

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

*If I Could Fly*

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
NEW YORK

*What the Bird Believes*

What the bird sees:

In the alley between two buildings  
a mother cat curls around her newborn kittens  
as a hungry dog approaches, following the tracks  
left last night, reading smells like a newspaper,  
or like phosphorescent road signs. He is set for  
the chase. On the sidewalk, a girl in a bright red coat  
sees the shadow of wings at her feet,  
looks up, and trips over the street person sleeping  
on a cardboard box. The noise scares the dog in the alley  
into a run. He misses the cat nursing her kittens,  
distracted by new clues to this day: a garbage can,  
a bag of chicken bones, so much treasure in his path  
he can't turn back for old joys. He barks up at the bird.  
Called out by the dog, a woman remembers  
to put the day-old loaf of bread in her bag before  
she walks to the park.

What the bird wants:

The bird spots the old woman on her bench.  
He flies in ever-closer circles, hovering over her head.  
She is slow in her movements, eyes unfocused,  
she is looking deep into her loneliness. The bird is hungry,  
but he must wait until she notices his graceful dance,  
created just for her out of thin air. The bird dips and rises  
within her vision until the woman's eyes lift up toward the sky.  
Because he is there, she notices the promise of a new day,  
and she breathes the crisp air. Soon she will remember why  
she is here.

What the bird gets:

The old woman will scatter her offerings before her,  
and in a soft voice, as if she were praying, she will sing out,  
*Ven, paloma, ven.* And he will alight at her feet  
to eat his daily bread crumbs. The bird believes  
she is here for him, and she believes  
he is there for her.

## PART ONE

In display flight a pigeon usually spreads its wings widely, beats them rather slowly through a wider arc than usual and often makes a loud clapping noise when so doing.

It [does seem] likely that those elements of the display flight which actually slow down forward movement—the wide, slower wing beats, spreading tail, gliding instead of beating the wings—originate in a conflict between tendencies to move away from and to remain in or return to a certain area.

# 1

When I come out of my room ready to go to church, I find Papi in the kitchen drinking yesterday's coffee. He's looking *perdido*, lost, in deep thought as he stares at the newspaper. When he sees me, he announces abruptly, "Doris, there is something you need to know. Your mother left this morning and was too upset to wake you to say goodbye."

"Thanks for the bulletin, Papi."

I stare at him while trying to swallow the large lump in my throat. He could have let me sit down first. He's wearing his pajama bottoms and a T-shirt with his band's name—¡Caliente! ¡Caliente!—that prominently features their motto, "It doesn't get hotter than this," and a silly drawing of a guitar on fire. After what feels like a century of ignoring my eyes' daggers, and my silence, he finally looks up from his paper, but doesn't even seem to notice my crumbling face.

"Where is she?"

"She has gone for a while." The way he says the words, like

someone trying not to say too much, makes me feel cold all over. He folds and refolds the newspaper.

“Where is she?” I hear the whine in my own voice and feel the baseball-size lump in my throat throbbing—this means I’m going to start bawling like a baby any minute.

“*Hija*, your mother doesn’t want me to say any more right now, just that she’s okay. She called me when I was in the city with the Merry Widows and told me that she needs to get away. She needs time to herself, Doris. Can you trust me on this?”

No, I can’t trust him on this! They are both playing games with me. I hate the way they treat me like an adult when it suits them, but keep me out of all their plots and plans.

“By herself?” I ask him, sarcasm creeping into my voice.

“She said she needs time *to* herself. Doris, you are fifteen, almost a woman. You know how to take care of yourself, and I’ll be around as much as I can. Please, *mi amor* . . .” But I don’t let him finish the sentence. I run up to the roof to be by myself, church forgotten. The pigeons are gone for the day, but at least I can count on them coming home at night. I let myself cry as much as I want. I guess I knew Mami was going to leave, but having my father actually say it was like being punched in the stomach.

“Where are you?” I scream the question up at the sky and then down at the sidewalk, where an old woman stops and looks up. I didn’t know my voice carried so far.

\* \* \*

After I scream and cry, I feel a bit saner, and I start thinking: Is it my fault that my parents' marriage has exploded—just like the junky band speakers that they blew up one night?

Although Mami has always played the quirky artist and diva, I don't think my parents are unhappy. My father seems content to be doing what he does most days. He makes plans for his bands. He writes songs about an island that is real only in his dreams, about women who are much more beautiful than the ones he knows. He talks to me about the future. His idea is that I will get an education and make a life away from the barrio. He wants *me* to be the one to fly the furthest because I am smart and practical. He thinks I should switch to a Catholic high school, and maybe go to college. He thinks that I will be *saved* from the bad influences of the barrio through an education, become a good, successful Latina—whatever that means.

