



Sights a Bird

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Sights a Bird

*She sights a Bird - she chuckles -
She flattens - then she crawls -
She runs without the look of feet -
Her eyes increase to Balls -*

-Emily Dickinson

For what was the use of nine lives if you could not risk at least one of them in the service of adventure? And what was the night if not for searching and sniffing and discovery? And what of the city if not newly discovered each and every night?

From midnight to sunrise, the city belonged to Zelda, and all its mystery was there to be found. A million pirate treasures, and everywhere an X upon the map. But which X to choose?

Choices, choices, and yet none too clear. What she needed was the bird's eye view, but without feathers or flight there was none to be had. Unless...

A shadow in amongst shadows, Zelda purred her way to Montmartre and there took a perch upon the Church of Saint Pierre to see the city from above and find her adventure.

The lights of a million and more souls were bright that night. They loved and laughed and talked and drank and where they could they smoked as others had smoked in secret rooms thick with ideas.

But the humans did not concern her. She had left the humans behind to find something more on the streets of Paris.

Maybe a kindred spirit, another cat to tandem the adventure? Or a sleeping dog to wake, and run out the rest of the night in chase? Or...a snack?

A black and white flutter of wings caught Zelda's narrow emerald eyes.

A magpie, fat and round.

Supper in flight. A meal fit for a King, and most definitely this Queen of the Night.

Zelda licked her lips and jumped.

She followed the bird as a ancient wise man might have followed a bright star. From Montmarte to the foot of the Eiffel Tower, where the black-and-white star fell to perch upon a sign for river tours along the Seine.

The bird watched her.

She watched the bird.

How many times had she played this *Sylvester-and-Tweety* game? Unlike the cartoons she watched with amusement in the apartment of her owner, Sylvester always won when it came to the world beyond the television. But there was something new about this night and this game.

Zelda, belly flat against the ground, the blood of the Savannah deep in her ancestral blood, approached her quarry.

The bird, unafraid, did not flutter or fly.

Zelda paused.

What was this now? Why no flight, why no dropped feathers or chirping? Bird and cat, the oldest of enemies, night and day. But not on this night.

The answer was human and close by.

An artist with brushes in hand and canvas as blank as any novelist's first page, provided the needed comfort for the bird, still watching. He smiled and reached down to pat Zelda upon the head, tracing the contour down to her back.

"Well, well. And why do you visit me on such a night, little kitty?" he said.

Zelda struggled to free herself, but the artist's hand stroked the secret spine beneath the fur. That place where, once touched, triggered purrs and sleep.

She purred.

"I see," the artist said, divining meaning in the sound, "you are here as I am, to see the city under different light. To capture beauty and hold it, yes?"

Zelda wagged her head, a no as universal as mathematics.

"Then you already know the city, yes? You come here not to discover, but to find something new? Adventure, I would wager."

Zelda curled her spine around the artist's fingers and felt the chemical electric energy of the man and the art. A dreamer he was, unafraid to dream. A story writing itself in life. A story she would have loved to hear any other time.

But not this time.

She curled her way from his stroke.

His hand returned, tickling the secret trigger behind her ear.

Zelda let out a frustrated and pleasurable purr.

"And I'll wager you're wondering why any man would come out under such conditions to paint?" The artist said. "You wonder is there art without light or a blue sky above? How does one see the muse in the darkness?"

She did not wonder, for the city and its people were art under even the darkest night sky. Her wonder turned to the bird. Had it taken to the skies while she was trapped under the artist's fingers?

Zelda turned her head enough to see the bird, silent and unmoved as a taxidermist's pride possession.

Why do you not move, she wanted to say, but instead her animal language was cut short by the hand of the artist by her side.

"I have answers to the questions, little kitty. The muse is here, she has arrived, and you shall be that muse on this fine night. You shall be the inspiration and subject. Do you agree?"

Zelda purred, which was neither a yes or no, but the artist found meaning anyway.

