

Spring of Freedom

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It had not rained this hard in years. Just trying to walk in the wet hay and mud was nearly impossible. The sky was already dark, the rain slanting down thickly across it. And it was starting to get downright cold, too. I wondered how anything could stand to live out in it. Even the dry, grey wood of the old barn was soaked, dark and brown. Trying to feed the cows in this weather was miserable. I liked the rain—I just wished I didn’t have to slop around in the thick mud; working in heavy, wet coat.

Finally, I forked the last cumbersome pile of silage into the last manger. It was such a relief to be done! Another heavy drop of water beaded up on the end of my long hair, hanging in front of my eyes, pausing, then dripping icily onto my face. I sloshed noisily to the shed, putting the pitchfork back just inside the door. The tin roof vibrated with the rain hitting it in sheets. I listened for a moment, then closed the door quickly, eager to get out of this place. I tried putting the latch back, but it simply refused to hook. The door apparently had shrunk with the cold, semi-winter weather. I gave up, not caring too much. The wind would hold it closed.

I felt the water trapped in the coat against my shoulder as I turned and began heading back to the barn. I’d almost forgotten my knife. Small tool I had to use to unlock those awful straw bales with.

I nearly fell on my back as my right foot slid in the mud, the uneven, tractor tire-eaten road was an obstacle course for my feet. I cursed the ruts, and continued on, glad I had a good sense of balance.

The cold rain on the hood of my coat abruptly ceased as I walked under the barn roof. The stacked pile of straw smelled dry and slightly musty. Small feathers were scattered about on the straw-covered ground. The roof of the barn had a hollow space, perfect for the starlings and the sparrows to sleep and nest in. That’s where they were now; I could hear slight rustling of their wings as they cuddled closer to each other, trying to keep warm and dry. The feathers all amongst the straw had accumulated over the years, some getting buried, or blown away by swirling wind; others just remained, as though they were part of it all.

I climbed to the top of the stack, getting still more itching shafts of straw embedded in my socks. Damn stuff. There was my knife—still stuck in the top bale, where I had stood to toss straw out the windows of the barn, bedding the corral below.

A hollow sounding wind blew in and swirled the straw in a circle, down by the corner where an old wooden palette lay. I held on to a thick support wire, one of a dozen that ran across the top of the barn, just under that birdy roof. I pulled the knife out of the bale easily, folding it closed in one hand. I pocketed it and took pause to watch the sky through the three or four high windows. For as beautiful as it was, the rain sure could be miserable. I wondered what it would be like to live in it; without some roof over your head, or a heated abode to be lazy in.

I sighed. ‘What a crappy April,’ It had rained for a few days now. But it was really coming down now.

There was fluttering above me as I stepped up to the highest platform of straw bales. I ducked under a wire and walked to the edge. There was the ground, hardly three or four times my height below. Yet, I couldn’t get down there without climbing the same way, unless I decided to jump and suffer whatever happened next. What a meaningless thought— I leaned over another wire, looking out the west window at the Trees. They were at least eighty feet tall, probably more. I wasn’t good at judging things like that. Everything seemed depressing, the monochrome sky; trees just a black silhouette.

The Hawk’s nest in the second tree was a black, twiggy mass from this distance, but I smiled when my eyes found it—it was always the first thing I saw. And there was Shree, sitting in it, incubating the eggs. Poor Shree— Rain was a friend, but it just made it so much harder. Atweek had to work much more to hunt food and

bring it to the nest. Shree didn't move while I watched; or if she did, it was too faint for me to detect. I could just see the shape of her head, where it rose above the nest, probably half awake and totally bored. But she was content; the rain would pass.

The evening grew darker, and it became hard to see her through the rain. I yawned and turned to stare off into the grey shafts of cool falling water. I loved it up here in the barn, higher than the loft itself. I could see all the little mud-holes and puddles I had to walk in. The field to the north, previously nonexistent behind the wooden fence, now unfolded to me, showing even the slight slopes of the land. The highway was just a narrow black strip that went somewhere off in the distance. The fence I had to climb over to get to the oat granary was just a small, beat-up wooden thing. I could see it all, but I didn't control any of it. I didn't even have to worry about it—up here.

I wondered if that was how Shree felt, similar, but with greater emphasis on the neutrality of it all.

I looked out the north window, seeing my house a block away. Dark smoke billowed from the chimney in looming, ominous clouds. It was almost scary to think that it was a thick, choking blanket; a burned up tree. 'Yeah,' I thought, sarcastically, 'there was our tree, coming out in smoke, there's Shree's tree,' looking to the west, 'still standing with all its magnificence.'

I thought for a while, then changed the subject on myself. I was a real psycho sometimes.

My hair was thick and damp on my forehead. I'd let it get rained on until the rain got so heavy I retreated into the coat hood. Feathers, though—I'd seen what rain does on a Hawk's back. Water just beads up and practically rolls off, right down to the edge of their tail. It was not just feathers, but the way they were put together, in that overlapping fashion. In fact, not only that, but the oil that they spread in them. This rain was hardly a thing to worry about, to Shree.

I wondered what she thought—about life. In a strange, perhaps demented, sort of way, I wished I could see what it was like to live in the rain. I wanted to know what it was like to live with the bare essentials of life; be able to take care of myself, live anywhere, go anywhere. Hell, that's what I'd wanted my whole life.

I shook my head. Not be stuck in some barn, walking in mud, to go back to some house, then go in some car to some school building the next morning. I thought about school for a while—

I felt like it was such a waste of my life. I used to rather enjoy it. But now I see it as a kind of punishment: to be damned into the useless cycle of humanity forever. To use up eighteen years of your life, making you damn smart, so you can go and do some kind of work for another great number of years. What was the purpose? Why not live for perhaps twenty years? Never have to work, and just enjoy the beauty of Nature and the feeling of freedom and being alive. Sounds almost boring— But—compared to what? Sitting at a desk for seven hours a day? Oh, sure, mentally it was different every day, but only with variations—

No—I stopped my thoughts. I was getting into that old argument with myself. I couldn't convince myself that it was worth it anymore. I knew it was impossible, and I had finally been able to accept it. Of course, it made me go into a kind of careless state. What difference did anything make? You were going to die eventually anyway. I was an atheist, so I really didn't care what the purpose of life was, other than to figure out what made you the happiest. If life was nothing more than that, then why did I have to be ruled over by my people's government? Or do anything? I had to be left alone to do what I wished. I had to be free—

And again, I found my mind trying to slide into that debate— It was time to go. If I went home and buried myself in my computer, then I didn't have to worry about it. Maybe one day, when I've been rescued by some heart bypass operation, and am on a kilo of pills a day, and am sitting in some therapeutic chair at my computer when I am ninety years old, maybe I'll figure it all out. Then again, I'll probably just be found dead one day, head propped up by the monitor, hands flat and heavy on the keyboard. Probably a few lines of text on the screen similar to this—then a repeating character 'till the end of the page where my hands fell limp over the "B" key—

That's really how I viewed life? Good nature! But it's true! That's what I think.

