

Rachel's wings.

Long ago, when this planet was young, the sun and the moon shone on a world with little colour. It was like a painting made up mostly of greys, with no vibrant colour to highlight beauty in the world. The only way to see the form of anything was through the shades of grey. The land and the sea would be bright in the day and dark when the sun or moon didn't shine. The seas rose and fell, continents formed, mountains rose from the land forming lakes and valleys. Rivers searched for the sea and forests formed. Over time these forests grew dense with trees. Light would peek through gaps in the trees but in the thickest of forests, it rarely reached the ground. On even rarer occasions, when the moon was full, a magical light would sometimes reach the forest floor. When such a moonbeam was focused in exactly the right way, it created a magical creature. These creatures were born in the forest so they liked to live there. The magical power they prized the most was that of creating colour. Their main purpose in life was to give colour to the world. They were made from light and for that they came to become known as Fairies.



One clear evening in the forest, a fairy was born from a moonbeam. The moon spoke in its own language and named the fairy Rachel. She joined with all the other fairies of the forest and learnt of the wonderful life that they lived. Other fairies taught her everyday activities such as magically painting vivid colours on plants and animals in a way that created beauty. Rachel learnt how to work other magic also in the process, but more importantly to her, she learned the art of flight. In time Rachel became the most graceful and skilful of all fairies in the forest when it came to flying. With her insect-like wings, she could dart between the tiniest spaces in the trees. She memorised every part of the forest so that she could navigate her way from one side to the other before most fairies could think of where to go.

The world they lived in was still young. They were original forests and the creatures in and around them were still learning their place and purpose. Many things were unknown and a mystery, even to the fairies. Rachel lived like this for many fairy years. After all that time she found flying so easy, she hardly had to think when to twist or turn. Other fairies came to Rachel so that she could teach them her flying skills. Over time, many others became almost as skilled, but none could ever outfly Rachel. Not at that time.

One-day Rachel was leading another fairy around the forest. Now fairies are not perfect and sometimes they make mistakes. Rachel twisted through a narrow gap which she had flown through many times. She looked back to make sure her student followed safely and flew headfirst into a branch that had fallen down the night before. Next she knew, Rachel was lying on the forest floor, unable to move. The other fairies came and carried Rachel to a safe place to give her time to recover.

Rachel took some time, but slowly she got better. With lots of help from fairy magic, she first started to move her head, then her arms and her hands. She prayed every night that she could soon move her legs and most importantly, move her wings. Unfortunately, Rachel's legs just would not move no matter how much magic everyone tried. She was able to stretch her wings out straight but she could not flutter them and therefore, could not fly. Her hands were weak and it was difficult for her to hold a brush for painting the flowers, so Rachel decided to place the brush in her mouth. The other fairies were amazed at how well Rachel was able to paint in that way. Rachel was thrilled to feel useful once again and she even began teaching the new fairies how to paint, which she found most rewarding. Rachel still longed to be able to fly again however. The nearest thing she could find was to be carried by other fairies to the top of the tallest tree in the forest and watch all the others flying beneath her, dreaming that it was herself. Rachel felt old and was beginning to grow weary of having to be looked after by the other fairies whenever she wanted to move somewhere.

One-day, sitting at the top of the tree, Rachel noticed some birds flying by. In the past, she hadn't paid much attention to birds as she thought them to be awkward at flying. Now Rachel would accept being awkward if she were somehow able to fly. She noticed that these birds sometimes stopped flapping their wings, but they kept flying. They were losing height but they were able to glide until they landed. When she had flown, Rachel had always fluttered her wings, she had never thought about gliding like this. Then she had an idea. She would study how birds flew when they didn't flap their wings and then she might be able to copy them and glide down from the tree by herself.

Rachel spent every day after that at the top of the tree watching birds. She was worried about how she might land without the use of her legs. She noticed that when birds landed into wind and flared their wings, they could touch down without a step. Rachel stretched her wings out, and though she still couldn't flap, she could twist her wings to flare them like the birds did. Her wings felt weak so Rachel exercised them as much as she could. She began to stretch them out, twist them back and forth, then fold them back in hundreds of times a day until she was too tired to move them any longer. After lots of exercising, Rachel could do this thousands of times a day and her wings felt much stronger. She knew that in flight she would have to be able to hold her wings out straight at a suitable angle. If she couldn't, she would fall from the height at which her wings failed.

Finally Rachel told the other fairies of her plan to fly again. Though nervous, two fairies carried her up and then released Rachel when she stretched out her wings. The other fairies were ready to catch her if she fell, but Rachel was able to glide away and slowly descended back to the ground. She turned by twisting one wing more than the other and could change speed by twisting both wings. Some long grass had been tied to a tree branch so that Rachel could see which way the breeze was coming from. Rachel turned smoothly into the light wind that was blowing and performed the most graceful of no step landings when she flared her wings up. This was a good thing because her legs crumpled beneath her and Rachel was left sitting on the ground. Next thing, Rachel was crying. The tears were not from sadness though, they were tears of joy. After all those years of being the best at flying of all the fairies, this unusual flight made Rachel happier then she could ever remember.

After that, Rachel went gliding whenever she could. She still sat at the top of her tree and studied how birds flew. When she was finished, Rachel fell off the branch and glided back down into the forest. Other fairies were all too happy to carry Rachel above the forest and then let her go. With lots of practice, Rachel was able to gently land seated with her legs crossed, even in no wind. She discovered that there was an effect, when very close to the ground, that allowed her to skim the surface for a certain distance before flaring her wings to land. This ground effect allowed her to fly further forward without losing height than she was able to do away from the surface. It reminded her of the time her wings could flutter. Rachel became so good at these short flights, she asked other fairies to carry her higher so that she could fly for longer. The other fairies were afraid to fly too high and away from the safety of their forest. They didn't know what dangers might lurk so they preferred to stay close to their home. Rachel begged them to carry her higher and some tried, as high as they dared. After a while, the other fairies didn't like to carry Rachel above the forest and if they had to lift her, they would place her at the top of her tree and no higher. Rachel complained but it was no use, the more she did so the harder it was to find help.

