

The Moment She Was Better

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A young girl—hair wild with frizzy curls—cupped a baby blue bird in her hands. The bird nestled comfortably in her palm, the child's button nose mere inches away from its nimble beak. The sun hung in a sleek, cloudless sky and beat down on the girl who stood alone in a field of dandelions. She glowed golden, a halo illuminating her face and hair, a personal spotlight for her and the bird.

A soft breeze fluttered through the field, the dandelions danced with their heads banging, and grass straws of a deep green chimed to their neighbors' melodic movements. The wind thrashed a swift hand throughout the dandelions until little white flurries glittered the field. A dandelion sparkle tickled the girl's ankle as if her veins were webs climbed by a spider.

The girl took her eyes off the bird briefly and smiled brightly as she saw shining sprinkles dust sky. There they floated—reaching to the heavens—until their soft tips disappeared and were swallowed by the sun.

"What does it feel like to fly, bird?" the girl asked her little friend.

The bird chirped—a brisk whistle that sung a thousand notes in one second.

"Sounds amazing," the girl laughed.

The bird wiggled ever so slightly while its wings flitted; feathers sent gentle sparks to the girl's fingertips (a quick hug for her dear friend). Then the bird flew toward the sun until it landed home in a nearby tree.

"Janice!" the girl's mother called from the porch of their farmhouse.

Janice's small feet clomped into the ground as she ran to the lemonade she knew was waiting for her. As she skipped up the porch steps, her mother looked down at her with a kind smile. Janice didn't know how thirsty she was until she gulped the sweet, tangy juice.

"Did you have fun playing?" her mother asked.

Janice nodded as she handed her now-empty cup back to her mother. "I made a new friend," Janice said.

"Oh, did you?" Her mother had a sing-song voice.

"Yeah," Janice said as she ran to the porch swing. She plopped down on the scratchy cushions and swung her legs ecstatically. Her legs pumped back and forth—faster and faster—until Janice pictured herself in flight with the birds in the sky. She couldn't help the giggles that escaped her lips as a breeze brushed against her face and tickled her skin.

"Careful, Janice," her mother said as the swing began to squeak and rock loudly. Janice's mother placed a firm hand on the swing to stop its motion. "Don't hurt yourself." She joined Janice on the swing and started up a slower motion.

Mother and daughter pumped their legs together, one more cautious than the other, with their fingers interlocked and smiles on their faces.

"My bird friend told me what it's like to fly," Janice said.

Janice's mother cocked an eyebrow, but her smile never left. "Your bird friend?"

"Yup!" Janice gazed up at her mother with free-spirited eyes that sparkled with wonder. "The bird sang to me and gave me a hug and then flew so high." She leaned in close to her mother and whispered, "It was magical."

"Sounds like it."

"Yeah." Janice giggled. "One day I'm going to fly like that."

Janice's mother wrapped an arm lightly around her daughter's shoulders. "What will you do when you fly?" she asked with a smile that sparkled almost as brightly as Janice's.

"Join my bird friend." Janice pointed at the sun, her fingertip glowing against the daylight. "Up there. We're best friends, you know."

"I thought I was your best friend." Janice's mother gave a playful shoulder nudge to her daughter.

"Nope," Janice said without a doubt. "The birds are my friends. But don't worry, Mommy." She looked up at her mother with wide, dreamy eyes. "I'll make sure to give you a wave."

Janice's mother chuckled. "You better," she said as she gave her daughter a gentle shoulder squeeze. "So you had a pretty magical day, huh?"

Janice nodded her head so fast her curls whipped her cheeks.

"But I know of a more magical day coming up."

"What?" Janice bounced on the swing in anticipation, like a bubble refusing to pop.

"Your birthday, silly. Are you excited to turn seven?"

Janice's face lit up with a smile three times large enough to swallow a cake whole. "Yes!" She jumped off the porch swing and did a little twirl. "It's my birthday tomorrow!" She kicked her feet, wiggled her toes, shimmied her hips, and fluttered her fingers in a celebratory pre-birthday dance.

