored than usual.

Uncle Kazek appeared at home. Mamma said that uncle had to stay here with them for a little while. Uncle Kazek sat through whole days by the radio, he argued noisily with papa about various incomprehensible matters and he smoked even smellier cigarettes. He slept in the kitchen on a mattress laid out under the radiator. He complained that the cold came

in through the cracks in the window frames. He sneezed and blew his nose.

Mamma wouldn't let Addy go outside. So he couldn't even go sledging or throw snowballs with the children from the block.

Father and Uncle Kazek went downstairs to the neighbor. They came back and complained that the telephone was still dead. Then they complained that it wasn't possible to talk because they were listening in on the line. Mamma spent a lot of time at the next-door neighbor's.

Addy took up his place on the window sill.

He began to read a book about the adventures of spies and partisans. The cold blew in from the window and grandma wrapped the boy in a blanket. From the morning she had looked very frightened. What could grandma be afraid of?

The housing project seemed to Addy to have been abandoned by the residents. Nobody was walking between the blocks. The sky to the east had darkened. Perhaps it was a cloud, or perhaps the smoke from the factories, now almost black. The snow was dirty too.

Sometimes in the evening, all huddled up as he looked out on the gray housing project, Addy began to feel a peculiar sadness. He had to swallow hard and blink for a long time.

The lights burned in the windows of the blocks. Addy watched the little people moving about in the little squares in the concrete, against yellow backgrounds, against blue-gray backgrounds. The blue-gray was where the television sets were on.

Grandma turned on the television too. On the television they

were showing the babbling men. Then babbling men in uniforms. Then soldiers with cannons and tanks. Then the babbling men again. And then one man in a uniform, with a large head and in large glasses.

Somebody knocked on the door and grandma went out. Addy was left alone in the empty apartment with his little sister sleeping in the crib and the television on.

He pressed his cheek up against the cold window pane.

The housing project had disappeared into the darkness. He closed his left eye. He thought that he was the only person on the whole Earth. Well, there were those in the lightened windows, but after all they weren't real.

He breathed on the window pane. The world steamed up and misted over pleasantly, like in a fairy tale.

Grandma came back. She took one look at Addy, laid her hand against his brow and promptly packed him under an eiderdown. Addy really was sniffing loudly by now. Grandma blamed uncle Kazek. She had foretold that uncle would infect everyone in the house.

Addy fell asleep for a while, woke up, fell asleep again and woke up again. It was dark in the room. Only the crack of light under the door allowed him to tell pieces of furniture from monsters.

He went to the bathroom. His parents, uncle and grandma were sitting in the kitchen and arguing in hushed voices. Addy peed and then listened for a while, until he began to get chilly and he was seized by the shivers.

He went back to bed.

He fell asleep and woke up. He dreamed of the pictures from the television. Black-and-white generals. A giant crow over some soldiers. The empty streets of dark cities.

He was sweating profusely. Mamma gave him hot tea with raspberry juice to drink. She bundled him up thoroughly and kissed him. He wanted to ask what was happening, but he saw that mamma was afraid too. He just pulled the eiderdown up higher, right up under his eyes. Now he was almost safe.



He awoke again. Something terrible was happening in the apartment, he knew it. Some noises had awoken Addy - but he only recognized them after a moment, as he sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

The window pane had shattered - what he had heard in his sleep was the crash of showering glass. Something heavy fell onto the floor too and mamma screamed in terror. It was all happening in his parents' room.

He jumped out from under the eiderdown and trotted down the hallway. Cold air blew over his feet. He began to sniffle again.

The door to his parents' room was ajar. The light was shining there. The racket hadn't ceased. Addy recognized Uncle Kazek's voice. Uncle was saying some very bad words.

Addy cautiously moved his little head to the door slit.

In the shattered window, on the broken window frame sat a giant Crowe, exactly like the one that Addy had dreamed of: black, glistening, dreadful.