He lifted her up by the belly and framing the Eiffel Tower and the night with one hand, he placed her within that frame. He wagged a finger at her as though she were a common dog.

"Sit still now, long enough for the wine to warm me and the paint to dry."

The artist poured wine and supped a glass dry while he dipped brushes into fresh tar-thick oils.

"Good kitty."

Without his touch, Zelda lost her purrs and replaced them with a hiss.

How dare he treat me as a dog! I'm a Queen of this night. This is my city. I speak with her and she speaks to me. Pfft! Let him paint thin air and get too drunk on that wine to see straight.

Zelda cocked her head at the artist and faced the bird.

"Wait, Kitty, wait!" the artist called.

But Zelda did not listen.

No creeping left, she stalked forward.

"Well now, bird," she purred, "do you not fear me?"

"Fear?" The bird chirped. "Why should I fear you, cat? You are too far away to leap. Your claws are retracted."

"I move fast," Zelda purred.

"And I fly faster."

"Shall we see?"

"We shall."

Zelda leaped into the air.

The bird fluttered its wings.

Claws out, she swiped, but found nothing but the same air she'd left the artist with.

The bird was gone.

Into the sky.

Hours burned away to dawn, but still she could not find the bird. Where had that black-and-white snack found its perch, Zelda wondered? And why so brave? None of their kind had been so brave before this night.

None so brave, and none so quick either. None who had beat her as she leaped. None before who had managed to escape.

All wrong.

It had to be fixed.

But how, when she could not find the bird, nor sniff its scent upon the night winds? And what if the bird escaped once more? What if she leaped too soon, found only thin air again?

The shame of the bird's victory would haunt her as she haunted the night streets. How could a cat, a Queen of this night, hold her head up high in company when a simple bird had bested her?

She could not.

Home then?

To the apartment and there curl up and forget this night and the adventure that almost was? Warm, safe. But not happy.

There would only be happiness when her mouth was stuffed with feathers, and she licked the last of that bird from her fangs.

A determined scowl upon her face, Zelda followed the night toward *Le Pont du Carroussel*. There she froze.

At one end of the bridge, as still as a statue, the bird waited. Watched. Unmoved by the couples that strolled by, or the presence of a hungry cat.

Blind luck?

Or did the bird wait for her?

Zelda approached at a unhurried pace.

The bird moved only to preen its feathers.

Closer and Zelda purred a question.

"Why do you wait here, bird?" she said.

The bird eyed her with a contemptible look.

"To rest, cat, to rest. Do you not rest as I?"

Zelda sat, eyeing the bird for weakness, but could find none.

"When the afternoon sun is hot I will take my rest, let that sun warm my belly."

"Then you understand why I must rest, cat," the bird said.

"There is no sun."

"But there is the journey."

"The journey?"

The bird flapped its wings.

Zelda felt her heart jump, her muscles tense, ready for action.

The bird remained steadfast.

"From here to there, there to here I travel. Between I take my rest where I can find it."

Zelda smiled.

"You think you can find rest in my presence?"

The bird, its beak twisted as only a bird's beak could, smiled right back.

"I am not frightened of you, cat. I have escaped once before, or have you forgotten?"

Zelda scowled.

This was not about rest, but a game, she was sure. A game that the bird liked to play and, to her annoyance, was winning. At that moment she would have traded eight of her nine lives just to hold the bird in her claws for a moment.

"Once, bird," Zelda said, "and only once. The next time you won't be so fortunate."

"There will be a next time?" the bird said.

"I vow it."

"Vows are not always kept, cat. After this night I may never see this city again. Then what? How will you find me?"

Zelda opened her mouth to purr a response, but was struck dumb by the bird's questions.

If the bird was passing through, how would she find it again? How could she make good on the promise she'd made herself? You could not play cat and bird without the bird.

But an idea formed, a plot, a plan of action.

