The Bird, the Grape, and the Photographer

I never intended to take a photography class.

I reclined lazily in the ocean of grass and pointed my borrowed camera towards the sky; although it really no longer mattered if I shot up or down. I had taken so many pictures; everything looked about the same. For my first project, I had taken twenty or so shots of one lamppost from all different angles. The portfolio was returned to me with “Brilliant, amazing, and incredible” scrawled on top in red ink, thin as spiders’ webs. It may have been all these things, but I thought it was a terrible waste of time and film. I could just have easily taken one picture to portray the same object.

All around me, I could hear the sounds of shutters going off. And then the teacher’s voice penetrated the air, “What are you focusing on?”

“The… birds,” I answered, quickly sitting up.

We both looked up at the empty blue sky. There wasn’t even a single cloud. The look Mr. Mathers gave me told me that I had better start taking pictures. I stalked over to where my friend William was bent over a staircase. He took a picture of the chipped corner of the first stair. All around us, students walked around, scanning the scenery with quick, darting eyes looking for the next perfect picture like a bird searching for a big, fat, juicy worm.

I couldn’t stand my girlfriend. But still, I obliged her and agreed to go on a picnic at the beach Sunday afternoon. “It will be so much fun, and probably nobody will be there, so we can have the whole beach to ourselves,” said Chastity, in her whiney, high-on-helium voice over the telephone. “And… it will kinda be like a date, like—”
“Sounds like a barrel of fun,” I interrupted her, sarcastically.

On the way there, we stopped at a grocery store to get some food for our “day of romance.” Near the entrance, there was a giant pentagonal cardboard contraption filled almost to the brim with red-purple grapes. Flies buzzed around in the air and a small child screamed in the cereal aisle.

I reached out to try a grape, but Chastity practically screamed, “Z! You don’t know what’s in there, probably dead flies and rat droppings, and chemicals and human diseases.”

“Appetizing,” I said, bringing the grape up to my mouth.

“I’m serious!”

“What—you want me to take it home and wash it?” I asked, completely irritated.

“Yes,” she answered, and I knew she was testing me, like a defiant toddler does his parents.

I rolled the grape around in my palm and sighed, “Okay, Chass, what else do you want to get?”

I followed her to the in-store deli where she paid for French bread, turkey and a pound of potato salad. And on the way towards the exit, I made a turn for the check-out stands. “Zach, where are you going now?” she followed me.

I carefully placed the grape onto the black conveyor belt and put hard, plastic separators down in front of and behind it. Chastity rolled her eyes, impatiently. I was glad this was annoying her. The check-out lady was tired-looking and chewed a piece of gum like a cow chewing on grass. She operated the belt so that the grape began its bumpy journey towards the register. She had spider-like fake eyelashes and she picked
up the grape between two long, hot-pink acrylic nails, “Here,” she dropped it into my open palm. “You can take it.”

“Thanks,” I said. I looked at Chastity as I said, “Plastic, please.”

The lady thrust a plastic bag at me and I took it with a courteous, “Thank you.”

After the two of us had our sandwiches, Chastity got up to take a dip in the water. She walked down the strip of beach until she was barely a recognizable dot, the same as a grain of sand. Up close, she was a real person with desires and ambitions (and imperfections). Far away, she was just part of the scenery. I ripped pieces off of the leftover baguette and threw them onto the hard, cold sand. Pretty soon, a flock of birds swooped down. They were so unafraid.

One solitary seagull was brave enough to stand just a few feet from me. He had a noble, pure white head, shiny beady eyes, and a flash of red on its yellow beak like a streak of lipstick. What really caught my eye though was that this bird had only one leg. He hopped around, pecking at the sand.

“Bird of the future,” I said out loud, “Does the job of two with just one.” I dug the one grape out of my beach bag and set it down gently in front of the one-legged bird. I wished for once that I had that heavy camera with me.

He flew around a little bit and then landed again, hopped forward a few steps to catch his balance. When the bread was gone, all the birds rose up into the air, simultaneously, and flapped away. They flew until they were tiny dots above the ocean, flying further and further away until they were of the same substance as the sky.
Monday at school, I wielded my camera. I took a close-up picture of one side of the staircase. But it was only one side. I took a picture of the other side, focusing in until I captured all the cracks, chips, the fallen leaves, and black smudges of hardened bubble gum; all the imperfections and characteristics of the tan stone. But you couldn’t even tell that the picture was of a set of stairs. I stepped back further and further until I could fit the entire staircase in one shot... but they no longer had character. No meaning. They were only stairs.

Like Chastity was only a grain of sand.

And the one-legged bird was a dot in the sky, flying, flying, until I was no longer there.