

The Seventh Adventure The Miracle of Flight

The moon was shining brightly, and pinprick stars speckled the evening sky when they reached the end of the ditch and pulled their rafts onto shore.

Thimble pulled Chickpea up the bank a little ways as the other mice tended to their vessels. She pressed her nose into his chest.

“Thank you for coming for me, Thimble,” she said, “I think, somehow, I always knew you would. Though, it seemed impossible. Did you miss me?”

“Oh, my love,” Thimble sighed, and held her body close, “you can’t know how much I missed you.”

It was true. Chickpea’s cage had disappeared from the tabletop in the breakfast nook in autumn, and Thimble had begun climbing into the Maple tree that overlooked the window. It was the same route he had taken all summer to visit her. Now the table stood empty. Its face shone back at him. Her absence was marked and left him bereft, but still every day that autumn as the leaves in the Maple grew a deeper and deeper shade of red, as they began to wither and fall, and the gusts of November turned to the snow flurries of December, Thimble would wait in the tree and stare through the window at the place Chickpea had been. The Todd family strung Christmas lights, they wore thick socks, and encompassing sweaters, the house glowed warmly against the winter chill. Outside Thimble’s whiskers froze to his chin. He shivered against the wind and ice.



Ladle grew increasingly concerned for his brother. Each night when Thimble would return to the feather strewn den they had built under the stone down the path from the pond, Ladle would try to get him to eat. Their Winter stores were plenty, there was no need to conserve food, but still, Ladle could only get Thimble to take in a few seeds, before he would fall heavily to sleep.

Ladle held his brother through those long winter nights. Sometimes Thimble would cry. Sometimes he just laid like the dead. Ladle rocked him like a pup, and told him everything would eventually be well. That it would be summer soon, and he would be happier then.

Soon even winter began to ebb. The snowflakes became rain drops, and the frozen ground gave way to mud. Small green things began to grow in the garden. From Thimble’s vantage point in the Maple, he saw the first buds of leaves.

That night curled up against Ladle, Thimble whispered, "Do you think I will ever see her again?"

Ladle stayed quiet for a moment, then snuggled closer to his brother, "I think, you should try to get some sleep."

Thimble had emerged from the den with the dawn light. The earth was wet with puddles from the rain the day before. He looked up at the Maple, and sighed heavily. *No more*, he thought, and turned the other direction.

He found himself walking aimlessly toward the lane. He paused at a grassy spot and allowed himself to feel the weight of his own heartbreak. *I don't think I will ever see her again*, he thought, and just then a sly wind came blowing down through the puddles in the muddy lane, and on it was a bit of newspaper, and on that bit of newspaper was Chickpea's face.

Now, not two days later, to be standing along this bank embracing her, Thimble was overcome. *How lucky am I*, he thought, *how very, very lucky*.

"Where to, Chickpea?" Decimus was walking up the hill, and the rest of the white mice were following him.

"Right this way," she responded, and pointed toward the sidewalk of a little street which still abutted the wood, but turned away from the main road.

Thimble felt an eerie shiver shoot down his spine.

"Wait," he said, watching the mice all jauntily head toward the street.

Again, Thimble found himself the subject of fourteen sets of eyes, "Shouldn't we," he began and stopped, "shouldn't we perhaps stay hidden under the tree line for a little while?"

"Why?" asked Una.

Thimble stared at his domestic compatriots. He was at a loss. They looked expectant, and excited. Why shouldn't they be? They had found freedom, and they were on a journey leading them to a new home. Thimble searched himself. He felt he should be happy as well, but instead a dull, panging, anxiety was creeping into his chest where happiness should be.

He looked to the night sky, clear and expansive before him. How could he explain to these exuberant faces that he feared what might be hunting them, out there, somewhere in the night? He looked at Chickpea. She watched him with her big eyes. *No need to frighten them unnecessarily*, he thought.

"It's nothing," he said at last, "let's just move quickly."

