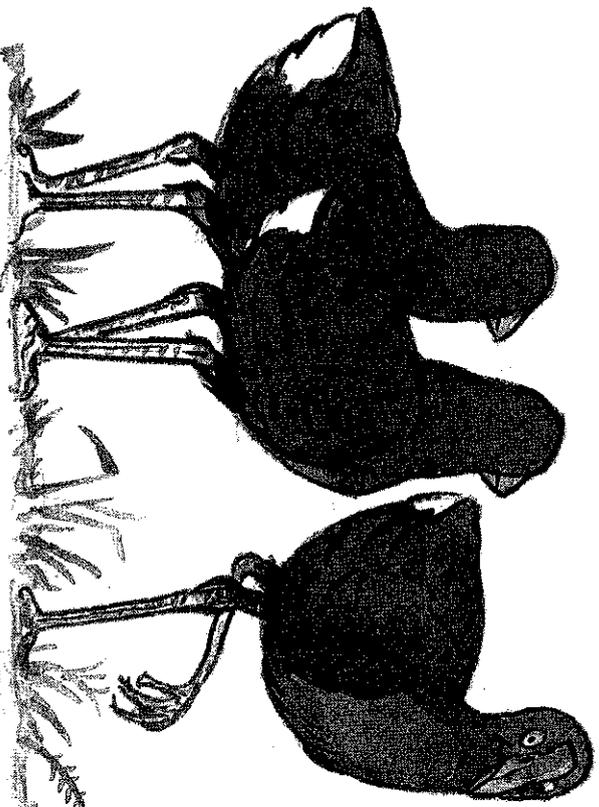


Mrs Flicktail<sup>5</sup> is not so calm. She wants to leave the nest immediately to go to Pecker, and she wants Mum to come with her.

“But who will egg-sit?” says Mum.

They put their heads together and begin clucking softly. *Clicketty-clacketty-clack* go their beaks. *Yaketty-yaketty-yak*. Usually, they talk about egg teeth and Crimson Eyelid Syndrome and the best way to regurgitate insects. Today, though, there is whispering about “mistakes of the past.”



I catch the phrase “A tragic event.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand.

“I’ll tell you when you’re more responsible,” says Mum.

“I *am* responsible,” I reply.

So Mrs Flicktail says, “Good. In that case it’s your turn to egg-sit.”

“He’s far too young,” protests Mum.

But Mrs Flicktail says, “Nonsense, Esmerelda, he’ll be fine,” and pushes her off the nest.



They flutter away, leaving me staring at the eggs. They are a really ugly, yellowish-beige colour with horrible brown blotches at the big end. I can't believe that I started life like this. It's just too embarrassing. I'm trying to lower my backside over the eggs without completely losing my dignity, when who should come wading past... but Indigo Tuk-Tuk and her sisters!

The bird of my dreams stands on one foot watching me. It's as if she's waiting. If only I were brave like Porp, I would fly right over. I would sweep her off her foot. I might even kiss her on the beak. Instead, I am paralysed by a terrible sense of duty. If I ditch the nest, the eggs will freeze, the chicks will die... and whose fault will it be? Mine! I am also a teensy bit worried that my backside is not big enough to cover all eleven eggs. Then again, it might actually be *too* big. If I sit down too heavily, I could break the shells. Why are there no instructions?

I start to get panicky. I push out my wings, fluff

up my feathers and try to stick my butt up in the air to make room for the eggs underneath, but the manoeuvre goes horribly wrong and I end up belly-flopping. My head flick-flacks over the side of the nest, into the mud. Luckily nothing cracks, but I'm sure I hear Indigo sniggering as she moves about pecking reeds. The next two hours are the most uncomfortable of my life, and I am not just talking about the eggs.

16 OCTOBER

## A Horrible Thought

Today, I have a horrible thought. "Mum," I say, "are you absolutely sure that you can tell which eggs are yours?"

Mum shifts her weight and checks for cracks. Any day now, she's expecting them to hatch.

"Of course," she says.  
"That's funny," I say, "because they all look equally revolting to me."

"Darling," says Mum, "I am not going to muddle up your siblings with Billy's, okay? I knew which eggs were mine last time, and I know this time."

"But last time it was easy," I say. "There was only one egg. Me." I pause. "Right?"

