The Girl Who Couldn’t Fly

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Iwas walking up the road from Baker’s Corner the first time I saw her. She was sitting on a fence at the edge of town with a couple of other kids, all of them talking intently about something that was obviously very important to them, but which I suspected wouldn’t matter much to adults. I reckoned she was maybe ten or eleven. At the first I didn’t realize she had wings; I thought she was wearing some kind of fancy dress coat, or maybe a seriously overblown hair ornament.

But then I got a better look, and saw what was there, and I stopped and went over to say hello.

I didn’t have a good reason, really; I was just curious. I’d never seen a girl with wings up close before. I’d heard about a few, but never met any.

When the kids saw me coming they all stopped talking and watched me warily.

“Hey,” I said. “Is this Damonsburg?”

“Sure is, mister,” said the one boy in the trio.

“Thanks. Say, are those wings?”

The winged girl shrank back and hunched down a little, and her two friends sat up straighter.

“What’s it to you, mister?” the boy demanded.

I held up my hands. “Nothing, nothing! I didn’t mean any harm; I just never saw anyone with wings close up before.”

“Well, now you have,” the boy said.

“How big are they? Could I have a look?”

The other two looked at their friend, who still didn’t say a word; she looked from side to side, then leaned a little forward and spread her wings.

I should explain that you may be thinking of blonde angels with shining white wings, or black-haired beauties with wings like bats, but this wasn’t either of those; she was a plain little girl with drab brown hair, and when the wings were folded down they were that same dull brown color, but feathers, not hair. I wasn’t expecting much of a display.

But then they unfolded, and kept spreading until they must have been about twelve feet across from wingtip to wingtip, maybe more, and they swept up in a graceful curve, and the underside wasn’t dull brown, but red and gold feathers, patterned and barred, bright and beautiful as anything you can imagine. I stopped breathing, just looking at them, at those colors shimmering in the afternoon sun.

Her friends turned to look at her wings, but didn’t say anything. They didn’t look as impressed as I was, but I suppose they’d seen them before.

“Lovely,” I said at last.

The girl folded them down on her back again and watched me suspiciously.

“Can you fly?” I asked her.

She said, “No.” It was the first time I had heard her voice, which was soft and sweet, but she sounded a little annoyed. I knew she must have heard that question a thousand times.

“Pity,” I said. “But they’re beautiful wings, all the same.”

“They get in the way,” she said. “Momma has to make special clothes for me.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to go, mister?” the other girl asked, a little belligerently.

“’Course,” I said. I tipped my hat. “Thanks for letting me see your wings, Miss.” Then I turned and walked on into Damonsburg.

I didn’t really have any business there, but then, I didn’t have any business much of anywhere just then. I’d been on my own for about three years at that point, just roaming about, seeing the world and trying to decide what to do with my life, since I couldn’t go home. I’d seen the witches in Abbot’s Creek, and the dogs of the Salt Coast, but I hadn’t yet seen anywhere I’d want to stay for more than a few months. I’d heard Damonsburg was a nice place, so I’d come to see for myself.

Those kids hadn’t seemed particularly friendly, but then, practically the first thing I’d said was a nosy question about something that was none of my concern, so I didn’t hold it against them.

I wondered a bit about why she couldn’t fly, though; those splendid wings certainly looked big enough. Maybe she didn’t have the muscles to work them properly? Maybe they weren’t as aerodynamic as they looked?

But it wasn’t my business.

I walked into Damonsburg and looked it over, liking what I saw; it was clean, green, and pretty, and of a reasonable size, probably about a thousand people. I wandered into a saloon that faced on the town square and read the board above the bar. They listed a dozen sandwiches, a dozen beers, and a dozen currencies they accepted, and one of the currencies was the Black God’s silver, which I had some of in my pocket, so I got myself a ham sandwich and a glass of porter and settled on a stool at the bar. I asked the bartender a few questions about the town, and he answered them in a friendly fashion until I said, “I saw a girl with wings on my way into town.”

His smile got a little less friendly. “That’ll be Nina Parmenter. You’d do well to leave her alone. Poor kid’s had enough trouble.”

“I don’t mean any harm,” I said. “I was just curious. Never saw anyone with wings before.”

