

A BIRD ON THE WING

by Bill Judge



Lying in bed, his face turned away from the window shade because even the softest grey bothered his eyes, fifteen year old Evan heard the door bell just below his room. He dreaded the sound. No, more than that, the sing-song ding-dong hurt his ears because of his constant headache. He gritted his teeth. Why don't they leave me alone, he moaned as he buried his face for a second into his damp pillow.

He kept his eyes closed because the flame from his mom's votive candle danced on the walls and ceiling and made his head spin. It was supposed to be a constant prayer to St Peregrine, the patron saint of cancer patients, but it made his room feel more like a funeral home than his refuge. But, as sick as he was, all he could do was huddle under the sheet and peep the smallest peek beneath his eyelids when he was awake.

Alternately feeling hot and cold, he lifted a finger to flick his sweaty hair from his forehead. His face burned red and his feet froze. He never felt comfortable. Just about to roll over again, he stopped when he heard voices.

"Is Evan home?" He didn't recognize the voice since his pillow was wrapped around his head and muffled his hearing. His mom said something and he couldn't hear that either. He pushed a corner away from his ear.

"I think he's sleeping," his mother continued.

"Okay if I check?"

"He's pretty sick, Jessie."

Oh, his friend, Jessica, from next door. Wonder what she wants, he thought.

"Will he see me?" She asked. He let go of his breath. He was safe. His mom would say no.

"Maybe." The smallest pause while his heart sunk. "He was pretty sick this morning, but, since you are here, and I need to give him his meds anyway, let's check. You are a sweetheart for coming. Let's go up. You can see him for a minute."

"Thank you."

Crap. Can't she leave anything alone? He didn't want to see anybody. First, it was a priest who said some prayers that he didn't understand and, when the priest tried to rub some oil into the palms of his hands, he pulled them under the covers. Nodding, the priest just muttered some more. Sure, the priest tried to say something nice to Evan when he left but he couldn't say the words he really wanted to hear - you're cured. No, it was more of that mumbly-jumbly stuff, how God works in mysterious ways. Tell that to someone who cares about mysterious ways.

Then it was some kind of nurse who taught his mom how to administer his medications - which didn't help. Just made him feel sicker. Bottom line, he didn't want to see people, real people, moving around however they wanted when he couldn't. And he particularly didn't want to see Jessie, who had been his best friend since they were practically babies. He didn't want her to see him like this. Besides, he was in his hospital gown and shorts and he was drenched in perspiration.

Even though he knew they were coming, he still flinched when he heard the tap.

"Evan? You awake, hon? Jessie's here." His white six paneled door creaked as his mom turned the knob and pushed. From across the room, he groaned at the intrusion.

Rushing to his side, his mom asked, "Are you okay?" As she reached to touch his forehead, she brushed against his gown. "Oh, Evan, you're soaked! Why didn't you say something?" She fumbled with the drawstrings around the back of his neck.

What could he have said? She was downstairs... he stopped himself. He wasn't going to blame her though he sure felt like it. He wanted to blame somebody, anybody, but not her. At least, not just her. It wouldn't be enough. It was so unfair. Besides, it was just as well that she was downstairs, he didn't want her in his room all of the time anyway. He was fifteen and not a momma's boy. She'd just end up crying. "I'll be alright, mom. Really." He snuck a glance towards Jessie who had stayed near the door. His stomach turned again as he realized how pretty she was. Something he hadn't noticed even a few weeks ago, before he got really sick. Before they knew it was cancer.

Her long, straight brown hair lay over her shoulders, framed her cute button nose that they both used to laugh about, and fell just above her breasts, something else he noticed. He could feel his heart beat in his chest. In the dimness, he

couldn't tell, but he knew, that her brown eyes glossed like two pieces of translucent jasper. Jessie was always there for him. Had always been. He was glad she came. But, as she felt for the wall with her hands behind her, he sensed she was scared and that made him sick, too. He didn't want her to see him like this. He felt like a big old stain on a white shirt.

