

*The Mockingbird of 79<sup>th</sup> Street* by Donna Kaz

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I live on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment building on the corner of East 79<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue and one Sunday in March, a few weeks into the closing of schools and businesses in New York City, a bird began singing outside my window. At first I thought I was hearing the call of a willet or a blackbird, but when I stepped onto my terrace to listen I was caught up in a trilling unlike any other. The notes were repeated and repeated and then changed and repeated. There was one line of music, then that one line again, and after a time a new song took over; a song made up of 16 different verses and an equal number of refrains. I did not identify the bird composing these tunes right away because I was struck by the thought that I was actually hearing a bird singing in the middle of Manhattan. The empty city had been transformed into an audible world full of warbles and tweets. Music had replaced the clamor of jack hammers and the grinding of traffic.

The next morning my window was open to the cool spring air and again, I heard the bird sing. Binoculars in hand, I stepped out onto my terrace and followed the sound to the building across the street and then to the wrap around terrace of a penthouse but I could not spot the bird. I dropped the binoculars from my face, closed my eyes and tried hard to listen to where the sound was coming from. I realized my bird was much closer. Pulling the binoculars up over my eyes I scanned the building to my left and atop an old, round water tower, I spied the small shadow of a grey-brown bird. I could just make out his body twitching as he sang. Every so often he flew up and into the air, a white flash of

wing, as if he was trying to catch an insect, only to land back down again in the same spot. After a ten minute concert he flew south across the street, perched on top of a chimney and began his chorus and dance again. I ran back inside, got on my computer and did a search. The bird was a Northern Mockingbird.

That day was full of music as the mockingbird sang all day and into dusk. Around 7PM his monotonous and ever changing melody ceased for the night, only to begin once more at first daylight. The repetitive routine of pandemic isolation soon became enveloped in the song of a mockingbird. Every day a smile would cross my lips when I opened my eyes very early to hear him singing and singing, always a variety of songs over and over again. His voice was lilting and light; sweet and soothing. I did not care that everyone around seemed to be gone. There were dozens of dark windows in the structures close by and my own apartment building felt less than half full. I had a companion in quarantine: the mockingbird of 79<sup>th</sup> Street.

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When I was 23 and had first moved to New York City I took singing lessons with a middle aged man named Tony who lived in midtown. He cranked out hour long lessons, one after the other from Monday to Friday, in his mysterious apartment. The only room I ever saw was his studio which he had outfitted with padded walls, heavy velvet drapes and a baby grand. I remember busts of composers like Beethoven and Mozart on fake marble pedestals around the room. Tony would greet me in his signature outfit – an ascot tucked into a loose fitting jacket. He had unmistakably dyed black hair and an ear shattering speaking voice that was always jovial and upbeat.

Tony assigned me old fashioned songs to sing like “Baubles, Bangles and Beads,” and “The Party’s Over.” I came to him because I was new to New York and was one of hundreds of waiters who were also trying to be actors or singers or dancers. But I was also drawn to the avant-garde theatre scene that was exploding downtown and was searching for a way to connect show tunes to the Theatre of the Oppressed. When Tony realized I was having a hard time relating to his standard repertoire he started teaching me difficult arias from famous operas. The music was challenging and dramatic and I responded, singing freely and without constraint. Tony urged me on, cheering when I hit a high note or completed a long passage on one breath.

Through voice lessons I discovered the glory of singing. My entire body resonated when I sang, a conduit for the pulsing of the planet. To sing was a transformative and circular experience. Sounds were sent from me only to be received back into my body moments later. Through music I connected my spirit with the world and the world to me. I was uplifted, a sensation which lingered after each lesson during my walk back home through the cavernous city streets.

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A mockingbird sings what they hear around them. They mostly mimic the sounds of other birds in phrases which they repeat but they can also imitate the quack of a duck or the croak of a frog. It is said they can even reproduce the sound of a car alarm. I listened for the sounds of the city in my mockingbirds concerts but nothing echoed an ambulance, fire truck or other piercing blast that often traveled from east to west across 79<sup>th</sup> street. No, my mockingbird’s playlist had nothing but music -- favorites like *Toweet*,

*toweeet, toweeet; dido, dido, dido* and *burt, burt, burt*. I began to wonder if my mockingbird was lost. Did he take a wrong turn from the wild and end up in New York City?

More research uncovered probable facts about my bird. He was most certainly male because female mockingbirds do not sing during their breeding period, April to July. Mockingbirds are monogamous and mate for life. Those who sing all night are bachelors, trying to attract females. My mockingbird never sang past dusk. His leaps into the air and display of wings were most likely movements done to protect his nest. A pair of mockingbirds can have as many as 4 broods a season.

Each day my mockingbird flew north to south and south to north across the street to stop on a favorite perch – the water tower, a chimney, an aerial – and fill the upper canyons of 79<sup>th</sup> street with music. He sang at dawn to wake me. He sang at noon to entertain me. He sang at sunset to end my day. I was awestruck by his simple melodies and the commitment he made to repeat, repeat, repeat the same notes. A sweet, small cycle of song became the underscore of my sequestered life.

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As much as I progressed in my early voice lessons under Tony's tutelage I was petrified of singing in public. Even though I took years and years of dance classes as a young girl, I was never comfortable on stage. It was fine if I could stand in the back or sing in the choir but not alone or in a spotlight. And so when the non equity open call for Rizzo in Broadway's original production of *Grease* was posted, I really did not want to go but knew I had to. I mean, what was I taking voice lessons for? So after waiting for

hours on a huge line of hopeful young women that snaked around the Royale Theatre on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street, I stepped through the stage door and grabbed a cardboard sign with a number on it from the monitor. As the line thinned out I could see ahead of me a wide proscenium arch lit by a ghost light. Suddenly, someone was breathing into my ear. “There is a “x” mark on the floor of the stage. Walk onto the “x,” and state your name. When the piano starts playing, sing. When you’re done, exit left.”