Up on the sidewalk, the street looked perfectly calm and asleep. A few houses stood on the other side of the street, their front porch lights casting protective glows over their front lawns. A streetlamp emitted a beam of light, creating a yellow circular glow across the pavement.

Everything looked placid and in its place save for an orange barricade that flashed a warning for any motorists who happened by.

"Ha," Decimus smirked looking at the flashing orange words, "I think I know what that's about."

"What does it say?" Thimble whispered to Chickpea at his side.

"It says, 'don't stop for monkeys.'"

Up toward the front of the party of mice, Thimble could hear Nona making plans, "We can find a hollow tree trunk, clear out as much space as possible for storing food. We don't need to go hungry in Winter if we prepare properly."

"What about fruits," Octavia whined, "we won't be able to keep fruits in winter, and I do so love something sweet."

"We might try to dry some," Nona said, and she screwed up her face in an effort to think more efficiently, "we would need a very hot day."

Thimble stopped dead. He stood on the pads of his feet. His heart thrummed so loudly in his ears, that all other noise went distant and far away.

Even Chickpea's voice next to him seemed quiet, "Thimble? What's wrong?"

The fourteen white mice all stopped walking and looked at him concerned.

"Thimble? You're frightening me," said Chickpea.

In the pool of light from the streetlamp up ahead, and only for the briefest of moments, Thimble had seen its shadow. It flew in silence, but he had been able to make out the wings, the great knife-like talons protruding from its toes. The blood in Thimble's veins was replaced by ice water. A cold flowed through him. He stood very still.

"Thimble, please," whispered Chickpea.

Finally, Thimble said a word, and that word was, "Run."

The fifteen mice bolted toward the shelter of the trees. Thimble, though the smallest, took the lead. Thimble was, after all, wild, and those who are wild know when to flee, and know the importance of rapidity. He led the mice down through the wood. He leapt over twigs and branches, he ducked under ferns and toadstools. He galloped, his hind legs springing him forward, his front paws clutching clumps of damp earth.

Thimble glanced back. Chickpea was directly behind him, and the others were coming up fast. The muddy ground was speckling their white fur. Their eyes bulged. Nona and Treize raced side by side, Decimus moved powerfully, Septimus weaved in and out as though he couldn't decide where he should be.

"Come on," Thimble cried, "keep running!"

Above them, the owl poised itself for an attack. It dove. The crash of its talons hitting the earth next to the mice was deafening. They were sprayed with a wave of mud. Una, who had been nearest, screamed as her body was propelled up into the air by the force of the impact.

The owl's wings flapped causing gusts of wind to hit the running mice, and it flew again, silently, into the trees.

"What's it doing," shrieked Octavia.

"It's getting a better advantage," Nona cried, "it's going to dive again!"

"Keep running," yelled Thimble, and he doubled his efforts.

The owl dove, this time, it did not miss. It sailed downward toward the front of the party, and its talons found their target as they laced themselves around Thimble. For a flash, everything was black, and Thimble felt the hot sensation of the owl's skin ensconcing him. But in that instant, Chickpea's arms were around his waist, and she yanked him free. Together Chickpea and Thimble went rolling through the mud, and the owl flew upwards again.

Thimble lay panting in the mud, Chickpea was above him, and he felt her paws ruffling frantically through his fur, “Are you alright,” she was crying, “are you alright?”

“Yes,” Thimble said, coming to and taking her paw, “come on, come on, we have to keep running.”

Through the woods they went, the fifteen mice were nearly blind with terror and mud. Their bodies were exhausted, but still they ran. Above them the owl readied itself. Thimble could feel a shiver of impending doom tingling through the fur on the back of his neck.

“We’re not going to make it,” Una screamed.

