

Let Them Destroy You

by Coraline Ismael Karim

There was a man who lived in the house colored like amber leaves that used to sing about a little bird he called “Concerto”. I did not know him very well, not when you work in hospice; you just know them enough so that it can’t hurt you too much when it happens. The ones with money are kept alive or go into hospice now—the others are sedated and tossed in giant holes by the green lake near Castle St. where the kids used to kick basketballs against the blasted brick walls. They kill you if you don’t make yourself useful. The rich ones made enough human capital that they could live centuries if God allowed it. Yet the ones in giant holes are meant to suffocate before they wake, they tell us. It’s better this way.

“Makes you hurt less, just trust me,” said my hospice mentor, Ms. Janus, on the eve of my last day in training.

She always wore a wrinkled long black skirt and dirty leather ballerina shoes to work, and her coils were glossy and reflective in the warm lamplight of the high-school classroom we were in. It was a classroom that was used for many things: two-minute weddings, food drives, hideaways for refugees, and hospice mentorship classes.

When I finished my training, my first hospice patient was an old white lady who refused to wear her dentures. She mostly mumbled her words, and somehow her mumbles had a Slavic accent that I was familiar with only because of the anti-Russia ads I saw when watching my kid shows years ago. Now most of the world’s been nuked and some of the American colonies, too. The people, at least. The ones in power somehow always make it out alive.

I can’t remember the old white lady’s name who mumbled the red language. She had a hooked nose with many moles and freckles, and she wore this locket around her neck that had

some beautiful engravings on the outside, like a bouquet of the rarest silver flowers you've ever seen.

“Спасибо,” she told me, the only time I could actually make out any words. It was the last thing she said to me before closing her eyes forever. She had the prettiest eyes. Like wet mulch after a thunderstorm. Kinda like yours, I think. I couldn't tell you what it meant, though.

Then there was the man who sung for Concerto. His door was unlocked when I came to him, a tall mahogany door with four stained glass panels within it. They were each of different types of landscapes: a still river through a green forest with a bunny rabbit drinking from the stream; a crystal sunset that was more orange than yellow; moonlight colored like old film from the 1950s like cream in the blackest coffee; and a world on fire, a fiery crimson and spiked flames surrounding faceless people holding hands.

When I walked in, it smelled like fresh linen, as if the man who sang for Concerto had done his own laundry somehow. Most of his furniture was gone or moved to the corners. All he needed was his hospice bed, now. He had wood panel floors, real ones that moan when you walk over them, and his walls were painted sky blue, like the picture books Momma read us as kids. Most of the sky is black now from all the bombs that have gone off, and the rain can't carry it away since the mushroom plumes have risen higher than our clouds have sunk. There are moments, though, when the sun breaks through and warms our faces. Those memories I cherish the most.

“Hello?” I asked, calling out his name.

There wasn't any answer, and I thought my job would've been quicker than the first, but I heard the churn of a respirator machine behind the cream-colored wall and walked around the corner to see him tucked in his bed. He was in the kitchen, and the cabinetry was marvelous. It

was the original wood, maybe a dark oak or spruce, and the knobs weren't your typical doorknobs. They were little figurines of flying doves frozen in gold and iron. He had a small aloe plant sitting on his bedside. I hadn't seen aloe since Momma's garden. What a peculiar home he had.

I thought he was dead with those closed eyes of his, but the man just loved his sleep, it seemed. He was naked beneath his blue hospital sheet, and his bed was on wheels but locked in place. He told me later his little bird Concerto loved the kitchen because of the sunlight that'd enter in the morning. Concerto's favorite snack was sliced watermelon with the real black seeds and ripe green olives from the old man's homeland. The seeds made Concerto brilliant, smarter, the old man would say. The old man told me how much he'd laugh watching Concerto pick at the pink flesh of the fruit with his small beak, singing his birdsong so mellifluously. Such music, he'd say. Music we can't ever hear again.

One morning I witnessed the greatness of the sun in his kitchen. A golden ray hugged the birdcage beside his bed, the light seeping through the rusted iron grating and hitting the wall behind it creating a different sort of prison. The birdcage was empty, of course. The old man still made me clean it, the dust at least, and replace the water and feed. He made me care for the birdcage more than him, it seemed.

"What's your name, little bird?" he asked me after waking just minutes after I arrived.

I was reluctant to answer. Ms. Janus told us to give fake names in case the dying call out for us in the afterlife. I feared communion with the dead, if you know what I mean.

"Sumiya," I told him. It was the nickname my first crush gave me in grade school. He said I looked like a sumo wrestler and a jihadist meshed into one person, and Sumiya was the

only Persian model portrayed in perfume commercials because they had the lightest skin of us all. I took it as a complement, weirdly enough.

The old man, his clouded respirator mask over his face, his pink lips dry and chapped, and giant liver spots covering his pale face, just smiled.

“A beautiful name. Just like my beautiful Concerto,” he said, staring past me, towards the bare white ceiling.

The old man would sing, mostly when I bathed him. He had a clawfoot tub, and his soap smelled like the salt of ocean water and linen. He sang as if he needed no machine. It was like listening to God in the wind. Like Momma’s kisses when she puckered up and left lipstick on our cheeks. Like when you sang to me our dua when I cried after being beaten by Father for dressing too girly.

