The Caged Bird

*The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.*

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

The window has condensation on it again. That’s understandable; it must be frighteningly cold outside. Its white paint is flaking away, and there is mould growing in the crevices between it and the wall. There is a mismatched arrangement of empty seashells on the windowsill. The open fire produces muffled cracks now and then. Its amber glow fills the dank room with a misplaced sense of cosiness; while the seagulls squawk and squeak outside the dripping window. The small room is scarcely decorated, with two armchairs situated around a small, dilapidated coffee table, and an unplugged television. There are holes in the covers of the chairs, and its green fabric has faded to a grey mess. There’s a photograph sitting on the table, and it has an odd gleam to the silver frame. It looks like it’s the only thing in the room that is cleaned. It’s as if it’s treated like a magic lamp: rubbed in the bleak hope that a wish may come as a result. The photograph is of a woman. She is middle aged, though the photo looks like it was taken a considerable time ago. She has a gentle look in her eyes; one of understanding; one of softness. The only light sources come from the grubby fire and the window, and there are damp marks on the ceiling. The roar of the ocean outside is muffled by the noise of the boiling kettle on the hob.

I know I should get up; take it off and… Well I can’t actually remember why I put it on in the first place. I don’t want tea or coffee. I get up, and drag myself over to the cooker. Cautiously, I pick up the kettle. It’s squealing reminds me of a pig in an abattoir, or what I imagine a bug would sound like as you squeeze it between your forefinger and thumb. I pour it down the sink, watching the steaming water spiral down the plug. Once it has all gone down, I stand motionless for a moment. I can’t really say what I was thinking, because I wasn’t thinking at all. I placed my hand down on the metal counter beside the sink, and jumped suddenly. Some of the boiling water had spilled, and I had placed my chapped hand onto it.

I curse, and return to the shabby living room. I look at the picture of my mother on the coffee table, and notice a grubby finger mark on the glass of the frame. What would she think of me? Her daughter; thirty-seven years of age and living alone in a dingy little flat with mouldy windows and stains on the roof. She has been dead now for almost twenty years, and the pain has never quite left me. I just sort of ignored the fact that the tumour was cancerous. She was never going to die in my eyes; why would she? Not a day goes by and I don’t think about her and her grace; her undying beauty; her effortless shine.

I return to the torn armchair, and gaze out into the window. The seagulls are floating around the closed ice cream shop, on the street below. The noisy beasts are eating some chips dropped by a group of scantily clad teenage girls, out on the prowl for a night’s companionship. Week old litter swirls around the empty bins on the street, and the shop fronts of those that are still in business are unclean, and several smashed windows are dotted along the road. Dishevelled and malnourished trees line the street, with their mangled grey branches reaching out above the numerous potholes on the road.

A great roar rose from the street below, as the gulls spread their wings and flew upwards. They swirl around, playfully nipping at each other, oblivious to any danger; any limits; any sadness. They know no confines. If they wanted to they could fly to America and back and still have the rest of the world to see; whether they were the most majestic, beautiful swan or the smallest bird, hopping from tree to tree. Slowly gliding through the sky, they are liberated. The world is theirs. No bars prevent their wings from spreading.

But then there’s me: the caged bird. I dream of the rolling hills; the endless horizons; the limitless freedom. I long for the day when I can walk, and never stop. Or when I can fly, feeling the wind caress my feathers, not knowing where I’m going to land. But the bars of my cage have killed my wings. They have withered over the years of my captivity, being constricted by the death of my mother and my steady decline. The feathers have fallen, the skin has emaciated, and the bones have wasted away. My wings are no more.

As I watch the gulls fly to the sea, I look down onto the street. The night has picked up, and there’s a group of drunken twenty-something’s walking up the promenade, wobbling on their high heels, unaware that they have left their belongings in the club. I look towards the street, and the boarded up ice cream shop, which was the start of the gulls’ journey. A lone gull is standing in the middle of the road, flapping her wings, trying to fly. Maybe it’s the first time she has tried to fly, or maybe she is scared; scared but eager. Eager to find what awaits her, but scared to leave the safety of the nest. She stands awkwardly, flapping her wings. At the same moment, a car came round a nearby corner and knocked the bird off her feet. Her wings are broken, her legs are snapped and her dreams are shattered.

\*1000 words\*

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