The rain fell as heavy as ever, starting to drown out my thoughts with the noise on the tin roof. The mud in the corrals was overwhelming. I was actually considering staying up in the barn. But I had to road to walk home on, the glorious paved asphalt. Soon I could be in my warm room, eating something out of a box, watching the dancing lights of my computer monitor. I could kick back and listen to abstract noise, or music, maybe sleep for a while, while the rain pelted down continuously outside. Outside on Shree—

I wished I knew why I was the way I was. People seemed to generally enjoy life. They went to school. They went to work. They seriously seemed to like it. Of course, they all dreamed of something better—we all did. But I knew that their dreams were of the human mode: “Maybe I’ll get rich and famous,” or, “Live in a big mansion,” or, “Be a movie star,” or “Be a hero.” Whereas mine is different? I’m sure everyone would like to be free— but would they want to give up all they “own,” all that they are used to, so that they could live in the wild, getting their own food and owning nothing? What need is there of money there? What is money, anyway? Fame? Among who? What does it matter if no one knows your? If you can life and let live, then it shouldn’t matter if the whole world knows your name. Name? What name? Being famous is a form of greed, perhaps, greed of attention. Face it, no one is apart from being greedy, in some way or another . . . What about the big mansion? Okay, so I guess mine is the same: My big mansion is the forest, the mountains and the plains. No telephone poles, no roads, no houses, no people—that’s my big “mansion.” I live in all those places—at the same time—and also nowhere, too.

Hmm. The wire of the barn was making my armpits sore from leaning over it this whole time. My mind tended to run away, start arguing with itself, trying to convince me of something, but not knowing how. I should probably start leaving now—

I stood up straight, slightly cramped (but I still loved the barn). I looked out at Shree, this time looking not as though I were thinking over a novel, but just to watch—! I was on the outside— Of her— And her life— And Atwheek’s—

Nooo!!! I finally went crazy. I didn’t care at all: I jumped off the highest bale of the stack, feeling nothing at all—

—which was strange because there really was no feeling. I abruptly came back to reality, startled at myself and my stupidity. Now what had I done?

I felt myself floating, like in a dream but more real. The wall of the barn was zooming towards me like I had been thrown at it. What the hell was happening to me? In a flurry of feathers and a dizziness I realized without doubt that I had suddenly launched into their world; the world of the Hawk.



I was powerless to do anything. My mind was stunned at the simple prospect that I wasn’t dreaming. I felt my arms — or were they arms? —outstretched, but I couldn’t move them. It was like I was being controlled by something else— The sides of the narrow opening scraped harshly against me. I did nothing but let it happen, just watching a kind of blur wave past my eyes.

I felt a cool wind, then saw the stalls looming close. It was like I was gliding swiftly at them, but doing nothing to stop, change course, or at least slow down. The top rafter zoomed right at me, or vice versa, and the next thing I knew, I had a pounding headache and a struggle to say conscious—

Which apparently I lost, because when soon I awoke, I found myself quite disheveled, lying in the shit of the corral, cold and wet. I’d fallen all right, but not where I thought I’d fall; not straight down. I was a hundred feet from the barn, and there was the massive— No, the gargantuan head of a filthy cow hovering mere inches over me. There were three or four of them—

I really was sore and I felt like hell. The cow had probably drooled the biggest hunk of snot on me or something while I'd been unconscious. I was caked in mud; well, actually, something quite worse than simple mud; wet, and cold. Plus, it was raining even harder than before. But I knew I had to move—had to get out of this hellish place. I hated cows with a passion anyway—

As if by some miracle, I found a way to my feet and tried to run out of there, but I was still dizzy. I'd hopped maybe one step when I had to stop and shake myself off. I knew what was going on. It had finally happened. I didn't know how, but it had happened. So now where was I? On the edge of some crap-filled corral. What a beginning! Here I was, trying to realize my dream, and where was I? I felt too miserable to stop and relax, I just wanted out of here! At the moment I was wet and cold, and wondered if I would make it. How did they stand it? I didn't know how long I'd been out in the rain, but something told me I was off to a bad luck start—

Furious and frantic, I stumbled over the clumps and through the wet mud. The cows jumped back in surprise. Anything could startle them. It seemed like forever, but I made it to the fence, and slipped under the bottom board easy enough. Finally I was in a little bit better situation. The rain pelted me on the back, but I was already wet, so hardly noticed. I was hoping it would clean off the cow crap I had fallen into. It was a cold rain, but not a chilling one; I stayed still in it, glad to be in the wonderful long grass at the edge of the field. Now I could finally pause and relax, and look myself over.

One thing was for sure: I looked like hell. That matched how I felt exactly. I figured it would pass; it was only because I'd had such a rough "introduction" to this new life. Already I was thinking in terms of it as such: a new life. My feathers were either discolored or wet or totally out of place. My tail feathers needed some desperate preening, the edges were separated and brown. But my feet looked okay; the wet grass and the rain had kept them beautiful yellow. Rain or no, I wanted to stop and just get used to this, then maybe I could continue and not be so unsure and stressed— Everything had happened so suddenly that I had had no choice but to take action and move. Now I was stopped. Now I could think about what had happened I could scarcely believe it wasn't some kind of dream. But it felt too real; the rain really was there, and my head really did hurt. I looked back through the fence to see where I'd come from. The barn was across the corral, the line of stalls on the other side. I figured I had probably glided or flew or something from the barn window to the top of those stalls, but being unable to control anything, I ran head-first into the wood frame, and of course, knocked myself out. What a way to start out! But now here I was, and that was what mattered.

