

## **"Growing Wings"**

**By Alan Davis**

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Diane stopped using her full-length mirror when the small white feathers on her back were large enough to see from across the room if she twisted in her nightgown like a dancer. Closeup, the feathers were invisible, the angle of vision all wrong, so she turned the mirror around and stared for hours at its black paint. She also made regular retreats to a large utility closet full of baggy flannel shirts and large woolen socks. In class, sitting against the back wall, she wore a faded grey trenchcoat to hide the feathers, but her teacher, Mrs. Hanes, often made her hang it up in the coatroom.

She stared at a waterstain above the classroom door. Jamie, who always sat next to her, leaned close and whispered something. She failed to respond to him or to a question from Mrs. Hanes. "Pay attention," the teacher said. Diane lowered her eyes to the worn floor, pockmarked with swirling wormlike scratches. We should learn not to be aware of ourselves, she had read that morning in her sister's spiritual notebook, to no longer have ideas, but to simply live what we are.

"Diane, redeem yourself. What's the theme of Lord Jim?"

Her pennyloafers scraped circles on the tiles, a muffled rhythmic whisper. You tend to interpret everything, an internal conversation goes on always in the mind. She repeated Melinda's polished phrases for the comfort. You must open yourself to the possibility of not-thinking, or meditation, as it's commonly called.

"Diane!"

Jamie poked her gently. She looked up. My sister often wore purple, she thought; it's very spiritual. Maybe I should dye the coat.

Mrs. Hanes got the students writing. "Come with me, Diane."

In the principal's office the steady hum of an air-conditioner sounded like the whisper of shoe leather on tile and she thought about the Salvation Army store. Her mother would be scandalized to know how much time she spent there, off the beaten path her classmates followed to school, but it was comfortably musty with a smell of wool and mothballs. The woman at the store always let her sit quietly, often next to a wheezing air-conditioner on its last legs, and she would listen

to Melinda's voice. We see what we want to see. We don't see things as they are. We have to discipline ourselves, watch the motes of dust in the sunlight, learn how to put such discipline into effect.

Sometimes the woman gave her a glass of milk. "You ever talk, sweetie? Or do you just sit and think?"

For the first time Diane told someone. "I'm growing wings."

"Oh. Well, that's good, I suppose."

"I need an overcoat. Do you have one?"

"Oh, I think we might." The woman smiled and moved away with her sweet smell of Feen-a-mint. She fitted Diane with a coat a size too large. "It only costs a dollar today, wings or not. A special."

A hand placed itself gently on her shoulder. The principal. "Don't you listen, Dee?" He guided her to the counselor's office, his hand still on her shoulder like a small friendly animal. "I'm to leave you with Mrs. Esposito, to have a talk."

The door closed. "Hello, Diane."

A pause. "Hello, Diane."

A longer pause. "Well, we don't have much to say today, do we?"

The Universal Law resolves everything, but there is always a tendency to be impatient, Diane thought, still feeling the warm weight of the principal's hand.

Mrs. Esposito adjusted a small gold pin on her tweed jacket and shuffled through a manila folder. Violet nail polish, Diane thought. Why did she choose that color today?

"Now, let's see. You were just here, when? Last week? Yet here we are again, and you're still wearing those silly clothes. What's the story?"

Diane leaned forward. "Is something the matter with your eyes?"

"My eyes?" Mrs. Esposito picked up a small mirror. "My contacts, maybe? They seem ok, but let's look." She closed her eyes and gently massaged each eyelid.

"How's that?"

"Better."

"Hmmm. Well. Tell me, how much time do you and your mother spend together? Does she have much time for you since your father and sister passed away?"

Experience is a flash of lightning in a sky filled with dark clouds. She visualized the words as they appeared, neatly copied in her sister's elegant script.

"Dee? Did you hear me? What's the story?"

Diane smiled. "I'm 14 years old." She held up both hands, fingers spread wide. She closed her hands and then displayed four more fingers, two on each hand.

