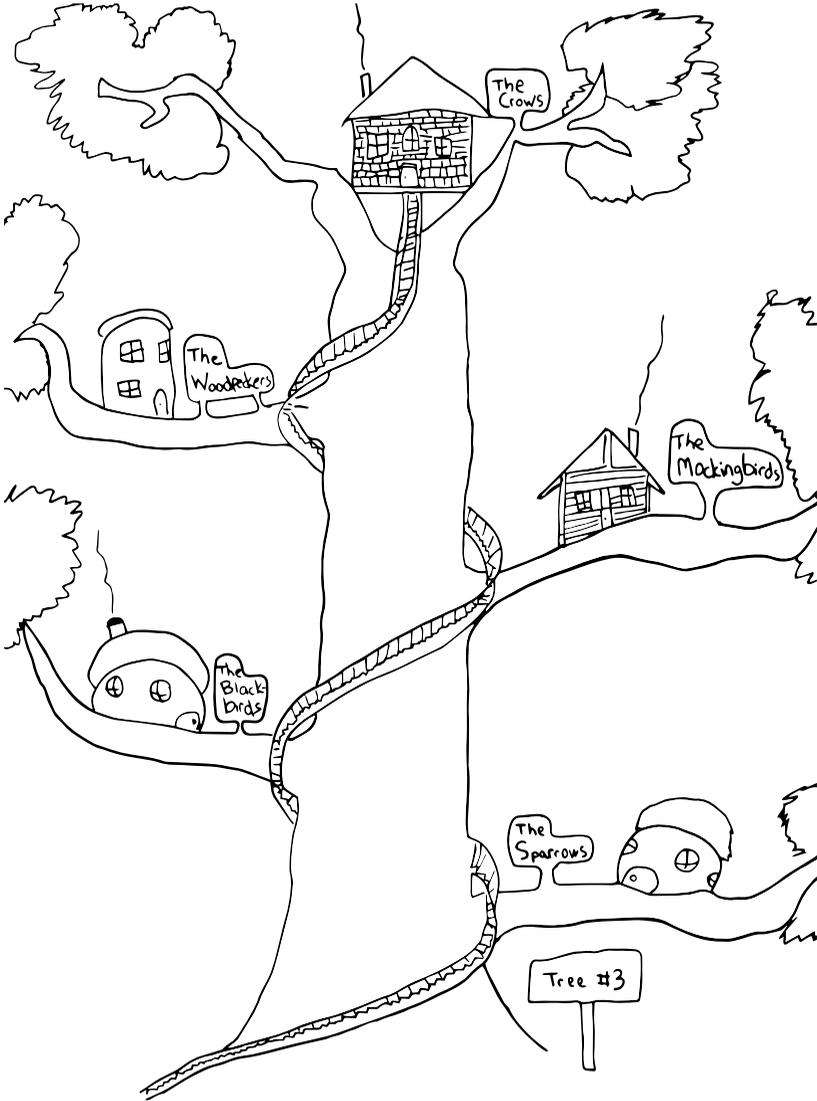


Charlie Sparrow and the Secret of Flight



David Anderson



Charlie Sparrow
and the Secret of Flight

A story for kids who know they have wings.

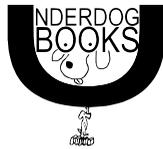
Written and Illustrated by

David Anderson

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*Dedicated to Genesta,
my better half
and inspiration.*

Contents

1 Charlie's Fall	9
2 Cedar Swing Park	17
3 The Leap	23
4 The Cure	29
5 The Leaping Cavern	35
6 The Secret	47
7 Betrayal	55
8 Charlie's Trick	61
9 Doctor Percy's Trial	69
10 Judge Trimble's Verdict	79
11 The School of Flight	85
Acknowledgements	95

