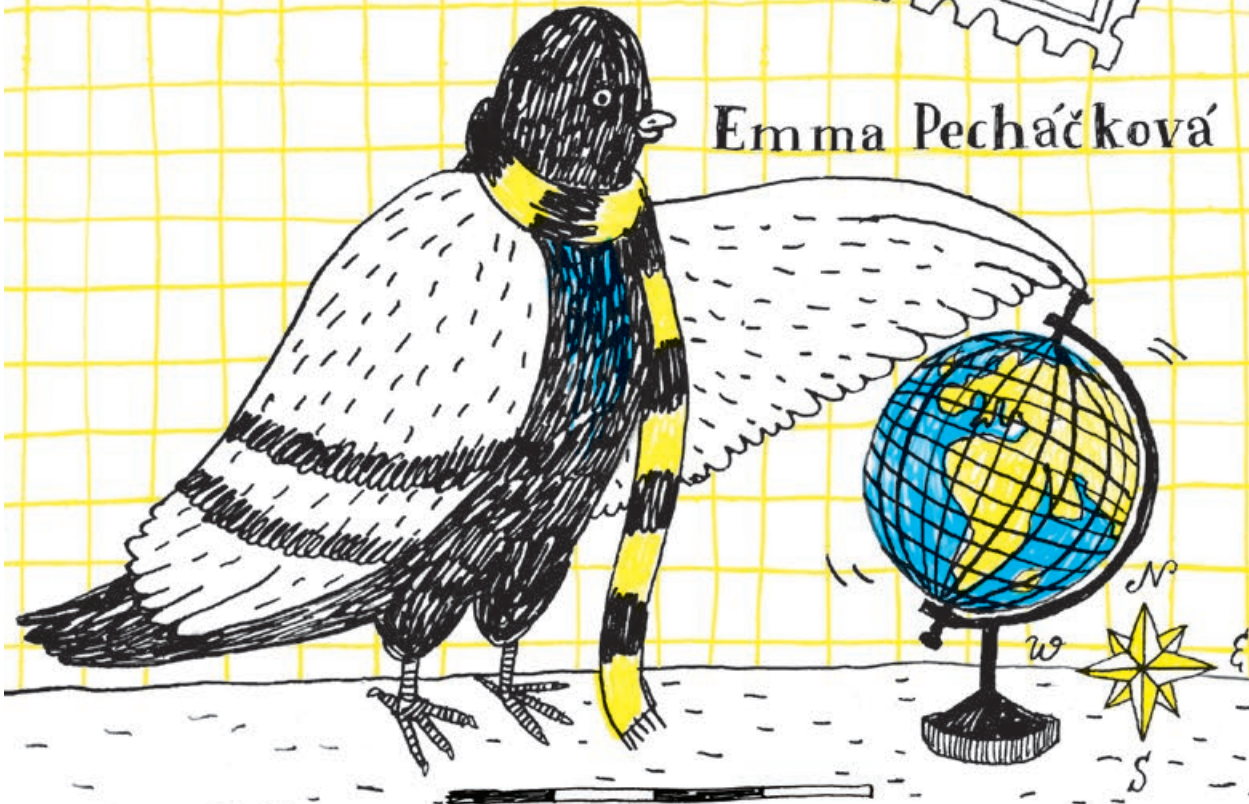




# COLUMBUS PIGEON

Emma Pecháčková





*Liberté*

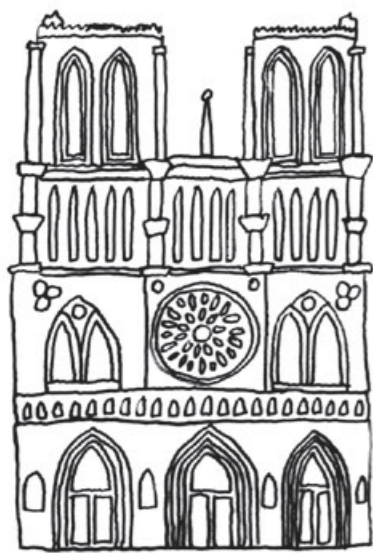


*Egalité*



*Fraternité*

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*Notre Dame  
de Paris*

She left without delay for Paris, where she will give a concert at seven o'clock tomorrow evening."

Overjoyed at this news, Columbus clapped his wings and performed a pirouette. Then, without further ado, he was on his way again – to beautiful France.

