

Edwin and the Nightingale

—Inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's *Nattergalen*

Hidden among the lush spice forests, Edwin sat comfortably in a large rattan chair. He was drinking coffee and admiring the rolling cinnamon groves from the veranda of his extremely large and fashionable palazzo.

Appearing to grow right out of a mountain, Edwin's modern luxury palace nestled between white hawthorn trees and wild nutmeg bushes. His home was exquisite, as many of his famous guests commented, on more than one occasion. But no matter how you described it, Edwin lived in a wonder of the world.

His gardens went on for miles and miles, displaying the precision and artistry of the best gardeners money could afford. The grounds were organized according to Edwin's design, though how far and wide it extended, not even the landscapers knew.

Edwin hung silver bells on his favorite plants. And when a spectator would pass by, the bells would sound, drawing attention to the flower, liana or exotic fruit tree. When the winds picked up, the garden was a chorus of chimes. Composed by nature, the bells sounded out in single tones, brisk harmonies, and even, when the wind was up, bracing symphonies.

If you walked far enough, you would come upon a secret forest where tall cypress trees almost touched the skies. Under its canopy, the evergreens concealed bottomless, blue water lakes. Besides one of these crystal lakes, in an ancient plum tree, nested a nightingale.

The common nightingale is a small brown bird with touches of red in its tail feathers. They are not particularly pretty birds; they are not the most colorful birds. They are known to sing delicately charming songs with long lamenting refrains. Many of Edwin's guests would visit the nightingale's forest to hear him sing. In spontaneous bursts, the nightingale would croon heartrending songs, bringing those listening to tears.

Sometimes the nightingale would fly around Edwin's gardens, whistling his wondrous sounds. His songs inspired poets to write verses, dancers to dream up new dances, and artists to

create new masterworks. Musicians would go into the forest and search for the nightingale, hoping to be inspired and maybe compose original pieces of music based on his songs.

Once, when Edwin was entertaining several friends over the weekend, and after an excellent dinner, they moved to the poolside portico for banana flummery and cake. All the guests looked out on his magnificent gardens populated with the most beautiful flowers, the most ornate plants, and of course, his collection of rare spice trees.

Edwin relaxed in his chair, enjoying the pungent, peppery scents of allspice wafting through the air while drinking a short cup of strong coffee, waiting for his dessert. A famous musician, who was visiting Edwin, played a new musical composition on a grand piano; the music was based upon the nightingale's song she had overheard that afternoon.

Surprising as it may sound, Edwin had never heard of the nightingale. He knew of many rare bird species that lived on his estates, but he never heard of this particular nightingale before or its celebrated singing.

"Incredible," the musician cried out. "To have so much at your command, and yet not know the most wonderful nightingale lives on your estate. It's too much to comprehend!"

It was too much to comprehend, Edwin thought. When he asked around, all of his guests knew about the nightingale. They assumed, of course, Edwin would know the bird; it was his home, his palazzo, and thus, it was his bird. Unfortunately, the nightingale never revealed himself or his music to Edwin.

"In the morning, will you take me to where the nightingale lives?" Edwin asked the musician. She readily agreed.

They set up an early morning expedition into the spice forest to find the nightingale. Edwin wanted to meet this famous bird and to hear for himself the melodious songs so many people already knew.

As they traveled for miles and miles across the lush forests, they listened to many different kinds of wildlife. Edwin held his breath and listened very carefully. He would ask at each crackle or hoot, "Was that it? Is that the nightingale?"

And each time the musician would say, no, "That was a goose."

Or she would say, "No, that was a rhinoceros."

Or, "No, that was a flamingo."

Or, "That was a giraffe."

Or, ‘No, Edwin, that was a frog, but if we are patient, I think we shall hear him soon.’

Hours later, in the afternoon, Edwin was getting discouraged when, out of a small clearing, the nightingale, sitting in his plum tree, began to sing his provincial songs.

The musician pointed to the small bird seated in its purple-leaved tree, and told Edwin, “Look, be silent and hear.”

They listened for a very long while, mesmerized by the bird's beautiful melodies. To Edwin, the birdsong sounded like happiness, like glass bells chiming. The bird's music danced around a merry theme, like warming sunlight enjoyed on a summer afternoon. Edwin was astounded. He had never heard such majesty come out of a bird before. With such spontaneous longing in its voice, it made Edwin's heart soar.

However, he was surprised by how unassuming and common the bird appeared. It was just a pale brown thrush, not the glorious phoenix he had dreamed up in his mind. He thought its plumage would be striking blues, like a peacock or dazzling red like a cardinal. Instead the nightingale was an everyday bird though it had an uncommon voice.

The nightingale sang and sang his sweet, blushful songs. Tears welled up in Edwin's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Then the nightingale sang another sweet song and Edwin's dim heart dissolved into forest mist. There he sat a weeping mess, wiping his eyes with his silken handkerchief as he listened with joy to the music that this dull-colored bird could sing.