The Crowe spread his wings and covered the whole wall, from the bookcase to the wall unit. In one taloned foot he clutched Addy's bloodied father, with the other he clung onto the window sill.

He lifted his meter-long beak and brought it down violently, a sharp and weighty pickaxe. He stabbed Addy's mamma with it. Mamma was trying to save papa, to pull him away; she didn't

succeed. The foul bird struck mamma. She fell onto the floor, screaming in pain.

The Crowe opened his beak. He shook off the red drops from it and let out a dreadful screech, so that the echo resounded across the housing project.

The drapes and the curtains fluttered in shreds about the Crowe. The icy wind blew fountains of snow inside. The lamp swung below the ceiling, the crooked shadow of the Crowe leaped over the faded wallpaper.

Addy threw himself to his mamma's aid. Uncle Kazek caught him by the shoulder. The boy broke free and yelled.

The Crowe turned his black head around towards him. Enormous, flat eyes - glasses of coal - stared at Addy.

Addy was trembling with cold. He tightly clutched his uncle's pajamas. The pitch-black eyes must have sent out some invisible paralyzing rays, for Addy could not move a step either backward or forward. The dead, icy gaze of the bird had frozen the boy to the floor.

“SON!” cawed the Crowe.

“Bang!” burst one of the light bulbs.

All of a sudden the Crowe folded up his wings, snatched up Addy's unconscious father, and together with him swooped into the night.

All that remained was a whirlwind of black feathers, white snow and shreds of paper from the torn-up books. Documents and ripped-out pages were scattered about the whole room.

Addy and his uncle rushed to the window. The freezing gale wrung tears from their eyes. Addy wanted to climb onto the

window sill, but his uncle held him back. He just pointed at the shadow fading into the nighttime sky above the housing project, above the roofs and cranes.

Uncle and grandma carried mamma into the other room. Uncle ran to the telephone. Grandma tried to dress mamma's wounds. The Crowe had stabbed her above the heart. A red stain was spreading on mamma's night shirt.

Mamma wasn't opening her eyes.

Addy stood in the corner and bit his fingernails.

The neighbor with the telephone appeared.

"They'll be here any minute," he said.

Grandma looked back at the terrified Addy.

"Take him please, Mister Jan."

Mister Jan took Addy in his arms. He ran out into the stairwell, panting heavily. On the stairs he passed Uncle Kazek. They shouted to each other as they ran.

Mister Jan hurriedly slammed the door of his apartment. He turned all the locks and put on some chains.

Catching his breath, he carefully moved the peephole aside and looked out through the glass eye at the stairwell.

"They're coming," he whispered.

"Who?"

"They."

And he put his finger to his lips.

Addy pressed his ear against the door.

At first the wind blew through the stairwell. The shutters

and the door frames banged. The doormats scraped. The downstairs door to the stairwell slammed. Then the stamp of many pairs of boots resounded. THUMP-WHUMP, THUMP-WHUMP. They were running, but it was as if they weren't in any hurry at all. Floor after floor, closer and closer. Addy took his ear off the door for a moment. They didn't stop, they ran on up the stairs. To Addy's apartment.

Mister Jan put his finger to his lips again. They heard grandma's screams. Uncle Kazek was loudly saying something too.

The steps began to get closer again. They ran past back downstairs. THUMP-WHUMP, THUMP-WHUMP. For the second time the downstairs door to the stairwell slammed.

And silence.

Mister Jan opened the door and looked outside. Addy slipped out from under his arm and dashed upstairs first, into his home.

There was no home now. They had broken, smashed, ripped, tipped over, knocked over, shattered, scattered, perforated, poured out, torn out, hacked, crumpled, mixed up, soiled, spoiled, and destroyed.

Addy looked over at his little sister's crib. Empty.

Not a trace of mamma, grandma and Uncle Kazek either.

All the windows open or smashed. Over the ruins howled the wind with the snow.

Mister Jan and Addy trod over the clothes, papers, bits of appliances and furniture.

“Where's mamma?”

“They've taken them.”