With my head held low, the first thing I kept thinking about was my feet. There they were with powerful black talons on each toe. It felt so; well, there wasn't a word except different to say. Certainly I noticed the way I now stood—on my toes with my heels in the air. Although it was different, I felt quite comfortable. I didn't have any restricting pants or a heavy coat on which brought up another thought: Even though I was wet and the rain felt cold, I was nowhere near freezing. I just felt a little unable, which probably wasn't the best word, but good enough. It really was true; that feathers did a better job than any clothes— I couldn't wait for the rain to stop so I could . . .

fly

. . . There was that word—first time I'd thought of it since I'd hit that board. I opened my wings in quickened anticipation, looking carefully at the beautiful feathers— My pulse rate went way up, as I thought back to the pictures in my room at home. Pictures of birds and their outstretched wings, stretching way out, feeling the sky, soaring, flying. Now I saw real wings, in real life, but not like I had seen of the Hawks I had cared for and rehabilitated, but my very own wings. As they quivered in the rain and slight cold, I felt it, and felt immense pleasure in simply realizing it.

I folded them to my sides, felling warmer having done so. I would have to wait— I looked up at the dark sky, past a hooked beak, into the rain. There was my new home—

Time to get dry. I began heading for the barn, not exactly sure how to go about it. Walking was very strange, probably even for a natural Hawk. But soon I found the easiest way, by stepping high; half hopping. I couldn't feel it now, with the rain and all, but I could tell that I was indeed light and agile. The rain soaked air felt excellent to breathe. My eyesight was clear and focused, despite the greyness of everything.

I jerked my vision up to Shree's tree. She was still there. I felt a union like none other just then. I was in her world— In Atwheek's world—

Crawling back under the fence was easy. I was wonderfully small.

For a moment, I found myself wondering how to even get in. The only window on this side was five feet up, and I felt quite unable to fly up there. Soon, I forgot about the barn; some approaching cows created a new distraction. They promptly walked right up to me, more curious than fearful. I wasn't a threat because I wasn't human. But I was quick, and ducked back under the fence. The cows somehow seemed disappointed; both that their curiosity had not been satisfied, and that they weren't small enough to duck under the fence. Oh it was great— I already felt like I was able to escape.

But it wasn't going to be great if I stayed wet. Something made me stop and consider. Why was it that I was wet even under my feathers, while Shree was not? It had to be because of my fall. I'd gotten mud and crap on me and it messed up the feathers, letting the rain soak under them. This was one rainstorm I wouldn't get to see what it was like to repel the water effectively— But there certainly would be more. I would be out here for the rest of my life, and every rain that came I would know of. So for now I would wait in the barn, trying to get oriented and dry. After that— Never again would I come back to these people. I just hoped I could find a place that was perfect for me: Trees, grassland, cliffs, canyon—someplace without humans!

Now I felt like I could really call them that! Careless and stupid humans. I wasn't one anymore, I had changed sides—and with a deep relief. I didn't feel like some kind of traitor; instead I felt quite liberated and free. In fact, I didn't feel like it was a 'side' at all. I didn't know how to explain it, but I found myself quite amazed that I wasn't going crazy. I mean, I wasn't frantically running around, scared to death or excited as ever. I was perfectly awake, of course, and I felt great. (Other than my head.) I felt like I could move for the first time in my life. My back wasn't sore, my legs weren't tired— I felt very alive. Of course, my head still throbbed with slight pain, but it was just a headache, not a concussion or something. My thoughts wandered for a while, then I realized I'd better hurry and get somewhere dry, before I got a cold—or whatever Hawks get—so I could be well when this storm passed.

There were several cows now, packed into the area, lined up behind the fence in a chaotic assortment. All of them were interested in this funny feathery thing in the grass. Geeze, I still hated them. Now I was glad I didn't have to feed them ever again— What was my boss going to do? I wouldn't be eating cow and drinking their milk ever again. I was actually relieved to think that my food now was not raised and fattened in herds, but rather wild and free on their own, too. I'd have to be strong and able in order to catch my prey, I knew that. There were a lot of things I'd have to be. Hopefully, I would be able to learn all the essentials, and perfect them.

But right now I had to get in the barn. It was too far for me to walk around to the normal entrance, and I certainly wasn't going back into the disgusting corral. Funny to think it was too far to walk around, me, being a bird. But walking truly was a difficulty now, and I didn't want to approach the highway at all, lest someone decide I'm in trouble or something and capture me. In a way, I felt mad, knowing how vulnerable I now was to any human's whim. I was offered no protection by them, save for the dumb laws protecting birds, to whatever extent they went. Nooo— I thought, looking at it from that perspective, I had done something absolutely degrading and insane! I was just a stupid animal now! Just a dumb bird—

But I didn't care. I wasn't seeing that perspective. That's the viewpoint I had tried so hard, and succeeded in escaping from. Now I had an opportunity to see life how it really was. How life was in the most divine and basic form in Nature.

I waited for a long time in the grass, holding very still, trying now to keep warm. Occasionally, I tried preening some feathers to keep out the rain, but it didn't seem to do much good. I wasn't very cold, just an occasional shiver from the wet, but it was nothing near as deterring as the freezing feeling of rain in mid-February. In addition, I could somehow tell that I was warmer inside. Birds' internal temperatures were hotter than humans' by about ten degrees, and having just been human, I could tell there was a difference. It felt slight, but in this rain, I knew it was a good thing.

I wondered if I could fly that measly distance to the window. I was not in a condition to stay in the rain all night. It was getting dark fast, and I didn't know how I would get about in the dark.

The cows were getting tired or bored, or both, and were starting to find stalls to sleep in. Good. I needed to figure out how to get up to that window.

When the cows had disappeared from the area, I crawled back under the fence in the dusk light. The rain still fell as dense as ever, and was doing no good for my comfort. The only way I was going to get up to it was to fly up there. It was four or five feet up, and now quite above my head. I felt strange realizing that I used to be six feet tall, just a few hours ago, able to climb in with an easy push of the arms. But I didn't feel any less able. I knew I had a real future coming, however different it was going to be. Looking at the great sky, I knew I was capable of flying in it; small, quiet, and totally free. Free to act any way I wanted: Like a Hawk. Free to go anywhere I felt like, free to do whatever is natural and normal.