Edwin was so enthralled. In gratitude, he removed his golden necklace and hung it around the nightingale's tiny, feathered neck.

“Thank you, but no. I could not possibly take such a beautiful object,” the nightingale said politely to Edwin. “I have been abundantly compensated by your presence here. I have seen tears in your eyes. Your wonderful reaction to my music will strengthen my spirit in future, lonelier days.”

“Then don't be lonely, come to my palazzo in the spice forest,” Edwin offered. “You have an open invitation to stay with me, at any time, for however long you wish.”

The nightingale began to sing again.

“I have wonderful assistants and world-class chefs and many staff. You would be most comfortable.”

The nightingale continued singing.

“And should you feel contented, maybe you could entertain my guests?”

The nightingale considered his offer for a long while, and once he was assured that he would not be Edwin's pet, but rather a free bird that could come and go as it pleased, the nightingale agreed.

A music palace was built for the nightingale to perform in. Edwin wanted to ensure the nightingale would be comfortable in his home, so he hired a famed professor of ornithology from Oxford to create a beautiful nest in a nearby nutmeg bush.

Sometimes, the nightingale would stay with Edwin for weeks at a time. He performed nightly for the many celebrated guests Edwin entertained. And when he was not performing for an audience, or resting, he would sing accompaniment with the musician as she wrote new compositions.

During these times with the musician, the nightingale learned a great many things about music. The nightingale was never trained as a musician, but rather as a poet. He tried to intone what he felt at that moment. He never understood the musician's desire to write down the tune they sang yesterday, because, as the nightingale understood it, a new day deserves a new song.

Edwin was so pleased with the nightingale; he asked the bird to perform several times a day. He would listen to his anthems with an open heart, and tears would run down his cheeks as he proclaimed his utmost joy.

When the nightingale missed his home, he would pick up and fly beyond the near meadows, over the still streams, past the rare spice trees, and through the majestic gardens then wind his way back to his plum tree. He would relax in the comfort in his own nest and simply be with his family.

On one of the nightingale's excursions home, Edwin received a large package labeled *The Nightingale*. It was sent to him from his friend, Dagmar.

Thinking it was yet another portrait of his now-famous nightingale; Edwin opened the box halfheartedly. By this time, Edwin had many paintings and sculptures completed by renowned artists. However, much to his delight, he found a stunning gift inside.

It was a replica of the nightingale, cast in gold and encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. But instead of a lifeless sculpture, this was a golden, windup animatronic. It was made of gears, motors, and gyros, and when the clockwork bird was wound up with a small cut-glass key, it could sing one of the nightingale's songs.

As it sang, the clockwork bird's head would look around the room. And at times it would waggle its glittering golden tail. Edwin owned many beautiful things and displayed them around his luxurious palazzo, but he was quite surprised to hold such a treasure in his hands. Around the artificial nightingale was wrapped a golden ribbon that read, *Merry Christmas, from your dear friend, Dagmar.*

Dagmar was always one to try and out-do others' gifts, and Edwin always looked on her with suspicion. However, this present was a treasure. Edwin wound up the bejeweled, clockwork nightingale and it played its one song over and over again.

"It sounds like my nightingale," cried Edwin.

Edwin fell in love with his new nightingale very quickly. When it wound down, he would wind it back up again. He took the clockwork bird with him around his palazzo, bringing it to meetings with clients and friends. He would carry his nightingale to meals, and even bring the golden bird with him when he exercised.

The clockwork bird would sing the same song to Edwin, and Edwin was delighted. It was not uncommon to see him cart the wind-up nightingale with him throughout the whole day; from the moment he woke, to the instant his head touched his pillow for sleep, Edwin was near his toy.

When the real nightingale returned to Edwin's palazzo, he was just in time to witness a performance at the music palace, held for a large group of Edwin's friends. The clockwork nightingale was about to take the stage with the musician.

Edwin was thrilled to show the nightingale his animatronic bird. "Aren't you impressed?" Edwin asked.

The nightingale was impressed and said, "What a lovely thing you have."

The musician began to play a black grand piano, and slowly the clockwork nightingale began to sing. The nightingale bowed to the clockwork nightingale and took a seat next to Edwin.

As the artificial bird crooned, the musician played a soft, sweeping background sonata. Their timing was perfect, and the breathtaken audience was visibly moved. When the pair finished their concert, everyone rose to their feet to applaud the brilliant music.

Edwin was filled with joy and looked meaningfully at his friend, the real nightingale, who was equally electrified by the music.

"So tell me, what did you think?" Edwin asked.

"I thought it was sublime," said the nightingale. "I cannot enjoy my songs in the same way one does when they are listening to me. I can only hear emotions that come to my mind as I sing. So this was a rare treat indeed. I thank you dearly, Edwin."