Addy climbed up onto the window sill. Mister Jan caught him by the collar.

In the snow below the apartment block could be seen the tracks of enormous canine paws with a deep tire tread in a herringbone pattern. By the communal trash heap a man stood in a black overcoat with the five-meter needle of an antenna rising out of the top of his skull. He was turning his head around to all sides and the steel spike drew circles and figure-eights in the night.

“The Hounds took them,” grumbled-growled Mister Jan, squeezing Addy towards him with a fat arm. To the boy it sounded as if a cement mixer were turning in the depths of the bald neighbor’s chest.

“They’ve left a Spiky Spook. Be careful, kid, or he’ll see us. He reports everything to the Crowe.”

Addy shivered.

“C-c-cold.”

They went back to Mister Jan’s apartment.

Mister Jan brewed some tea. From a bottle into a glass he poured himself Something Stronger. He gulped it down and exhaled.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Addy,” sniffed Addy.

The neighbor extended a giant hand to him.

“Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław Mortar”

With some difficulty Addy squeezed Mister Mortar’s thumb and index finger.

“Why do you have such big hands, sir?”

“With these two hands!” boomed Mister Mortar. “With these two hands I have built!”

“What have you built, sir?”

“Houses! Streets! We have built factories! Cities!”

“Aha.”

Mister Mortar went back upstairs to fetch some warm clothes for Addy.

In the meantime Addy looked at the old photographs of Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław standing on the bookcase. All of them were taken on large building sites. Mister Mortar still had hair on his head. Stripped to the waist he stood with bricks in his hands. Or with a putty knife and a bucket. In the background were the construction machines. And all around them walls and concrete pillars rose up. On them hung ribbons and banners. 1000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA. 20000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA. 250000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA.

There were also two smaller pictures, to one side. A slightly older Mister Mortar was accompanied in them by a pretty lady with very long hair and a boy: first at a few years old and then as a teenager. All of them were smiling broadly.

Mister Jan, with some difficulty, had found some good clothes for Addy. The sweater was torn at the sleeve, the trousers had a hole in them, and the shoes didn't match. On the coat half the collar had been torn off.

“We'll wait a bit,” said Mister Jan. “Your uncle called the family. Everything's going to be fine, kid. Auntie or grandpa will take you away before the Crowe finds out.”

“But what about papa? What about mamma, please sir?”

Mister Jan rubbed his bald head.

“Ah, that. A nasty business.”

“But they’ll be back, won’t they?”

“You don’t mess with the Crowe.”

Somebody knocked on the door.

It was Mister Jan’s next-door neighbor. He had heard everything. And maybe he’d seen it too through the peephole.

He came in and he chattered chattered at Mister Jan. Mister Jan was nodding his head. The neighbor smiled at Addy. Addy pretended that he was only interested in the hot tea, which he slurped from a teaspoon.

“I can I can give give you you the keys the keys to the passage to the passage through the cellar through the cellar,” said the neighbor.

Mister Jan thanked him. The neighbor went to his place for the keys.

“Why is that man double like that?” Addy asked Mister Jan.

“What are you on about?”

“He does everything double and he talks double.”

Mister Mortar wrinkled his brow and shrugged his shoulders.

But then at once he clapped his hand to his forehead.

“We’ve got a Double Agent right under our noses!”

“A Double Agent?”

“An Agent, you see, is one who acts. You act, kid, I act. But each after himself, for himself. But there are Double Agents: they act both in their own and in someone else’s name. Openly and in secret. In one way and the other. In truth and

in lies. As if to the right, but really to the left. As if it were this, but really that. Do you understand?”

“I don't know. As if it's his doing, but it's also the doing of - who? The Crowe?”

“The Crowe,” Mister Mortar ground his teeth and clenched his great fists.

The neighbor came back came back with the keys.

“A thousand thanks,” said Mister Mortar and shook his hand.

The neighbor paled paled and wailed wailed.

