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In Medias Res - A Stranger's Paper Bird

By: Jewel Blanchard

"...I guess this is goodbye then. You were the love of my life, Greg, I want you to know that. Good luck back home. I'll be thinking of you in the city.

-Bree

"P.S. -Remember this bird from first day of Freshman year? I found it in my stuff. I'm not throwing away, just passing it on."

I picked up the origami crane, folded from paper-backed foil, that accompanied her goodbye message. I clutched it and sunk to the kitchen floor sobbing.

Three Years Later

"Morning," grunts my boss, Ryan, pacing past my cubicle. "Promotion treating you good? Liking the new space?" A cardboard box full of desk accessories sat waiting to be unpacked on my new desk. One folder lay open on the tabletop. It was crammed with post it notes and scraps of lined paper I had doodled on over the years. Crimson ink splashed on manilla paper. Emerald pastels smudged across blue stripes. I was in the process of tacking them all up on the carpeted wall of my new workspace. Ryan shoved his way beside me to snatch a pink sticky note and peer at it. A flash of silver was laying underneath it.

I picked up the foil crane. As I gazed at it, I was transported to the messy classroom where Bree first fished the origami from out of the trash. I grinned as I recalled her words:

"Look, someone threw away a masterpiece...Promise me you won't throw away any of your comics like this. They're too valuable."

The next time I would see the foil crane, it was a parting gift from her.

Seeing it now, shining against the drab office, I was reminded of how much I had lived. How much I had been shown. How much I owed her. And how I had somehow ended up here. In a grid of gray cubicles and fluorescent lights. In a small town where nothing mattered.

I must have stood there for several minutes, coming to a decision. I nested the crane in my shirt pocket and strode out of the office, past people I didn't care about, hard at work for a goal they couldn't even identify. No one even looked up to question me.

The sunlight was strange after the dim cubicle. I got into my car and drove straight to the subway. There was little traffic. After waiting on a graffitied bench, I spent the train ride gazing out the window. Freshly-plowed fields rolled by, sprinkler systems chugging and spraying over the soil. I retrieved the crane from my pocket and considered the worn foil sitting in my palm. Half-remembered conversations flickered through my mind.

"So that's how you ended up here at community college. Where dreams die." Bree smiles dryly. "Some old dude told you to settle."

"Maybe I'm not going to go take special art classes in the city to mess with play dough with a bunch of rich snobs," I exclaim. "But at least I have a plan for my life!"

"Oh, so you have a plan, now, do you? You have a plan to get an average education to work an average job with average pay and have an average life! What a phenomenal plan!"

"You think you're better than me, because you're going to a school you can't afford!"

"No," she whispers. "God, I don't think I'm better than you. But all my life, I've had this one thing. And I always knew I would chase it." Bree gazes up at me with dark eyes. "I just hate to see you not chasing yours. Come to the Academy in the city with me, Greg! You've always been talented, but art classes would teach you so much more. We can make it work!"

The train lurched to a stop. I slipped the foil bird back in my pocket, and climbed out of a station crammed with people and sounds that could only be found in the city. They hearkened back to when I used to live here with her. From the best days of my life. It was still light outside. The air smelled like salt and gasoline. The bay breeze cut through my shirt.

A car lurched close to my sidewalk, blaring its horn. I flinched back, and caught a whiff of something unpleasant. I covered my nose with one hand and held my other arm out, hailing a cab. A yellow-painted car flashed past without stopping, then another.

"Oh, come on!" I dismayed under my breath. Finally, a taxi pulled over.

"Where are we heading?" the driver said in an accent I never encountered back home.

"Academy of Art."

When we pulled up to the building, I paused outside the doors. Knowing the silver crane was in my breast pocket gave me strength. With a deep breath, I strode inside.

A receptionist sat at a rounded kiosk. She had unruly frizzy hair and an assured face.

"How can I help you, sir?" She smiled. A name tag reading *Mona* was pinned to her flowy blouse. I glimpsed the wire frame of a bird cage sitting on the floor behind her desk. A song bird the color of sunshine warbled a tune on its perch.

"I'm looking for someone," I said. "Breanna Gaines." Mona frowned in thought.

"Oh!" The receptionist exclaimed at last in recognition. "She works here."

"Is she, um, working right now?"

"Is who working right now?" My heart stopped when I heard the voice behind me. I turned and Bree was there. Her hair was cut in a sharp bob. She was in a two piece suite unlike anything I'd ever seen her wear. She looked into my eyes, and glided toward me. I just gazed back, helpless to say anything now that she was before me. I glimpsed a sparkle on her left hand.

A wedding ring.

Just like that, the illusion was broken. I remembered the fight; how Breanna had chosen the city and a teaching position at the Academy of Art over our hometown and a life with me. How she had left me in our city apartment along with a note and some origami.

The anger I had felt melted away over the years to become a shrine built to her in my heart, where I worshipped her endlessly. This morning, when I was sitting at my desk and found I was in

hell, I had run to her, so she could fly me back to heaven. But I saw Breanna now, at the foyer of our old school, and the halo I remembered her with was shattered.

"You're married?" I asked, chasing her roving eyes with mine, craving a connection.

"Engaged." Breanna clasped her hands mechanically. "My fiancé is on his way to pick me up. Maybe we could talk outside?" I nodded, and followed her outdoors. Finally, she looked at me. "Greg," she said, "How have you been?" I cringed at her mundaneness.

"Good." I remembered this was the same person I once gave my heart to, and the truth tumbled out of my mouth. "I got stuck, Breanna, back home. Just like you said." When Breanna didn't butt in like normal, I continued. "I got some desk job. It pays well, I even just got a promotion. But I'm just another pencil pusher." Bree remained quiet. Unnerved, I changed the subject. "So, you're teaching? Like you always wanted?"

"Yeah." she smiled forcefully. "I guess I'm living the dream." She pursed her lips, breaking composure. "At first, it was everything I hoped for. And then I realized teaching at an institution is no different than working on a factory line." She looked out at the traffic speeding by. "I just wish I was back to when we were young. Back then, teaching ceramics meant something." After a pause, I pulled out the origami crane.

"You taught me to never give up on yourself," I said, holding it out to her. "We might be stuck right now, but we can make it. I was stuck before, and you were there to help me." Breanna took the origami gingerly. "You're stronger than them."

"Breanna!" a dark-suited man called from outside a parked car across the street.

"Thank you," she said, smiling shyly. "For this. And everything else."

"No. Thank you." I watched her step neatly across the street toward the man she was going to marry, with a stranger's paper bird in her hand. She greeted him before she got into the car. He tugged at the crooked hem of her collared shirt. A flash of silver fell into the street. The engine growled to life and the hungry tires rolled over the unsuspecting paper bird lying in the road. It was left mangled on the black pavement.

And the car drove away with a part of my life in its back seat.

"Dammit, she left!" the receptionist exclaimed from behind me, gesturing after the car that rolled away. She held a leather portfolio. "She forgot her briefcase..." I spotted the tiny yellow bird, now nestled within the depths of her curls. The sight of the girl and the bird gave me an idea for a comic, like the kid U used to storyboard when I was a kid. I smiled to myself as she bounded back in side, plans for the future unfolding as I crossed the road to return home. A title for a graphic novel began to form in my mind, something like "The Girl With the Bird in her Hair." When I passed the flattened crane in the street, I stepped around it carefully. I didn't look back.