I knew, wet or not, I should be able to get sufficient lift from my wings to get to the bottom edge of the window. I could feel a panging in my breast as I contemplated my jump. I knew I could fly—

On the third thrilling sensation of anticipation, I burst into life. I opened my wings easily and pushed down hard, along with a hard push from my legs. I felt myself rise, and for hardly a second, felt myself separated from everything. It was so natural, too. When I touched the ledge, I immediately wanted to turn and launch into the sky. But I knew I was far from being competent and experienced enough to attempt it.

Gripping hard with my taloned feet, I struggled to maintain balance on the thin board. It was easy enough to hold on, my feet were extremely strong in relation to my weight, which was wonderfully little. The hard part was learning where my 'center of gravity' was, how to hold myself still on the perch. With quite a bit of tail bobbing and a couple of wing flutters, I finally had attained a steady balance, and found that it was actually an easy and comfortable pose. It figured, of course, it was perfectly natural to Hawks. Since it was my first time ever, in the rain, it had been difficult; but now I felt as though I could do it a thousand times over, perfectly.

I took great satisfaction in simply perching. I was out of the downpour itself, and starting to feel more like a bird since I was finally perching. The last thing I wanted to do before settling in for the night was to get into the loft, where I could stay dry and sleep.

I realized that I was fairly tired; I supposed because of the great energy it took to make me a bird in the first place, then the energy I used up in excitement and adrenaline. I wanted to spend some time getting myself into good condition; I had a lot of ruffled feathers.

There was a large beam that ran the length of the barn, just under the window. I hopped down to it and carefully ran along it until I was a short distance away from the edge of the loft. Relying on my experience with the window, I leapt from the board and tried to fly to the loft, just six feet up.

But I hadn't planned on it being higher, or something, because the next thing I knew I was pushing off the wall, two feet short of the floor of the loft. Now I was falling again, but this time I was quick to react. I righted myself with a thrust of my wings, and beat upwards until I landed on top of the bales of straw. I was back where I started, in a sense.

I quickly regained my balance and jumped easily across a hole where there weren't bales. I felt considerably better, now that I was up off the wet ground. In fact, looking down, I noticed that I was far more comfortable being at a height now than when I was human.

Besides, I could feel the urge to stay high now, too. If I thought I hated the ground before, it really got me now. The only excuse I had to be on the ground now was when I caught some prey, or found water to bathe in or drink. And even then only for a short while.

I looked down among the straw-covered ground, able to see perfectly the half-buried bale strings, the tiny white and black feathers, the bare spots of earth. I focused my attention on my eyesight, which truly was phenomenal. Every bit of straw that fluttered or moved with the occasional wind had a distinct quality to it, a clarity that I had never known before. I couldn't wait to get up in the warm air, look down on the fields, and see things perfectly, fly in ecstatic silence, the wind over my feathers, my beak piercing the cool upper air of the summer— I felt another tingle of euphoria, a giddiness in me like I had discovered the secret to life. In fact, for me, that was exactly what I had done.

I hopped to a desirable spot atop the bales, just about where I'd been when I'd jumped off. I noticed, surprisingly for the first time, that my clothes were strewn out just by the barn entrance. That was all the proof I needed that this was still reality. I felt a sense of great ease in realizing I was free from them, too. So much more able, agile, and alive—I was warm, but it was a perfect warmth. No more heavy shoes, hot legs and cold head. I had known feathers were great, but never had I realized just to what extent.

I could stand being wet no longer! I set about sorting through the feathers on my body with my beak. I loved the sensation that every one was a part of me. Any that looked or felt wet or out of place I had a way to get at it, and run it soothingly through my beak, felling it pull slightly on my skin, then fall neatly into place. Of course, some of them had a rather unpleasant taste, but it was a matter of necessity, and determined to be strong, I did it as an animal, and ignored it.

It took a long time, of course. It grew dark quick, and I was soon working by the light of the street light near the barn. It was actually quite nice to be able to reach nearly every part of my body with my head. There was no way to explain it: Perhaps it was just the difference from what I had known, but I truly felt far more comfortable to be like I was now. I didn't feel strange having a beak or taloned toes. I felt very much satisfied and at ease with it. Although I had to admit, having wings folded against my sides was certainly a difference I wasn't used to, but it felt warm where they pressed against me.

My feathered front was hardly in need of careful preening; I had landed on my back when I fell in the corral. So after 'combing' my back several times, I finally felt fairly good about my start out as a bird. It would just take a little time now for the fluffy down feathers to dry, and then I could feel far more capable.

I was beginning to feel tired, but I had to continue to look myself over. I was afraid if I went to sleep that something would happen and when I awoke it would be all just a dream. But this I knew was reality, and was constantly excited by it.

I turned my attention to my tail. I noticed immediately that it had a tinge of light red, which meant that as a Hawk I was almost an adult. I would rather have been reborn as a Hawk, so that I would lack my human consciousness, but at this point I was not turning back. Oh it was great even to have a tail. I fanned it out and looked at the twelve broad feathers of it, each with a dark brown band near the tip; just like the ones I had in a collection at home. The ones from years of watching Atweek and Shree. Now I saw and moved my own. All perfectly in line and part of me.

I grew very tired, and, comfortable among the straw, standing easily on one four-toed leg, I buried my beak in my scapulars, falling asleep as a beautiful Hawk. Not really knowing the greatest hardships lied just ahead in my new life.



The early morning light brought the feeling of newness and warmth to the dawn. It rose beyond the other barns east of here, and shone brightly in the large, high windows, chasing the last remnants of rain away. I awoke easily and looked eagerly about, the bright light reaching my Hawk eyes.

I remained on one leg, and remained a bird. Nothing had been a dream after all. Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I stood on both legs and stretched my wings. Usually Hawks stretch by extending a leg and the same side wing down below the branch they're perching on. I was on a flat plane, the bales, so could not. But I stretched them as though I were flying, and felt some of the moisture of the previous rain in them. My back, however, was dry. My warmth easily dried out my feathers; now I was ready, in case more rain should fall.

I looked around the barn, getting a feel for where I was again. Outside the fields remained muddy; the hay dark, and the clouds thick and somewhat grey. But there were openings in the sky where the morning sun shone brilliantly through. It was my first morning. I thought, of being totally liberated; totally free. I still felt somehow bound to my previous life, yet I felt even that would soon fade.

With renewed energy, I sprang to a higher bale, landing perfectly with only one flip of the wings. I looked down, and noticed my coat and clothes strewn somewhat randomly about the ground, just below where I had originally jumped. I had an eerie feeling, almost as if I had done something wrong. It was strange now, to see remainders like that— It seemed like those clothes were somebody else's—something else's.

