

M_ockingbird Voices

A short story by

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This short story is dedicated to all my friends and loved ones who were my little birds this year. A special dedication goes out to my great great aunt, Clara Griffen, whose sense of humor and kindness were an example of true hospitality and generosity in my life. Thank you Aunt Clara for your root beer floats, coconut cakes, your screen door, the root cellar, the sparkles on the ceiling, the milk baths, the bird in the music box, and of course the M&M's that you shared with one and all. I love you.

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Sometimes good intentions can hurt for years and cause parts in us to be muted and asleep. Sometimes those parts are muted before we even discover that they reside in our hearts. Every morning I wake to hear the birds outside my window singing the most beautiful songs into my sleepy Cherokee ears. I used to think that the birds were just singing to wake our brothers and us at dawn, but now I hold a different opinion. I think every morning God gives the little birds a list of inspiring messages to sing to those around them that need it. I think that the song most assigned is this:

*Awake all those that give an ear.
Awake to a song made for you to hear.*

*Listen and know a truth from love.
Listen and know the peace of the dove.*

*For you have a voice that has been silenced and
shamed.
Believing the lies you are helpless and maimed.*

*But God placed me here to show you by example,
What kind of voice is true, hearty, and ample.*

*Wake up this morning; open your eyes and pray,
With your heart truly open, giving thanks for the day.*

*“Father, my creator, let me sing like my brother
Fearless and true—a unique voice like no other.”*

It was the millennial year that I began to listen to the birds. Birds don't just have wings and live outside your window either. They can take the shape of mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers and those special ones we call... friends. Let's just say, I hear much chirping, and it is sweet.

Before, I had too many lies in the form of cotton balls that plugged up my ears. The cotton balls all contained little gnats that buzzed continually so that not only could I not hear the birds, I couldn't even hear my heart. And then one day... I took a shower. You see, one morning after many months of life that was barely breathing, I climbed into the shower, grabbed the soap and began to pray. That soap had olive oil in it. The bible said that the Jews used to anoint kings with olive oil. That morning I think God used the soap to anoint me with a healing spirit. I prayed and prayed in that shower. I prayed about all my shortcomings, my dreams and desires, and especially my pain. I just wanted to be clean again—to start over, toweling off the old life. God took that soap and water and cleaned me off as my prayers went up to heaven with the steam. And right before I leaned over to turn off the faucet, he popped those gnat filled cotton balls out of my ears. I have been hearing birds ever since.

As the dawn drifted slowly over the trees and houses, squirrels and fences and all the sleeping life in my neighborhood, a mockingbird began to sing ever so softly to me through my window. My room began to grow with the light and the song, wrapping me in blankets of tender hope. I lied there and listened. The bird was in full chorus now with his friends, and a message like a little seed was getting planted in my heart. I rolled over and prayed, “God, I miss singing.”

I began to wonder what the odd thick mud feeling was around my vocal chords. I had never noticed it before, but somehow, the birds knew it was there and told me. I did know one thing. I was terrified to sing in the company of others. I had studied music and had taken singing lessons for years, but the fear was there like concrete. *Why?* I thought. I was getting a nauseous feeling in my stomach just thinking about it. The question stayed with me as I went about my housecleaning, my work, my writings and my errands—my typical day.

I left for school that afternoon still bothered by the mud. It was like a muscle you just can't get into the right position to stretch. I got on to the highway and proceed to jockey through every radio station that exists in the area, and nothing would ease me or entertain me. There was to be no

escapism on my way to school that day. I turned off the music in my car and replaced it with thoughts and questions, tears and confoundedness. I had to get to the bottom of it. *What had happened to make me this way?* I asked myself. As I watched the little white lines pass by my car, I remembered another time I had been in the car, crying about singing.

There had once been a time when I had no fear of singing at all. I sang in the church choir just like the mockingbird with fearless abandon, but with tone and structure. I loved to sing. I would sing as loud and as strong as I could get it out. And then... I was asked to sing in front of the church with 2 other girls, Jessica and Amy. This had never occurred before. I had once sung a cappella with a couple of girlfriends in front of about 200 people in my school gymnasium, but church was different. It seemed to mean more. It was as if I was finally able to fit in to their tightly knit group, that had always seemed to be saying, "We are perfectly behaved and God thinks we are perfect, because we follow all the rules, and that's what counts. What's wrong with you? You should just try harder to follow along with us. If you don't, God won't like you and maybe even punish you." Needless to say, I hadn't fit in very well at church. I hadn't really fit in anywhere, but especially church, and now was my chance to be just a little more special, or a little more like

them. Maybe people would hear my voice and talk to me more. Maybe Jessica and Amy, the most popular girls at church, would start to notice me and be my friends.

Jessica and Amy's parents were incredibly active in the church, and therefore their daughters always came dressed in a way that these Southern Baptists approved. They wore dresses with bows in their curled hair. They didn't wear much makeup, and they were always at church when the doors were opened. They had little lacey Bible covers with handles on them to carry around everywhere. They were the epitome of all things Southern Baptist, which was to look pure and innocent, as if you did no wrong, as if you followed all of their rules. *Strange*. I thought. I could never find their rules in the Bible we were reading.