1 Charlie's Fall

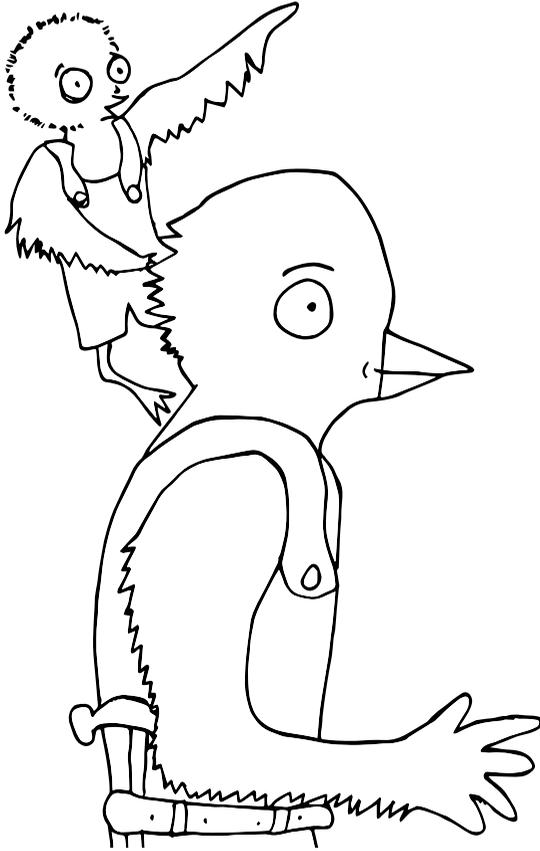
“TO THE TOP of the tree!” Charlie called from his perch on Mr. Sparrow’s shoulders.

“Off we go!” Mr. Sparrow said, starting up the long staircase that coiled like a huge snake around Tree #3, Chestnut Row. “I remember when your grandpa took me on my first repair job,” Mr. Sparrow began, in a far off, thoughtful voice. “I was just like you. Full of excitement. He taught me everything I know about staircases.”

Charlie watched the Blackbirds’ adobe nest go by on branch two, listening to the clinking of the nails in their pouch in Mr. Sparrow’s tool belt. Next came the Mockingbirds’ wood-frame nest on branch three, a thin line of smoke curling up from its chimney.

“I’ve never told you this,” Mr. Sparrow said, his voice cracking with emotion. “But when you hatched,I

swore then and there I would teach you everything I knew about staircases. Today, I get to start.”



Charlie leaned to see over the banister. He stared wide-eyed at the ground far, far below them. His heart fluttered at the huge distance to the ground. When he looked up, they were passing the Woodpeckers’ stucco nest on branch four.

“Someday,” Mr. Sparrow declared, “you’ll be a staircase repairman too. Just like your old dad, and your grandpa before him. It’s what Sparrows do!”

Charlie looked up at a stately brick nest perched in the forked branches at the top of the tree.

“It’s the Crows’ place! We’re almost there!”

Mr. Sparrow set Charlie down ten steps from the top. “That’s right, son. We’re very high up. Almost fifty feet above the ground. Stay close. Mr. Crow told me there are some wobbly steps up here.”

Mr. Sparrow crouched and tapped his hammer along the wood of a step, all the way up the banister posts. “You want to test each step, one at a time,” he said, “like so.” On the next step, the hammer punched through the wood. “Aha! It’s rotten. Be careful, Charlie. Wood rot has a way of hiding in plain sight.”

But when Mr. Sparrow looked up, he saw that Charlie was no longer with him. He had raced ahead to the top, where he stood with his head poked between two banister posts.

“Dad! I can see the Seed Mill from here! There’s City Hall, and the Courthouse! And look at those huge trees over there!” He pointed to the massive trees of

Redwood Row in the distance, towering over the rest of Tree City.