Mister Mortar had caught him by the neck and pressed him against the wall. The neighbor goggled goggled his eyes. With one hand Mister Mortar crushed him into the wall of the apartment block, while he smashed the other into the concrete and brushed it aside.

“With these two hands!” he rumbled, reddening from the effort. “With these two hands I'll show you!”

The neighbor kicked kicked his legs, flailed flailed, punched punched in all directions. But on Mister Jan it made no impression.

He mashed the Double Agent into the concrete until he had mashed him completely. Then he patted down the surface of the great slab with his hands so that not a trace remained, and he wiped his grey mustache.

“Ooph. A makeshift arrangement. But it'll do.”

Mister Jan sat down on the sofa bed. He sat like that for a long time, resting his chin on his fists and staring at the wall.

Addy had drunk all of his tea. Normally he'd feel like

sleeping, but he was too frightened. He was afraid for his parents too and for his little sister and grandma and uncle.

The Phone Book fell from the little table under the phone. Mister Jan got up, put on a thick coat and pulled a fur shapka over his bald head.

“We’re going, kid.”

“And auntie?”

“Auntie’s been exposed.”

“What?”

“The Screech-Owl Snitchers and that double. We can’t wait.”

They went out into the stairwell and silently went down to the landing above the ground floor. Mister Mortar looked out through a small window.

“The Spook. We won’t get out this way.”

“And through the cellars?”

“That’s what they want us to do! Probably some UAs or other Boobies have hidden themselves down there.”

They went down to the ground floor. Mister Jan caught hold of Addy tightly. Addy couldn’t see very well in the dark what Mister Mortar was doing.

Suddenly he lifted the boy up and put him through a hole in the wall into the interior of a dark apartment. Then, grunting and panting, he himself climbed through the hole.

“Come on, kid. The Nowackis have gone to see their grandchildren. We’ll get out through the balcony.”

They groped their way through the Nowackis’ silent apartment. Addy thought that it was some kind of ghost hunt. Only that now he and Mister Jan were the ghosts. And what if

they were to come across Mister Nowacki now? He'd be frightened to death!

They went out onto the balcony. Mister Mortar lifted Addy up onto the balustrade and lowered him down onto the snow. Addy glanced around the housing project. Only the gray glow of televisions flickered in the countless little squares of the windows.

As they were walking along the block, Addy craned his neck to see inside the apartments.

Whole families were sitting there in front of televisions. The bulging picture tubes cast patches of grainy grayness onto their faces and clothes. There was a warm quietness in these scUA. A normal evening, normal parents and children. It stabbed Addy in the heart.

Mister Mortar turned the boy's head round and covered his eyes with a great hand.

“Don't look.”

They went out onto the street behind the builders' shed.

Mister Jan pointed to the black strokes against the background of the night, over the roofs of the lowest buildings: the antennas of the Spooks. It looked as though under every apartment block in the project at least one Spook was on the lookout.

“We won't get far now, kid. We'll stay the night and then see. I've got an old buddy here.”

Addy was tired now. He didn't reply. The cold was stinging his cheeks and scratching his throat. The boy strode through the snow with difficulty. He squeezed Jan's hand tightly. Now

what? What about papa? What about mamma? Where was grandma, where was uncle, where was his little sister? The Crowe had flown in through the window in the middle of the night and torn his world into shreds. Addy took little steps with his head lowered and sniffled his nose.

The old buddy of Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław Mortar lived in a storeroom by the thermal power station. Inside it was very hot and very stuffy. Mister Jan's buddy had a beard like Blackbeard and he smoked a big pipe.

The two adults discussed long and loudly. Addy's eyelids drooped. He didn't hear, he didn't understand.

Blackbeard made him a bed on the sofa behind the wardrobe and gave him three blankets. But before long Addy had dug himself out from under the blankets and stolen up to Mister Jan, who was snoring noisily on a folded-out armchair. He clambered in onto the breast of the bald, mustachioed man and hugged him tightly.

Mister Jan opened one eye, looked up and pulled the old quilt over Addy.