He softened a bit. “I don’t suppose they’re common,” he admitted. “You know, they wouldn’t ever be common in any case, but they wouldn’t be as rare as all that, except a lot of parents cut the wings off as soon as the baby’s born.”

I put my drink down and stared at him. “Now, why in the world would anyone do that?” I asked.

He seemed surprised by the question. “Where are you from?” he asked.

“Nowhere near here,” I said. “What’s this about chopping the wings off babies?”

“Well, stop and think about it,” he said. “A kid with wings eats a lot more than a regular kid, and can’t wear regular clothes, and if she gets squirmy when you’re holding her you can get a feather in the eye and it can really hurt. Babies are enough work and enough trouble without putting wings on ’em.”

“But...but the wings make them special!”

“And how is that a good thing for the parents? Or for the baby, for that matter? You’re setting the poor kid up to be teased for the rest of her life. Around here we’ve seen what poor little Nina’s gone through, and while I’m not one of those idiots who think everyone should be alike even if it means mutilating them, I’d have to think twice if a kid of mine was born with wings. Hell, my daughter’s got a tail, just a cute little one, and my wife and I had to give some pretty serious thought to whether she should keep it, let alone wings.”

I had not ever before thought about it in those ways; I had just thought how fine and beautiful wings might be, and how glorious it would be to fly. I took a swig of beer and polished off my sandwich, then said, “But Nina’s still got her wings.”

“Sure does. Walt Parmenter insisted on keeping them. Partly he was just being a good father who didn’t want to see her hurt, but he also thought it would be valuable to have a little girl who could fly, that it would be something people would pay to see, that she could do things ordinary people couldn’t. And it got him killed.”

I almost choked on my beer. “What?”

“About five, six years ago, some drifters, four of them, got drunk and decided they’d kidnap Nina and train her to steal for them, flying in upstairs windows or some damn fool thing like that, and Walt went after them, and it ended badly. We hanged the only drifter Walt left alive for us, but we weren’t in time to keep Walt from bleeding to death.”

“Nina wasn’t hurt?”

“Oh, Nina was fine, except for hearing the whole fight—she didn’t see it, they had her tied up in a sack. She had screaming nightmares for the next six months.” He shook his head. “And she couldn’t fly, anyway. They hadn’t thought about that. If she could, then she would have just flown away home the minute they tried to make her work for their little scheme. They might not have been able to catch her in the first place, if she could fly.”

“She really can’t?”

“That’s what she says, and it’s what her mama says, and I figure they should know.”

“It’s a shame.”

The bartender shrugged. “Walt wasn’t a bad fellow, so that part’s a shame, but I don’t know Nina would be any better off if she could soar like a damn eagle.”

I left it at that, but I thought to myself that having wings like that and not being able to use them was one of nature’s nastier tricks.

When I’d finished my sandwich and beer I inquired whether there might be somewhere in town I could get a room, as I wasn’t in any hurry to move on, and the bartender hesitated, frowning.

“Is there a problem?” I asked. “I’m not looking for trouble, I promise.”

“Well, it’s just...” He grimaced. “I do know someone with a room to let, but...”

He didn’t seem inclined to finish the sentence, so I prompted him. “But what?”

“It’s Dacey Parmenter. Nina’s mother. I don’t know that she’d want me referring you there after all your questions about little Nina.”

“Ah,” I said. “Mister, I respect what you’re saying, but I’m not going to bother Nina. I get curious, yes, but I don’t have any nefarious purpose here; I just need somewhere to sleep until I’m ready to move on again—or ready to find somewhere permanent, if I decide to settle here.”

He still seemed a little reluctant, but he pointed. “Third house on the left on Front Street, the one with the fancy balconies. Don’t tell her I sent you.”

“Thanks,” I said, leaving enough silver on the bar to cover my tab and a little more.

The house wasn’t hard to find; I might have stumbled across it on my own, since the “Room to Let” sign in the window was plain to see. I went up on the porch and knocked.

I think I might have recognized Dacey Parmenter as Nina’s mother even if I hadn’t been told she was the landlady, as she resembled her daughter right to the dull brown hair.

No wings, though. She was a good bit taller, too, and wore her hair shorter than her daughter’s.

I pointed to the sign in the window and said, “I could use a room.”