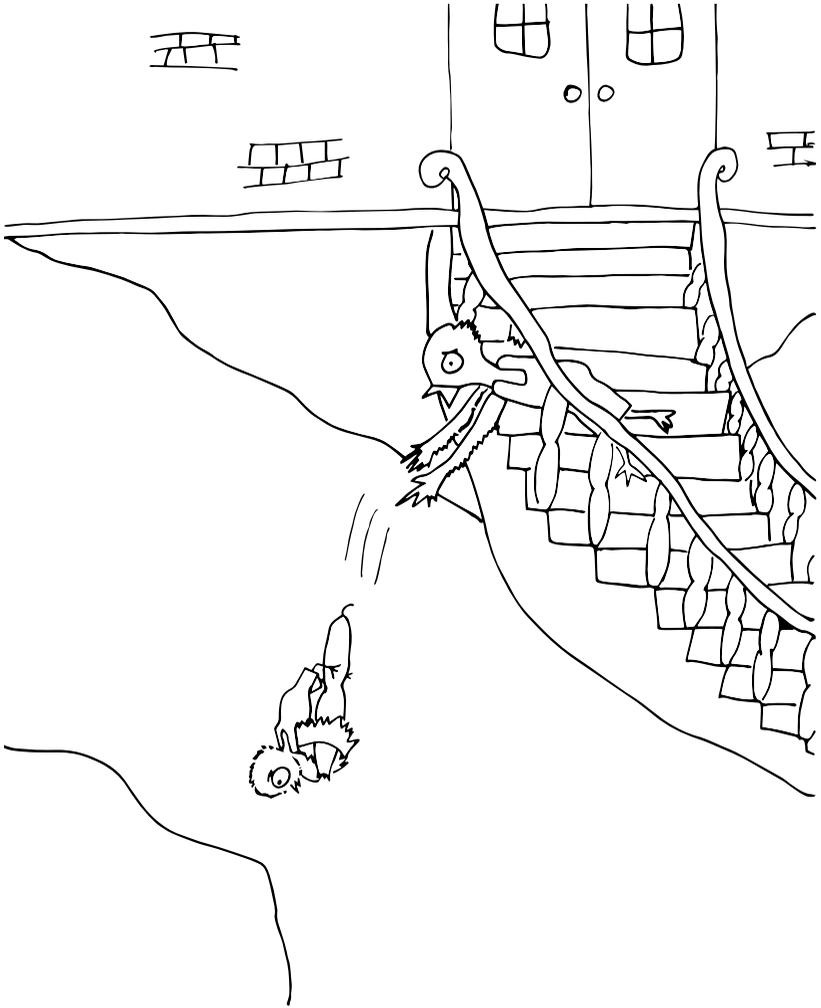
“Careful!” Mr. Sparrow said. “That wood could be rotten! Stay where you are. I’m coming to get you.

Just then there was a snap. Charlie cheeped. The top of the banister post he was leaning against broke off and flipped forward. Charlie hugged the post as it dangled from a single, bent nail.

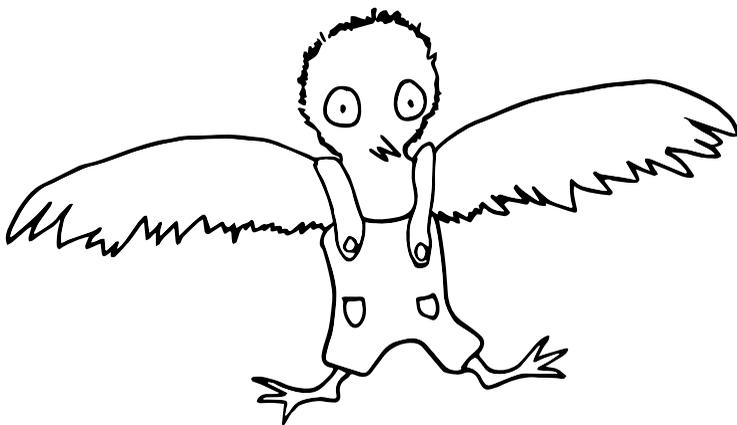
Mr. Sparrow leapt up the stairs three at a time and dove for Charlie. He was too late. The nail let go and the post dropped, taking Charlie with it.

Being a bird, Charlie might have opened his wings and flown back to his dad. Being a bigger, stronger bird, Mr. Sparrow might have dived after Charlie on heroic wings. But neither sparrow knew how to fly, or that they even had wings. In fact, none of the birds of Tree City knew a thing about flying, which is why they built such impressive staircases up their trees.