Addy fell asleep to the sounds of the turning cement mixer, huddled up under the mighty arm of Mister Mortar.

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In the morning he was grumpy and didn't want to get up. Blackbeard took out some powdered milk which had come from the donations and boiled some for the boy. Addy drank it with a stale roll and some cheese spread.

“Sir, you have a son too, don't you?” he asked Mister Jan.

“I don't have son.”

“I saw in the pictures.”

“I had one, but not any more. Eat.”

“What was his name?”

Mister Mortar wiped the white mustache from Addy's lip.

“Christopher. Chris.”

“He's dead?”

Mister Mortar shrugged his shoulders.

Addy wrinkled his forehead.

“Did the Crowe take him?” he asked in a whisper.

“You could say that,” snapped out Mister Jan. He said nothing more about it.

They set off for the city.

They waited at the bus-stop for a bus. But the buses weren't running as they should have been. They went on foot.

Along the longest avenue in the project stood the telephone poles. On the wires sat some Screech-Owls. With closed eyes, tightly clinging onto the wire with their claws, they listened to the conversations running along them between telephones.

Every so often a Screecher-Snitcher opened its beady eyes, twisted its great head in astonishment and rose up into flight. Addy followed the birds with his eyes in the gray sky. They were heading towards the center of the city.

“They're reporting to the Crowe,” murmured Mister Jan quietly. “They're all reporting to the Crowe.”

The eastern part of the horizon was veiled by a thick,

black cloud.

The city had turned gray. The streets had turned gray, the buildings had turned gray, the cars had turned gray, the shops had turned gray, the snow had turned gray, the sky had turned gray, the people had turned gray.

“Why is everybody so gray?”

“The Machine is working,” replied Mister Jan. He pointed with a motion of his head to the neighborhoods on the other side of the river. “Don’t go near the Machine, kid. But no, not everybody’s gone gray.”

It was true: some were less and others more gray.

The completely gray ones walked like this: close by the wall, straight over the path trodden into the snow. With stiff legs they made short steps. And they looked like this: hands hidden in the pockets of overcoats and jackets, heads lowered, pushed into the collars of overcoats and jackets, eyes fixed in the mud in front of them.

At the intersection stood an iron devil’s cauldron and it smoked with black smoke. Thickly bundled-up Rook-Soldiers with angular rifles on their backs had gathered in a ring around the cauldron. One after another they bent down over the cauldron and breathed in the dark fumes. And whoever took in a deep breath immediately became more soldierly, more riflish and Crowe-like. He was no longer afraid of the cold. He held himself upright, he craned his neck, he glared at the passers-by.

Every so often ravens dived down from the sky and flung pieces of bloody meat that they had brought in their beaks into the cauldron. The meat dropped into the pot, let out a hiss, and the smoke belched out more thickly. The ravens flew off cawing noisily.

Now Addy saw the foul birds settling on the roofs and gutters of the buildings in the city. He could have stood

there and counted the black ravens against the background of the white snow all day long, and still he wouldn't have been able to count them all.

He glanced over with upturned head at the other side of the street. He hadn't noticed that they had been drawing closer to a great building with neon letters on the wall. "BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY" Addy read the inscription. The first word was missing its last four letters and the middle two words had burned themselves out completely, so that only the faint outlines remained.

A Merryman on a square surrounded with flags stopped a young man. The young man took out his wallet. He said something. The Merryman soon stopped being merry. He threw the wallet into the snow and almost leaped up.

"Beat! Beat! Beat! Beat!" he cried, reaching for his belt.

A second one ran up and the two Merryman Batoned the young man into the white.

The gray passers-by sneaked past, striding even faster, with their heads lowered even further. Some of them seemed entirely to melt and stick into the grayness of the walls. They vanished into grayness.

Mister Jan looked up and down the street.

"Don't say anything, kid."

Addy didn't say anything.

"Documents!" cried out the Merryman at them. (Addy saw that he was not very merry at all).

Mister Mortar handed him his Identity Card.

