

## The Windbird Pinocha (Excerpt)

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### Chapter Ten: The Adventure of Snow Mountain

A wide beach lay out in front of Pinocha. Before him, the surging surf, and all around the calls of thousands upon thousands of sea birds shuttling back and forth across the sky. There was only one bird standing alone on the beach, facing away from the land. Its grey back was familiar.

Is that Shady? Pinocha thought to himself as he moved toward the bird and chirped at it.

The bird slowly turned his head. Alas! It was Cripple!

Pinocha took fright, woke up, and broke into a cold sweat.

He looked around. All of the other ringed plovers were lined up by the river, fast asleep. The temperature had dropped precipitously, leaving them in the cold. After a month in the mountains, returning to the foot of the mountain was like entering a different world. The river water beneath his feet would flow to the river mouth, sooner or later. "I wonder what the seaside is like now?" Other waterfowl must be busy molting and feasting in preparation for the return migration north.

"But where is Red-eye?" Pinocha asked, suddenly noticing that Red-eye was not in the line.

Pinocha looked around again, anxiously. Finally, he found Red-eye elsewhere in the delta, standing alone. This was as he had just seen him in a dream, except that Red-eye was facing a towering black mountain, from which the mist had lifted, at least for now.

Pinocha was too cold to fall asleep, so he walked towards Red-eye, making sure to make noise as he went. Red-eye did not react, just gazed at the mountain in a trance, like a piece of metal strongly attracted by a powerful magnet.

Pinocha gave a little cough and asked, "What's the name of this mountain?"

"It's called Snow Mountain," said Red-eye calmly, having noticed Pinocha's approach.

"Snow Mountain?" gasped Pinocha. "It snows often up there?"

"It depends on the weather. On a day like this, it should be snowing at the top. In the past, whenever it got cold, we'd fly to the plain to avoid the cold, just like mountain birds. Just like in the north, none of us had ever seen the snow. Tonight, I've got a strange hankering to see some snow."

Snow.

Of course, Pinocha had never seen any. None of the ringed plovers had.

"Would there be any danger in going for a climb up the mountain now?"

"I'm not sure, but it'd probably be too cold for us to endure."

"Why this sudden hankering for 'snow viewing'?" Pinocha asked. He just had to know the answer.

"I want to find out why we can't survive the winter in the north. I want to come back with the answer alive," Red-eye turned towards Pinocha and said, slowly and deliberately.

Pinocha was used to Red-eye thinking outside the box, exploratively, even though he himself did not have the ability to think in such a way.

In the dark their eyes met, glowing with mutual understanding.

"So do you want to go or not?" asked Pinocha, his voice firm. Infected by Red-eye's enthusiasm, it seemed, for this time he was the one to take the initiative.

"Now?" said Red-eye, unable to believe his ears. This juvenile bird before him was even crazier than he was.

Pinocha nodded once again. Of all the crazy things he had done in the past, he was always following some other ringed plover's lead. This time, he was going to do something that no other ringed plover had done before.

"Are you hiding anything?" asked Red-eye.

Pinocha nodded and answered honestly. "I want to prove once and for all whether you are the migratory bird called Shady."

"Shady? The migratory bird? Whether I am the migrant Shady?" Red-eye looked a combination of confused and happy. It was as if he knew who Shady was. "And you think you can prove it one way or the other by a flight up Snow Mountain?"

Red-eye's apparent doubt didn't bother Pinocha in the least.

"I believe that except for Shady, no other ringed plover would think of it. Even if they did, they would not succeed."

Pinocha's strange leaps of logic stopped Red-eye short.

"How about you?" Red-eye asked.

"I want to live to see you fly to the top," replied Pinocha.

Red-eye said nothing more, and just kept gazing at Snow Mountain.

Pinocha stood right next to him.

Dawn found these two birds standing abreast.

In the early morning, they set off straight for Snow Mountain. It was even colder than the night before.

Due to the heavy fog on the peak, they kept low until reaching the foot of the mountain, then started climbing. This was something they had expected. As far as they were concerned, nothing could stop them now but death. Though the fog was thick, at least it wasn't raining. Red-eye taught Pinocha how to keep a clear line of sight by flying just above the tips of the trees, where the fog was sparser. Pinocha quickly picked up the skill of wave-flying over the ocean of trees, and thought to himself: "Next time I go seaside, I'm maybe gonna try flying around the breakers, just like the seagulls do."