He touched down in Paris on Notre-Dame Cathedral, landing on a gargoyle. He knew this place well. His French brothers were happy to tell him everything they knew about the Italian diva. "Bon, we stood at the windows with ears pricked up, so as not to miss a single note. It was magnifique! Formidable! A sell-out! And if you want to hear Marcella for yourself, you still have the chance. Bonne chance! Today she's giving a second concert – a more intimate one for the crème de la crème of Parisian society, at nearby Versailles. Why not fly over? It'll be well worth it. That Italian lady has a voice like a bell! Comme la cloche de Notre-Dame!" Columbus was in too much of a hurry to explain that he was interested in the singer's bird, not the singer herself. "Merci! Merci beaucoup, mes frères," he said in thanks; then he flew away. He knew Paris like the back of his wing (the Palace of Versailles likewise), so he didn't even need to ask the way. As a youngster, he'd passed through Paris lots and lots of times!

As soon as he arrived in the gardens of Versailles, Columbus encountered the resident peacock. From a respectful distance, he asked about Marcella Buttini. But the peacock was too vain to answer the question. Swaggering like a prince and blinking at Columbus with his blue eyes, he said, "Do you happen to know whom you are addressing? Do you know who my great-great-great-grandmother was? Well, she was the Court



*Louis*



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*Bah!*



Peahen of Louis XIV. My whole family has blue blood. That's why I too am called Louis ... What a state you look, you poor thing! All dusty and grey like a common barn owl! Have you got even one coloured feather? I shouldn't think so. What's it like being a pigeon? It must be awful! I just can't imagine it. I feel sorry for you, sir. Bah! Now please excuse me. I'm on my way to a concert, and I'm in a hurry ... je dois me depecher au concert."

The peacock was far too lofty a creature to speak with a post-office pigeon. Having turned his back on Columbus, he strode away through the middle of the park. Not all birds were admirable characters, thought Columbus. Yet with his last sentence, the peacock had told the pigeon what he wanted to hear. He turned to the palace behind him and headed towards it. Moments later, he was at the left wing of the building, looking through an open window straight at Signora Buttini! She was leaning against a white grand piano, and she was in the middle of a breathtakingly flawless vocal performance. Columbus waited on the windowsill until she finished. Then, still on the other side of the window, he followed her, certain that her steps would take her to Edith. But in the great maze of Versailles rooms, he lost her from view and didn't find her again.

The past few days had been very tiring for Columbus. Flying about Europe had drawn all the energy from his body. He settled on the head of a stone stag, which was spouting water into a fountain, and fell fast asleep.

Columbus opened his eyes, looked first right, then left, pulled out his fob watch and gasped. He had overslept!



*Orient...*



*Chichi from Versailles*



A snow-white Angora cat was sitting on the edge on the fountain, basking in the early-morning sun and watching the pigeon with narrowed eyes. Columbus didn't believe old-fashioned talk about cats eating birds. And as this French cat had a kindly smile on her face, there was surely no need to be afraid. He had no hesitation in acknowledging the shaggy ball. "Good morning, madame," he called.

"They call me Mademoiselle Chi-Chi, young chap," said the cat, as she licked her paw.

"Would you happen to know, Mademoiselle Chi-Chi, at what time Signora Buttini left the palace?"

The cat stretched herself sleepily. "Oh, pidgie-widgie, she's been on her way for hours," she miaowed. "Headed for the Orient. Who are you, by the way?"

Columbus was horrified by the information. "My name's Columbus ... I'm a post-office pigeon from Prague. The Orient, you say? How far into the Orient? Turkey? India? Further still?"

