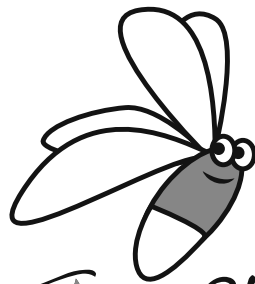




The Midnight Swan

Catherine Fisher



Firefly

1



Seren Rhys is hot and bothered

Buy a sweetbread, buy a ribbon...

Buy a box that will not open.

‘Look! Look at all the stalls! And there are boats on the river!’

Tomos was almost standing up in the pony-cart in excitement; Mrs Villiers grabbed hold of him in alarm as the whole thing swayed. ‘Do keep still, Master Tomos, please! You’ll upset us all into the road!’

Denzil, who was driving, gave a snort of agreement and flicked the reins, so that the pony trotted faster. Heat rippled over the fields.

Tomos slid down. ‘Please, Mamma, can we take

a ride on a boat?’

Lady Mair was pinning the veil on her hat to keep the dust from her face. ‘We’ll be there very soon, dear, and then we’ll see. Calm down now. Look at Seren. She’s being very sensible.’

Seren, sitting on the warm leather seat, glanced up and blinked. She had been so deep in her own thoughts that she hadn’t even realised they had arrived. Now she scrambled up next to Tomos and excitement swelled inside her.

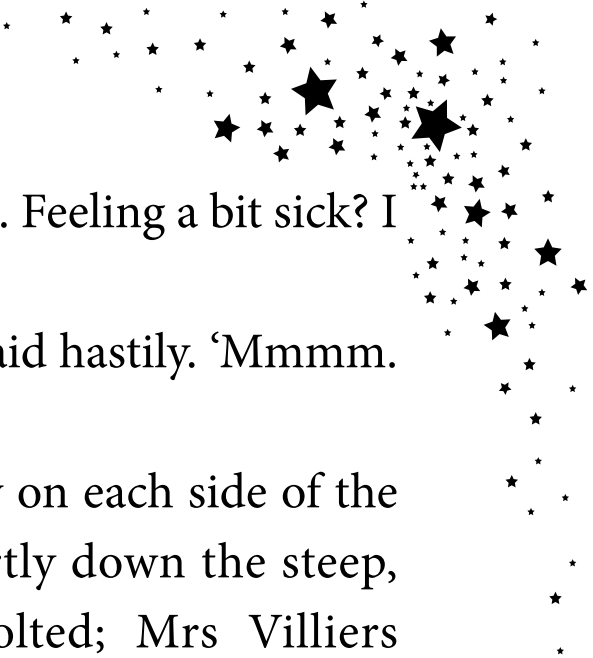
‘Oh, it looks lovely!’

The little town was decked out in all its finery for the Summer Fair. Gold and blue pennants rippled from windows and chimneys, and on the church flagpole a great red dragon flapped in the breeze. From the crowded streets rose all sorts of interesting smells and noises – Seren could hear hawkers crying their wares, the constant bleat of sheep, the lowing of calves and the loud, raw music of a hurdy-gurdy.

‘I could have a toffee apple,’ Tomos said, anxiously. ‘Couldn’t I?’

Lady Mair laughed. She seemed almost as excited as her son. ‘Yes! And so will I.’

Mrs Villiers gave Seren a shrewd glance. ‘You’re



not so chatty as usual, my girl. Feeling a bit sick? I have some ginger pastilles...'

'I'm fine, honestly,' Seren said hastily. 'Mmmm. Smell the honeysuckle!'

The hedges were high now on each side of the cart as Denzil eased it expertly down the steep, rutted lane. The wheels jolted; Mrs Villiers clutched the seat and held on.

'Lord! How dry and broken the road is!'

It was true. There had been no rain for weeks. The harvest would be a fine one, and the hedgerows were ablaze with flowers, but the water in the well at Plas-y-Fran was a long way down and Captain Jones had been worried about his thirsty cattle.

Tomos slid beside Seren. He said quietly, 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'There is. You've been looking forward to this for weeks.'

'I am!'

'Not as much as you were yesterday.'

She frowned. But it was right he should know. 'Well, maybe. You see, it's the Crow.'

Tomos glanced round. He moved a little closer.

‘He’s not flown away or got himself broken, has he?’

‘No. It’s worse than that. Remember that letter that came yesterday? Addressed to me?’

Tomos nodded. ‘Yes! You never get letters. You said it was from a girl you knew in the orphanage and...’

