



Snow Angels

Aimee Rutherford

Fable

Dear Mr H.C. Anderson,

I am sure by now you believe you've seen all the world's strange and mythical creatures. But as a fanatic of magical beasts myself, I must tell you, you are much mistaken. Listen please to this particular tale – of what exists, and what I found, in the winter night, at eight years old – and I'm sure you'll come around. Please add these creatures to your list.

Yours sincerely,

A World-Famous Zoologist

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They are nocturnal, and draped in pitch-black feathers, which in moonlight look like silvered cloaks. They are often mistaken for crows, blackbirds, and magpies, especially when it snows; the white flakes get tangled in their wings mid-flight, highlighting their feathers but not their faces. If perchance you saw their human features, you might think they were ghosts.

The creatures of whom I am writing now have only been seen by children. Enchanted by their goodness and imaginations, I think they forget they're not supposed to be seen; they flutter up to windowsills and sit like shy cats, just so that, with their enormous owl-like eyes, they might catch sight of children playing in their rooms at night, inventing games with toys by candlelight. They listen eagerly to the stories whispered from bed to bed, and when the games or tales reach their ends, they simply cannot help themselves; the creatures leap into the air with delighted shrieks and flap around the sky like wild beasts. On hearing them, the children run to

their windows, and squash their noses against the panes to get a better look...

If the snow is light, they might glimpse ghostly forms frosted in snow, see a pair of wings, hear high-pitched cries. Of course, most children think these creatures are either birds or spectres, so they either return to sleep, or suck in breath, scream blue in the face, and run to hide.

Only one child I know was brave enough to see these 'ghosts' and seek them out. She lived in a house by a lonely wood; she was a budding zoologist who went walking often, in search of beasts, through the trees and the mud. By seven years old, she'd discovered squirrels, and badgers, and owls, and beetles, and foxes, and faeries, and birch elves, and river nymphs, and even the dung of a Jabberwock. Thank goodness she'd never discovered a witch, or indeed the Jabberwock of those woods; if she had it might have put her off her exploring, but instead she ventured as far as possible, drawing and recording whatever she could.

This child was talking to herself one night, when the snow was falling thick and fast; she was talking out loud about the animals she had found, when she heard the SNAP! SNAP! SNAP! -of what were certainly, terribly, her father's animal traps.

Jumping out of bed, the little girl pulled on her boots, tugged on her coat, put on her mittens and her woolly hat, picked up her notebook and a HB pencil, stuffed them into her rucksack and crept to the window. Looking out, she squinted through a raging storm – the snow drummed loud on the pane and made it hard to see. But the beating of wings was discernible on the ground, of something half human and half-bird trying to break free.

The girl lifted the window and slid down the drainpipe, then tramped through the blizzard which thrust knives of ice at her face – she removed one glove and took out a pencil, approaching the creatures at the fringe of the wood.

Up close, they were fuzzy with down on their faces, with the wild kind eyes of a spooked Shetland horse – and they were trapped in ropes and metal braces, that her father had made to keep rabbits and gnomes off the grass.

She handled her notebook with difficulty – the pages flapped back and forth. She sketched quickly and hastily, when a roaring voice suddenly made her stop.

'P ____!' Her father hollered, from the window she'd left open. 'Don't you dare let those creatures loose!

Remember, they need shooting, P_____, you know that they do, or they'll steal all the veg – don't move!'

He was going to get his shotgun; he'd be hurrying to make it outside before she built up her courage to disobey. But not for the first time, the girl looked at innocent creatures, and after finishing her sketches, and looking back at the closed door of the house, she started to pull at the ropes and undo each brace.

Up they flew from where they'd floundered in snow – three miraculous bird-like ghost-like Unknowns – and after them sounded three bullets in a row. The girl turned around to her furious father, who was red in the face and fighting the snow. Then all went oddly quiet, and by the time he had reached her, the creatures had disappeared, and the winds had ceased to blow.

'I told you,' he spat. 'I told you! I told you not to let them go.'

'They were angels, dad,' the little girl insisted. 'They were angels, not thieves – they have hearts of gold!'

'Hearts of gold,' her father growled. 'Angels – ha! Stop dreaming. They were rabbits, or gnomes. And now you made me miss, you little miss. Now they'll come back and eat everything we grow.'

'They won't,' cried the girl, as he grabbed her hand. She pulled away and pointed at the ground. 'Just look at the marks that they left! Look at their shapes!' Then she showed him her notebook, matched the feathers and faces with the shapes; he held it up to the moonlight and suddenly paled.

Her father looked back and forth from the sky to the page, to the snow and the winged human shapes that they'd made.

'I nearly shot angels,' he whispered, with horror. Then, very gravely, he cast his gun away.

The little girl and her father stared out at the trees, with a sort of wonder that cannot be explained. Then her father broke the traps he'd set with his bare hands, got down on his knees, and started to pray.

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This tale tells of magical creatures, which left snow-angel shapes in the snow. And now this girl, who led her father to kindness, speaks of these creatures to let you know: snow angels exist, and they're wonderful creatures, at risk of animal traps. Let people know that they might shoot angels, and then hunting might finally be banned.