

## A Swallow's song

There's a woman sitting on my couch again. The midday sun filters in through a crack in the blinds and illuminates the fragments of dust wandering aimlessly around the room. The woman goes into the kitchen and makes herself a mug of tea. She's using Allan's mug. He first bought it in a tucked away market in Spain many years ago now, a place filled with exotic beads and clashing colours, silks and fresh fruits. He's away to the shops I think.

The woman has wrinkles around her eyes like an over ripened peach, and her eyes, her eyes remind me of someone. Her face clicks with some recognition gauge in my brain. I still can't place her.

She's sorting through my medicine, sorting the vast spectrum of drugs from Monday to Sunday. They each have a little box, everything organised, everything sorted. She's a pretty woman. Tired but pretty. Strands of grey peak through her ochre locks as she leans over her work, eyes squinted in concentration.

"And what tablets don't we take on a Wednesday?" she asks quizzingly.

Closing my eyes, I wrack my brain.

"Purple" I reply proudly, earning a smile as reward.

She stands and runs her fingertips over the spines of the books on the tall shelf, filled with Allan's prized works ranging from Shakespeare to detailed model train manuals.

"Be careful mind, Allan has them in alphabetical order, and he won't be happy if they are all muddled up!" I joke stretching and repositioning myself in my chair. She nods in acknowledgement with an odd smile. She's tired I suppose. Did she get any tea?

The woman fixes my pillow and gives me water and my tablets. I examine my fingers, all ten of them. Each one now much weaker than my younger years. My engagement ring glistens just like it did that sunset night on the pier. The sky was purples and magentas, merged into a luminous watercolour blending into the dark sea. I had worn my bright yellow dress. It clashed with my ginger hair, I didn't care, I liked it. Allan and I sat on a bench, freezing, eating chips breathing in the sea air. I remember realising that night how much I loved him. He knelt down, shivering, voice shaking and laughing like a nervous idiot. He asked me to share the rest of our lives. It was so long ago. I said yes.

She reminds me to take my tablets.

“Has anyone watered the flowers?” the woman asks, peering out of the kitchen window onto the patio.

“Allan will get round to it, not to worry” I say reassuring her.

“No it’s fine. I’ll get them now,” she says, slipping on her shoes and opening the glass door.

“I’ll join you,” I say smiling, looking out at the sun, the pink begonias swaying lightly in the wind.

Preparing for the move she flutters over and around me like a slightly flustered chicken, ensuring I had my stick and enough layers, because ‘it’s always colder outside than it looks’. We stroll slowly through the garden; the woman waters the tulips and petunias. Allan has always had green fingers. He was always growing vegetables for my soups, sweet carrots and sharp onions bursting with flavour. With my legs starting to tire, the woman sits me on the old wooden bench. I close my eyes and feel the hot sun lace my skin. There is the scent of spring in the air, fresh and zinging. I struggle to remember why I am outside.

The woman leaves me to make my dinner. She often does this. I don’t see why: Allan will be back soon. He’s probably met a friend at the supermarket and gone to the pub I’m sure. A swallow darts past me, moving almost rhythmically with the wind. Such beautiful birds, so delicate and intelligent. I make a note to myself to tell Allan when he’s home that I spotted one again. There must be a nest nearby I think.

The woman is beckoning me back to the house so I return for dinner. I am warmed from the hot carrot and coriander soup we both begin to eat. My hands shake buttering my bread roll. The woman helps me. She is very kind, I must admit, but I feel I don’t really need a “helper”. I have Allan and we help each other. There seems to be a bit too much “help” if you ask me.

She helps me wash. I can’t find my pyjamas again. She finds them. She puts them on me and then turns on the kettle. Helping me into bed, she looks at me sadly. This poor woman really does seem to be down.

“Wait till my Allan’s back, he’ll be having you chuckling in no time my dear” I say with a smile.

He is and always had been a complete joker, doing anything to make the weight of the world a little lighter on my shoulders.

A tear rolls down her cheek. She looks lost.

I hold her hand and she clutches it fiercely.

She picks up a photo frame and caresses it, like the way a mother would cradle a child when they were hurt.

“Allan really should be home by now, it is nearly half past eight” I say checking the old clock on the wall. He isn’t usually this late. The woman crouches next to the bed.

“Allan isn’t coming back.”

She explains that Allan died a year ago. He wasn’t in pain.

She starts to explain that she’s here to take care of me. Because that’s what daughters do.

“Just like what you did for me” she says.

She told me that she’s here for me.

I don’t know this woman, How can I not know this woman? Where is my Allan?

I feel sick. My head spins and she hugs me, wet with tears. A stranger. A stranger who is my own daughter.

She sides out a photo album from the bed side table.

“This usually helps” she mumbles. She shows me black and white family portraits. She points out each person in the picture.

“That’s Lydia, she’s your eldest, and then there’s me here, me, Emma” she says pointing at the blonde.

Staring at the picture I try and grapple with what this woman is saying. Blinking rather rapidly, I try and connect her with Allan. I try to connect her to me.

My mind flashes with film clips. Girls in pigtails swimming in the sea, in baltic weather, family dinners eating stew. Sending Lydia away to university. Clutching Emma’s hand as I dropped her off to her first day of primary school. Emma on Allan’s shoulders. Arguments with Allan. Kissing Allan.

Finding Allan beside me.

Allan not waking up.

Contorted with grief, she cradles me.

My head hurts. We pick the flowers, we sing the hymns, we cover him in soil. I place begonias.

My bed suddenly feels so empty. Suddenly there is far too much space for just me.

This woman, a daughter I could not recognise, a daughter I could neither help nor remember fully.

Exhausted I start to drift to sleep. The woman. Emma, brushes the hair off my forehead.

I wake up to the sound of birdsong coming from the garden. So delicate. So quaint. Smiling I try to remember to tell Allan when I get up that there's swallows in the garden. I think there is a nest nearby. Yes, I will tell Allan when I get up, I say to myself as I nod off. A swallow's song is quite beautiful. I'll tell him.