

## *Flying*

People were deceived, for the most part, by his placidity. But behind the torpid manner cowered an excitable being with a fluttering heart. He was such a timid boy. Especially in the face of loud urgency or demands. Beverly heard on the news he couldn't tell them his name.

Donny, scrubbed and serene, waited in his wheelchair, which took up the only open patch of kitchen floor and barricaded the exit. But the morning sun — the only sun to find its way through the maze of neighboring buildings — crept through the solitary window with a reminder of open skies. From a cage in the corner the zebra finch racketed a welcome to the light. Donny rolled his head toward the sound.

At his feet, Beverly said, "Such a handsome birthday-boy!" He seemed almost beautiful with sunshine spilling a glow across his pallid face and turning his fair hair gold.

She couldn't imagine shutting Donny away from the light. It was inconceivable. Others demanded it, however — first the boy's father and now Eric: it was his motif. When he was absent, the refrain vibrated in her mind in connection with Eric. When he was present, the same note sounded, tantalizing, whether he spoke it or not and despite her efforts not to hear. Eric's easy smile would disappear, replaced on his smooth face by earnestness. "Think of ME," he'd say. He could see nothing in the boy.

Beverly looked up from the colorless linoleum. "Today is SPECIAL," she informed her son. She was kneeling, tying Donny's laces. The white bows drooped against red canvas. Six months and still the sneakers were unsullied.

"The SHOES — my God," the other mothers in the park would say to each other, watching the children scuff and tumble and climb, "the SHOES they go through! It's impossible to keep a kid in shoes." And Beverly would see the women clustered on the bench nodding wisely together, making a wall of their backs. While beside her, Donny slumped in his chair and watched the leaf-shadows sweeping back and forth on the bright grass and the pigeons with their heads cocked sideways sidling up to the crumbs on the dirt path and the pigeons flashing up in graceful panic when he rocked with happiness.

She and Donny went to the park less and less.

Beverly sighed and rose wearily to her feet. She drew the belt tight around her limp wrapper. The night had been too late again, almost always too late because too rare: old Mrs. Karpuzov — Beverly couldn't blame her, it wasn't her fault really — Mrs. K. was reluctant to sit with Donny, to be near him, even when he slept. It was the way people were about the child, they felt caged by something shameful. And then to argue again with Eric, there was only one argument, to come home to Donny's formless nightmares visited on her like a judgement. Although she would have been tired in any case. She smiled for Donny.

"Eight years old. Such a big boy!" His head was turned toward the finch. Gently, she traced a fuzzy gilt eyebrow, claiming his attention. "Whose birthday is it, Don-Don?" The gaze that fastened on her face was clear and green and bottomless as a mountain lake. The golden brows puckered.

"Donny's birthday," she prompted. "I know you can say it."

Green eyes wavered between the birdcage and Beverly's face.

"Donny," she insisted. "Birthday."

"Dah," he finally said, the sound released slowly and with care, fragile as a robin's egg. "Bah-bah." She smiled and patted his cheek. He began to bump from side to side. "Bah, bah, bah, bah. . . ," he chanted.

Already this morning, the tension was settling in her shoulders. Her smile faded. "My goodness, I almost forgot. Wait till you see. . ." She squeezed through the narrow space between table and wheelchair and headed for the pantry with quick, excited steps.

It was a tiny built-in pantry with leaded glass doors. Boxes of cereal, jars of baby food labelled with smiling infant faces were visible through its miniature windows. She liked the pantry; it was a touch of homey, old-fashioned charm. As for the rest of the flat — it was there, that was all. Four walls enclosing mother and son, a roof over their heads.

Behind the oatmeal box on the second shelf were three square envelopes all marked 'Donny' in the same hand. She drew them out and cried, "Wait till you see!" Donny still lurched rhythmically in his chair.

The sun fled, leaving the kitchen dim. Beverly flipped the light switch.

"Birthday cards," she grinned. There was just space enough to pull a chair out and wedge herself against the dinette. She pecked the formica with the edge of one stiff envelope. Donny stopped rocking; his head swivelled. Beverly laid the cards out carefully.

Balloons in primary red and blue, sulphurous ducks with a placard proclaiming '8 YEARS OLD': "Mrs. Karpuzov," she read. "Isn't that nice?" She waved the bright colors before his face, and he focused briefly. There was a volley of bird chatter from the finch, a whirring ruffle, then the rapid light tapping of its circuit around the bottom of the cage.