‘That was a bit of a lie.’ Seren went red. ‘Well, a complete lie. Actually it was this.’

She pulled the letter out of her pocket and handed it to him, and then watched as he read it quickly, while Mrs Villiers was busy swatting flies.

The dirty envelope contained a scrap of paper that looked as if it had been torn from the bottom of a printed page. Scribbled on it was a hasty message.

Dear Miss Seren

I would be most grateful if you would pass on the enclosed letter to my brother. It is not good news. Please look after him, as I cannot come at present in person, as I have certain, er, personal difficulties. I will be there as soon as they let me out.

I remain

Yours most sincerely
Enoch Marchmain

Tomos whistled. 'The Crow's brother? That tall thin man?

Seren nodded.

'So what does it mean?'

Seren took the paper from him and tried to look like her favourite detective. 'Watson, you know my methods. First, you must examine the envelope.' She turned it over. 'Observe. The address is written with a pencil, and the writing is very scribbly. Notice the hurried S and the almost illegible Y...'

'Seren, stop being Sherlock Holmes and just...'

'So I deduce that it was written secretly, in a cramped place, with a small blunt pencil by a left-handed man who was very worried. Then there's the postmark ... London.'

'So...'

'And this.' She turned over the note and showed him the edge of the printing on the back. 'There's something faint here. I've gone over the letters in pen. I had to use a magnifying glass to make them out, but that's what they say.'

The letters looked like a pale ink stamp with some so faint they had vanished away.

ARSHALS A PR S N

Tomos shrugged. 'It makes no sense.'

Seren tried not to look superior. 'If you had read Mr Dickens novels it would.'

'I'm going to read them. One day.'

'Look. If I do this...' She took out a pencil and, as the cart rattled into the cobbled town, she wrote the letters M, E I and O.

'Oh!' Tomos stared. 'I see!'

Now the words were quite clear.

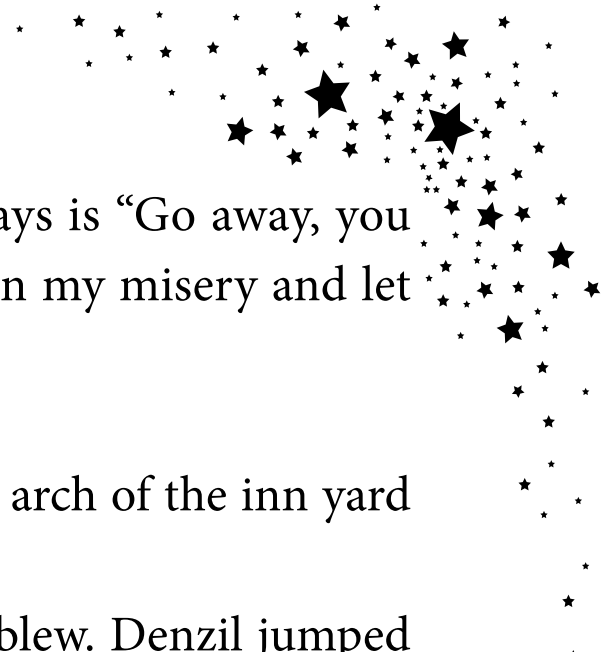
MARSHALSEA PRISON

'That's really clever, Seren. But prison! Does it means he's done some ghastly murder?'

Seren shook her head. 'No, silly. The Marshalsea is a place where you go if you can't pay your debts. Poor Mr Enoch must have run out of money. Maybe that's why he wrote to his brother.' She sat back, and then said, 'There was a sealed letter inside the envelope and I gave it to the Crow. He put on his little spectacles and read it.'

'What was in it?'

'I don't know.' She frowned. 'As soon as he'd read it he locked himself in the wardrobe and now



he won't come out. All he says is "Go away, you stupid girl. Leave me alone in my misery and let me die in peace"

'Oh dear,' Tomos said.

The cart rattled under the arch of the inn yard and stopped.

The pony whickered and blew. Denzil jumped down and stretched.

Lady Mair looked at Tomos and Seren. 'Now, this is my plan. We will meet back here at the inn for tea at four before we go home. The Captain will ride back with us. He's already here with Angus. Oh, I do hope Angus wins the big prize!'

Tomos grinned. Angus was the Plas-y-Fran champion bull. 'He should. He's enormous!'

'You never know,' Denzil muttered darkly, handing Mrs Villiers down. 'Lot of handsome cattle this year, I hear.'