"Yes, I know." Mrs. Esposito folded her hands over the notes and waited.

"It's my mother. You're right."

"Yes? What about her?" The counselor motioned for the girl to continue. "You can tell me, Dee. You can say anything. Nothing gets past these doors. I'm safe as a bank."

"Well..."

"Yes?"

"Well, my mother... Look, I don't know how to say this, Mrs. Esposito. But Mother, well, she eats tennis balls."

Mrs. Esposito's face reddened.

"It's the truth." Diane crossed her heart. "It's driving me bananas. But what can I do?"

"What do you mean, 'eats tennis balls'? What's that supposed to mean? Does she spend a lot of time at her club?"

"No, just what I said. She uses ketchup, mustard, sometimes a slice of onion. And on the good china, Mrs. Esposito. Can you believe? It's disgusting." She pointed to the telephone on the desk.

"Please call her right away and tell her to stop."

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As she walked through the empty hallways, classroom voices discussed dangling modifiers and the Civil War. Words filtered into her awareness and fell away to vague murmurs. Drone City, she thought, and looked up. Sorry, sister, I'll get serious. Then she giggled, remembering the expression on the counselor's face.

Her trenchcoat and floppy hat waited in Mrs. Hanes' classroom. She overcame a desire to feign sickness or maybe just go home and settled instead for the comforting silence of the lavatory. The low hum of fluorescent lights, the coziness of dull porcelain and laminated particle board stalls made this the one place where she could stop thinking without fear of reproach. They've told me I won't have to come back here again. This is the last time I'll have to go through this. The words had the graininess of chipped marble, as though written on the wall before her. She stretched and turned to the mirror, twisted her neck and noticed how her flannel shirt bunched up near the shoulder blades.

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"What happened in the office?" Jamie asked on the walk home. "They didn't kick you around, did they?"

There was a layer of sky above the one where most people stopped looking. She always had at least one ear cocked in that upward direction. I'm becoming better, she thought, at walking towards each moment without interpreting anything. But if I don't listen with discernment, I'll miss Melinda's call when it comes. She saw Jamie frown. "Are you happy?"

"Huh?" Jamie shrugged. He looked down at his feet. "I guess."

"You ever pay attention to the way you walk?"

"I don't know. Not really."

"You ought to."

"I guess. You don't, um, pay attention sometimes." He stared down the street to her house. "By the way, you want to walk to the park before we go home?"

"No. Not today. I don't have time. Thanks, though."

"Oh. What else do you have to do?"

"I grow wings." She looked at him appraisingly.

"Oh. Wings, huh? I grow hair." He smiled.

"Well, good-bye, Jamie," she said when they reached her house. "Thanks for walking with me."

"Did you wink at me?" he asked.

She giggled. "Are you happy?"

"Sure. I'm glad you winked. Didn't you wink?"

"It doesn't matter. See you later. Be happy."

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The sounds of dusk became clear, as though travelling across water. Diane sat on the front porch, her feet propped on the railing, leafing through Melinda's notebook and eating a banana sandwich. Eyes closed, she saw her sister talking in a slow hypnotic voice about the long spiritual struggle to leave behind the chains of the world, to climb cold mountain slopes. The dreamy voice brought Diane to the edge of trance, but willing her sister's appearance was more difficult. A car door slammed. Chords of practice exercises started up behind lacy curtains across the street, and then voices in the drive. Her mother stepped to the porch, holding an unlit cigarette. "Hello, kiddo. You get something to eat?" No reply. "Jack and I are going to a movie. You want to come? It's a Burt Reynolds thing, a romantic comedy. But we got to leave soon to make it."

"Okay. Have a good time. Don't eat too many tennis balls."

"Huh?"

"You better take it easy on the onions, Mother."

"Sometimes you're too silly to believe." She puffed on the unlit cigarette. "I don't have bad breath, do I?"