"Come on, lift your arms, hon," his mom tugged at his sleeves.

One of the snaps snagged on his thin patch of underarm hair. "Owww," he flung his left arm open to free himself. Suddenly aware of his bare boy chest, he wanted to dive under the sheets but he knew it was already too late. Embarrassed to the bone, his eyes wanted to dart to Jessie but he forced himself to look at his feet. He just knew that she'd look away and then slink towards the door. She wouldn't want to see his skinny sick body. But tears clouded his eyes and he couldn't see anything. He blinked and then looked her way, trying to focus.

She smiled. He saw that. An almost hidden little smile that anyone else would miss but he could see the corners of her mouth lift. Of all of the things she could have done, he never expected her to smile, but there she was. What a good friend. And then she grinned, just like the time he tried to show her how to jump the picket fence between their yards, and the seat of his pants ripped. He couldn't help but smile. He turned away or he would have laughed.

Seeing him duck his head towards the window and away from his friend, his mom asked, "Do you want Jessie to leave?"

"No," he said, as he looked again at her across the room. Dropping her hands from the wall behind her, she relaxed and gave him another mini smile.

"Oh, okay then," his mother finished helping him with the new gown. "Are your shorts okay?" She asked.

"Mom!"

Jessie snickered.

"Oh, excuse me," his mom twittered. "Of course." She started for the door and Jessie stepped to the side. His mom rested a hand on Jessie's shoulder. "I'll leave you two alone for a bit. But remember, you need your rest." She left the door open.

They both waited until they heard his mom on the landing. Jessie leaned back against the wall.

"How have you been?"

"You know."

Jessie's eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened. "No, I don't." She drew closer to his bed. "They wouldn't tell me and they wouldn't let me see you."

"Who? My mom?" He suddenly grew angry.

Her eyes dropped. "No. My mom and dad."

"Why?"

Shrugging, she said, "Who knows? They're scared? They don't want me to bother you. Or your mom?" She searched for a chair and he noticed.

"Over there, by my desk. Duh."

"Duh, yourself. I can't see anything. It's like a funeral in here. Does it have to be?" She dragged the wooden chair next to his bed and sat.

"No, I guess not." He lifted the shade in his window and shut his eyes tight. "Well, it does hurt a bit."

"The light?"

"Yeah." He played with the edge of the shade. "Maybe. I don't know. I always have a headache."

"Bummer."

"Yeah." He sighed and squinted.

"Want me to go?"

"No, not yet." But he didn't look at her.

"I'm sorry, Evan." She laid her hand on his. She left it there and waited for him to say something.

Instead, his chest heaved and he gulped for air in stutters. She grasped his hand tighter, "Are you all right?"

Starting slowly, he sobbed. Then cried. And cried.

She wouldn't let go of him. "I'm here, Evvie."

"I-I-I know," he managed to choke out between his tears. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She brushed his hair. "It's not your fault."

"I don't know about that." He settled down though his breath came in gulps. "I can't do anything. This sucks so bad."

"It does. I know it does." She laid her hand on his again. "We'll get through this."

Shaking his head, he said, "That's not what they told my mom."

"Who? What?"

With his eyes barely open, he stared at the bedpost by his feet. "I'm not going to make it."

"What do you mean?"

"That's what I heard them saying downstairs. They said it's fatal. I was sleeping but my mom must have cried and woke me up." He sobbed again.

"Oh, Evvie, I'm so sorry." She touched his hair and waited for him until he was calm again. "All right?"

He nodded.

"Want me to go?"

He nodded.

She bit her lower lip. "Okay." Her finger tips touched his and then withdrew. She stood up. With her head down, she said, "I'm sorry." She reached the door way.

"Come back tomorrow, would you?" Evan whispered.

With a tear in her eye and a sudden smile on her face, she said, "You know I will."

"Your parents okay with it?"

"Who cares?"

Evan smiled, "Yeah, who cares?"

With the wisp of a smile and a wave of her hand, Jessie left.