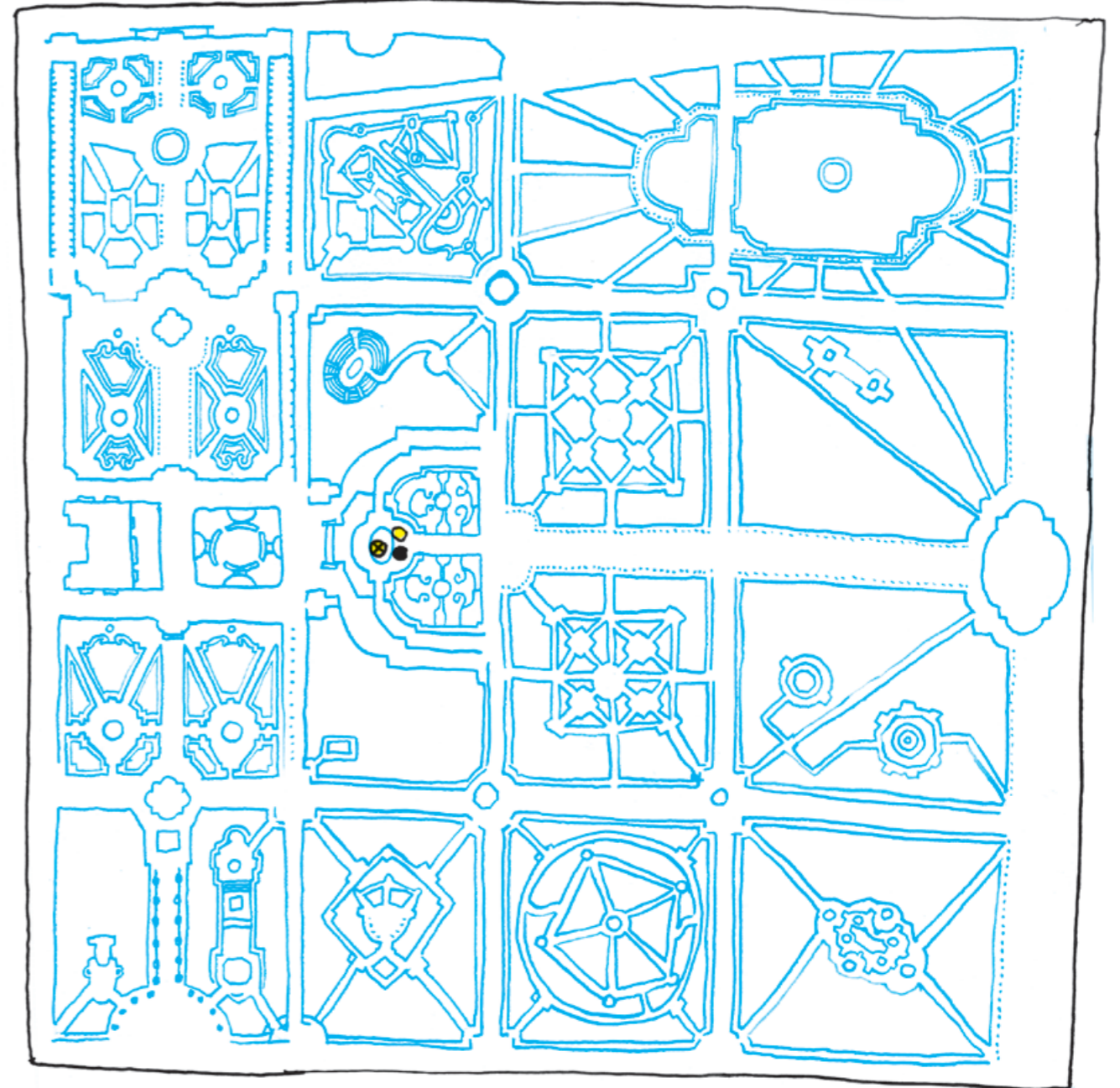
"The very furthest. Beijing, in China!"

Columbus sat down on his behind. "Life couldn't be any more difficult," he sighed.

"Don't despair, sir. Je peux vous aider. I'll help you get ready for your journey. We have a Chinese salon at the palace. I'll take you there and we'll find a map. Then you won't get lost in the land of the paddy field."

Very glad of Mademoiselle Chi-Chi's help, Columbus followed her into the palace.

They came to a room with silk wallpaper, paper lanterns, porcelain vases, pen-and-ink landscape paintings and carved jewellery boxes. It quite took Columbus's breath away.



- Columbus Pigeon
- Chi-Chi
- ⊗ Fountain with stag

*Versailles*

- park -





Chichi

“Voilà! This is China!” Mademoiselle Chi-Chi gestured with her paw. “Have a look in that little red chest, Columbus. That’s where the maps should be.”

Columbus lowered his head and began to rummage through the musty old papers. Then he realized he couldn’t get out of the chest. He was trapped!

“It doesn’t pay to trust strange cats, monsieur,” laughed Chi-Chi. “Didn’t your mother in Prague teach you that? Hee hee.” And with that, she brought down the lid of the chest with the pigeon inside.

“But Mademoiselle Chi-Chi!” he cried. “Cats don’t eat birds anymore! This is ridiculous! Let me out!”

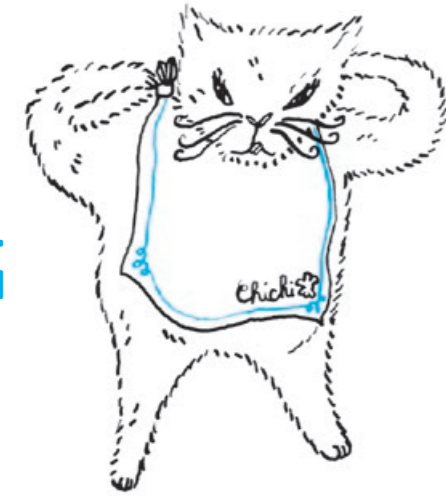
“Let’s wait and see if they eat them or not,” said the cat, lifting the lid. “The very sight of you makes my mouth water. Here at the palace, they’re forever feeding me things like rabbit pâté and salmon tart, and I’ve had enough of them. What I want to eat is a common or garden bird!”

“Who are you calling a common or garden bird?” said Columbus, enraged.