Charlie fell like any wingless forest creature—a chipmunk, or a squirrel—in a panic, arms and legs waving. But as the Woodpeckers’ stucco nest rushed past, something stirred deep within him. Charlie became calm and held out his arms—which is the name



he had been taught for his wings. To his surprise, he found the Mockingbirds' nest went by much slower than the Woodpeckers' had. The Blackbirds' went even slower, and his family's humble thatched home on the lowest branch crept gently by.



He was floating.

He landed below the tree, his eyes popping.

Mr. Sparrow, who had raced down the stairs, hurried to Charlie. “You’re okay! I can’t (puff, puff) believe it (puff, puff) you’re okay!”

Charlie looked up with a face of pure glee. “Can I do that again?”

“Absolutely not! Do you hear me? Never again!”

Mr. Sparrow scooped Charlie up and marched him home. Inside, he sat Mrs. Sparrow down at the kitchen table and told her about Charlie’s fall.

“It was awful. I’ll never forgive myself.” He buried his face in his prickly arms, whose feathers Mrs. Sparrow clipped short for him every weekend.

Charlie stood up on his chair. “But it was fun!”

Mrs. Sparrow leaned over and hugged Charlie close. “Don’t you see? You’ve had a horrible fall. You’re traumatized.”

“What’s ‘traumatized’?” he asked, his voice muffled by her hug.

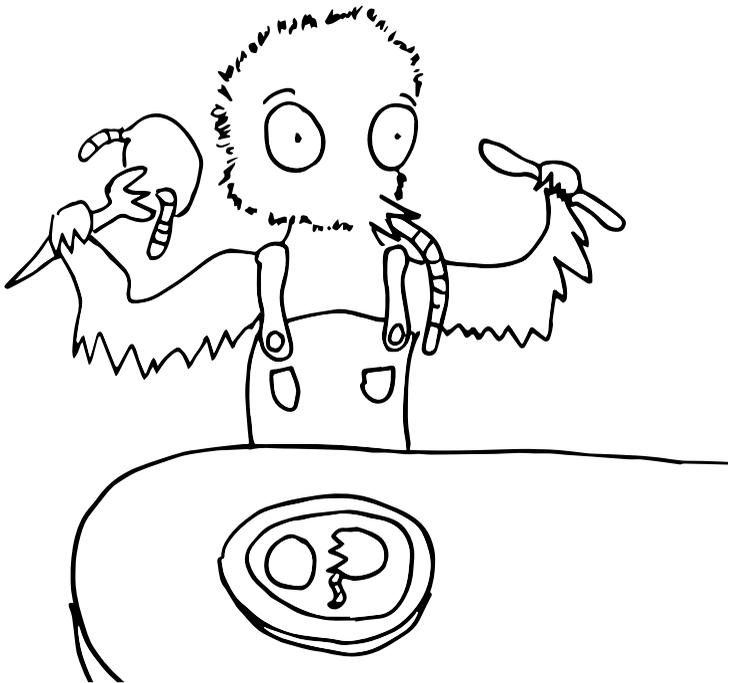
“It means something very scary happened that you won’t get over for a long time.” She carried him to his bedroom, tucked him in, and sang him a lullaby.

Charlie closed his eyes, but the image of himself drifting through the air like a leaf on the wind kept him awake for hours.

2 Cedar Swing Park

IN THE MORNING, Mrs. Sparrow slapped three steaming round cakes onto Charlie's plate.

"Yum!" he said. He took a bite, slurping up the worm that dangled from his beak. "Where's dad?"



Mrs. Sparrow untied her apron, tossed it over the chair across from Charlie, and sat down. “He’s gone to work,” she said. “I thought you and I would go to Cedar Swing Park this morning. How does that sound?”

“Isn’t dad taking me to learn about staircases today?”

“Nope—today you get to hang out with me.”

“Oh,” Charlie said. “Okay, cool!” He gobbled his pancakes, delighting most of all in the syrupy worms.

CEDAR SWING PARK stood on a big oval platform high in a cedar tree. It boasted a jungle gym, seesaws, sandboxes, and rows of swing sets. Charlie ran for the swings.