Meanwhile, the little baby blue bird sat perched on a nearby tree branch, watching from above as she danced with joy and spirit.

Two years later...

Janice's ninth birthday was one most would want to forget. There were balloons and some gifts with perky bows—but it wasn't a party. Far from it, as Janice was quarantined in a musky room that smelled of chemicals with no sunlight except through a tiny window that looked out over a city from ten floors up.

She had letters and drawings from random people; she didn't recognize their names. Her mother said something about *charity* when Janice asked, but she didn't really know what that meant.

She always felt cold—even in the summer. All she had was a thin blue

gown of tiny dots that would rip if she walked a little too close to the metal bed's jagged frame. There was a dinky white blanket too, but it scratched her skin more than it provided warmth.

Her wild curls were gone; bright overhead lights reflected off her fragile head, which made her brain freckles glow. A thick plastic bracelet (that dug into her skin a little too deeply if her wrist was cocked a certain way) lived on her—her identity simplified to a single barcode.

Janice rested her forehead against her only window; the glass was chilling. A blue bird nestled itself on the windowsill outside, where it rested in a puddle of Janice's reflected face. She placed her hand flat on the window as she watched the bird sleep in this outside world she was no longer familiar with. She remembered what it was like to have a tiny beating heart covered in feathers sit in her hands. She pretended she had that feeling now as she gently stroked the bird's head over the glass. Then she tapped *hello*.

The bird flew away as quickly as it had come.

Janice placed her head further against the window and shut her eyes. "I want to fly," she whispered.

That night, Janice tucked her head against her mother's neck as she cried. Her tears soaked her mother's shirt; it was stained with far too many snot marks and sad storms. The floor was cold as they both sat curled and hunched—lost in a hug. Janice's mother held tightly onto her daughter while Janice had her legs wrapped around her mother's waist and her arms around her mother's neck. They both gripped onto each other as if their body warmth possessed a magical cure.

Janice cried all night long. "It hurts," she said.

Her mother placed a soft kiss on her cheek. "I know, dear," she said through tears of her own.

"I don't want to hurt anymore."

"I know," her mother whispered, her voice wobbly and weak. She hugged her daughter tightly and began to rock softly back and forth against the floor. "Just close your eyes," she said softly.

Janice wailed and sank deeply into her mother's lap. She closed her eyes, just like her mother said, but the pain wouldn't go. She cried louder—her tears turning into screams—and her fingers clawed at the fabric of her mother's shirt.

"Shh," her mother sang as she cupped the back of Janice's head. "It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay," she pleaded.

"Make it stop, Mommy."

"I wish I could."

The farmhouse is now eerily quiet without the playful laughter of a little girl. A broken-hearted and mourning mother sits alone in a large house that suffocates her. She squeezes lemon halves until there is just enough juice for one large glass of lemonade. She adds two extra spoonfuls of sugar—just how Janice liked it.

With heavy feet, she saunters out to the front porch, places her glass of lemonade on a nearby table, and plops herself on the porch swing. Left foot forward and then right—she doesn't stop swinging, not even when the squeaks become excruciatingly loud. Higher into the air she goes; she closes her eyes and yearns to hear her daughter's laughter one last time. Her feet go limp and the swing eventually freezes, as if locked in time. She reaches over to the table and takes a sip of lemonade before glancing up to the sky. There are clouds of plenty—large, white balls of fluff that look like bunnies, bows, and flowers. The sun peeks through gaps in the clouds to explode streaks of golden light onto the field below.

She takes another sip, dreading that the lemonade is almost gone.

A little gold bird glistens and glitters as it flies across the sun. It sweeps through the sky like a windstorm blowing out of control until it takes rest on the porch banister. She looks at the bird—who has surprisingly familiar eyes.

The gold bird flaps its wings at Janice's mother and hops ever-so-slightly as it chirps. The bird says *hello* before it goes off to fly again in the endless sky.



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