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If I Could Fly

Written by

Jill Hucklesby

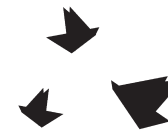
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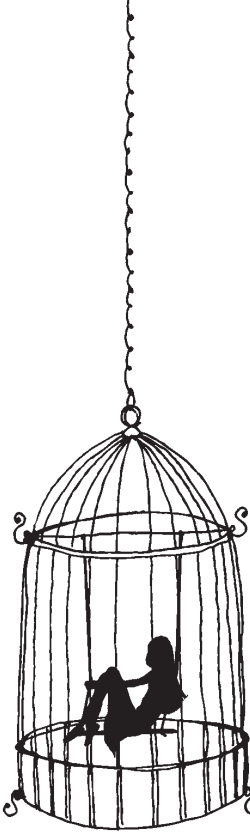
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Breathe. Stand still. Blend in. Don't cough.
Shhh, heart. Don't beat so loud . . .



If I Could Fly

JILL HUCKLESBY

EGMONT

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We bring stories to life

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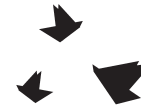
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Chapter One

Thud and *thud* and stones and blood in mouth and mud and moon and stars and spikes of corn and trackies ripped and ribs on fire; ice sweat on neck and chest and spine and ache in calves and arms and eyes wide open, dry and cracked but dropping tears; there is no sound but feet, the snap of sticks, the rasp of autumn air in lungs, a pumping pulse of pain. Must keep the rhythm.

Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum.

Stream to cross, a leap, a thump, a bank to climb, a clutch at grass, a stile with broken step; the wood is wet with heavy dew and, here, a tarmac road to nowhere. Take me there. Please take me there. A place to hide, a space that's safe. My heart is pounding in my ears, a drum, a march, must stay in step, must hide my face in case they come, push my hair inside my hoody, keep

my head down, sprint and jog and sprint and jog.

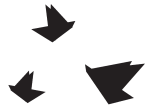
No air . . . a stitch . . . a searing cramp. Eyes scan for cover. Beyond the hedge, a field, a tree with roots like fat man's legs a hundred metres up a slope, so thrust and push and elbows punch and eat the distance like it is the longest bacon sandwich in the world and munch and munch and holy mangoes! Made it.

Breathe. Stand still. Lean against the bark. Blend in. Don't cough. Shhh, heart. Don't beat so loud.

I have legs of stone. I'm a fugitive, on the loose. Memories of the last few hours are a blank computer screen in 'sleep' mode. I should be able to rerun them, like an HD game of escape at the touch of a button, and take myself back to the beginning. But the button is broken. All I remember is running down streets and alleys, across car parks, trading estates with perfect families smiling down from tattered billboards, a playground and a dual carriageway, watched by a dozen surveillance cameras, my trainers barely touching the ground.

What am I running from? My fist hits the gnarled wood behind me and sends an aftershock through my trembling frame. But it doesn't shake open the part of my brain that can answer the question. All it throws back at me is the last rule of the Phoenix Feathers, the gang of free runners on my estate: the rule I had to swear to obey if I wanted to learn their secrets; an oath sealed with spit from my throat and blood from my wrist; a vow broken, my brain tells me, without letting me access the facts. I feel in my gut it's the reason I am here, far from home, the faint taste of blood in my mouth.

Never trust a promise.



Chapter Two

Om mani padme hum.

It feels good to say the words. They mean: 'May there be peace and an end to suffering. May all be well.' It's my mum's daily prayer, before the dawn wakes the smiling Buddha who sits cross-legged in his tiny shrine on the windowsill in our kitchen. I call him Bud the Pud. My mum tells me I'm half Thai and should lay a respectful flower at his feet. She says that monks believe the chants' vibration alone can ease the troubles of the world. My dad says to her, 'Little Bird, your daily tweets are getting on my nerves.'

I sink down to my knees, leaning back against the tree's great trunk. The pain in my left side burns white hot. Its throb is like the tock of a clock, a ball against a wall, a hammer against a skull.