#

"Evan, guess who's here?"

Urged into consciousness, he opened his eyes a quarter of an inch. He knew he had slept through the night. His brain had a hard time restarting. Remembering the events of the night, he realized that he had barely slept. He had to take his different meds at different times. In fact, he glanced at his desk alarm, he had only slept a few hours since his last medication.

"Jessica."

For whatever reason, his mother had a grin on her face. He hadn't seen his mom smile in weeks. He gazed through his sleep towards the door. "Hi." He lifted his fingers.

Taking a step forward, Jessica returned, "Hi."

"I'll be back," now his mother looked at the clock, "in thirty minutes. Time for your next dose."

"Okay, mom," he sat up in his bed.

"Better?" Jessie asked as she took another step forward.

Aware that she carried something behind her back, and curious, he answered, "A little. How about you?"

With a wide open grin, she said, "Me? I'm not the one who needs all of the attention."

Evan raised his brows and kept his smile. "Thanks for coming."

"Sure." She swung a shoulder back, "I brought you something."

Squeezing his brows together, he tried to look behind her. "What's that?"

"A drawing pad." She laid it on his lap. "And some pencils. I even have some Derwent charcoals." Placing a set in his hand, she added, "If you get good enough."

"Ha!"

"No, I mean it, Ev. None of your half-assed work. It's got to be good."

"Of course." He held the pad with both hands. "At least as good as the wishing well that my Mom framed in the kitchen."

"No. That's from the third grade. It was good for back then but I want one like you drew for me for my birthday."

"The finch in the weeping willow?"

"Yes," she swiveled in her chair to face the open room.

"But I don't see how you can draw anything in the dark."

Evan frowned.

"How about some light? Can you handle a bit?" She turned her wrist over to the window. "Anyway, it's cloudy outside."

He nodded and drew the shade up a foot. Looking across the hedges that ran along the sidewalk, he spied a section of the picket fence and the large pin oak that dominated that part of the front yard.

Jessie placed her chair behind his bed post so she could look over his shoulder. "Draw what you see."

"What? Now?"

"Sure. Why not? You going somewhere?"

Chuckling, he shook his head and pursed his lips to keep from laughing. Raising his knees up and balancing the pad on his lap, he lifted one of the pencils.

"Use your window to frame it."

"I know what I'm doing, Jess."

"I know," she breathed and watched as he made a few quick strokes. Boxing the perspective, he scratched the basics of the oak's trunk and the jagged lines of the hedges. He caught a sharp, straight section of the sidewalk and then just a couple of pickets on their fence. A robin lighted on one of the slats.

"Get him," she urged.

Flicking the charcoal, the bird's chest puffed out beneath its folded wings. With the beak pointed towards the ground, he captured the male's stare for food somewhere on the lawn.

"That's beautiful, Evan," she whispered.

He didn't answer. He filled in the lower branches of the oak and the little leaves of the hedge.

"I can almost see the tiniest wave of wind dance across it."

Evan's left brow lifted in acknowledgement. He breathed softly, slowly, and more easily than he had in three weeks. Slanting the tip, he enhanced the light by adding shadow. When the robin flew off, he added a leaf falling from the oak.

"There. What do you think? Can I keep the pencils?" He tilted his head back over his shoulder and looked at Jessie upside down.

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "Yes. Can I keep it?"

"Sure."

"Sign it."

"Come on, you're kidding. You know me and who it's from."

Pointing to the pad, she said, "Sign it."

He stroked his full name diagonally in the lower right corner. "Here," he started to pull the sheet from the pad.

"No, let me." Taking the pad from him, she carefully tore the page free. "I love it." She traced his name with her finger. "Evan Estwich, this is your best." Their eyes melted for a moment and she broke away to check the alarm on his desk. "I've got to get home for supper. Then back to school tomorrow." She had a pained look. "We all miss you."

"Even Buck?"

She laughed like crystal tinkling in a breeze. "No, not Buck."

