

## The Fallen Ibis

Oh how the mighty have fallen.

I am well aware that I am quoting an acclaimed religious text. Believe me, I know. I know more than you think for I see what you don't. I see the rhythmic demise of humanity, the extent of which you are oblivious to. I see the torrent of urbanisation, like cattle being herded to their death; the humans leave their land and seek out failure in the city. My kind has seen it all. I have heard the stories.

You filled in our swamps and planted buildings; you dug up our grass and sowed concrete. We were forced to migrate. We were forced to take flight.

We headed north, following the faint coastline before we glimpsed a ribbon of river that weaved in and out of rolling foothills. We settled into a swampy estuary that promised real food like grubs and bugs, not like the deep-fried heart attacks that we were forced to scavenge for in the city. This was a place we could call home. At the time it was far enough out of the city to avoid the onslaught of human machinery but close enough for a *tip* call if necessary.

That was four years ago now.

You would have thought that the nails of urbanisation and deforestation would spare the small country towns wouldn't you? It doesn't. I can promise you that.

We are once again, under threat. I am poignant in the expression of 'we'. Not in regard to my kind, but I extend the hand to you as well my friend, for we are both in great danger if you do not change your direction. As your kind swarms to the city and feeds the predator, mine is forced to relocate as the concrete jungle tightens its grasp and seeps beyond its constraints like molten lava that shakes the hand of condemned pastures.

You see, my brothers and I were once held in high regard, renowned for our fertile loins and praised in Egyptian temples by moonlight. Now we are considered scum; not worthy of flowing creeks or untainted breath. We fell from our pedestal and now you are to follow. You, unlike us, have a say in the matter. You, unlike us are bringing about your own demise.

I am a great example of how age does not thwart ego nor does supposed wisdom. But if you give me a minute of your time, I promise to tell you a tale of truth. The truth of how I saw things and how the times have changed.

It was not long ago that I thought I knew it all. That I thought humans were the plague of the earth, chopping and lopping to fuel their designer thoughts. I was old and I was bitter perched high upon a branch so I could look down upon the wrath of humans being. We had unknowingly settled into a wetland that neighboured a popular picnic area that local families inhabited on weekends.

I was respected within my community for being a somewhat outspoken activist for the campaign against human dominance (CAHD). Our acts were small, swooping and pooping, but I liked to think they made a difference. They gave us hope if nothing else. Made us feel in control to a degree, that if we continued our onslaught of excrement maybe it would stop the bulldozers. The members of the council shire were rightfully perplexed.

“Swooping Ibis? That’s ridiculous. Ibis don’t swoop, they may steal your scraps but they won’t attack your children...” They would say.

When the barrage of complaints didn’t cease, signs were erected in our honour. They read ‘Beware of swooping Ibis during mating season.’ We must be one hell of a horny species because we swooped all year round until the people got the message that they were not welcome on our land.

The time between human sightings grew longer and longer until you were nought but a distant memory, a shadow of a thought. We were dragged with quiet submission into a dark corner of fallacious security. Our self-imposed prestige climbed steadily. But like all hills there is a peak and then a slow, steady decline. We were sitting on the peak, soaking up the scenery, blissfully unaware of our impending slide. But sure enough it came.

I sat upon the highest branch – a luxury that came with status and supposed wisdom. The sun, midway through its daily pilgrimage warmed my back. I stretched my talons and curled them around the branch before letting my wings settle comfortably onto my shoulders. I stretched my neck and turned to give my back a scratch with my curvaceous beak. Looking back over my shoulder, a mass of arrogant steel, wrangled into form caught my eye. It was lumbering towards our land. The land that we had grown so accustomed to claiming as our own. The previous day, men in fluorescent vests had swarmed the area and sloped bright pink paint on almost all of the trees that made up our abode. Having grown accustomed to our privacy, I was more than a little shaken to be in such close proximity to the species that not so long ago had driven us from our land. I decided to ‘pull an emu’ as we say and metaphorically burry my head in the sand rather than alert the whole flock for what I hoped was merely some human absurdity.

It wasn’t merely human absurdity.

As I alluded to earlier, the onslaught of human destruction rolled in the next day. Fluorescent vests, bulldozers, chainsaws; I knew this wasn’t going to end well.

We decided to launch an attack. I’m not saying I am proud of the swooping and pooping that ensued but we were not prepared to give up without a fight.

The first assault lasted just under an hour. We took some time to rest, eat and restock our intestinal bullets before we took flight again.

We did not make the impact that we had hoped. The blanket of fabricated security was tucked too tightly. Other than a few stained trucks and workers

who were less inclined to make eye contact with the sky, our plan had failed. It was time to admit defeat and start evacuating the hens and chicks.

It was a hard time.

Wailing and screeching filled the air as mothers were forced to abandon their eggs or hatchlings that hadn't yet learned to fly. The grief was immeasurable.

They say a captain never leaves his ship. I was old, my chicks had all flown the nest and my mate didn't make the last migration. I wasn't going anywhere. There were a few brave ones who offered to stay and fight but I refused. Being an elder I had sufficient control over their decisions. I could see the relief dance behind their eyes as I waved them off in a flourish of wings.