When he had been swinging for about an hour, his mom called to him from her bench on the grass with some other moms. “It’s about time you tried something else, don’t you think?”

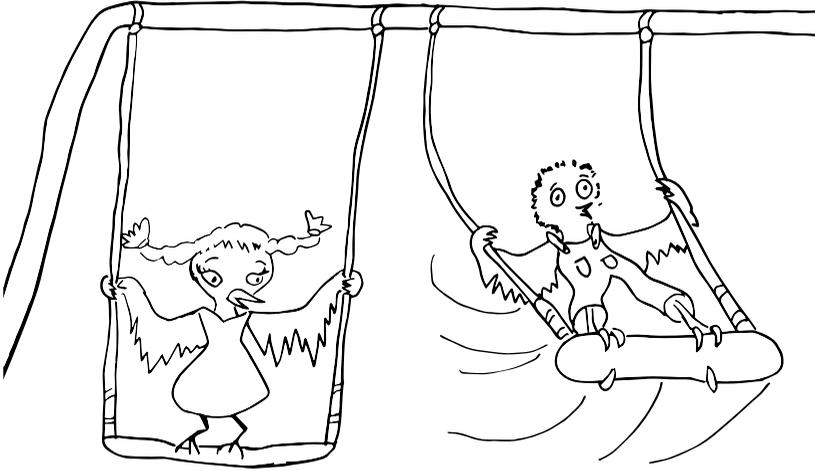
“Aw!” Charlie groaned.

“Let’s see who can go highest!” Charlie heard a voice say. It had come from a young finch with pigtails, swinging next to him. Charlie had been so swept up in the thrill of swinging he hadn’t noticed her.

“You’re on!”

The finch was speeding up. Charlie swung as fast and hard as he could.

“Charlie! Are you listening?” Mrs. Sparrow had stood up and was coming towards him, scowling.



“Just a sec!” he called.

“You’ll never swing higher than me!” the finch squealed.

WHOOSH Charlie went back and WHOOSH he went forward. He was swinging in time with Fanny now.

“What’s your name?” Charlie called.

“Fanny Finch! What’s yours?”

Just then, Mrs. Sparrow stepped in front of Charlie's path with her arms crossed. "Charlie Sparrow! Stop swinging at once!"

It was too late. Charlie's swing was going wild. He went so high so fast that he lost his hold on the ropes. He cried out as he shot off the swing, soared over his mom's head, and shot toward the safety fence like a cannonball out of a cannon. In a flash, that same something deep down inside of him sparked to life. Instead of panicking, he calmly held out his arms. A gust of wind puffed them up like little sails and he rose up over the safety fence and glided into the forest.

Charlie was blissful, until he saw the trees coming. He leaned to turn, but ended up rolling his body like a barrel. He was coming down, fast. He barely missed a wooden bridge between a pine tower of shops and a residential birch. Just before crashing, he turned his arms into the wind, slowing himself down. He tumbled along the forest floor and came to a stop.

He patted his body and jiggled his feet. He looked down and found himself in one piece.

"Woohoo!" he sang. "That was amazing! That must have been a hundred feet up!"

He ran through the forest back to the cedar tree and started up the stairs to the Swing Park. As he raced around the first curve, he met his mom.



“Charlie, you’re okay!” she cried.

“Can I go again?” Charlie piped from her smothering hug. “PLEEEASE?”

“No, you may not!”

She carried him home, choking back sobs the whole way.

At home, she took Charlie to his room and put

him to bed. It was only eleven in the morning, so she shut the blinds and sang him a quick song before leaving him in the dark.

