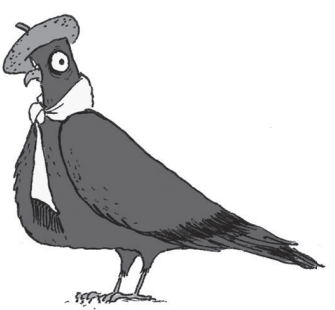
BETH LINCOLN

THE SWIFTS

A GALLERY OF ROGUES



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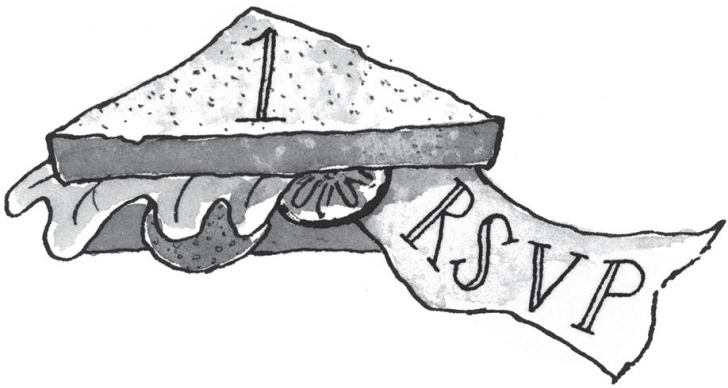
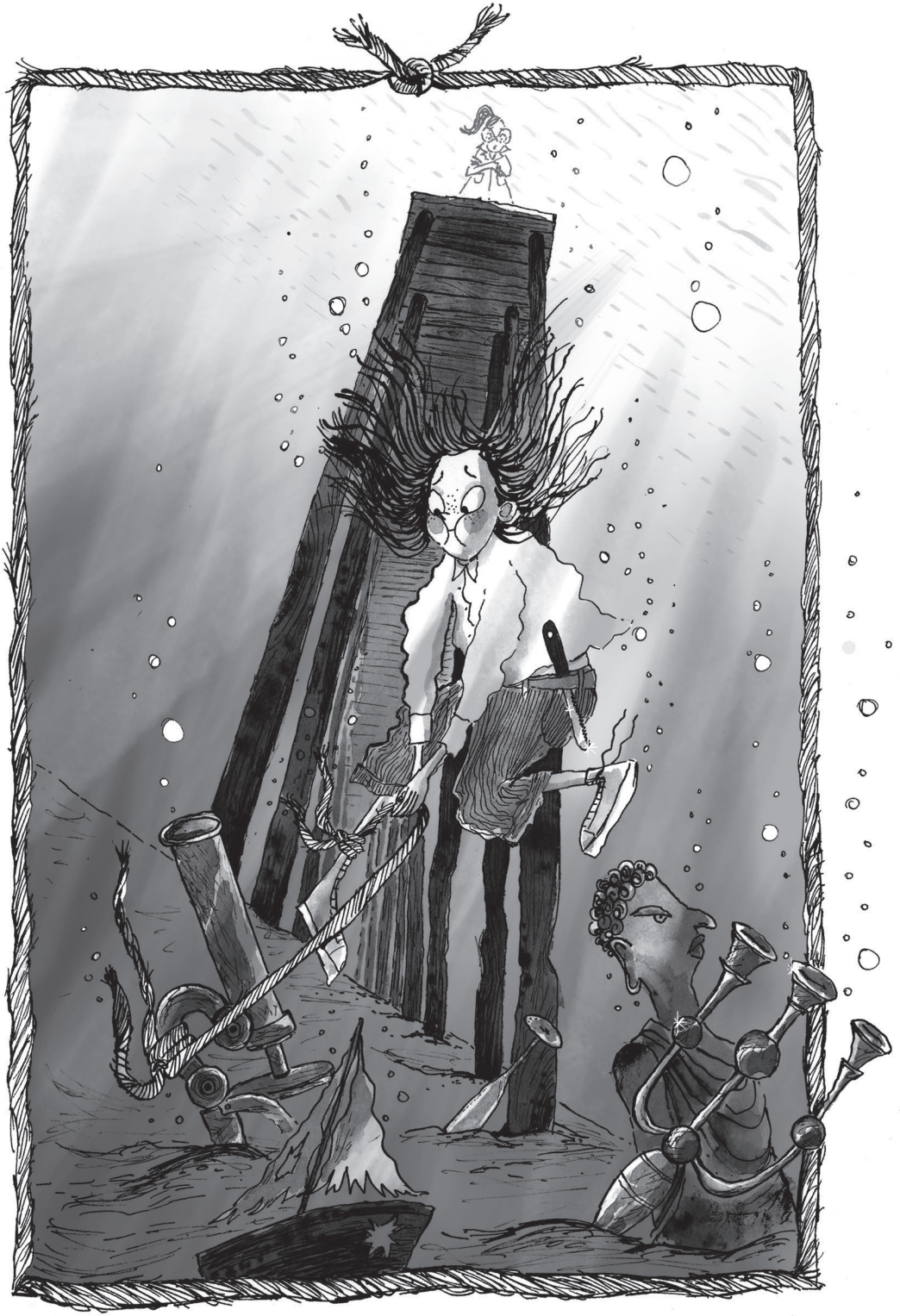