Once again, Rachel spent a lot of time at the top of her tree. If she could find a fairy to carry her there it would be a long time waiting after she flew down until she could find someone to lift her back up the tree. She watched birds flying by and most of the time they flapped their wings so Rachel had little to learn. Then one-day a golden-brown coloured bird came gliding high along the edge of the forest. Rachel watched it tuck its wings in and dive toward the ground at high speed. The bird swooped down to the ground and a mouse scuttled away in fright, safe this time. Rachel had never seen such a large bird before. She thought it looked impressive. Just before it reached the ground the bird had spread its wings and levelled out, trying to catch the mouse. Rachel noticed that with all the speed it had gathered by diving, the bird was able to climb back up very high without flapping its wings.



It seemed like every time her life became difficult, a lesson would come along to teach Rachel how to make things better. Just like the bird she had seen, Rachel tucked her wings in as she was gliding down from the tree. She began to fall faster and faster, and then she slowly spread her wings out straight. This was very difficult when she was falling so fast, Rachel barely had the strength. She was glad she hadn't fallen from higher to go faster or she might have crashed. Instead Rachel was able to round out her dive and climb back up almost as high as when she started to fall. What a wonderful lesson she thought in excitement. With this knowledge, Rachel was able to practice all kinds of new tricks. She would dive to gain speed and then use that speed to perform loops and rolls. Sometimes she would round out her dive so that she was skimming the ground and then, using ground effect, Rachel could dodge between the trees, twisting and turning like she used to do before her accident, before eventually landing. She learnt that by tucking one wing, she would spin instead of dive. After lots of practice, Rachel was able to perform all kinds of aerial acrobatics. She called them aerobatics and even the most skilful of fairies she had taught to fly were impressed with Rachel's new abilities. Once again some fairies were happy to carry Rachel up above the forest. The others were still afraid to go much higher than the tallest tree but they loved to see Rachel gracefully performing her aerobatics and many fairies began learning flying skills from her again.

Without all the difficulties she had faced, Rachel wondered whether she would have ever learned as much as she had since her injury. She decided that she would look at any problems in the future as a sign that she was about to learn something new and valuable. She also decided to try and be more aware of what went on around her. Then she could try to learn things before a problem had to come along and teach her.

Rachel knew that to fly for longer she had to get higher. There must be another way she thought. She had an idea that birds had more to teach her, so she sat at the top of her tree for many days hoping to see something new. Finally she spotted the large bird again in the distance. It was high and gliding toward her. When the bird had almost reached the edge of the forest, it was getting lower. Sometimes it would flap its wings a few beats, but mostly its wings were stretched out straight. When it was quite low over a pile of boulders forming a hill, the bird started circling. It stayed flying in circles over the hill for some time but Rachel was most interested to see that it wasn't losing any height. In fact, the bird began drifting with the wind away from the hill and gaining height as it circled without flapping its wings. The higher it circled, the faster the bird started going up until it was just a dark speck in the sky underneath a fluffy white cloud. Then it began gliding again along the edge of the forest. Rachel kept watching and when the bird started getting low again, it began circling back up underneath another fluffy cloud. It seemed like magic though Rachel was certain that birds could not perform magic.

When Rachel wasn't flying or teaching others, she watched for the large bird. She had been told it was called a hawk and to be careful of it because it might try to catch her. Other fairies had seen it catch a mouse and carry it away. That made them even more afraid to leave their forest. Rachel wasn't worried though. The only thing that frightened her any more was the thought that she couldn't do things on her own, especially flying. She spotted the hawk flying more often when she was especially looking for it. It must have had a nest nearby. Occasionally Rachel would see the hawk flapping by on grey days but it hunted for food mostly on sunny days. Those days, the hawk rarely flapped its wings. Rachel figured that the sun must heat the ground around the forest so that the warm air would rise above the hot spots. It seemed that the warm air went up and formed fluffy clouds. Rachel decided to call these updrafts "thermals". This was all new to Rachel as she was used to the cool forest with little wind inside the trees. Eventually, she came up with a plan.

The next sunny day with no wind and lots of fluffy white clouds, Rachel begged two fairies to lift her as high as they dared by the edge of the forest under a cloud. The fairies carried her a lot higher than the tallest tree and then dived back to the safety of the forest. Rachel flew along the edge of the forest. She was hardly coming down but the further she flew from where she started, the faster she began to lose height. She turned around and flew back to find that in the other direction from her starting point, she was slowly gaining height. She turned away from the forest and started going up faster. Every time the lift got stronger she flew straight and as it weakened, Rachel turned. This helped her to find where the air was going up the fastest. Soon Rachel found herself high above the forest, much higher than where she had started.

Rachel had never been so high. She could see so much more than she ever imagined. Before then, the forest was all she knew but now she could see that there were other forests. There were also what would become known as mountains and in the distance, a large sea of water. The sea seemed to stretch on forever. She had known that water fell as rain and flowed through her forest in streams, but she never had thought of where it might go to. She supposed that must be where the water ended up. Rachel was still getting higher and she noticed that the cloud was getting very close. Next the wisps of cloud were all around her and the ground was becoming hard to see. Rachel felt as though she were being swallowed up. Frightened, she flew straight until she popped out the side of the cloud and started losing height again. She flew along the edge of the forest as fast as she could but at that height, it looked like she was hardly moving. As she got lower, she could see things in more detail and she spotted the hawk circling not far away below her. By the time Rachel was directly above the hawk, it was quite close to her. Though she was a little nervous, Rachel wanted to thank the hawk for helping her to learn how to fly upward. She flew down alongside the hawk but it didn't seem to notice her. Rachel tried speaking to it but the hawk could neither see nor hear her. The large bird was looking around as though it sensed something but it never looked directly where Rachel was flying.

Rachel realised that she had nothing to fear. She decided to fly with the hawk and learn where to find thermals to lift her each time she got low. By the end of the day, Rachel had discovered that lifting air could be found just about anywhere. Mostly though, the air seemed to rise from high points on the land near to something that was heating well in the sun. If strong enough, the air would keep rising until it formed a cloud. Sometimes dust or even leaves could be seen rising in the updrafts. By late

afternoon, the thermals were quite weak. Rachel was still flying with the hawk. She had seen it return to its nest several times that day. The nest was quite a distance from her home in the forest and the hawk was flying in that direction again. Rachel decided that she should fly home before sundown in case she ran out of lifting air to keep her up. As a token of thanks, Rachel painted some more vivid golden colour on some of the hawk's feathers before she glided home in smooth air and circled down into the forest. The other fairies, who were worried where Rachel had been all day, saw her come in and land. They all crowded around her as Rachel told them what she had learnt. Rachel had never been so excited in all her life.