3 The Leap

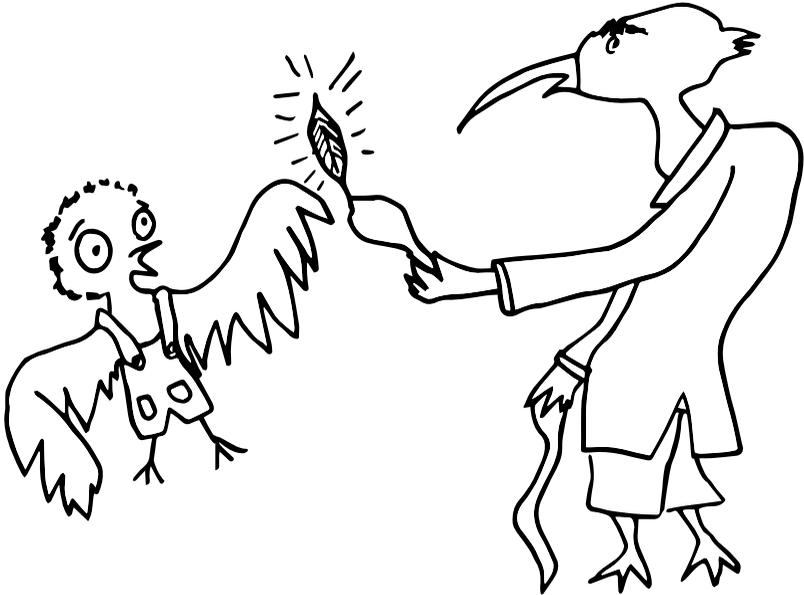
CHARLIE WAS WIDE awake. He couldn't stop thinking about shooting clear out of Cedar Swing Park.

Around lunchtime, he heard voices from the other room. One was his dad, home early from work. The other belonged to a stranger. There was a knock at his bedroom door and his parents walked in, followed by a hunched-over bird in a white coat.

“This is Doctor Nightingale,” Mrs. Sparrow said.

“Hello, Charlie,” the old bird said, hobbling forward with the help of a gnarled walking stick. “I'd like to take a peek at you, if you don't mind.” He bent over Charlie and flashed a small light in his eyes. “Blink. Good. Now open your beak and say ‘Ah.’” He shone the light in Charlie's mouth. “Well done. Now stick out your tongue and sing ‘Bah Bah Black Sheep.’” Charlie did as asked, or tried to.

Doctor Nightingale chuckled. “Ha! I’m only kidding. It’s impossible to sing with your tongue out! Now take a deep breath and lift up your arms.” He looked closely at Charlie’s arms. “Aha!” he said. “Just as I suspected.” He drew a pair of long tweezers from his coat pocket and, without a word of warning, plucked one of Charlie’s feathers.



“Ouch!” Charlie yelped.

“What do you see?” Doctor Nightingale asked, showing off his prize.

“My feather!” Charlie answered, not hiding his annoyance.

Doctor Nightingale turned away from the chick. “I ask again: what do you see?” he said to Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow.

They bent forward to look closely at the small, wispy feather. “It’s beautiful,” Mrs. Sparrow said.

“Shiny,” Mr. Sparrow agreed.

“Exactly!” Doctor Nightingale said. “Exceptionally healthy feathers. A clear sign of a dangerous childhood disease.”

“Disease?” Charlie gulped.

“Yes,” Doctor Nightingale said. “It’s called Leaping Syndrome. Also known as the Leap. Defined in the Tree City Dictionary of Medical Conditions as an extreme and dangerous urge to leap off things. The Leap has driven our youngest, most vulnerable birds to jump off beds, chairs, tables, countertops. You name it. I once had a patient named Wendy Warbler who swung from a chandelier. She broke an arm and chipped her beak. Based on Charlie’s tremendous falls in the past two days, I must say that I have never seen a case this bad.”

“Is there a cure?” Mr. Sparrow asked.

“Yes,” Doctor Nightingale said. He leaned away

from Charlie and whispered: “We must remove them.”

“My feathers?” Charlie had heard clearly.

“I am afraid so,” Doctor Nightingale replied. “Unless one day you would like your parents to find you splattered on the ground below the tree.”

Mrs. Sparrow buried her face in Mr. Sparrow’s shoulder.

“Isn’t there another way?” Mr. Sparrow asked.

“No,” Doctor Nightingale said. “No other treatment exists.”

“Can’t we just clip all the healthy feathers?”

“Believe me, Mr. Sparrow, I have tried every possible treatment on my patients. Unfortunately, clipping is not radical enough. It only makes the disease worse.”

