

# **The Calling**

**by**

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## THE CALLING

She died suddenly, violently—her sweet voice, her soul’s melody, stolen from me in the night. Although my mother’s assailant was known to all, he was never caught—forever in the wind and free to kill again. As protection, I locked myself into a virtual prison created by fear. I didn’t travel. I skipped family gatherings—no more nighttime concerts, no more dinner parties with my friends, and, worst of all, no more singing.

Today, at breakfast, a tiny kernel of corn stuck in my throat. I couldn’t breathe. Bent over, wheezing and hacking, I finally cleared my airway. Besides freeing that gritty morsel, I coughed up something bigger, a grain of common sense. I laughed, declaring to myself, “I’m such a birdbrain.”

Worries of what might happen were eating away at me like a cancer. My mother died suddenly, but I was dying slowly—a death of my own making. Drained of joy, missing opportunities, losing friends, a fear of dying had developed into a fear of living. I needed to fix that.

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How to begin? I was ready to sing, but who would listen? Fluffing my feathers for warmth, I stared at the icy glaze blanketing a field of broken cornstalks. At the first snowfall, my father and sisters flew south to the milder climate of the Sierra Madre mountains of northern Mexico. That left me alone except for a few winter-weather friends.

With any luck, Mariel and Rudy were huddled in the brushy thickets surrounding the frosty cornfield. I scanned the treetops searching for Rudy’s bright red coat. After several unanswered tweets, I heard Mariel’s chirpy reply.

“What’s up, Lucie?”

I quickly returned the chirp. “Can we chat? I’m sorry I’ve been so withdrawn. Are we still friends?”

Her immediate answer sounded cheery. “Of course we are. You’re my friend, always. Meet me at the watering hole. I have lots to tell you.”

Nodding my head to no one but myself, I agreed. “Great. I’m on my way.”

Except during Texas gully-washer rainstorms, the watering hole remained a small puddle replenished by a trickle from an underground spring. The surrounding mix of muhly grass, dull-green junipers, and spiny desert agaritas stripped of their berries offered shade and protection for those who came to drink.

Moments later, I settled at the water’s edge. With each swallow, my scruffy reflection waved outward, slowly disappearing into the shallows, a watery image of myself. After several refreshing gulps, I hopped beneath the slender fronds of nearby muhly grass. It was a private, windless spot for us to talk.

Mariel arrived quickly, but to my surprise, she was alone. “Where’s Rudy? You two are always together.”

Mariel leapt close to me, her approach as bouncy as her speech. “Oh, he’s keeping watch from the juniper. He’ll give us a whistle if he spies danger.”

As I began an explanation for my absence, Mariel interrupted. She had neighborhood news to share. I sighed as she began. “You’ll never guess. Chickee’s cousin flew in from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It’s funny. He spends more time hoarding juniper seeds than visiting with Chickee. Rudy and I watched him hide hundreds of seeds in one of the knotholes on that old

cottonwood on the west side of the arroyo. And then, while he was busy searching for more seeds, the squirrels rushed in to pilfer his stash.”

I chuckled and started to tweet, but Mariel had more to share. “Then late yesterday, we watched a large rattlesnake fall from the clutches of a large red hawk. Splat! The snake hit the rockpile in the center of the field. By morning, its bloodied carcass had been ripped apart, probably by the old possum that burrows under the rocks.”

“On seeing that assassin, Rudy whistled out a warning. This was the first time we’ve seen that copper-tailed demon. I think that it has claimed our neighborhood as its hunting ground.”

At this revelation, my whole body quivered. Mariel stopped talking and stared at me. She must have realized that the same kind of predator had taken my mother. Again, I was face-to-face with the ordeal and pain of her loss. I breathed slowly, then muttered to myself, “Let it go.”

Mariel draped her soft-brown wing over my shoulder. I leaned toward her and whispered, “I’m okay.”

Although I didn’t feel thankful for Mariel’s update, I spoke the words. “Thanks for sharing. I’ve been away for too long. When my mother disappeared, it felt like I was dead too. One feather, that’s all I had of her—a keepsake of my anger and fear. Finally, I understood that I couldn’t change what had happened, but the pain of yesterday shouldn’t control me today. I needed to find a place for her in my heart and let go of the grief.”

A still moment passed between us before I withdrew and spread my wings. “Ta da, here I am. I want to sing again.”

Mariel bounced toward me. “Great, I’m glad you’re here. We have work to do.”

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She began hopping in circles, scattering desert dust as she spun. Laughing, I joined her dance.

