When Fish Learn to Fly

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Charlie Walkingfish didn't think he had a death wish, but love was very demanding, and if it demanded his death, so be it. He rolled his eyes, looked around his little pond. He'd miss his home – meadow grass waving tall along the gently sloping banks, pink and lavender columbine blossoms intertwined between the narrow leaves of elderberry bushes.

And the sycamore tree, its huge gray trunk stretched skyward in stately splendor, leaves shading his favorite resting spots during the hottest part of the day.

Without the sycamore, there would be no Patty.

Patty Goshawk cleared her throat. "Flat Top Mountain is much too far away, Charlie. Even if your fins could drag you that far, you'd get all dry and your scales would flake off."

Charlie just nodded and admired the way Patty's black and tan feathers glimmered in the late afternoon sun. A hawk cried in the tree overhead. Patty spread her wings and hunched down, nibbling Charlie's fin with tender care. A delicious shiver rippled his scales.

"Don't you go doing anything stupid, you hear?" Patty whispered. She flapped her wings and rose into the air, joining her parents as they started on their evening hunt.

Charlie's heart swelled. Every time he saw her she was more graceful, more beautiful. They'd met the day Patty fell out of her nest in the sycamore tree. He'd dragged himself out of the water and asked if she was okay. Patty sputtered and wobbled and flapped her prickle-feathered wings and Charlie had fallen fin over tails in love.

A huge lump formed in Charlie's throat as he watched Patty soar higher and higher. His eyes ached from the strain and tiny black dots formed at the edges of his vision. He'd give anything to be flying with her, banking hard into a gust of wind, soaring on invisible air currents. He practiced every night in his pond. In the water he felt almost as graceful as Patty looked. When morning came and he pulled himself out of the water to visit with his beloved, all that grace disappeared and he was nothing but an awkward mud puppy.

Reality sliced like a fishhook inside Charlie's gut – there was no future for an air-breathing fish and a high-flying hawk. He coughed and swallowed hard before rolling an eye toward the

young skunk sitting on the grassy bank.

"How do you get to Flat Top Mountain, Bo?" Charlie asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Bo danced around, lifting his white striped tail high into the air. He started drawing lines in the mud. Charlie's heart sank as Bo drew line after line. Patty was right. Flat Top Mountain was a long, long way, especially for a fish. Bo finished up with a triumphant flick of his bushy tail.

"There. I think that's it. This path here," he tapped a claw on a wavy line that seemed to go on forever, "leads to the top. Once you get there, you find a tree – Uncle said there's only one – and sit down and wait for the magic man to show up. The magic man can do anything." Bo stamped his front paws and nodded his head.

High overhead came Patty's triumphant cry as she sighted prey far below. Charlie pictured himself flying alongside her, gliding above all the ponds and trees and skunks.

He closed his mouth and shoved himself back down into the pond. "Thanks, Bo. Guess I'll see you tomorrow." Charlie's heart was already flying alongside Patty; somehow he had to get his body up there too. He drifted through the pond weeds, thinking hard about ways that a fish could fly. Ways that did not involve dragging one's moisture-loving body through eons of dirt and rock to see something called a magic man.

Maybe Patty would lend him some feathers. He could build his own wings and stick them on with spider webs and marsh grass. Or he could weave a pair of wings out of . . .

Something snagged Charlie's tail and he darted forward between a pair of moss-covered rocks. Breathing hard, he turned and stared back out of his hiding place. A shiny, malevolent eye stared back. Pike! The water seemed to darken and the rocks to sway. If he wasn't careful, he'd be eaten before he figured out how to fly.