

**“BIRD”**

Short Story

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Words:

Camarillo State Mental Hospital was a nice place, at least aesthetically. It was also a loony bin. These days it would be called a mental health facility. But we're talking about 1946, so it's a loony bin. The hospital stood in stark contrast to the harsh Skinnerian style architecture that was so in vogue at the time. The Camarillo was anti-industrial, the antithesis of the sterile, steel blandness that has come to be representative of science. It featured big rooms, high ceilings, and florid Spanish style architecture.

Gregory Talbot, a slack middle aged man, didn't have anything in particular against the institution. He'd never really noticed his surroundings. The world kind of tapered out of his consciousness once you got about five feet out. It turned fuzzy, like a nearsighted guy without his glasses. Even the things in his immediate view had the washed out appearance of an old black and white television with a bad picture tube.

Although unaware of his surroundings, Gregory was very conscious of the world as an abstract whole that spread out like a tapestry around him. It was this world he was worried about; this metaphysical world he wanted to escape.

The world let him down. A trapdoor opened in his mind and his life and everything he thought to be true had fallen into a dark nothingness. The world let him down badly enough that he was going to kill himself, whether *they* wanted him to or not.

The ironic thing was how sane Greg was forced to act in order to be trusted enough to get the chance to commit suicide. While he remained himself, remained honest, they kept a close watch on him, gave him no privacy, no chance to escape. So Greg, a pragmatic guy, changed his behavior radically. He did everything in his power to downplay his uglier emotions. He changed his behavior in the group meetings. He started using the lingo he heard around him, the lingo of those who saw their privileges grow.

Greg told everyone at group that he understood that sometimes people did things to hurt other people, that he wasn't responsible for their decisions, only for his own. He told them he wanted to live, wanted to repair his psychic wounds and learn to live again. The things he said had little meaning to him; they were only words, keys to the lock that kept him breathing. Greg understood that if he didn't say the right things, he'd never get his hands on a knife.

Days slid by like smoke while seconds ground like grains of sand one at a time through an hourglass. Greg appreciated the irony, but wasn't relieved by it.

Eventually though, *they* bought it. This was 1946, for the most part the doctors just wanted you to do what they told you to do and say you felt the way they wanted you to feel. By the psychology of the times, this was sanity. If you were sane enough to appear sane, then you were sane. It made sense. It was wrong. But it made sense.

Besides, work needed to be done, and if Greg was willing to work, then who was the staff to stop him?

Specifically Greg went to work washing dishes. He didn't mind doing the labor. The soap smelled good, fresh. His hands scrubbed and rinsed the dishes, his mind thought of the realm that came next. He had hope, but it was only in that other place. He no longer felt meaning in this world. He'd loved her so much. And she'd been so cruel...

He washed dishes for three days before he took the knife. Although he'd obsessed for the 72 intervening hours about how hard it would be to steal the simple steak knife in the end it was quite simple. He slid it into his pocket, using the blade to cut a hole in the pocket so that it wasn't visible. The whole thing took about ten seconds.

For the rest of his shift he kept imagining that people were looking at him, searching his eyes, trying to see what he was up to.

They weren't.

His dish washing shift ended and Greg walked to the locker room feeling every set of eyes on him like weights. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. He could hear the quiet scrape of the knife's dull edge against his leg every time he took a step. He could feel the hand falling on his shoulder, the hand of authority, the hand of this world, holding him fast.

But it wasn't there.

The next thing Greg knew the knife was inside his mattress. He would wait until the next afternoon during "rest" time. He'd always liked afternoons. He could remember the way Missy used to like to take naps in the afternoon. Then she'd wake up. They'd make love...

But that was before. Things were different now. Those things were over now. Ghosts.

The blade slid through his skin with just a little bit of gouging, his arm tensed involuntarily which only caused the blade to sink deeper. A trickle of blood welled up out of his wrist where the blade invaded it. He paused and took a deep breath, preparing himself for the pain he knew would accompany the initial slash. It would only last until he went into shock, so the pain was OK. He could deal with it.