Charlie reached out for his mom, who sat next to him on the bed.

“Doctor Nightingale’s going to make you better,” she said.

“Will it hurt?” Charlie asked.

Mrs. Sparrow looked helplessly at Doctor Nightingale.

“Oh, there’s a touch of pain,” Doctor Nightingale

said. “But it’s quick. Nothing at all. Like ripping off a band-aid. And then it’s over. There is a device that performs the cure quite well. I invented it, in fact. Works like a charm.”

“Can you be brave for me?” Mrs. Sparrow asked Charlie, stroking his head.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

Charlie looked up at Doctor Nightingale’s bushy eyebrows and crooked beak and wondered if maybe this strange old bird was right. Maybe he did need to be cured.

4 The Cure

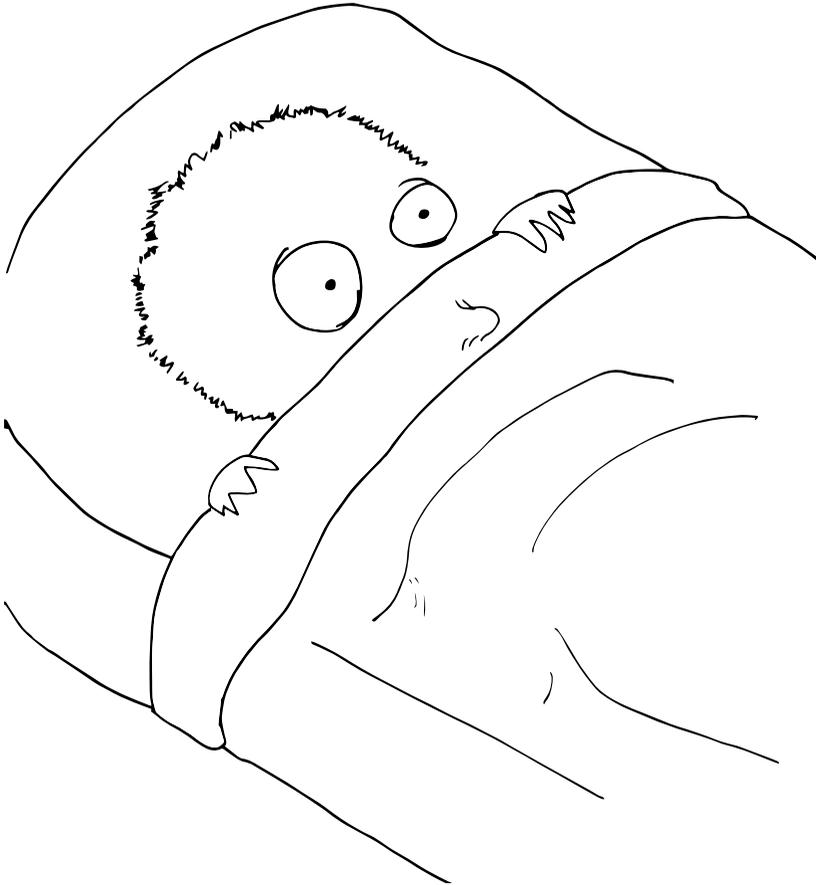
AFTER DOCTOR NIGHTINGALE left, Charlie didn't feel well enough to eat lunch or dinner. He stayed in his room, staring at his feathers, wondering what was so wrong with them.

That night, he had the same dream over and over. He was soaring through the air. Sometimes he leapt off a treetop. Sometimes, it was off the roof of a nest. But every time, the same wonderful feeling filled him so full he was sure he would burst, like a balloon filled too full with air.

When morning came, he hid under his blankets.

"Charlie," Mrs. Sparrow said. "Remember what you promised?"

Charlie poked his head out. "To be brave."



He slid out of bed, dressed, and followed his parents from Chestnut Grove through the Pine Passage to Redwood Row, where the Medical Tower stood taller than all the other trees. They took a long elevator ride up to Doctor Nightingale's office at the top. The glass elevator gave the best view of Tree City Charlie had ever seen. As the ground got farther away, his heart

beat faster and a strange knot of excitement tied up his stomach.

