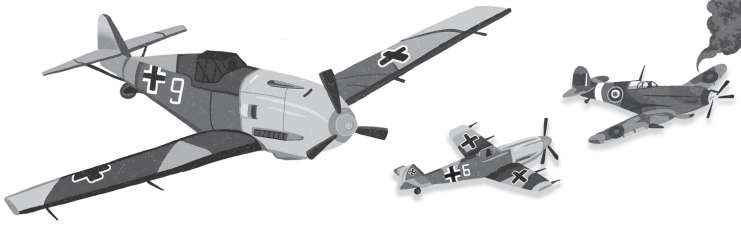
HILARY MCKAY

The Swallows' Flight



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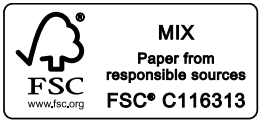
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One
Erik and Hans
Berlin, 1931



One summer, when he was ten years old, Erik became famous for buying dead flies.

'Really!' said Hans, who was in the same class at school and had just moved into the apartment below. 'You're always becoming famous for something embarrassing!'

'I know,' admitted Erik, because it did seem a bit that way. The falling off the bridge on the school expedition to the river; his hospital for dolls – he'd fixed one small girl's doll and the news had got round, 'Erik can mend dolls!' and suddenly he'd found himself with a bedroom full of prim china faces not necessarily attached to their bodies.

And now he was buying dead flies.

The reason Erik needed flies was a family of little birds. Their nest had fallen; the fragile shell of dry mud had crumbled and split from the wall and two fledglings had been lost, but three had survived. Erik's *kleine Schwalben,* his little swallows.

He'd tried finding enough flies for them alone, but without having wings himself it seemed impossible. He'd taken a teaspoon to every rose bush within walking distance, scraping

off greenfly. Both the baker and the butcher had asked him very forcefully to get out and mind his manners when he'd offered, as politely as he could, to remove the wildlife buzzing in their windows. He'd haunted the rubbish bins at the back of the apartment building. Even so, he couldn't manage to keep up with the swallows' demand, and so he'd recruited his classmates. They naturally said they were not going to spend their spare time collecting flies for nothing, and demanded to be paid.

Erik had paid first in fruit drops, from the box he'd had for his birthday, and next with an assortment of rather chipped marbles, and after that with cigarette cards: scenes of old Berlin, Flags of the World, and his precious Exotic Birds and Animals. He had a few French cards too, mostly pictures of famous film-star girls.

'Girls!' said Hans, scornfully, when he came with his flies to trade. Hans had a sister named Lisa. She was one year younger than Hans, but she was taller than he was, and she bossed him about. Lisa had a hundred friends, or so it seemed to Hans. 'I've enough girls at home.'

'Well then, choose a flag,' suggested Erik, 'or an armadillo or a camel or something.'

Hans said he didn't care about flags, and that the camel and the armadillo had unfriendly faces. In the end he chose a girl after all, one with great waves of hair, and a very small top hat tilted over one eye, not at all like his sister or any of her friends. In return he gave Erik an envelope full of bluebottles, mosquitoes and other small flies. The mosquitoes were squashed and so no use, but the rest were all right. Erik, for

about the tenth time that day, explained why squashed were no good, with all the juice wasted.

'You do know everybody is talking about you, don't you?' said Hans.

'Are they?'

'Saying you are crazy!'

'Oh, well, yes.'

'What other cards do you have to trade?'

'I don't really, Hans,' said Erik.

He did have an album of fairy tales cards, collected for him by his mother, long before. He couldn't trade them, because she was still fond of them. Now and then, on winter evenings, she would turn the pages and murmur, 'Yes, I remember,' when she came to the seven swans, or the tin soldier, or whatever. Erik also hoped that he might keep his five Dogs of the World: the German shepherd, the husky, the St Bernard with the little barrel on its collar, the English sheepdog with the smiling face, and the small French poodle. He had owned them for as long as he could remember, given them names and dreamed them stories. They were old friends, and yet . . .

He'd known these swallows since they were eggs: every summer a nest was built above his bedroom window; already the parent birds were building there again. And now Erik had these three.

He kept them in his bedroom, in a box by the open window, snuggled together in his winter hat, which would never be the same again. Hans came to watch his latest delivery of flies disappear.

‘More than an hour’s work gone in seconds,’ he remarked. ‘However do these ridiculous birds manage in the wild?’

‘Easy,’ said Erik. ‘They can fly. What I really need is a butterfly net and a very small plane.’

‘What you need is my Uncle Karl,’ said Hans.

‘Why?’

‘He can fly. And he’s mad, like you. I’ll tell him about you, next time I see him. Have you given them names?’

Erik laughed and shook his head, so Hans named them on the spot: Cirrus, Nimbus and Cumulus.

