SILVERWING

KENNETH STEVEN



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by Kenneth Steven

Illustrated by Ishy Walters



NEEM TREE
PRESS

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Published by Neem Tree Press Limited 2021
info@neemtreepress.com

Neem Tree Press Limited,
95A Ridgmount Gardens, London, WC1E 7AZ

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Cover Design and Illustrations Copyright © Isaebel Walters 2021

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

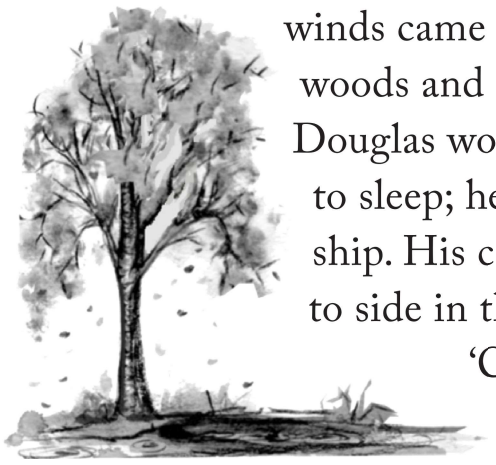
ISBN 978-1-911107-33-0 Paperback
ISBN 978-1-911107-34-7 Ebook

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Douglas sat on the wooden chest that once had belonged to his mother and gazed out over the fields.

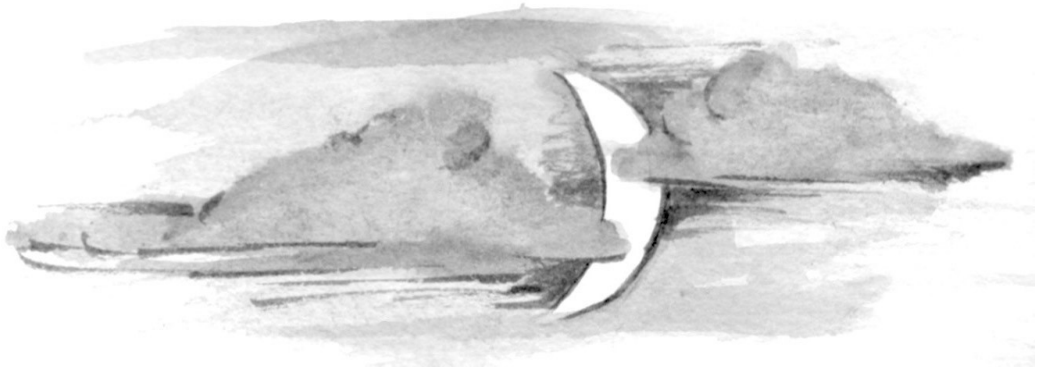
Everyone else hated that last bit of autumn. They moaned about it and wished for it to be over. Douglas, however, saw a beautiful, mysterious world. The fields were filled with shallow ditches of water that reflected the light grey sky. The far trees and low hills above them were almost invisible through the mist. Douglas could only just distinguish their outlines. It was true that everything was a different shade of grey, but it was not true that it was boring and miserable. This was the most magical bit of the entire year, when anything might happen. At night, the winds came and shook the skies, the woods and the house too. Sometimes Douglas woke and did not want to go back to sleep; he imagined he was in a great ship. His cabin rocked from side to side in the storm, buffeted by the gales.



'Can you get some coal?' his dad, John, asked.

He was pulled from his reverie. He turned around, but his dad had gone already, so he didn't answer. Douglas didn't want to go, but he knew he'd better all the same. He padded down the wooden stairs and put on his boots in the porch, picked up the bucket.

Outside, he recognised a familiar sound. His feet crunched the gravel to go round the side of the house. A single call, then others. He tilted his head right back and looked up at sky. It was the geese! They had come back!



Douglas knew these were migrant birds that left in the spring, spent the summer in Iceland, and returned before the winter snows fell there.



That night he heard them circling the house. Their cries sounded like rusty wheels and they drifted in and out of his dreams. The night wasn't stormy, that was why he could hear them clearly. He thought about their journey, the flight across the seas from Iceland, and how they came back to the same field, year after year.

*

Douglas's mother had not come back. She had been ill for two years with a disease called cancer. The doctors kept saying that she would get better, but she never did. She had died almost a year ago now, last November.

He had returned from the hospital that night with his dad. The drive had taken perhaps an hour. It had rained for a whole week and there were deep pools that almost flooded the road completely. It was a back road that could take you to the city hospital, but almost no cars used it nowadays. Douglas didn't remember seeing another vehicle the whole way home.

He had thought that the skies and the trees had cried for his mother; they had all cried, and these were their tears. This was what they had given in their sadness. The car was warm, but he wished he could have got out and walked into the woods, even in the pitch-black outside. He believed that there he would meet his mother. She would come towards him and everything would be all right, everything would be as it once was.

But they drove on, mile after mile through the strange darkness and the floods, and he felt enclosed in a cocoon, as though he was wrapped in wool and didn't even know if he could move his hands or his feet. And afterwards, he wasn't sure if he and his dad had spoken or not. He only remembered the darkness and the floods and the warm car, and it was as if he was not really there at all.

In the hospital, his mother had whispered '*Douglas*,' and he had reached out and held her for a long time. She was still

his mum. Her voice was just the same. And her face was still beautiful. But illness had aged her.

At first, when she had told him she was unwell, she hadn't seemed different at all. How could she be dying then? That was why he had believed the doctors when they said she would get better; she had never looked ill for the whole first year. She used to love running with Douglas. He would always win, partly because she always started laughing.

But in the weeks before she went to hospital for the last time, it was difficult for her to even get up the stairs. He had believed they would find what was wrong and she would get back to her old self again, that everything would be all right again.

But then the doctors had stopped saying that. He wanted to believe just the same that one day he'd find her, as she had been before, out there in the woods. They'd run together and laugh again, and they'd go looking for the geese.

*

Douglas woke up early and knew he had to go outside. He wanted to look out for the geese after last night. The room was chilly, but that didn't matter. He slipped out of bed and got dressed, quietly opened the door and crept downstairs. He did not want his dad to know he was going out. He put on his boots and clicked the back door shut behind him. There wasn't a single sound in the world. The neighbours who lived in the houses on each side were still asleep: the curtains in their grey stone houses closed.

He walked down to the bottom of the long garden, past all the old apple trees, to the little stile that crossed the fence into the field. He liked moving quietly, feeling he could step so softly he disturbed nothing at all.

The geese were nestled in the long grass, some still asleep, others looking around with their golden-yellow eyes. They were called greylags and had grey feathers edged with white, orange beaks and oddly pink legs. It was hard to spot them in the fields since they were camouflaged so well in the haze of the early morning light. Douglas stood and watched them for a while. Then he took a path down the field. He felt the rain on his face, not really rain but more a mist of pearly drops, feathery soft against his skin; the year was still not cold. After a while, the quiet was broken by a strange noise from the long grass – a squabbling sound, like nothing he had heard before.