There was one other thing I forgot to mention. They didn't talk to me. This was the other Southern Baptist trait: Legalism causing prejudice and separatism. They didn't mingle with the sinner, unclean or basically different person. They didn't socialize with the rule-breakers, and this is how they viewed me. The atmosphere in my church screamed, "cloning" and it "stunk to high heaven."

This was it, my moment. We picked out a song that would supposedly convict or comfort the congregation, or some minister-approved piece.

The day for rehearsal arrived. I had already been given the music and had been practicing on my own. Now it was time to practice with the other girls. I had driven to Jessica's house. It was large; they were fairly wealthy. They had what you would call a "proper Christian home" which of course was to be seemingly without fault or problem, and thus seen by outsiders as the ideal. Who's to say what it was really like?

I arrived late, or at least late in their eyes. I was on Indian time as usual, getting there as soon as I could, but not too concerned with the minutes. It would be the quality of the time we spent rehearsing that mattered. This was normal in my household, which was rarely "on time." This cultural difference did not help my Christian church-going image and we struggled with trying to change ourselves.

So, not being as concerned with the time, I had arrived excited and honored with the opportunity to sing for my church. I knocked at the front door. Amy answered and smiled at me meekly as I entered. All of a sudden I felt a weird sense of hidden danger. I had not learned how to use God's little warning signs at 16. All I knew was something was out of place. I felt like a lamb led in for the slaughter. Helplessly brushing it off as nerves, I smiled and apologized for my tardiness. We went into the living room. Various

sheets of music were on the piano; they had already started. I felt a twinge of being left out of the loop. Fear began to settle in. *What was going on?* I looked at them and asked if we could get started. They didn't move away from the couches. They glanced at each other and asked if I would sit down. I put down my music and purse and set on the edge of the sofa. To this day I believe that the sofa must have been full of prickly things, because I felt tortured, and no one had even opened their mouths. Jessica also looked uncomfortable, as if maybe she wanted something to be over, or maybe she didn't quite agree with what she was about to do, or maybe she was just ready for me to be out of her house. Who knows?

Amy set her face firm. She didn't seem happy either, but she was masking it with some type of righteous determination. Amy had always looked like that when she addressed me. This time was no different.

"What's going on?" I asked as they began their "talk" with me. I immediately became aware of all the 16 year old insecurities of adolescence wrapped around me like a skirt made out of paper ready to rip and expose me at any minute. They went in for the kill.

"We've talked with the music minister, and we don't think that it is a good idea for you to sing with us on Sunday."

“Why?” I asked stunned.

“Well, the minister believes it would be a bad example for others. You don’t come to church every Sunday, and only those that come to church every Sunday are allowed to sing.” My ears rang; my hands sweat; my heart began to beat too fast, and my spirit began searching for the door. But before my spirit could tell my mind to tell my body to GET OUT, an arrow had pierced me. I felt embarrassed, devastated, rejected, angry and hurt. Somewhere inside of myself, I began to bleed. I needed suturing. I needed gauze, iodine, morphine—something. The worst part of it all, I began to feel guilty. I had been in that legalistic pit of a church as long as I could remember. Subliminally out of the nature of things, I was receiving a message. I was wrong, sinful and uh-oh.... BAD.

I started to resist. I was pissed off, I gained a thread of sanity and it took over. *They were wrong.* I argued. I felt the red war paint under my skin coming to the surface. It was to no avail. They refused to practice with me AT ALL. I had lost the battle. I was defeated.

I took my broken and bloody self off of the thorn-filled couch and out the door to my mother’s red car. The color was fitting. I climbed in and threw the music into the backseat of the car, grabbed the steering wheel and let out a

wail of a cry. Angry hurt tears poured down my face and mixed with the rejection that hovered about my shoulders. It began to form the thick muting mud in my throat. I swallowed and swallowed the rejection and legalism and mean spirited junk, but all the swallowing in the world wouldn't push that pain out of my voice box.

I remember returning to church the following Sunday. I watched Amy and Jessica sing the song I had rehearsed for hours. It was the shallowest song I had ever heard. I remembered my mother telling me of how her older brother made her look into the kitchen sink before dinner, and how she had found the feet of her pet chicken in the basin. I remembered her telling me how sick she got when they served the food. I knew sitting there and hearing that song exactly how my mother had felt. I was not myself. No matter how sweet they sang, or how prim they looked in their pink dresses, I now knew what was stuck up the girls' butts. I had sat on their thorny judgmental couches. I quit the choir. My anger and hurt caused me to distance my self from their church group even more.

Although I was angry, I sat there suppressing it. I became depressed and vulnerable. I began to hear my paper skirt tearing, leaving me naked and without protection. This was the perfect opportunity for Deceit to carry gnat filled

cotton balls over to my ears and stuff them shut with lies. He convinced me to lock up my voice to outsiders. *No one wanted to hear my voice, I thought, and if they did, they were just being nice. I must sound awful.* As I listened to the lies, and began believing them, the paper skirt ripped off and shredded into a heap beside me on the pew. I took the torn pieces and caged my little mockingbird.

I came back to reality from my past. My exit was approaching quickly, and I was traveling incredibly fast. Sweat dripped off my hands and coated the steering wheel. As I began to exit, I knew I held a revelation of where all of the tar-like mud had come from. It was a strange sense of eureka. It wasn't the jump for joy, get up and holler eureka, but a slow still cry of a lost piece of my soul....

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