‘Cumulus is the fat one,’ he said. ‘He’s my favourite. I shall go and catch his supper right now.’

After that, Hans stopped charging for his flies, and he was a great help to Erik because the little birds were constantly hungry. They were growing so fast that every few hours they seemed to change. Real colours replacing the down. Their pin feathers coming through on their wings. All three of them stronger every day, stretching out a wing, jostling for the next beak-full of food.

‘How did you learn to care for them?’ asked Hans, and Erik explained that two years before, it had happened just the same, a nest had fallen and he had scooped up a nestling and fed it on baby food. Bread and milk. And it had died. He wouldn’t make that mistake again though, he said. Flies, that’s what his swallows needed, from four in the morning until darkness at night, flies by the dozen, flies by the hundred, not caught in airy swoops around the rooftops like the parent swallows did, but delivered by a train of helpers

with matchboxes, cocoa tins, or sometimes just clenched fists. Up and down the building stairs, driving the occupants mad.

'Wash your hands!' his mother ordered the children, with every new delivery, and sent them to the kitchen sink and made sure they did it properly. The soap wore out and people got so tired of washing they stood under the windows and yelled instead, 'Erik! I brought more flies!'

'How much longer?' asked his mother, and Erik said perhaps a week or a little more.

'A week or a little more!' she groaned and suggested egg yolk, minced sausage and canary seed soaked in water. Erik shook his head. He dared not risk it.

'Well, well,' said his mother. 'I suppose you must do what you can.'

Erik did, although it wasn't easy. To part with the German shepherd, who he'd named Otto after his father who had died before he was born. With dear brave Brandy, hero of so many imaginary snowbound adventures. Comet, the blue-eyed, curly tailed, moonlight-coloured husky. Tessa, the smiling sheepdog. 'Take care of her,' said Erik, as he handed Tessa to her new owner, and there was an aching beneath his ribs that was beginning to feel familiar even though he still had Belle, the little French poodle.

'She's pretty,' said Lisa, who had come to see what all the fuss was about. 'One day I will have a dog like that, with a pom-pom tail and a pink ribbon in her hair.'

Lisa, although nearly always indignant or angry, was also

pretty in a furious kind of way, and Erik gave her Belle, even though Hans disapproved.

'She got exactly what she wanted, then,' he grumbled, when Lisa, clutching Belle, had run away downstairs again.

'Good,' said Erik.

On the fourteenth day after Erik found them, his three swallows flew from his open window, straight from his hand into a bird-filled apricot evening sky, joining dozens of others circling the roofs and eaves and skyways of the city.

Never, ever had Erik known such illuminated joy, such a lift of bliss that it felt as if he could have flown with them.

'Well,' said Hans, who had come to say goodbye to Cumulus and the others. 'That's three more birds in the sky.'

'Yes,' agreed Erik, hanging out of the window to watch. 'Imagine being a swallow. Racing about like that!'

'You'd have to eat flies, though,' pointed out Hans. 'What do you think they taste like?

'Pretzels and lobsters,' said Erik, so matter-of-factly that Hans started shouting and flinging his arms about and exclaiming, 'Erik? You didn't! Hey, tell me you didn't! You can't have! Are you crazy? Are you joking?' Then he stopped jumping about and came up close to look into Erik's face. 'You are joking,' he said. 'Aren't you?'

'Yes.'

Hans pushed his shoulder affectionately. Erik pushed him back. They both, at the same moment, realized how much they liked each other. Hans remembered how Erik had leaned

over the bridge and leaned over the bridge and leaned over the bridge, and said, 'Oh, dear,' and vanished with hardly a splash. Erik remembered how quickly Hans had pulled off his jacket to wrap him up when they fished him out again.

'Nutter,' said Hans, catching Erik in a casual headlock.

'Nutter yourself,' said Erik, wriggling out backwards and dumping Hans flat on the floor.

'I wouldn't be surprised if they *did* taste like pretzels and lobsters,' said Hans, thinking about it, stretched out on his back. 'Perhaps you're not so crazy after all. Perhaps one day you will be head keeper at Berlin Zoo.'

'Perhaps,' said Erik, hopefully, once more gazing out of the window. 'Do you know, Hans, those little birds will go to Africa.'

'Oh, here you go again!' said Hans. 'Africa! I was wrong, you really are a nut . . . Hey! Erik!'

Erik's brown curly head was suddenly nodding. He wobbled where he stood, leaning against the comfortable wooden window frame. Only four hours sleep for two weeks and three insatiable babies all day, and now night was coming in over the rooftops.

Hans leaped and grabbed him just before he toppled out of the open window.

'Thank you, Hans,' said Erik.