I can hardly believe it, but Mum's red eyes fill with tears. "Have you ever wondered why you have no brothers or sisters?" she whispers.

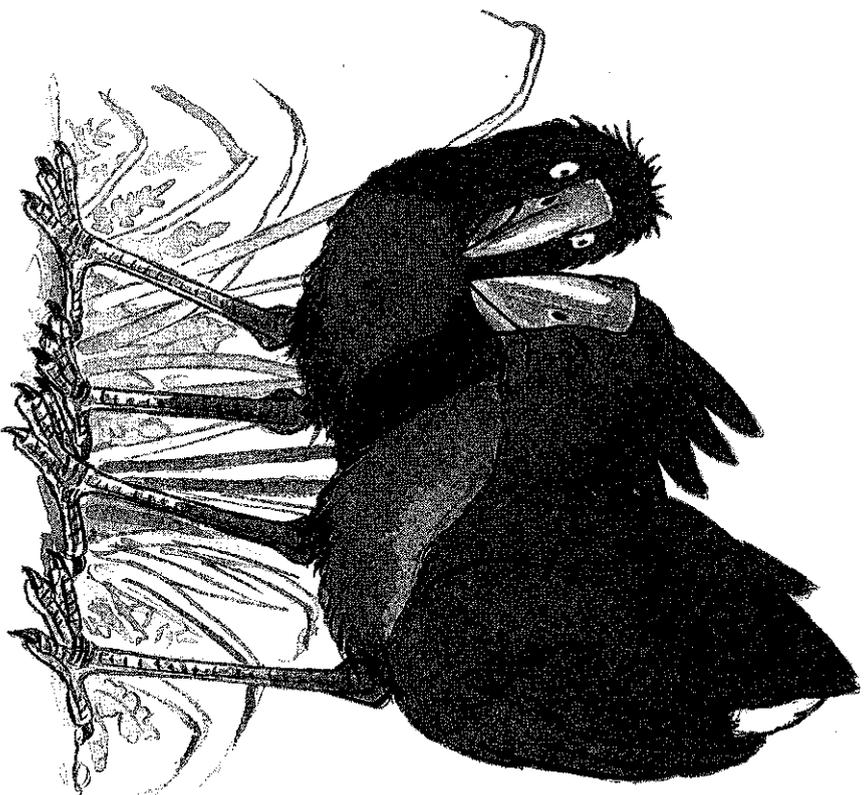
I can't honestly say that I have, but now that I stop to think about it, I guess it is a little odd. Porp has nine, with another six on the way.

"Did something happen?" I ask.

In a voice so soft it's little more than a chirp, Mum replies, "Harrier hawk raid." She confesses to me that she had left the nest – just for two minutes, and only out of extreme hunger – but it was enough. I was the only surviving egg.

"You mean I nearly died?" I stammer, and Mum dips her beak in a nod.