The next card was all flowers and serious script. "This one is from Daddy." Alarm rippled across Donny's slack moon face: for an instant, the air hummed with a vague unease. But the card was a lie, a lie and a lullaby: "... come true, Having a wonderful son like you. With all my love, Daddy." Donny's gaze drifted away, peaceful.

She wondered where Donny's father was. She hadn't heard since the divorce. For four years, his memory had retreated, farther and farther away. Some could not bear to witness certain and pointless deterioration.

"And, OF COURSE, there's one from ME..." She looked at the child's profile. He was no longer there. Like father, like son. Her hand fell slowly to the table, down and down. She left the last card in its envelope.

Eric, her — what? Boyfriend? Temptation? Eric was a salesman. He'd be driving his inland loop today, spreading charm and order blanks through the outlying sections of his territory. He wasn't due to call at Valley Roofing for another week.

So there would be no sudden breath of air, no lifting heart, nothing for her at the office, a knocked-together hut at the back of the supply yard, an over-sized wooden box cluttered with scarred desk, crumpled invoices, bills of lading, and filing cabinets that banged her knees if she shifted too far in her chair. A person could suffocate.

Perhaps he would stop by tonight, after Donny was tucked into bed and out of sight. Eric would press for a decision. She saw Donny sitting in a vast and shadowed room while white uniforms flitted through the gloom like ghosts. She and Eric walked through the park, and the pigeons swirled in the air like a cloud of confetti. "Think of me," his voice breathed inside her. He would press... Her tight shoulders ached. Her breasts ached. Her heart ached.

Beverly looked at her son. Last year at this time, he had balanced, for a while, in a regular chair. He said "birthday" — drawn out slow, of course, but clear as day — and even seemed to examine the cards. She caught herself before she sighed; it was becoming a habit.

It took no time at all to slip into jeans and shirt and sneakers. Then she ran cold water into the pan she'd used for Cream of Rice and into the two sticky bowls and left the dishes crowded together in the sink.

Napkins, sodas. Cup and spoon. Next an apple and a bologna sandwich followed the jars of bananas and strained beef into a brown bag, and, on top, she put two cupcakes from the bakery. The bag went in Donny's lap. He sat with his arms draped around it the way she'd arranged them. like the limbs of a bendable doll, a doughy mannequin in too-tight OshKosh overalls and too-new sneakers.

She had put the car keys somewhere — it was cheaper, usually, to take the bus and besides, it conserved gas — there they were, now they were ready. She put the keys in her pocket, nestled her purse in his lap alongside the grocery bag, then carefully manuevred the wheelchair backwards out of the room, turning the light off and leaving the finch quiet in the dark corner.

The rickety elevator clanked down, down, to the faded lobby, and they went through the lobby and down the crumbling elegance of the steps at the entrance of the building.

On the sidewalk, Donny blinked at the light. There was no yellow bus at the curb, no special bus with converted doorways and hydraulic lifts and modified aisles. When she turned the chair away from the bus-stop, he began to fidget.

"No school, she explained, "You and I are playing

hooky. That's your present: we're having a picnic!" She explained again, several times, changing words and tone, until something of her meaning filtered through and he was satisfied. Or simply forgot.

He was a growing boy— heavier, it seemed to her, everyday. She worried about getting him in the car. It had been so long since he'd been in the car. They seldom went out. Desolation was easier in private.

She wondered whether the makeshift harness would hold him straight in the seat now that he was getting so big. She worried about the freeway, about car trouble and needing more napkins and finding the road to the creek and getting the wheelchair down the path.

How could she concentrate on important decisions when she was hemmed in by trivialities? Donny's father had never understood either, and back then it was just beginning, really. Men had so little patience. She forgot to hold the sigh back.

The car was a station wagon, a tank, splotches of chalky white overtaking the original grey paint like a skin disease. "U.S. Navy Motor Pool" and a string of numbers still showed faintly on the door, and rows of rusty holes ran the length of the car, marking the former locations of decorative chrome.

"Built to last," she told Donny, leaning over his shoulder to point. Exactly what his father had said when he'd brought the car home, although it was ten years old at the time and the broken odometer had already turned over once. "Built to last," he said and disappeared the next week. Which was touching, in a way, since he must have wanted to leave her well provided for, at least as far as transportation was concerned.

On the freeway, the wagon labored in the slow lane and lugged at every rise in the road. But it felt like they were

soaring above the highway at the speed of light. Hot wind rushed through the open window, and the city sped by like a muted kaleidoscope. Donny was entranced. The freeway snaked out from beneath a dun-colored veil of smog and into the brown hills and wound through the canyons.