In *Morbidity Swift's Definitive Ranking of Painful Deaths*, Drowning is quite far down the list, sitting squarely in the Merely Unpleasant tier. It is well below Starvation, Bear Attack, and Acid Vat, and well above Having a Piano Dropped on One's Head, or Dying Peacefully in One's Sleep Whilst Having a Lovely Dream About Butterflies.

This thought was a comfort to Shenanigan Swift as she struggled for air. Things could always be worse.

She squinted through the murky water at the rope round her ankle. It was tied securely in a bowline knot. Shenanigan was good at knots, and she had tied and untied a bowline a hundred times before. But *this* one stubbornly refused to loosen – as did its twin, which she had looped round the heavy brass microscope now



half-buried in the soft mud of the lake bed, as snug as a tooth in a gum.

A rebellious bubble snuck out of Shenanigan's left nostril and made a break for the surface. Her lungs burned, and her throat contracted desperately. Her body was telling her firmly that she needed to take a deep breath *right now*, and wasn't listening to any of Shenanigan's reasons why that was a bad idea. With a gurgle of effort, she pulled the bread knife from her belt and began to saw desperately at the rope. Something interesting was happening to her vision. It was going dark at the edges, as if she was squinting through dense cloud.

The rope snapped. Shenanigan rocketed upwards, expelling air as she went. Above her, light danced in broken beams on the water's surface, a rippling glass roof that she shattered with the force of a hurled stone.

Shenanigan burst into the hot sun of mid-morning, coughing and gasping as she hauled oxygen into her lungs. She scooped water in her now-empty hands, and looked down to see the bread knife winking merrily away into the depths of the lake. Cook would not be pleased.

‘Oh, there you are. I don’t suppose you’ve seen my microscope, have you?’

Shenanigan jerked in surprise. Phenomena had got quite stealthy lately. She stood at the end of the jetty, her lab coat glowing in the sun, aiming a raised eyebrow at her half-drowned sister.

Shenanigan thought fast. ‘Well, yes,’ she replied. ‘I have seen your microscope. Many times.’

‘But recently. In, say, the last hour or so?’

Shenanigan never lied. She merely told a version of the truth. This was infuriating to everyone, including Shenanigan, who constantly had to come up with creative ways of telling the truth that wouldn’t get her into trouble. She often considered writing a guide.

‘It has been . . . some time since I last saw it,’ she hedged. Technically, a minute counted as ‘some time’. But Phenomena had grown up with Shenanigan, and had come into the conversation with the unfair advantage of knowing most of her tricks.

‘It’s just that when I asked Cook,’ Phenomena went on, ‘she said she hadn’t seen it either, but *had* seen you heading into the garden with a covered object she described as “microscope size”.’

Shenanigan resolutely did not look below her kicking feet, where the microscope snuggled ever further into the mud. 'Are you sure she didn't say "microscopic"?'

'I'm sure,' said Phenomena. She squinted through her glasses. 'It doesn't take a scientist to collect the data and draw a conclusion.'

'Didn't you once tell me,' tried Shenanigan, 'that correlation does not equal—'

'My microscope is in the lake, isn't it?'

'It is in the lake, yes.'

Phenomena sighed, and held out a hand to help Shenanigan flop on to the jetty.

'I didn't expect it to get stuck,' Shenanigan muttered apologetically. 'I was *going* to pull it back out again.'

'Like the statue, the candelabra, and the ornamental doorstop?'

Shenanigan winced. The bottom of the lake was now a backyard Atlantis, in which strange objects loomed out of the silt like relics from a long-lost civilization. Shenanigan would never have taken Phenomena's microscope if she hadn't run out of other heavy, less important things.

'And I don't suppose you'll tell me what you're up to?' Phenomena asked.

'Will you tell me what *you're* up to in the hidden room, with the EEK?'

'Oh, of course not.'

The sisters grinned at one another, each delighted in their own secrets, and headed back to the House.

For weeks, Shenanigan had been dodging her Family's questions about what she was doing in the lake. She'd told them that she was training to be an escapologist, which was half-true. Escapology was a very useful skill to have, like juggling, and could be helpful in all sorts of situations. But the truth was that she needed the weights to pull her to the lake bed as quickly as possible, so she'd have more time to rifle through the sludge for Grand-Uncle Vile's long-lost treasure.