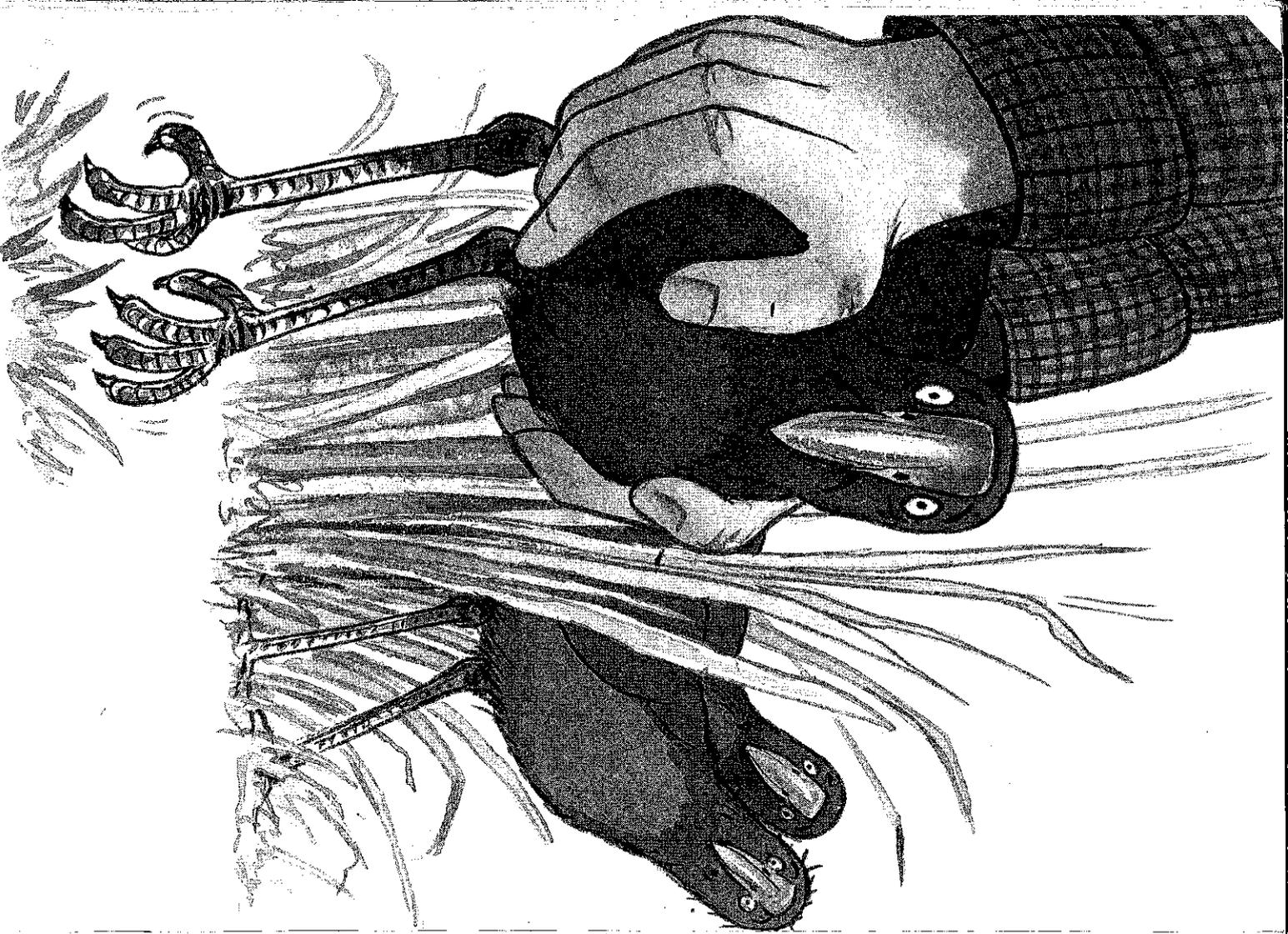
Cripes. Something like that really makes you think. "It could have happened to anyone,"



I comfort her. "You musn't blame yourself."

Mum clucks softly. "You're growing up, little one," she says.

And as I stand there at the swamp's edge, my wing around my weeping mother, I know that it is true.



19 OCTOBER

## The Worst Day of My Life

It's one day before the Swim-Run-Fly, and disaster strikes. Billy gets returned! We hide behind a clump of reeds and watch as a furry-faced human places Billy in the middle of the field and tiptoes off.

"Goodbye, little birdie," says the human.

Little birdie! Porp rolls his eyes. We both agree that human beings are nuts.

"They can't help it, though," says Porp kindly.

"Just look at them. No feathers. No wings.

No beak."

It's true, poor things. Their knees even bend forwards instead of backwards.

As soon as the coast is clear, Mrs Flicktail flies at Billy and hugs him so hard, I am hopeful he will be at least partially suffocated. Indigo swoons at his feet.

"Puke," says Porp. I can only agree.

When the flapping and clucking and hugging has calmed down a bit, Billy tells the crowd that he is now a Television Star, and has been trained to put his beak inside a plastic bag containing Munchie Crunchie potato chips and pretend to eat them.

"What are you *talking* about?" says his mother.

"Is that all?" says Porp, but Indigo goggles her eyes at Billy, and says, "WOW!"

Whatever Munchie Crunchie potato chips are, they have ruined my chances with Indigo forever. Somehow, I always knew that that potato would come back to haunt me.

Mrs Crake squawks with happiness. "It's wonderful to have you back, Billy," she says.

"I do hope you'll feel rested enough to compete in the Swim-Run-Fly tomorrow."

"Sure," says Billy, and now I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt – I am doomed.