Gregory could deal with just about anything as long it was in the service of getting him off of this plane of existence. Death would be something new, the chimera of life would be gone and all that would be left would be the Truth. The lies of the world shattered by the loss of the blood that kept the electric Jello in his head running smooth.

There was a total silence, a silence as deep as the darkness in a cave. And then, tearing through the silence like a bolt of lightning, there was music. Remarkable, living and shimmering music. Music so dark it made him shiver involuntarily.

Boodledwee-dadadaaa-boodledwee-doo-doo-daaaaa.

This wasn't a record, this music was live. In spite of the fluid punching notes, there was a melancholy in the sound that reached deep down into Gregory's heart and stirred something that was dead.

The music was coming from a saxophone.

Instead of finishing the job Greg pulled the knife out of his wrist with an accompanying shot of pain that he felt straight up to the roots of his teeth. He flinched, dropped the knife on the floor. It clattered, made a small spray of blood where it landed.

As if in a dream Greg floated across the room to the window and looked out into the beautiful green courtyard that sprawled towards the mountains that jutted up in the distance. The courtyard didn't look beautiful before. There was no beauty in the world anymore, even five seconds earlier, but with that sound playing, the color was back in the world, a brightness that had been missing for so long he'd forgotten it was ever there.

The music was like a bridge out of the morass of his depression, a bridge into heaven. And not the stifling white robed heaven where everyone plays bingo. This music was a bridge to the funky heaven, the one people would actually want to go to.

The notes were like birds, they flew around the vibration of the melody in swoops and dives, sometimes frantic swirling, sometimes smooth and acrobatic, a musical ballet.

BaBa-badoodle.dweedle-dweedle-dop.da da-dweedledweedle--dah dah.

A dancing pixie of sound.

The lines of notes were like a genius speaking a language Greg couldn't understand intellectually; only emotionally. He felt like his soul, the one part of himself that was already deceased so far as he knew, suddenly leaped out of its grave. All thoughts of suicide were swept out of his head by the sound. They were replaced with a new desire...

Just to hear that music. To dance again.

The knife was forgotten. Everything was forgotten. Greg went and lay down on his cot, sliding his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. The sound of the saxophone drifted through the window and instead of bleeding to death Greg Talbot fell asleep with a small grin on his lips and countless tears drying on his face.

That evening when rest time was over Greg found that he was in trouble again. He was woken by the nurse finding the knife on the floor. She saw the blood on the blade and on Greg's wrist. He was roughly gathered up by a couple of orderlies, taken to the doctor, both head and body. They put him in isolation, wrapped him in a straight jacket, and threw him in a padded room that smelled of vomit and urine.

It didn't matter. As they lifted him like a sack of potatoes, while they enslaved his arms and dropped him like so much laundry, he didn't mind. There was the music playing in his head, the soft melancholy melody that had come to represent life itself in his mind.

Again Greg found himself held captive by the irony of the institution. Now that Greg *really* wanted to live and was no threat to himself he was trapped, kept captive so that he would pose no threat to himself. When he tried to explain that he was OK, that he'd heard this music and it was OK, he was treated like he was just trying to get some privileges back so that he could try to commit suicide again.

Three times a day the doctor would come to his room. By the third day Greg figured out what it was that the doctor wanted to hear. He'd made an unfortunate mistake, wrought by his fragile mental health. He'd gone too quickly, expected too much too soon. But he knew now that there were no quick fixes. He needed to work the system, learn the ropes, and be a fruitful member of the hospital society.

Over time he found that there was actually a great beauty in this place of pain. Greg hadn't seen it before; he hadn't seen anything in quite a while. But now that he was free he was quite taken with his surroundings. The bars that held him in his room were actually quite beautiful. They weren't your run of the mill straight bars stuck into concrete. Instead, they were wavy and twisted round and round with a great artistry. Bars they were, but bars with dignity, with humanity. Indeed, the bars were, in their own way, infused with the same quality as the music, only he'd been too damaged before to see it. Even the tiles around the drinking fountains were hand painted, colorful, and covered with ornate designs.

Within a week he was allowed outside. Two hours everyday, but only in the inner courtyards.