Shenanigan had once read that Harry Houdini could hold his breath for over three minutes. So far, she was up to two minutes and two seconds. She had been disappointed in her progress, until she remembered that his lungs had been much bigger than hers; but then, since his body was also much bigger, perhaps he needed more oxygen than she did? The question of who had the better lung capacity would have been an excellent one to ask Phenomena, but Shenanigan couldn't, because she had promised herself that she

wouldn't tell her relatives about the treasure until she'd figured out what to do with it.

It wasn't that she couldn't decide. She decided at least three times a week. Lying in bed, staring at the rain drumming on her skylight, she'd think, *I'll use it to take Arch-Aunt Schadenfreude on holiday. She won't want to go, but I'm sure if we put blinkers on her, like on a horse, we could get to a train station without her bolting.* Listening to Cook tell her how to make an omelette, she'd think, *Maybe I could buy up all the green bell peppers in the world and sink them to the bottom of the ocean, and then no one would ever have to eat them again.* While reading in an out-of-the-way pocket of the House, she'd think, *Maybe I'll give the money to an orphanage, like some old woman with no heir and a terrible secret. I'm sure I'll have a terrible secret one of these days.* And round and round the ideas went, until her dreams were a whirl of gold and silver and cheering children, who all had lisps.

As Shenanigan picked pondweed out of her hair, Phenomena passed her a slip of paper. 'I found this in my sandwich,' she said. 'We've got another Family meeting.'

Shenanigan squinted at the writing, barely legible beneath the peanut butter. It said:

I welcome you with arms wide to the place where the sun is saved.

When Arch-Aunt Schadenfreude had retired several months ago, she had named their second cousin Fauna as the new Matriarch of the Swift Family. Fauna was the ideal choice. She was compassionate, forward-thinking, and optimistic, the opposite, in many ways, to Aunt Schadenfreude. As part of her new role, Fauna had moved into Swift House, separating for the first time from her twin, Flora.

It had been an adjustment for everyone. Fauna travelled into town on sunny days, squashing rumours that Swift House was a den of vampires. She invited Suleiman, their intrepid postman, to come for tea. She had taken an active role in Aunt Schadenfreude's funeral rehearsals, and impressed her deeply by crying every single time.

But the hardest thing to get used to was her insistence on Family Meetings. Aunt Schadenfreude considered it coddling to speak to the children more than once a day, and the idea of sitting around discussing their feelings, plans, and accomplishments had not gone down well with the inhabitants of Swift House. In an attempt to win them over, Fauna had taken to holding

each meeting in a different room, with the time and location hidden in a riddle, cleverly deducing that their competitive spirit would ensure they turned up.

'*The place where the sun is saved* could be the conservatory,' suggested Shenanigan.

'A room where the sun is "conserved", or saved, yes,' said Phenomena.

'And *arms wide*?'

Phenomena held out her arms as if wanting an embrace. 'Imagine I'm a clock.'

'Oh! Your hands would be at nine and three. So, quarter to three?'

'Or a quarter past nine, but that seems a little late.'

Shenanigan picked up Phenomena's wrist and checked her watch. It was twenty to three.

'I thought I'd better come fetch you,' Phenomena explained. 'There will have been a note in your sandwich as well, but no doubt you ate it.'

It was hot in the conservatory, the plants drinking in the sun and exhaling a green smell Shenanigan found a little stifling. Fauna was sitting in a rattan chair, answering a few of the extended Family's messages. Several lengths of washing line criss-crossed the room,

with envelopes fixed to it by brightly coloured pegs. Now and then, Fauna would pull on one of the lines, and with the rattle of a pulley another set of letters would rotate towards her. With her loose, wavy red hair and new taste for flowing dresses, she looked like an elf tucked among the giant leaves of the monstera and potted palms.

Shenanigan wrung her hair out into the nearest plant pot, and sprawled on the floor by Uncle Maelstrom's chair. He raised his considerable brows at the rope still knotted round her foot.

'That looks familiar,' he said.

'Does it?'

'Mmm. It looks like Manila rope. I remember leaving a length of it on my desk the other day after rehanging my hammock.' He took a penknife from his pocket, selected a blade from between the ballpoint and fountain pens, and carefully sawed through the knot at Shenanigan's ankle. This was greatly appreciated, as her foot was turning purple.

'It might interest you to know that this sort of rope swells when wet,' he added, 'which means any knot you tie in it would lock tight underwater.'

'Oh,' said Shenanigan.

'In damp environments, it's better to use synthetic rope, and tie it loosely. The stuff I have looped round my umbrella stand is waterproof, for example.' He winked.

