

Flight

“She can fly,” I said. “I’ve trained her.” My dad didn’t even look at me. “Rubbish. You got wings? Where are they?” He pinched my skin between my shoulder blades and laughed. I shook his hand off and held on to the box. Inside the bird flapped around and let out another cry. She hated being inside that box. But I had to put her in the thing to get her here. The wind blew harder. Icy-cold in my face. “That’s a strong wind,” said dad. “Sure that pigeon can fly in this?” He knew she wasn’t a pigeon.

“She’s not a pigeon,” I said. “I told you before.” “Oh yeah, that’s right. A seagull. One of those noisy damn things.” I went to say something but clamped my lips together. He didn’t have one good word for Elsie. That’s what I called her. After mum’s grandmother. Elsie. It just sounded right. An old-fashioned name for her. It suited her. She flapped around inside the box and screeched. I held tightly onto the sides of it. She moved around so much I nearly dropped the box earlier. My dad didn’t notice. He was busy telling our neighbour about going to the top of the hill at the end of Station Road. “Got to let this bird out,” he said. “It’s been with us since he found it on the ground. Surprised it lasted this long to be honest.”

The neighbour gave me a friendly nod but I pretended to be busy securing the box. That’s when Elsie shook about inside and the box nearly fell out my hands. All the way to Station Road, dad made comment after comment. Always the same thing. That stupid bird won’t fly. That stupid bird is lucky to be alive. No reason she shouldn’t be alive. I fed her. I made sure she ate every day. Just a little blob when I found her on the ground. She hardly had any feathers and her eyes were almost completely shut. But I touched her and she moved a little bit. So I took her home.

Mum said I couldn’t keep her in the house. “It’s dirty,” she said. “It might have fleas.”

“She’s a she, mum,” I said. “And she doesn’t have fleas. I washed her.” I didn’t know what to give her. The pet shop man said that she would die in two days. He wasn’t interested, anyway. I went to the library instead and found a book on birds. There was a picture of a man feeding a baby bird some milk. I didn’t know birds could drink milk. I didn’t know what they drank. All I knew was that I had to feed her something or she would die. I didn’t want the pet shop man to be right. I wanted to make her live and then go down to his shop and tell him. Tell him to his face.

“So what you planning on doing,” said dad. “Throwing it off the top here?” He didn’t know anything. “I’ll help her,” I said. “I’ve been helping her the last two weeks.”

Dad laughed again. The same laugh whenever he thought he was right. A smug laugh, mum called it. But she always smiled when he laughed like that. She liked it when he proved himself right and her wrong. That’s what being married is all about. One person is always right and the other one is always wrong and that’s how they live forever. I wouldn’t do that. “Come on then,” said dad. “Get on with it. It’s freezing up here.” I put the box on the grass and knelt down to open the lid. As I fumbled with the two cardboard flaps, Elsie flapped around inside. “Come on, girl,” I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice. “Come on now.”

“Saying your last goodbyes?” said dad. “So sad.”

He couldn’t say any more as he went into one of his coughing fits. He bent over and hacked and hawed as he tried to clear his chest. I got the flap open and Elsie let her wings spill outside and into the cold air. She stretched them above her head at awkward angles. “Come on, girl,” I whispered. I put my hands down the insides of the box and slid my fingers under her tiny body. She pecked at my fingers in a rapid motion. I was used to her doing it. When she first did it I pulled my fingers away. “It’s okay,” I said. “I’ll help you.” Elsie calmed down a little, and I got my fingers underneath her body. She appeared so strong with all her feathers now, but I could feel how skinny she was. She ate her own weight in food every day but still like a little bag of bones.

I pulled her out of the box and held her close to my chest. My dad had gone quiet. I didn’t look at him in case it made him start again. The grass sloped down in front of me and then went at a sharper angle down. I got as far as I could and stopped. She had done it so many times before with me. I had held her, and she flew right to the end of the garage. One time she flew into the door. She was strong, I could feel it. I held my hands up higher to give her a full view of what was in front of us. “Come on, girl,” I said. “You got this.” I closed my eyes and lifted my hands higher. She let out a cry, it sounded like she said Far. Faaaar! Then I felt her wings pound the air. I could feel her body lifting.

And she was gone.