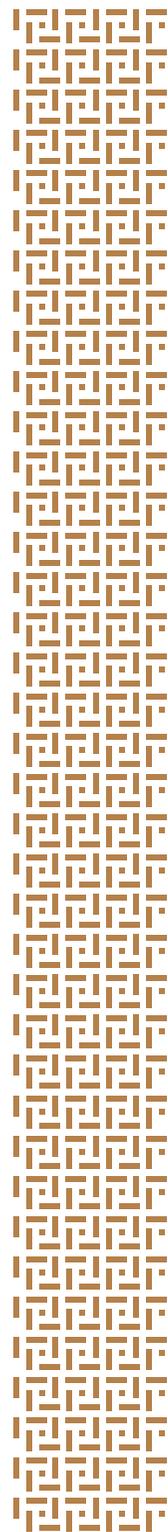




FJ Morris

FJ Morris is an award-winning writer from the UK. You can find her stories soaring the skies thanks to a Short Story Dispenser in a Canadian airport, and chiming away in various publications. Her collection 'This is (not about) David Bowie' will be available in November 2018.



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You would **never** **believe it**

by FJ Morris

A story inspired by



A story written for
The Phoenix Hotel

You would never believe it

When Eliana returned to

the Phoenix Hotel that night, she imagined that her grandfather's footsteps on the same floors, in the same hotel, after climbing the same mountain, would have sounded like clapping hands. But her footsteps sounded like she was dragging a lifetime of luggage. She wasn't prepared for failure, and she was not prepared to find a mythical bird perched on the balcony of her room.

She ignored it. Her focus was on the pain. She ignored how the bird radiated like fire against the blue dusk. She ignored how it stood, majestic, as if it had been pushed out of the land when worlds collided. She ignored its wings flapping like an eruption of dreams. Instead, Eliana sat, staring at her left leg stuck in its brace. Volcanic ash from the mountain printed her face, her hands had seized into fists. She pried open her palm and feathers fell from it:

Brown. Ivory. Amber. Scarlet. They fell.

She'd found the feathers hiking up the mountain. She'd believed that they were a sign. A sign that her grandfather was with her in spirit. That she would make it to the top. That her leg wouldn't hold her back. But the feathers had floated down as if made of nothing.

When Eliana knelt down to blow them away, the bird flew in through the balcony doors she'd left open, landed on the lamp and called at her. Its high-pitched, raspy cry woke up the man sleeping in the next room, and he came to her door when the noise didn't stop. When he saw the bird behind her, he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"What kind is it?" she said.

"Well, we are in the Phoenix Hotel... Or it could be the Garuda, or even the Moo poo bird—"

"The what?"

"It's folklore about a boy and his grandfather who went into the jungle. The boy couldn't keep up because of his bad limp, loses his grandfather, and turns into a bird." He stared at her leg. "What happened to yours?"

"It's an ExoSym. Helps me walk straight."

"How long do you have to wear it?"

"Forever. I have cerebral palsy."

"Oh," he said, pulling on one earlobe. "I'm Tim by the way."

"Eliana."

"Well, Eliana it *could* be the Moo poo bird. Maybe it's here to tell you—"

"Look, I don't care what it is. I just want it out of here."

"Have you tried the front desk? They probably deal with this sort of thing all the time."

Eliana was too exhausted to respond. She sat down and made the call. A man from the front desk came, cool and fresh like a pool of calm in chaos. He wore his batik uniform like a king, as if it was tailored to every corner of him. He stood as if the very hotel was his castle.

"How can I help?"

"There's a bird in here," said Tim.

"Where?"

"There. In front of you."

Nobody spoke. The man straightened his sarong, which was held up by a phoenix-shaped belt-buckle. "I'm sorry, but I don't see it. How big is it?"

"Huge," said Tim, gesturing his arms as wide as he could. "Can't you see or hear it?"

The man smiled and it sent tremors through Eliana. "Ah," he said. "Well we have a saying in our family: *Sometimes it will rain. Sometimes it will thunder. But oh what a wonder, because heaven is calling her.*"

He focused on Eliana. "This call is for you." He winked and left.