The other fairies listened in wonder as Rachel recounted her adventure. The next day was similar to the last and Rachel encouraged the other fairies to join her exploring the land around their forest. Most of the others were too scared to leave, but two fairies boldly carried Rachel into some lifting air then released her and briefly joined her in circling higher in the thermal current. The higher they climbed, the smaller their forest appeared beneath them and eventually fear took control. Both fairies apologised to Rachel then flew back down to the forest beating their wings as fast as they could. Rachel kept flying by gliding from thermal to thermal. Sometimes she would get low and be forced to glide back to the forest rather than risk landing out where no one could carry her back to safety. Each time the other fairies would carry her back up to catch another thermal. The others watched on with a mixture of amazement and even some disapproval.

"It's just too dangerous", some would exclaim.

"I hope no other fairies try to do what she's doing. How irresponsible that Rachel is." Secretly however, most of the fairies envied Rachel as she was doing something they would love to have the courage to do and seeing things they could only dream of.

The next couple of days remained sunny so Rachel kept practising her new-found skill. In actual fact, she thought it more a new-found knowledge of things that happened around her that previously she had never noticed or even cared about. Rachel already had wonderful flying skills but it was knowledge that helped her to climb out before she was forced to land. She knew how the invisible air currents circulated around her, what caused them to move as they did and what tell-tale signs helped her to know where to glide in order to find them. She flew alongside the hawk often and wondered why it could not see her. In the same way that she had been unaware of things going on around her, Rachel guessed that the hawk could not see her because it was not looking properly and that it did not notice the effect the presence of fairies had on the world around.

Flying about the countryside surrounding her forest by gliding and thermalling became quite easy and Rachel was able to circle back up high in the rising air currents even from very close to the ground. She was very small and light so it did not take much to lift her up. Without the power of her wings beating to propel her however, Rachel was limited in how fast she could fly forwards or downwards. Usually she didn't care about wanting to go downwards because that happened each time she left a thermal. Neither was she in any particular hurry to go forwards. As long as she could keep up with the birds she flew alongside, Rachel was happy. On this day the clouds began to grow larger and darker. Soon they joined into one large dark cloud that shaded much of the forest. Rachel was annoyed that the shade might stop the air from rising but to the contrary, the lift seemed better than ever. Rachel enjoyed the fastest climb she had ever experienced and was very high. The cloud was darker than ever and had spread out so far that all the land around was now shaded. Looking way out to sea there were islands in sunshine now visible on the horizon but Rachel also noticed that she was rapidly approaching the scraggy base of the huge cloud. She tried to fly out of the lifting air but it seemed to be rising everywhere. Rachel tucked her wings in and tried to dive straight down but the air was going up so fast that she was still steadily being drawn up into the cloud without the ability to beat her wings. She flew towards the nearest edge of the cloud but it was still a long way off and eventually she was sucked into the belly of a towering thunder head. Suddenly everything was dark around her. The air was churning in all directions and Rachel was sent hurtling like a leaf throughout the massive cloud.



Rachel was totally disoriented. She could not tell whether she was going up, down, left, right, forwards or backwards. She had long since drawn her wings in and she shivered with a mixture of cold and fear. Briefly she was blinded and deafened by a flash of lightning and the thunderous sound that came with it. Just as she had recovered from the shock, more and more flashes of lightning came and Rachel's ears were ringing between the thunder claps. Having seen lightning strike the ground and destroy things, Rachel wondered whether she would die in the thunder cloud. She curled up as best she could as she was catapulted throughout the cloud by the strong gusts. After what seemed an eternity, Rachel noticed light all around her. Fearfully she opened her eyes to see that she had been spat out the side of the storm. She was extremely high, almost level with the top of the storm cloud which seemed to bubble out over a huge area. The only thing she could see at ground level away from the cloud was the distant sea and a solitary island. Rachel stretched out her wings and started gliding toward the island, it seemed her only hope as she did not want to be drawn back into the cloud. Cloud covered everywhere else that might have land beneath it. After a considerable time gliding, Rachel found herself getting lower. She could tell that she would clear the edge of the cloud before descending into it because more and more water was becoming visible between the cloud and the island. There seemed to be nothing but water, other than the one island, and Rachel couldn't quite tell whether she would make it there. Another problem, the sun was about to sink below the horizon. After passing the edge of the cloud, Rachel was eventually able to see back beneath the cloud to the distant shore of the mainland. She couldn't believe how far she had travelled from her home and there was no way she could glide back to the mainland from where she was. Other than drowning in the sea, the island was Rachel's only hope and she still had some distance to travel before she made land. Descending lower, Rachel could see swells in the water as she approached the island. In fact, she could barely see the land, just the breaking waves of water as the swell reached the shoreline. The wind had been blowing from behind her up higher but now Rachel was battling a headwind to make the island. It looked like she was going to fall just short. In desperation, Rachel used her remaining height to dive down near the waves where the wind wasn't so strong. With all the speed remaining from her dive, Rachel was able to skim the surface of the water behind a wave. When she reached the beach, Rachel had just enough speed to fly up a small sand dune and awkwardly land onto a scrubby bush at the top. Exhausted and relieved, Rachel sank into the leaves and fell into a deep sleep. The sun had set to end an eventful day.