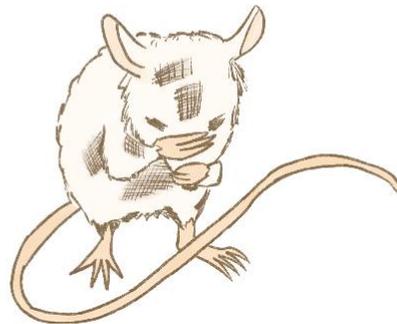
Chickpea was sobbing. Her eyes were blurring with tears. Her hind right paw hit a pebble and sent her flying. She stumbled to her feet, and put her paws across her eyes. She trembled, and tried in vain to make herself as small as possible.

Thimble looked back, and time slowed to the pace of molasses. He took in the image of Chickpea trembling in the mud, and the claws of the great beast above her, its long, slicing nails reaching for her, slowly the owl descended.

“No!” Thimble screamed, and turned back, willing himself to be fast enough to save her. Thimble found time had slowed for himself, as well. He saw his paws raise slowly in front of him as he ran. He could see he wasn’t going to get there in time. Chickpea crouched, she pulled her arms in tight around her, tears were spilling over her nose and hitting the mud below. *Please no*, thought Thimble, *no, no, no, no...*

In an instant, from the side and from above, two sets of powerful feet came swinging toward the owl. They made contact with the beast’s breast, and the owl went tumbling out of the sky and away from Chickpea. It hit the earth and rolled in a mass of confused feathers. It twisted its head, and beat its wings, and when it had its bearings enough to fly away, it did so. Thimble watched its silhouette glide away on a shimmer of moonlight.

Thimble ran to Chickpea and scooped her up in an embrace. The rest of the mice stopped, and all about them was a cackling laughter. *Ooh, Ooh, Ooh, Aah, Aah, Aah!*



At first the fifteen mice stood agog, taking in their situation. Not only had they been saved, but all of them had survived the owl attack with all their various legs and tails intact. The two monkeys who had kicked the owl stood on the ground before them, and as they followed the laughter and looked up into the trees, the mice saw the reflective eyes of the remaining monkey troop decorating the boughs. As they stood and watched, several rats popped their heads over a log, an aggravated chinchilla waddled out from under a fern, and an apricot lop hopped out from behind a tree.

“Peony!” Thimble exclaimed.

“Hello, mouse,” she said.

“I’m happy to see you made it out! However did you manage to free all those monkeys anyway?” asked Thimble.

“Oh,” she stroked one of her long ears with a cavalier swish, “I just chewed a hole in the netting at the bottom of their enclosure and asked them to come down.”

“Oh,” said Thimble, and he was disappointed there wasn’t more to the story than that.

“Speaking of,” one of the monkeys snarked, and stalked toward Thimble on its towering legs, “I think *you* need to see Calixto.”

Not again, thought Thimble, as his whole body was lifted and tossed into the air. *You know*, he thought as he bounced from one monkey to the next going up and up through the trees, *I have spent an inordinate amount of time flying lately--for a mouse*.

Four monkeys, and a small bout of dizziness, and Thimble found himself, for the second time, standing on a branch very high up face to face with Calixto.

“I understand you’re fugitives now,” Thimble said.

Calixto laughed at that, “and we have you to thank for it, mouse.”

Thimble looked at the monkey, and he looked at the chilly little wood, “where will you go?” he asked, for it was clear that this was no place for monkeys.

“We’ll keep moving south until we find somewhere warm. The important thing is that we’re free. We owe you a great debt of gratitude, Thimble.”

Thimble felt his cheeks grow hot, “Oh,” he said, “I didn’t really do anything. I was just looking for Chickpea.”

“And you found her didn’t you?”

Thimble smiled, “Yes I did, I’m taking her home.”

“To your garden?”

“Yes, to my garden.”

Calixto tilted his head, his eyes narrowed in contentment.

In the next instant the monkey was flabbergasted for Thimble had thrown his arms about Calixto’s neck and nuzzled his nose into the primate’s fur, “I hope you find your warm place,” he said, “I will miss you, my friend.”

“Thimble,” Calixto’s voice was melodious and deep, “I am lucky to have met you.”

On a branch nearby there was a rustling of feathers and Thimble turned to see a big blue and yellow macaw preening himself under his wing.

