

Floating

I was just as clumsy as any other kid. There are old photos of me, you know before digital; all brown and faded? The adults in cut-off denim shorts and flares, with longer hair, and my parents surrounded by loads of friends, a few of them I recognise, but thinner with better skin, lazing in the sun watching me try to walk. There's one I found with me, arms held straight above my head, dopey grin, off balance with a foot up to one side! Then next photo: adults laughing, me on my arse, tears and snot all over. I like to look into the sun in a photograph, just because you can't you?

Yes.

I never touched the earth though; you can see the grass underneath me isn't touched, in the photo. Never touched it. Nor for that matter our deep-pile, star-buy in the living room my mum was always so friggin' protective about. Sorry. Until I started school I never thought I was strange, never thought to look at other children's feet, never knew any other way I suppose. I just floated along.

I would float when no one was looking, when I was alone playing. Sometimes I could raise myself to a foot or so off the floor, until I got frustrated at not being able to go higher and I'd sink. I could almost fly, the way you do in dreams, the way Superman does. You know; proper swooping? I would float for hours cross-legged above my bed, like the Indian man in my cartoon book, playing the flute to a snake in a basket. I loved that book. It had nothing to do with the man, he was in the background of a scene - Ali Baba maybe - what's that other one? But it caught my eye and was my favourite page. I still have the book in a box in the attic somewhere.

Go on.

I don't know why I didn't tell anyone that I could float. Instinct maybe. I showed my cat first and he ran away. I asked my best friend Nia why people couldn't fly like birds and she said it was because we didn't have wings so I showed her the picture of the Indian man and she said it was make believe.

What about games? What games did you play Karen? You've mentioned What's the time Mr Wolf before.

No.

Ok Karen. Go on.

So I'd want to be alone more than the other children. My mother could never understand why. 'You need more friends to play with', she'd say, 'You should let Claire come round to play with your Barbie house, she won't have one'. But Claire would hit me whenever I didn't do or say what she wanted me to. I remember she even hit the boys. I didn't like visiting her house, it smelled of different food like burnt white toast and her little sister always cried and her mother always shouted; lived in a proper dump come to think of it. You had to walk from our close, across the playing fields in the park and into the estate. It felt like bloody miles and some of the children didn't like to see me there. They'd shout and call me 'posh bitch' and 'spoilt brat', even though I only lived a few hundred yards away.

Anyway, I didn't like to play like that. I was always quieter than the others. I used to feel happy just sitting there floating. Or on a windy day I would stand in our back yard waiting for strong gusts of wind to blow me along. I'd scream all scared that I'd end up out to sea or trapped on top of a tower block. I didn't need normal games, although I enjoyed What's the time Mr Wolf? because I could creep right up behind my friends without them hearing me.

Did you always win?

Yes.

Did they ever hear you?

Only when I grew up.

So you grew up?

As you do, and realised that people couldn't fly and they built airplanes or parachutes or helicopters to do that for them.

When do you think you grew up?

I began to stare at other children's feet, I even started a game at school by bending down to look at other kid's shoes to see how far off the ground they were, but disguised it as a dare-to-kick-each-other game.

Karen...

They'd scuff the yard with their plastic sandals and I'd be fascinated by the dirt in the scratches. They'd laugh and run away as if no one was allowed to see the soles of their shoes. Weird. Then some boys dared to lift Nia off the ground and she banged her head and they laughed at her knickers and pointed, and the teacher shouted at them and took Nia to the nurse who took her to casualty for stitches. We'd never seen stitches before so we called her Frankie after the Frankenstein cartoon on TV at the time, you know? She was a tough kid and insisted we shouted 'What's the time Frankenstein?' when we played with her.

Could you touch things with your hands? How did that feel?

I felt different; not a good thing when you're a kid, you know. So I tried to kick little stones or scuff leaves along in autumn or splash people by jumping in puddles like my friends. But I couldn't do that and I couldn't fly either, just floated about. I thought that if I could fly I'd be special. I knew that people would hurt me if I just floated pathetically around because they'd push me and play games with me, so I thought that I really must fly properly. I was too scared to climb the high tree or step off a big building to launch myself, so I'd run around the yard flapping my arms and jumping into the air. I must've looked really stupid. And years later I heard that a kid called Tom from a neighbouring school had jumped out of his bedroom window two floors up, breaking his back and everything else. Word

was he'd tried it before but broke just an ankle or something. I remember him from sports days and swimming galas where he was a loner too. He wasn't good looking but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was a great long jumper, my sport too you know, and he caught me looking at him as he checked the length of a jump. He looked away, then looked back to see if I was still watching. I smiled at him, he looked away again. I thought that he wanted to fly too, that he was so committed he threw himself out of windows. I hated my friends and my parents for calling him mad. I respected him, thought he was brave, like Peter Pan.

Did you ever meet him?

I saw him later in a wheelchair on the high street where me and my mates would go to smoke and people watch, and take the piss out of the wierdos: the fat guy who looked like his bulldog; the piss-head who sang opera to shop doorways and delivery vans; the guy who always wore white gloves; the Jews with the funny hair and black clothes who'd get fake sneezes off the lads, a-choow, a-choow. The lads sang that crap puppet's song: *I wish I could fly, way up to the sky but I can't. You can. I can't.* Tom moved his wheelchair to the other side of the street. I hit two lads across the head but they just giggled and tried not to spill their beers. 'Fuck off,' they said. 'Fuck you,' we said. Sorry. We were back next Friday because we actually fancied the lads, but I never saw him again.