This was why Shenanigan loved Uncle Maelstrom. If she'd announced she was going to leap out of a plane, he wouldn't try to stop her. He'd teach her how to make a parachute.

'Thank you all for coming,' said Fauna, pouring tea with one hand and replacing a peg with the other. She had a faint frown on her face; it made her look like her sister. 'How are we today?'

She surveyed the circle of relatives. There was Aunt Schadenfreude, lounging comfortably with a battered paperback and something green smeared all over her face; Cook, sleeves rolled to the elbows and her cropped hair streaked with motor oil; Phenomena, making notes in her journal; Maelstrom, squashed into his too-small chair with one of Fauna's tiny Japanese teacups cradled in his hand; and finally Shenanigan, coaxing some feeling back into her toes. The eldest of the Swift children was not present. Felicity was abroad, staying in Paris for a few weeks with Flora and Daisy. She phoned, when she remembered, and peppered her conversation with little French phrases to show she was sophisticated now.

The only other resident of Swift House was John the Cat, and he was not present either, as he wasn't very good at riddles.

'This had better be quick,' snapped Aunt Schadenfreude. 'I was just getting to a good part of this very silly book.'

The book in question had an image of a woman on the cover, swooning in the arms of a muscular werewolf. Schadenfreude had really dedicated herself to retirement. Cook had even bought her a pair of fluffy slippers, which Aunt Schadenfreude had insulted viciously and worn every day since.

'Noted,' said Fauna. 'Cook? Maelstrom? You're well? Good. Girls?'

'We're fine,' Phenomena and Shenanigan chorused.

'Not missing Felicity?'

'Nah,' said Shenanigan.

'I forgot she was even gone,' said Phenomena.

'Who's Felicity?' added Shenanigan.

'It's alright to miss her, you know,' said Fauna. 'You've been together your whole lives. It's a big change.'

'I *know* it's alright.' Shenanigan sighed. 'But I really don't.'

'She's probably having the time of her life,' added

Phenomena. 'Conjugating verbs at people, and buying silk scarves.'

Fauna's smile was sad. 'You can be glad she's living her life without you, and happy you're living yours, and still miss her,' she insisted. She blinked hard. 'Since she's in Paris, and very far away, and your best friend.'

'She's not my best friend,' Shenanigan muttered as Cook handed Fauna a handkerchief. 'She's not even my best sister.'

This made Cook tut, but Shenanigan and Felicity had ended their long grudge a few months ago. They still insulted each other, but now Felicity smiled when she called Shenanigan a pest, and Shenanigan removed spiders from Felicity's room rather than putting them there.

'Anyway –' Fauna blew her nose – 'Felicity is actually the reason I called you all here.' She plucked a letter from the line above her head and smoothed it over her knee. 'Your sister has sent us a letter, and – well, before I read it, let me just say that I don't think we need to be concerned.'

'Always *so* reassuring to hear,' muttered Aunt Schadenfreude.

'It's just that I know you're going to react badly,' said

Fauna, 'and I really think there's no need. Um. I'll just read it.'

Felicity had learned to write from romance novels set in the 1800s, the kind where people fall into near-fatal fevers at any minor inconvenience. To Shenanigan, her letters all sounded as if they were about to announce either her imminent marriage or imminent death. This one read:

To my beloved family, from whom I am separated so cruelly (and also Shenanigan),

I write to you from a café on the Champs-Élysées, with a pot of coffee to my left and an Opéra cake to my right, and a perfect view of Paris's most fashionable citizens between them. Daisy was kind enough to purchase this petite gâterie (that's 'little treat') for me, and I think it cost as much as my last pair of shoes. She and Flora are currently in a parfumerie (that's 'perfume shop') across the street, and if I squint I can see them in the window, spritzing.

An event occurred yesterday that will be of great interest to you. Whilst I was visiting La Garde-robe (a fashion museum), I was approached by one of our

cousins! Her name is Pomme, and I found her charming and most agreeable, and she has invited me to stay with our French relations, the Martinets, at their hotel. I was quite surprised, as I didn't even know we had French relations, let alone ones with a special surname and a hotel of their very own!

I have decided to take Pomme up on her offer, and shall be parting company with Flora and Daisy forthwith. Of course, I know it is common for young women of my age to Go Into Town with their aunts, but I do believe my chaperones could do with some unchaperoned time themselves (please imagine I am giving you a meaningful look, Fauna). I will be heading to the Hôtel Martinet tonight, and have enclosed the new return address for your letters.

À bientôt (that's 'see you soon', basically),

Felicity

It seemed like a perfectly normal letter to Shenanigan, but Aunt Schadenfreude nodded grimly.

'Well, that's it, then,' she said in a brisk tone. 'Felicity's as good as dead.'