

FICTION

A Little Bird

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It was beginning to get a little warmer. The sun came up early in the morning. The buds were sprouting from the bare branches of the trees in the backyard. Alighting on a top branch, a little bluebird, rubbed its beak on the dry bark. The bird was kissing the branches, silently acknowledging the tree's hardships and bravery. The bird was thankful that the tree was still standing. This was the tree she had chosen to build her nest for spring.

Two weeks ago, there was a late winter blizzard that lasted for two consecutive days. A middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas were outside for several hours, cleaning their drive way and the long side walks. They had a corner house. They had to shovel a lot.

Heavy snow had piled up on the branches. It had covered the tree with a numbingly cold blanket. But the tree kept alive the hope of spring in the depth of its heart. The glow of hope gave a warm feeling even in the dark freezing nights.

A few trees had broken their branches from the sheer weight of the snow. Most of the others sprung back when the bright sun melted the snow, on the third day. In the next few days, it got much warmer. The lawns turned green. New hope sprouted everywhere as if Mother Nature had fallen in love, again.

The birds were busy building nests on the trees. One could hear them in the early morning, chirping melodiously, announcing the advent of spring. Soon it will be mating season. In a short time, these nests will be the home of many young chicks.

Daylight stayed around longer in the evenings. The neighborhood kids were playing outside after school. Anika Thomas, a pretty thirteen-year-old girl, stood on her porch, against the railing, staring ahead. She looked sad and frustrated with her life. The tree in her backyard was making rustling sounds to soothe her. She sighed deeply and looked at the blue sky. "I am having a terrible day! Firstly, I misplaced my violin after orchestra class and then I got a C on the Math test. Then, to top it all, Ms. Anderson caught me swearing at the bully of the class. Nothing seems to go my way. How can I explain all this to Mom? How can I set things right? Disasters seem to appear from every corner. I am terrified that I am going to be in deep trouble. I will be destroyed."

She saw the birds flying carelessly, cooing to each other from the branches. Just looking at them, Anika knew they were happy. "Do the birds ever think like me? How would they feel, at a difficult moment? They would probably acknowledge that they have fallen into a deep hole. They may look for a way out. Perhaps, they will explore many possibilities till there is no way out. But then they might still look for some new hope."

Secretly the girl wished to be one of the birds, even though, she did not quite understand what was so liberating about

worries and fears, she noticed that her favorite bluebird had got caught in a piece of kite-thread. A few days ago, the wind was perfect for flying kites. A bunch of neighborhood kids were flying kites. The kite threads were specially made with glue and fine glass dust over it, to cut through other kite threads in the kite flying game. One of the kites had got entangled in a nearby tree branch. The kite was retrieved but some of the thread still hung on the tree branches.

As she stood there concerned about the well-being of the helpless bird, she heard her mother call her from inside. "Sweetie, please give me a glass of water." Anika ran inside to help her mother. Her mother was lying in bed, feeling very tired. She had gone through a lot of blood tests. The reports would help diagnose the real cause of her sickness. Anika's mother had been working long hours and was under tremendous stress for the past few months. The previous day after dinner, she had fainted after vomiting blood. She just got discharged from the hospital a few hours ago. A slight smile appeared on the dry lips as she saw her daughter hand her a glass of water. "Thank you, dear."

Her mother took a few sips and laid back. Anika rushed back to the porch to check up on the bird. Unfortunately, the bird's wing had slipped through the mess of threads. The glass dust coating cut through the flesh and the thread went in deeper into her wing.

The poor thing was completely trapped. She cried for help as she flapped her wings vigorously. Her companions heard the cry and came in a large group to help. The wing was deeply entangled in the loops of thread. The flock of

what's the update?" She heard the sound of gulping. The voice was trembling. "I wish I did not have to tell you this but I don't know who else to vent. I got a call from the doctor a few minutes ago, regarding your Mom's recent tests.... It's bad news. Your mommy has third stage pancreatic cancer. I will do everything possible to fight this. But I want you to be prepared for the tough times ahead."

As if lightning had struck her, the girl stood there frozen and dumbfounded. "Why did this happen to Mom? This cannot be true."

The western sky turned pink. The Sun was a beautiful red dot half-hidden behind the veil of gray clouds. Many

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birds were flying back to their nests. Anika heard the bluebird cooing for her friends.

The girl slowly went inside to her mother. "Mom, if I have ever hurt your feelings I am sorry. I will always listen to you and be good. " Her mother looked surprised. She laughed, "Sweetie, you are behaving as if I will never get better." Anika made a pretended angry face. "That's not what I meant. I will just listen to you more and be a good girl." Her mother smiled. "I know what you mean. You are no longer my little baby. You are actually ready to face the world. I am so proud of you!" They hugged each other tightly. Just then, the doorbell rang.

