A SNAKE AND A FEATHERED BIRD

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BEN

1890

HIS MOTHER STOOD IN THE SHADE OF A LARGE OAK, DEEP IN the forest where the mushrooms grew. It was dawn, cool and green. The birds twittered and darted like black sparks through the branches. With her back to him, she crouched to pick the mushrooms. She sang.

À la claire fontaine

M'en allant promener

His legs wouldn't move, but still he drew closer. The earth beneath his feet seemed to close up, shrinking the space between them. Her voice grew louder.

J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle

Que je m'y suis baigné

She picked and picked, but when he was close, he saw her basket was empty, and it wasn't mushrooms she picked at but her ankle. She smiled.

Look.

She lifted the hem of her skirt and revealed two punctures, each the size of a peppercorn. She laid a finger on one of the marks, bruised and spongy under her touch, and dug into the wound, knuckle deep. Clear juices eased out the sides. With a twist of her finger, she scooped out flesh.

In her palm, a glistening piece of orange.

She let it fall to the ground then pulled at her collar, where another gash stretched along her neck. She dug into it with two fingers and a thumb, pulling out a longer slithery piece of orange and letting it fall.

Do you not see, she said, moving her wet fingers to a tear in the side of her bodice, where her side had split open and wept a murky syrup down her dress. She pushed both hands into her ribs, dug out fistfuls of pulpy fruit and held them out to Ben. The juices ran down her arms and peppered the ground like soft rain.

Look.

Ben opened his eyes to the stain on the ceiling, the spider in its web in the corner. He sat up, thrumming inside. Lily was gone.

Wrapped in his blanket, he opened the door to a blinding white world. Lily's footprints, already filled with snow, led down the stairs and into the alley. With the icy slap of air, he knew he couldn't leave her with a wound that could fester. Maybe he'd decided it while he dreamed, or before that, when Mae talked of sparrows.

He thought of Mr. Stenhouse, stuck without a farmhand when extra hands were needed most. Ben would have to be quick.

There were two whisky jugs on the table. He put on his boots and coat, pulled on the tight hat, then grabbed the heaviest jug and followed Lily's footprints.

After his mother died, he'd shown his father all the things they could have traded for a doctor's visit—eggs, chickens, the painted bowl, jars of preserved blackberries, braids of garlic, a chair. He yelled at his father's retreating back, "We don't even need chickens!" And his father only waved him away while keeping the worst to himself: that he had all that money sitting hidden and useless.

Voices came from beyond Lily's alley, and when he turned onto Wharf Street, it seemed the whole city was gathered there. In both

directions, men were shovelling and shouting. Steaming horses carted off snow in wagons, their iron wheels crunching. Children with frost-burned cheeks climbed the white hills piled along the sidewalks.

Ben passed it all.

"Hey, kid!" someone yelled. He pointed at the wall of the ironworks, where shovels were lined up. "Grab a digger!"

"Sorry," Ben called back. "I have to find someone first."

He was right to think Lily had gone to The Jug. When he opened the door, he saw her sitting at the bar with Oland, a stack of playing cards between them.

"Little Mouse," she said. "Come."

The place was filled with winter light and empty of customers. Chairs were still turned over on the tables. A low fire burned in the grate. Lily pushed a half-eaten plate of stew toward him.

"I thought you might have left by now," she said, rubbing his arm. She was pale, the bloodstain on her side a wet and muddy bloom.

"I'm going to go find a doctor," he said, taking a bite of stew. "Will you be here a while?"

Lily looked at the whisky jug and leaned back in her bar stool. "That may be a fair enough trade, if I needed a doctor in the first place."

Oland leaned in, his droopy brown eyes on Ben's. "You get that doc, friend. Look at her. All pasty."

Ben nodded, downed another bite, and left.

He remembered the brick house from his walk with Will. Green shutters, black steps, a brass plate by the door. *Dr. C. M. Silman*. He used the knocker, then waited, hunched under his coat and blowing on his hands.

