

# The Birds: Crowfighting Song

written by Guest Contributor | July 24, 2018



Lass, I see that clever crow followed you in to the aquarium from the outdoor café. That ape with feathers is hiding itself, or thinks it is, in the nook below the beam running across the open walkway above the aquarium.

*-“Ahhh. Eeee Ya! Ahhh. Eeee Ya!”*

Your voice smiles, lass, silky smooth as your friend Billie Holiday. You laugh with devil crows, smile at death herself, and sing through it all. Here we are waiting for your brothers under a rook in a nook, admiring a jellyfish at the California Academy of Sciences. You keep singing, and I’ll stand by you.

There’s your older brother Patrick, clutching his camera, World Champions Cubs cap sitting high atop a wild mountain of blonde hair, twitchy hands twirling a totally superfluous, but stylish white scarf. He pitched a no-hitter against the eventual state champs in his final start in high school. Confidence in his fastball and a flair for the dramatic. Now he makes independent movies and somehow pays the bills. He and his fiance Alyssa will probably get married on set.

And here’s your twin Joe, with his backpack, five o’clock shadow, and leading man looks. He’s a longboard legend, loves climbing mountains, and already spent a year in New York studying acting. Now he’s nailing small parts, auditioning for bigger ones, and making a little money at the surf shop back home in Carolina.

Your brothers are visual storytellers, but words punctuate their entrance, lots of ‘em. Tempo, vivace. Bet you a nickel we don’t get a word in edgewise in this scene.

Patrick- “Pops! Gwenni! Mom’s chilling with Alyssa. She told me to tell you she’s finished in the rainforest section and might meet you at the waterfall in Golden Gate Park or go for a swim at the hotel pool before dinner, she and Gwen really being mermaids and all. Or she and Alyssa might just meet us at Francisco’s at 8. Joe! Look at these colors! Gwenni’s teal tie-dye sundress,

wisps of coke-red hair curling around her ears, and that jellyfish! Let's frame that shot before we roll. Working vacation 2016, Mermaid Princess sitting regal-like in her rolling throne, bathing in the purple and orange hues of her mystical jellyfish minion."

Joe- "Jellyfish! If nothing else, they're persistent. They've been stinging wisdom into surfers since before the dinosaurs. Hey Pat! Don't mess with that curl over her eye. She's perfect. You're going to miss the shot."

Patrick- "*I am not throwin' away my-shot!*"

Joe- "Pops! Lose the Boston Marathon Unicorn windbreaker. Keep the Lennon frames and colonial ponytail and you're *Alex-ander Hamilton!*"

Gwen- "*Ahhh Ohhh Ahhh Ohhh!*"

Joe- "I hear ya, your highness. Pops, Gwenni's staring through you like a pissed off mermaid goddess. She wants a story. Tell her a story about that jellyfish."

Patrick- "Later aloha, Pops! Need the beat, Joe- '*I am not throwin' away my-shot! Not throwin' away my shot!*'"

And off they go, blending their tenors and turning the rooftop of this place into a guerrilla film location for another music video. They didn't even see the crowd. Most never do. I didn't, until that night.

- "*Eh Ohhh oooo! Eh Ohhh aaAH!*"

OK! I owe you a nickel because you got a word in, you scat-sang a Mozart aria from "Die Zauberflaute" at the end of that scene there and I missed it?

- "*Ohhh Aiee oooo.*"

Don't go all Amy Winehouse, lass. You win. And I know the teal tie-dye sundress rocks, you've got better hair than Pat, and you really do want a story.

A beginning, middle, and end. A story. Sounds easy enough. But where should the story start? Some people say, "Looking back, this is where it all began." I wish I had 20-20 hindsight. I'm as blind looking backwards as forward.

-Arms crossed, legs crossed, brow furrowing under a curl of cherry coke red. And eye staring at that clever crowd.

You remember, do you?

-Of course I remember, say your sparkly warm sea-blue eyes. Your sad smile says it's me that needs to remember. I need to remember the time before the in-between, the days you rolled a ball across the floor with Joe, stacked your alphabet blocks, and hugged your unicorn. I need to remember the nights you started to sing along with me at bedtime and the first little words rolled sweetly off your tongue. I need to remember how in the end the words

are not the song and love swims in tears.