She looked me over, and I tried to stand straight and look respectable. “For how long?” she asked.

“I don’t know, ma’am. I’m traveling as the fancy takes me. I don’t necessarily plan to stay in Damonsburg forever, but I’m not in a rush to move on, either.”

She gave that a moment’s thought, then shrugged. “I’ll show you the room.” She turned, and I followed her into the house.

Halfway up the stairs I remarked, “I believe I may have met your daughter.”

I could see her shoulders tense. “Oh?”

“I suppose she might be some other kin, but she has your face. She and a couple of others were sitting on a fence by the Baker’s Corner road. Seemed like nice kids. I’d never seen a girl with wings before.”

She relaxed ever so slightly. “That’s my Nina,” she said. “You stay away from her.”

“Didn’t mean to worry you.”

She didn’t answer. We reached the top of the stairs and turned right, and she opened the door of the room. It was bright and airy with a big old canopy bed, the sheets and canopy white with bright red roses on them. A door on the far side opened onto one of those fancy balconies, overlooking the front lawn. I thought I’d enjoy sleeping in a room like that.

“What are you asking?” I said.

We settled on a price, meals included, and what currencies she would accept. I paid for a week, then set my pack down on the floor. She left, closing the door behind her, and I went out on the balcony.

Damonsburg looked even better from up there than it had from the street, full of flower gardens, and small shops, and rocking chairs on front porches—there were two on the Parmenter front porch, for that matter. I decided I’d definitely be staying for at least awhile.

I went back inside and unpacked, then went downstairs and out for a walk. I was thinking that if I intended to stay long I should probably find some honest work. I still had enough money hidden in my pack to live on for another year or two, but it wouldn’t last forever, and I didn’t like the idea that I wasn’t earning my way in the world.

I hadn’t found anything when suppertime rolled around, so I ambled back to the Parmenter house feeling a bit disappointed in myself. I went upstairs and dropped my hat on the bed, then went back downstairs and walked into the dining room as Nina was setting the table; I could hear her mother working in the kitchen.

“Hello,” I said.

Nina looked up at me and frowned. “You’re the new boarder?” she asked, in that sweet, soft voice of hers.

“That’s right. Can I give you a hand?”

“No, I’ve got it, thank you.” She went on setting out cutlery while I stood there, a little awkwardly, watching her while trying not to be obtrusive or rude.

She kept her wings folded down tight against her back, curving peaks thrust up above her head on either side, tips down by her ankles; even so, it seemed as if they were getting in the way whenever she had to reach to the side.

She finished, then stood by the kitchen door. A moment later her mother emerged holding a big pot of stew and spotted me.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to make it, Mr. Smith,” she said.

“And miss a proper home-cooked meal? I don’t think so.” I turned to Nina. “We still haven’t been properly introduced.”

Nina looked at me but didn’t say anything.

Her mother frowned, and I remembered that she had told me to stay away from Nina, but then she relented. “Nina, this is Mr. Smith. He’s renting the front room. Mr. Smith, this is my daughter Nina; I understand you’ve met?”

I nodded. “This morning, on the road from Baker’s Corner,” I said. “It’s a pleasure.” I looked at the table and saw three place settings on a table big enough for at least six. “Just the three of us?”

Ms. Parmenter said, “You’re the only boarder just now. If you’d take a seat, please?” She gestured toward one place—all three were at the far end of the table, mine on the right side. I sat there while the two of them made another trip to the kitchen and fetched out the rest of the meal.

“Would beer suit you, Mr. Smith?” Ms. Parmenter called, and I called back that it would suit me just fine.

Then they came back out and set everything on the table. Nina took the chair across from me, and Ms. Parmenter the one on the end.

We ate in awkward silence at first; neither of them spoke up, and as the guest it seemed as if it was my place to start the conversation, but I couldn’t think of anything to talk about but Nina’s wings—every time I looked up from my plate and started to open my mouth, there they were showing above her shoulders. I didn’t think anything I might say about them would be welcome.

Then Ms. Parmenter took pity on me and said, “Where do you come from, Mr. Smith, and what brings you to Damonsburg?”

“Well, I grew up in Crooked Falls, down by the Blade Ruins,” I said, and I went on to the whole story of what happened to my three sisters, and how my parents went away and left me with their wyrdstone, and how I sold it to my uncle and had to leave town when he decided I’d cheated him, which I had not.

