

WINGS

by

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WINGS

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It was cold and dark and miserable in the tall black room, and Danny Kellett couldn't feel his hands. That should have been the most terrifying thing but it wasn't, he reserved that for the soft fluttering of wings somewhere up in the darkness, and the furtive rustling. He had no doubt what was making those sounds and he hated his own certainty, hated his fear of them even more.

The floor was rough and dirty - he knew that much because he was on his side, face grounded in dirt - and from the movements above he guessed the rafters were maybe ten feet... A burst of activity sent him scurrying backwards into the wall, electric shockwaves prickling his skin. Something touched his face and he screamed...

Why won't any sound come out? What have they done to me?

Straw drifted to the floor, scratching his face, and Danny forced himself into a sitting position against the rough panelled wall. Dried paint scraped off the panels, snagging in his hair and dropping down the neck of his shirt. His movement stirred up the foisty dried shit smell he had almost forgotten. Blackness spread around him more completely than any he'd ever seen, blotting out all before him and above him and below him. The only reality was the wall at his back, the ground beneath his backside, and the stench in his nostrils.

And the fluttering wings above him.

Danny's mind grappled with the enormity of his blankness. He tried to remember where he was and how he got here, but each question threw up another and another, none of which he knew the answer to. He didn't know what time it was or how long he'd been here, and he had absolutely no idea who was responsible. His world was restricted to that which his senses detected, and that wasn't very bloody much. The only thing he knew was who he was, and he clung to that knowledge like a drowning man to a lifebelt.

Danny Kellett. My name is Danny Kellett. I live at...

He stopped there, struggling to think where he lived. He had been going to recite his address, age and occupation like a prisoner of war stating his name rank and serial number, but a paralysing cramp seized his mind. He found he didn't know any of those things, and the blank walls in his mind took on all the solidity of the invisible wall at his back. He could see nothing around him and nothing inside him either.

Danny Kellett. My name is Danny Kellett.

He held onto to that, unable to expand on it, smelling the birdshit smells around him and hearing the... *What was that? What did you say? Birdshit smells?* Something came out of the darkness of his memory, out of the vastness of his past, and...

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He was a child when he bought the catapult, standing outside Ratcliffe's Sporting Goods Store in Huntriss Row ripping open the packaging because he couldn't wait until he got home. The shiny metal "Y" glinted in the late afternoon sunshine, throwing shards of light into his pale blue eyes. The twelve year old boy with the build of a prop forward dumped the packaging in the nearest bin and walked round the corner into the small park besides the clifftop elevator station. Scarborough castle was a scale model across the bay, and Danny thrilled at the smell of sea air and the feel of sunshine on his back, but most of all he thrilled at his new purchase.

He selected a small stone from the gravel path and fit it snugly into the black leather sling at the end of two thick elastic straps. He held it between finger and thumb then straightened his arm, clenching the base of the "Y" in his young fist and drew back the stone. Flint eyes sighted along his outstretched arm, picking a silver birch at the end of the park, and he held his breath. A gentle sigh, then he let go.

Woosh... crack. The impact was almost instantaneous, thwacking a chunk of silvered bark from the tree six feet up its trunk. *Wowzer wowzer*, he exclaimed inside. He didn't say such things out loud any more, that was childish, but it was still his favourite saying and they couldn't laugh at what happened inside your head could they? *Wowzer...*

He tried three more shots, surprised at his accuracy, turning the tree into a machine gunned outpost on a lonely battlefield, then pronounced himself ready. *No more fear*, Danny told himself. *Today the people fight back.*

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In the tall dark room where he couldn't feel his hands Danny reflected on that, tried to pinpoint just how long ago that had been. Years? Days? Hours? *How old am I now, still twelve, or much older? I don't feel twelve, I feel more like a hundred and twelve.*

The vision kicked open some doors though. He knew he lived at home with his parents, even though he couldn't picture their faces, so he supposed he must still be a child. If that was the case then they must be worried about him. The blackout was so complete, far greater than a mere darkened room, so it must be night, and if it was night then his parents must be wondering where he was. Would they have called the police yet? Were the boys in blue scouring the countryside for him right now?

Danny felt a wave of nausea wash over him. The brutal truth about why some boys went missing seeped into his brain. Some boys were taken, abducted, or simply enticed away by dirty old men who wanted to do unmentionable things. In the blackness he tried to remember how he had got here - wherever here was - and more importantly if someone else had brought him. He wished he had the catapult with him now.