Seren jumped onto the straw-scattered cobbles. Suddenly all she wanted was to forget her worry about the Crow's letter and explore the Fair. 'Can we go? Right now?'

'Wait.' Lady Mair took out her purse and gave them a sixpence each. 'Don't waste it all on nonsense.'

‘Certainly not,’ Mrs Villiers snapped.

‘And if you want to see me judge the pigs, it will be at three.’ Lady Mair sighed. ‘It’s such an honour and I want to do it well, but I am so nervous! What if I choose the wrong pig and offend some stout farmer!’

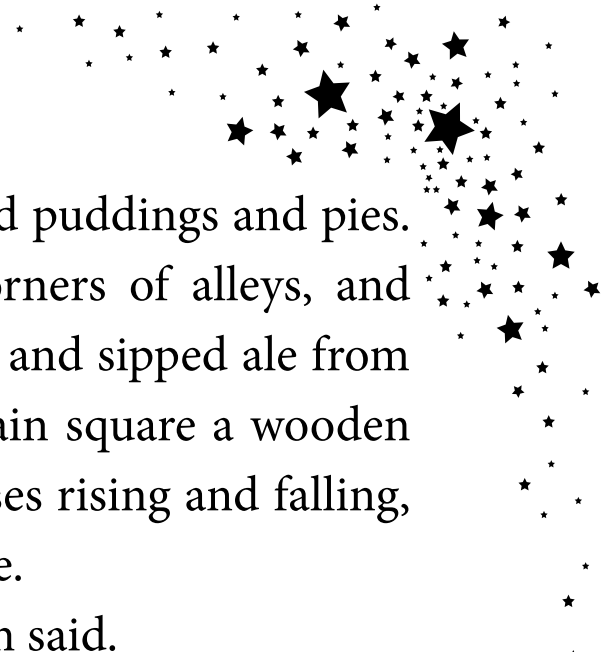
Tomos grabbed Seren’s arm. ‘You won’t, Mamma. Anyway, Denzil will advise you.’

Seren turned to run with him, but Denzil caught her sleeve quickly. The small man put his lips to her ear. ‘Be careful, girl. Keep the boy safe. Everyone comes to the Fair. Even *Them*.’

Seren looked at him, startled.

Then she nodded.

The Summer Fair was a joyous riot of colour and noise. The streets, normally so sleepy, were packed with people. Fairings and sweetmeats and pots and pans and ribbons and honey and jam were being sold at dozens of stalls. There were shooting games and big men smashing a hammer to make a bell ring, tug-o-war, foot races, and, in a tent by the church, poetry being made up and chanted in Welsh. The sound of it fascinated Seren; Tomos had to tug her away. There were competitions for



the best flowers and fruit and puddings and pies. Dancing went on at the corners of alleys, and fiddlers played reels and jigs and sipped ale from foaming tankards. In the main square a wooden roundabout creaked, its horses rising and falling, steam gusting from its engine.

‘Shall we go on that?’ Seren said.

Tomos shook his head. ‘No. It reminds me of the hateful Carousel and *Them*. Let’s look in the mirrors instead.’

Seren frowned, thinking of Denzil’s warning. *They* were the Tylwyth Teg, the Fair Family. Strange, silvery, immortal beings, *They* lived underground or in the hills. Twice now they had tried to steal Tomos away, and the Crow too. She looked round, determined. She would keep her eyes and ears firmly open. If *They* were here, she would spot *Them*.

‘And don’t worry about the silly old Crow!’ Tomos ran towards the nearest tent. ‘Buy him a fairing! That’ll cheer him up.’

As she ran after him Seren thought that was a good idea, but the Crow couldn’t eat anything and he would certainly never wear a ribbon. Well, maybe she could find something that would bring

him out of his bad humour.

But the Fair was so wonderful she soon forgot everything else. She ate two liquorice dabs and a long unwinding stick of sherbet. She bit through the crunchy outside of a toffee apple into the white soft fruit. She threw balls at coconuts and small yellow wooden ducks. She ran screeching through the Hall of Mirrors seeing a whole row of stretched, gross, squat, shrivelled and enormously tall Serens.

She bought a red ribbon for Lily the maid, who had been disappointed not to come, and a gingerbread man for Gwyn the stable boy.