Chi-Chi pretended not to hear. She tied a napkin around her neck (she didn’t want to get grease on her snow-white fur) and gave herself a good lick. She was opening the chest carefully when WHOO-OOSH-SH...

Quick as a flash, Columbus squeezed through the gap and shook out his wings. Then he flew out of the open window like a shot. It had worked! Au revoir, Mademoiselle Chi-Chi! Columbus wiped the sweat from his brow. How close he had been to the gravedigger’s shovel!

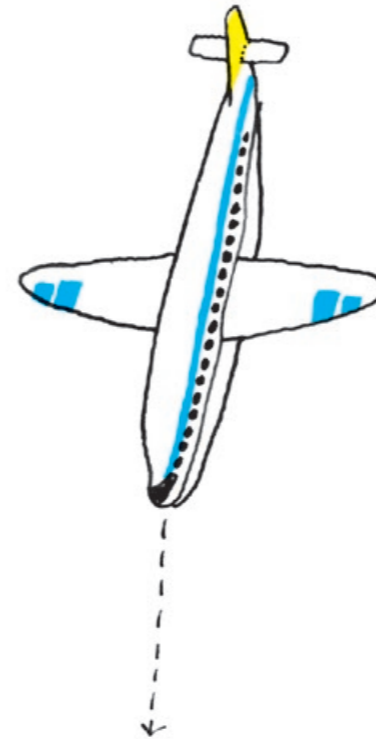
It had ended well this time, but he knew that there would be more danger to come.



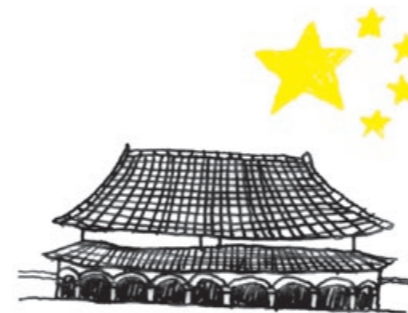
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Beijing



As a former elite post-office pigeon, Columbus was anything if not naïve. He knew that it would take him at least a week to fly to the Far East, and he couldn’t afford the time. He had no choice but to resort to modern inventions. He wasn’t very keen on these, but what else could he do if he wanted to be in Asia tomorrow? He smuggled himself on to the regular Air France flight from Paris to Beijing, which promised to reach the north of China in only ten hours.

Columbus Pigeon was indeed gifted at languages, but in the land of slant-eyed yellow people who read not letters but tea leaves, he was struck dumb. He was wandering the labyrinth of narrow, overpopulated grey streets, close to despair, when somebody squawked at him. The words were half-Chinese, half-French.

“Salut, mon ami! Yes, you! 你好! By the heavenly emperor, what is this supposed to mean?! A pigeon in Beijing! Ha ha! 真奇怪!”

Columbus turned. Smiling at him from a little bamboo cage hanging from a tree was a mynah bird as black as Chinese ink.

“You speak French?” Columbus couldn’t believe his luck!

“Naturally. The French Embassy is just around the corner. I must listen to this croaking language every day, mon petit. I’d have a devil of a job not to learn it! You look terribly confused, mon ami. Vous n’aivez pas du faim? Would you take a bowl of rice with me? 你要米饭吗? Rest a while and tell me what has brought you to us.”

“That is very kind of you, Monsieur ...”



Bowl of rice

Monsieur Zhang



Amore mio!



“Zhang is the name,” announced the mynah, with the bow of an educated French bird.

“... Monsieur Zhang. I will join you gladly.” Columbus spent a pleasant afternoon in the company of the likeable but over-chatty mynah, who was keen to practise his French on the pigeon from abroad. Before they parted, Columbus learned from him that there was an opera house in Beijing. Exactly two hours and thirty-three minutes remained until the next performance.

Columbus slipped into the building unnoticed. He had opened almost every door along the corridor before he came to Marcella Buttini’s dressing room. After all the hardship and unhappy coincidences, he had succeeded at last! There was a table in the room, and on this table stood the familiar golden cage. And in this cage was Edith, the bird of Columbus’s heart! She was singing a wistful tune very softly.

“Amore mio!” cried Columbus. Edith couldn’t believe her eyes. Was the bird in front of her truly the pigeon she had got to know in Prague a few days ago? The very bird she hadn’t stopped thinking about since, even for a second?

“But how ...? All the way ... to Beijing ...? So far ... I ... I ... oh, Columbus!” Edith stammered.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Edith. Without you, my life no longer has any meaning ... I’ve flown to the end of the world just to find you. Fly away with me, my love! Please, dearest Edith, I beg you on my knees.” At this point, as far as it is possible for a pigeon to do so,



你要米饭吗?

Peking ★

Beijing

Tea leaves