"Only when you frown, Mother." She riffled the pages of the closed notebook, still carrying a faint suggestion of patchouli. "Mother. Did Melinda ever grow wings?"

"Huh?"

"Wings on her back?"

"Wings? What you saying, kiddo?"

"Wings, Mother. White, with feathers. Flap flap." She dangled her arms to illustrate.

"I still don't understand." She tapped her cigarette on the porch railing. "Stay in the real world, kiddo. It's all we have these days. Right?" She glanced at her watch. "Hey, you sure you don't want to come see Burt Reynolds?"

"What do you mean, 'the real world'?"

A large dog, fenced in, barked fiercely at a passerby. It was Jamie, shuffling past. He waved feebly and put his hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped. The car door slammed, her mother and Jack drove away. Alone, she realized how much she missed Melinda, whose presence always calmed her, like Sunday mornings stroking the veneered pew in church, daydreaming through stained-glass windows, absent-mindedly mouthing hymns. Across the street curtains parted briefly to reveal the wistful face of the young piano student. All actions should be spiritual manifestations. If approached with the right motivation, it is fine to have all sorts of actions and experiences, even distractions, but not to attach to them. Diane smiled. Maybe the piano student secretly flapped her arms like wings, became a black crow and flew, squawking.

She lay on her bed. Were her own wings a sign from Melinda? Or rather, what kind of sign? Maybe she too had lived many lives, and had to be here only this one last time. In the light of a single candle shadows played on the ceiling. An owl chased a pumpkin, the owl became a cactus-flower, the cactus-flower became a pumpkin. The thunder of an airplane turned on car headlights that slanted through the window, illuminating a hanging fern, which in turn shed a tangle of waving fingers on the ceiling. A huge brown bird wearing her overcoat grabbed her. She fell in Jamie's lap, he kissed her, she reached up, touched her sister's lips. And woke, thirsty, uncomfortable, back aching, on the verge of tears. Don't think, she thought, and blew out her candle. There were places, she decided, remembering her wings and turning to her side, where she wasn't ready to go. One of Melinda's books, *Spiritual Initiation*, urged the apprentice to maintain detachment, discrimination, discernment, the three keys to interior serenity. But she couldn't relax. Why did dreams of flying frighten her so? Why did Jamie, in her dream, become Melinda? Was she ready for wings?

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"Go to the counselor's office for your appointment," Mrs. Hanes said several days later. Distracted by Jamie, Diane stared at the floor, where a black ant made its deliberate way to a crumb.

"Young lady!"

She grabbed her coat and hat as she left.

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"Dee, please take off that ridiculous hat," said Mrs. Esposito.

"If you take out your eyes."

"How can you hear me with that stupid thing on?"

"Excuse me. What did you say?"

Mrs. Esposito lit a cigarette. She wore a neatly-tailored suede jacket, dark-green, which Diane wanted to caress. "You can be so sweet," she said after a long puff, "but you're in one of those moods, aren't you? What's the story?"

"There's nothing to be done." Diane stared into swirling smoke. "There's nothing to be done and nowhere to go."

"That's a ridiculous thing to say, isn't it, Dee? I mean, where would we be if we all thought that?"

"Nowhere."

"Exactly. Nowhere. We can't give up, can we?"

"You don't understand."

"Well, maybe not." The counselor stubbed out her cigarette. "You know, Dee, you haven't had much to say to me. Have you? Melinda died last summer and we still haven't talked about it. Is there anyone else you talk with?"

Diane touched her forehead. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, maybe a lot. It depends what the story is." She reached across her desk. "Take this glass of water, for instance. I would say it's half full, but someone else might call it half empty." She sipped water and cleared her throat. "Look, Dee, it's not nice to have a father or sister die, much less both, and especially when it happens all of a sudden. I've had that happen."

"You had a sister die?"

"Well, no, I was an only child, but my father died when I was twenty, and my mother not so long ago."

