

Years 7 & 8  
3rd Place: Leo Ford  
Year 8, Perth Waldorf School

## Manu

It was a crisp winter morning. My breath made clouds in the air and the frosty grass crunched under my boots. I walked across my still backyard towards the oak tree standing proudly in the corner. A tiny fledgling lay still at its strong base, like a crumpled piece of paper, or a forgotten dream. I gently cradled the bird in my hands, it was warm, and I could feel the faint flutter of its heart.

“Ma!” I called, hurrying back inside. “Ma! A bird, I think it fell from its nest!”

My mother appeared. Her brown hair was tied in a messy bun, and she was wearing a paint-stained apron.

“Let me see him,” she said, taking him from my shaking hands. My mother examined him carefully. “Such a big fall,” she murmured, glancing outside at the oak tree. “And such a small bird.” She shook her head. “It looks like a broken wing, but there could quite possibly be some internal damage.”

I swallowed.

“We should get him comfy, go get some tea towels.”

We made a nest out of some old tea towels and a shoe box.

“Honey . . .” My mother said softly. “He’s really not in a good condition, and birds don’t recover well. He might only have a few hours left. So just . . . don’t get attached.”

“Yes Ma, I won’t.” But I did. I spent the day whispering stories and songs to him, praying that he would open his eyes. He didn’t, but his breathing didn’t stop either. That night I held his frail body close to my heart and drifted off into a deep, deep sleep.

The bird did survive the night, but his eyes remained firmly shut and his breathing shallow. Still, I stayed by his side, telling him stories, of brave warriors, powerful sorcerers, valiant knights and Greek Gods. Just as I was telling him the story of Manu, (a wise man from Indian mythology) the bird opened his eyes and tweeted softly. I smiled. “Manu. That’s what I’ll call you!”

Manu accepted a few drops of water from an eye dropper then fell asleep once more. I continued telling him stories, but this time a new hope shone within me. Manu **WOULD** survive; I was sure of it.

The next day Manu didn’t sleep as much, and he even had some food from the eye dropper. Later that week he stood up shakily (for about five seconds).

And after many weeks of care and attention, Manu slowly, slowly healed.

The snow fell thick and fast until the world was nothing but a white blur. I spent most days reading by the roaring fire with Manu perched on my shoulder nibbling affectionately on my ear. Christmas was just around the corner, and Manu was rather surprised when a decorated fir tree appeared in our living room. At first, Manu avoided it like the plague, but after a couple of days he was perched at the top like an angel, watching the comings and goings of humans. And admiring his charming reflection in the shiny red baubles.

And on Christmas morning we awoke to find our stockings upended, Santa’s cookies demolished, all our presents unwrapped, and a guilty looking Manu sitting amongst shreds of colourful wrapping paper.

We stood there in shock; our mouths agape and our eyes stretched wide, until Manu slipped on a piece of wrapping paper and we dissolved into giggles. Mother fetched her paints and easel to paint the embarrassing scene.

And so, as the days went by, Manu began to change; small differences at first, an adult feather here and there, a change in diet. Then larger, after a few months Manu was almost fully grown, and he started flying from one side of the room to the other. One other thing happened. I can't tell you when or how, it just did. Somehow Manu, a few months ago just a tiny hatchling lying on his frosty deathbed, had become part of our family.

Seasons changed. A pale-yellow sun shyly peaked its fair face over the horizon, ending the long darkness of winter. Snow melted and buds appeared on the once bare branches of trees, animals left their dark dens, blinking sleepily, and bathed in the warm golden sunshine. Birdsong could be heard once more. Spring was here.

Me and Manu went for long walks; we were sick of being cooped up inside. Everything around us looked like a fairytale, the grass was long and green, and brightly coloured wildflowers sprung up everywhere making the air smell sweet and fresh. The forests were busy with the comings and goings of all sorts of animals including birds. The first time Manu saw another bird he flew after it. They chased each other round and round the pale blue sky, singing happily to each other. Then the other bird soared away to join a flock of birds that dipped and dived gracefully together like they were one being. Manu watched them, then reluctantly fluttered down to join me. And I breathed a sigh of relief.

Every time we saw birds after that, Manu would watch them with a strange look in his eyes. But he didn't try to join them.

One day we were walking in the forest when two birds burst from a tree tweeting happily. Manu looked at me and I gazed into his deep brown eyes. And in that moment, I knew what he was trying to tell me.

"You have to leave, don't you?" I whispered as my eyes filled with tears. Manu was silent. "I'll miss you".

Manu climbed up to my shoulder and rubbed his silky head against my cheek. And I knew that he was saying thank you.

"I love you Manu," I cried. Manu looked at me once more then spread his graceful brown wings and flew up, up, up. And just like that, Manu was gone. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

For the next week I was numb. I didn't eat or sleep much. My heart was missing a Manu-shaped piece, and it hurt horribly. One day I went outside to the oak tree which was now green and healthy. I sat beneath it and listened to the rustling of leaves in the breeze, the tinkling of wind chimes, and to birdsong. I breathed deeply, inhaling an earthy scent. Then I heard a rustling sound. I opened my eyes and saw a brown feather lying on my lap. I twirled it in my hands and remembered all the good times I shared with Manu; the first time he flew, those stormy nights where we kept each other company, and the sun-drenched springtime walks. I also remembered the look that he had in his beautiful brown eyes when he saw the other birds; one of longing but also . . . sadness. Leaving wasn't any easier for him than it was for me. Manu's face was so

clear in my mind. I could hear his chirpy voice, see his wings open to catch the golden afternoon sunlight and feel his heart pitter patter in sync with mine.

Then I realised; there was not a Manu-shaped piece missing from my heart, instead Manu was imprinted onto my heart. Where he would always be. For ever and ever. I smiled and looked up into the endless expanse of blue sky, where I could see a bird flying freely to join a flock. Manu was where he was meant to be. I knew I would never forget about Manu, and he would do the same for me.

“Thank you, Manu!” I cried. And the bird inside of me spread its wings.

The End!