20 OCTOBER

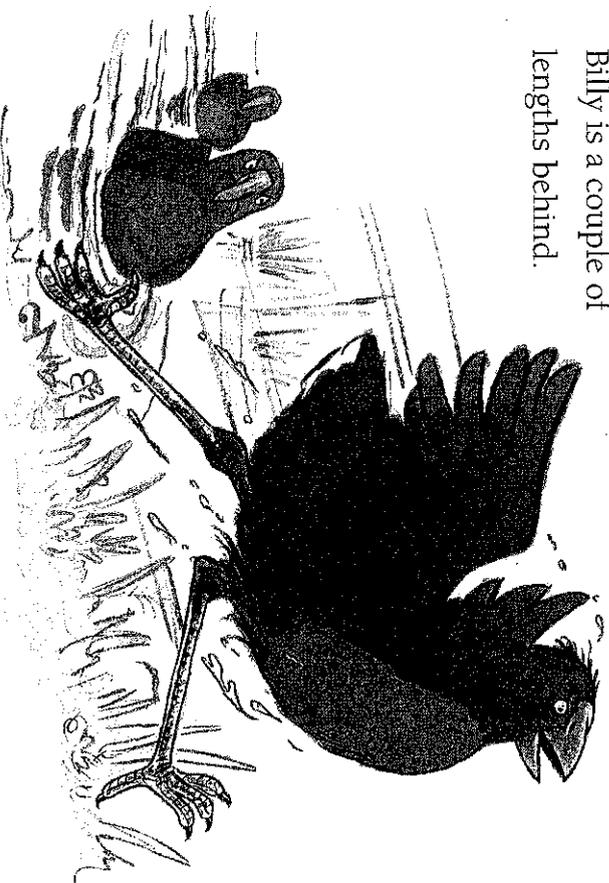
## The Swim-Run-Fly

As I take my place at the water's edge, I feel sick. Maybe I shouldn't have had that extra worm for breakfast.

"On your marks . . ." says Mrs Crake. "Get set . . . GO!"

The water is murky and full of weed, but I swim like I have never swum before. It only takes a few seconds to overtake Pecker, who is on the lookout for Old Plastic Bags.

Of course, Porp passes me soon after, which is as it should be, but amazingly, Billy is a couple of lengths behind.



I feel a glimmer of hope. Perhaps he is out of condition . . . too many Munchie Crunchies?

Could this be the Revenge of the Potato?

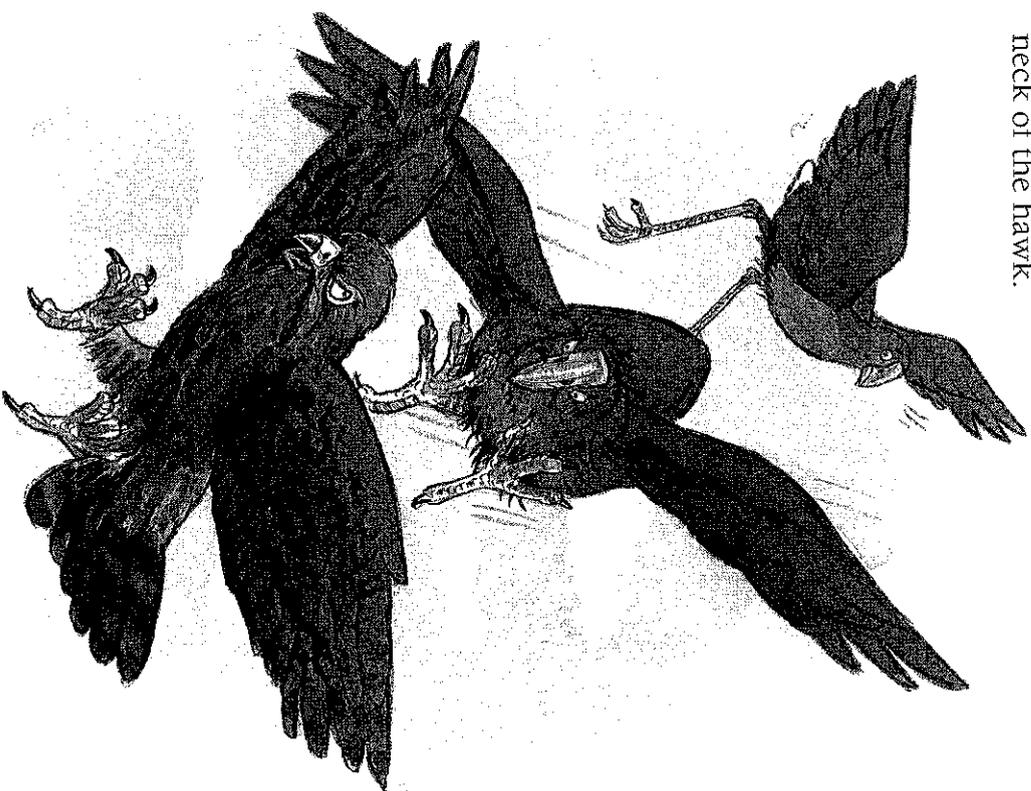
I exit the water at top speed and run for my life, lifting my feet as high as they'll go and flapping my wings for extra speed. By the time I reach the final mark, I can hardly believe it: I've overtaken Porp as well! If only I don't disgrace myself in the Fly event . . .