Let's roll your throne to the bench so I can sit down. It's your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. We'll save the jellyfish story for another time and I'll tell the crow story, the night I first saw you fight Celtic Queen Morrigan, goddess of death. How she, her sisters and her crows, jealous of your beauty and grace, came to steal you to their faery lands.

-*"Eeee. Eh. Ahhh! Ohhh!."*

Of course we'll eat after the story! You sang that phrase with the strength and hunger of Lady Gaga. We're meeting your mom, brothers, and Alyssa at The Franciscan on the Wharf at 8. And yes, mom and I will let you sip a Mermaid Cocktail. You're 21, not a kid anymore. Let me get that curl, and tell the story.

The year after you were born we moved from Philly to Wilson, NC. We'd heard horror stories of the humidity in the Carolinas, but Philly has about the same heavy summer air. What Philly doesn't have is heat and humidity that starts in May and ends just before Thanksgiving. What Wilson didn't have was a beach. For Philly transplants like us, that was the worst of Wilson. Not the drawl, the lack of decent pastry or pasta, the palpable presence of the KKK. There was no Jersey Shore near Wilson and hence no waves but those of heat rising from the tobacco fields. You can't surf those.

By July your mom had had enough heat and booked a motel in Wilmington. I signed up for a swim race off Wrightsville Beach. I splash and thrash, but your mom's a better swimmer. Motherhood and father time had dampened her enthusiasm, but she used to swim across the Hudson River when she was a kid at summer camp. You and your brothers get your movie star looks and ease in the water from her.

We figured leaving Wilson at lunch would give us plenty of time to check out the beach before dinner. We didn't figure on sharing the road with everyone else in Eastern NC. It's a beautiful thing when masses of people have the nearly the same idea at the same time.

The ride started well. We packed into the Country Squire station wagon and turned on the radio. You settled into your pink carseat in your Little Mermaid onesie, holding onto your Unicorn stuffed toy. You even started singing along with Donna Lewis's summer jingle, *"I love you always forever, near and far, closer together."*

You bopped in rhythm and chirped, *"Lub you. Lub you. Lub you."*

Pretty quickly we regretted not getting the air conditioner fixed. Well, we regretted not having the money to get the air conditioner fixed. We got the oil changed but basically it was fix the air conditioner and stay home, or pay for the motel and just deal with it. "Just dealing with it" won. It usually does.

We got trapped behind a farm tractor near Goldsboro, and you started crying. At first we thought the traffic and the heat were too much for you. But your tone wasn't quite right, your articulation was eroding by the mile.

Patrick tried to soothe you by reading you his Star Wars book. When that didn't work he pulled his little Cubs cap over his eyes and drifted into his own 5-year old imaginary world. It's an in-between world he frequently visits as a film maker/artist.

Joe reached out, touched your cheek, tried to capture that twin skin to skin magic, and said, "Iz OK Gee, Iz OK." Unable to comfort you, Joe clutched his Pooh Bear and Power Ranger and eventually fell asleep.

Then came the stench.

"We have to stop," mom said. "We've got to change her up again."

"I saw a sign for a McDonald's a few miles ahead," I said. "As long as the tractor ahead of us doesn't break down, we should be there in a couple hours."

"It's your turn to change her," your mom said.

"Linda," I said a little crispily. "It always seems to be my turn."

Three fat crows cawed on the storm gutter above the dumpster at the rear entrance of the McDonald's on Route 117. I changed a diaper that looked like a blend of burrito, re-fried beans, and quacamole dip and smelled worse than it looked. The new diaper added a slightly more palatable aroma. But not much.

By the time we came out of the bathroom, your mom had ordered everyone a Happy Meal. Despite the Happy Meal, your crescendo continued.

"Use your words!" Patrick implored. "Why won't you use your words? Joe uses his words."

We sweated like Carolina hogs in the heavy traffic and heavier air. I turned on the radio. Your volume ebbed and flowed with the music. You only smiled when Donna Lewis sang that ditty. Your blue eyes didn't close until we arrived at the Corning Plant where Route 40 becomes Wilmington's College Road. The dark was already descending.