“Pardon me,” called Thimble, “forgive me for bothering you, but I was once told, by a parakeet named Peter, to remember that I had many friends with wings.”

**

Thimble was a magnificent sight, looping down to the ground atop the majestic blue and yellow bird. They landed gracefully before the fourteen white mice, and Thimble slid elegantly to the ground. He gestured toward the parrot's back, and the macaw gave a deep bow toward the mice.

"We shall be traveling the final leg of our journey by sky," Thimble announced with the air of a conductor.

Thimble watched the woods below them grow small as they soared into the air. To the eastern horizon an early light was glowing. The sun would be rising soon. The morning wind rushed through his whiskers, and Chickpea tightened her grip around his waist.

"This way," she cried to the parrot, and she pointed him toward the South.



**

Ladle sat by the pond in the dawn light.

"No sign of him all night?" It was Cashel who asked the question, only his eyes and nose were visible above the surface.

Ladle looked at his friend, and shook his head.

Yesterday, after he had finally pulled himself away from the Morning Glories, Ladle had tried to go about his business, but it was very little use. He quickly found that everywhere he turned in the garden he saw his brother. He imagined Thimble stealing raspberries, or racing up to the Todd House to see Chickpea. He saw Thimble climbing sunflowers, and he saw him waiting, melancholic, in the Maple tree.

Later than usual, when the sun began to set, and a burnt orange sky unfolded over the garden, Ladle had heard Mr. Todd's car come up the lane. *Finally*, he thought, and he went running for the drive. The Morning Glories were shut up for the night when he arrived, and Mr. Todd stood by his car, the front door ajar.

"You have no idea," Mr. Todd was saying to Mrs. Todd who had appeared on the stoop to receive him, "if I had known all the animals in the world were going to go barking mad today, I would have stayed home ill."

"I saw it on the news," Mrs. Todd was saying excitedly, "animal control was warning motorists not to stop for monkeys! Are they dangerous?"

"No," Mr. Todd sighed deeply and put his hand to his head, "they're just... smart."

Ladle was most disappointed that Thimble and Chickpea did not appear from the vehicle. He returned to his empty den, beneath the stone, down the path from the pond, with a heavy heart. He tried to eat, but found himself uncharacteristically unable to stomach much food. He tried to sleep, but all night he tossed with dreams, imagining what terrible danger a mouse could face in the wide, wide world. *I should not have let him go*, he thought, knowing full well that when Thimble had made up his mind to do something, he did it. *Such bravery*, mused Ladle, *for such a small mouse*.

Now he stood by the pond with Cashel, "I'm not sure we will ever see him again," Ladle sighed, and turned his eyes upward into the dawn sky and there he saw... something.

A beautiful, enormous bird with blue and yellow feathers, the likes of which neither Cashel nor Ladle had ever seen before was making long, lovely loops toward the garden.

"Could it be?" asked Cashel.

"You know," said Ladle, a smile breaking across his face, "I think it just might be."

**

There had never been such a celebration. Whatever Thimble had expected upon returning to the garden, it was not the uproarious cheers they received. The macaw landed among a crowd of animals. Wild mice, and squirrels, rabbits, grasshoppers, frogs, and birds gathered about to welcome their hero home. They gasped with joy when not only Chickpea disembarked, but thirteen new white mice as well. Thimble was lifted onto shoulders and paraded around the pond.

While Ladle had worried over the whereabouts of his brother all the day before, the story of Thimble's expedition had been circulated far and wide. It began with a sparrow sitting on the windowsill outside Peter's cage. She had a habit of stopping in to ask how her parakeet friend was fairing, and had found him all a twitter with gossip. Later in the day the sparrow spoke to a rabbit who sat enraptured while the sparrow explained the story of the missing white mouse and the wild mouse who was off to save her. The rabbit had spoken to a frog, who added to the story by boasting about the frog company's contribution to Thimble's adventure. The frog related Thimble's flight through the Todd House, and his stowaway mission in Mr. Todd's car to a squirrel who happened to stop by the pond to check her reflection. Soon every animal in the garden knew of Thimble's brave rescue, and anxiously awaited his return.