The musician called out from the stage to the real nightingale, "Would you join us for a duet?"

The audience thought this was a fantastic idea and began to applaud. Embarrassed, the nightingale joined the clockwork nightingale on top of the shining piano. They both bowed to the musician and then bowed towards the audience.

The musician again played her sweeping sonata. The clockwork nightingale sang its song again. As soon as the real nightingale found his place within the song, he joined in. The nightingale sang a beautiful solo that fit the song perfectly, taking the music into a new direction, with a new feeling.

This took everyone by surprise. The audience started to shift in their seats, some started to shuffle their feet uncomfortably. And others began to whisper to their neighbors. Some people talked outright, saying to anyone who might listen, they were not enjoying the real nightingale as much as they adored the golden bird.

The audience expected to hear the same song that they had just heard and were not sure they liked what they were listening to now. They anticipated re-experiencing the same feeling that they had just felt, but instead, this was different and astonishing. It was too new, too pretentious, the audience thought.

When the musician finished playing their song she applauded the clockwork nightingale, much to the approval of the audience. She shook the wing of the real nightingale and said politely, "Next time, we shall practice a bit more before I put you on the spot like this again."

The nightingale said thank you and looked out to the audience. They were all glaring at him as if he had done something very wrong. Even Edwin did not look pleased.

The nightingale bowed to the musician, he bowed to the golden, jewel-encrusted nightingale, and then he flew into the right hand of Edwin and bowed to him. Then his wings bit into the air, and he flew off over the nutmeg bushes and faded off into the night sky.

Edwin was saddened to see his friend leave so quickly and waved slowly as the bird trailed off into the forest. The audience began to murmur, *How dare the nightingale not bow to them.* They began to gossip and talk badly about the nightingale, glad to see it leave in a huff. Some

people started to say how plain and unbecoming the bird was, not nearly as elegant as the golden bird that was still here, seated politely on the piano.

The musician spoke to the audience, "Ladies and gentlemen, no one ever really knows what to expect from a real nightingale. But with our clockwork bird, everything goes to plan."

The audience whispered while Edwin nodded approvingly from his rattan chair.

The musician continued, "If we must have one nightingale, I think we can all agree, we are better off with our golden friend."

Edwin applauded this. He asked on behalf of the audience, "Would you play your song once again, if you please?"

In the days and weeks after the nightingale left Edwin's palazzo, the clockwork nightingale stayed by Edwin's side. It sat on a sultan's cushion near his desk. When Edwin would need to hear its song again, he would wind it up and let it play.

Some days Edwin would let the bejeweled nightingale play all day long. And it was not unusual to hear the golden bird sing its song one hundred and forty-four times in a row. Edwin was pleased by how many people enjoyed listening to his clockwork bird. It made him feel special, loved, even more distinctive than his wealth made him feel. Yet in his heart Edwin knew this love was a lesser feeling from that which he enjoyed in the company of his friend, the real nightingale.

One night, Edwin heard a strange clicking sound come from his clockwork nightingale. It sprung, sputtered, and clicked. It gave a loud *Clack* and then it stopped singing altogether.

The clockwork nightingale was broken. Edwin was in a forlorn panic; he never imagined it could break down. He called in an expert to assess the inoperative bird, but the expert was not encouraged by his findings. The expert concluded the nightingale's clockwork mechanism had worn down from overuse, wear and tear, and lack of regular maintenance.

There was nothing to be done to fix the bird, as there was no way to replace the internal parts needed without causing further damage. It was a one-of-a-kind object, which meant it could not easily be repaired. The expert warned Edwin that if he tried to repair it, there was no guarantee it would be able to play its song in the same way it once did.

They agreed that the expert would fix the golden nightingale just enough so Edwin could play its song once a year. Each Christmas, Edwin invited his friends to come and listen to the clockwork bird sing its song once, and only once. Then it was whisked away and placed on its

silken cushion, displayed in a glass case in Edwin's bedroom. There he could enjoy looking at the bird even though it could no longer sing.

For five years this ritual took place, and each year when the clockwork bird sang, rather than making Edwin happy it made him feel very, very sad.

His sadness would fill the room, making it heavy and wearisome on his guests. Over the years, fewer and fewer people accepted his Christmas invitation, and this year only the musician decided to come.

The musician always felt indebted to Edwin. She wrote a very popular song from the clockwork nightingale's melody. It was a bestselling album around the world; the whole planet was enchanted by the nightingale's song.

When the musician arrived at night to Edwin's palazzo, Edwin's assistant told the musician that the Christmas celebration would not be held. Edwin was very ill and near death. The musician was distraught to hear this and demanded to see Edwin.

There he lay, cold and pale on his magnificent bed. Moonlight shone on Edwin and his artificial bird. When the musician saw him laid out, she thought Edwin was dead.