However, this happy time did not last. Upon entering the pine tree groves at two thousand meters above sea level, flying became a struggle, and he flew slower and slower. Red-eye, too, because it was simply too cold. The fog that soaked their wings was starting to freeze. Everything from his shoulders down went numb, as if it did not belong to him. The cold was more severe than Pinocha had imagined. "Red-eye must be suffering as well," he thought. Red-eye, who was in front of him, kept forging straight ahead. Pinocha was not going to admit defeat so easily, so he struggled to catch up.

Soon, a nasty rain appeared, rain that was exceptionally chilly. Each drop slapped into their bodies and stabbed their hearts like an awl. Under this torture, Pinocha felt heavy and weak. His wings sagged ever so slightly lower. He was about to fall into the sea of trees.

Out of the blue, Red-eye's voice suddenly reached his ear: "Hold on! I'm not doing any better than you. We've got to keep each other's spirits up."

Red-eye swooped over and yelled. Pinocha and Red-eye were the same, both dispirited, pathetic. Willpower was the only thing that kept Pinocha going. Though his eyes kept closing, he clenched his beak and forced himself to open them, wide. But soon they started closing again....

"None of us can live far from the sea. Even if he took a break from the sea he would have to return or else he would lose the supportive power of the environment. Spiritually and mentally, he is weak, and would grow to fear death!" The words of the elders echoed in Pinocha's mind.

A gust of cold wind struck Pinocha, waking him from his stupor. To his surprise, he was still floating in the air, right next to Red-eye. It was a miracle! Even more surprising was the white stuff on his wings.

Snowflakes!

Oh my! It really is snow! Snow was falling on their wings. He had finally seen snow, after all he had been through.

Pinocha was so excited that the exhaustion he had just endured, as if he was about to freeze to death, had all been swept away. It wasn't the least bit cold.

They were almost at the top. Silence blanketed the world. Not a sound was to be heard.

In a blink of an eye, the snow was falling heavier, and wind gushed down from the peak. No longer novel to them, the snow, intensified by waves of wind, became more and more frightful. The burden of the snow piled upon their wings became heavier and heavier, which made flying impossible and forced them to land in the snow.

Pinocha took a tumble as soon as his feet met the ground.

"Up we go! We must walk up the mountain."

Red-eye bellowed, the sound resounding in Pinocha's ears. Pinocha could will himself to stand again and crawl up the snowy slope only with great difficulty. The progress he made was slow and halting.

Their wings had frozen and could not be closed. Unwieldy, they dragged in the snow, weighing them down.

The experience of walking across the sand flashed through Pinocha's mind. "This snowy ground is just like that sandy one, full

of treacherous tricks. Charging onwards, head down, is no way to get to the top,” thought Pinocha. This thought gave him strength, reinvigorated him, and brought self-assurance back into his step. He turned and found Red-eye next to him, yet Red-eye, so loud just now, looked so worn out that he seemed to be dragging not only his wings, but his whole body.

“We can’t just rush straight up. Better angle along the slope and zigzag our way up. Come, follow me.”

Seeing Pinocha reinvigorated, Red-eye agreed with a weary nod.

Pinocha led the way, walking slowly sideways, just like he was climbing a dune. At the thought that he was guiding a great flier, Pinocha’s confidence and determination got another big boost, and there was more and more of a spring in his step.

Red-eye followed close behind. His usual look of composure was gone, replaced with a pained expression. Obviously, he was suffering pretty bad. The top of the mountain was too far, so far they’d never even get close. Red-eye’s mind was a muddle. Sometime later, who knows how long, he vaguely realized that Pinocha was pushing him, pushing him onto a clearing. Only then did Red-eye realize they had summited the mountain.

Besides the snow, endlessly white, there was nothing.

Pinocha stood there, gazing at the snow and repeating:

“Is this what the North is like?”

Too tired to stand, Red-eye crouched down to rest in the snow despite the freezing cold.

Pinocha was happy to have summited, yet he was well aware that this was not a place they could linger. So he woke Red-eye from his torpor.

“Do you still think I am Shady?” asked Red-eye dazedly.

Realizing Red-eye was losing his senses, Pinocha anxiously patted him and yelled:

“Let’s go, get on your feet. We’re gliding down on the

wind.”

