



## **Birdsong**

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Elliott was nine years old when he realised that he could not save the world.

It was a summer Saturday. Lazy, warm, and drizzled with cinnamon and vanilla.

His alarm had gone off almost an hour ago, a little cuckoo which cried out once every ten seconds, except it only did so once now, fading into an echo of rustling springs and memory.

“You’d better be here in five, or no pancakes for ya today!” mama shouted from the distance, her voice drowned by the sizzle of sweet, sweet batter. She was lying, of course.

Elliott knew that, which gave him the courage to lie down on his bed even as the sun no longer remained hidden behind the distant hills. Sunlight spilled into the room, on him, on the bed, on the cuckoo which barely cried. Mama had asked him to get rid of it, for he was a big boy now and big boys needed better alarm clocks, ones which beeped and kept beeping till Elliott was out of bed and ready to face the world.

But Elliot wasn’t ready to face the world that morning. So much so that not even the promise of syrup laden pancake would get him up.

“I ain’t gonna call ya again, son. I mean it!”

In one story, Elliot goes back to sleep. The pancakes remained on the table, till they got cold and the syrup drizzled onto the side of the table. Mama ran her fingers through his hair, and put them in the oven that evening, and Elliot gave her a little kiss before promising her that he’d never miss pancake day again. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t. But that did not matter.

Here, in this moment, Elliot slowly made his way up. He stretched his arms first, and then his legs. He had learnt it from the dog, the one they never could come up with a name for, and just like a beast of instinct, followed the smell of cinnamon, slowly making his way off the bed.

Life was not perfect. But life was good.

As his eyes adjusted to a new day, he stared out of his window, into the suburb he had seen a thousand times. His neighbour, Mr. Graham, with the newspaper and a cigarette (his mama always said it'd hurt him, those nasty things, though he didn't know if she was talking about the papers or the cigarettes); a couple of women he had never seen before in particularly bright leggings jogging past his fence; and a cat with yellow streaks on its black fur... sitting on the fence, almost crouched, almost like a hunter waiting for its prey to make a mistake.

"You really don't want no breakfast today, do ya?" mama said, walking into the room.

Breakfast was a little bird, fresh into the world. A fledgling, his science teacher William would say. He would call him Mr. William, but he insisted that he be called William. To be cool with the kids.

It rested near the window, just a pounce away from the cat's paw. Shivering against the morning breeze, almost resigned to its fate.

If death must come, let it be a good death.

It would take an avian philosopher to decide if ending between the jaws of a house cat was a just way to die, but Elliot was too young for the ethics of mortality.

The feline arched its back. It was not the villain in this story; there are no villains in nature. Just the one who are hungry, and the ones who will feed them.

Time stood still.

The cat jumped.

"Mama!!!"

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"... didn't mean to make you cry, if I'm not back again this time tomorrow ... carry on, carry on as if nothing really matters..."

"He's a real shit singer, you know?"

"What, no! Freddie was ..."

"Not Freddie ... this guy".

Vanessa pointed at the young college freshman, and his unkempt long hair covering half his face. They paid him a couple of dollars to keep the bar anything but quiet, and he did precisely that. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"Well, better than having Garth put on the news. Can't ... can't deal with that anymore".

Vanessa stared at Elliot for a moment, before popping an ice cube into her mouth.

“You look like shit, do you realise that? When was the last time you got some sleep?”

Elliot never thought he’d need glasses. Always ate the veggies mama asked him to. Stayed five feet away from the TV. Never read with a torch under the bedsheet, except that one time when mama got him the new Superman comic.

So every time he had to pull them off his face, and clean them on the flannel shirt he was wearing that evening, he had himself a little chuckle.

“Yeah, uh ... I’ve been, a little out of sorts, I guess”.

The ice had almost melted.

“Out of sorts? El, you look like you don’t sleep. You look like you don’t eat. You barely call. You ...we can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep doing this. You care so much about the world that it leaves you a crumpled mess. You are angry, you are upset, and you ...”

She spat out what remained of the ice onto the floor.

Behind the counter, Garth clicked his tongue. But he wasn’t going to interfere. Not now.

“Look, I know. I know it sucks to see this, this entire country go down in flames. I know that there are innocent children dying halfway across the world. And I know that it hurts. I ...”

Her hand held Elliot’s. It was shivering. Maybe she’d have a fever later that night. She always did when she was upset.

“You can’t save them all, El”.

He knew that. Of course he did. And it was killing him.

Him, and this relationship.

“couldn’t look you in the eye ... you’re just like an angel ... your skin makes me cry ...”

Elliot didn’t register Vanessa moving her hand away from him. The coldness of her palm gave way to the coldness of emptiness. He didn’t know which was worse.

The brown jacket, flung over her shoulder, almost kissed the floor as she walked towards Garth.

“If I have to come back here and listen to this shit again, either I’m gonna kill you, or I’m gonna kill him”

Garth put her night's drinks on the tab.

The door flung open. Wind whooshed in, almost like a senile man taking in a long, laboured breath.

She looked back, the neon sign above her head showering her with an ethereal, green glow. Just like an angel.

"You can't save the world, Elliot."

THUD.

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THUD.

Between a cat's claw, and a glass pane.

Mama rushed over, thinking that Elliot had hurt himself. He had. Her arms wrapped around the young boy, smothering him with desperate kisses. She looked out the window, half expecting a daylight spectre or a man. But there was nothing, just a kitty that'd been spooked by a little boy's scream.

"Mama, there's ... there's a little birdy down there. The cat almost got it. Mama, it's gonna die, mama. We need to save it."

Mama held Elliot's face, as tears began to roll down his cheeks. Oh, my sweet, sweet boy.