Rachel woke at first light. Everything seemed still. Looking around her, Rachel tried to take stock of her situation. A white bird flew past flapping its wings. Rachel called out to no avail. Like all the others, the bird didn't notice her. Rachel feared that she would be trapped where she was forever with no one to assist her aloft. The day wore on and the seabirds, to be known as gulls, passed by regularly, still flapping most of the time. A breeze was beginning to stir the leaves of the bushes around her. Unlike the night before, the breeze came from the sea towards the land and as it strengthened, the gulls began to glide without flapping much at all. Eventually Rachel realised that when the breeze reached the shore, it was being diverted upward to create lift, which enabled the seabirds to glide and even climb at will. Where the dunes were highest, the seagulls were soaring much higher again above the steepest slopes. Rachel knew what she must do. She spread her wings and leaned forward into the breeze. Being at the top of the dune, Rachel gently rose and began to climb steadily as she flew along the steepest slope. She flew up and down the shoreline but the island was rather small and before too long, the wind was no longer being diverted upward but would curl around and eventually become quite turbulent. Each time Rachel worked her way back to the windward side of the island where the air flow was square on to the land and much smoother. She climbed as high as the lifting air band allowed but the air was only diverted upward so far before it flattened out and became just a headwind. From that height, all Rachel could see was the island below and the sea all the way to the horizon elsewhere. As the wind abated late in the day, Rachel flew down and landed in a bush at the highest point of the steepest slope on the island. She tried to sleep but as the night wore on, Rachel's fear was increasing and she kept waking up. What if she really was marooned? How could she ever cross the sea further than the horizon to return to the mainland?

Days turned into weeks. Rachel was able to fly when the wind picked up. She had a fair idea of the direction needed to travel back to the mainland. One day she got as high as she had ever been over the island and she thought she could see a faint outline at the horizon but it was so far away, she would never be able to glide there from where she was. Attempting to avoid despair, Rachel cleared her mind and thought of the lessons she had already learnt out of adversity. Many times she had been fearful, but each time she paid attention to what was going on around her, a lesson had always arrived. If she could read the signs, she could learn something that would help her progress.



The next day Rachel was flying high over the shoreline when she noticed a different kind of seabird. It was white like the birds of the flock living on the island, but its wings were much longer and it was flying alone out at sea. It would become known as an albatross. Its wings were fully extended at all times. The albatross was turning downwind from a height, diving down then skimming the surface with one wing as it carved out a smooth arc back into wind and climbing back up to its starting height. Repeating this in succession allowed the bird to traverse the sea, even when it was relatively flat. Rachel couldn't work out how this was possible without flapping, she expected the bird to plunge into the sea each time it got low. If there was a passing sea swell, the albatross would sometimes skim quite a distance along the downwind side in the wind shadow, like Rachel had done when she first arrived at the island. Eventually it would then fly up to the peak of the swell and suddenly climb out, again without flapping. It was all highly impressive. The albatross was changing its direction of flight to take advantage of the changing wind speed at various heights and places. This technique allowed it to stay aloft to effortlessly travel wherever it pleased and the albatross was wheeling its way toward the island.

Rachel knew that this was her chance to leave. She followed her new teacher from her starting height, though she was descending progressively. As she got close, she could tell that this albatross was much bigger than the gulls. It had an enormous wingspan and was obviously flying on instinct. Rachel had to use all her skill to stay close, but she copied everything the albatross did. There were regular, large lines of swell on the sea surface and they were skimming low behind them a lot. Rachel could see fish swimming beneath her and was momentarily distracted. She looked up and couldn't see the albatross. Had it moved on to the next swell? Rachel flew to the peak of the swell she was skimming behind but she still couldn't see the bird. Suddenly from behind, it dived underneath her and flew in behind the next swell. It was as though the albatross had been waiting for her. After that, Rachel avoided distractions and mirrored every move the bird made. They travelled quite a distance, though the time passed quickly for Rachel as she was so enthralled with this ingenious way of traversing the seas. Gradually the sky began to darken. A storm was brewing and the wind was picking up. There was still no sight of land but there was something else developing on the horizon that was a concern. A funnel was beginning to form at the base of the black cloud and it was stretching its way down towards the surface of the sea. A waterspout was forming. It should have struck fear into Rachel, but instead she controlled her emotions as she realised that this could help her. It was, after all, rising far higher than she would ever have achieved by staying on the island. Rachel looked around to find the albatross but it was nowhere to be seen. Had it guided her to this place, to this opportunity? She flew towards the eye of the tempest. The dynamic soaring technique she had learned from the seabird was no longer required as she was beginning to be drawn up, along with everything else around her. Higher and higher she climbed and then there it was, she could see the mainland starting to appear. Rachel needed to get high enough to glide there, but not so high that she was drawn into the storm cloud and lose her bearings once again. Before she was too close to the raggedy cloud at the base, Rachel drew her wings back and flew as fast as she could towards the mainland. Even at that speed, she was still climbing for quite a distance but the further she flew from the centre of the storm, the less she worried that she might be drawn into the cloud. Eventually Rachel started to descend so she extended her wings fully in an attempt to glide more efficiently. Even then it would be a struggle to make the mainland. When she was around halfway, Rachel calculated that she would not quite make it to land but she could see whitecaps on the waves below. As long as there were wind and waves, Rachel knew that she could use the technique she had learned from the albatross. Could she make it home? Hope had returned.

As Rachel had anticipated, she found herself dynamic soaring, using the swell and the wind variances to enable her to reach the shore of the mainland. The storm was far behind her now and the prevailing wind was blowing up the cliffs she now approached. The air rose up, deflected by the steep cliffs and Rachel soon found herself soaring high above them. Looking back over the landscape, Rachel knew that she had the skills to thermal her way wherever she pleased while the sun was up and to soar any slope she found where the wind was deflected upward. The only problem was that she could not tell where her forest might be. She saw several forests scattered within varying distances of the coastline but she knew that her forest was beyond the horizon. Rachel decided to head for the nearest forest for the night and if necessary, progressively work her way from one forest to the next until she found her way home.



As it was almost time for sunset, Rachel climbed as high as she could over the cliffs at the coastline, then turned tail wind and headed for the nearest forest. Everything viewed from a distance seemed lighter, someone blueish, though as Rachel approached the forest, it appeared mostly grey. Rachel had expected most of the forest to be green, but this somewhat sad looking collection of trees was decidedly plain. She alighted on the highest tree around the perimeter and was somewhat shocked. Had it been dark, she wouldn't have noticed, but the last rays of sunlight illuminated nothing but grey foliage all around her. Rachel was exhausted. She had been flying all day and fell into an instant, deep sleep. When she awoke, the sun was beginning to rise. The forest was still grey and dark below the canopy, yet Rachel sensed that there was movement, some life in the darkness below. Peering down, she thought she could see objects flying back and forth, but they blended so well with the darkness and the grey surroundings, Rachel was unsure so she called out. Within seconds, two fairies appeared out of nowhere. They wore grey clothing and blended in with everything around them. Their initial greeting was direct.