“Been wandering ever since,” I said. “I’m beginning to think about settling down for awhile, though.”

“Here in Damonsburg?” Nina asked, and she didn’t sound as if she was especially pleased with the idea.

I shrugged. “Maybe,” I said. “Can’t say I’ve seen anywhere better, as yet.”

By that time we had polished off most of the stew, and Ms. Parmenter began clearing away. I offered to lend a hand, but she told me no.

“She doesn’t like anyone else in her kitchen,” Nina said. “Not even me.”

“No?”

Nina grimaced. “No. I’ve knocked too many things off the shelves.” She flexed her wings a little, to make her meaning clear.

I nodded. I didn’t dare say anything; I hadn’t yet learned what she might take offense at.

She stared at me a moment, then leaned across the table and whispered, “Was that story true?”

“What story?”

“About your family—your sisters, and your uncle.”

I smiled. “Every word, I swear it.”

“I wasn’t sure. We’ve had some tale-spinners here.”

“I’m not surprised. The worlds are full of them.”

“But you aren’t one of them?”

“Well, now, I won’t say I haven’t ever added a few arms or legs to a story to make it more interesting, but all in all I try to stick to the truth, and everything I told you tonight is just fact.”

She smiled. “No extra arms or legs?”

“Not a one.”

She nodded. “You said you’ve been traveling ever since you left your town?”

“Indeed I have.”

“So where have you been? I saw you come up the road from Baker’s Corner; what’s it like there?”

So I told her about my stay in Baker’s Corner, though that wasn’t much of a tale. Ms. Parmenter cleared away the rest of the dinner leavings about then, and we got out of her way and went out on the front porch, where I told her about the Salt Coast, and Bootmaker Marsh, and Abbot’s Creek, and half a dozen other places I’d visited.

I still had more to say when Ms. Parmenter came out on the porch and said, “Nina, time to come in and clean up.”

“Yes, Momma.” She hopped out of her rocking chair and went inside.

Ms. Parmenter paused and said “You two seem to have hit it off, Mr. Smith.”

“Well, she’s a good listener, ma’am, and like most men I love the sound of my own voice.”

“She doesn’t usually care for strangers. She’s had some bad experiences.”

I nodded. “I heard about what happened to her father.”

“I asked you to stay away from her.”

“You did. My apologies. I was just trying to be polite, answering her questions.”

She stood for a moment, considering, then said, “She seems to like you.”

I nodded. “I like her, certainly.”

“Then you can talk to her, but only in this house. I don’t want her following you around town.”

“I’m fine with that, Ms. Parmenter.”

She smiled, and followed her daughter into the house.

I sat a little longer, enjoying the cool of the evening and watching the firehawks draw lines of light in the sky over the distant mountains; then I went inside.

The next day I looked for work again, and this time I got an offer from the foreman at the sawmill east of town. It wasn’t the best job I’d ever had, but it was steady work and paid well enough that I thought it would do until—well, unless—something better came along. I put in an honest afternoon’s labor, then went home to the Parmenter house for supper.

It was roast chicken this time, rather than stew, and the conversation was easier—I told the Parmenters about my new job, and Nina told me about the feud in progress between two of her friends, Anna and Sybil.

“You met Sybil on your way into town,” she said. “Anna was home sick.”

“I hope it wasn’t anything serious.”

“Well, that’s part of what they’re fighting about.” It seems that Anna was claiming she had been cursed by another girl they both disliked, and Sybil said that she would have cursed both of them so it must have been someone or something else, and...

I confess, I didn’t follow all of it, but I enjoyed the sound of Nina’s voice as she chattered away.

Again, we went out on the porch after we ate, just the two of us, and we talked. I told her more about my wanderings, and she told me more about her friends. Apparently she had about half a dozen close companions, while the rest of the children in town avoided her.

I decided to risk asking, “Do you think it’s because of your wings?”

“Probably. And what my Daddy did when I was little.”

I didn’t answer at first, but at last I said, “I think I heard about that.”

“He saved me from those men,” she said, her face serious. “They deserved it.”

“Why would it make anyone avoid you?”

“What he did to them. It was pretty horrible.”

