

Untitled

Emily Kneale, Year 8

Beams of light shone through my window. I recalled three swallows flying past. On September 19th 1893 something good was going to happen; although I couldn't really trust my bird theory every day. Peering over the end of my bed, I noticed my four brothers and sisters still fast asleep, living in their dreams.

A black and white sash was hung over the banister railings. Posters, banners and books were spread out on the floor.

"Give women the vote," I read upside down. A shriek brought me back to the living room carpet.

"Richard Morrison, upstairs. Quickly." I hurried upstairs, trying not to trip over my feet. Mother's red curls were tied in a huge knot on top of her pale face. Her blue eyes stared down at me. Her white bony fingers sat sternly on her hips. Mother's dark dress loomed over me, the armband the same colour as her face.

"Look Richard, I need you to stay home and look after your brothers and sisters. Being the oldest, you're the only one I can rely on. Charlie is on the verge of starting school but he wouldn't be able to look after the twins as well as himself," Mother said sternly as if she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"But what about Papa?" I asked.

"He has a busy day. He's going to the Robinson's house to operate on Mr Robinson."

I snapped. "Why are you never at home anymore? Mothers are meant to be there for their families, not marching through the streets and taking part in protests outside the government building. Most of my friends' mums don't wear white armbands. Why are you different?"

Mother stormed downstairs, leaving me in silence and frustration. Through the window, I glanced over the back streets of Christchurch. It was just another day and another responsibility.

I didn't understand why when Father was at home, he spent most of his time arguing with her. Normally, my father's eyes are subtle and true, but now they're solemn and tired. His brown hair is never brushed and his equipment is dirty. My father is the town's best doctor and he works hard, but why are he and Mother always arguing? Every so often I had sneaked down at night and heard them confronting each other. It always seemed to be about women and their rights, but Mother never shares anything with me about her work and her beliefs. When my aunt and grandma used to come and visit they would talk about a woman knowing their place in a house. I think that is what mother is protesting about.

Later that day, at dinner, we were all at the table. All except Mother. A feeling of dread was in the bottom of my gut. She had run away and it was all my fault. I didn't know what to do. I was on my last mouthful of bread and butter when the front door slammed. I could hear shoes scurrying across the slate and knew at once it was Mother.

She was hysterical. She was vociferous. I'd never seen her in such a state. I sunk deeper into my seat.

"All I've done has paid off! Next elections, I'm going with you James, to vote for our Prime Minister." She looked straight at Papa.

"I don't understand, Mum," I said quietly.

Mum explained: "New Zealand began a democratic voting system in 1853. Only men like your father were allowed to vote. People always said women are meant for the house and shouldn't have a say. People like me have been protesting for decades, and we finally caught the government's attention. Today we became the first country in the world to give women a chance to vote. By twenty votes to eighteen!"

So, the swallows were right today, and I think tomorrow is going to be even better.