"Didn't think so."

"Keep drawing, Ev." She bent and snuggled her face next to his. Kissing his cheek, she said, "I'll be back when I can."

Gazing at him as she left the room, he felt the warmth of a blush still on his cheek.

#

"Sorry I've been gone all week. Too late for me to come over because of band practice." She dragged the chair next to his bed. Noticing the beads of sweat on his brow, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Fine." He reached between his bed and the window. Pulling up the pad, he said, "What do you think?"

She flipped through the pages. "Nice. I like the way you zoomed in on the tree and then pulled back your view in this other sketch." She lifted a page and then again and once again. "Who's this feathery little guy?"

Evan's eyes brightened and a smile spread wide. "My friend."

"That's a mourning dove. Is he totally white?"

"Yes. It's really quite fantastic." He rested his hand on the window sill next to his bed. "He stops by all of the time. Right out here." He swiped his hand along the lower window sash. "I wonder when he started resting here."

Jessie shrugged. "You sure seem to have done a lot of him."

Trying to save paper, he had drawn several figures on the same page.

She stopped and settled on a drawing, "Wait a minute. He seems to be talking to you. Am I right? What's he saying?"

"I don't know."

"He really is trying to talk to you?"

"I think so."

"Wow, that's so cool. You need another pad. I'll get you one."

"That's okay. Mom got me another." He grinned, "And more pencils. Here look at this one." He handed her another pad.

"How did you do this? This captures the bough of," she looked out of the window, "that branch as it meets the trunk. Almost like you sat there."

"I know." Giggling he added, "My friend flew from here over there and I think I just drew what I imagined he saw. But it wasn't really imagining."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know but it's like I was right there. Think about it, Jess, I climbed that tree again. Or, at least, I guess I did."

With her mouth open and her thumb rubbing the edge of her upper teeth, she said, "Yeah." She gave the slightest shake of her head, "That's what it looks like. Spooky."

"Not spooky, silly. It's freedom."

She raised her brows and then nodded, "Yeah, I guess you're right. It would be freeing." She stood up. "I wish I could be free but I've got to go to my cousin's wedding now. I'm sorry. I wanted to spend more time with you."

"No problem. Bye. And try to have fun," he said with a whine and a laugh in his voice.

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"Wake up sleepy head." Jessie tapped Evan's shoulder. His gown was damp again. His hair was pasted on his forehead and temples.

"Uh?"

"I'm back like a boomerang."

"So you are." Waking up, he handed her his latest drawings and then yawned.

"Oh my gosh, these are surreal. How did you ever?"

"I don't know," he laughed and crossed his eyes at her.

"You told me to just draw what I see. That's what I see."

"But that's my back yard. You can't have drawn this."

"I don't know. I've been there before."

"But how did you know we have a broken pane in the garage window?"

"I saw it."

"That doesn't make sense. Dad broke it just a week ago with a rock blown out by the lawnmower."

"Well, I still think it does make sense. When I fly with him, I feel alive."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"The dove. I finally figured out what he was trying to say."

"What he was trying to say? Oh yeah, now I remember. What?"

"He was trying to say, 'Come on.'" He paused and continued, "Or maybe, 'come with me.' I don't know exactly. It's not like he has a tongue or anything, goofball."

She pushed his shoulder. "These are beautiful. And you're right, they're exhilarating."

He sighed. "I wish I could do it all day. But."

"But what, big butt?" She played with him.

"I get tired."

"From flapping your wings?"

He scowled at her. "No, Miss Know-it-all." His shoulders dropped, "Just tired, you know. I can see everything and we fly way out but it's like I feel a tug or something. As if we've gone too far. And somehow he keeps flying and I end up back here as if I didn't leave at all."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to irritate you."

"No, it's not you," he tried to explain. "It's me, I guess. I'm not feeling well."

"If it's any consolation, you don't look it either."

A little smile broke the grey of his face.

"But you must have left. You did all of these drawings."