We clanked into the parking lot of the Greentree Motel on Market Street. You dozed in your pink carseat cuddling your unicorn while mom and I moved the expedition's supplies of diapers, snacks, bathing suits, fold-up crib, twin stroller, ointments, extra juice boxes, See and Say, Dr. Seuss books, Power Ranger action figures, Pooh Bear, and sunscreen from the sweatbox Country Squire into our cramped quarters.

"I saw a Mexican place we can walk to," mom said when we finished unpacking. "I'm not getting back in that car."

"I hate Mexican," I said as I placed you in the twin stroller next to your brother.

You were usually neater, sweeter, and more focused than Joe when it came to food. Maybe you didn't Mexican, but you made a mess. Almost like your hands were forgetting how to find your face.

Thunder peeled in the distance as we strolled back to the Greentree Motel. We changed diapers, slipped on Joe's Pooh Bear jammies, your Little Mermaid jammies, placed your unicorn and your Ariel doll in the crib next to Joe's Pooh and Power Rangers. Patrick settled into to one bed, tiny Cubs cap still glued to his head. I slid in next to your mom and closed my eyes.

The skies opened up. You started howling again. The storm passed quickly, but your maelstrom continued unabated.

The cops arrived around midnight.

"Is everything ok?" asked the tall sad-eyed cop peering over my shoulder into the room. His partner stood behind and to the side with his hand on his hip.

"What do you think?" snapped your mom. "She won't settle down!"

"Have y'all been drinking?" he asked.

"Officer," I said. "We tried feeding her, reading to her, giving her another bottle, changing her diaper, turning the air up, turning the air down, turning the TV on, turning it off."

"This is like the 3<sup>rd</sup> complaint," the cop said. "It's pretty bad when prostitutes say you're too loud."

"Prostitutes?" your mom asked, a little startled.

"Maybe I'll walk her around," I offered.

"Been some bad trouble around here, lately," the cop cautioned. He scanned a "Non-Smoking" room that smelled like years of stale tobacco, puke, cable porn, and your guacamole diapers. He stood there, looking blankly at you. He said, "Maybe she's sick. I could call an ambulance."

"No," mom assured him. "She'll be fine."

Joe and Patrick stared wide-eyed at the cop. Joe shook his head from side to side, "Din't do it. Din't do it."

The cop smiled. "Please try to keep her quiet," he shrugged, turned, and left.

The skies opened up again. Joe joined you in a duet. He held the tenor line and you sang your wild-eyed soprano. Patrick crashed Power Rangers in battle, found a copybook, and immersed himself in drawing epic stories. Joe quieted, escaped the twin crib, and curled in with mom. Mom said, "We can't even see

what we're fighting. I'm so tired."

Mom's always fighting for you, so I buckled you and your unicorn in the twin stroller, and headed out into the storm-cleaned cool air and puddled parking lot.

I sang, "*Summertime, and the livin' is easy.*" I sang more like a gravelly, desperate Janis Joplin than your buddy, silky sad Billie Holliday, but it soothed you for a block.

Singing "*Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra.*" the Irish lullaby bought another block of relative peace. But then the battle began in earnest. Thunder boomed like distant artillery. You let out a banshee wail and your back arched as if your heart was being wrenched from your chest.

I stood under streetlights and cried. Mom and I suspected you were slipping away for months. We had taken you to the local doctor he set appointments with specialists up and down the coast. No one could see what was attacking you, stealing your sleep, your hands, your words; stealing you from us.

I lifted you out of the stroller, held you tight, and swayed side to side. Your eyes settled on mine. Your bottom lip pushed out, trembled, then relaxed. Your breath settled. Your hands cupped my chin and wiped a tear from my cheek. You smiled. And then, slowly and distinctly, eyes sparkling with each syllable, you said, "Mom-ma, Dad-da, Paa-Paa, Bo-Bo. Lub u. Lub u."

"Luv you, too, lass," I said.

