



DEL & ESTELLE

SERIALIZED

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THE POPCORN LADY

Del stood on his streetlight perch. He looked left and spotted the **#52** bus coming up Ashby Avenue.

“Coo! It’s Thursday afternooon,” he said. “And whooo gets off the bus each Thursday afternooon! Woohoo! The Popcorn Lady! That’s whooo.”

Del fanned his striped wings. The **#52** bus stopped a block away to let off a boy with a skateboard tucked under his arm.

“The Popcorn Lady will get off at the next stop,” he said. “She’ll sit on the bus stop bench and wait for me. She’ll call me *Pretty Bird* and toss me popcorn all afternooon.” He looked across the intersection. “And boooohooo for yooou, Estelle. Since yooou have no veeew of the bus stop from your perch, yooou haven’t a cluuue about the popcorn.”

On the opposite corner, Estelle was perched on her streetlight preening her feathers. She saw the **#52** bus enter the intersection. She watched it turn right on College Avenue and roll past Café Roma. Leaning far to the left, she saw the bus stopped outside the Elmwood Movie Theater.

“Del thinks I can’t see the bus stop from here,” she said. “Foolish coot. He’ll stuff himself with popcorn all afternooon.”

Meanwhile, Del stared down upon the bus’s long white top. His dark head swayed side to side as the bus door folded open.

“Hellooo, Popcorn Lady,” he said. But only a college student wearing a leather

backpack climbed down the steps.

"Coo! Where are yooou Popcorn Lady?" said Del. "What will I dooo for food if yooou don't come tooday?"

As Del watched the bus, Estelle watched Del. "What would Del do for food without handouts from people?" she asked herself. "Yesterday, he pigged out on potato chips in the park. Tomorrow he'll stand outside the doughnut shop. I bet he's forgotten how to hunt for fresh seeds and whole grains. Coo-a-roo! I must do something before that Dodo ruins his health on junk food."

Just then, Del heard a muffled shout from inside the bus. The bus door reopened, and a woman dressed in a long brown dress and carrying a large white shopping bag, clumped down the stairs.

"Halleluuujah!" Del shouted. "How dooo yooou dooo, Popcorn Lady?"

The woman in brown walked to the bus stop bench and sat down.

"Coo! Now she's reaching into her bag," said Del. "Now she's pulling out a bag of...popcorn! Woohoo! And she wants tooo toss her popcorn tooo Del. I mustn't keep her waiting." Flapping his wings, he dipped to the sidewalk.

At the same moment, Estelle searched the rooftops surrounding the intersection. On the roof of Wells Fargo Bank, she spotted what she was looking for, a large red squirrel.

"How I loathe squirrels," she said. "Such chatterboxes. But a pigeon must do what a pigeon must do."

With a single flap of her wings, Estelle sailed onto the bank's flat roof. The instant she landed, the squirrel ran up to her and began to talk.

"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter."

Estelle listened while continuing to clean her feathers.

"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter," the squirrel went on. *"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter."*

Still, Estelle listened. "Excuse me," she said. "May I have a word?"

But the squirrel ignored her. *"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter."*

At this point, Del stood a few yards from the Popcorn Lady's brown boots.

"Pretty bird," she called, flinging a handful of popcorn onto the pavement. "Come, come, Pretty Bird."

With his head bobbing front to back, Del stepped closer to the bench. He pecked at a popcorn kernel.

"Oh, *deee*licious," he said. "The popcorn is fresh! And I have the entire sidewalk to myself."

"Pretty bird," chanted the woman, tossing more popcorn.

Del stabbed a second kernel, took two steps closer, and picked up another piece. With each step, more popcorn rained down around him.

"Oh, *deee*lectable! Oh, *deee*lightful!" he said. "Estelle, you have no idea what you're missing."

While Del gorged on popcorn, Estelle remained with the squirrel on the bank roof.

"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter. Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter."

"Del, you have no idea what I go through for you," she said.

"Chatter, chatter, chit, chit, chatter chatter."

Finally, Estelle flapped her wings and rose a foot into the air. "Will you be quiet, squirrel!" she shouted. She cocked her head toward the bus stop. "Look! Popcorn! All you can eat!"

By now, Del stood inches away from the Popcorn Lady's feet. Another white shower of popcorn bounced on the pavement.

"Pretty bird. Pretty bird," the woman said.

"Oh, this is yummy! This is stuuupendous!" Del said, eating as fast as he could.

As Del bent for another piece, something soft brushed his side. The next thing he knew a large, furry object was pushing at his beak.

"Coo!" Del called out. "A squirrel's tail? Phoooeey! What's a squirrel doing here? Shooo! Get out of my face, squirrel!"

Without bothering to turn around, the squirrel swished his tail, knocking Del toward the curb.

"Pretty Boy," said the Popcorn Lady. "Come, Pretty Boy."

"Pretty *Boy*" said Del regaining his balance. He saw the red squirrel sitting on its haunches, facing the bus bench. "Hooo! That's no pretty boy! That's a stuuupid squirrel! And he's eating my popcorn!"

"Pretty Boy," the woman repeated, tossing more popcorn.

Del darted toward the closest kernel. But another squish of the squirrel's tail sent him rolling onto his side. He ran for another piece, only to have the squirrel pounce on it first. A dash toward a third and fourth piece got the same results. Each

time, the bulky red squirrel beat him to it.

“How cruuuel! How ruuude!” Del said. “My feast is ruuined. Where did this koooky squirrel come from? Coo! How huumiliating! I’m glad Estelle can’t see this.”

Estelle, however, was enjoying the scene from her streetlight.

“Foolish coot,” she said. “I also told the squirrel about the Popcorn Lady for his own good. Who would look after Del if I didn’t? He *does* put the pig in pigeon.”