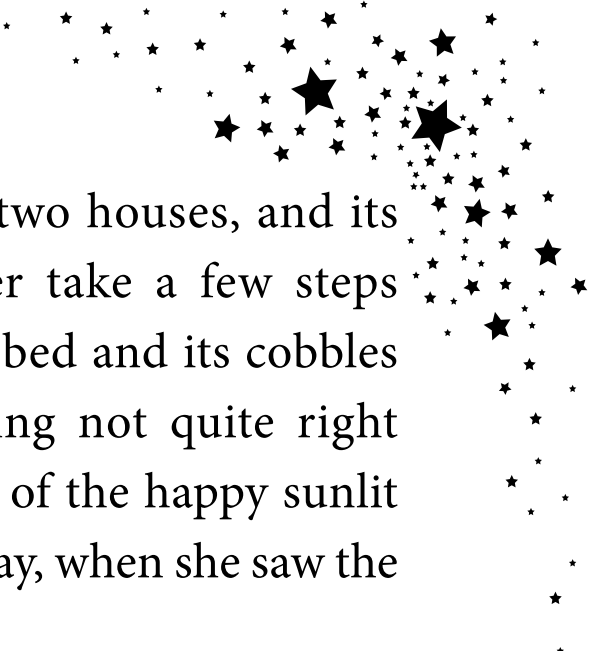
So by the time the church clock struck half past two she was hot and sticky and thirsty and red from the sun. Also, she had lost Tomos.

Suddenly worried, she looked round.

She was in the middle of the market square and a huge flock of ewes was coming through. She stood back between a stall selling copper kettles and some baskets of whelks and cockles that smelled really fishy, but the bleating ewes shoved against her and she stumbled back again, into a sudden space she hadn't known was there.

She turned.

Behind her was a small dark alley.



It was squeezed between two houses, and its slanty strangeness made her take a few steps closer. Its walls were cobwebbed and its cobbles glittery. There was something not quite right about it, as if it led right out of the happy sunlit day. She was about to turn away, when she saw the last stall.

‘Oh!’ she said.

It was a little way down, against one wall. Its lop-sided trestles were piled with old junk, kettles and books, looking worn and tattered and smelling wonderfully musty.

Seren hesitated, just for a moment. Then she hurried down into the dimness.

No one was there. A small lantern was propped on the top of a pile of china saucers, and a cup of ale, half-empty stood beside it.

‘Hello?’ she said softly.

Her voice rang round the stone walls and overhanging roofs. The Fair seemed very far away, its noises distant.

Next to the lantern was a sign. It read:

EVERYTHING ONE PENNY.

Seren was relieved, because that was all she had left.

The books were certainly old. They were piled in dusty heaps, some of them spotted with mildew. They were bound in leather and calfskin, with their titles in worn gold letters. A few had metal clasps and locks and, when she prised them open and looked inside, they were written in languages she didn't recognise at all. One actually fell to pieces as she turned its pages; she glimpsed unicorns and manatees and impossible beasts but the pictures crumbled to dust even as she tried not to breathe on them. They were unreadable.

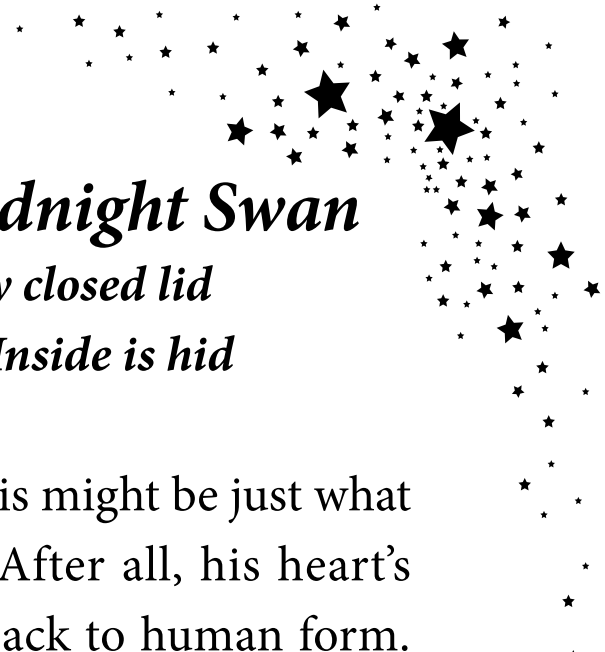
Disappointed, she pushed them aside and from the bottom of the pile, she pulled out something else.

It was a small casket, made of a dark metal.