I looked up to the few twinkling stars through the fast moving clouds. Your head fell softly to my chest. I cradled you and looked gratefully up to a sliver of colorless crescent moon. I sang, "*I love you always forever, near and far, always together.*"

A lone crow's sardonic caw broke the peace.

Your body stiffened. Your breathing stopped. Your back arched as if the base of your spine had been struck by lightning and was slowly burning upward. Your eyes rolled back and you reached a high note that raised the hairs on my neck. You fought to bring your eyes to mine. You looked at me with such bewildered agony I thought you were dying.

Above us circled shrieking squadrons of winged fairy creatures. The true adversary had arrived, the Celtic goddess Queen Morrigan, her two sisters Babd, and Nemain, and a murder of war crows. With fire red hair flowing over ashen skin and jet black breastplate covering a cold heart, Morrigan, Queen of Death approached.

The winds shifted. Cold rain pelted down, stinging the flesh of our faces. My words and your song rose up against the shrill shrieking of the crows. I used every word I could muster to negotiate a settlement with screeching demons. I begged Morrigan to take me. Impassive steel eyes wide open, she devoured words and dreams with the cool efficiency of a tiger shark tearing through a bloom of jellyfish.

Morrigan's legions tore at you, striving to drag you to the in-between of their faery realm. You fought with the ferocity of Celtic warrior Culahain's daughters. And you kept singing.

Then the rain and crows withdrew as quickly and unpredictably as they arrived. Perhaps Morrigan heard the strength in your song and found a drop of mercy beneath her breastplate. Whatever her reasons, it was clear my words were impotent syllables scribbled on an impartial breeze.

After that skirmish I held you close, staggered back to the motel, tenderly placed your battle-weary body in the twin crib, and covered it with a light pink Little Mermaid blanket. I lay down next to your mother and Joe, stared at the spinning ceiling fan and contemplated my impotence, "What kind of father can't protect his daughter from the phantom queen of the in-between?"

As my eyes finally closed, the alarm rang. I scanned the room. Mom, Joe, and Patrick slept soundly. And you, luminescent in your crib, breathed easy and cooed like Nina Simone, alive and at peace.

I cried soft gratitude. Whatever Morrigan took that night, the precious present and your song remained.

In numerous battles over the last twenty years, Queen Morrigan, her sisters, and the crows would plunder every future they could from you, your mother, your brothers, and me. They would gather your unicorn, the alphabet blocks you were learning to stack, and your See-And-Say. They would take nearly every word you might speak, your grades, brilliant SAT scores, piano lessons, tennis rackets, broken cellphone screens, and role as Juliet in Shakespeare on the Green. They would rip away college applications, barista jobs, boyfriends, husbands, and each and every one of your children and grandchildren.

Morrigan would take from your older brother, Patrick, harmonies with you in his garage band, the inside scoop on that varsity quarterback you crushed on, sneaking you out to that bonfire keg party at the North end and sneaking you back in unseen, and writing that part in his feature especially for you.

Morrigan would take from your twin brother arguments about teachers, duets in musicals, and most of the magical, mystical, skin-to-skin, soul-to-soul soothing of merely having come into this world together.

Morrigan would give your mother labels for you such as Profoundly Retarded, Atypical Autism, Rett Syndrome. And Morrigan would lift the lion's share of laughter from your mother's heart. Laughter that might have come from teaching you how to paint and plant a garden, from planning trips to exotic lands, from swimming across the Hudson alongside you and maybe even helping you teach your own daughter, her granddaughter, to swim. Worse than that, Morrigan stole the smiles that would have arisen from merely swimming in the stories of her daughter's life.

-Eyes drooping shut, head tilting to the left, luminescent in your stroller. A peaceful half-smile rises from the land in-between wake and slumber as you

coo to that crow.

Let's roll, lass. Our jellyfish has drifted away for the moment, though that crow continues to shadow us. We'll exit this scene unencumbered by words. Maybe tomorrow we'll hunt waterfalls with mom, climb mountains with Joe, or map clouds from the Golden Gate Bridge with Patrick.

Let me get that pesky curl. No. Joe's right again. It's perfect. Let's sing your crowfighting song, *"I love you, always forever."*

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