"Tell me, bird, why is your visit so brief? Do you not live here in the city?"

"I call many cities my home, cat. Many places. I have travelled continents from sunset to sunrise. I have followed great rivers and seen the oceans. I have..."

As the bird recalled its greatness, Zelda inched forward. Closer, closer still. She wore a mask of interest even as her mind prepared the feast to come.

"...I have seen the moon rise over Bologne, Berlin and Biarritz. I have seen the sun fade behind the Alps and..."

She was within a paws reach of the bird now. No mistakes this time. Soon she would find feathers and blood.

"...I have..."

Zelda leaped.

Into the arms of a smiling man.

"Hello there!" he called.

A woman joined him.

"What have you there, Philipe?"

Philipe, for that was the man's name, twirled Zelda around in a dizzying rush.

"Why, I have a witness to our ceremony, Marla, what we could not find anywhere else!"

"Will this kitty-kat do?" Marla said.

"Man or beast, it will do just fine. What do you say, kitty-kat?" Philipe leaned in close to Zelda's face.

The stench of strong wine and cigarettes filled Zelda's delicate nostrils, made her whiskers twitch. She twisted, but could not see the bird any longer. She clawed, but Philipe held her fast within his arms.

"Do we do it here, Philipe?" Marla said.

"Here, under this Paris sky is as good a place as any." Philipe tickled Zelda's stomach. "And our marriage shall be blessed by you. You shall be our priest, best man, bridesmaid all rolled into a cute little bundle. Won't you now?"

Zelda saw now the humans in their folly. One dressed in white veil, the other in tuxedo and black tie. Ready for an impromptu wedding upon the bridge.

"You start, Philipe," Marla said.

Philipe cleared his throat. "Do you, Marla Robicheaux take this man, Philipe Dumont to be your lawfully wedded husband."

"I do," Marla said, her voice a chuckle. "And do you, Philipe Dumont take Marla Robicheaux to be your lawfully wedded wife?" Marla added.

"I do, a thousand times, yes," Philipe said. "And now the kiss."

He leaned toward Marla, but Marla leaned away.

"No ring, no kiss," she said.

"Yes, the ring!"

His grip loosened as he transferred Zelda into a cradle of his left arm and searched his pockets for the ring.

Zelda saw her chance.

She saw her victory.

The bird had not taken flight. Laughing, it stood upon the bridge as fixed as it had been moments before. Enjoying its victory.

Not for much longer.

Zelda scratched her way free and jumped.

This time the bird had no chance.

Zelda pinned it to the bridge with both paws, a smile exposing her fangs.

"You were saying?" she said.

The bird, trapped under claws, talked in rapid chirps.

"Leave me be and I'll tell you a secret," it said.

Zelda eyed her midnight snack with suspicion.

"I know all the secrets of the city, you cannot tell me anything I do not already know."

"This you do not know. I promise."

"I know the spirit of this city, bird, she is a woman and she talks to me come midnight. Do you think there is a secret that I do not know once that woman whispers into my ears? You cannot say anything that will stop me."

The bird struggled out words. "That may be true and good, but the city is not the world, cat."

Zelda pushed down hard.

"You talk in riddles."

"Let up your paws and I shall speak more plainly."

"And let you fly away? No, I'm not so trusting. Fool me once—"

"Then only one paw, so that I might breathe a little more easily."

"One paw?"

"Only one, I can't fly away if you have one paw on me, can I?"

Zelda had her victory under foot, and the bird was right, it could not fly away if she had only one of her paws fixing it to the bridge.

She lifted one paw off the bird's throat.

"Talk," she said.

The bird coughed.

"I will talk, and I will tell you that this city maybe yours, but the world is ours, cat. From village to town to city we birds carry with us dreams."

Zelda's claws itched for action, but she stalled the instinct.

"Dreams?"