A woman answered, very small and round and almost entirely lacking a chin. She wore a black dress and a lacy black cap on her grey head.

"I'm looking for the doctor," Ben said.

"Yes." She looked up at him. Her pale eyes bulged slightly, as if she blew a trumpet. "What is the problem?"

Ben began to explain. As he did, the woman wrapped a black shawl around her shoulders, grabbed a leather bag from a table next to the door, then held out her hand for the jug. Ben gave it over and she popped the cork and sniffed.

"The doctor is tending to someone," she said. "I'm Mrs. Silman."

She led the way past the shovelling men and the shouting children, her steps swift for a woman so short, her black lace cap fluttering. When they arrived at The Jug, she walked in, set down her bag, and said to Lily, "Let's see your trouble, my girl."

"Oh hello, Mrs. Silman." Lily was smoking a dark cigarette. She held it between her lips while she undid her bodice and her corset. She pulled them aside to show the flame-pink gash, held together with chicken-scratch stitches.

"Sloppy job, this," Mrs. Silman said. "It's all dirty and inflamed." She opened a small jar of clear liquid and doused a clean flannel rag. "And how'd it happen?"

"My friend Mary." Lily watched the woman's small hands dab her side. "I owed her money."

"I see." Mrs. Silman opened another jar, the contents dark, but orange when she painted it on the wound.

"She only meant to tear the dress," said Lily.

"Yes."

Mrs. Silman worked quickly and gently as she unwound a spool of gauze and wrapped it around Lily's ribcage. When she was done, she buttoned her back up like one would a child.

"Now," she said, holding Lily's gaze. "You don't want this to turn foul, my girl. No baths, no fumes, no men in your bed."

"I don't generally take baths."

"And you should go home and rest."

"Hmm." Lily sucked long on her cigarette. "Like a prisoner."

"No." Mrs. Silman brushed aside a strand of Lily's hair. "Like someone with a badly stitched stab wound. You can come and go as you please, I only ask you rest in between the wanderings."

Mrs. Silman snapped her black bag shut and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. She looked at Ben. "We'll know in a few days how it fares."

"A few days?" Ben looked outside, where the sun had already lowered to the roofs of the buildings.

"Get her some Pink's Ointment from the chemist and come fetch me if the wound weeps or reddens." She stopped at the door. "I don't much care for whisky."

They watched her through the window, a bustling form against the white street, skirts and cap and shawl flapping like black feathers. After she turned the corner, Ben's gaze remained stuck there. *A few days*.

"You're proud of yourself, little Mouse," Lily said. "I believe I see a puffed-up chest beneath that old coat." She took a thoughtful drag on her cigarette. "Or is it something else?"

"Of course he's proud, Lily," said Oland. "Stay and have a pint with us, Ben."

Ben turned from the window. Lily's dress was still open and her bandage showing. She absently picked at it with a dirty fingernail. He needed to think.

"Thanks," he said to Oland. "But I was asked to help clear the streets." He ate the last bite of stew and put on his hat. "I'll see you tonight, Lily."

"I'll see you, Mouse."

Ben stepped outside and began walking. Each step brought a thought of Mr. Stenhouse, or one of Lily. If he could, he'd talk to Will, who would be quick to form an opinion and just as quick to share it. Ben was slower at figuring things, a plodder. Still, he knew what Will would say. She'll be fine, Ben. This place isn't for you.

Ben stopped. He turned back and poked his head in the door of The Jug.

"Do you have a penny I could borrow, Lily? I want to send a letter to Mr. Stenhouse."

She smiled at him through the curling strands of smoke. "I'll bring you one tonight, Mouse."

ANGIE ELLIS is a writer from Vancouver Island whose short fiction has appeared in *Narrative*, *Story*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, and other literary journals. Her stories have won the Masters Review Short Story Award, Best of the Net, and Best Small Fictions, and two were longlisted for the CBC Short Story Prize. She has received grants from both the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council. A graduate of the Humber School for Writers program, she has also attended the Humber Summer Workshop. She lives in the Cowichan Valley.