Then, familiar as yesterday, there was the turn-off. And suddenly, a small and noisy Donny stood bouncing in his seat, three years old, with a toddler's unquenchable energy. Donny's father sat behind the wheel, except his mustache had vanished and his blonde hair was Eric's, a glossy brown-black. He smiled at her with Eric's caressing smile.

And how could she forget the road? The three of them took the same route every week: behind a 'No Trespassing' sign there was token asphalt for a mile and a half, and then the air turned to dust and the road turned to dirt and fist-sized rocks bounced under the car. The tires crunched over dry wild oats, and she parked in their usual spot near the edge of the gully.

Going down was harder than she'd thought. The path, a narrow fire road, cut steeply across the face of a shallow cliff. She dug her heels in, hauling on the hand grips and trying to throw the load back on the rear wheels of the wheelchair. Donny sagged, inert, his face gentle in the open air. The big wheels jerked over stones and caught in holes. She was constantly wrenching the chair straight, fighting it as it skewed from side to side. Her arms and legs were heavy, trembling with the strain.

She might have managed to carry him. Beverly stopped and steadied the weight in the chair. She should have carried the boy and come down again with the folded chair. But she'd been thinking of them as a unit.

There was no way to stop now. She struggled on. They

bucked and slithered down the cliff, and it seemed like years before they reached the bottom. She felt dizzy from the effort. She patted the wheelchair and giggled, "Built to last."

They were in a wash threaded with a ribbon of running water and a procession of cool cottonwoods. She forced the wheelchair through the sand. Near the trees there was shade and space and firmer ground. She smoothed her hair back with both hands to let the breeze fan her face, then stretched triumphantly.

She was curious. "Do you remember?" she asked.

But Donny was gone, leaving only the mild landscape of his face. His head lolled back against one shoulder, and the green eyes roved the open sky.

"Well," she said aloud, from long habit. "I guess it's time for lunch."

The lunch shut up in the brown bag was a jumble. The story of her life. She sighed and rummaged through the cupcake fragments.

No broken jars. But her sandwich looked as though it had been hammered. She dangled it between finger and thumb and grimaced. "I guess not," she said. Instead, she fed the boy, whose mouth gaped automatically between spoonfuls, even food failing to distract from an inspection of clouds and sunlight flickering in the leaves.

She was afraid to open the soda cans: battered about like that, under pressure, they would probably explode. So she brought him a cup of water from the creek, then wet a napkin in the cup. The paper dissolved beneath her fingers as she wiped his face. She threw the soggy wad into the bag along with the remainders of the picnic.

The boy in the wheelchair paid no heed. He had seen the birds, a trio of sparrows popping lightly over the ground, coming to investigate. Beverly edged away; he



didn't need her. At the edge of the creek she freed her feet from sneakers. and rolled up her jeans. The cold water bit at her skin, and stones slid underfoot. She flapped her arms for balance. The shining water forced her to squint.

It was very quiet. When she rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, there was a grinding sound in her neck, and faint cracks when the clenched muscles relaxed and tiny bones snapped into place.

A raucous cry sliced through the stillness. The sparrows had vanished. Farther up the wash, two ravens squabbled and danced over something in the sand, their huge wings arched wide. Closer, on the near shore, the boy seemed to be drowsing.

Beverly waded downstream to the bank, to listen under the trees. She spread weightless arms wide and still there was room. Eyes closed, she shuffled in lazy circles.

Voices breathed in the cottonwoods. Whispers and phantoms wove behind her eyelids as she turned. "No hope," Donny's father said. "I can't, I just can't. . . I can't," she echoed. Doctors shook their heads, murmuring in serious pairs. The mothers buzzed behind their wall; faces closed against her in the street.

"Hopeless," said Eric, her new hope, tugging at her hand. In connection with Eric. He said, "Think of us." Always, she answered.

Eric's face wavered, melted into young Donny's, fresh and gleeful. She cocked her head. He was piping, thin and high, a string of words flung back over his shoulder to her. She couldn't catch the words. But he was happy. He darted away, out from under the trees, and she lost him in the glare.

Beverly opened her eyes. It was time to leave. Relief made her light-headed.

Climbing up was easier; her muscles were refreshed and strong. She fixed her eyes on the lip of the cliff. Back under the cottonwoods, Donny sat enthroned, turned to gold. A squirrel nestled on his shoulder, jabbering softly in his ear. Guardian ravens crouched on the back of the chair, and sparrows perched trustingly in his outstretched hands. His smile was like a benediction.

When she got home, she would fly to Eric. He would accept her, draw her into the circle of his arms and fold his body around her like a cocoon.