Something had begun burning at that moment. And it wasn't just the pancake she'd left on the stove. Mama rushed back to throw it all into the water, a swoosh of steam filling the kitchen. Burnt cinnamon, and a burning heart.

The dog with no name had heard the commotion, rushing into room, expecting a burglar or a dropped piece of meat. There was neither, just a young boy on the verge of tears, asking his mother to take him into the backyard.

The backyard that'd be the grave of not only a little bird, but his innocence. Dog was the first to rush out into the untrimmed grass, before Elliot stepped out, rubbing away both sleep and sorrow with both hands off his face. From a distance, the feline fiend stared as the child knelt under the windowsill, rubbing his palms into the dirt and the soil.

"It ... it fell somewhere here, mama. Lemme help it, mama. It ... it's just a baby..."

Mama could feel her lips quiver.

"Help me, mama!"

He's just a boy. He'll understand.

“Mama, please!”

He’ll understand that he can’t save them all. But not today.

“Mama ... I ...”

WOOF!

Dog snarled, and growled. The obvious suspect would have been the age-old enemy, who had now perched above the fence, a front row audience to the drama of it all. But it wasn’t the cat which got dog’s attention. It was a faint chirp, among the grass. A single chirp, and then silence, like the spring within its sinews rusting with every passing moment, just like the cuckoo on Elliot’s desk.

Elliot was never athletic. But perhaps, at that moment, he was the fastest boy on the planet. He rushed to where dog was, falling onto his knees like prayer, and dug his fingers into the soil.

Chirp. And then ... silence. He put the handful of soil against his ear. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

“Mama ... it’s...”

Of course not. Mama’s been around long. Seen the grass grow, and the sun set. Seen the blood spill, and held tears like floodgates.

Mama knew.

“Take a good look at it, would ya?”

Dog whimpered a little. A low, shrill noise. Elliot opened his palm.

Wrinkled feathers. Open beak. A tinge of crimson red where it hit the ground.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

The last pulses of a beating heart, in his palm. And then, nothing.

Death and Elliot were no strangers. Papa’s absence reminded him of it all the time. The little cuckoo clock, that he’d gotten Elliot on his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, rotted with every passing second. Death incarnate.

But this was different. This wasn’t a star he could cry to in the middle of the night.

He felt mama’s palm on his shoulder, and shuddered.

“Hey, kiddo. The pancakes are getting cold”.

Cold. Like this corpse, claimed by death, gifted to decay.

“Ya can’t save the world, Elliot”.

He knew that. Of course he did.

But that didn’t change a thing.

He cried.

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He cried. And licked the salt off his finger, humming away to the tune of Radiohead's 'Creep'. The freshman was gone (fortunately), and so were most of Garth's patrons.

The wind had turned into a tempest, knocking on the bar's door, rattling the roof, shaking the soul.

"Look, kid ..." Garth began, mop in hand, "I know it's been a shit day, but unless you plan to sleep on one of the tables, which I'd definitely not recommend, you might want to check out, eh?"

It was a cold night, and it would only get colder.

Elliot held onto his jacket, walking past flickering lights and desolate alleyways.

A part of him hoped he'd never see her again. Vanessa. And a part of him knew that he'd rather be dead.

"Listen ... I ... I tried it all, okay? I tried writing, and volunteering, and making petitions, and going to rallies ... and ... and it does work, but it doesn't work enough, okay? It ... it's like throwing a cup of water at a forest fire. It ... just doesn't work ... and it hurts".

Maybe she loved him because he cared. Maybe she hoped he'd care about her the same.

Maybe she was wrong.

A pamphlet swerved past his ear. The wind was picking up pace. In the distance, the campus oak stood tall, its branches swaying, but not giving in to the tempest. It'll have to do.

Elliot's shadow pulsed with the flickering lights, as he dug his fingers into the bark of the tree. Knives had left the marks of lovers who had long forgotten each other, and a little squirrel scurried into its hole. All around him, the leaves echoed with an ancient hum. If he didn't know any better, he'd think they were laughing.

He'd laugh with them. But the joke was on him.

The wind pulsed against him. This was a bad dream, maybe, except the itch in the back of his throat reminded him just how real this was.

Elliot closed his eyes.

Just breathe.

Breathe.

You'll be alright

One ... two ... three.

Again.

Slower ... slower.

Slow ... one ... two ...

THUD.

On overcast afternoons, when he smoked a cigarette by the great oak, Elliot had noticed the crude nest of straw and hay which would hang from the side of the oak, always threatening to fall, but never quite tipping over.

Hope, he thought.

Not tonight.

Nature is cruel. Nature is unbiased. Nature doesn't care that the bluebird's eggs were about to hatch.

Death claims, and gifts it to decay.

Eyes wide shut, Elliot could see it. The splatter of the incubated eggs, right in front of him. Life, stolen away even before it could have a chance.

A single tear rolled down his cheek.

"You can't save the world, Elliot."

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Chirp.

Chirp ... chirp.

Elliot opened his eyes. Under his feet, lay the dilapidated nest, with nothing but a single egg. Light blue, and cracking open from the inside. Even as the wind howled and the leaves laughed, the chirp of the little nestling cut through the vortex.

Elliot kneeled, just like he had all those years ago. The shell cracked further, as a blind, crinkled bird made its way into the storm, before he shielded it with his palms.

His mama would have asked him to take a good look at it. And he did. It was frail, and it was weak. And he could feel its life in his palm. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Elliot placed the nestling against the heat of his chest, covering it with his jacket, their hearts beating together.

The chirping stopped. The leaves stopped laughing. The wind gave way to a softer breeze.

Not tonight.

Not again.

It'd survive the night. It'd survive. He'd make sure of that.

He couldn't save the world, maybe.

But he'd try.