She stroked her chin. "They were sick, granted, and we expected them to go, but that didn't make it easier." She picked up a ballpoint pen and clicked it. "I only want to help. If we can monitor these automatic thoughts you have, maybe we can figure out some sort of rational response. Your thoughts effect your feelings, and then your feelings control your thoughts. It should be the other way around."

Diane breathed deeply. "What makes you think I need help?"

Mrs. Esposito leaned forward. "The way you get sometimes. The way you are right now. The way you react to my questions. You do want to talk, don't you?"

Suddenly Diane pulled her floppy hat over her eyes and lowered her voice an octave. "I have the trenchcoat. Don't you think I should ask the questions? Where were you on October 15th?"

"Come on, Dee. What's the story? Let's get down to brass tacks."

"Okay. You smoke cigarettes. Aren't you afraid of cancer? Think about it."

Mrs. Esposito smiled tightly, pulling back her lips into a line. She glanced at her watch. "Of course. You're right. I should give them up. Anyway, it's time for the bell. You think about it too, okay, Dee? We'll keep seeing one another for a while, or maybe we can find somebody else to help."

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"Did you hear me in class?" Jamie asked.

"No."



"There's, um, a dance tomorrow night. It's in the gym. Want to come?"

"No. I don't think so. But thanks for asking, Jamie."

"You don't like dances?" Jamie kicked a divot out of somebody's lawn. "Me neither. What I mean is, what else you have to do? I mean, we can do something else."

She picked up a leaf and pressed it carefully into the pages of her book. "I told you. I grow wings." Why was she telling him again? It was secret.

"Oh." Jamie frowned. "That's interesting. And I told you, I grow hair. You know we all have the same amount of hair? Only some of us have it inside our heads and some of us outside."

Diane laughed. "That's funny, Jamie." He glanced at her and she giggled. "You don't believe me?"

"Oh, sure. Can I see?"

"No. Definitely not. Why you have to see? You can't take my word?"

"Yeah, I guess. But I let you see my hair."

"Let's forget about it. You have expectations, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it."

"Why should I think about it? Why can't you tell me?"

"Are you happy?"

"How can I be happy when you won't tell me?"

"That's what I mean."

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She tossed in bed that night, tried to lie still, but her body was taut, wings larger. And she didn't feel comfortable on her stomach. She turned on the bedside lamp and the curtains ruffled in a slight breeze. She listened for crickets, but it was too late in the year. They've told me I won't have to come back here again. This is the last time I'll have to go through this. The last time she saw Melinda, her sister had a load of books for the library. "I'll be right back," she said. "You wait up and we'll make banana bread for the orphans." Diane tilted her head quizzically. "Orphans?" "You know," Melinda said, laughing, "the ones on the railroad tracks." Oh, thought Diane, the cartoon we saw.

The memory made her angry. I've seen Melinda since then, she thought. Other people, no, but I've seen her. Staring at the well-thumbed notebook, she shook her head stubbornly and turned off the light. The library books, the last conversation, the way Melinda precariously balanced what she said and what she carried. At the funeral, clutching the book like a portable altar, deliberately impersonal, one of the few without tears, Diane was detached, even serene. Mourners descended upon her. "They called for her," she told them. "The death was painful because she could learn something. And my father didn't feel anything." At the wheel, he had a heart attack, the car swerved across the highway's center stripe.

Come to me, she willed, sitting up in a half-lotus position. Instead, Melinda stood painfully vivid before the car with the library books. Okay, sis. I know things don't work that way, but give me a sign. In what form do you watch over me? Make yourself known, I will wait for you here. Her tongue swollen, she dragged herself to the bathroom for water. The light at the bottom of the stairs guided her down the hall, past her mother's empty bedroom, where two glasses glistened on a night table.

She gulped down the water and turned, to go back to her room. Instead, she slipped off her gown and opened the medicine cabinet over the basin. She took down a pair of scissors with blades the color of graphite. I'll trim my wings, she thought, beginning to cry. I'll have baby wings.