The Merryman pointed with his Baton at Addy.

"Is this your son, sissyzen? Documents!"

Mister Jan began to explain that Addy wasn't even going to school yet and that he didn't have any Documents. The Merryman started and the dirty-white Baton twitched nervously in his hand.

“It is demanded of the sissyzen Documents of Identity certifying the sissyzen’s family relations of the act of law of the sissyzen of the state of insubordination of papragaph hereby the sissyzen of the functionary in the case forthwith Documents! Documents! Documents!”

Addy hurriedly searched through the pockets of his coat, through his trousers and underneath them. He still had his pajamas on.

Finally he fished out a sheet of paper folded up into a little square.

He carefully unfolded it and handed it to the Merryman.

The Merryman read: ADAM.

He saluted and handed back the sheet of paper.

“On your way!”

They went around a tall building and entered from the back into a winding corridor. They went past some important Persons looking very Official. Then they passed through some glass doors and into a hallway. Here the Persons were moving about and speaking less Officially.

Mister Jan looked at Addy from under a wrinkled brow.

“What sort of a fast one was that, kid, eh?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“What did you show him?”

“I signed my name on papa’s typewriter. I know how to write!”

Mister Jan just rumbled at this like a mortar mixer.

They went into a smaller room. Mister Jan whispered something into someone’s ear. They passed through the room into a Backroom. Three men were sitting there on packages of Waste Paper and playing at cards. The radio was squawking out News and Announcements.

The men were very Colorful. The tallest of them was haggling about something now with Mister Jan. He waved in the

air with his fingers and smiled broadly. He had blue pants, a red shirt and green glasses. On his finger, on his neck, and on his tooth shone dazzling America.

They placed Addy on a tall pile of Waste Paper. Addy swung his legs and picked at the paper.

“Changey-tipsy, one thousand and eleven six hundred and seven, changey-tipsy,” hissed Mister Colorful and Counted on his fingers.

“Who’s that?” Addy asked Mister Jan once Mister Colorful had gone back to his companions.

“They do Business with the Rookies. They’ll give us a Tip-Off. We have to find out what happened to your family, kid. Someone has to take care of you.”

“You’re taking care of me, sir.”

Mister Mortar made a strange face.

The black-market moneychangers told them that they should come back for news before the Hour of the Raven. The radio had made an Announcement. Within the Hours of the Raven, from ten in the evening until six in the morning, ravens on the orders of the Crowe were swooping out of the darkness at passers-by and pecking out their eyes. Even the Merry-men and the Soldiers wore hard Helmets for protection then.

“Never go out alone,” repeated Mister Jan to Addy. “Don’t go out at all. Do you understand?”

“Mamma wouldn’t let me go out to play either.”

“Listen to mamma, kid, listen to mamma.”

Addy thought about mamma. He lowered his head.

Mister Mortar straightened the boy’s little cap.

“Now, don’t be afraid. It’ll be all right, it’ll be all right.”

They went out onto the street. The snow was falling more and more thickly. Mister Jan pulled Addy in the direction of a pedestrian crossing.

Suddenly he stumbled. He stood still as if touched by a premonition. He looked up a cross street behind the closed meat shop.

Addy stuck out his neck to see out from behind the massive figure of Mister Mortar.

Whatever it was at the end of the street was obscured by the snow. Out of it ran two gray passers-by. Then another one. This one screamed something.

Mister Jan squeezed Addy's little hand tightly.

Everybody was running away now.

“GAS!” they screamed. “GAS!”

And before Addy had time to ask anything, from behind the meat processing plant and the Office rose up a great cloud of GAS. Puffing up and inflating, it twisted its mighty head the size of two churches and in a flash swallowed up the meat shop, the Office, as well as the bus-stop and a broken-down bus. The swallowed people disappeared into the GAS without a trace. You couldn't even hear their cries. The GAS was grayer than them. So gray that it was almost white.

“Run!” panted Mister Mortar.