No more fear. Today the people fight back.

It was ironic how that thought was reversed so completely. At the moment he was more frightened than he had been in his life, but not frightened of some dirty per... Noise exploded from the rafters, dropping straw and chippings around him. Wings battered the air, and the birdshit smell filled his nostrils. He shook his head to escape the feathery touch of falling debris and spat dust from his mouth. His sightless eyes tried to penetrate the dark but there was no light at all. *What time is it? Must be way past midnight.* More wings fluttered, then the noises settled into a furtive rustling, then silence.

Danny hated the sound of those wings, and realised now that he hated anything with wings. Birds or bats or moths, it didn't matter, he hated them all; was afraid of

them all. It was the uncertainty of their movement, the fact that they could swoop down at you without warning and brush past your head. *If I had the catapult now I'd fettle you, you bastards.* That thought kicked in another, and he realised why he'd bought the catapult in the first place.

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Great clouds of starlings swooped and dived above the trees, following a daily ritual as they sought perches for the night. Around the walkways of Peasholm Park, white squidgy piles of birdshit dotted the tarmac beneath the cherry trees. It made him sick.

Danny, the twelve year old built like a prop forward, aimed along his outstretched arm and loosed off a wizzcracker of a shot into the cloud of wings. The stone flashed through the birds with terrifying speed but he couldn't tell if it hit anything. It must have, he reasoned, but could see no evidence of the destruction he sought. No blood and feathers, no squawk of pain, no dead birds spiralling down to the ground. *No more fear*, he repeated to himself. *Today the people fight back.*

Just what he was fighting back against he wasn't sure, but he could taste the hate like bad liquorice in his mouth. *When I die, I'm going to come back as a cat, and I'm going to be the top birdcatcher in Scarborough.*

Starlings darkened the evening sky, but there were too many to target, he needed something easier to hit and knew just where to find them. He looked across to the island in the middle of the ornamental lake, then slowly made his way to the wooden footbridge.

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The fluttering above him was silenced, as if the birds up there could read his thoughts. *Yes, if I came back as a cat I'd be up there catching you now.* But he wasn't a cat, he was a frightened twelve year old boy who couldn't feel his hands. His back ached and his head felt like it had been smacked with a cricket bat, but it was the lack of feeling in his hands that scared him the most. He told himself if someone

had cut them off he would feel *something*, even if it was only a kind of numbing pain. He'd heard that people who lost limbs could feel them itching as if they were still there, but Danny could feel nothing. He couldn't even move them round to the front so he could see them, it was that dark.

A wet splodge hit him on the forehead, running into his right eye, and he squealed with disgust, unable to wipe the bird dropping off his face. Unable to squeal either. That was something else that worried him, but he tried to rationalise that as a side effect of his fear. A panic attack had simply robbed him of his voice, and that was that.

Coupled with his lack of hands however it took on more weight, and the longer he sat cramped against the unseen wall in the unseen room filled with unseen birds, the worse it got. His fear was taking focus and the hatred that came with it began to crystallise. Polarise. He knew now what he was afraid of, and along with that came the knowledge of what he hated most in the whole wide world.

Wings, and anything that had them, but birds in particular. He hated them with a vengeance, and the catapult was going to... The silence was broken by a soft electric whine followed by a sudden gush of water beneath him. The humming vibrated through the floor and tickled his spine. The feeling would have been pleasant but for his surroundings. The water became a raging torrent, he could hear it tumbling down an invisible waterfall. The noise stirred up the birds in the rafters and wings fluttered nervously. More shit plopped around him.

The waterfall, Danny thought. *I'm near the waterfall*. Peasholm Park leapt into his memory and he searched it like a roughdrawn street map. The waterfall. It was coming back to him now, and suddenly he was back on the footbridge leading to...

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Dusk was drawing in when he reached the island. It sat like a giant ant hill in the centre of the man-made lake, surrounded by a thirty foot wide watercourse beloved by boaters in the summer and ducks in the winter. The Chinese garden and walkway was still under renovation but most of the path was festooned with gaily coloured lanterns which trailed from poles or tree branches along the route.

Danny followed the path as light slowly bled from the sky, climbing inexorably upwards toward the red, green and yellow pagoda at the summit. He had been up there before with his parents, exploring the walled garden at the top of the hill, but it was the pagoda which fascinated him, terrified him as well. The structure stood at the source of the intricately carved waterfall. It had once been a small cafe and tearooms but was now boarded and empty.