"Who are you? Where have you come from?" Almost in panic, they grabbed Rachel by her arms and carried her down into the darkness. "Don't you know what danger you were in being on the outside?" Their grip remained firm as Rachel was carried to what must have been close to the centre of the forest. There, a faint light was making its way through the canopy as the sun rose higher in the sky. A kind of throne had been constructed on an isolated tree branch and Rachel was placed on the ground below, where other fairies, all in grey, were gathering as the news spread about their unusual visitor. Rachel was dressed in purple, her favourite colour, and it seemed that the other fairies were fearful of her because she was different. A strong voice broke through the quiet chatter that surrounded and Rachel looked up to the throne and saw a stern looking fairy, also in grey.

"Do you know what danger you may have brought upon us all by being out at the top of our forest? The predators may already have seen you." Scowling as she scanned the forest around her throne. "They may be coming for all of us as I speak!"

"I'm very sorry if my presence has frightened you. What creatures do you fear will come and what do you think they might do?" Rachel could hear murmuring from the fairies around her.

"The birds!", they seemed to be saying. "We have seen what they do to other animals and even each other. If they knew we were here, if we stood out, they would come for us."

The monarch nodded her head. "It's a miracle that you weren't seen when the sun came up. That is their favourite time of day. We see them hunting on the outside. They take worms, they take mice and small creatures, sometimes they attack each other. We stay hidden to survive, it's the only way."

"But that's not true", Rachel blurted. The fairies were instantly silent, all looking up to their Queen, who stood up from her seat on the throne and struck down with her sceptre.

"Be silent! How dare you question the wisdom that has been passed down by my ancestors since history began. We have survived for generations by heeding this knowledge. You would have us all perish once the predators realise we are here?" The Queen motioned with her hand to the fairies all around below. "We wear grey and keep close to the shadows, that is the only way we will live on. Take this stranger away and lock her up until she agrees to follow our rules. Otherwise, she will be banished into the night outside the forest to fend for herself." Several fairies tried to take her away but were surprised that Rachel didn't fly with them or even try to stand.

"Don't force us to drag you!"

"But I can't", Rachel started but she was interrupted before she could explain anything.

"Very well then, have it your way." They carried her to an enclosure and posted guards. They were not to realise that Rachel couldn't escape from a place with no wind, sunshine or fairies willing to help her. A full day passed before a fairy, who seemed to have some authority, came to address Rachel.

"If you swear to wear grey and keep close to the shadows of our forest then we will allow you to stay. Otherwise you will be banished to the exterior in the night-time to then fend for yourself, never to return." Rachel didn't even consider such an option.

"I cannot accept a life like that I'm sorry. I know that there is a better way. I am unable to walk or fly freely within the forest. With all due respect, I would rather fend for myself." The official, along with all the guards, seemed confused.

"What do you mean, you cannot walk or fly freely? We have offered you that freedom as long as you follow our rules." Rachel knew it was pointless to try and argue with this community who had known no other life. She would have to show them. Her silence was taken as insolence. "So it shall be then. You will be banished to the exterior tonight."

Darkness fell after sunset and before long, the guards took Rachel outside the forest. They carried her as far as they dared before dropping her in the open and darting back to the safety of their home. The Queen was not interested in what might happen the following day. She had offered Rachel sanctuary within their forest and she had received no response. Other members of the community could not resist however. As the sun came up the following day, many eyes peered out from the shadows to see what might happen. Rachel had slept most of the night, though she woke as always at dawn. Signs of

life beginning to stir did not worry her. A mouse scuttled by, not seeming to see her, but somehow sensing that the place Rachel sat was to be avoided. The mouse disappeared down a hole nearby. A short while later, it re-emerged and started making its way back toward Rachel when out of the sky, a hawk swooped down and almost caught the mouse. The nimble creature made a split second move to the side, causing the hawk to miss clutching it within its talons. The mouse scampered past Rachel and down another hole. The hawk landed, knowing it had missed its chance. It walked past quite closely, but the hawk took no notice of Rachel. Eventually it flew away. The fairies watching from the forest were wide-eyed. As the day went on, many creatures passed by the place where Rachel sat calmly. None seemed to see her, though all of them stayed clear of her exact position. That night, message got back to the Queen. The following morning, she went to the edge of the forest and watched in amazement. How could it be that the birds were ignoring this fairy in purple. Everything she had been taught and had passed down as law upon her community may not be true. That night, as Rachel remained waiting patiently, several fairies emerged from the forest to carry her back to the Queen.

"What kind of magic spell have you made stranger? Why do the predators leave you be?" Rachel remained calm.

"Your Highness, I do not know why, but other creatures do not seem to see me, only fairies can see me. Sometimes they may sense my presence, but birds have never harmed me. To the contrary, they have only helped me."

"Helped you?" The Queen looked horrified. "You are in league with these beasts?"

"No your Highness, it's not like you might think. I have observed different birds and they have taught me valuable lessons. They may not know what they are doing, though sometimes I wonder whether they intend to teach or lead me on a path. They pose no threat to me and I believe that it would be the same for all of you. Why don't you come out of the forest with me tomorrow?" The other fairies began murmuring amongst themselves, though they were still looking fearful. The Queen stood up and motioned to the guards.

"Take her away. I must speak with the council. All councillors, report to my chambers immediately." Rachel was kept under guard for several hours before the council returned to address her. A senior member stepped forward to inform her that he had been chosen to go with Rachel outside the forest the next morning. The councillor looked apprehensive but determined.

"You will need to carry me out there", Rachel informed the councillor. He looked puzzled, but nodded that he would do so.

In the morning, the two fairies made their way out into the open. The entire forest community watched on as their councillor in grey carried Rachel tentatively away from them.

"I thank you for believing in me", Rachel began, but the councillor cut her short.