'The free runnin', it can save your life, Paper Clip,' Crease, the Phoenix Feathers' leader, told me, play-punching my shoulder. He's really fit, but it takes time for him to put words together. He never calls me by my real name. He says it ties his tongue in a knot just trying. So Calypso became 'Clip' and he added the 'Paper' as a tease. When he's tired, I become just plain PC. I'm always the butt of the gang's jokes, every which way.

I'm going to miss running with them – Crease and Slee and Moby, Jam and Shell, Foo and the others. Well, running behind them, technically, as I'm too young to be 'with' them, if you get me. I love hanging around when they train on the monkey bars, slides and suspended walkways in the playground near our estate, honing muscles, preparing for the next display.

'Watch and learn,' said Crease. And I did.

I remember watching them do a free run over our public library not long ago, when the nights first grew long and the air in our road smelled of sweet

honeysuckle. Their feet explored every wall, every angle, every ledge. But wait. Weren't there sirens and batons and shouting? Weren't Crease and Slee arrested? Didn't the rest of us vanish like sprites across the terraced rooftops and down thin alleys full of stinking rubbish? Wasn't there a whisper that the FISTS – the Forensic Investigation and Security Teams – had tracked them on all the social networking sites?

'You don't want to mess with the FISTS,' Foo told me later, dabbing at a cut on her cheek with the cuff of her fleece. 'Them and their "jaws on paws" sidekicks.' She shuddered and I saw her hand was shaking. We crouched by wheelie bins, waiting for the sound of raised voices to stop. When it was quiet, we scarpered over fences, through gardens, across roofs. When we reached the road, Foo pointed for me to go a different way. Swear to God, I saw her jump a parked car and disappear.

After that, I couldn't find the Feathers on any of

the usual online sites. My new mates had erased their profiles. And now, when I think of their features, framed by different coloured bandanas made out of tea towels, they are just a blur.

I rub my eyes, look up. In the sky, all I can see is a giant saucepan of fairy lights, hurtling my way. It's quite something when sparkly pans become lethal weapons with my name on.

Cal-yp-so (noun) – a folk song from the West Indies, maybe a story the singer makes up as she goes along.

'A girl with such a name is on a journey,' my mother would murmur in my ear, when I was small. 'She will have adventures. Her voice will be heard.'

Who will hear it now, Little Bird? Just night creatures – the rabbits, badgers and the mice. I daren't say it out loud, in case it's written on every news update to every curfew-centre computer in this region. It may already be travelling through cyberspace to the mobile phones of each officer patrolling the grid. I shouldn't be out here in the countryside. I don't have

permission to be travelling through areas zoned off by the quarantine.

It's a free country. That's what the graffiti in the shopping precinct says. Maybe it was, before the virus swept through and killed five thousand people. The government made a universal media announcement to explain that the virus is carried by wild animals, which must be kept out of the towns. Any found beyond the barbed-wire checkpoints are being destroyed. 'No great loss,' my dad said.

'Maybe it's all just a lie made up by the prime minister to keep everyone frightened,' I suggested to Crease.

'Maybe you should keep that thought to yourself, Paper Clip,' Crease had warned me, his eyes holding mine, unblinking.

'Free country,' I replied, deciding this would be my favourite phrase. Crease just shrugged, his sleek shoulders rising and falling like the curve of a mountain range. It made me feel hot and embarrassed, like there were weighty things I didn't get or understand. It was

a gesture that said, *You are just a kid – you know nothing.*

I thought, *Soon, when I'm fourteen, I'll know what you know.*

But look at me now. Crease was right. I'm just a kid without a plan. With a dodgy memory and stupid holes in my best trackies.

Forget Crease, I tell myself. Focus on this moment. The sit-u-a-shun, as the Feathers would say. Look around. Assess every contour. Map the footholds, ledges, flat tracks. Work out the next move.

