

NBE 3E

# ASSIGNMENT 5.3

"The Last Raven"

Richard Green

- ① Read "The Last Raven"
- ② Complete ASSIGNMENT 5.3  
Q #1-4

by Richard G. Green

Looking at Dan and Nola Goupil, you'd never guess they're married. Not that they're unworthy but she's at least two heads taller which makes you wonder how they make out physically. They subtly administer the word of God each week, while we sit in a circle trying to overcome hardness from the high-backed wooden chairs. This circle is part of a continuing plot to get up closer to God, nature, and each other by moulding us into a team of young-adult Christians. Truth is, Sunday school attendance is mandatory to play on the hockey team, which is why I'm here.

When I adjust my tie clasp, my elbow presses against the flesh of a bare-armed girl sitting beside me. She brushes at the spot as if removing bacteria, folds her hands

with kindergarten precision, and places them in her lap. She knows I'm Mohawk and I know that's why she brushed off her arm. Girls outnumber boys two-to-one in this class, and none of them drives you mad with desire.

"Well, Mr. Silverheels," Nola says, her voice one octave above a whisper in true Christian fashion. "What do you think the meaning of Christ's action toward the penitent woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee was?" Hanging *Mr.* and *Miss* to surnames is supposed to elevate us to adult status, though we're expected to call Dan and Nola by their given names. When the Goupils first arrived, I labelled this a get-acquainted trick, but I accept their eccentricities, though it's weird not being called Jim.

"What?" I say. "I . . . I don't think I heard the question." I glance toward Bill Shostrom, as he flashes a devilish smile. He slouches in his chair, the lapels of his blue suit flex into a diamond shape exposing the too short length of his polka-dotted tie. His punk hair is greasy with hair-goo, and a glimmer from the ceiling lamp reflects off his forehead. If you believe opposites attract, then you know why we're chums.

Tracking down the direction of my eyes, Nola says: "Now don't you tell him the answer, Mr. Shostrom." The class laughs. She turns to the fat girl beside me, who's impatiently waving an arm.

"Yes, Miss Breen."

Miss Breen leaps to her feet. "I think it's a story to remind us that even though we're constantly submerged in sin," she says, confidence rampant in her tone, "Christ loves those who love." Satisfied with her brief moment of superiority, she directs a smirk toward me as she plops her oversized buttocks back into the chair.

"I disagree," I say. I'm not sure why this blurted out, but now I'm committed to explanation. I feel tension in the wily shifting of everybody's eyes.

Dan Goupil glares at me, and a nervous hush settles over the room. He never enters class discussion, but I can see he's interpreted my remark as an attack on his wife. He removes a handkerchief, holds his plastic-rimmed glasses toward the ceiling light, and huffs on the lenses. Wiping them with a fluid motion he says quietly, "Exactly what do you disagree with, Mr. Silverheels?" A smile curls his thin lips as he scans the class. "Surely you don't challenge the love of Jesus, eh?"

"No, sir," I say.

"Well I'm glad to hear that." The class translates his actions, and, suddenly, I'm in a sea of snickering faces. "Well then, Mr Silverheels." He puts on his glasses. "*What* do you disagree with?"

"It's just that . . . well, I uh, I don't think the love of Jesus is in question here. That's the constant theme of the New Testament and is indicated in many previous occasions. I think that, by forgiving this woman of all her sins, Christ is directing a lesson of humility toward Simon."

"Humility?"

"Yes. He's raised Mary Magdalen to a level of respectability above that of His host. He's used her to show Simon that her example of love makes her superior."

"You think Christ would *use* somebody for His own gain?"

"In this case, yes."

All eyes rest upon Dan. It's plain that emphasis has shifted from correct and incorrect and is now a question of vanity. To these people, Christ is their saviour; to me, He's a prophet. I realize Dan's next statement decides the outcome. He glances at his

wristwatch, and I'm reminded that it's almost time for dismissal. Perhaps I'll be saved by the bell.

Nola raises her eyes above an opened Bible. "Mr. Silverheels?" she asks. "What do you think Christ means when He says, 'Therefore I tell you her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.'"

Dan brushes dandruff specks from his lapel. Simultaneously, shuffling feet and voices penetrate from the corridor outside. Looking at me, Dan says, "I think you've misconstrued the point of today's lesson . . ."

"Dan," Nola smiles. "I think you're *both* right." Everybody closes their Bible, with a thump. "Now, class," Nola continues. "Before you all run off, don't forget our house-party this afternoon. We expect to have a lot of fun, and I pray none of you will miss it."