But Edwin was not dead. He was sad to see the musician looking down at him with such hesitancy in her eyes. He tried to speak to her but he could hardly breathe. It was as if a great weight was sitting on his chest.

When Edwin looked properly, he saw that it was Death, sitting cross-legged on top of him, right on his chest, poking at his heart with a bony finger. Edwin saw in Death's limpid eyes the blackness that overshadowed him.

From his death cloak, Death drew out a magical flute. It played a cankerous melody borne in cacophony. Supernaturally, a set of ghostly, velvet curtains emerged from beyond. From behind the curtain materialized hundreds of mournful faces, people from Edwin's past. Some were horrifying and frightening, while others were gentle, caring, and compassionate. Death lounged on Edwin's chest and laughed.

These faces made Edwin recall his past deeds. He contemplated how well, or inadequately, he treated the people in his life. Many faces of the crowd simply stared through him, in a state of pure serenity. Others leaned into Edwin and told him phantasm stories that made cold sweat run down his forehead.

"Do you remember me?" one ghostly face asked Edwin. He did not.

"Sing, sing to me," Edwin cried to the broken nightingale. But the clockwork bird could not sing. It only looked at him with its starry, motionless, ruby eyes.

"Please sing, please, just a little music!" Edwin called out. But the musician stood silent, not knowing what she should do.

Through his great hollow eyes, Death looked into infinity, and it was quiet, deathly quiet.

Suddenly, a sweet burst of sound filled Edwin's bedroom. Sitting on the branches of an allspice tree, the little nightingale from Edwin's past began to sing.

In the nighttime, the brown bird appeared to be jet black. Edwin feared it was another ghost, asking him to revisit his troubling memories. Edwin always felt terrible remorse at how the nightingale left his home. He wanted the nightingale to feel admiration in the same way that he admired the nightingale, but it did not work out the way he hoped.

The musician spoke, "Please little bird, come and sing for poor Edwin. He has never needed your comfort more than at this moment."

As the nightingale sang, the phantasms around the ghost curtain grew pallid and started to fade. The colors of life began to come back into Edwin's face, and slowly he sat upright.

Death listened perilously to the beautiful song of the nightingale. And when the nightingale caught Death's hollow eyes, Death was entertained.

"Please, little nightingale, continue your delightful song," Death said.

The nightingale agreed, "Only if you promise to release Edwin. He is my friend, and this is not his time to go. You know this as well as I do, and we should like to spend a little more time with him over Christmas."

As an ornamental vision, Death stood up and unseated his pale, ghastly form from Edwin's chest and hovered to a silken cushion where he sat down in tranquility.

The nightingale took in a deep breath and sang a song of a lovely white garden, where white roses grow among nutmeg bushes. He sang of green grasses and lush trees filled with plums. He sang of friends long passed, whom we still miss to this day. And finally, he sang of the hopeful, silver days still in front of us, in which we can do anything, change everything and make good the mistakes we are obligated to mend.

The nightingale continued to sing and sing, charming Death with faded anthems to make it long for its home. In a cold gray mist, Death apparated into the hereafter of Neverwhere.

When it was apparent Death had gone away, Edwin was ecstatic in his appreciation. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Edwin cried out while the musician stood in the far corner, applauding the most fantastic piece of music she ever heard.

“Little nightingale, you came back to me in my hour of need,” Edwin said. “I mistreated you, and yet you sent Death away, gleefully! How can I ever repay you for such a wonderful gift?”

“Think nothing of it, my dear friend,” the nightingale said. “Now lie back and rest yourself while I sing you back to health.”

The nightingale sang until Edwin fell into a sound, inspirational sleep. In the morning, the nightingale was still singing, and Edwin woke up a new man.

“Please, my friend, would you stay with me always,” asked Edwin. “Sing to me only when you wish, come and go as you like. I will even break the clockwork bird into a thousand pieces if it pleases you. Just please stay.”

“Oh, no, don’t destroy it. Your clockwork bird is a wonder; keep it near you as a memory of today. I will stay in my forest and come and visit you often. I will come to your window and sing to you. I will sing songs of life’s riches, songs of the poor who are struggling, and I will sing songs of those who need help, more than you just received. I will sing to you of farmers and fishermen and factory workers. I will sing of bankers and lawyers, and I will sing to you of the sick and the brave doctors who attend to them. I will make sure that you are never without song again. I promise you this. I love your heart more than I do your wealth, which may be a silly thing to say. But I am a bird and birds do not care for things they cannot eat or what they cannot sing about.”

“But...” Edwin stuttered.

“Never fear, I will come and sing to you if you promise me one little thing.”

“All that I have is yours,” Edwin cried, and he stood up from his bed and bowed a deep bow to the nightingale.

The nightingale bowed back to him and said, “Tell no one about my visits,” and flew away.