

The Other Side

The world seemed to be different from a second ago. It used to be sliced into pieces with those bothersome golden bars, but now there was a breach in the uniformity – something that would only happen once a day when one of my owners refilled my food tray. I did recall watching her seal the rupture after the piling my tray with another heap of seeds I had already gotten tired of eating – so how did it reopen?

I rewound my memory back to the time my owners left the house. I was hopping around in my little cage, thinking how to spend another day with basically nothing to watch or do when I landed on something that moved with a *creeeaaak* – enough to send me scrambling back onto my favourite perch, my heart jittering at the sudden sound and motion. And the result was a rectangular opening to the outside world.

I had been staring at it for quite a while now, but nothing had changed.

A thought flitted across my mind. My heart immediately picked up pace. *Does this mean...?*

Almost trembling with excitement, I hopped off my branch and made my way to the gaping hole. I poked my head through it, then my chest.

Sure enough, there wasn't anything to hold me back.

My heart was now hammering in my chest so hard I was sure it was going to gnaw its way out. The sheer thought of what this discovery meant was almost too overwhelming. Too good to be true.

But now I was standing here, just one hop from the world I had always longed to be in.

Joy bubbled up in my chest until it couldn't be contained anymore. With a cry of delight, I flew out of the cage, circled the room a few times to stretch my wings and test my flying, before diving towards the only window in the room – a portal I had discovered not long ago that could connect me to the place I truly belong – outside.

I let my mind go blank as I neared the window – the only way to cut off my vision so I couldn't check if there was glass in my way. I was too scared to see it myself, too scared to face the disappointment when I found out that my journey had ended before it could even begin. I figured it didn't matter – as long as it meant I would never be locked in that detestable cage again, I would happily go with any result. I would rather go blind and let fate choose for me.

After what seemed like eternity, I realized I was still airborne, not smashed to death against the invisible glass. Wind whistled in my ears as it brushed past me, smoothing out my feathers, providing lift to my entire body. I could feel the sun shining down on me, each ray of light touching me gently, warming me up, as if welcoming me for joining the other side. I finally mustered the courage to return my sight, and what I saw took my breath away.

Below me was the stunning vista of the streets, thriving with life and prosperity. I had imagined what it would look like when Pidge – a friendly pigeon that occasionally stopped by the window and told me all the adventures he had – had described the scene to me with all the details his nut-sized brain could remember. But this was nowhere near it. There were dozens of tiny humans strolling on the streets on either side of the boulevard, walking into and out of the buildings beside, their laughter and chatter audible even from this distance. There were cars that packed the roads in the middle, forming long dotted lines of different colours, like arrays of dyed ants that suddenly got frozen in place on their way to a food source. Lush trees that lined between the crammed roads and the loitering pedestrians, guarding the beasts from running onto the streets. Blocks of buildings that extended into the sky along with the roads, their smooth surfaces broken by rows of windows that glistened in the sun. And there was the sweet scent of freshly-baked bread and pastries that pervaded the air and drifted up into my nares when I swooped down.

The sight was even livelier and colourful than I expected and had more things going on than my eyes could take. It was starting to make me clutch on the notion that I almost lived my entire life without even having a glimpse.

A feeling I had never experienced before enveloped me – a euphoria that made me want to sing out with all my heart.

So I did.

I started with a little whistle, then gradually made it louder as calmness filled every inch of my being. I whistled the tune that best matched my overflowing emotion, adding a series of trills and gurgles as the melody went on. A few humans underneath me began looking up when I glided by, searching for the source of the music – some spotted me, and their faces lit up, as if they hadn't heard anything like this before. I eventually landed on a streetlamp that seemed to be the best spot to spread the music to every corner of the street, into every listener's heart. I had never been so joyful in my life – was that what 'freedom' make one do?

I was so engrossed in singing I didn't notice that another bird had landed beside me. It wasn't until he made a noise and interrupted my song that I noticed his presence.

'What a surprise to see you here, fella,' he cooed throatily.

'Pidge!' I chirped, hopping closer to my friend. I noticed how the feathers around his neck glittered in the sun, showing sparkles of green and purple.

'You out for a fly?' he asked, surprise written all over his face. 'It's quite unusual that owners let their pet birds – especially a nightingale like you – out the cage, you know.'

'I don't know. I just remember landing on something in the cage and the next thing I knew, I was out.' I tweeted, trying to recall exactly how it had happened.

'Never mind your escape. You're free now – that's not something you can do every day. Why waste time thinking about the past when you should be seizing your chance to explore the city right now?' Pidge unfolded his wings and hopped off the lamppost. 'Come on. Let's go fetch dinner. There's a lot waiting for you to learn living in the cities.'

I followed him and together we soared between rustling trees, zipped through narrow alleys with walls that nearly brushed our wings, and skimmed across a river pellucid enough to show schools of silvery fish swimming lazily. They were all captivating views that couldn't be easily described with words, scenery that could be forever etched in your heart.

I was totally ready to let go of my old life and embrace the new one – at least that was what I planned to do until an awful shower washed all my dreams away.