I stand and file toward the door, a feeling of betrayal welling up inside me. If the objective of the class is participation, why haven't I been shown any mercy? Passing Dan in the doorway, I smile meekly. He squeezes my shoulder and says, "See you this afternoon." But I'm unable to answer.

On our way home, Bill and me and a skinny kid named Hartmann always stop at Gimpy's Diner. Our arrangement is we keep Gimpy's shoveled in winter and he lets us in on Sundays to play a pinball machine everybody calls "The Chief". Light the 975,000 point feather, and with Gimpy's verification you get a dollar from the "Picnic Fund" jar. In three years of play, I've won twice.

"Are you going to the Goupil's this afternoon, Jim?" Hartmann stares at my reflection in the machine's glass panel.

"Not in a million years."

"What about you, Bill?"

"I dunno. I've got a lot of homework to do."

Hartmann looks back at me. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I say, tearing open my collection envelope.

"Hey," Bill says, "Your parents are supposed to take mine to a lacrosse game, eh? You're not going with them, are you?"

"No," I say. "The Warriors are in last place, and they'll probably lose again. I'll probably stay home and terrorize my sister."

"Get out of the way, amateurs." Bill squeezes between Hartmann and me. "Make way for the pro."

"Speaking of girls," Hartmann says, "maybe I'll go to the Goupil's party. Linda'll probably be there."

"Nola's kid sister?"

"Yeah."

Inserting a quarter into the slot, Bill says, "Don't tell me you're in love with Linda Switzer?" He pushes the coin-return button with the heel of his hand and takes out a jackknife. "Hey Gimpy," he works the blade into the slot. "This damn thing's jammed again!"

"I wouldn't say I was in *love* with her," Hartmann says.

Gimpy walks over, scratches his belly, and pounds on the machine. To Bill, he says, "I don't know why you're the one who always screws up this machine."

"Because he's just a big *screw-up*," I say, overcome with cleverness.

“When they get older, you gotta prime ‘em a bit.” Gimpy kicks the machine and the coin clinks inside. Lights flash. Bells clang. The caricature of an Indian in Sioux headdress swings his tomahawk and dances backward into starting position. “There. What did I tell ya, eh?” Gimpy winks and limps back to his cleaning chores.

“I wouldn’t say I was in love with her,” Hartmann repeats. “But if you guys aren’t going to be doing anything,” he cracks a knuckle, “then I’m going to the Goupil’s party.”

Bill launches his first ball. “Who says we’re not going to be doing anything?” He pushes a flipper button, and a wave of satisfaction sweeps his face. “We’re going to be shooting drunken crows this afternoon.”

According to Bill’s latest plan, after our parents leave for the lacrosse game, we’re going to take our fathers’ shotguns on a hunting trip. Bill says the radio reported that a flock of crows has been gathering on the edge of town menacing people for several days. Because of something called jurisdictional ingress and egress over the woods they’re in, nobody can do anything about removing them.

“We’re going to be big heroes, eh?” Bill says, as we leave Gimpy’s. “We’re going to do our duty and eliminate hazardous crows. Meet you at the bridge at two o’clock.”

When my parents leave the house, my older sister curls up on the sofa and flashes her beady eyes. “*Sehksatiyohake Senta: whah,*” she says in Mohawk. She does this to aggravate me. We left the reserve when I was three, and my family seldom speaks Mohawk here in Brantford. Sometimes, when the house is full of visitors, she gets everybody going and there’s always a point where they all look at me and laugh. But she can’t fool me. She wants me out of the house this afternoon, so she can cuddle with her boyfriend. She’s hovering around me like a fruit fly on a puckered apple, and it’s impossible to get the shotgun from my parents’ closet. To avoid suspicion, I put on my new maroon windbreaker and depart for the woods in street shoes.

I’m first to arrive. I sit on my favourite girder at the railroad bridge listening to creek water gurgle far below. To the west, a band of nimbus gathers on the horizon, promising rain. Bill and Hartmann laugh while they goose-step the railroad ties, gleaming shotgun barrels propped between body and forearm. Bill wears a red plaid jacket and a ludicrous straw hat, whose front brim is folded flat; ‘BILL’ is inscribed there in red paint. Two ragged pheasant feathers jut from a hatband, denoting hunting prowess. Hartmann’s olive jacket has ‘SMITH’ in stencil letters above his left breast pocket. They both notice I don’t have a shotgun, but say nothing.