¡Caliente! ¡Caliente! (most people forget the second *caliente*, which upsets my father, who gave it two names for a reason—he wants it said like you just got burned: hot! hot!) is one of two bands my father co-manages. He is also the drummer. The other one is an all-woman polka group called the Merry Widows. But he only travels with ¡Caliente! I know he prefers to stay near home. He has his fan base here. Or maybe he wanted to stay home for my mother, who, on bad days, acted like our apartment was a cage. She talked about time running out. At one point, she wanted me to take voice lessons and to sing some duets with her. She kept talking about the School of Performing Arts. She thought we could

be famous as a mother/daughter singing team. But the more she tried to persuade me, the less I liked the idea.

I finally lost it, and informed them that I was not their property, that I sing only when I want to. I particularly didn't want to sing in a salsa band to a bunch of loud people drinking rum all night long and then go home to sleep the day away and dream of fame and fortune.

To clear my head of all my parents' mumbo jumbo, I began going to the roof, where I've taken up the care and feeding of Doña Iris's pigeons. Their lives make sense to me. Birds know the time by instinct: when it's time for their coops to be opened, when to fly, and when to come home and eat the food I set out for them. The couples go to their own little apartments after a day of flying. They have a purpose for each hour.

Now, up on the roof, the sky seems close enough to touch. I imagine that just beyond the blue is the place where dreams are stored, and the closer you get to them, the easier it is to call them into your head. If I could get away with it, I'd make myself a place to live up here. It would be so sweet to fall asleep listening to the soft cooing of the pigeons, then to wake to a new day, free of walls.

I am the not-beautiful, not-really-ugly only child of *salseros*. But, unlike my parents, I am not musically *obsessed*, although I can sing almost as well as my mother.

And I am a medium. This is not my size in T-shirts. It means that I have dreams that show me things no one else

knows. And I can tell a lot about a person just by being in the same room. None of my friends know this about me. I only found out myself when our neighbor, Doña Iris, the local oracle and, when I was little, my sometime babysitter, told me I had *facultades*. Having *facultades* means that a person has the potential to receive the gift of clairvoyance. You have to train yourself to accept it; if you don't, then your talent will disappear. Doña Iris said my mother did just that, wasted her own spiritual talent by focusing on singing trivial songs about people falling in and out of love. "God is generous, Doris, but he's not going to give someone two gifts at once," Doña Iris said when I asked whether my mother had *facultades*, too: "Your mother chose singing instead of dreaming, and He said, Okay, girl, if that's what you want, but you can't have both. Not in equal measure, you can't."

Doña Iris went on speaking. "Want to know all there is to know about *El Amor*?" I thought she was asking me a question, but she was only making a point. "You won't learn it from listening to silly songs, or even from reading psychology books. *Love* with a capital L happens to be a different thing for every single human being. So if you want to know what *El Amor* is, wait your turn. If you are lucky, you won't have to ask."

So Doña Iris talked me into it. I gave up practicing my singing and started concentrating on my other gift, the one my mother had rejected. What's singing compared to conference calls with the dead?

My mother does not like Doña Iris much, but my father

does. Mami calls her La Bruja, the witch, and says that the only reason that she can see into the future is because she snoops around our building all day long and knows everybody's personal business. Still, she had no choice when it came to a babysitter for me; there was no one else to stay with me the nights my parents were away.

These days, I don't spend much time with Doña Iris. She has started to go senile, especially since her buddy, Don Pichón, died. But lately I've been thinking about the things she said about my "gift."

I hear my mother's voice when I look through my boxes of what she called "souvenirs": calendars, posters, wedding and baptism favors, napkins with pictures of old couples celebrating their fiftieth anniversaries—all kinds of stuff she brought home to me as a sort of show-and-tell, to illustrate her stories of where she'd been performing and the people she had met. These were my good-night stories when I was little. In my mind, I'd fly to those parties as she spoke, and she'd make me laugh with her imitations of the drunk father of the bride, or the birthday girl at a fancy *quinceañera* spilling punch on her thousand-dollar gown.

The day my mother left, I started to have strange dreams at night, dreams where I *feel* my mother's presence in the room, smell her perfume, and hear her voice. It takes me a while to convince myself that it's all in my head.

I also start dreaming about flying, but these are daydreams. While I scrub the roof of bird poop and human trash—beer bottles, candy wrappers, a roach here and there—I imagine

## IF I COULD FLY

what it'd be like to fly over the city toward the ocean. While I wait for my mother to come home, and for my father to stay around long enough to make a plan for the future, I try to make my own flight plan.

In the meantime, I take care of the birds. It's the deal I make with myself this crazy spring when both my parents have gone nuts: I'll stay cool for a while, at least until school ends. I'll keep the apartment from turning into a dump and take care of the birds. After that, I don't know. Maybe I'll fly away, too.