“Mariel, exactly what work are you talking about?”

She stopped abruptly and turned to me, beak-to-beak. “You want to sing; you need to sing. Your bright staccato cuts through the daylight chatter like the blade of the farmer’s plow and pierces the night like a bolt of lightning. Your powerful voice is your gift—so use it, develop it, and you will sing again.”

My eyelid closed as tears cleared the dust. “Really, a farmer’s plow? But you’re right, Mariel. I have squandered the best part of me. Help me fix that.”

She hopped close again, beak-to-beak—hers a vivid orange, demanding my attention. “We’re going on tour.”

I couldn’t believe her. “What are you talking about? I am not prepared to sing to myself, much less to a flock of unappreciative old crows.” I turned my back on her.

“Stop that. Look at me. I’m not asking you to perform. I’m asking you to listen.”

I spun around. “Listen to what? I don’t understand.”

“We need help from Chickee’s cousin, Coronel. When he’s not hoarding seeds, he talks of a city beyond the mountains, a city with incredible twilight tweets, trills, and warbles. We’re going to ask him to guide us there. You must leave your field and forest songs and search out these amazing new sounds. Gather them as Coronel gathers the juniper seeds. Practice them; perform them. It is your destiny.”

This was too much for me. Angrily, I asked, “What do you know about my destiny?”

“Remember, your mother and I were best friends. She often tweeted about your special voice, with a range crisper, broader, and faster than most mockingbirds. In her view, you were wasted

on this farmland. When she was stolen from us, I promised myself that I would help you find your voice. It isn't here. It's out there, beyond the mountains. Let's talk to Coronel."

I watched Mariel flit off to the juniper grove to find Chickee's cousin. I guessed he was either eating seeds or stuffing them into a knothole. After building a flimsy nest from a few strands of dry grass, I fluffed my feathers, closed my eyes, and settled on my cold feet to wait for their return.

Mariel's cheer-cheer-cheer call startled me awake and announced their arrival. She and Coronel joined me in my crude nest within the frozen safety of the muhly grass. The fading winter sun did little to warm us as a cold wind whirled across the landscape. Mariel fluffed her feathers and then turned to our guest.

"Coronel, thank you for agreeing to lead us westward to the mountains beyond the high desert. As I told you, Lucie and I are anxious to listen to the mysterious songs of your homeland."

Coronel dropped several juniper seeds on the ground before advising us, "We have a long and treacherous journey ahead. Leaving now would risk a snowstorm that would weigh us down and hide the food necessary to fuel our bodies. We must wait for the mild Spring winds. Until then, strengthen your wings and your resolve. You must commit to the journey. Once we begin our flight to the mountains, I will not turn back."

Without speaking, Mariel turned to me and waited. Questions churned in my head. Was my hesitation common sense or lingering fear? Was I strong enough, brave enough to dare? Would this be one more missed opportunity? My bird brain didn't have answers, but my heart did. I tweeted my decision. "Let's do it."

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I devoted weeks flying back and forth over the barren cornfield, strengthening my flight muscles, practicing my trills, and occasionally stealing juniper seeds from Coronel's stash. The days were getting longer, and my friends and I were getting noisier. Also, I noticed a change in the air; it was lighter, warmer. I hurried to find Coronel. In between snacking, he pointed to the reddish buds on the branches of the cottonwood—an early sign of Spring. "Find Mariel. It's time to fly."

Mariel and Rudy were resting high in the juniper overlooking the watering hole. She didn't seem excited when I shared that Coronel was ready to head home. In a sullen chirp, she asked, "Could we talk alone? Let's get a drink."

I waited for her to sip from the shallow pool before springing into our hideaway. She quickly explained her solemn tone. "I'm sorry, Lucie, but I can't go with you. I'm worried for Rudy. His eyes are swollen and crusty, making it hard for him to find food. I can't leave him alone. I hope you understand. You and Coronel will have to travel without me."

I wanted to scream. It was her idea for us to make this journey. She was the one who convinced me that my destiny lay beyond the mountains. And now, I had to do it without her. The *we* was now *me*. I sat quietly, digesting the situation. "I'm sorry, too, but I understand. You are committed to Rudy, as I suppose I am committed to this journey."

When I turned from our grassy retreat, I caught a soft tweet, "Sing, dear Lucie, sing."

Coronel and I lifted off before the sun rose above the horizon. My small wings can go fast but not far. By noon, I was exhausted and thirsty. We found a small pond where we took several refreshing gulps. I nabbed a passing beetle when Coronel chided me. "We must keep going. We need to get to that distant juniper stand before dark. Then we can eat."