I step atop a gleaming rail and gingerly keep their pace, my shoes making a tap-dancer sound. We hike down the straight tracks, grateful that railroads always take the shortest, most private routes. I’ve never seen more than two crows in the same place at one time and believe Bill’s story to be false. We turn and cross a field, their heavy boots clearing a path for me through chest-high thistles.

We march toward a stand of hemlock when Bill signals a halt. From an opening beyond us, I hear a confused hum of shufflings and scattered caws. Perched amid saplings and clusters of lobe-leaved bushes, crows occupy the centre of a U-shaped clearing. Bill and me are going to circle, leaving Hartmann stationed at the opening to block any escape attempts. To the north-west, the woods thicken, and, when we reach our position, the crows are between us and a barrier of trees.

Bill hands me a yellow box of shells and we begin. Each squawk, each shriek intensifies, and it's plain we've been detected. It's so noisy I'm forced to cover an ear.

A sea of bobbing heads covers the ground like a rippling stadium tarpaulin. Branches bend in smooth arcs to accommodate squawking occupants. The crows compete for tiny red berries; they rape the bushes and peck each other in rages of greed. One bird leaps from his branch, frantically beats his wings, and flutters to the ground. These birds aren't drunk as Bill reported; most are too bloated to fly. Smaller crows retreat to the woods beyond, but the majority continue their indulgence in spite of our presence.

Bill inserts two shells into his double-barrelled shotgun and closes it with a snap. Signalling Hartmann, he drops to one knee, cocks the hammer, and aims into a crowded sapling. I've been instructed to pass two shells into his palm and stand clear when spent casings are rejected. One hundred metres away, Hartmann slams the breech of his gun closed and raises its barrel in readiness. It's clear we've entered a world not intended for humans.

Bill's first blast shatters the air; my eardrums ring in response. Again he cocks, sights, and squeezes the trigger. *Boom!* He breaks the gun, and two casings spiral to the ground; a stench of sulphur bites my nostrils. "Shells!" he yells. I slap two cylinders into his open palm, like an intern assisting at surgery. An unexpected blast from Hartmann's direction makes me flinch. Bill smiles.

Fluttering and squawking, the crows are in chaos. Their numbers work against them; wings become entangled, foiling attempts to fly. Where Bill has fired into loaded branches, twin holes poke through the blackness. Leaning forward, he aims at the base of a crowded bush. *Boom!* His body jerks up with the recoil of the gun. In its panic, one crow hovers above us. It flaps its wings to escape, but Bill blows it into an inkblot of swirling feathers. "Shells!" Bill shouts, waving away down-fluff. I barely hear him through the liquid hum in my ears.

Some of the crows fall to the ground, others scurry through the grass toward Hartmann. Some flap their wings, crane their necks, and scold, but remain imprisoned in their branches. Hartmann concentrates his blasts on those who manage flight, his left arm pumping with mechanical precision. Bill can hit three crows with one barrage. It's evident from his cursing that he considers it a miss if only one falls. Hartmann lowers his weapon at the black army advancing toward him. His first explosion pours through their ranks like a splash of soapy water on a ship-deck, lifting and transporting those in its wake.

Drops of rain hiss against Bill's hot gun barrel, but he continues his shooting oblivious of weather conditions. "Shells!" he yells, blowing at smoke billowing from the breech.

A thunderclap booms across the terrain. The OPP must be on their way. "It's starting to rain!" I shout, relieved at the possibility of leaving.

"Good," Bill says. "It'll muffle our shots." I hear the clink of shell casings dropping into a pile at my feet. "Come on, we've got to chase them toward Hartmann!" We advance, Bill firing once every three strides. It's like walking through a ploughed field, clods of black bodies occasionally squishing under our feet, the sensation plastic and awkward.

A crow deliriously wanders about the ground, dragging a broken wing. I stoop, hypnotized by its misery. It trips and falls forward on its side, desperately clawing at the earth for traction. I reach to help, but it pops its smooth head between twisted wing feathers into a contorted position of defence. Eyes shriveling with betrayal, it arches its neck to peck my hand. Instead, its eyelids squeeze shut, muscles relax, and it rolls over on its back. An eyelid pops open and an empty black sphere gazes at me. I scoop up cartridges from the shell box. I drop them into my pocket, and tear the cardboard into a sheet. Covering the crow's body, I marvel at its design, reminded that things intended for a simpler function can be separated so easily from it.

When we rendezvous with Hartmann, a squadron of crows approaches head-on as if in attack formation. They are flying at eye level, their silhouettes barely visible against the backdrop of trees. In his haste to reload, Bill grabs a jammed shell casing and burns his fingertips, "Damn it," he winces. "Quick Jim, gimme two more shells!" He loads, waits for Hartmann, and takes aim.

