

Syrupy dew coated waxy leaves of bromeliads and rubber trees, dripping down toward the lush forest floor. Shrill morning bird calls, with their repetitive consonants and discordant melodies, created a familiar chorus I never thought I'd miss. Soaring above the canopy, where the sun shines bright and the air is clear, I let out a cry of joy. My jungle life was bliss. I soared past fluffy clouds and felt the breeze through my blue feathers. However, my dreamlike state was soon broken by sharp calls of my flock, so I flew down to convene with them on the branches of a sturdy brazil nut tree.

My flock moves through the jungle as a unit, frequenting our favorite spots. Today we spread out on the tree, looking for brazil nut pods and cracking them open with our beaks to access the delicious nuts we coveted. Being a young bird, I hadn't yet mastered this skill, and as I grappled with a pod, I let out squawks of exasperation. Squawks I would soon regret. For in that moment, humans below heard me and spotted our flock. But they didn't see birds, they saw money. I would later learn we Hyacinth Macaws were worth thousands of dollars, which meant everything to the poachers who followed us through the forest that day, anticipating the cover of night, when silently they climbed the tree where we slept and abducted six of us, before the rest of our group awoke and flew off frantically. I was placed in a sack, where I remained for two days without food or water. An eternity later, we arrived at a huge glass box with bright lights, titled Exotic Bird Surplus. We were exchanged for stacks of bills and withdrawn from our sacks, dehydrated and weak. Two of my kin died that day, the other four of us nursed back to health and displayed in a room full of birds I had never seen before, birds once wild and free like me but now, frightened and confused. People flooded in and out of Exotic Bird Surplus, "oohing" and "ahhing". I cowered, fearing further harm. They were far less intelligent than us birds.

I planned to escape when no one was watching. However, this idea was scrapped when I witnessed an erratic green bird fly into a glass square called a “window”. It let out a shriek and fell to the ground in shock. A person promptly removed the bird from the display area. I never saw it again. Days later an elderly man with beady eyes hobbled in and spied me. He spoke to the store owner, handed over money, placed me in a cardboard box, and drove us to his home, where he kept dozens of birds in rusty cages, the inhabitants screeching relentlessly. His floor was littered with feces, bird seed and newspaper, the air dank and sickening. Greasy rats marched on the bars of a finch’s prison. A chained dog barked incessantly, yet the old man was unfazed. He reached into the box where I sat. My heart beat frantically. A surge of fear filled me. I would not allow myself to suffer the same fate as these animals. I yelped and clawed at the man, flapping my wings in his face. He coiled as I kicked him and took flight, doing my best to navigate his cluttered home. I saw an open door and wasted no time flying faster than ever before, out into the world. But what world was this? The palm trees and tall buildings were alien to me, and I felt helpless.

I soon grew tired and perched on a red stop sign to rest. The air smelled of gasoline, and there was nothing to eat or drink. I scanned the urban landscape and longed for the jungle. Would I ever see it again? As the sun set, I grew cold. I shut my eyes and fell asleep. In the morning I awoke to human voices. A crowd had formed of people pointing and taking photos. I was frightened and wondered what they would do to me. *I’ll fly away.* I thought. But to where? I had nowhere to go. I thought of my flock. We always supported each other. I’d never felt so alone.

The crowd grew larger. I was breathing rapidly and felt lightheaded. Three people wearing blue shirts stepped out of a van with a ladder. In an instant I was hoisted from the stop

sign into the van. I must have fallen asleep, because when I opened my eyes, I was in a space that reminded me of Exotic Bird Surplus. Yet something felt different. One of the blue shirt people wrapped a blanket around me and brought me to a bowl of nuts and fruit. Just like what I ate back home. I was starving, and I indulged. After eating, I felt much better, but I was confused. Were these people trying to help me? I was taken to a dark, warm room where I rested. The people in the building all wore the same blue shirts and said the words “Rescue, Rehabilitate, Release.” Each morning I was offered water and food, and I regained strength rapidly. The people would smile and talk to me, and I think they cared about me. Humans confused me. Some were good and some were not.

One morning, a woman in a white cloak injected something into me. I fell into the deepest of sleeps and woke hours later on the ground. I stood and looked around. Tall rubber trees, bromeliads, chattering birds. The sounds of home. Joy rushed through me, fast like the rushing river of the rainforest. I stretched my wings, felt the humid jungle air, and called out. Minutes passed. I called out again and waited. Then, voices responded. The voices of my flock! They flew down and huddled around me. I had so much to tell them. But for now, I stood still on the forest floor and breathed in relief. I had thought my life was over. But I was still a young bird, and now that I was back in the jungle, it was just beginning.

Today, I am old. The elder of my flock. Some birds have died. Others have joined, and baby birds have been born. There are thirty of us now, and we fly above the tree tops every day, free and grateful. And each morning, I remind myself how lucky I am, and I remember my best day. The day I was brought back home.