"I'm not sure whether you tell the truth or not, but I would forever wonder unless someone had the courage to find out. We all would. If you are right, then we have been following a lie our entire lives." He placed Rachel down and sat beside her. Some time passed before any creatures came near them. Once again it was a mouse, which scampered by several times on its way to and from various holes in the ground. It paid them no attention until the last time, when it froze for a moment. The councillor thought it had seen him until he realised that the mouse was looking above him. He spun around to see a hawk flying straight at him. In terror, he crossed his arms in front of his face, but the hawk passed straight over him and caught the mouse in a flash of motion. No sooner had the hawk begun flapping its wings, that it was struck by a different hawk. Surprised by an adversary, the hawk dropped the mouse which wasted no time in scuttling down the nearest hole. Both hawks saw the mouse disappear as they landed to glare at each other. They were not far away from the two fairies. Rachel called out loudly to the councillor.

"They can't see us. Why don't you go to them?" The fairy in grey was still recovering from shock, but he summoned all his courage and began flying slowly towards the hawks. The fierce creatures had looked as though they might start fighting with each other, but as the fairy came closer, his presence seemed to pacify the birds. One turned away and flew off while the other turned towards the councillor. He was nearly face-to-face with a creature he had feared all his life, but the hawk didn't see him. It tilted its head, as if trying to understand a strange sensation, before it too turned and flew away. The councillor watched it disappear then turned to Rachel, deep in thought.

"We have many things to discuss my dear. I sincerely apologise for the way we have treated you. Would you do me the honour of remaining here with me for a while longer? I have many questions to ask you and we must demonstrate to the others beyond question that you have told us the truth."

Rachel sat and spoke with the councillor until sunset. He had many questions. Rachel told him all about her home forest community, the colours, the work done by fairies to paint such colours on things around them. She described her accident and the lessons she had learnt since then. He could hardly believe that Rachel could have flown to his forest.

"Would you mind if I lifted you above our forest so you could fly back in to tell the others?" Rachel nodded her agreement and was lifted to a good height over the forest before being released. She glided gracefully down through the still evening air. Being grey, the forest had absorbed heat from the sun throughout the day and now that the sun was setting and the open plains had quickly cooled off, the air above the forest was particularly buoyant. Rachel flew around for quite some time without a beat of her wings, able to maintain her height easily. She could have climbed out if she really wanted to, but she decided to stay fairly low and demonstrate to the fairies below her alternative means of flight to their fluttering of wings. Eventually, Rachel performed a series of loops and spins to descend quickly down into a gap in the trees. The councillor flew ahead of her so that Rachel could follow to the centre of the forest and land below the throne. Soon the entire fairy community had crowded around them, eager to hear what the councillor had to say. He began speaking immediately, enthusiastically suggesting that they no longer had to fear the creatures outside. Suddenly, the Queen, appeared by her throne and interrupted him.

"Just as I suspected! She has bewitched you, fooled you into believing her lies. It was obviously all a trick, designed to make us all let down our guard so she could take over our forest. Guards, seize them both and lock them away until I have time to decide on their fate." The other fairies began murmuring to one another. "Silence! I am your Queen. I expect that no one will question my wisdom on this matter. Guards, take them away. The rest of you, go back to your homes and rest well. By the morning, I will have decided what we should do with the intruder."

Rachel and the councillor were taken away and held under guard. She whispered quietly to the councillor, assuring him that she told the truth. He nodded to her and the look in his eye told Rachel that he believed her.

"Get some sleep", he suggested. The guards themselves rarely had to actually detain anyone. They seemed confused. Having witnessed what they thought to be a miracle, all had wondered if their lives might change for the better. The Queen had extinguished any dreams they may have held of a life more bold and exciting. The councillor was unable to sleep. He was deep in thought throughout the night. In the early hours prior to sunrise, he addressed the guards.

"Listen to me my friends. I was there yesterday, outside our forest. I saw the eye of a great bird, closer to me than I am to you now. It sensed something, but it did not see me. It left me in peace and I no longer fear creatures on the outside. I am certain that Rachel tells the truth. Let us go now and we will

leave the forest. You can join us if you wish or stay here." The councillor paused to give them time. "Either way, you will show great courage should you allow us to leave. Courage to believe us, or courage to face the wrath of our Queen to have let us escape. I do not know what plans the Queen may have for us but if we leave tonight, she can pretend that nothing has changed. I cannot myself live with such a pretence." The guards appeared unconvinced though still uncertain. "Please my friends, you know I have served you well as your councillor and Rachel has done you no harm. Allow us to leave in peace."

The three guards discussed the matter between themselves. After some time, two of them decided that they would leave the forest with Rachel and the councillor. The third guard was too afraid to venture outside. He was however, prepared to say that he had been overpowered by the others during the escape. "There is no time to lose then. We must leave immediately before the sun has time to rise", urged the councillor. Pointing to one of the guards he then directed, "You will scout the way out while we carry Rachel and fly closely behind. I have no time to explain why but she cannot make it out of here without our help. It will also appear to any onlookers, that you are taking us somewhere as part of your duty." To the remaining guard, the councillor then turned. "You will raise the alarm once we are outside the forest. No one will dare follow us. I hope that the Queen does not punish you my friend." Promptly, they lifted Rachel and followed their scout. As everyone slept elsewhere, the three silently navigated the fastest route to the outside and before long, they flew off in to the night.

Rachel eventually spoke. "Thank you, all of you. Now we must go up until we see the sun rise." The two guards looked alarmed, but the councillor assured them that they could trust her judgement. The four fairies ascended to a great height above the forest. Finally the Sun appeared over the horizon. Rachel fixed her eyes on a distant forest. "You can let me go now. I can fly from here. You just need to follow me. I don't know what will await us but it's sure to be an adventure and I'm sure we will all learn a great deal."

The air was smooth in the early morning and Rachel was able to maintain an exceptional glide path as the other three fairies fluttered along beside her. "Why don't you beat your wings Rachel?" The former guard looked confused.