“I guess I didn’t hear that part. All I heard was that he saved you from a bunch of drunken fools.”

“He did, and they deserved it, but what people said...”

“Did you see what he did?”

She shook her head. “No. I was tied up in a big bag, and the people who found us didn’t let me out until we were outside. They didn’t want me to see. But people told me about it later. My Daddy cut them to pieces.”

“Oh.” I didn’t say anything more for a moment, and neither did she, but at last I said, “He must have loved you very much.”

“Uh huh.” She sniffled a little.

“It’s getting a bit chilly,” I said.

She nodded.

“Should we go inside?”

She nodded again, and we did. I had thought we might continue our chat in the parlor, but she excused herself and headed up to her bedroom.

That was the pattern for the next week or so; I would work at the mill, come home and eat supper with the Parmenters, and then sit on the porch with Nina. Sometimes we talked, and sometimes we just sat and enjoyed each other’s company. A couple of times one or two of her friends came by and joined the conversation; I was introduced, and each of them deemed me acceptable, indicating as much with a handshake. I got to re-tell some of my adventures, with Nina adding commentary along the way, warning our guests when a scary bit was coming, or telling them to get ready for some upcoming detail.

Ms. Parmenter remarked again on how well Nina and I got along. She said her girl didn’t trust many adults.

“I don’t blame her,” I said. “Can’t say that I trust many myself.”

One evening, when it was just Nina and me on that front porch and no one else in sight, she started talking about her wings. She had opened them, as she sometimes did, to keep them from getting cramps, and had given them a firm shake that blew my hair in my eyes.

“Sometimes I wish I didn’t have them,” she said, as I brushed my hair back into place. “They get in the way, and grown-ups all treat me as if they’re the only thing about me that matters.”

“But they’re so beautiful!” I said.

She shrugged, and her wings fluttered.

“Maybe if you could fly, you’d like them more.”

“Maybe.”

I hesitated, and then asked, “Why can’t you fly?”

“Momma won’t let me.”

I sat silently for a moment, blinking in surprise. “That’s it?” I asked. “You could fly if she said it was all right?”

“I don’t know,” Nina said. “Maybe.”

“You haven’t tried?”

“Momma said not to. I did try when I was little, but I kept running into things, and I hardly got off the ground, and once Daddy was gone Momma said I shouldn’t do it any more, ever. So I haven’t.”

I nodded. “Your Momma probably knows what’s best.”

She looked up at the sky above the mountains. A lone firehawk went spiraling up from one of the peaks, and Nina said, “Sometimes I wonder what it would be like, though, seeing everything from above, and going wherever I wanted.”

“I’ve gone wherever I pleased these last few years,” I said. “There’s something to be said for it, but I’m happy to stay here for a time.”

She nodded, and folded her wings in.

It was about three days after that Dacey Parmenter met me on the porch as I came back from work.

“I think it might be time for you to move on, Mr. Smith,” she said, as I came up the steps.

I stopped. “Oh? Why would that be, Ms. Parmenter?”

“Nina’s spending too much time with you.”

I considered that for a moment. “We enjoy each other’s company, Ms. Parmenter. I don’t mean her any harm.”

“She’s getting old enough that it’s not safe for her to be hanging around older men.”

“Ma’am, I never see her anywhere but in the house and on this porch.”

“It’s still too much.”

“You could tell her not to come out to the porch with me.”

“I could, yes, but I’d rather remove the temptation instead of giving her orders.”

It seemed to me that she had already given Nina a pretty big order about not trying to fly, but maybe she was right. The more commandments she gave, the more Nina would be inclined to break a few. Fortunately, I thought I saw a way out of the situation that wouldn’t force me to leave.

“If you like, I’ll sit out on my balcony in the evenings, instead of the front porch,” I suggested. “And when it gets too cold for that, I’ll stay in my room instead of the parlor downstairs.”

For a moment we stood silently face to face; then she said, “We can try that. I admit your rent money’s welcome.” She stepped aside to let me into the house, and called after me, “Dinner will be a little late.”

We ate, and no mention was made of the new policy at the table. Afterward I went up to my room, rather than out to the porch, where I went out on the balcony and settled down with a book. I confess I missed Nina’s company, but it was still a pleasant enough way to spend the evening. I finished the book and went to bed.

