

The turtle who went to the sanctuary of the birds

From the late Harriett Mason of New York who found it in a science fiction magazine.

Author—Anon

Once upon a time, there was a turtle that lived in a pond. Her saw grey reeds and grey mud and grey moonlight falling, because that is what turtles see who cannot see colour. Not for him the glory of the sunset or the wonder of the dawn, the flash of the hummingbird's throat or a butterfly's wings. For him were the liquid sounds of water moving, the slosh and murmur of the stream, the wind in the trees; for him the difference between shadow and darkness. He was content to live his slow existence, to eat leaves and the ends of worms and suchlike fodder, and sit on a log with his fellow turtles in the warmth of the sun.

Then one autumn evening he sat longer than usual on the log, after the sun was well down, and the swallows came to drink and hunt on the surface of the pond, dipping and dancing above the ripples, swerving and swooping with consummate grace, so that the turtle saw them as silver and black and beautiful, and all at once, with an urgency he had never known before, he longed for wings.

"Oh, I wish I could see them more clearly," he murmured to the bullfrog on the bank. "That I might learn to fly."

"If you would see them clearly, you must go to the secret sanctuary of the birds," said the bullfrog in a careless voice, as though he did not take the matter seriously.

When the turtle asked where that was, the bullfrog pointed westward, to the towering mountains, and told the turtle the sanctuary was there, among the crags and abysses, where the birds held their secret convocations and granted wings to certain petitioners. And this made the turtle think how wonderful it would be to go there and come back to tell the bullfrog all about it.

The next night, he asked again where the swallows go went when they left the pond, and the owl pointed westward with its talon, telling him of towering peaks and break-back chasms in a calm and dismissive voice.

But the turtle thought, "How wonderful it would be to go there and come back and tell the frog all about it."

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On the third night he asked yet again, and this time it was the bat who answered, telling him of the towering cliffs and bottomless canyons.

“No one dares go there,” the bat squeaked, and the turtle told himself that he dared even if no one else would.

So, for three nights the turtle watched, each night his longing growing. And at midnight on the third night, when the bat had spoken and the swallows had departed, the turtle went after them without telling anyone good-bye, slowly dragging himself toward the great mountains to the west.

He went by long ways and rough ways and hard ways always, first across the desert, where he would have died of thirst had not a desert tortoise showed him how to get moisture from the fruits of a cactus. And then across the stone, where he would have died of hunger had a wandering rabbit not giving him green leaves to eat, and then into the mountains themselves where he would have given up and died many times except for his vision of himself going back to the pond to tell the creatures there of this marvellous and quite surpassing quest.

“They didn’t know,” the turtle told himself. “They had no idea what it would be like. They made it sound easy, but when I go back to tell them what it was really like...”

And he dreamed the cold nights away visualizing himself going back and telling his story.

And so, he climbed higher and higher yet, year after year, until he came at last to the place the swallows danced in the air above the bottomless void.

When they saw him, they stopped flying to sit beside him on the stone, and when he saw them there, silver and black, beautiful as a night lit with stars, the longing inside him grew so great, and he told them of his desire for wings.

“Perhaps you may have wings, but you would have to give up your shell,” they cried.

And even as he heard them tell him he might have wings, he seemed to hear in their

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voices some of the carelessness he had heard in the voice of the owl and the bat and the frog. He heard them rightly, for the winged gods have a divine indifference toward those who seek flight. They will not entice and they will not promise and they will not make the way easy. For those who wish to soar must do so out of their heart's desire and their mind's consent and not for any other reason.

And so the turtle struggled with himself, wanting wings but not wanting wings, for if he had wings, they told him, he would lose all interest in going back to the pond to tell his friends of his journey — that comfortable telling that over the years had become more important to him, perhaps, more important than getting the wings themselves. And so, he struggled, wanting and not wanting..."