I did exactly as I was told as all the moisture inside my mouth was sucked away, my throat squeezed closed and my lungs turned into under-inflated balloons. I managed to push out a few thin sounds before I heard someone in the audience shout, “NEXT!” Many disastrous singing auditions followed. No amount of preparation helped. If I had to sing in public I might believe in my abilities for a few seconds, but they would invariably vanish into one huge fail.

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Thomas Jefferson had a pet mockingbird that would sit on his shoulder and sing while he played the violin. In Harper Lee’s novel, Atticus Finch states that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. *They do not eat up your garden or nest in your corn, all they do is sing their hearts out for you.* My mockingbird sang his heart out for me all spring.

Some say that mockingbirds represent resilience. As a spirit animal they encourage humans to find their voice. I often thought the bird was my father attempting to communicate with me. He was a wood worker and in his retirement took up bird carving. I heard his rational voice in between the mockingbird’s steady notes, especially

when I would panic about the future. *There's nothing you can do but put your head down and focus*, I would hear him say in bird song. And so I would. And so I felt better.

The mockingbird of 79<sup>th</sup> Street created a calmness during days of anxiety and confusion. Every day he invited me to sit and listen. Most of all, he reminded me to sing. By Memorial Day I began to worry about how long he might stay.

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At the top of the wind pipe sit the vocal cords. To sing you inhale and let out a sustained breath over the cords which makes them vibrate and produce sound. The voice was the very first musical instrument. Song predates spoken language. There is no culture in the entire world that does not sing.

The act of singing is considered a super spreader of the coronavirus. When you push air through your vocal cords you can also push out droplets of the infection from your lungs. Singing pushes these droplets much further and wider than speaking does.

Performance anxiety is defined as not being able to control the thought that stepping onto a stage is a dangerous act. *I will forget the lyrics; not be able to hit that high note; make a fool of myself; and sound so awful I will be booed off the stage*, are thoughts which can dominate a singers mind. Stage fright is the biggest fear reported by American adults, many of whom claim they would rather be in their own coffin than give the eulogy at a funeral.

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Catastrophic auditions did not stop me from singing. I lived on the west coast for a while where I studied with a woman named Raven who started each lesson with shouting exercises and taught me how to sing very, very loudly. I successfully auditioned for and landed the role of Jenny in “Three Penny Opera.” To combat my performance fears, I developed a pre-show ritual which involved arriving at the theatre 4 hours before curtain.

I began to write music. I sang in churches, in choirs and for funerals and weddings. I met a very talented actor who became an artistic partner. We sang together almost nightly in his apartment, both of us strumming guitars. We sourced out a local country western band and played a few small clubs in West Village. He turned to me one night after an especially raucous gig and told me he believed my sole purpose in life was to sing.

Still, I never got over my fear of singing in public. It would take me hours to get up the nerve to do it. And then my artistic partner died and I could not bring myself to sing any longer.

On the day I turned 50 I thought, well that’s it, I am going to lose my singing voice. Like Joni Mitchell and Julie Andrews, my voice will disappear. It will lose its shape. It will age. One day I will wake up and it will be gone. I will open my mouth and all I will be able to do is croak.

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June brought warmer weather. My windows were closed and the air conditioner drowned out my mockingbird's daily concerts. I would still go out on the terrace and greet him each morning. I looked for his mate and fledglings but never saw them. Once in a while I would whistle back at him or repeat his songs.

Where does the internal pull come from that causes us to want to stroke the nose of a horse or swim with a dolphin? When I am out in nature and hear a quiet chirp or a distant howl I am reminded of how fragile is the connection between all living things. In his own way, the mockingbird of 79<sup>th</sup> Street was there for me. I tried to be there for him. Our commonality and understanding of each other was in our unique ability to produce a sound from the soul.

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A few years ago I was at a party talking to a stranger who told me she was taking singing lessons with a vocal teacher on the lower east side. Singing lessons. Something inside me ached to sing again.

I asked her for her teacher's number and called the next day for an appointment. "Oh, I teach a very specific method," John warned me during our first meeting. "You might not like it and it is not going to be like anything else you have ever learned." "Fine," I shot back. "I'm just here to find out if I've lost my voice yet." John looked at me and laughed and we began. The method John stressed turned out to be breathing. He taught me to breathe into every cell in my body and then release air over my vocal cords.



To sing is to release air. In simplest terms, to sing is to inhale and exhale a sound on pitch.

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By the end of June the mockingbird of 79<sup>th</sup> Street had been cutting back his concerts. He sang only in the morning or for a brief period in the afternoon. The city began to open up. There were more cars on the street and people inside apartments. Restaurants and bars served people at tables on the sidewalks. The city noises returned as the song of the mockingbird faded. One day his song was gone.

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I sing. Loudly, if I like. On good days I even hit a few high notes. Growing old made my voice a bit different but as long as I can breathe I will sing.

My mockingbird is fine. He is doing what birds do, I imagine. Mating season is over and he is on to his next adventure. Perhaps he will be back next spring.

I hear a taxi cab honk its horn. A garbage truck rumbles over a pot hole. I take a deep breath, let out a sound, listen for the world to echo back - a circle unbroken.