Eliana nodded as if her head was filled with heavy thoughts, her gaze reached inward to a place only she could visit. There was one feather Eliana hadn't let go of, a feather that she'd carried with her since she was six-years-old: a gold feather pendant. She took the necklace from her pocket and held it up. It had the same shimmer of gold in the amber fronds as the bird. "Where did you get that?" said Tim.

"My grandad."

The bird rose up and flew toward Eliana, its wings knocking over the lamp. She covered her head with her arms as the wind from its wings rushed past her. The bird took her necklace and flew into the bathroom.

"Hey!" Eliana limped after the bird, slipped on the marble floor and crashed into the shower door, making it rumble.

Tim ran in after her. "Are you OK?"

"It has my necklace," she said, pointing to the bird perched on the sink. It flew toward the doorway. There was a crack like splitting wood. A deep thunder shook the room. And the bird imploded.

"No!" Eliana launched toward it but Tim grabbed her shirt to pull her back.

A fireball of flame pulled in and out like a supernova. Tim pulled Eliana into the shower and turned it on. Ash washed down her face as she watched everything burn. As she watched the last of her grandfather go up in flames, the last bit of hope she had that she could make it on her own.

The flame faded. Only a mound of ash rested on the bathroom tiles. There wasn't a single singe or mark on the walls. Eliana stepped out of the shower and toward the ash. Water dripped from her as she ran her hands through the burning memory.

"What are you doing?" said Tim. "The fire could have killed you!"

"I need it. My necklace. To hike Merapi."

"What?"

"It helps me fly."

"Fly?"

"That's what my grandad told me. Said it was magic."

Tim knelt down by her. "Before this evening, I'd have said feathers were just for duvets and pillows."

"It's all I had left of him. When I was learning to walk, kids started calling me Elly the Elephant, so he gave it to me. Said it would make me fly higher than anyone. And it

did. I could do anything with that feather." Eliana sighed. "Until today."

"You don't need it."

"I do. You don't know how hard it is..."

Eliana felt stacked up with ceilings and limits, blockades and full stops. She'd come to climb Mount Merapi, but she had another mountain inside of her, always blocking her way.

"Do you know what they called me?" he said. "Dumbo. Because of the ears."

Eliana smiled. "You're an elephant too?"

"Oh yes! Remember when Dumbo is trying to fly but he loses the magic feather?" Eliana nodded. "It was never the feather, Eliana. He flies. Even without it."

"But..."

The pile of ash wriggled. Eliana jumped back. A head pushed out. Soon there was more than a head, there were wings, followed by a body, followed by legs. It shook, creating a cloud around it. When the ash cloud cleared, it sat upright, looking at them.

"Do you see what I see? It's beautiful," she said.

"I can't believe it. What's it doing?"

"Not sure. It looks confused. Do you think it knows how to fly?"

She inched closer and the young bird flapped its new wings and fell over. It was a fully grown bird, but it couldn't fly yet. It jumped onto her hand, and dug its talons into her thumb.

"Go to the balcony. Maybe it needs height," said Tim. They went to the balcony, the phoenix wings flapped, but it still kept a firm grip on her. Tim watched the bird jump up, flap and come back down again. "Can I come with you? When you try Mount Merapi again?"

"How do you know I'm going to try again?"

"I just do. Would be great, don't you think? To see two elephants flying."

"Yeah, I just don't think I'd believe it."

"I think it needs help," said Tim. "Gently lift it up into the air."

"But it looks unstable."

"Trust me, birds need to feel the wind."

Eliana lifted the bird and it flung out its wings. They were strong. Able. It was ready. So when it pulled in its wings, Eliana propelled it into the air and it let go. For a moment it hovered over the balcony, but then it flapped and spiralled, taking their hearts downward with it. But before it hit the pool below, it caught the wind.

They gazed as it soared up toward the night sky, burning red against it, the clap of its wings sounding like applause.

"Tell me you see it too," said Eliana.

"I do," said Tim. "I see it."

"But do you believe it?"

"Yeah," he said. "I think I do."

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