Two
Ruby
Plymouth, Devon, 1927



Ruby was her name, and even that caused trouble. All the girls in the family had flower names – there were Lilies and Daisies and Roses, an Iris and a Violet, once a Marigold. It was a family tradition, unbroken since goodness knew when, until Violet, who was Ruby's mother, said, 'Ruby.'

'Ruby?' asked a whole bunch of flowery relations, gathered in the room above the newsagent's shop. 'Ruby?'

'I like rubies,' said Violet, 'better than diamonds or pearls. I always wanted a ruby.'

'You can't pretend Ruby's a flower name,' said bossy Aunt Rose.

'I wasn't,' said Violet, in a mind-your-own-business voice.

'It's flashy,' said Aunt Lily, who had no tact. 'It'll draw attention.'

'Attention?' repeated Violet, in a tone of such unexploded fury that Aunt Lily took a step back. Even as she retreated though, she couldn't help glancing towards the baby sleeping in the wicker basket, and then, one after another, everyone else in the room glanced too.

Ruby's face was splattered with what looked like dark brown paint. Birthmarks; a large one like a paintbrush had swiped below her left eye, and showers of smaller ones patterning both sides of her face. They were the first thing anyone saw and nobody could say a word to Violet about them that didn't make her angry.

The family discussed it in murmurs when Violet was out of the room. There had been, according to Violet's mother, other babies born in the family with marks just the same. A boy was recalled, fifty years before.

'They said his might fade,' Ruby's grandmother remembered.

'And did they?' demanded Rose.

'He died when he was six or seven, they hadn't faded then.'

'Better not tell Violet,' whispered Iris.

'You can't tell Violet anything,' said Rose.

'I know,' agreed Lily, nodding. 'Ruby! What kind of a—'

'Shush!' hissed everyone, but too late.

'What are you shushing?' demanded Violet, appearing suddenly in the doorway.

A twitching silence followed while people tried to remember what they'd said.

'It's about the baby, isn't it?'

'We were just talking about her name,' said Iris, soothingly. 'I was thinking that there's Clover, and I once heard of a Lavender.'

'Clover is a cow's name and Lavender's for bath salts,' said Violet, witheringly. 'Anyway,' she added, picking up the sleeping baby and rocking her on her shoulder, 'you can all

stop fussing because she's going to have a flower name too. Her dad picked it out.'

Violet paused.

'Go on, then,' said Rose.

'Amaryllis.'

'Amaryllis?' repeated the whole bunch, Iris, Rose and Lily. '*Amaryllis?* What in heaven's an amaryllis?'

'I've never *heard* of an amaryllis,' said Ruby's grandmother.

Neither had Violet. The name had been in a library book about gardening. There hadn't been a picture, just a list of 'Rewarding rarities' at the end of a chapter and the lovely word among them: *Amaryllis*, that rang like a chime and a charm. Ruby's father had read it aloud and it had caught Violet's heart.

'Ruby Amaryllis,' she said proudly. 'Her dad's looked it up and everything. He says it's a flower like a lily, but better.'

'It's even fancier than Ruby!' said all the horrified relations.

'Good,' said Violet.

It hadn't stopped there. The christening had been as extravagant as the new baby's name. Violet had sewn white silk into a christening gown and her best friend Clarry had brought from Oxford a shawl of snowflakes in soft white lace. Clarry was to be Ruby's godmother, and she arrived for the christening with other presents too: a rattle with silver bells, and a whole collection of parcels for Ruby's eight-year-old brother, Will.

Will was already sick of the whole business, the fuss, the new clothes he was required to wear, and the bone-deep knowledge that he would never again be loved as exclusively

and completely as he had been loved before the arrival of the ugly, wailing baby. Therefore he unwrapped his torch, his book called *The Pirate's Parrot*, his jar of sweets and his box of coloured marbles with very bad grace and when prompted to say thank you, said, 'They're just to shut me up.'

To Will's disappointment, Clarry didn't immediately turn on him in indignation. Instead, she said cheerfully that maybe he would like them later, and nodded in agreement when he said he supposed they'd do for swaps.

All the grown-ups seemed to be amused by him. They talked to him about trains and school and football, as if he cared. He longed to ask if the brown marks made it more likely that the baby would die soon, but he didn't dare in case they guessed his darkest thoughts. His life was ruined, and no one understood. He tried to make himself sick in church but failed.

Ruby Amaryllis grew up in the three little rooms over the newsagent's shop, with her mother and father and Will, who she always treated warily, half ready to run. Plymouth was a naval town, with huge dockyards on the river that had their own train station. Ruby's father was a porter there, riding backwards and forwards on his bicycle every day. He said when Will was old enough he should get a job there, too.

'Catch me!' Will used to exclaim scornfully, whenever this boring idea was suggested. 'I'm going to do something a lot more exciting than that!'

Will was like his mother; tall, with creamy skin and grey-green eyes. There was no understanding between him and