

## Only A Bird

Freshman year of college, I was arrested for saving a brown pelican. The extenuating circumstances take a long time to detail and a short time to forget, so I will give only the essential context: the bird was healthy but for a bad eye, the wildlife officer vowed to euthanize rather than seek out a rehabilitator, and I stole the bird from under his nose to buy it more time. This landed the bird in a rehabilitation center, while I wound up in handcuffs and ankle shackles in the back of a squad car.

“Are you sure about this?” the booking officer asked the federal cop who’d arrested me. “It’s only a bird.”

The cop had berated me with the same words, but spoken in a very different tone. This was not an endangered animal. This was not a cuddly, carefully-bred creature like a goldendoodle or Persian cat. Why was I willing to risk my scholarship, my safety, my freedom for something so irrelevant?

“You can get arrested for that?” One of the officers at the county detention center was (to his credit) horrified—assuring me I’d be out before his shift was over. I was without the handcuffs now, but dressed all in orange and shuddering against the cold as I waited to be assigned a cell allocated for “least concern.” Another prisoner forced to keep his handcuffs on leered at me from the bench he’d been chained to. A woman coming down from a drug overdose jabbered frantically to herself, drool collecting in the corner of her mouth. I gazed at my full body X-Ray on the screen, showcasing the fluorescent vulgarity of my organs, my silhouette, my

bones. The radiation was protocol for new intakes who weren't submitted to cavity searching.

"Just for a pelican?"

The officer running the X-ray machine had kind eyes, unlike yet another cop who'd transferred me from the city jail to the county prison. The latter had been playing good cop, I'm-on-your-side cop, please-take-a-deal-because-this-is-embarrassing-for-everyone cop...but his words were too callous for me to accept:

"You're righteous," he'd told me, "and that's admirable—but if you keep up that mindset, this won't be your last time in here."

I spent that night shivering on the floor of a prison cell. The next day, the arresting officer wouldn't let me even be seen for a bail hearing until he had questioned me—threatening to arrest my mother if I didn't talk to him, to slap me with years in prison, to destroy my life—over a bird. At the eventual bail hearing, I heard the value of our crimes. A man who'd beaten his wife was given a three-hundred-dollar bail. A woman who'd stolen something was given five. I found myself with a thousand-dollar bail, the same as a felon in possession of a firearm who'd made lascivious comments as I walked in the door of the courtroom. I was not allowed to share my side of the story, like all the others before me.

I lost all faith in the justice system, over a bird.

"Do you think that pelican cares that you're in here?" the arresting officer had jeered at me. The question was as laughable as his badge. At the time, I didn't possess the composure or the strength to answer, but I wish I'd said this:

No, I'd tell him, the bird doesn't care, but doing the right thing isn't dependent on the concern or conscience of others. It isn't built on the codex used to trump up charges against me,

and it won't be erased by that, either. Being a good person comes down to the individual choices we make, the gravity of our beliefs, the daily commitment to sacrifice for what's right even when it's hard, or thankless, or painful. Even when the system opposes you. Even if it's only a bird.