He searched for the sounds that saved his life and within fifteen minutes he found them. A pretty sizable black man was sitting on one of the benches, his eyes closed. He had a saxophone on his lap. His foot was tapping even though he wasn't actually playing. Greg walked up to the man, he didn't say anything at first he just stood before him, waiting for his eyes to open again on their own.

In a few minutes they did. The big man jumped a little, he clearly hadn't heard Greg's approach.

"Oh hey. Didn't see you there." With practiced ease he shifted the saxophone into one hand.

Greg just smiled at him in return.

"Can ya talk?" The man asked. He held out his hand.

Greg smiled wider and took it. They shook.

"Yeah. I can talk. I'm sorry. It's just that you saved my life."

"I did what?"

"You saved my life. I was over there," He motioned over his shoulder, "In my room about a week ago. I was about to kill myself, had the knife actually in my wrist." He offered out his wrist, the cut just an angry red line now.

The man leaned forward and looked. "Damn!" He said.

"Yeah. So I was getting ready to finish the job, and I heard your playing. You're a genius."

"Nope. I'm in here too man. Ain't no genius in that. Got drunk, lit my hotel room on fire. Stupid man, just stupid." He shook his head. "My name is Charlie Parker."

"I've heard of you. You're famous right? They call you Bird."

"Yeah, I'm Bird. And no I'm not really famous. Well, maybe a little. I don't think the jazz world is going to be real happy with me right now. Before I burned up my hotel room I managed to completely tank a recording session. I mean terrible! But I think things are getting a little better now though."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Got the monkey on my back, got the monkey on my back. But like they say, without a cross, there is no Jesus."

"Junk?"

"Yep. That heroin's got my soul and alcohol is frequently trying to get what little bit that's left. But don't none of it touch my playing." He said, lifting his instrument. "This place though, as much as the Bird needs to be free, at least in here I can have some space; some time to put my head back on straight. No gigs, no dope, no booze, just my sax."

"Do you think you'll beat the dope?"

"Well, see the problem is that you can't think your way out of a heroin addiction. It gets you. Here. And

here.” He pointed to his crotch, and then his heart. But to answer your question, I don't know man, I don't know. I can hear it calling me, even now...” Bird trailed off, his eyes looking off toward some demon that only he could see.

“Am I interrupting your practice?” Greg asked, suddenly aware that he was doing just that.

“Well, yeah I guess.” Charlie smiled. “But I can't think of a better reason to interrupt someone then to tell them that they saved your life. I can't tell you man, I really needed to hear that just now. Good stuff, really good stuff. You're welcome to hang around man, just stay quiet OK?” Charlie gave him a warm smile and began to play.

After a minute of warming up, running the scales of the instrument Bird began to play, totally improvising, playing a duet with the universal instruments of the spheres. After a few minutes a squirrel came right up in front of them, standing on its haunches, not moving an inch. Bird, noticing the fuzzy creature, began to play to it, playing his notes in time with another pair of squirrels that were chasing each other around a tree. After a minute Charlie stopped playing.

Bird said, “Man, one time I read that cows really dug music you know. Farmers found out that if they played some classical or some jazz or whatever the cows would end up giving more milk the next day. So one night we were driving through the country side on the way to a gig and there's all these cows standing around in a field. I start yellin' at the guy driving to stop the car and let me out. So he stops and I cruise up to this cow and just start blowin my horn right there in the middle of this field and this cow just stood there looking at me while I was playin. Just standing there, chewing it's cud and watching me. Everybody that was there makes fun of me for that. But fuck them, that cow dug my playing.” He laughed. “No really, there were other cows standing around in that general area. Man, they were listening too. Music is universal. It's just vibration you know. Different frequencies, modulations, and syncopations. Everything is pretty much vibration. Life's just a vibration, that's what the physicists say.”

“I guess that's what music is for.”

“What?”

“To realign the soul with this world. To adjust wonky vibrations.”

“You may be right man, you may be right...”

Bird started playing the saxophone again and Greg closed his eyes.

Together, in the shade of the music that flowed through Bird as much as it came from him, they healed.

For a while.