By the time we reached our destination, it was already dark. The sky was rumbling ominously, all trails of the balmy afternoon gone. I was pretty much starving to death and my wings felt like they would snap any second. Pidge, on the other hand, seemed unaffected by the long travel. 'It's not even that far, fella. I used to fly across cities without getting tired,' he cooed, as if it wasn't a big deal.

I looked out to the sight below, too tired to counter. From the statue we had landed on, I could overlook the entire area without having to stretch my body. Clusters of trees spotted the landscape, some with a park bench positioned under the canopy. Several intricately designed streetlamps were scattered across the extent, trying their best to cover as much area with what little light they emitted.

I finally managed to catch my breath and ask, 'Why're we flying this far? Aren't we just getting food?'

‘Not just *get*, young fella. You first have to *find* it.’ Pidge cooed, his beady eyes sweeping the compound. ‘Everything comes with a price. You want freedom, you have to find your own shelter and grubs.’

I gaped at him, trying hard to process his words.

‘Anyway, a little birdie told me there’re a lot of insects to chew on in this park.’

‘We’re eating *insects* for dinner?’ I squawked. The sky grumbled deafeningly in the background, as if emphasizing my shock. The mere thought of chowing down on *insects*, those creepy-crawlies that scared even *humans*, made me queasy.

‘Price of freedom – if you consider *eating insects* as a price. Come on, it’s not that bad. The actual hard part is catching them, but don’t worry, you’ll quickly get the hang of it. After all, many birds are born insectivores, right?’ And with that, he dove into the dense foliage of a tree just a few body lengths away.

I continued to stand there, too aghast at the revelation. *I’m born to eat insects?* I had never eaten anything other than seeds for almost half of my life, and I thought *that* was normal.

A chilling drop pattered on me, breaking me out of my trance. I looked up, and all I could see were thick clouds engulfing the last of the once-blue sky. Another drop collided onto my carefully-preened feathers as I watched, then another. Then all of a sudden, water began pouring from above. I was instantly drenched from head to tail.

I immediately fluttered my wings and plunged into the leaves Pidge had disappeared in without as much as a second thought.

The rain sounded a lot distant inside the tree, and the dense leaves provided a pretty good cover from the shower. But that didn’t help with the fact that I was now shivering from the freezing cold seeping into my bones.

I couldn’t find Pidge from where I was perching, so I carefully hopped from one branch to another whilst calling out his name. I heard the leaves murmur as they swayed in the wind, as if mocking my inability to cope with the situation. I bristled at the thought. I had to prove that I could survive in the outside world. I stopped calling for Pidge and started scouring, examining every leaf and branch for hiding insects, but quickly realized it was no simple task. The only potential dinner I caught sight of scattered away before I could even twitch a feather.

I didn't know how long I had been searching. All my efforts seemed to be in vain. I was now chilled to the very core, ravenous, and exhausted. I thought of my little cage, the pile of seeds that was always present despite my growing disdain, the dry twigs I got to wrap my feet around.

The sky suddenly exploded with a bone-disintegrating clap of thunder, and that was all I needed.

'I give up!' I yelled in despair. 'I'm going home!' The last of my words was lost in another boom from above.

Pidge must have heard my cry above the thunder, because he emerged from behind the leaves the very next second. 'What's the matter? You found anything juicy?' He cooed, excitement rolling off his grey body.

'I want to go home!' I wailed. I couldn't care less if I sounded like a terrified chick at the moment.

'You sure about this, young fella? You barely lasted *an afternoon!*'

'I'd rather trade this with dry land,' I tweeted, my voice quivery.

'You're trading *freedom* away!'

'I quit. This life isn't for me. It's far too difficult and loud and *wet!*'

The giant bird seemed stricken at my outbreak. 'It's only a thunderstorm, fella,' he cooed, crestfallen. 'But if you insist, I can bring you home. After all, pigeons are experts at navigating and orientating – even in the rain.'

Throughout the whole journey back, flapping my damp and heavy wings as I tailed behind Pidge, I thought about my decision. But the moment I landed on the dry windowsill, I made up my mind: if freedom meant having to find all the happiness and wellbeing yourself, then I was giving it a hard pass.

The living room in front of me was lit, and I saw my owners huddled together, staring at my empty cage blankly. I suddenly felt sorry for escaping in the first place – it was actually the first time I realized how much they loved and cared about me.

After chirping goodbye to Pidge – we would see each other soon in the future – I swept into the dry house without remorse. My owners gasped and sprang up from the sofa as soon as they spotted my silhouette, their eyes glinting with tears. I circled beneath the ceiling one last time, relishing probably my final chance of flying this freely, before my soaked feathers dragged me down and I had to land. I

flew into my cage with resolve. One of my owners immediately went for the cage door, and with a *click*, I was again shut out from the world I once yearned to be in.

I shook off as much water as I could before diving into the mountain of seeds, I once became weary of.

I may have chosen a dry body and stable food supply over freedom, but I didn't regret it. I already had my fair share of breath-taking scenery, insect-hunting and miserable downpour.

I was okay with my life right now.

As long as I never have to think of eating insects for dinner again.