The old man would choke on his words after a minute or two of singing, and coughed phlegm into the bathwater.

“My respirator,” he’d say, his wrinkled hands waving over his mouth, grabbing for air. “I need it now.”

His baths were always cut short for this reason. He always wanted to sing in the water. He told me the water was a natural sound chamber, that God himself made it for us to sing for each other. I don’t know which God he was talking about. Religion’s been illegal for years now.

One night, while I was tucking him into bed, he asked me who I was.

“Your nurse,” I told him.

He shook his head and gave me that old man smile again.

“A title is not your person, little bird,” he said, his eyes becoming hazy. His eyes were like Momma’s, like the wet moss in our backyard that stuck to her favorite tree, the oak that could grow taller than mountains if it wasn’t bombed by the colonies’ government.

“Who are you really?” he asked again. He’d cough into his mask, a wheezing force of spit and congestion and mucus, his brown face filling red, like a bloodied wood, and the whites of his eyes filling with those coral branches called veins. The earstraps loosened from the force and would dance upwards with the upheaval of his weak chest. I wanted to hold him in that moment, afraid that he’d die. I wished to cradle him like you did with me when we were children, hiding under Momma’s bed when missiles quaked the house.

“Your nurse,” I told him again. He didn’t smile when I said this. He was in quiet anguish, really. I sliced an arm off the aloe plant and rubbed the gel over his forehead, like Momma taught us. His breathing calmed, and his exhale was slow and delicate.

“My mother did the same thing when I was a boy,” he said, his eyes studying the ceiling in a closing stare. “My ma’s daughter, my father’s wife, my sister’s favorite parent.”

He moved his eyes and watched my own. “Her name was Fatima. She loved to sing.”

The man chuckled beneath his coughs, and a smile broke through his long wrinkles.

“Momma kept so much bird feed in the laundry room that eventually many birds started to visit her. They had no fear for her. They sang with her, too. I couldn’t believe it. She kept the windows open for them each day, especially during rainstorms, and the tile would get soaked, and our footprints spread more dirt after playing in my father’s olive field. And she still wouldn’t care. My sister—”

I massaged his head, hoping to ease him into some sort of rest. The aloe smelled of basil, grass, and its gel soothed my skin.

“You remind me so much of her,” he said, in a fleeting whisper.

I didn’t know what to say. I never do. What does anyone do when they’re watching a person die before their eyes, someone you know you have to care for but mustn’t become attached to, someone who thinks and breathes and loves and feels, yet they are a moment in your life, made for seconds and lasting no more than days before expiring into another chamber to be turned to ash to fill our black sky.

I could feel my body sway, my hands growing cold and numb between the man’s blue walls. The aloe’s smell was vibrant, even in this silence. I wanted to tell him about you. About the time you found me hiding beneath Momma’s tree canopy, when the thunder raged through my ears and the sky was split apart by those white veins etching the gray clouds long ago. And we saw the earth from above, the thousand white roots filling the stars of the breaking sky, their thick trunks falling into our home. Destruction. Destruction. I heard you screaming for me. If only I stayed inside. We would have all died together.

His eyes closed, as if he were entering a dream. “Aloe vera,” he said, his mouth agape and in awe, his mask growing more cloudy from the thick breaths. “Like the little bird, far from a home now in ashes. It grows in neither sunlight nor darkness, and its arms leak blades from its edges.”

His laughter melded into a cough once more, and his respirator chortled harder from his exuberance. His madness amazed me. I wondered if all the dying could be like him, like a babe being unborn.

He turned to me. “Concerto would tilt his head and sing with me when I did,” he began, his voice breaking. “And I see those tears you hide from me when I do, little bird.”

I didn't know what to say. I asked him if he was comfortable. He nodded in a slow manner, his hazy eyes watching mine, and I re-fastened the straps on his mask and let the respirator run. It made a loud churning moan then turned into a low grave sound, like the machine was being pulled beneath the water. When I left, he tried telling me something, but I couldn't hear the words beneath his mask. I curse myself to this day for not asking what.

My last day with the old man wasn't any different. He struggled to keep his eyes open. He slurred his speech if he spoke too long, even with the respirator.

"They killed my Concerto, little bird," the old man told me, his eyes still closed. I was patting his perspired neck with a moist towel, trying my best to keep him comfortable. This is how it usually ends, Ms. Janus told us. This is how it ends for them all, in sleep and in company.

"You would've loved him. Concerto had feathers like the cosmic twilight, stars that bred with Lady Indigo herself," he said to me. His eyes dripped slowly with the salt of tears.

"You remind me of him, little bird. A happiness silenced by screams."

The old man coughed, and the phlegm hit the condensing plastic of his inner mask, globs of dark green congealed liquid sticking to the barrier.

"Sumiyah's a beautiful name, little bird. A beautiful name for a woman, a beautiful name for a boy, a beautiful name for any person. Do not let them destroy you like they did my Concerto," he said one last time, and there was no more condensation filling his mask, just the invisible air surrounding us, and the quiet of the respirator.

I couldn't tell you what he meant by that. I couldn't ask him to tell me more about his Concerto. I failed to ask many times before out of fear of falling apart. And here I am again, writing to you as if you'll ever respond. You've been dead for years, Aziz. I'm sorry for being so silent. I'm so sorry.