In the following weeks, Anika was true to her word. She did all her homework, chores and violin practices on her own, meticulously. She helped her Dad with meals and cleaning dishes. Her mother was happy but did not regain her old energy. She was especially tired after her chemotherapy treatments.

Anika cared for her mother in every possible way, without complaining to anyone about her situation. She was much more patient as she attended to her mother's needs. Sometimes, Anika could not help noticing the irony of the situation. She had never felt this close to her mother before.

Often Anika's mother called her to the bedside, at night, and related to her the most wonderful stories. They were stories from her own childhood, Japanese fairytales, Jewish legends or stories from Indian mythology. The young girl's mind travelled through exotic lands and historic times. The whole world opened up in new ways for her during those nights. Out of curiosity, the girl would come to the porch every morning and check on the bluebird. As days went by, the bird became tired and silent. Sometimes, the bird would flap her wings slightly, indi-

cating the remnants of an undying hope. After a few more days the flapping also stopped.

Finally, one day, the bird hung there from the tree branch swinging in the breeze without any resistance. A sharp pang went through the girl's heart as she realized that the carcass was lifeless. From that point, Anika stopped going to the porch.

It took almost another two months for the body to decompose and disappear completely. The other birds did not make a big deal. It was not the end of the world for them. There was no lingering lamentation.

After many weeks Anika went to the porch one morning. The leaves trembled in the morning breeze. There was no sign of the thread or the bluebird anywhere. Was there going to be no evidence of her existence anymore? She stared at the tree in disbelief. For a moment, she questioned her eyes. Was the bluebird really true or a dream?

That day in the school bus, she suddenly realized that she had forgotten to pack her project work that was due for submission today. She had worked on it very meticulously for the past month. Getting a late grade would be like not getting due credit for her work. But she consoled herself knowing she would have another chance to excel in the class.

When she came back home, the first thing she wanted was to get a hug from her mother. She hurried to the master bedroom where her mother was lying on the bed. She was in deep sleep. Her face had a peaceful appearance as if the worries and sorrows of the world could not touch her. Anika gently sat beside her and touched her shoulder. She was cold. She tried to wake her up but it was useless. Anika could not feel her breathing. Was this really happening to hear?

She ran out of the room. With trembling fingers, she called her father. "Dad, come home now. Something has happened to Mom. She is not waking up. She feels cold."

Anika's father came home within the next fifteen minutes. Shortly after he arrived, an ambulance came in front of her house. Her Dad had called the doctor's office and explained the situation.

A registered nurse got down. She checked Mrs. Thomas' pulse and temperature. She pronounced her dead. Perhaps, Anika's mother had suffered a heart attack during her sleep.

Her father was crying like a child when her mother's body was taken away in the ambulance. Anika hugged him but could not say anything. She thought to herself, "Why do some lives end abruptly?" She remembered the little bluebird. "Where did her life fly away, leaving behind just a still body? Is Mom going to see the bird?"

Anika imagined that her mother was taking a journey in the amazing world of dreams. Remembering the last glimpse of her mother's face, she knew that she was happy wherever she was. Her eyes welled up thinking that she would never be able to hear her voice relating another story. How was Anika going to be happy?

Then she remembered how her mother had said "Anika, you are ready to face life on your own." At that moment, Anika knew she wanted to be a bird. Birds are content just being alive, carefree and of no particular importance..... being a bird, thoughtless, fearless and soaring high in freedom.

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POETRY

Newspapers at the Breakfast Table

BATOOL SARWAR

With the gathering helpless compulsive rage
Of an addict unable to give up
Habits that turn cannibalistic,
I wonder who first invented this ghoulish
ritual of reading
Newspapers while eating breakfast,
This potent potpourri of porridge and pain.

I delicately butter my high fibre multi-grain
toast
As I gaze at the smashed body of a young
child,
His blood and flesh smeared across the field
Like the bright red strawberry jam
I enjoy eating every day—
A single snippet of the daily dose of horror
Passed on as sacred beacons from bright
young brains
Selecting the latest sensational scoops,
Carefully processed and prepared to appeal
To consumers of all appetites
And dutifully delivered to my doorsteps
By energetic muscles eager to make a fresh
start
To a new day,
But its modern day twin,
Spawned by the wonders of technology
Serves up even more varied fare:
The newsfeed with its endless vampire
offerings
Of blood and gore—burning and mutilation
and ethnic cleansing
And lovely mouthwatering pictures of cakes
and steaks and sushi
And bland tasteless selfies,
All washed down with a nice hot cup of
cappuccino.
How skillfully I've learnt the art of escape—
Carefully compartmentalizing the personal
from the public;
After such knowledge what forgiveness?

One has to cauterize the neurons that send
messages
To the nerve centre of the brain,
Or, be swallowed whole
By the predatory politics of news production,
But a part of mind wryly comments
That mass repetitions of such daily rituals
Are a dark indelible ink stain
On the black and white pages of history.

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