But he himself couldn't run very fast. He loped along in heavy bounds, stumbling and wobbling from side to side. Everybody overtook them.

The GAS was getting closer with every second. It opened wide its maw, puffed out its cheeks, and goggled its bulbous eyes. The seven round bellies of the GAS piled up in waves, blocking the whole width of the street and the intersection. There was no way out.

Addy squeezed his eyes shut and closed his mouth.

The GAS swallowed them up.

The others too were running around blindly inside the GAS. They bumped into Addy and Mister Mortar. Eventually they knocked them over.

Addy rolled over the snow. He picked himself up and ran back. But when he opened his eyes, at once they filled with tears. He began to cough and choke.

Why had Mister Jan let go of his hand? How had it happened?

“Addy!”

“Please, sir! Please, sir!”

“Addy! Over here!”

“Please, sir! Don’t leave me!”

They had lost each other.

Again someone ran past and bumped into Addy. Addy fell into the mud and hit himself painfully against the curb. He couldn’t see anything, only tears. He wanted to call out for Mister Jan once again, but the tears must have run into his throat, for he was choked completely.

He was left alone in the billows of GAS, alone in the city and alone in the world.

From the depths of the cloud-stomachs of the GAS came the rumble of Tanks.

Addy knew their rumble from the television. He roused himself and ran ahead, anything to get further away from the Tanks. He fell over and propped himself up on his hands.

He heard the groans of the people being digested by the GAS. He imagined with terror what it looked like. The sticky tongues of the GAS engulfing the victim - the victim breathing them in, the victim swallowing them - the GAS dissolving the hapless passer-by together with his clothes. The grayness in the air was really the gray passers-by: swallowed up and digested by the GAS into GAS-eous form. The whole GAS was composed of the wisps of corpses.

With a cry Addy brushed off and unstuck the damp tentacles from himself.

He ran for a very long time. Or at least that was how it seemed to him: that he ran and ran and ran.

He didn't even notice that he had run out of the GAS, for his eyes were still watering. Once again he fell over and bruised himself and he stayed there huddled beneath a wall, for he was out of breath. By now he couldn't hear the Tanks. Only then did he regain his sight.

He was not sitting beneath a wall at all, but beneath the back of a ticket kiosk. On the other side of the street an old janitor was scraping faded posters from the walls of the apartment buildings. A little girl was leading a dachshund on a leash. The coalman's horse and cart drove past. Nobody paid any attention to Addy. It was no longer snowing. There was no GAS.

Addy thought to himself: I have to find Mister Mortar.

How was he to find Mister Mortar? He couldn't go back into the GAS for him. He couldn't go back home. The Spooks and the double neighbor were waiting there. He could go back to Mister Blackbeard. But he would have to make his way on foot back to the housing project. He was very afraid that he wouldn't make it. He would get lost along the way between the building sites and at the Hour of the Raven the Crowe's birds would peck out his eyes. (I'm not going to cry, he told himself. I'm not going to, I'm not going to cry now).

But he remembered that Mister Jan was supposed to go back to the Moneychanger for the Tip-off. So he would have to seek out the tall SAFE building. And that way he'd find Mister Jan!

Addy was wet through by now and covered in mud. He saw his reflection in the window pane of a closed shop: gray.

He scurried along the wall. He dragged his little hand in his knitted glove over the rough plaster. He looked around for the tall buildings.

It seemed to him that all the ravens on the roofs were

turning their heads towards him.

That steel needle between the chimneys - was it a radio antenna or a Spooky Spike?

From around a corner, straight onto Addy, came a Merryman.

Addy darted into the first doorway and rushed into the Line for a Shop.

“Not-your-place!”

Addy was hurled back, as if the pavement had kicked up beneath his feet.

“Not-your-place!”

And again he jumped back, further along the Line.

“Not-your-place!”

“Not-your-place!”

“Not-your-place! Not-your-place!”

“Not-your-place!”

He only came to a stop behind the last lady with her bags.

“Remember who you’re Standing behind.”