So you could touch things? Karen, you could touch things?

Yes, of course, I can eat can't I? Knives and forks and stuff.

So how did you float? Karen, you've said before, and you need to...

So, finally I decided to ask Mum why I couldn't fly. She said it was because God hadn't given us wings. That made me so angry. I knew praying didn't help anyway. So I shouted at her that I could float so why couldn't I fly? She did that being-far-too-calm-thing in her bloody holier-than-thou-voice and said of course I couldn't float, 'don't be so silly'. So I said, 'Look! Look! Mum I can, I can, look under my feet!' And she said, 'Dear they're firmly on the ground like all the best people'.

Did you ever show your father or ask him about flying?

I ran away crying, out the back door, over the wall, down the alley, right along the main road and up to the allotments. I always went to the allotments to hide. I liked the fences and I liked the smells. I liked the sunsets, over the rooftops, all the aerials and chimneys.

You mentioned this run before, Karen, you said it hurt your feet you ran so fast.

No. Yes. As I ran I felt shockwaves through my body for the first time. It hurt. It felt like I was pulling the Earth towards me rather than running along it. You know that feeling? Like your head's too big, or your teeth are falling out?

Sort of, go on.

So I ran faster. I crawled under the fence at the place I always did, but I cut my knees. I'd never really noticed pain before so I stared at my cuts, not believing what was happening, crying. Or maybe I'd stopped crying by then. I remember feeling the wet ground seeping through my dress, then a feeling of the weight of the world underneath me; the weight of the whole world!

Good Karen.

And I remember not being able to tell what was up and what was down, just pushing it away from me. Pushing and crying like crazy. I turned over to feel it wet against my back.

Good Karen.

I lay there looking at the sky. The clouds were pink because it was sunset and the trees were orange because of the streetlights. I felt like I grew out of the ground like trees and houses. Like everything just grows out of the ground, like not just in the allotments, like I had roots. It was weird but didn't last, just gone in a heartbeat. It's what everyone else feels. It's why they can't fly. But I just got on with it, but I can't fly because I can remember it, but I can still float, but I just get on with it.

Thank you Karen. So is that what you're doing now?

Getting on with it? Yes.

So you realised you couldn't fly in the allotment?

I realised why other people don't fly. They can, they just don't.

But sometimes you still think you can.

I can't fly; I can almost fly! I can float.

You're not floating now Karen, the cushion behind you is depressed, look.

It's because I have to talk.

You mentioned allotments this time; you said you ran to Nia's house last time we spoke.

I liked Nia's house best.

Were you alone?

When?

When you ran to the allotments.

No. Nia was there.

You didn't mention her.

Yes I did.

Were there any gardeners there?

No, who would garden at dusk?

It's a lovely thing, a sunset, isn't it?

Yes, I suppose so.

Have you ever flown in a plane?

No.

Why not?

Never needed to, never had the spare cash. I've always had holidays in Devon or Cornwall or by ferry to France. I love Normandy; the beaches go on forever.

You like beaches?

...

Karen, you like beaches?

Yes.

Did you go there with your parents?

Yes.

What did you do there with them?

Nothing much.

Swim?

No, just paddle.

Have you been on many beach holidays since?

Some.

What do you do there? Sunbathing? Reading? Karen?

I like it out of season when there's spray and foam blowing around and everything's grey. I like wind.

Did you play on beaches as a child much?

...

Karen, did you play on beaches as a child?

No.

Where did you play?

At Nia's or Claire's.

Just in their houses?

Yes. No.

Where else?

...

Where else Karen?

Just around, you know. In the mall and places.

Like around town?

Yes.

Much to do for kids?

Yeah, swings and stuff.

You liked swings?

Yes.

What was the best thing to do?

When?

As a child.

How old?

Well, you tell me. What was the single most fun thing you did in your childhood?

Playing with dolls at Nia's.

How about What's the time Mr Wolf, you said you were good at that?

No.

You said you could creep up behind people...

I didn't like being on. Holding the shed with my eyes tight shut.

Did you play in the allotment? With all the other children?

Yes. There was a shed. Fairies lived in it.

How many children?

I pretended to see them in the allotment.

Good, Karen. Fairies?

When we used to go to the allotments, me an' Nia would see them. And there were always lovely sunsets from the allotments because you could see over the terraces all the way out of town, and you'd get silhouettes of trees and aerals

Were the allotments quiet?

Yes.

Good for fairies then?

Yes. For pretending.

How many children were in the allotments playing Mr Wolf?

Lots. Seven.

When did you last see Nia?

Yesterday.

No one came to visit yesterday, Karen.

Day before then. Nia came.

No one has come for a while Karen. What else did you see in the allotments?

Tools. Plants. You know.

So you went there in the daytime?

Yes, but mainly in the evening.

When did you first go there?

When I was little.

Did you find them with Nia?

...

Karen? Did you find them with Nia?

Dad took me.

Did he have an allotment?

Yes. No.

Which? Did he help out there; help a mate?

Uncle Paul. There was a shed.

Did he let you help him? Teach you gardening?

...

Karen?

I could fly when I was a kid you know? I kind of hovered just off the ground. I kind of floated around on the breeze. I have a photo of me on one leg and you can see the grass isn't touched. I showed Mum and she said it was make believe.