Well, now they were— I felt so perfect with feathers compared to the wet, heavy, restricting clothes. I felt far away from that, although I knew it had only been a short day ago that I was living the horror of it. Horror? It certainly had its merits — so I suppose I couldn't call it a horror: human life. But I had been fairly depressed and miserable. Now I knew I could go on by instinct. Acting upon what I felt, rather than what I thought. Feelings; the underlying personality; and the soul were more important than any learned behaviors and complicated choices, in a sense. If you have a good, sensible soul, and you follow closely your emotions, then all should be well. It's almost free of stress and aggravating problems.

Still remembering—feeling slightly bound to that past life— I thought more about the situation. What were my parents going to think?!? It hit me hard and fast. My original plan, one that I had thought up at work, if I ever did become a bird, would be to forget them; let them figure things for themselves. I had left more than adequate amounts of writings; things they had never read of mine. They would get to them, and when they did, they would know— But what about their feelings? Wouldn't they feel terrible over 'losing' me? Hell, they would feel terrible even if they knew that I really would prefer to be a Hawk—

I had to do something about the clothes. I knew I could just leave it alone, but at the same time I couldn't leave anyone like Harlow or my parents that kind of problem to figure out. But, there was one factor: my writings at home. Practically 500 pages over the last four years I had wrote and rewrote about what my life should have been like—they may be able to put it together—but it would take some time—

My final decision was to do something about it. Because my clothes were the first thing they were going to discover, and they'd get extremely worked up about it. But what was I going to do with them? It wasn't like I would be able to hide them anywhere— But maybe long enough for them to snoop through my stuff and figure it out. One thing I wasn't going to do, however, was go back there. No way; not now. I was a bird, and I intended to stay perfectly wild. To go back, even long enough just to let them get the message would be violating my whole philosophy—my entire dream.

It still made me think I was going against the naturalness of it all, but I knew I had to at least put them in a pile — I knew it sounded weird, but it would just be better if it looked like I had voluntarily removed them, you know?

I was on practically the highest bale, and I neared the edge with a hopping step, most birdlike, and felt no fear at all with the height. It seemed even less a distance now, even though it was many times more my height than when I had been human. It was the gift of flight in me, my mind-set. I opened my wings and simply stepped off the straw — to float easily down in the air— I knew no control, I was frantically overcorrecting myself to keep from crashing into the opposite wall of the loft, and thus ran headlong into the stacked bales. With a little “ffffmfp” and a lot of ruffled feathers, I found myself half-sprawled on the ground again. But I was unhurt and about where I wanted to be anyway. My wings were nearly the length of my human arms, and they now seemed huge with my much smaller body. Clumsy wouldn’t be a good description, they didn’t feel like that—it was more that I was simply in a tight space and inexperienced than I was ‘cumbersome.’

I shook myself, and my feathers fell back into place, for the most part. I was going to have to be careful; it wasn’t like I could take them off and run them through the washer.

Quickly, I set about trying to put the heavy clothes into a semi-orderly pile. The last thing I’d have to do to cover myself, and forget entirely of my past—if I could.

I didn’t spend any more time on the ground than I had to. I felt nervous and uncomfortable on the ground than I had to. I felt so small down there. Feeling totally out of place, I pulled on my shirt with one foot, dragging it closer to the stack of straw. Actually, all it did was get more straw all over it, and make it look worse. I gave up. I wasn’t going to mess with it. It didn’t matter what they thought, anyway. I was leaving—forever.

With one flap of the wings and a couple of steps, I was out of the barn. Now I felt the morning sun on my back and felt totally renewed. I was really outside, and really on my own. Really as in: I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do, but I knew whatever it was it wasn’t going to be easy. But I knew at the same time that it wouldn’t be someone else telling me what to do.

I stretched my wings out to catch the warmth of the sun. It was something I’d always wanted to do. I looked at the absolutely captivating feathers on them; my own. I could feel every one! It still amazed me just to realize that it had actually happened.

There was the dark patch on my— What did the humans call it? Well, I knew it a couple of days ago, but forgot the term. Most likely for the better—it didn’t matter what anything was called. Soon enough, those wings would be carrying me far and high, and I wasn’t going to be thinking about words and descriptions.

Just feeling the wonderful warmth of the sun, I looked about—just getting the feel for where I was and what I was. My shadow, just in front of me, cast by the horizon hugging sun, dark - and not the lanky human shadow I had been so used to. Simple thought it was, I delighted in the magic that wherever I moved, it too moved. The little slits of my feathers, there, in my shadow. The perfect shape of the dark silhouette.

I was holding off, for some reason. I knew I couldn’t fly yet—not well. I had a lot of work to do, to learn it, to know it. My ‘instinct,’ as you might call it, made me want to—and I had wanted to long before the change, anyway.

I stepped a few times, closing my wings; just getting farther from the barn. I looked up, seeing the sky again. This time it was like some kind of new world. I looked at it with Hawk eyes—knowing I could be up there—somehow—soon.

My gaze fell upon the trees. Those monuments I had wanted to be able to watch everything from for so long. And then, quickly, I turned my attention to Shree and the nest. For the first time I saw her, and knew how she felt — a lot better than I had ever been able to know before. She was a Hawk up there—same as she had always been, but now, I was a Hawk down here, too. I could see details of her—the deep orange eyes behind the beak. Even at this small distance, my eyesight seemed far superior to what I had known. Now I saw her, and knew I was the same. I was sure that the eye I saw her with was likewise orange. And I could feel it—looking past my beak at

hear. It was like looking at a mirror, in a strange, indirect way. And thinking of it as a mirror, instead of an unconnected picture, brought an entirely new cast of emotions.

Shree was looking off into the distance, thus far unaware I was around. Most likely for the better; I didn't plan on imposing upon their territory. If I had been a 'threat' as a human I was now 'competition.' I'd leave—soon enough. I had to find a place even further; totally away from people. But first I had to learn how to live. I needed experience. How I was going to go about the next immediate portion of my life I wasn't sure.

I looked away, finally clicking back to awareness and closing my wings. I would have to soon learn to keep my head out of the clouds, because I was finally "there," in a sense.

