

“Pay Attention to the Stars”
by Rebecca Kilroy

The wing clipping ceremony came with great fanfare. It always followed our middle school graduation and usually happened in the same auditorium. They called us up one by one and we hopped across the stage, our fledgling wings trailing behind us. By fourteen, our wings were fully grown but not yet developed enough for us to fly. The wing clipping was designed to prevent that from ever happening. Flying was a deviant habit. People who flew were disgusting, depraved, and un-American.

“It’s for the best,” my mother reminded me when I cried over the loss of the last row of feathers on my wings. “It really is for the best.”

“But what if that’s not true?” my friend Alexander asked me one day. We were sitting in the triangle of sun on the square of roof outside his bedroom window. We’d been bemoaning the difficulty of the end of junior year. I’m not sure how the topic of wings sprang up, especially since I usually ignored mine. I didn’t know how to respond to him. I just sort of stared down at his mother’s dying vegetable garden.

“Come on, Ari,” Alex continued. “What if *they’re* wrong? What if flying isn’t all that bad?”

I gaped at him. I’d always known Alexander was different, sort of...artsy. That was part of why I liked him. He was unique and fascinating, but always in a good way. I never thought he could be a flyer. It was impossible.

“You know flying’s wrong,” I told him.

“But is it? I mean, we’re born with wings. Why don’t we do anything with them?”

“Well, you can’t complain. At least yours are good looking,” I said, and it was true. Alexander had the wings of an archangel. They were four feet long, white as fresh snow, almost blinding when the light hit them and dripped with flecks of gold. Mine, on the other hand, were as dusty brown as a barn owl’s. There was nothing angelic about them.

“Seriously, Ari. Haven’t you ever thought about flying? Haven’t you ever wanted to try it?” he demanded.

“No,” I said in a small voice. I felt like Alexander was testing me.

“I have dreams about it,” he said. I pulled in a sharp gasp and stared at Alexander. He fell onto his back and flopped a hand over his eyes to block the sun. Or maybe to block out me. “I had them about once a week. Now it’s every night. So...yeah.”

“Alex.” I couldn’t say anymore. I knew wing clipping had been harder for him than for most. You see, and this was supposed to be a secret, his had grown back. Most people got theirs clipped one and done. But he’d had his clipped *seven times* in the past three years. Alex’s wings just seemed to want to exist.

I laid down next to him and pulled his arm away from his face. It was wet where it had been over his eyes. “Oh, Alex!” I wrapped my hands around his. “It’ll be okay!”

He sniffled. “I want to go somewhere else.” His voice broke. “I hate this town. It’s going to strangle me. You know, in California, there are colonies of flyers. They live next to one of those national parks, in the redwoods. Of course, my parents would never let me go. My dad especially. He’s all, ‘Keep a straight path and pay no attention to the stars.’ But there are hundreds of flyers out there, Ari. Flying every day like it’s totally normal. Can you imagine

living there?" I couldn't, so I decided it was a rhetorical question. I stayed silent. He did too. Pretty soon I climbed back through the window and left. I figured that was the end of it.

Three days later, Alex broke through the roof of the sports atrium. I didn't see it happen. People said he was walking down the hallway towards P.E. Then he took off his backpack and started running, like he'd lost his mind. He reached the middle of the atrium and...took off. His wings astounded everyone. The gusts they created knocked track trophies off their shelves and sent a few freshmen sprawling to the ground. When Alex reached the ceiling, he blasted straight through the glass. Shards of it rained onto the tile like a jagged hailstorm. Then he was gone.

I never saw Alex again. People assumed he crashed somewhere. It was an old wives' tale that you could fly into the sun and burn up. We knew that wasn't true, but either way, his wings wouldn't have been strong enough to carry him far.

"Dumb kid," they said.

"What a stupid, teenage thing to do."

"And from such a nice community."

The shame could've killed his family. For me, it was the keeping it in that nearly undid me. I couldn't cry for him, couldn't mourn. It was best that I forget and move on, because Alexander was gone.

But six months later, I got something in the mail. It looked like a homemade postcard. It was a Polaroid of the night sky, looking up through a canopy of redwoods. On the back someone had scrawled, *pay attention to the stars*. When I looked at the front again, I could almost make out the shape of a boy, wings outstretched, swooping between constellations.