Addy nodded his head. He just wanted to hide from the Merryman. The lady with the bags made a good cover. Five children could have hidden behind her.

By now the Merryman must have moved on long ago. Addy wanted to leave the Line - but his legs wouldn’t move. His feet wouldn’t tear themselves off the ground.

“Oh dear.”

All the Standers were stuck like that in the Line, fastened to their places in it. They moved their heads, they moved their hands, but if the Line didn’t move - they didn’t move their legs.

“Please ma’am, please ma’am!” Addy pulled the lady with the bags by the sleeve. “Make it let me go!”

“Hold your place, child. Mamma will come, then she’ll replace you.”

“But I don't want to stand here!”

The lady with the bags laughed sadly.

“No one wants to Stand in the Line. But we Stand our whole lives.”

They had umbrellas in case of rain and snow. They had bags of food and drink. They slept on their feet. Beneath the wall on the right, in front of the doorway, he saw a row of shrunken figures covered in snow. These were the Standers who had ended their lives in the Line. They had been ripped out of the Line after their deaths, along with the paving stones and the roots that they had thrust down through the slabs deep into the ground. The roots spread out from each foot. Addy untied his left shoe and tried to pull his foot out of it. That didn't work either.

The Standers had feet that were twice as large as normal feet. And longer arms encumbered with bags. They Stood in silence. Sometimes they would pass a secret signal or incantation to one another in a half whisper. Then they would twist their bodies round in place, without turning their heads, and speak behind. The Line rustled like the trees in a wood.

“Please ma'am, please ma'am, what are they selling here?”

“But surely you can see that the Shop is closed.”

It was true, the Shop admitted it on the signboard: SPAŁEM
Addy lost hope. He wanted to sit down. That didn't work either, since he couldn't tear his feet off the ground. He just flew forward into the lady with the bags.

She whirled round indignantly. But she saw the look on the boy's face and her heart softened.

“Don't be afraid. Stand up straight.” She fished a handkerchief out of the bottom of her bag and wiped Addy's face. “Where did you get so dirty?”

So Addy told her about the GAS, and then about Mister Mortar, and then about mamma and papa and the Crowe. And so,

sniffing his nose, he told her everything.

The Line passed along Addy's tale, mumbling and murmuring. The Stander moved like pine trees in a gale.

Then back the other way from Stander to Stander meandered various pieces of advice. The last lady with the bags repeated them to Addy.

“You must go back to your family, to your uncle, to your aunt.”

And:

“The Lord God takes care of children. Where is your parish, your parish priest?”

And:

“Dear child, there's no other way, you just have to go with this matter to the Member. The Member knows the people to know. The Member will Write. The Member will make a Phone Call!”

And:

“Run away to the country, to the country, to the country. It's always safer in the country.”

That's what they told him, rustling their bags, clattering their umbrellas and flapping their overcoats.

It started snowing again. Along the street outside the doorway the howling cars were driving by. Addy wondered what time it was now.

He Stood and Stood. And Stood. And Stood. He would be Standing until the end of the world. He would never see mamma, papa, grandma. Mister Mortar wouldn't find him here. Addy would grow big feet, he would put down roots.

He hung his head.

So he didn't see a new fellow with shopping bags. The man walked along the Line.

“Who's Standing last?”

The lady with the bags nudged Addy.

“I’m the last!” squeaked Addy.

“Then I’ll be Standing behind you.”

Addy caught the man by the sleeve.

“But this is your place! Here you are!”

The man with the shopping bags looked at Addy suspiciously.

“You’re giving up your place to me?”

“Yes!” Addy moved his left leg. His shoe tore itself away from the concrete with a loud crunch. “Yes. That’s-your-place!”

The Line whispered.

“That’s-his-place.”

“That’s-his-place.”

“That’s-his-place.”

Addy tore away his other foot. He leaped out of the Line. The man with the shopping bags took his place.

Addy ran as fast as he could out onto the street.

The Line swayed in farewell.