I sensed a faint movement behind me, having a greater range of peripheral vision. Feeling slightly tense, I swiveled my head around quickly, looking easily back into the barn. I noticed her immediately: It was Kalico, the farm cat that was always hanging around. She was trying meticulously to sneak around the straw bales, peeking up at me constantly. Probably she was more curious than thought she would tangle with me. In either case, I didn't want to have anything to do with her. I was no longer her friend, and I wasn't going to offer any cat food from the barrel. Much less, I wasn't going to be cat food, either. I didn't know whether a cat like her would try to mess with a grounded Hawk or not, but I didn't much care to find out; not until I knew my limits, at least.

Not overly optimistic about my ability to jump and perch, due to my last couple of attempts, I knew I would have to keep trying. Eventually I'd be able to get a real feel for it. A great deal of what I did was going to be very difficult, more because I had lingering human thoughts and motives, rather than I was simply inexperienced. Young Hawks would have an easier time, so I knew I was going to have to be very lucky to make it—

The first precaution I intended to take was to get to the top of the fence right by me, bordering the cows' corral. The cat could get up there, but I would be able to see it a lot better. Even without the presence of the stupid cat, I wanted to get off the ground again, anyway. I wanted to start flying but I knew it would be a pointless effort. First, there was no wind to help get me going; second, it was still a cool morning, there would be no lift offered from thermals. I imagined Atwheek, wherever he was, had probably taken a short flight to just 'wake up,' but nothing now. Flying for hunting, as well as learning, had to be much easier when there was wind or warmth.

I turned to face the fence, contemplating how I could flap up there. It should be fairly simple. I'd seen Izzy flap just two or three times from the ground to land on a fence. It was just an easy 'jump.' I opened my wings again, this time in readiness. I bobbed my head a bit, getting it set in my mind how I was going to do it. Then, with a powerful downward sweep, I felt myself rise, air rushing about with my stroke. I continued, trying earnestly to stay far enough away that I didn't prematurely run into the fence, but at the same time didn't lose momentum and crash back to the ground. I sped up, and realized the fence was within my reach, and I grasped for it with my feet, in a frantic motion. With a bit of surprise at the suddenness, I felt wood against my talons, and I tightened my grip, feeling that it was a firm landing surface. I almost lost my balance and toppled into the corral, but thanks to a little bit of tail work, I was securely perched once again. This fence was nearly twice as high as the barn window I had initially flown to.

I'd been holding my breath. Now I breathed out with relief, and looked about. The cat was sitting quietly on top of a grounded straw bale. He was looking elsewhere, which showed although he was aware of me, he was not overly interested in exploring the nature of this strange Hawk. I didn't care to get involved—I doubted the cat intended anything but curiosity. I ignored him just the same, and set about watching the day— The sun felt great; soon it would be warm enough to find some large thermals, and perhaps try to learn how to really fly—

I was totally comfortable on the fence, I felt as though I could stand there all day. But I didn't want to. I wanted to go and fly. To start out and do nothing would be a mistake. Soon I'd have to depend on knowing how to fly for survival. I knew that the time to hunt and provide for myself was coming. If I did nothing now, I would have a much harder time facing my future—

I turned my head back and saw Shree again. I was nothing more than her. She was staring off, moving rarely only to study something else. The small birds were singing and fluttering around as usual, I looked at them in general and felt strangely united. I realized I had suddenly become as simple as they were. I had no more importance than they did. At the same time it was a scary feeling, it was also an uplifting one. In a way my existence now meant nothing. But that was from the point of view I had always been used to. The point of view that required technology to advance. Bigger and better, faster and easier. I could contribute nothing to that view now. I was as primitive as every other wild creature. However, my existence was suddenly far more meaningful to me. I didn't need to be a number anymore. I didn't have to go along with the crowd. True, my life as a bird was now set, in the way of everyday life. But where I went, what I did, and how I felt were now totally me. It was exceedingly difficult to describe my reasoning, yet I knew that my next priorities were to first, forget all of my customer, logic, and learned nonsense; and second, to start feeling and thinking 'bird,' instead of just being one.

Suddenly I noticed that I was doing something wrong. While I had been thinking and musing, I wasn't paying attention to reality. There were a number of cows finished eating and approaching me curiously. I would have to be very careful, lest next time it be a Great Horned Owl or— a human—And surely they would not be so casually slow as the fat cows below me.

My eyes moved little of their own ability. Of course, this was something I had known from the books, but I was rediscovering it for myself. Looking around meant moving my head, something I had not been doing while contemplating my future. The reason exactly why birds' heads are never still for long. I needed to be aware. There would be no more deep, grueling thoughts. Of course, I had to think, but unlike when I had been human, I could not afford to ignore reality long enough to systematically go through my mind's thoughts.

Cows were beginning to annoy me; here came four of them, prancing up to the fence at their leisure. It was time to move on, perhaps this time to a much higher place.

As if to prompt me, Harlow came walking around the corner, singing some obscure tune. I immediately felt a strange emotional tearing, part of instinctive fear, and a confusion of losing friendship with him. I had to go—The cows were starting to reach up with their thick necks, wet noses sniffing loudly. And I was no higher up than the approaching human. He hadn't seen me yet, which hardly mattered, but at least I knew him in a way. I turned around on the fence, my body now facing away from the cows and the man. I bobbed my head about in search of a good place to attempt flight to. There was a board by the road, leaned against the silage pit, jut below the North Tree.

I felt something brush my tail, and I knew it was a cow straining with its tongue. I jumped, wings open and pumping hard. They pushed air, and I was aloft. I continued flapping hard, trying to get well above the west corral of cattle. I rose, but not without effort. There seemed to be no wind whatsoever, I could fly, but the air felt thin. It was a straight line—I flew heavy and labored, but I flew a good distance. It was a good bit of work, but feeling myself touching nothing like that was so absolutely thrilling that I wanted to bypass the board and continue on forever. But I knew I could not. Already I could tell I would be unable to keep flapping like this for long. The board was swiftly approaching. I dropped slightly down by tilting my wings and tail against the air, reaching out with my feet, to land quietly, but not lightly, on the top of the two by eight. I balanced, then relaxed as I felt secure once again.

Whew! I had flown! For those few moments I had been so completely free! My legs had touched nothing, tucked almost beneath my tail, feeling just the air. I was tempted to simply take off again, but I was breathing hard from my effort. It would take experience and practice to make it my life. Not to mention a bit more wind, or altitude on my part. In any case, my confidence had went up. For my first real flight, I knew I had done well. I'd probably looked like a newly fledged Hawk, but the important thing was I could do it. I'd even landed satisfactorily.