A paw clapped Thimble on the back, and he swung about to find himself face to face with Garlic. He was wearing his monocle, and it made his right eye appear much larger than his left.

"Good to see you back,"

"Garlic," cried Thimble, "did you learn to read in the white place?"

"Is that where you were?" asked Garlic, "Of course! I never knew its proper name, but yes. When I was a kit they taught me to read there, but my eyes, you see, they got all blurry as I grew older. I couldn't see the cards anymore, and Mr. Todd brought me back here. I suppose he thought I couldn't be taught. I've been here ever since."

"But you can still read," said Thimble.

"Yes," Garlic laughed loudly, "I just need my monocle!"

Chickpea scampered up to Thimble's side.

"Are you happy?" Thimble asked her, and her laugh came like jangling bells.

"Oh yes."

Thimble kissed her and whispered in her ear, "Welcome home."

Home In the Summer Garden

Thimble stood by the pond. He splashed water over his whiskers and down the back of his neck. Even in the morning, the August day was hot. He knew the Todd girl would be out soon to sit by the water and watch the newts. She was getting taller.

There was a familiar clicking sound approaching. Thimble let it get closer until he could sense the terrier was directly behind him before he turned.

“Tuppy,” he said, his voice stern, “sit.”

She did so, her fangs flashing as she smiled exuberantly, and allowed her big wet tongue to flop out of her mouth.

“Good girl,” said Thimble and he climbed onto her back and gave her a gentle kick.

Down the path they trotted, past the stone where Thimble once shared a den with Ladle. It was now occupied by Octavia and Ladle, who were sitting atop the stone enjoying the sun. They waved when they saw Thimble ride past. Octavia was pregnant and Ladle patted her tummy gently.

High up in the Maple, Treize and Nona were experimenting with drying plums. Nona had fashioned a half a walnut shell on a string connected to a pulley. Its purpose was easy travel to and from the hollow hole in the Maple where the mice stored their food for winter. When she saw Thimble and Tuppy, she leapt into the walnut and rode down. Thimble watched her glide through the air, and thought, not for the first time, that she looked like she was sailing in a boat. He thought of the night they had all spent on the water.

When Nona reached about parallel with Thimble she gave a tug on the rope telling Treize to arrest her movement.

“Look,” she was a bit breathless with excitement and held up a perfect prune for Thimble to see.

“Oh, well done!” Thimble cried.

Down the path, Thimble looked into the trees. Secundus, Decimus and Septimus were hard at work with Garlic. They were building mice sized foot bridges all through the branches.

He and Tuppy rode past the trees, to where the thick summer grass led down toward the lane. Tuppy gave a small *woof!* Thimble patted her head and said, “It’s alright, girl.”

When she barked, seven pairs of rabbit ears appeared above the lush grass. A pod of wild rabbits had stopped to enjoy the shade of the garden. As Thimble watched them, an eighth set of ears emerged, but they were apricot, and flopped toward the ground. Soon he could see Peony’s lovely face.

Thimble waved. She waved back, and then continued to eat.

When they could see the tall stalks and the flowers whose heads were like blazing suns, Thimble jumped off Tuppy’s back.

“Off you go, you mongrel,” he said, and she went scampering off to find things to smell.

Thimble liked walking this last bit by himself. He liked the way the grass parted in front of him as he headed down the hill. He liked how the image of Chickpea, her white fur gleaming in the sunshine would materialize as he went. When she saw him, she looked up and smiled. It took his breath away. He paused for a moment, just to look at her. She was so beautiful.

At her feet were ten pups. Some were white like Chickpea. Some were brown like Thimble.

When Thimble reached the base of the sunflower stalks, he gave their mother a kiss and sat down amongst his children.

Chickpea pointed upwards to the sunflowers, then she knelt in the dirt at her feet where everyone could see. She made a symbol that twisted and curled. The letter S.