The following day I stopped at an antique shop on my way home and bought another book, as I had exhausted my personal library. I read about half of it that night.

On the third day of the new regime Nina asked me at the table, “Why don’t you sit out on the porch anymore?”

Ms. Parmenter tensed.

“I wanted a change of pace,” I said.

“I miss talking to you.”

“You could visit one of your friends, couldn’t you?”

“No! I’m not allowed in their houses; I knock things over.” She spread her wings slightly, then folded them back down, to make clear what she meant. “We always play outside, but most of them aren’t allowed outside after dark.”

“You could invite them over here.”

She glanced at her mother. “Maybe,” she said.

We finished eating; I excused myself and headed upstairs. I could feel Nina’s gaze following me.

I had been on the balcony, reading, for perhaps half an hour when I heard Nina’s voice. I took my feet off the rail, closed my book, leaned over, and looked down at the front lawn.

Nina was standing there, looking up at me.

“Did I do something wrong?” she called.

I held a finger to my lips, then shook my head.

Nina looked toward the front door, then up at me. She hesitated.

Then she spread her wings, and flapped.

She was a bit awkward at first, but by the time she was high enough to grab the railing of my balcony she seemed to have it under control. She hung there on the outside of the railing, slipped her feet between the uprights, folded her wings, and demanded, “Why aren’t you talking to me anymore?”

“You flew up here!” I said, astonished. “I thought you couldn’t fly!”

She ignored my words. “Why aren’t you talking to me?”

She was clearly not going to be satisfied with any sort of evasion, and I did not want to lie to her. “Your mother asked me not to,” I said. “She thinks a girl your age shouldn’t be spending so much time with a man my age.”

“My age? I’ll be twelve next month!”

“That’s the point. I think she’s worried you might have a crush on me, and that I might take advantage of that.”

She stared at me for a moment, then said, “Oh.”

“She’s your mother. She wants to protect you.”

Nina frowned. “But... she doesn’t need to protect me from you.”

“Well, I don’t think so, and you don’t think so, but she doesn’t know whether she can trust me. Or you, for that matter. She told you not to try to fly, and here you are.”

“She doesn’t know...”

“Have you been flying when she wasn’t around?”

“No! This is the first time, I swear it!”

I believed her.

“I did fly, didn’t I?”

“You really did.”

Just then we heard the front door slam, and Ms. Parmenter calling, “Nina! Are you out here?”

“Oh!” Nina said, spreading her wings.

And then she flew away, up and over the top of the house, as her mother came down the steps calling for her.

Ms. Parmenter looked up—she probably heard the sound of her wings—but not in time to see her before she was out of sight over the edge of the roof.

“Mr. Smith,” she called, “have you seen Nina?”

“Is she missing?”

“I don’t know where she went!”

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

Ms. Parmenter looked up and down the street, obviously worried, then turned and went back into the house.

I decided I had better reassure her. I put my book away and headed down the stairs, and found Ms. Parmenter in the front hall, and Nina emerging from the kitchen. She must have come in the back door.

“There you are!” Ms. Parmenter exclaimed.

“Here I am,” Nina said.

I stood at the foot of the stairs and watched as Ms. Parmenter hurried toward her daughter.

Nina took a step back, though, and spread her wings as far as she could inside the house.

“Momma,” she said, “I can fly.”

Ms. Parmenter stopped dead in her tracks.

“It’s wonderful,” Nina said. “I’m not going to stop.”

Ms. Parmenter stared at her for a long silent moment, her face frozen. Then she nodded.

“Just be careful,” she said, and her voice shook. Without another word she turned aside.

I stayed through the winter. Nina and I spoke on the porch sometimes, but sometimes she was flying, exploring her world’s new possibilities, and I would sit and read. I would look up occasionally to see the firehawks over the mountains, and the red and gold of Nina’s wings catching their light. When the snows came I watched Nina dance among the snowflakes as they fell, and saw her land with her wings speckled with white and her face alight with joy. We spoke less and less often, as she used her new freedom to find new places and new people.

And in the spring I decided I had had enough of Damonsburg and headed out, my pack on my shoulder. Nina gave me a hug before I left, and she flew along overheard for a mile or so, looking down at me, before she turned to go home.