“Wheeee!” came a sharp whistle.

I spotted a small human child on a bike, his mom walking alongside. They were coming down the road, soon to pass me and the Trees.

“Mommy, Mommy! Look, it’s a bird,” he pointed, almost falling off his contraption.

Now I knew I had to get out of here. Farther and higher. The feeling of tension and fright returned the moment I saw them, and now the kid was riding closer. I started looking for a new place to fly to, unsure because I was still catching my breath.

“Ooh, it is,” his mom said, reinforcing him.

“Look at him!”

He rode right off the road and dropped the bike, running crazily right up under me. Instinctively, I puffed up my feathers and held tight to my board. There was nowhere to go; he was here, under me. I watched him carefully, wary of any sudden moves. I felt threatened, and wasn’t totally sure why.

“Now, Rory, not so close,” his mother warned. As expected, he ignored her and stayed put.

I was torn between being amused and being frightened. I wanted to entertain him, as I’d wished Shree and Atweek would have done for me, but I also just wanted to go. I’d wanted out for so long, I simply had to leave.

Again I looked for a place to retreat to as the boy continued making what he thought were Hawk noises at me. His mom stayed on the side of the road, content to watch with amusement.

By my house there were electrical poles with high, flat tops. I had seen an owl there once at night. I decided since I had flown well enough my first time, to try a level course toward the poles—surely I could climb to that height in the distance.

I breathed in, flattened my feathers, and made ready to take off, facing the direction of my old house.

“Wheee!” he whistled again. He’d settled down, but he still wanted so much to hear me. His face was bright and energetic, totally thrilled by my presence. He kept looking back to make sure his mom was watching.

I hadn’t made a sound since becoming a Hawk, except when I crash landed in the barn—and that was just a sigh. Actually, now reminded, I wanted to scream and hear myself for the first time. It was always part of my dream to be soaring high, and let forth a literal cry of joy—

I decided to humor him slightly. I tensed my legs and began flapping as I dove off my board. I felt the air raise me, and I was soon over the old cherry picker. A surge of euphoria came over me with flight once again. Every feather, every bone in my body could feel it. I breathed in, and felt air blow across my beak as I opened it—“Areeeei!” I was amazed at my own voice. It was high and raspy; exactly as it should have been—a perfect first cry.

“Wheee!” a quiet whistle sounded behind me. I looked down, and behind me, and saw the small human boy watching with pleasure as I flew further and further away.

I crossed the field, and was still pumping my wings laboriously. I had gained altitude, but still could not detect the right ‘feel’ in the air to try gliding or soaring. To the pole it was.

The cool morning air entered my lungs and made me feel better than I ever had in my entire life. Even though I was getting tired and flapping was getting harder, I knew I would soon get in shape and be much better at it. I was amazed at my speed as the green field passed below in a blur. As the pole swiftly approached, I began to make ready to land upon it. It was considerably higher than any place I had yet been. I didn’t realize how far up I had climbed in my flight.

I made a point of flying slightly higher than the top, and slowing down by cupping my wings and lowering my tail. Talons outstretched, I felt the pole as I landed and closed my wings. To my amazement, I’d made a perfect landing. I caught my breath and looked back to see the route I’d taken. From the board ten feet tall, across the

field and to the pole was at least a hundred yards. And the pole was a good thirty feet high. I was suddenly giddy with pleasure. I looked down and felt no fright at how high up I was. This pole was the highest spot I had been in for years, human or not. Ordinarily it would have given me pause, even though I'd never been afraid of heights, but now I felt only total comfort in being above the ground and able to see in all directions.

I couldn't help but spend more time looking at and admiring my new body. The ivory feathers of my breast blended into the brown bars and beautiful rufous highlights all around me. I remembered staring at posters and pictures for hours trying to absorb the details of Hawks' structure. Everything from the smallest down feather to the curves of their wings. I poked my beak into the feathers on my side, feeling the feathers respond as I rustled them around. It was a glorious feeling to be free of clothes; naked; out here in the cool morning. My feathers felt indescribably wonderful. I bent down and pulled on one of my curved black talons with my beak, nudging it to feel it even more. Every part of me felt new and light. As I turned my head, I felt the feathers on the back of my neck shifting. I lifted a leg up and closed the grip of my foot, as I had seen many Hawks do at rest. It disappeared under my front feathers exactly the same as when Izzy and Sky did. I blinked and noticed the difference with the third eyelid all birds of prey had, called— I couldn't remember that either, but it was a translucent sort of eyelid. I opened my beak and called once again in triumph over years of wishes and dreams: "Areeeei!"

I fanned my tail and spread my wings. I felt so incredibly alive and strong. I opened and closed my mouth— my beak—a few times, trying to compare the feelings I felt to old ones in memory. I was very flexible. I could turn my head quite far, and in fact, look down my back and see my reddish tail feathers.

The sun climbed higher and the morning turned into a bright, cheerful day. After the events of last night, it seemed a perfect first day. I wasn't sure what I was going to try next, but I didn't care at the moment. I was too busy just perching and feeling the power and spirit of being a bird.

The constant chirping and chattering of robins, starlings and barn swallows suddenly came to my attention. On the electric wires going to and from the pole, small songbirds were beginning to congregate, and the way they were inching closer to me, yapping constantly, was indication enough that they were trying to ward me off.

I'd seen it happen often enough with birds I had rehabilitated: The birds from all around the house for some reason went practically nuts when a large bird was present. I suppose it was because they posed a threat to their young or even to themselves. But it was amazing to see how brave they could be. After long enough, the robins would get the courage to dive-bomb and annoy the Hawk, in hopes that it would leave. I was curious now because I *was* the Hawk they were trying to annoy.

