

Preface

Tom John-Mary rested his beak on the edge of his nest and looked out at the valley before him. Set like a scene on a canvas, the right foreground was filled by a beech tree with rich copper leaves. To the lower left, a scatter of sheep grazed a steep field bare of grass. Above that, and deeper green, late silage was ready to cut, while, beyond it, a freshly ploughed corn field was the colour of winter. The far wall then rose steeply to the snake infested common they never landed on; a sombre thought he quickly dismissed as a weak sun broke to greet the new day.

In the air about him, many birds hunted for breakfast, though Tom had already been out. Some, in frantic pursuit, were parents, too, chasing flies for hungry chicks that waited with juddering wings in their nests. Others, free of responsibility, ducked and swooped, thrilled on the joy of flight.

He saw swallows and swifts, near cousins to him, a housemartin; they followed a similar migratory path, but never mixed or socialised. It reassured him they were still there, however, as swifts were first to head south, meaning the northern season wasn't quite over. Swallows made their nests indoors where they had no view of the outer world and he couldn't understand that; they missed so much. The hen swift he now watched reached her nest through a small roof hole by a downpipe - even more reclusive. But, for him, there were no others than these, just acquaintances, like the sparrows, who sometimes took nests when they were on migration and fought to hold them when they got back - if with little success.

Beneath him, his three chicks were finally full and sleeping. He had flown through dewy air to bring them mouthfuls of flies they grabbed with a hunger he thought would never quell. All exhausted now, his peace would be short lived, as the

demands of chicks were endless. And he had no hen to rear them, no mate to share the work; was at a loss to know where it would all end.

As Speaker of the colony, Tom was, in fact, leader of the flock. The bird to whom all others looked when danger came, he was their protector when there was conflict. Speaker was a position only granted after years of learning and hard work. He could read the weather, knew when it was time to come and go; could feel the heat wane, see when the sun was falling south. Before long, the flies would get scarce here and there would be little left to eat. Swifts would leave then, followed by the swallows, then it would be their time; simple truths even young chicks might know, though there needed to be one who saw, who acted, and who led the way.

Still, at that very moment, none of this mattered, for Tom's heart was broken, as Sally, the love of his life, the hen to whom he had given many chicks, was gone and he didn't know where she was. Missing, too, was Simon, the young cock she had recently been seen with, as if an ageing hen could find new energy and expect it to last forever. He couldn't understand how it had happened, either, but she was as gone as Daisy, as gone as a past migration.

Others asked questions – but there were no answers for them - questions of propriety, even about life and death itself.

For gone, too, was Daisy, the mother of these chicks, making it a bleak time as tending them was an all-consuming job and he was busy in his duty as Speaker. Except Daisy was in the ground and it wasn't in his heart to regret that, as she had brought nothing but darkness, like a weight that had been sent to cause anguish for him that was never explained. A nightmare that had entered his life and tarnished it for all time.

For a moment, he thought then about the time he had first flown from his parents' nest on this very same wall and was warmed by the memory of John the Speaker and Mary the Beautiful. They had been good to him, so vital in preparing him for what he now was. Their care had been a web to save him from birds that preyed and storms that blew; their love, a cloak that had made him stronger than many others.

If he craned out, he could see where they were buried in a lonely place where all Speakers and their families lay, but with the horror of Daisy near them. Her presence was a blight to the very spot they rested and he felt guilt for having let her into their lives.

He thought of the years between his parents and now, when the weight of duty had often been a barrier to enjoyment. Times when the joy of love had had to be balanced against the drudge of living; and there had been many such times. He recalled the days when they were banished, him and Sally, when the great strength of their love had been weighted against the pain of missing this place.

Then he thought of the daily burdens that could come in sharing a nest. Too many chicks created problems. Yet, though such things were in the past now, he would suffer them again if only he could have Sally back. Sally of the singing voice, with the beauty of rainbows, the warmth that had always made his heart jump – or stop.

And what was he to do? How was he to feed and fatten these and have them strong enough to fly so far, so soon? Migration would take fully six weeks and, if he spent the intervening time with them, who would see to his other duties? There was no one.

When he thought of it, chicks were probably the source of all his problems, the reason for which had started in his youth. It was what he, an only chick, had taken from his parents' nest: a cock got greater attention when free of the intrusion of others.

But his father had said it: the young must go forward and fill the skies, never to return to the land of their birth; except for those who would be Speaker. It was a rule, the way to spread blood and avoid weakness, though it wasn't a rule to which all birds gave respect. Some, like Daisy, held onto those chicks they wanted, defying it. Others, like Sally, wanted to keep all her broods, always.

This had been his first time as Speaker here, too, the fulfilment of a life's ambition, as he had forever wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. With it had come much respect. But what was respect when weighed against a life, when weighed against love? Nothing! They could have it all if they would only bring Sally back.

Yet, he knew, as Aves ruled all things, it wasn't written for that to happen.