“Am I Shady?” Red-eye went on murmuring.

Pinocha ignored his question and pushed him into a “wind gap,” lifting the other’s wing onto his own shoulder.

“Come on, we can make it together. Let’s glide down together, all the way to the shore.”

When a gust of wind blew through the gap, Pinocha took care to support Red-eye, flapping his wings to enter the flow. Pinocha knew this was their only chance to survive.

They were gliding swiftly on the wind. Pinocha had wanted to go with the flow, all the way down, but with Red-eye at his side, he couldn’t maneuver very well. The two birds kept tumbling in the air currents, like two pieces of driftwood bobbing in a flood, powerless to break free.

The stiff mountain breeze seemed to shock Red-eye awake. When he found Pinocha by his side, he immediately realized what had happened. His lack of climbing experience had been his downfall. Red-eye gazed gratefully at Pinocha, motioning with his wing to say thanks. Unexpectedly, just as he relaxed a little, a gust of wind blew them apart. Pinocha rushed towards Red-eye, but the wind was too strong for him to get a grip. A river of wind now separated them.

Red-eye was still waving with his wing, as if to say: “It’s okay, it’s all good.” It seemed he was also showing his gratitude. At the same time he opened his mouth to speak, but the wind was too strong for Pinocha to hear clearly what he said.

They got farther and farther apart, until all that Pinocha could see of Red-eye was a dot vanishing amid the mountain peaks.

## Chapter Eleven: Back to the Shore

The southwesterly blows briskly before the plum rains. All of the geese and ducks had returned north, and it was now

time for the shorebirds to migrate home. Most of them had shed their greyish brown winter coats, replacing them with bright, colorful spring plumage, and by assiduous food gathering, they had accumulated a thick layer of fat, which they would need to complete the long journey. They were waiting for a dark, windy night, then off they would go.

The sand was at its most beautiful, the dunes at their roundest. Lightly brushed by the southwesterly, the dunes glowed like gold, their contours soft and fine, no longer so taut and fierce as in the wintertime. Nothing like the dank rain that had frozen the land in the winter, the spring showers nourished the wasteland with warmth. Accumulated rainwater had turned low-lying areas into temporary pools, lush with fresh green weeds, while mosquito larvae floated in the water.

Shorebirds depend on the direction of the wind for their comings and goings. Whenever the southwesterly blows hard, the shorebirds clear out, often leaving the beach wide open and empty the next morning, perhaps to be occupied by a new formation of northbound shorebirds. It's their turn to rest and feed there.

At this time of year, the shorebirds who visit the beach don't like to fly if they don't have to, because they're conserving energy. Whenever they're not gathering in tidal lagoons or pools to forage for food at ebb tide, they're resting and grooming, waiting for the right weather to set off. Shorebirds with brilliant spring plumage often appear and gather together to stand on a golden dune, a magnificent azure sky at their backs. Sometimes, when they form a single line on a ridge of sand, each standing on one leg, they look like a great wall of birds.

Round dunes, mild weather, plump shorebirds: the most affecting beach scenery in the world.

Naturally, the beach in spring is livelier than in winter. In advance of their return migration north, the shorebirds show their territorial side. There are endless quarrels, fights, and brawls.

Raucous squawking is everywhere.

The tidal lagoons are as bustling as always, since that is where baby fish who want to grow up in the estuary school are. Their presence lures even more seagulls and reef egrets.

Every ringed plover was stuffing itself, as were the resident birds who, even though they would not be traveling north, had to keep healthy in order to breed. Unlike other windbirds, ringed plover plumage doesn't change much in color with the seasons, but their gorgeous spring plumage now gleamed with silvery grey, like the color of the distant sky on a cloudy day. As for the male birds, the contour defined by head, neck, and breast was even more distinctive.

There was no doubt that Pinocha would return north and complete his life's mission—to breed and carry on the family line. However, since his Snow Mountain odyssey, he'd felt tired and hollow inside. In fact, after Red-eye and he flew their separate ways during the descent, he did not head directly back to the beach. Instead, he wended his way along unknown coasts, not knowing what he was after. It seemed he had forgotten about Shady. Finally, after many twists and turns, he arrived back at the beach with other tardy shorebirds which had yet to return north.