Hazy clouds blocked the western sun as we reached our waypoint. I was thankful for the food and comfort it provided. We nestled our weary bodies among the fan-like leaves and waited for daybreak.

From sun-up to sundown, our daylight routine was the same: gliding, resting when we needed, eating what we could, wings flapping, muscles aching. After a few tedious days, we cleared the high desert. I was grateful when Coronel agreed to rest at the base of the mountains before finishing the journey over the dark peaks of evergreen forests.

The next morning, soft gray rain clouds drifted in the distance as we crested the mountains. We rested on a white fir tree to take in the landscape beneath us—a meandering river, rugged mesas, thick woodlands. Coronel happily chirped, “My journey has ended. My home is here, in the mountains. Yours is below, set in the foothills among the budding aspens. Be patient, and the city will sing to you. As Coronel disappeared into the dense forest, I recognized that I was alone and far from home. The feeling proved both frightening and thrilling. I dove from the treetop to search out a new home, and, hopefully, a new life filled with song.

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By midday, I found a nesting site near a steep-sided arroyo lined with dense shrubs. I discovered a few small dark olives hiding deep in thick branches, a perfect place for food and safety. After a day of collecting sticks and grass, I burrowed into my twiggy nest and closed my eyes. Now, as Mariel suggested, I had to wait and listen for the nighttime melodies.

It took several days to establish my territory, warning off a white-winged dove and a pair of robins. Then, each night, I listened, but I only heard the sounds of the forest. And every morning,



I rested on a tall juniper that offered plenty of breakfast berries. I scanned the city in the distance. Perhaps I was too far away to hear its music. Yes, I needed to move closer.

After a day of scouting neighborhood gardens sprinkled throughout the city, I rested on a rustic fencepost. My new life was beginning to feel like my old one. That's when I heard it—one piercing bird-like tone. It was coming from an open window behind an Apache plume dotted with tiny yellow butterflies. As I hid in the colorful shrubbery, a stream of staccato notes shook me from my perch. Unable to resist, I hopped to the windowsill and listened.

“Shoo, shoo, go away.” Flapping her hands, a young woman raced toward me and slammed the window shut. Shocked and afraid, I flew back to the fencepost and then returned to my nest in the foothills. That night, I realized what I had to do. I would claim the garden as my own, build a nest near the window, and wait for it to open. There had to be more music.

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The next day, I returned to the fencepost to begin gathering sticks and grass. Throughout the day, I snacked on bees and butterflies as I assembled my new home in the Apache plume. At nightfall, I slept, exhausted and uninterrupted.

A dry morning breeze shook the leaves around me. Awake and hungry, I snatched a butterfly before I landed on the fencepost. From there, I could oversee my territory, which now included the window. It didn't take long for it to open. I swooped to the sill. At first, lots of babble, then finally, a repetition of the notes from yesterday. I was stunned by the intensity and rapid-fire vocal leaps. Suddenly, an older woman approached the window. She stomped her cane. I didn't flinch, and before she could say *shoo*, I repeated the high-pitched staccato.

She leaned toward me. “Aren't you a sweet thing?” With that, something fantastic happened.

I answered. “No one has ever called me sweet, more often, smart, determined, a great singer, but never sweet. How is it possible that we can communicate?”

“It is a magical blessing, a gift I’ve held since childhood. I can’t explain it, perhaps a sense not yet defined by science. My name is Sofia. What’s yours?”

“Lucie. I’ve traveled from beyond the mountains to listen to the music of your city.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you came. Stay, please. I want my daughter to hear you sing.” She turned away and yelled, “Sylvia, come to the kitchen. I want you to meet Lucie.”

Standing behind her mother, Sylvia growled. “Is this bird another one of your chatty friends?”

Sofia pointed her cane toward me. “Go ahead, Lucie.” Then to her daughter, “You listen.”

My turn to smile. Her challenge to Sylvia reminded me of the same order from Mariel. I cleared my throat and repeated the attention-grabbing notes.

Sylvia fell back and stammered. “Ask her to sing that again.”

When I did, she joined me. For several minutes, I would follow Sylvia’s vocalizations, playing back the sharp, staccato bursts that imitated familiar bird calls.

Needing to rest her voice box, Sylvia stopped and spoke to her mother. “I have a hair-brained idea, no, make that a bird-brained idea. We have a new stage director for our production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. He wants a novel presentation of this famous operatic comedy. What if your bird could join me in my role as Queen of the Night? We could echo the F6 notes together. That would be funny and amazing. I’m sure we could also cast Lucie in the opening scenes.”