Thousands of tiny stars glinted on its sides.

Beautifully painted on the lid, the face of a swan was staring out at her. Seren gasped. The Swan's gaze was so direct she almost thought it was alive, especially as the eyes were inlaid with some shiny silver foil.

It was a black swan, and it wore a diamond collar. All around the painting were some words. She had to turn the box to read them.



The Box of the Midnight Swan

If you can open My closed lid

Your heart's desire Inside is hid

Seren's eyes went wide. This might be just what the Crow was looking for! After all, his heart's desire was to be magicked back to human form. Could it really only cost one penny? It seemed too good to be true.

She tried to open it, but the lid wouldn't budge. She tugged and peered, to see if it was glued or stuck together, but no, there wasn't anything wrong with it, and no keyhole either. There must be some trick to it, or...

Something hissed.

Seren turned, quickly.

On the corner of the nearest house a gargoyle was carved. It was an ugly goblin face, with its tongue out, eyes wide-open, ears like bat-wings. Below it another peered round a pillar, goat-eyed and angry. Seren backed away.

There were more. A cheeky one between some ivy, a sly one under the eaves. She took another step, then took the penny out of her pocket. She held it up.

‘I’m leaving this for the Box. I hope that’s all right.’

Seren put the penny down on the stall. She hurried backwards with the Box under her arm; she had a horrible feeling that it would be a mistake to turn her back on the faces.

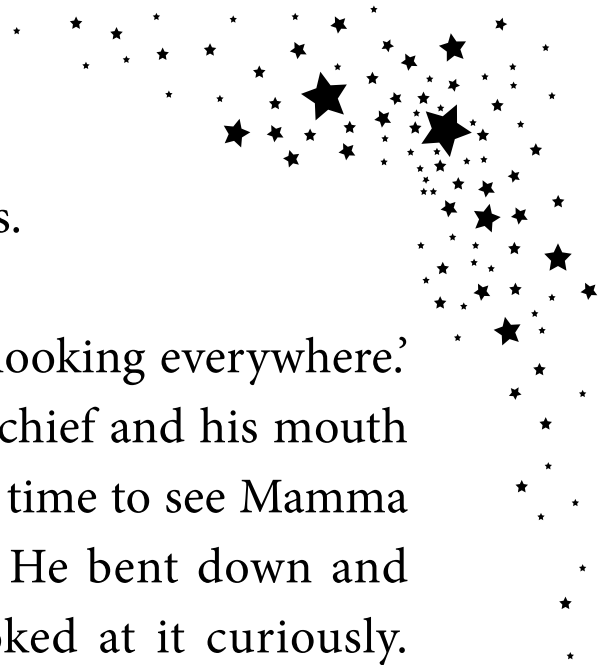
Then something tiny and cold as a needle touched her arm.

It was a raindrop.

But it hadn’t rained for weeks!

Even as she thought it, a huge hot downpour began, roaring down on the dim alley, rattling in pipes and gutters, being spat out in fountains by all the gargoyle faces, turning the cobbles into a stream of water. Seren gasped; she turned and fled, and was it the thunder of the rain or were there padding feet on the cobbles hurrying angrily after her?

She was soaked. Her dress clung to her. Her hair was plastered across her eyes, and then small hands came out of the storm and snatched at her hair, grabbed her dress. She gave a shriek and pulled away and yelled, ‘Leave me alone!’ and burst out of the alley into blinding sunlight, and crashed straight into Tomos.



The Box fell on the cobbles.

Seren staggered back.

‘There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere.’
Tomos wore a jaunty neckerchief and his mouth
was smeared with toffee. ‘It’s time to see Mamma
do her judging. Come on!’ He bent down and
picked up the Box and looked at it curiously.
‘What’s this? Trust you to find some old stuff,
Seren.’

‘It’s not for me. It’s for the Crow.’ She snatched it
back from him. ‘I got it from that stall down
there...’

She turned. Her words dried up.

Between the copper kettle stall and the fishy
whelks there was just a blank stone wall.

No alleyway.

No gargoyle faces.

No stall.

Not only that, it was sunny and she was
completely dry.

Tomos wasn’t listening. ‘Tell me about it later.’
He grabbed her arm. ‘Come on, now, or we’ll miss
it all!’

Seren let him pull her away. But she kept tight
hold of the Box, and took another look back,

puzzled and scared, at where the alleyway should have been.

They had been angry. This was something secret, something They didn't want her to have.

But it was too late now.

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