"Why do you move your wings when as you can see, it is perfectly alright to glide like this with little effort? I suppose I would fly as you do had I not been injured some time ago, but I actually enjoy the challenge of having to use my knowledge of the way air flows in order to go from place to place. Occasionally I need assistance to get started but if I start off from a high place, I can pretty much go where I please." Rachel proceeded to explain to the others some of the soaring skills she had learned but eventually they descended and were above a new forest. This one was particularly green in the early morning light. Much brighter than the forest they had just escaped from, yet decidedly lacking in any other colour than green. There was also much activity beneath the canopy. Thousands of fairies dressed in green were making their way throughout the forest on their morning business. "I think we should fly right into the centre of this forest and see what happens", Rachel suggested. "Best that we explain ourselves". All four navigated their way down through the canopy and alighted in a small clearing towards the centre. They had certainly been noticed, not only as strangers but because they were not wearing green. Rachel's purple and the grey of the others stood out glaringly. The first thing they noticed was that there were many fairies walking on the forest floor. Just as many fairies flew above, however they were all male. Those walking all seemed to be female and the fact had not escaped them that both Rachel and one of the guards accompanying her were female.

"How is she able to fly?"

"There's more than one of them, how can it be?" Even the male fairies that had landed around them were astonished at the sight. Not only were two female fairies flying, but they were wearing colours that had never before been seen.

"Please excuse our sudden arrival", Rachel stated in greeting. "We have come from a forest over the horizon. Well, these three fairies have come from there. I came from a forest far from here on a great adventure." Rachel looked around at the puzzled faces. "We do not wish to intrude. We would like to be friends with all of you. We can tell you about where we came from and if you like, some of you could tell us about your way of life here in this beautiful green forest?"

The green fairies, though slightly shy, told them about life in their forest. Male fairies were the only ones who flew because that was the way it had always been. They had larger wings, their female counterparts barely being able to move theirs. Everyone wore green simply because that was the only colour they knew. The sky changed colour but they could not touch the sky, so they only concerned themselves with their immediate surroundings, which happened to entirely consist of various shades of green. There were no particular rules or leadership groups. Every fairy played their part and tried to help out each other within their forest community. They weren't afraid of other creatures living in and around their forest as they had come to understand that they could only be sensed, not seen. They tended to stay close to the forest because they were quite content living as they were. There was some apprehension with the arrival of the four strangers, but also intrigue. All the green fairies seemed eager to learn and Rachel was only too keen to pass on her experience. The three grey fairies were happy to learn from all as they came to realise the oppression under which they had existed previously.

After a while, Rachel had taught them how to paint. Some fairies wanted to use their mouth like Rachel, though she explained that it was far easier for them to use their hands to hold a brush if they were able. She knew the magic necessary to create the paint so then it was just a matter of adding colours to whatever they wished to change. The green fairies, though still fond of their prevailing colour, were delighted to learn this new skill and before long, their forest subtly transformed into an even more beautiful realm. Many of the female fairies were also keen to learn how to fly. It turned out that their wings were smaller mostly due to neglect. "Use them or lose them", Rachel suggested. She explained that she could not flutter her wings any more following her accident, but that she was still able to fly after exercising what movement still remained. A large group of the female fairies began daily exercise classes with Rachel to strengthen their wings. She also taught theory classes since they would initially have to glide and there was much to learn about airflow and how to take advantage of that knowledge. Rachel then began individual flying lessons. The male fairies carried them aloft before releasing them, much in the same way that Rachel had relearned how to fly, but with a little more caution at first since any flying was new to these fairies. Once these female fairies had developed the ability to glide and turn, they spent time mastering safe landing approaches and efficient landings. At first they needed assistance from their male counterparts, so that they didn't crash into trees. They even had to avoid each other once their numbers increased. It was quite hectic in the air at first with all the new glider pilots, so to speak, trying to avoid mid-air collisions. A system of rules of the air were established to avoid bumping into each other. Their landings were at first clumsy. Several of them fell flat on their faces while others were running as fast as they could on the ground until they were able to develop the skill and timing of the flare, when they would twist their wings to perform a no step touch down.

Some of the females noticed that their wings were growing stronger and larger. They were able to move them in the beating motion similar to that of their male acquaintances. They were not yet strong enough to be able to take off and fly with power but it did help with their manoeuvrability once in flight. Rachel had taught them well how to utilise the energy around them and glide, but self-sufficient flight was their ultimate goal. Several of the females came up with an idea of how to gain their initial height by alternative means. They were able to climb onto the backs of birds and then hang on until they were at a suitable height for release. The birds did not realise that there were hitchhikers on their back and the fairies discovered that they were able to exert their own will upon the birds after some practice. They could direct where the birds flew through their thoughts. This discovery was welcome news to Rachel. She had often worried that she might become stranded somewhere without anyone's assistance to become airborne. After some practice, she could affect her will on just about any of the creatures around her. Ground dwelling creatures could pick her up and carry her places, while birds could carry her aloft.

She knew now that she had all the skills necessary for her to make it back to her home forest but she found it difficult to leave this community. Everyone was so positive. They always thought things carefully through before acting, but they held no negative thoughts in their mind to hold them back. This meant that they were able to achieve just about everything they desired. Everyone got along fabulously, there was no feeling of superiority to discriminate against anyone in the forest. Rachel's lessons on creating colour and enabling the female fairies to fly had opened their minds to all sorts of possibilities and Rachel knew that they would go on to discover far more than any fairy currently knew of.

One day, the three fairies who had come from the grey forest came to discuss something with Rachel. None of the fairies were burdened with grey or green in this community any more. They were free to choose whatever colour attire they liked. The three, once known only as the councillor and guards, had been living happily in the new community. They were troubled however by the thought that their old community in the grey forest were still subjects of the Queen and her stifling rules. They were asking for volunteers to travel with them, back to their old forest. They wanted to tell the fairies in that community what was possible in their lives. They thought that they could persuade even the Queen to change her ways but they wanted as many voices as possible alongside them that they could recruit. Otherwise they suspected that the Queen may not believe them and react the same way as she had when Rachel first arrived. Rachel encouraged them to return with a positive outlook. Several other fairies decided to accompany them on their pilgrimage. Rachel was still busy teaching flight skills and knowledge to the female fairies where she was but she wished them all well as they departed. Over the days, then weeks that followed, Rachel hoped for the best.