Sofia laughed, turned to me, and lifted a questioning eyebrow.

No need to think about it. I chirped my response. “It is my destiny.”

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Each morning, I sat on the windowsill and sang, sometimes Sylvia’s aria, sometimes my own twist on her music. After several days, she announced the director’s response to her idea. He loved that a real bird, with a range beyond that of any coloratura soprano, could be part of the performance. But before he could authorize it, the conductor needed to hear me sing.

I refused the birdcage Sylvia offered for our trip to the theater. Instead, I insisted that her mother join us as my translator and guardian. I would ride on her shoulder. Sylvia and Sofia stared at each other before nodding in unison.

“Okay,” said Sofia, “but you must not panic. The theater can be swarming with performers and overwhelming with chaotic sounds as the orchestra rehearses.”

I voiced my agreement.

After weeks of practice, it was time for the short trip to the theater. When we stepped from the car, the familiar feeling of fright and excitement clenched my hold on Sofia’s shoulder. She winced and scolded, “Lighten up, little bird. You got this. You were born to sing.”

The director greeted us at the door. “So, this is Lucia.” When he reached out to touch me, we both pulled back. I heard him whisper to Sylvia, “The conductor is skeptical. As a challenge, he’s assembled the full orchestra for the Queen of the Night aria. Quickly now, get into your costume, fluff your feathers, and be ready to sing in ten minutes.”

I tugged at Sofia’s ear, “My name is Lucie, not Lucia.”

As she helped Sylvia dress in her glittering black gown, Sofia chided me. “Maybe it can be your stage name. Lucia has such an elegant ring to it.” There was no time for Sylvia to fix her hair.

Instead, she tied it into a topknot. “Here’s your perch, Lucie, Lucia. Let’s go.”

My body trembled when the orchestra struck its explosive opening chord. At that moment, Sylvia became the Queen of the Night, and I became Lucia, the queen’s second voice, matching her pitch, duplicating her rapid-fire staccatos, climbing beyond the range of her human voice.

After our dramatic exit, Sylvia collapsed in her mother’s arms, and I hopped on her mother’s shoulder. We heard words of praise as the stage director and conductor approached us.

“Bravissima! You captured the fury, the rage, the emotional intensity of the aria.” The conductor clapped his hands. “We have much work to do before opening night.”

The rehearsals were both grueling and invigorating. Although I required frequent beetle breaks, the conductor was lenient and instructive. I loved every musical morsel.

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Sylvia had first-night jitters, but I was ready. As instructed, I flitted through the opening comedic scene shrieking like a banshee as I chased Tamino, the prince, across the stage. After that, I rested offstage on Sofia’s shoulder, munching on raisins. I waited for the signal from Sylvia, the Queen of the Night, now dressed in her magnificent, threatening costume, dagger in hand. I rested on her headdress while we moved center stage.

The conductor waited for the audience’s laughter to subside before lifting his baton. At the first note, we were united in the vengeful, explosive rage of the queen. My notes reflected and magnified Sylvia’s range. Our performance was precise and intense. When the queen and I turned to exit the stage, the applause, the bravas, and tweets were thunderous.

As we waited for the final curtain call, I asked Sofia to explain the story behind the opera. She quickly obliged. “There are many messages within this opera. It’s about choices, about bravery and friendship. To me, its essence illustrates a transition from foolishness to wisdom, from fearfulness to confidence.”

When we stepped centerstage for a final bow, the audience renewed its approval. Soaking amid the accolades, I appreciated the parallel to my own story. My life’s journey has been filled with fear and confusion. On my dear friend’s advice, I listened to my heart song, to my true calling, which gave me the chance to fulfill my dreams. Brava, Mariel.

### **Author’s Notes**

*The Magic Flute* struck me as an imaginative mix of fairy-tale adventure and comedy. Written in 1791, it was Mozart’s last opera. The story is about compassion and inner strength. One of its most memorable characters is the Queen of the Night. Her brilliant, high-flying music makes her instantly iconic—especially the famous “Queen of the Night aria,” whose blazing, bird-like coloratura high notes have made it one of the most recognizable pieces in all of opera. My own sense of her character was shaped in part by Diana Damrau’s performance on YouTube, which is easy to find through Bing Videos.

**Mockingbirds and cardinals** can be very territorial. Although a fanciful story, I tried to use scenarios that ease the tension between them: when territorial lines relax in the winter, when food is plentiful, when a predator is near, or when they gather around a neutral space like the waterhole.