It's funny. I was expecting things I've seen on the TV: endless coils of metal on the landscape, like giant Slinkies, blocking off the footpaths and the single-track country roads; signs with *Keep Out* in black and red; tape across farm gates; piles of dead sheep and cows; regular patrols by the FISTS. Maybe this zone is free from infection. Or maybe I just didn't see the warnings in the dark and this very moment the lethal 'glue' virus that makes your eyes stick together is spreading through every cell in my body. Maybe I've watched too

many movies and the moon's made of bendy cheese.

Do they know I've gone, Little Bird? You would never tell them, but there are others who might.

The facts will look like this – just words on a screen. Calypso Summer. Yeah, that really is my name. And then would come some letters. AAAR. Absent, alone and at risk. NYO. Not a young offender, unless you count the giant protest poster I stuck on the window of the discount clothes shop in the high street. Turned out its stuff is being made by kids younger than me, working twelve-hour shifts in complete dumps in India. It was my initiation act, to impress the Feathers. Crease took me to one side and kept repeating, 'Be cool at school, do you hear me? Break the System. Never get caught.'

Until I met Crease, I hadn't really thought much about the System. Life's OK on the estate, I thought. The gates don't bug me the way they bother some people. We have a two-bedroom semi with a nice white bathroom and our own garden with a pond. Our

kitchen is yellow and cheerful and smells of spices. There's a plasma TV; Dad insisted on that so he doesn't 'have to stare at the pictures of gold temples on the wall'.

I've got to keep focused. The ground beneath my feet is vibrating. There's a low thrumming close by, getting louder, the deep *whoop whoop whoop* of blades chopping through air. I throw myself face down and lie very still as a shaft of white light beams down into the field. Leaves are sucked into a swirl in the updraft. If this is a Wasp, the patrol helicopter of the FISTS, I'm in trouble. It feels like it's going to pull me skyward, chunk me up like a vegetable slicer.

I've seen Wasps on the TV. I know what they do. Any moment now, there will be a gush of liquid, the chemical solution they drop to stop the spread of the disease. The newsreaders say it's an anti-viral, but what if they're wrong? What if it's poison?

Are you looking for me? Is your sting ready?

My brain is in free fall.

Am I going to die, here, amongst worms and beetles and rotting leaves?

Everything is closing in. I'm imagining our front room – the grey sofas, the purple cushions with hand-stitched gold edging, the coffee table with elephant's legs made of wood. Then everything suddenly implodes. Little Bird becomes a tiny doll, standing amongst the rubble. Her smile is fixed and empty. Some huge force is propelling me away from her. I so want to feel the lightness of her touch, the softness of her fingers wrapping round my hand, as delicate as silk.

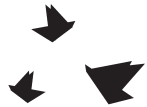
A wind rushes over the surface of my body. It feels as if it is stripping the clothes off my back. The thrumming instantly recedes. The Wasp is flying away, its luminous eye scouring the ground as it goes.

I'm on all fours, like a cat, trying to steady my eyes, which feel as if they are spinning in a vortex, and forcing back the waves of sickness washing up to my throat from my clenched gut.

I lie on my belly again, pushing my face into the

layers of damp leaf mould, letting the vegetation stifle a series of low moans which are spilling from my spleen, my liver, my lungs, my heart. In the tall trees, the rooks start to rasp in unison. In the dark undergrowth, the badgers shriek and the foxes howl.

I know what they are telling me. There is no going back.



Chapter Three

Daylight. I can tell, even though my eyelids are closed. I don't want to open them. It's not real, the soil on my tongue, this ache in my ribs, this burning in my thigh. Any minute now, Little Bird will open my door, wish me good morning and place a hot chocolate on my bedside table.

There are insects crawling over my face. I am frozen. My neck is stiff. There is no doubting now that my bed is the earth beside a massive, tangled tree root, and, when I dare to open my eyes, that my ceiling is a canopy of red-gold autumn leaves like giant hands, sheltering me. There are wood chips stuck on my cheek. Twigs digging into my chin. Dew is clinging to blades of grass like glass baubles and now, I am sucking at them, trying to rid myself of a terrible thirst.