Empty except for the workings of the waterfall, which was force fed by a powerful electric motor pumping water from the lake and shooting it down the cascade. And empty except for the fluttering parasites which had moved in when the customers had moved out. Silver grey collar doves and dirty grey pigeons wandered the eaves, sneaking into the roofspace through cracks in the panelling and holes in the eaves. The verandah which surrounded the building was caked in birdshit and smelled of stale urine, and it made Danny sick.

He reached the walled garden as the sky deepened into a blood red tapestry of torn clouds and dark blue sky. Under the archway, then a right turn and there he was, right up the arse end of the pagoda, and ready to wreak havoc on those dirty bastard pigeons. He took the catapult from his jeans pocket, the dying sun glinting redly off the silver "Y", and selected a stone from the gravel path. On the rooftop half a dozen pigeons cooed and nodded as they walked around the edges. Danny took aim at the nearest one, sighting along his arm just as he'd done in practice, and woosh...

Blood exploded from the pigeon, snotty gloop and feathers splattering the other birds. They took flight in panic but not before Danny killed another with a snap shot Clint Eastwood would have been proud of. The stupid birds landed in a flutter of wings six feet from their dead colleagues, and Danny mashed two more in quick succession. He felt his pulse race and was surprised to find he had a rock solid hard on. His little pecker hadn't had this much stimulation since he'd thumbed through the pages of Forum in his father's study.

The garden wall climbed in narrow steps and joined onto the right side of the building. Without any plan Danny filled his pockets, then clambered onto the low section and climbed the makeshift stairs to the pagoda roof. The pigeons that were still wandering on the roof tiles moved to the other side and he felt his penis twitch with excitement as he closed in on them. From here he would get a good view of

their exploding innards and that excited him and disgusted him at the same time. He had never felt like this around fluttering wings before. The worm had finally turned.

He rounded the peak, slipping another stone into the sling, and heard the tiles creak under his weight. A nervous glance at his feet to make sure the roof was holding, then he loosed of a venomous shot that took the nearest pigeon's head clean off. For a second the bird kept walking, blood spurting out of its severed neck, then it flopped onto its back, wings flapping crazily in a last spasm of death.

Danny almost came in his pants, ignoring the splintering sounds beneath him. He was completely surprised when the roof gave way, plunging him into the long dead park cafe. He hit the floor head first, crashing heavily on the dusty boards, and the world went dark.

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It was cold and dark and miserable in the tall dark room, and Danny Kellett couldn't feel his hands. He knew now where he was and how he got here, but it didn't lessen the fear he felt. It was black as pitch, and the pigeons cooed softly above him, mocking the twelve year old boy with the build of a prop forward. That build meant he hit the floor with tremendous force, and Danny was certain he had done some serious damage. No wonder he couldn't feel his hands. They hadn't been cut off by some child molesting pervert, they had gone numb because of the bone crushing fall.

Wings fluttered in the rafters and three more plops of shit hit him in the face. The pigeons were getting better with practice, just as Danny had himself. No more quickfire shots from the silver catapult now though. No more, *if I came back as a cat I'd be up there catching you now*. Now Danny Kellett leaned against the wall in a crumpled heap and prayed someone would find him when daylight came.

As if that thought kicked in some otherworldly rheostat, Danny noticed the first faint lightening of the sky. A slightly lighter dark showed through the hole in the roof, and he could just about make out the splintered beams and broken tiles. It gave him hope, and he tried to call out.

Nothing came.

He tried again. This time a faint whisper tickled his lips.

Again. The whisper solidified into...

A cold shiver coursed through his body. The whisper sounded like a... *No, it can't be*, he thought. But there was no denying it. As the sky took shape and the pigeons mooched aimlessly above him, Danny Kellett's cry for help sounded like the plaintive cooing of a dove.

When I die I'm going to come back as a cat, then I'll be up there catching you.

The terrifying truth began to settle into his bones. The fall had been bad, he knew that, but he was only just grasping how bad it really was.

...come back as a cat...

No, not a cat. As Danny Kellett flexed his arms, feathery wings spread from his side. In the dawn light he looked around and saw the twisted body of a twelve year old boy who was built like a prop forward. Lying next to it was the silver "Y" of the catapult.

I hate birds, he screamed in his head. *I hate the fluttering of their wings*. But even as he said it he knew he was trapped in a new life. A life that meant unless he was targetted by some bullying schoolboy he would be surrounded by wings for a very long time.