"Yes, and that's strange, too. I don't remember doing them. We fly away. I wake up here and yet, the drawings are here. Of things I knew I had seen. And there's something else."

"What?"

"While we're up there. I think he says to me, 'Are you ready?'"

"Ready for what?"

"I'm not sure. There's something incredible out there, something magnificent and bold and beautiful, but when he asks me, I get this feeling that maybe I'm too tired to go, and all of a sudden, I'm here. And each time I tell myself that I'm going to say 'Yes, I'm ready' because I want to see what's out there. Because I know it's awesome." He continued, "It's so bright up there, and I don't mean sunshine bright, I mean something else. See? I tried to draw it but only when I'm here, not there. It's what I remember but it's not exactly the way I see it." He rolled his shoulders, "After all, you just gave me charcoal and not brushes dipped in liquid emeralds and flowing diamonds. I can't draw air as sweet as maple syrup." His voice trailed off.

They sat in the quiet.

"You won't be mad at me if I go, will you, Jessie?"

She didn't answer and they soaked up the silence. A tear rolled down her cheek. "No, Evan, I won't be mad." She held his hand.

#

Jessie sat at her desk, doing her homework, when she heard her mother cry. Turning toward the door and ready to get up, her mom knocked and opened her door.

"What's the matter?" Jessie asked.

"I've got some sad news, dear." But her mom quit talking, she sniffled instead, jerked her hand up to her mouth and nose and Jessie's heart stopped.

"What is it? Is it Evan?" Despite a sick feeling in her stomach, she stood up.

Her mom nodded. "He's dead. He just died. Caroline called me. An ambulance is on the way." She raced into the room and hugged her daughter.

Jessie pulled away, "Let me go. I've got to see him."

"Don't. Don't bother them now. You don't know how hard it is for them."

But Jessie struggled, "No, mom, let me go. He'd want me to." She ran out of the house and jumped the fence with one hand, just like Evan had taught her. The Estwich's door stood open. With a quick rap, she crossed the threshold and ran up the stairs. Evan's bedroom door was wide open.

Holding his hand, his mom sat next to his bed and sobbed. Heavy grief filled the room like a fog. Jessie hesitated at first and then crossed to her. With a pencil between his thumb and finger, his hand rested on a pad of paper propped up on his lap.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Estwich," she whispered as she wrapped her arm across the mother's shoulders. Jessie felt the awful blackness of her loss, the nadir of pain as Evan's mom shook with each halting breath. Nausea passed between them and gripped her stomach and Jessie laid her head against Mrs. Estwich's hair. A great sadness oozed through them as they bonded in his death.

Before falling into a hole of complete emptiness, Jessie gazed at his pad and saw the tip of a wing dip towards the sun. With no view of the earth or clouds or stars or sky. Somehow, Evan had found a way to draw the most perfect light. And now they both followed that path, from darkness to light to beauty to magnificence. Sheer walls of alabaster resounded with whiteness. If one could celebrate the light with sound, there were trumpets, harps, cymbals, bass drums and bells, a coordinated cacophony of utter music that permeate the light. Jessie wanted to be there. Evan was there. His mom was there. They were all happy. They shared a vastness that defied imagination. And then, ever so slowly, Jessie and his mom came back. Back, back, until they were holding each other again in his room.

"Did you feel that?" Mrs. Estwich asked.

"Yes."

"Evan's free. He's alive. We'll see him again."

"Yes."

#

Standing with her parents at the gravesite, Jessie glanced through the crowd that stood nearby. Mrs. Estwich, although crying, smiled at her and Jessie nodded.

All of Evan's classmates were there. With the slightest grin, she noted that even Buck had come. The priest had blessed the casket one final time and the funeral director lowered it with a winch.

"Look, there!" Buck pointed up into the sky. A white bird swooped overhead and vanished.

Out of nowhere, a feather floated down. Ever so slowly like the softest of all the snowflakes. Jessie stuck out her hand and closed her fingers around it. She knew for sure that her friend was free.

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