There I stood, a lone warrior facing a seemingly never-ending barrage of human 'developers'. I found out later that they were clearing room for an overpass or a dam or something equally as sinister. The grasps of the advancing city were closer than I had realised in my egoic splendour.

I launched lone attacks in between entertaining the chicks who were lovely and ignorant to the rampant war a few trees away. They were not stupid though and eventually realised that the others were not coming back.

The humans had already started to chop - trees were torn down by the dozens. I could hear their cries and shrieks as they fell to their death and took many along with it.

The chicks were frightened. I was hurting. It was over.

I was sitting with the chicks trying to comfort their squawks of anxiety when they chopped down the tree that we were sitting in. We fell. I didn't have time to find my centre to fly before we hit the earth. I don't think I would have anyway; I was going down with these chicks, I was going down with the ship.

The chicks were thrown everywhere. Most of them died on impact. I could see a few little chests pounding and lungs gasping but no other movement. Slowly, one by one their chests stopped rising. I resigned to the fact that I would soon follow.

I was lying on my side, the world had tipped over also. I tried to stand up but found that movement brought excruciating pain shooting through my wings and feet. I was drifting in an out of life with every breath. I had a foot in the door of death as my eyelids fluttered closed. After the years of a fruitless search for peace and quiet, I had finally found it.

I lay there, waiting for the pain to cease. I was acutely aware of my stomach; it was pining and whining for some sustenance. I opened my eyes as the colours of dawn painted the horizon. I could faintly make out fallen trees all around me. The sound of silence pumped incredulously against my ears. Silence was not a sound that one should hear at the approach of dawn in the

bush, on the banks of a river. I should have been hearing the sounds of my neighbours waking and preparing to greet the morning sun. Beneath the silence I could hear the grief and sorrow of a decrepit community pounding through my veins.

If only I could...stand...up, I thought. The effort invited a cloud of dizziness to settle over my eyes and swarm my peripheries. I used my beak, to forage in the immediate area for something...anything that I could eat. It was taking all of my effort to lift my chest with every breath. I thought I had resigned to death but apparently there was some stubborn force within me that wasn't ready to give in just yet. I can't say that I was surprised.

I don't know how long I was there before they came; I was at a point where the illusion of time had ceased to control me. They crept in on soft paws. These were the humans who had taken it all. I wanted with everything to launch an attack on this filth. I gingerly tried to stand up once more but failed dismally, hitting the soft earth with an insignificant thud. They came across the chicks first; I was expecting to watch them crushed under their weight as they prepared for some more destruction. Instead he crouched with tenderness on his tips as he scooped a chick into his arms. He turned to the mob of people behind him and muttered something I couldn't hear. They began to pick up the chicks with a loving tenderness that I had only ever witnessed in mother birds. Then they came for me. The man that I had seen first, bent down and put two delicate fingers on my chest. It felt like a tree branch. It took all of my strength to raise my chest and continue to breathe.

"We have a live one here," he said over his shoulder. Immediately there were four or five human faces staring down at me as they worked out the best way for me to be moved. I was so tired. My eyelids fluttered closed for a second and was met by a communal chant of "come on little guy, stay with us". I was scooped up in a flourish of gentle pain and cradled against the rib cage of whom I imagined to be the alpha or the elder or whoever led a pack of humans. I, an old war veteran was being treated like a sacred child, being crooned to and held with the promises of food and water tickling my ears.

His hair was long and wild which matched the whiskers that brushed my head. The mob began to walk with purpose towards the edge of the clearing. It was a bumpy ride over fallen trees, and branches that caught at their shirts. Their clothes were dirty and soiled, some were carrying signs others were holding chains and ropes.

We reached the edge of the plantation.

The sun was just starting to rise.

There were trucks and cars and men in coloured vests standing uneasy and unsure a few hundred metres from the trees. They faced a jungle of browns and greens that were my wild looking friends who stood with their backs to the trees holding signs and shouting. Some were pounding the earth with their pacing; others were chaining themselves to the few trees that were left.

I was bundled into a padded box and placed alongside other patients in the back of a car. I was given water and a small amount of food. I ate too quickly; the grubs scraped at my sandpaper throat but eventually hit my stomach with a hollow thud. I could see through a tiny crack in the box and out through the car window. I could vaguely make out the stark contrast between my jungle saviours, so eager to be a part of nature and those in foreign colours set against a background of wrangled machinery.

We drove away. The humming of the engine vibrated softly against my back as every turn of the car awoke me to my injuries. I was hurting, yes, but I was no longer scared.

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My injuries, four crushed ribs, a broken leg and a dislocated wing, were treated by a lovely lady name Patrice, she had eyes of mottled gold and I'm sure a heart to match. The man that saved me visited a couple of times before I was released. I haven't seen him since. I was released back into the wild after four months of rehabilitation. I live alone having lost my flock to the sky during battle. I now spend my days perched high atop a branch watching the family's picnic amongst the trees. Every year there are less and less as more families are forced to submit to the city for work and food.

I have found that we are not so different you and I. We are both in danger; we are both loosing our land and being forced to relocate. My species fell at the hands of your kind and I am sure you are going to bring about the same fate for yourselves. The times are changing; you are at your peak and like us are completely unaware of your impending slide. However there is one major difference between our kinds...you have the power for change.