Thoughts of Indigo drive me to super-avian speed. I flap like mad. I'm airborne! And – even better – I'm winning!

I never realised how beautiful it is up here in the sky, close to the clouds, with the cool wind whistling round my belly. Far below, I can make out the potato field, the swamp . . . even Mumm's nest. I waggle my dangling legs and squawk in greeting as I pass over, but suddenly a huge, black shadow falls over me. Something swoops down to my right, out of the corner of my eye I see what it is. And it's heading right for Mumm's nest!



I glance behind. Billy is gaining on me, but the finishing line is in sight. I have a split-second to make my decision, and I do it. I drop like a stone. Beak thrust forward, claws at the ready, I whizz, screaming through the air, aiming straight for the neck of the hawk.



Thwack! Brown feathers fill my vision; I knock him off course. Unbelievably, he changes direction and swoops away. I crash-land in a clump of reeds right beside the nest. When I open my eyes, there stands Mum, her eyes filled with tears.

"Never in the history of this swamp," she whispers, "have we seen the likes of that."

In the distance there is a cheer as Billy crosses the finishing line, but I know that it doesn't matter. I have chosen loyalty above glory. I have saved the chicks. And, right on cue, we hear a *crritch!* A tiny, fluffy black head with big black eyes and a teeny white beak pokes through the shell.

"Oh!" gasps Mum. "He's adorable!"



I am in no way certain that the chick belongs to Mum and not Mrs Flicktail, but I decide not to mention this. Billy is still my arch enemy but if we have to share a brother or sister or two, so be it. Mum is right. This little guy is *cute*.

**10 NOVEMBER**

## How I Nearly Become Mince-meat

I'm just slurping the last of my breakfast worm this morning when something happens that changes my life forever. I look up and see a pair of eyes staring at me. They're small, beady, mean-looking eyes. Then I see teeth, white and flashing.

"Stoat!" I shout. "Stoat!"

The chicks screech in terror; Mum freezes with fear; all the blue drains from Dad's face. I just know we're going to be eaten alive, when suddenly I hear a terrific shrieking and squawking.



It's Billy Flicktail and his brothers! They come charging towards the stoat, flapping, screeching and pecking.

The noise brings out more Flicktails, then Porp and his family, then all the Tuk-Tuks as well.

"After him!" squawks Dad, so off we race, driving the beast ahead of us, all the way down to the river. There is a flash of brown fur and the stoat disappears from view. I can't believe it. Billy Flicktail has saved my life.

"Thanks," I gulp.

He shrugs and says, "Aw, it was nothing." He has his wing round Indigo, but that's okay. Some things in life you just have to let go.

## 17 DECEMBER

### Violet

Today is the last day of term and Mrs Crake has an important lesson to share. She tells us that pukeko have succeeded where other species have failed because of our ability to cooperate. Alone, we are nothing. Together, we are strong.

"It's true," I say, and I can hardly believe it but Indigo's younger sister Violet waggles

her tail-feathers at me. Violet has an almost iridescent sheen. Her beak is already bright scarlet, and her legs a gorgeous shade of orange.

"I'll always remember what you did with that potato," she says. "It was cool."

My heart beats fast beneath my feathers.

I pluck up all my courage and ask her if she'll do the Screech and Squawk with me at the Tuk-Tuk New Year's Eve dance, and you know what she says?

"Okay."

My life is complete. Oh, yes. Sometimes it's good to be a pukeko.