Their first volley flashes with the ferocity of a howitzer; two crows erased in the blink of an eye. Bill's second shot hits its target, too, but the bird's inertia carries it into his chest. Bill pushes it to the ground and squashes it with his boot. Hartmann's second burst is true, and the largest crow, bomber-sized in comparison to the others, dives to the ground. Watching the crows falling like black snowflakes, I'm amazed at Bill's and Hartmann's skill at killing. Two crows peel off in an escape manoeuvre, but Hartmann's capable pump gun sweeps them to obscurity.

"We got 'em, Hartmann! We got every one of them!" Bill pushes his hat back. "Did you see how beautiful that big one rolled off and dove to the ground? Just like a Snowbird."

"Guess what, Bill?" Hartmann inspects his remaining ammo. "I hit that big one with my deer slug. You remember that deer slug I showed you?"

Bill nods. He blows at blue smoke rising from his barrels. "Hey, Jim." He slides a shell into the left chamber. "I want you to hit that crow in the tree over there." He closes the gun with a snap of authority and offers it to me.

I had hoped that Bill, consumed in his frenzy, would forget about my participation. Yet, like a substitute player sitting on the bench, I've been rehearsing all afternoon. "I'm not a very good shot," I say, not really wanting to be heard.

"Take it," Bill thrusts the weapon into my hands. "And don't miss."

I plant my feet, pull back the hammer, and raise the barrel. Raindrops poke at the shoulders of my jacket; one ricochets off the stock and splashes into my eye. I squeeze my eyelid, accept the brief sting, and shake my head. Bill sighs impatiently. Raising the front sight into the crotch of the V, I fix it on the silhouette beyond. My target twists its neck in puppet fashion against the pink colouring of the uncertain sky. I hunch my shoulder, tighten my grip, close my eyes, and pull the trigger. *Boom!*

"You missed!" Bill grabs the gun, breaks it open, blows at the chamber, and inserts one shell. "You don't sight a shotgun, stupid. You aim it with both eyes open. And don't pull the trigger, squeeze it." Bill hands me the gun. "Don't miss this time – this is the last one."

I wipe my brow, seat the gun butt against my shoulder, and pull the hammer back. I take a deep breath, raise the barrels, and sight according to Bill's advice. Suddenly, the crow kicks away, flaps its wings, and climbs toward the horizon. I follow it and calculate

its path. Hatred in the dying crow's eyes nags my mind, but it's erased by my passion for success. Squeezing the trigger, I can almost see the pellet pattern sink into the feathers. "I got him," I say, exhaling. Wings spread like sagging semaphores, the crow glides down breast first, bouncing in slow motion as it hits the ground. I feel a surge of triumph. I try to push my face into a smile.

Bill slaps my shoulders. "Nice shooting," he says, taking the gun.

Sheets of rain force us into the woods seeking shelter, but sunbeams isolate the clouds and begin melting them. Each imprisoned with our own thoughts, we view black specks dotting the landscape. Blotches of blood coating tree branches, bushes, and grass begin washing away. Divots in the ground smooth their sores. Severed branches remain, permanent scars to today's memory.

When sunlight finally blasts through, we cross the open peninsula toward the tracks, the ground sucking at our feet. Bill ransacks the largest black feathers and adds them to his hatband, his singed fingertips provoking an occasional grimace. In a show of humanity, Hartmann plods across the field, finishing off dying survivors with his gun butt. I pick up a shell casing and blow on its open end, the lonely whistle recalling the dead crow's eye and its echo of emptiness.

Beneath the bridge, I wash mud from my shoes with a gnarled twig. I notice a brown splatter of blood on my pant leg. It's partially dry, and I splash cold creek water on it to prevent a stain. Gusts of wind, already frigid, push at bushes along the bank sending messages of winter to those who are listening. I gaze at Bill and his Medusa-like headdress. A feeling of sardonic ridicule blossoms inside me, but humility pacifies the notion.

### Assignment 5.3

- 1 Compare the points of view for "Compatriots" and "The Last Raven". Which story offers the best picture of Aboriginal world views? Explain how the story does this. (5 marks)
- 2 Which of the Seven Teachings does Jim portray and how? (He may portray more than one.) Which of the teachings must he develop? (3 marks)
- 3 Describe the narrator's relationship with his friends, Bill and Hartmann. In your opinion, is he able to communicate his true feelings to his friends? Why or why not? (5 marks)
- 4 What is the theme of "The Last Raven"? Provide examples from the text to support your answer. (3 marks)