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## *Phyllis with Wings*

I ALWAYS THOUGHT OF PHYLLIS AS LOVELY, even without the wings. The delicate face and tiny waist. Taut breasts. A softly symmetrical nose and nearly exquisite eyebrows. Shapely bone structure like the exotic women who played temptresses in old movies. And those strange wide eyes that changed color with the angle of the sun and the phase of the moon.

I'd been crammed into a basement cubicle for two years when Phyllis came, and I was assigned as her secretary and given a desk in front of her chicly decorated office on the tenth floor—nice view with a southern exposure. From the moment Phyllis emerged from the splitting metal doors of the elevator, I knew that she was a woman I could learn from.

She quickly became the agency's golden child by landing a major ad account with a cosmetics firm—the one that created that mineral powder that makes your face disappear. Then she landed another with a large international airline, positioning herself on the fast-track to making Partner.

Still, she never asked me to bring her bagels or run out and buy her pantyhose between meetings. She could strike a million-dollar deal with a client at ten in the morning and then talk to me about cellulite and crow's feet over a piece of chocolate cheesecake that afternoon. For my birthday she gave me an Edith Piaf CD (although I don't speak a lick of French), explaining that Edith Piaf was called "the little sparrow." Even now I can only describe Phyllis as lovely.

Phyllis wore her wings clamped with a hairclip beneath designer blazers, trying to hide them under the expensive silk lining like a magician's trick. But though she maintained mannequin-perfect posture, the protrusions on her back were noticeable. People knew. And when she worked nights, she walked around the office with her blazer off, feathers slipping out from under the thin straps of her camisole like lingerie lace. Of course people knew. And they talked.

When Phyllis first came to the agency, the men in the office wore their tongues out like neckties, smiles bolstered to their faces whenever she was around. But the excitement soon wore off, especially after word got out that Phyllis refused to date co-workers. Flat-out refused. Most of them tried their damndest

to downplay her wings, arrogantly talking about them around the coffee pot when Phyllis was away on business trips.

“Man’s always been fascinated by flight,” they’d rationalize, “but Christ, once we discovered the internal combustion engine, our fantasies moved a hell of a lot farther than just the flapping of a set of wings.”

Then they’d all chuckle and swig their coffee and talk about the latest contestant to leave *The Bachelor*.

The girls in the office, on the other hand, had been snickering about the wings and whispering catty comments into their phones since Phyllis arrived on the tenth floor. They whispered that she had been a titty dancer, a feminazi, and everything in between. But as hard as they tried not to like Phyllis, after one lunch with her they were offering advice on lapis eye shadows to bring out the blue in her tip feathers and inviting her to their engagement parties and baby showers. Every day at ten o’clock, we would all meet in the tenth-floor bathroom to dish office gossip and touch up our lipstick. Phyllis would smooth her feathers in their tracks, licking a finger and plucking any unruly down. The rest of us stood around her in our concrete heels and reapplied our mascara, admiring Phyllis in the long mirror on the wall, silently comparing our reflections to hers and secretly wishing they would merge somewhere behind the glass.

Each afternoon Phyllis and I went to Alula’s for lunch. We always sat in a booth because the rigid metal chairs on the patio crushed Phyllis’s wings, pressing against their natural arch. I’d order stromboli with extra cheese, and Phyllis would order tossed greens and Diet Coke with lemon. Then we’d split a piece of chocolate-marble cheesecake for dessert (although I always ended up eating most of it). As Phyllis spoke her voice flowed, delicate and soothing, like water over your ears when a perfumed beautician washes your hair. I could sit and listen to her for hours.

“I just don’t know,” she’d begin, the “s” in “just” coming out soft and smooth. “I’m so tired of the whole thing.”

Her breath smelled of something sweet and herbal. She’d light her cigarette and tuck one arm under the other, feeling for a wing with her manicured fingertips. As she smoothed down a feather below the nape of her neck, she’d draw from her Marlboro Light, and we’d talk about relationships. I would complain about my husband, Rock, and Phyllis would complain about her lovers, usually about their reactions to the wings.

At the beginning of her relationships, men would stroke her wings and bury their faces in them. They'd call them "kinky" and "beautiful." They'd pull them out perpendicular to Phyllis's body and rub around on them like kittens, plucking feathers and asking if it hurt, then trying to tickle her with them.

"Just once, I'd like to be on bottom during sex," she'd say.

"I don't want to crush you, baby," they'd tell her.

But Phyllis knew they really just wanted to look at the wings from below, to be consumed, mesmerized, like children being eaten by butterflies.

Some of them had crazy hang-ups with her wings. A fetishist she dated begged her to dress in a mask and thigh-highs, and even bought her a cape with "Dominatrix of the Skies" embroidered across the back in jagged white letters. Then she went with a neo-Baptist for a while who testified that she was an angel transfigured and sent to save him. Phyllis even tried dating a couple of women, including a redhead named Marilyn who stopped eating poultry and moved in with her after three months. But two weeks later Marilyn saw a PBS documentary where they mentioned birds having lice. She took off that afternoon, leaving only a half-eaten broccoli pizza on Phyllis's coffee table.

"It's always the same pattern," Phyllis would say. "One week they're making me pasta from scratch and saying they've never been happier. By week three, they're complaining about feathers clogging up the shower drain and giving me the 'It's about the wings...' speech."

I think what bothered Phyllis the most was that no one—man, woman, or fetishist—could fly with her. She said that, when she was a little girl, she had always pictured herself holding someone's hand, some Cary Grant type, and taking off in flight, sky-tangoing across the city. They'd lift off together and travel the night, stopping on rooftops to make out or for him to propose to her, and then consummate their relationship on someone's penthouse patio furniture. She said it was like the scene in *Superman* where Margot Kidder (or whichever one was the alcoholic) holds Superman's hand, and, as long as they're touching, they can both fly.

But although Phyllis's wings were strong, they weren't strong enough to support two grown adults. And in the end she would smile and say that most of her lovers had been afraid of heights anyway and probably would have demanded honey-roasted peanuts and headphones at take-off. We'd laugh until I spit up some cheesecake, but it makes me sad to think of it now.

End of excerpt. For the full text, please see our print issue.