

The bird and the child

First day

"Today I have to go," said the bird.

"Why?" the child asked.

"Because I have to be free. I have to feel the wind in my feathers. I have to stretch my wings, float on the layers of air and gaze far away."

"Why?" the child asked again.

"Because that is how I am," said the bird.

"But what about me?" the child asked, "I can't fly."

"Yes, you can fly too," said the bird, "you don't know it yet, but you can fly further than you think."

"Just as far as you?" the child asked.

"Just as far and further still," the bird said comfortingly. "Wait and see. Where do you like to be?"

"In France," the child said, and they became a little sad, because they weren't there and because they wouldn't be there for a long time.

The bird saw this and said: "Close your eyes and tell me. What kind of things did you do there? What did it look like?"

"There was a castle," the child said. "In the castle there was a shower and a very high bathroom. That's where we washed ourselves. The bats lived in the top of the tower and from the narrow window we could see the shadows of the bats in the night."

"Very good," said the bird, "go on."

"When we were done and walked back to our tent in the dark, with wet hair, then we tossed white stones up into the air, as low as we dared. Then the bats came swooping down, very close to our heads."

"How exciting," said the bird, "tell me some more. I've never been there, there at your castle."

"When it's night," the child explained, "it isn't quiet at all. You hear crickets singing. Very loudly. Except sometimes, all at once, they're suddenly silent. As if they are holding their breath."

"Is it always night over there then?" the bird asked.

"No," said the child. "During the day needs even more words. During the day it smells so nicely of not-home and it is always warm, even when it is raining."

"See," said the bird, "see that you can fly as well."

"I can't do that when you're not here," said the child.

Second day

"Today I have to go," said the bird.

"Oh no, you don't," said the child. "I've thought of something. You have to stay with me forever." The bird watched with interest what the child was going to do.

It built a cage with sturdy bars. In a sheltered place in a shed with double walls against the wind, because it was terribly stormy that day. After a while not a single drop of rain could come through the roof. The child itself was completely drenched and very satisfied.

“Nice, right?” said the child.

“Gosh,” the bird said merely, and after a while: “Do I really have to go in there? Don’t I live here? Here outside where the wind is and the rain and the trees and the sky?” He was holding on to a small branch of a birch tree, which bent under his weight. The feathers of his wings were being blown messily every which way.

“Not anymore,” said the child, “Now you live here, with me.” And they put the bird in the cage. At first it seemed quite nice. The wind and the rain were outside. The bird and the child were inside. But when night fell, the child went home, and the bird stayed behind in his cage. The moonlight shone sparsely through the double glass of the windows and cast a strange white light over the quiet perch. “This way I am not being rocked by the wind,” the bird thought sadly, and he tucked his head under his wing to sleep.

The next morning the child skipped to the shed where the cage was. The bird no longer looked like their bird. The wings were heavy with sorrow, tears were dripping down it. The child dried them, but there was an immeasurable amount of them, and the drops made puddles on the ground.

“I miss it so,” the bird whispered quietly.

“What do you miss the most?” the child asked.

“The light,” said the bird.

So now the child built an outside cage. A large, strong outside cage behind the shed. “Here I will feed you, in the morning and the evening,” said the child. “I will bring you here and I will come fetch you again. But most of the time I will stay cosily beside you and stroke your feathers. And we will tell each other stories about France and stuff. And about everything we’ve seen and done.”

The bird played along, because he loved the child so much. But the stories dried up, his voice grew hoarse and his feathers dull. “I can’t do it,” he said.

The child promised: “Tomorrow I will come with a plan. I will ask the night to think along.”

Third day

“Today I have to go,” said the bird.

“Hey hey, not so fast,” said the child, “I’ve thought of something.”

“Did the night think along?” the bird asked. The child was silent, just like the night had been silent. And the bird knew enough, he no longer trusted the child’s plans.

When the child wanted to carefully bring the bird from the inside cage to the outside, the bird made a dive and began to swerve and flap. The child startled: “Don’t do that, don’t do that, that’s dangerous, I can’t bring you outside like this. Or I’ll have to leave you inside.” So, the bird stayed quiet and on the child’s shoulder he came along to the outside cage. Because he did want to go outside very badly.

Silent and sad he sat down on the highest perch, with his feathers puffed up.

“Why aren’t you happy? Why are you sitting so still?” the child asked.

The bird said: “Because of those bars I can’t see the world anymore. I only see lines. Lines through the trees, lines through the sky, lines through the grass. And I don’t like that; that’s not at all how the world is.”

“Then I shall give you an unstriped tree,” said the child and it dug a tree out of the ground to put it in the cage. “There, a tree of your very own. See how beautiful and large it is.”

But the bird ate the tree bare. It bit off all the branches.

“What did you do that for?” the child asked.

“Didn’t you see? The tree couldn’t stand the cage either. I only helped him a little.” The bird once again climbed to his highest perch and sat there silently waiting for nothing. “Will you ask the night to think along again?” he asked when the child brought him into the shed. The child nodded sadly.

Fourth day

“Today I have to go,” the bird said at once when the child came in the following morning. The child didn’t want to listen. They were silent. Once again, the night had not answered them. When they reached the outside cage, they saw an iron ring on a chain on the wall. “Do you see that?” the child said, “it’s a sign. I can’t believe I’ve never seen that before!” The child grew happier and happier. “Wear that ring around your leg, then everything will be alright again. Then you don’t need to be in a cage, but I will just tie you up. Then you are no longer bothered by the bars.”

The ring was heavy and it chafed. The chain was fixed to the wall, close by a couple of trees. The bird fought the ring. He got tangled up in the chain. He didn’t want to be fixed. He flapped around a tree and the chain grew short and taught. The child saw it and stood by helplessly. “Be careful,” they said, “or you’ll hurt yourself.”

The bird did not want to eat or drink that day. The child brought him the tastiest treats, but he barely took any of it.

“Why are you doing all this?” the bird asked.

“Because I love you so much,” said the child.

“Do you love me? Or do you love us together?” asked the bird.

Fifth day

“Today I have to go,” said the bird.

“Yes,” said the child, “that is true. I can see it, and the night said it too, you have to go.” They felt a strange itch on their back, right between their shoulder blades. They put the bird in the tree. Completely free, the way a bird ought to sit in a tree. The bird stayed close.

“Is there anything I can do for you still?” the bird asked.

“Will you teach me how to fly one more time?” the child asked, “so I’m sure I can also do it on my own?”

“Where are we going?” the bird asked.

“Where do you want to go?” the child asked.

“Shall we go to France again?” asked the bird.

And off they went. The child closed their eyes and talked about France. At first they talked carefully and a little hesitant. Told about leaking tent flaps, busy and dusty markets, caves with strange drawings from very long ago, castles and a sea that was wide and flat one day and stormy and foaming with high waves the day after. They talked and talked. They opened their eyes and dared to tell more and more.

The bird listened and closed his eyes. He listened and listened. And when the child fell silent, he asked something. Until they were done talking.

And then they were silent.

For a very long time.

“Do you feel the wings on your back?” the bird asked finally.

“The itch between my shoulder blades?” the child asked.

“Yes, that,” said the bird, “but now I have to go.”

The child nodded and said nothing.

“Whenever you think of me, you are flying along with me,” said the bird, “and sometimes I will send you a feather. Wait and see, then you will know I am thinking of you.”

The child nodded again.

The bird took off, higher and higher, while the first feather fluttered down from the sky.

“Tomorrow I will fly again too,” the child thought. “But not today.”

Written by Annechien Wijnbergh

Translated by Laura Simons