By the time Pinocha returned to the beach, the plum rains had arrived, and more than a half of the shorebirds were gone. The old Pinocha, with his overbearing personality, would have returned north already, occupied a territory, found a mate, and readied himself to breed. This year Pinocha hadn't even left yet. He had lost so much weight that from afar that he looked like a skinny three-toe plover, not a fleshy ringed plover.

Pinocha had indeed undergone a drastic physical change. But psychologically? He did not communicate with the other ringed plovers, so nobody knew what he was thinking.

His more perceptive companions soon noticed that Pinocha's weight-loss was due to all the flying practice he was

doing, not to a lack of industriousness in foraging. With his present prowess he should have no trouble flying north, but he remained at the beach, living quietly among shorebirds, with whom he foraged. They saw formation upon formation of shorebirds leave every day. Some ringed plovers were concerned about him, advising him to hurry up and go. But every time he would say, "Not yet." Weeks went by. Some of his closest friends asked him if he had found Shady, but he said nothing, just shook his head. Yet he heard Guli had found Shady in the south, and had already returned north. He could imagine Guli receiving a hero's welcome. Yet he kept hanging out with different shorebirds, alighting according to the tide. At dusk he stood on a dune watching them leave.

Pinocha could not explain why he had delayed his departure. He seemed to be in search of something, something he had seen somewhere before. However, he could not be certain exactly what form it took. He wandered not only along the beach, but also to the south shore of the river. Sometimes he even flew past the screw-pine grove, to the slopes of the northern mountains, seemingly in search of Red-eye and other ringed plovers who preferred an alpine habitat. Until one day, after returning to the north shore for food, he found himself alone on the beach, his only companions aquatic plants swaying in the water. Pinocha paid no attention to his surroundings, keeping his head down in search of food. Not until he had eaten his fill did he look up again, only to find another ringed plover on the dune in front of him, alone and standing on one foot, just like the bird he had seen when he arrived last autumn.

Cripple appeared again.

As Cripple listened to Pinocha tell the tale of his journey south, a flock of ringed plovers flew onto the beach.

"That's the last northbound flock this spring. You should join their formation if you are planning to go back, or else it'll be

too late."

"Have you ever been to the mountains?" Pinocha seemed oblivious to his wise counsel, speaking with his characteristically impulsive enthusiasm.

Cripple hesitated for a long time then, reluctantly nodding, he replied: "I met Red-eye before."

Pinocha's eyes shone. "You know him, too? So, is he Shady or not?" asked Pinocha, with a strangely self-mocking smile.

"Pinocha seems to have transcended his desire to seek certain things, but his insight into the meaning of life is the same," thought Cripple to himself.

"Are you sure the ringed plover they call Shady really exists?" asked Cripple, solemnly.

"Why shouldn't he?" Pinocha retorted, finding Cripple's doubt disagreeable. "I've seen him with my very own eyes."

"Another ringed plover is all you saw," said Cripple, rudely spoiling Pinocha's mood.

"So you think all the other ringed plovers are lying, including the circle of elders in the north?"

"Other ringed plovers are just spreading weird rumors," said Cripple, seeming certain he was right. Calmly, he explained why: "Every generation of elders unconsciously make myths based on their own experience. These myths are all around us, and they live in our daily lives. 'Shady' is just an obvious example of such a myth. The elders use their myths to encourage the younger generation to realize their migratory potential and thereby ensure the survival of the race. But resident birds face similar problems."

"But then why did the elders send us to search for Shady?"

"Because Shady has to be found, just as he has to die. Of course, you couldn't possibly be the one to find him. I dare say that before he dies, Shady will leave some precious last words to posterity, precious gifts to migratory birds."

"Ridiculous! There's no doubt in my mind that Shady

exists, he just doesn't go by that name. We have to shed any preconceptions about who Shady might be *before* we set out on our quest. Don't you know how much insight I've gained by being open-minded in my own journey?" said Pinocha with persuasive eloquence. "I sense your prejudice against migratory birds, but whether a bird migrates or not isn't the point. The point is what understanding of the meaning of life that bird has as a ringed plover. Why should resident birds criticize their migratory fellows? Where would migratory birds be without migration? Which is not to say that migratory birds should go around criticizing resident birds as lazy and unenterprising. To me, a commitment to settle down somewhere new, whether up river or up in the hills, is another way of expanding the horizons of life. Maybe it's high time for ringed plovers to evolve into two different species. No matter what, a great ringed plover soars in my heart. That plover might not be Shady, but he exists just the same. He might even be Red-eye. Even if I accepted your assumption that Shady's existence is only symbolic, the great bird that soars in my heart exists in reality, maybe as a ringed plover, maybe as some other kind of bird."

