

Starlings

By

Norma Allen

Even though he shivered in the cold wind blowing along the front, the child would not move from the seat. The whipped up waves were sending cascades of water onto the prom, dark clouds were gathering and people hurried away.

‘Let’s go home for supper now. Nan will be waiting. It’s your favourite.’ Evan held his hand out to the child.

‘No. Rhys stay. Birds.’ He shrugged away from his grandfather and pointed up.

‘They’re starlings, Rhys, getting ready to rest for the night.’ The child did not turn his head or speak.

The starlings were gathering in the dusk — rising and falling, weaving and turning, forming spirals in the air. More and more birds came and joined in the dance until it seemed the whole of the sky was full of their ever-changing synchronised movement.

The child remained silent, mesmerised — unaware of anything else around him. They’d stayed there until the last of the birds had dropped and settled under the pier. Only then did the boy allow Evan to take his hand and lead him home.

Sarah was peering out of the front window as they came up the path.

‘There you are, at last. What were you thinking, keeping the child out in this cold wind? He’ll catch his death.’

‘Sorry, love. We were watching the murmuration. He wouldn’t come away.’

Supper was on the table but the child pushed it aside. He fetched paper and began to draw. Sarah sighed and put the food to keep warm. They didn’t want to have to deal with one of Rhys’s tantrums.

It was perhaps half an hour before the child put down his pen and looked up. He did not show them the drawing but pushed it to one side.

Evan picked up the paper and saw with some surprise that the meticulous, seemingly random tiny marks the child had made with a black biro, revealed themselves as a sky full of swirling and looping birds.

‘Why Rhys, this is wonderful.’ He showed the drawing to Sarah. ‘See, love it’s the starlings.’

She nodded, adjusting her glasses to look more closely. ‘The boy’s got talent, he really has.’

She bent down to Rhys. ‘Clever boy, you’ve drawn the starlings.’

Rhys ignored her and carried on wolfing down his food.

All these years later Evan still had that first drawing displayed in the little box- room where Rhys had slept when he stayed.

That had been the first time. The child would agitate to go and see the starlings every evening he was with them. Not that he called them starlings. Try as they might they could not get Rhys to say that word. It was always, ‘Birds. See birds.’

He took him up to the prom at dusk whenever he could. Rhys always came back to draw what he’d seen. It kept him occupied for hours. Of course, as spring came the display ceased. The birds had flown off for the summer. The boy had not understood. He was often angry. At the time he and Sarah had realised that their grandchild was somehow ‘different’. Their daughter, Bethan, had been defensive.

‘He’s just late talking, that’s all, Mam. Bryn says he’ll soon catch up.’

He didn’t though and eventually the diagnosis came. Rhys was autistic. He’d need extra care all his life. At first Bethan would not accept it.

‘I’m not having that — those doctors can be wrong. I know my own child. He just wants extra attention and I’ll give it to him. He’ll be fine, you’ll see.’

When he wasn’t, she became convinced it was all her fault.

‘I should never have drunk wine in the early months. I can’t imagine why I did.’

‘But you didn’t even know you were pregnant then, love.’ Sarah would try to soothe her. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing to do with that.’

‘What is it to do with then, Mam? It must have been because I didn’t bond with him at first. Yes, that’s it.’

Bryn, Bethan’s husband struggled with the knowledge that his boy would never be the son he wanted. Inevitably, their relationship suffered. Things became worse between them as the child’s demands and challenging behaviour grew.

‘We can’t look after him properly, Beth. Rhys will have to go into a home. He’ll be better off there and we can get on with our lives. Maybe have another child.’

‘Our Rhys is not going into any home. How can you even think such a thing, Bryn? We’ll manage.’

In the end Bryn had left and they had eventually divorced. Although he paid maintenance for the child, he did not want to have anymore to do with his son and soon moved away from the area.

They had supported their daughter as much as they could. Rhys was often difficult but he was their kin and they loved him. They would have him to stay to give her a break now and then. But the child’s frustrations grew and as he became older and stronger he became more unmanageable. Eventually, he’d been found a place in a special school. It was nearly an hour’s drive away but the child was picked up and dropped off each day by minibus. They’d been assured that this would be the best way to help Rhys and it was. He was calmer, spoke a little more and was happy enough if he had a pencil in his hand.

This evening, Evan, passing down the prom on his way to the club, saw that the murmuration had begun. It was cold but clear and dry, the setting sun a golden backdrop to the display. Many others had come to see the sight, wondering at the ability of the birds never to collide. Scientists would be able to explain it but to most people it was as if they had some

mysterious signalling system. Evan had seen it many times but he couldn't resist sitting on the seat to watch. That's what had brought it all back to him, of course.