"A man in Lyon looks up to the moon and wishes he were in Paris with his love. A girl in Bologne falls asleep wishing for her father to return from a business trip. We birds hear all dreams and repeat them to the ears of those who wish to listen."

"Nonsense."

The bird preened its feathers hesitantly.

"I tell you no lies. Have you woken to bird song before, cat?"

"I have heard that cacophony once too often."

"Then you have heard dreams. You have heard wishes made and repeated. Birdsong is telegraph for wishes. Asked and answered."

"Prove it."

The bird fluttered under paw.

Zelda readied herself to fix it once again with her claws to the old stone of the bridge.

"No, hold your claws, cat. I can prove myself. Do you not find it strange that you found me on this night?"

"Strange is that it took me so long to beat you."

"Think, cat, you did not find me, it was the other way around."

"Nonsense."

The bird tried to wag its head, but with paws in the way it managed only shiver.

"You live with Karin Saint, do you not? She is an artist, a painter. A dreamer."

Zelda's emerald eyes flashed with suspicion.

"How do you know this?"

"I carry her wish with me, her dream, cat."

Zelda swiped an angry paw so close to the bird's face that a feather jarred loose and drifted away to the waters below.

"You lie," Zelda said.

"This is no lie. Kill me, cat, and you kill a wish."

"What wish?"

The bird almost laughed, but thought better and killed the laugh half way through.

"If I tell you then you will kill me and take the wish yourself."

"And how, pray, would I take this wish?"

"You are wiley, cat, an admirable foe. You would find a way."

Zelda leaned in closer, questions tumbling in her mind.

"You said that you found me, what does that mean?"

The bird turned away, and a blush crossed its beak.

"I was lost," it said in a low chirp. "I meant to follow you home to your owner and then tell my secret."

"A lie," Zelda said.

"Why would I wait here, at the tower? Why would any bird not take to the sky when faced with a cat? I tell no lies."

Zelda hated the logic of the bird's words, but they made sense. Not a game then, but something more. Could it be that this black-and-white feast was telling the truth?

"If what you say is truth, then what do we do now, bird? I will not let you go."

"Let me go, and I will not fly, I promise. I will sit upon your back and you will take me to your owner, then you will see. If I'm lying then you will know once we get to her."

"You are crazy."

"And you would sacrifice your owner's happiness for a meal, would you, cat?"

She would not, for that was home and after a night spent wandering and listening to the city, she always had a place to curl up, food in the dish, and stroking whenever she pleased.

But to trust the bird?

How could she, after the chase, after the taunts and the earlier stand-off? If the bird was lying then she would no longer be Queen Zelda of the Paris night, but just another cat, shamed to a life of dustbins and low company. The city would not whisper its secrets to her if she was beaten by a bird.

Zelda lifted her paw.

"Fly and I will find you, bird. The next time I will not waste so much time with your words."

"Understood," the bird said.

For a moment the bird did not move, even free from Zelda's paw.

Then it fluttered its wings, beat them three or more times, hopped onto its feet and shrugged away loose feathers.

"Are you ready, cat?" the bird said.

"You were telling the truth?" Zelda said.

"Turn around and you will find out."

"Turn?"

"Turn."

Zelda, nervous and feeling foolish, turned. This was insane, the bird would take to the skies any moment now and everything would be lost.

The night wind touched Zelda's raised fur.

And not long after, so did the bird.

Perched upon the ledge she watched her owner's sleeping body as it woke to the bird song outside the window.

Watched as stretched from sleep, her owner walked to the phone and picked it up. Then listened as a wish became true.

"Zelda! Zelda! Did you hear, did you hear!" the owner said, running to the window, there to pull Zelda into the air and a joyous, twirling dance. "I was too afraid to call, but I just had to, it was...the gallery. Did you hear? They bought my paintings, all of them, they were just waiting for me to call!"

The dance continued.

Somewhere beyond the window, in the Paris morning, birds sang their morning songs. Each a wish about to come true.

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