“Look! It’s Chestnut Grove!” he said. “I can see the Crows’ nest on top of Tree #3! Our nest is just below that!”

In the waiting area, he saw a door open. A family of chickadees came out—a dad, a mom, and a chick younger than Charlie. The mom held the chick, whose cheeks were wet with tears.

“There, there,” she said. “That’s my brave little girl.”

As the family went by, Charlie saw that the chick’s arms were terribly pink and terribly bare. They had been stripped of their feathers! The skin was swollen and bumpy where the feathers had been plucked.

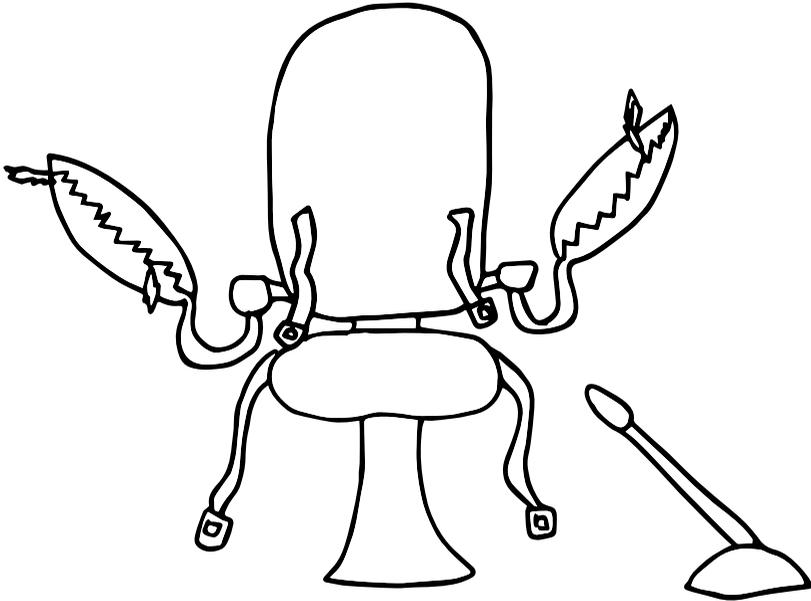
Seconds later, Doctor Nightingale hobbled out of the same room. “Ah, the Sparrow clan. Come in, come in.”

Mrs. Sparrow stood up, but Charlie sat firmly in his chair.

“Charlie,” she said. “Remember your promise?”

“To be brave.” He stood up and followed her into the room.

It was mostly empty, except for a chair on a shiny chrome pedestal. The seat and armrests were upholstered in brilliant white leather and sported white leather straps with buckles. Next to each armrest was a long, banana-shaped clamp with jagged teeth. A nurse was opening the clamps and shaking the clumps of chickadee feathers they held into a wastebasket.



“The procedure is simple,” Doctor Nightingale began. “Charlie will sit with his arms here.” He tapped the armrests with his walking stick. “He will be strapped in tightly. My assistant, Nurse Cardinal, will fix these clamps”—he tapped the clamp nearest him—

“onto Charlie’s feathers. When the clamps are secure, I will count to three and pull this lever.” He took hold of a metal lever on the floor beside the chair and slammed it down. The clamps turned sharply away from the armrests. “And voila! Charlie will be cured. We try to get them all on the first go, but there does tend to be leftovers. These stragglers, as I call them, must be plucked the old-fashioned way.” He clacked his tweezers to illustrate.

Charlie felt sick again.

Doctor Nightingale lifted Charlie up and set him in the chair. He wrapped a strap around the young bird’s left arm. “In moments, your new life will begin,” he said, looking at Charlie with a frightening kind of glee.

Thank you for reading this free sample of *Charlie Sparrow and the Secret of Flight*. The ebook and paperback are available for purchase.

www.CharlieSparrowandtheSecretofFlight.com

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About the Author



David Anderson grew up in Stratford, Prince Edward Island, Canada, and holds a Master's degree in English Literature from the University of British Columbia. He lives in Ottawa.