When the boy was getting towards secondary age he'd been offered a place for the following year in an excellent residential school for youngsters on the autistic spectrum on the outskirts of London. There, his needs would be met and his talent for drawing nurtured. Bethan was distraught at first.

'It's so far away. I'll hardly ever see him. I can't let him go.'

Sarah, ever the practical one, had said. 'Maybe, when the time comes, you could move over there to be near him — sell your house here and rent a flat perhaps. You'd easily get secretarial work. Not that we want you to go, love but it seems it's the best way for Rhys.'

'I agree,' Evan had said, even though he hated the thought of their only child leaving. 'We need to think of the boy. It's a wonderful opportunity for him. And it's not the other end of the earth, we can visit and keep in touch.'

That had been the plan for a few months until Sarah became ill.

'You're looking tired, love,' he'd said one day, noticing how pale and thin she was.

'I'm fine, don't fuss.'

'Why not have a check up with the doc? Can't do any harm.'

Reluctantly, she'd agreed. The night before the appointment she'd told him she'd found a lump in her breast a few months before.

'I didn't want to worry you and there's been a lot of more important things to think about with Rhys and Bethan. It'll just be a cyst, you'll see.'

It wasn't a cyst but cancer and by then at an advanced stage. There was nothing to be done except keep Sarah comfortable for whatever time she had left.

Bethan sold her house and moved in with them. It had been difficult with Rhys but he'd provided some distraction from the pain the family were in.

They hadn't said much to Rhys except that Nan was ill. When he came home from school he'd go up to her bedroom and sit by the bed doing his drawings.

Sarah had slipped away early one morning within a few months of her diagnosis. Her body had been moved while the boy was at school. They had tried to explain to the child but he hadn't understood. It had been distressing to see him searching for her in all the rooms in the house, looking under the beds and in the cupboards and wardrobes.

'Where Nan, Granfer? Where Nan?' he kept shouting.

Evan had struggled with the loss of his beloved Sarah. They'd been together since they were teenagers. He'd dreaded the time when Bethan and the boy would be gone too.

'I won't leave you, Dad, not now,' she'd said, 'Rhys can go to his new school. I'll just have to travel to see him when I can.'

‘No, Beth, I won’t let you do that. You need to be near your son. I’ll come up and visit you sometimes, stay in a hotel or something if your flat isn’t big enough.’ Eventually, she’d agreed.

At first, Evan had found it hard to come home from work each night to an empty house. He’d often stop at the pub, meaning only to stay for one then find himself staggering home at closing time. He’d wander around the rooms, searching — much like the child had done, even talking to Sarah at times.

Bethan kept in touch, telephoning most days, telling him how well Rhys was doing and how she’d found a good job. She came home some weekends and he even went to stay with her. Once, she’d taken him to visit Rhys at his school. It was a well-run place and the youngsters looked happy but his grandson, now a tall young lad, didn’t seem to recognise him at all.

‘It’s because he’s not expecting to see you here, Dad. When I get a chance we’ll come to Wales, I’m sure once he sees your home, he’ll remember.’ All the same it had hurt.

She’d never brought him though. Her visits became further apart as did the phone calls. I’ve got to let her live her own life, he thought and I must get on with mine.

Friends and neighbours were good to him and eventually, even after he’d retired, he found a way of filling his days. He had his garden to tend, walks by the sea, evenings playing dominoes or darts down the club and each year on his birthday a visit from Bethan.

She had phoned last night.

‘Sorry, I haven’t been in touch for a while Dad. Just rang to wish you a happy seventieth birthday for tomorrow. Are you doing anything special?’

‘It’ll be a quiet one as usual, I expect. How is Rhys? Is he still working in that art gallery?’

‘He’s doing well and selling a lot of his work.’

‘That’s good. Any chance of you coming down for a visit? You know your and Rhys’s rooms are always ready.’ At one time she never failed to come for his birthday.

‘We’re so busy, Dad. We’ll manage it one of these days. Do you still go up the prom to watch the starlings?’

No visit this year then. Well, he was too old to make a fuss about his birthday. He’d arranged to see a couple of mates down the club. He’d go on down once he’d watched the birds for a bit.

He didn’t notice them until they were close, until Rhys had sat down beside him on the seat and the young man had tugged at his sleeve.

‘Look, Granfer — starlings!’