When finally some of the fairies returned, Rachel was overjoyed to hear that the pilgrimage to the grey forest had been a success. After their initial trepidation, the grey fairies started believing the message that their lives could be better. When finally the Queen said that she believed them, the others were able to help create rapid change. The grey forest had transformed into a rainbow of beautiful flowers, trees, even colourful birds that had been attracted by the change. The Queen abdicated her power and apologised for her enforcement of the previous laws. By all accounts, the community were embracing the changes. All three of Rachel's fellow escapees had decided to stay to help establish the changed community there. Even some of their volunteers stayed on while others returned to their home forest.

Rachel stayed on for a while longer until most of the fairies were able to fly at least safely. Some had strengthened their wings sufficiently to fly under their own power while many others were mastering the soaring skills taught to them by Rachel. She knew it was time for her to move on. When she explained this to everyone, Rachel pointed out that she had done all she could in this place and that she felt the need to move on to other communities that may benefit from her teachings. When Rachel set off on her next journey, several fairies came along for an adventure. This pleased Rachel considerably. She felt that the message of fearlessness and positive thinking had been embraced by all and the support shown by these companions gave her confidence that they could help in some way, whatever they may find in the distant forests.

It took quite some time to reach the next forest, then others beyond that. Each community presented lessons for Rachel and her companions, who in turn passed on what they could to enrich the lives of everyone they met. Eventually, Rachel was considered a sage, revered by all as a fairy of great wisdom. It had been many years since Rachel was swept up into the storm cloud then landed on a desert island. She went out flying alone one day to clear her thoughts when she saw the most beautiful bird imaginable. It was much larger than even the hawks who had taught her how to soar the wind currents. She circled up to the bird, surprised by the fact that it seemed to be watching her as she approached. As she flew alongside, the bird turned then spoke to her through her thoughts.

"I am an eagle, in case you were wondering."

"You can see me?", Rachel thought in return. "But I thought that only fairies could see me." They continued to climb higher than Rachel had ever thermalled up to before.

"Of course I see you Rachel. I have great vision. I see everything that you have done. I have watched you evolve from a great flyer, through your challenges I have seen you grow to become an even greater teacher. You have truly made the most of every opportunity which has been presented to you. The lessons you have learnt, you have passed them on to all who would listen."



"You can hear me as well?" Rachel hadn't processed what the eagle had just communicated. She was still trying to comprehend the situation when in the distance, Rachel noticed something familiar. It was her home forest. She had climbed so high to reach the eagle that she could see the unmistakably familiar shape that she remembered so well. Immediately she started gliding toward it, but when she looked around her the eagle was nowhere to be seen. Had she imagined the creature? Surely not, but now Rachel kept her eyes on home. It was a long way to glide but she reached her forest with plenty of height to spiral down into the centre. She landed gracefully and as word spread amongst the community, before long every fairy was there to witness this miracle. Rachel had returned. They had long ago given up any hope that she may be still alive, yet here she was.

Little had changed in her home forest. If anything, the fairies there had grown even more afraid of venturing outside since Rachel disappeared. All of the fairies could sense that Rachel had changed. She emanated a warm confidence that compelled everyone to listen and believe. Rachel spoke of her adventures. The storm, the island, the tempest and all the forest communities she had visited on her journey home. Rachel encouraged them all to overcome their fears, to go out on pilgrimages and learn from the other communities. Rachel didn't recommend any one community over another, but emphasised that they all had cultures which were different. Whatever obstacles they may face on their journeys or in their lives, Rachel said they should look for the signs that would appear around them, clues to help them take the next step toward fulfilment. Inspired by her words, many fairies went out in search of adventure. Most of them were the younger fairies, less entrenched in their ways than the others. When some of these pilgrims returned however, even some of the older fairies were emboldened to travel and learn. Fairies from other forest communities eventually started to arrive on their own pilgrimages, to see where the great sage Rachel had come from and to meet her. It became an age of great transformation amongst the fairies of the world. A world that was gradually becoming a better place for all.

Years later, when Rachel was actually one of the oldest fairies still alive, Rachel was out gliding on her own. It had been a sunny day and Rachel was inclined to escape the heat down below. The higher she climbed, the cooler the air became as Rachel circled beneath the shade of a large cloud. Up at cloudbase, Rachel noticed some movement. Her eyes weren't as keen as they had been when she was younger, but Rachel thought she could recognise one of the beautiful birds, an eagle. The lift grew stronger as Rachel approached the base of the cloud, which was growing increasingly dark and dangerous looking. Just as Rachel came close to the eagle, it disappeared into the greyness. A voice in her head told her not to be afraid, to follow the eagle into the cloud. Soon Rachel was engulfed and the land below was not visible. Lightning flashed before too long with a rumbling of thunder and Rachel was able to see the eagle's silhouette ahead of her. She followed, unafraid. The flashes of light became more regular until everything around her remained white and bright. Rachel could now see the being in front of her. It had the wings of an eagle but a body much like hers. Soon others arrived. They flew alongside Rachel and smiled. There was no need to talk because Rachel could hear their voices inside her head. They all folded their wings as Rachel realised that they were floating in the whiteness.

"Who are you?", thought Rachel. "What are you?" Instantly she knew. "Angels?"

"Yes my dear", came a reply. "Just as you are invisible to the creatures of the Earth and sky, we have been invisible to you and all fairies. The ultimate purpose of a fairy is to oversee all of nature. To assist the creatures and the world they inhabit to live in beauty and harmony. That was not always occurring and we needed a fairy to teach her kind some valuable lessons. Now that the forest communities are learning from each other what they are capable of, fairies will be able to live up to that purpose." The angels glowed with pride. "You have taught them to live without fear, to look for lessons from the signs all around them. The world will be a better place for what you have instigated Rachel."

"So why have you come to tell me this now?", Rachel enquired. "Why didn't you speak to me and all the others directly?"

"As we said Rachel, fairies cannot see us, they can only read the signs we place for them. You can see us now because you are no longer a fairy."

Rachel tried to take this in. "No longer a fairy?" She looked down and everything seemed the same but somehow she knew that they were right. She moved her legs for the first time in years, effortlessly. Then she stretched out her wings. No longer were they insectlike. They were beautiful, white feathered wings. Just like all the other angels.

The end.

By Geoff Dossetor, in memory of my dear friend Rachel Whitford (née Koerner).