Feelings of panic, hunger, fear and the need to pee come in waves. The pain in my thigh makes all of these fade into insignificance. I wish I could dissolve into the soil like the dew. Disappear off the face of the earth, like Foo.

I read that a child goes missing somewhere in the world every five minutes. Staying lost is another matter. That takes planning. As of a few hours ago, it wasn't at the top of my 'to do' list. I can't remember what was. Maybe if I ask myself some questions, the faulty bits in my memory will put themselves back together.

Where am I? Dunno. A field. The furthest from a Big Mac I've ever been.

Why am I running away? OK, brain, just give in and tell me!

Where am I heading? I'll come back to that one.

What will I do when I get there? Put up a flag, sing the national anthem, starve to death, how should I know?

What would you do, Crease? You wouldn't sit here feeling sorry for yourself.

So try again:

Where am I? Well, the sun is rising over there, so that's east. The hills at a sort of right angle to this tree must be south. That must be the direction I've been running in, because the Social Observation Tower is behind me, in the distance, like an upended barbecue skewer.

Why am I running away? Something happened, something that frightened me so much I took off and didn't stop.

Where am I heading? There are three choices, and it doesn't include phone a friend. I can go east, south, west. I need to find someone I can trust, or at least somewhere safe to hide out, preferably with a roof.

Concentrate, Caly.

It's like waiting to pull down the lever on a fruit machine, choosing the right moment to stop the circling pictures reeling in front of me. *Kerchunk-chunk-chunk*. Two bunches of grapes and a banana. Hey. It's not as random as it seems. That's the fruit Little Bird

brought me when I was in hospital three years ago, with appendicitis. And the hospital was on a hill near the sea. Maybe that's a good place to head. It felt safe there – maybe they can help me again?

What will I do when I get there? Maybe try to find the doctor with blond hair who told me jokes, and the nurse who gave me chocolate. Get some pain killers, clean clothes, food.

It's diddly squat, Paper Clip.

'It's a plan, Crease. I'd like to hear you come up with something better.'

I'm talking to myself. I do it all the time at school, really bums off the teachers. I don't mean to. The words just come out. It's odd because I'm quiet at home, careful. Dad doesn't like 'squawking' as he calls it – stupid chit chat. If he's not around, Little Bird and I have a good old gossip, but never raise our voices, just in case he comes through the door with one of his 'heads' on.

We like it when he goes upstairs, puts on those

eyepatches and stays in the dark, looking like a pirate, for hours until his migraine goes away. On those days, Little Bird and I cook a special tea of rice, chilli chicken and peanut sauce. She lights candles for the table and reads me the letters from my aunties and uncles in Thailand. She tries to explain the symbols that make up the words and giggles at my random guesses at translation. I'm not exactly fast when it comes to languages, but she says I am beautiful like a lotus flower, my petals unfolding. When I was born, she wanted to call me Padme, which means 'lotus', but Dad chose Calypso because it was the name of his first drink in the Caribbean when he worked in the Merchant Navy.

My gran says I'm a Heinz '57 – a mongrel not a pedigree. British but half Thai with almond-shaped eyes, wavy black hair and skin that tans as soon as it glimpses the sun.

I've looked up mongrels on Google. They are often stronger and healthier than pure breeds. Survivors, in

other words, who live on their wits, not their looks.

My wits are telling me I must get up and keep moving, using the cover of the woods, the long grass on open ground, the dense, spiky gorse bushes, anything I can find. It's dangerous, this daylight. All the rules are reversed now. It's only safe in darkness.

When I close my eyes for a moment, I can remember the smells of the hospital on the hill: the lemon hand-spray the nurses and visitors use before coming on the ward, the disinfectant in the corridors, the wood polish in the day room, the mouth-watering sweetness of cocoa from the vending machine. My tongue pokes through my cracked lips. I'm nearly swallowed up with anticipation.

It's time to shift.