"You mean some other kind of shorebird?"

"Another preconception!" replied Pinocha, without hesitation.

Cripple noticed that Pinocha was no longer the ringed plover chauvinist he used to be.

"How did you meet Red-eye?" asked Pinocha, suddenly curious.

"I met him when I was residing at a mountain lake years ago. I could tell he is a bird who really knows how to enjoy his life. How I wish I could see him again!" replied Cripple. It seemed he was ruminating on what Pinocha had just said. Maybe Red-eye was once that bird for him. Cripple paused, lost in thought, before finally conceding Pinocha his point: "You might be right that in every ringed plover's heart there should soar a great ancestor."

Cripple was much plumper than he had been the previous autumn. No wonder: there was so much food in spring. The beach was teeming with sand worms and horned ghost crab. "I wouldn't imagine he ventures often to the screw-pine grove," thought Pinocha as he sized Cripple up.

Pinocha, too, had fattened himself back up since his return to the beach. Yet the restless urge to soar homeward bound was constant, which made him excitable—nervous and fretful. He believed that Cripple and other migratory birds must feel the same urge, it's just they suppressed it, or directly transformed it into the urge to mate. In fact, Cripple had, like the resident birds, been sitting on his patch of sand, guarding his territory.

Pinocha had affirmed that resident birds might have good reason not to migrate back to the north, but reflecting on his own life, he had no idea what that reason might be.

He just couldn't figure it out.

"Why don't resident birds accept the glorious mission of migration? If the ability to fly only serves as a means of escape from predators, wouldn't it become merely instrumental?" It was the same old question that had long vexed him, but he had to admit he was no closer to an answer. To him, migration wasn't just about avoiding the cold by wintering in the south and returning north in spring to breed. It was an expression of respect for tradition, a kind of affirmation. In fact, it was a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood for migratory birds. Without migration, how did a resident bird ever grow up?

What *were* the resident birds looking for?

The next time Cripple heard Pinocha express such reservations, he phrased his response carefully, still vividly aware of their differences of opinion in previous conversations.

"Migration doesn't always have to be wintering in the south and returning to the north when it warms up, when the impulse to breed awakens. It might transform into something else, call it

a commitment to challenging oneself, to self-development in the long term. Like you said, it might be something like exploring the upper reaches of a river in the mountains in search of a place to pioneer. Though many resident bird pioneers fail, it's a price worth paying for the chance to try. The price for this kind of "migration" is not any less steep than the sacrifice you have to make to complete the kind of migration you know. However, no matter how dangerous your north-south migrations are, there is still a well-defined route to follow. There's no such route for a resident bird to follow. In any case, there is always uncertainty and risk."

Though Pinocha had endorsed the pioneering spirit that might take a resident bird upriver to the mountain heights, he still thought 'real' migration was of a different order. And, as always, he wanted to prove to Cripple that he was right.

"The last shorebird formation is about to head north," Cripple reminded him again. "If you don't go now it'll be too late, and you will have to wait until next year, my migratory brother."

Having finished their feasting and resting, the ringed plovers had gathered on the ridge of a dune, each with its plump, round chest upraised, and one leg uplifted, standing tall as the golden beams of the setting sun slanted past. They formed a line, a line so tight it was like a well-planted, orderly windbreak. They couldn't have been more beautiful than they were at that moment, the contours of the dune a nice match for the curves of their bodies. Each of them was truly a child of these dunes! And every plover in the line was ready. When the next gust came from the southwest, they would alight and follow the wind, all the way home.

Pinocha just stood there, a bit reluctant to leave. He suddenly thought of Ma-nan.

What would Ma-nan say if he were still around?

"Get going!" urged Cripple again.

Pinocha slowly approached the dune, joined the gathering

of migratory birds, and adopted the same confident stance as the others, chest upraised.

He turned his head towards the shore, and saw Cripple standing solitary, waiting to watch them leave.

Then from the vortex of sand stirred up by the southwesterly wind, that line of ringed plovers shot into the air and flew off into the northern sky.

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Selected from *Fengniao Pinuocha* [The Windbird Pinocha]. Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 145–169.