I waited on my perch, pretending to be preening and minding my own business. There somehow got to be more of them, perching in different spots all around the premises. It was a chilling feeling now to have them working their way toward me, in their indirect manner. They stayed as far as practically possible from me when I was human. Simultaneously, I also felt better that I was no longer the unstoppable human, but rather the threatening Hawk. They came closer to me and paid some kind of attention, rather than having no choice but to fly. I also realized how much closer I was to them, remembering my first thought when I'd gotten to the fence outside the barn. I knew more about them, just as they now knew me. I felt closer to all animals in the wild everywhere. I wanted nothing more than to be able to live up to my full potential as a bird—

I saw, in the corner of my eye, movement in the sky, and I looked upwards to see the silhouette of Atwheek gliding towards the trees. For the first time I realized how much better my vision was now. The shape of his body and the coloration of his feathers were easy to see, and things weren't shaking all over the place as they did when I'd looked through binoculars. Things did not appear magnified as they did when looking through binoculars, just sharper. It was like seeing the detail of things without them having to appear larger. He was also quite high up; exactly where I wanted to go. I experienced another incredible sense of euphoria as I simply felt the knowledge that in fact, I could.

A robin came out of nowhere, suddenly diving straight for me. I ducked and decided to humor them. I had flying to learn!

I dove from my perch with a giant leap upwards. My wings unfolded and stretched out to catch the air. I felt myself gliding away from the pole and the wind pulling me upwards. Once again I was completely free; nothing touched me except the pure air. 'Free as a bird,' became vivid in my mind with new meaning. The sensation of being alone in the air was something I had always dreamed about but could never quite imagine. It was as I anticipated in that every slight motion controlled something. There was nothing but myself to manipulate the air currents. There were no attachments or contraptions as with even the simplest human flight method. There were no strings or bars or clothes to contend with. I was as separate from those things as I was from the ground. But what I had not been able to imagine was the awesome power I felt. It was a feeling of strength and endurance unlike any I had ever known. I felt capable and patient; warm and agile.

I flapped my great wings, feeling the lift with each stroke and the strong muscles within my chest that controlled them. My flight was somewhat better, but I could feel gravity already doing its dirty work.

Quickly I looked for a place to land, and found a fence post. I cupped my wings and approached it slowly and with ease, almost as if I had done it hundreds of times. I felt wood under my feet again, noticing for the first time that I really didn't weigh that much.

I took deep breaths, trying to solve my little puzzle. There was no wind, but certainly I should be able to get more flight out of things than this! I could feel my heart pounding somewhere inside my feathered chest. Partly out of exertion, and partly from frustration.

All I could do was simply keep trying, I finally resolved. Trying to ponder things was as effective as when I was human.

I rested a while, then climbed into the air once more. Again, trying different things; fanning my tail a lot, then a little; flapping harder, then less; angling my wings one way then another; I couldn't seem to stay airborne. I got tired quickly and looked again for a place to land. There was nothing reachable, but a stream ahead seemed like a good place. I was feeling a bit thirsty from all my efforts, anyway.

I landed somewhat hard on the ground, unsure how to approach it, but did not fall or get hurt. I walked to the stream, climbing easily down to it and stopping just short of the muddy edge. I looked around, checking to see if everything was normal. Somehow not being high up and able to see in all directions made me cautious. I stepped forward, feeling the cool mud between my long toes. I did not sink very far in, which made sense, but the old me would have been imbedded to the ankles. Another step, and clear water flowed over my talons. I lowered my head and dipped my beak in a smooth motion, letting the water touch my tongue. It was just as rejuvenating as any time I'd ever desired a cool drink. Probably more so.

Not really thinking about it, I waded in a bit further, letting the current flow around my legs and touch the feathers of my ankles and tail. I ducked my head in quickly, letting the beads of water that resulted flow down my back. I supposed I had needed a bath anyway. So I dipped my whole body in briefly, just long enough to let the water wash over me. I paused a moment, then opened my wings and did it again.

When my feet felt quite cool, I flapped and leapt out, clambering up the short bank and back into the field. I did feel better, though. I shook myself, feeling again what it was to rouse all my feathers up and let them fall naturally back into place.

It took some effort to get back into the air from the ground, but I was rather surprised at how quickly I gained altitude. Within just a few hard pushes against the wind, I was easily as high as the telephone poles. Feeling brave, I angled my tail sharply and stretched my wings as far as I could, turning slightly. I felt an odd lightness then, like the old sensation of floating when you get those passing headaches. But this wasn't in my head, I felt it across my whole body. Then I realized I'd found a thermal. A warm current of rising air. I was over a huge wheat field,

recently fertilized, and I was sure the cause of it. In fact, I hadn't had to move my wings for a moment. I was not only staying aloft, I was rising!

But just as surely as I felt my confidence build, the thermal terminated, and I felt the additional lift cease. I tried to turn back towards it, but I couldn't seem to find it again. Slowly, I was descending and having to flap more often.

I headed for the fence post again, and landed with precision I was proud of. At least, I thought lightly, I had the important part down.

I was not discouraged, though. I had definitely begun to understand the mechanics of flight. I knew for a fact that I was simply not very strong yet. My endurance had much growth ahead. I knew even on cold mornings and evenings that we could fly fairly long distances without getting tired.

We? Already, I noticed I was starting to feel right at home.

I rested, and flew again, searching for that bubble of air. I increased the time I stayed in the air a little, but came down again, this time back almost where I started, on the cement wall of the silos where I work. Used to work, I corrected myself.

The rest of my day continued pretty much the same, my determination never failing. I flew farther and longer each time, finding intermediate perches to land and rest on. But I had little luck in finding a good, rising thermal. However, the practice and exercise I got from steady flapping would be well worth it, I felt sure.

I took pleasure in being able to fly over the fences and the stream I had visited earlier. During a couple of better flights, I passed over the trees and poles as well. The freedom I could feel was very rewarding.

Finally I was worn out as the sun was starting to descend below the mountains. I was surprised an entire day had passed already. In a way, a lifelong question had just been answered. "What do Hawks do all day long?"

I found myself on a rather tall fence post as the daylight waned. I preened my feathers and spent time watching the sky, amazed that I had just returned from a brief sojourn there. I discovered new things about myself; things I'd known, of course, but hadn't encountered yet.

First, the oil gland above my tail. As I was preening, it was natural to rub it with my beak before smoothing feathers out. After I got over the amazement of being able to reach that far back with my head, of course.

Then I discovered the luxury all birds have in lacking requirement of toilet facilities. Such a natural function, of course, but new and different.

Finally I stretched and watched as the last of the light faded to that of the stars and night sky. I wondered briefly about the human past I came from. For a second I considered what those who had been family were going through. But I found it remarkably easy to force those thoughts away. Too easy, perhaps.

But I was a bird now. I had to be a bird.

8 February 1994