Lost – by Bonnie Coldwell

The smog is darker than ever tonight. It smudges everything in sight, making it so I can only see about a metre in front of me. The only light is the dim, fuzzy yellow of the streetlamps. It's fine though. I walk these same streets home every night, so I can get around without needing to see properly. The only downside is I keep bumping into the crowds of people nearby, which affords me a whole lot of scoffs and shoves.

Rain pours all around me and creates large puddles that splash every time I walk. There's a thick stench of burning coal in the air. It mingles with the damp, creating a rather unpleasant assault on my nose.

Tall, imposing buildings make large shadows on either side of me. Many beggars line the street, but I don't have many coins to spare. Still, if I see a particularly thin child asking for money, I'll usually toss them a coin or two.

I realise I should only be about a minute from my house. I keep a steady pace as I navigate the darkness, following the same path as every night. Therein lies the rub. I've been walking for what feels like far more than a minute, yet I'm still not home. Lost? No, I can't be lost, I've walked this exact trip hundreds of times before, and I've never once gotten lost.

My legs are beginning to ache. Now I'm sure I've been walking for at least half an hour.

The crowds have long since dissipated, and their faint hum of chatter has vanished. Now all I hear is a bitter, icy wind and my own heavy footsteps. The shadows of buildings seem to be getting closer. If I were to stick my arms out, I would probably touch the cold brick.

Maybe I should turn back. I must've just been extra tired tonight and made a wrong turn.

As I have this thought, I suddenly find myself walking into a wall. No, wait, that's no wall - it's a woman.

"Oh!" Her voice is sweet and breathy, and a stark contrast to my own rough voice as we both exclaim.

"Hello there." She smiles warmly. "What are you doing here?"

She's beautiful. Not just a bit beautiful either, I mean she's quite literally the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life. Long, straight black hair, that flows in the wind, frames her small, extremely pale face. Her petite build is covered in a short, white dress. The dress itself has a bow on the chest and is covered in a loose veil that sparkles. There are a few ribbons wrapped around her limbs and twirled in her hair. There's something oddly familiar about her. I'm sure I've never met her before, though. I

would've remembered a face like that. She looks like an angel. I can't describe her beauty in words; I never was a poet after all.

The only rather strange thing about her is that her eyes are completely closed, yet she seems to be looking directly at me. Also, she doesn't seem to be shivering at all, despite only wearing a thin looking dress in the depths of winter.

"Me? I-I think I may be lost." I can't help but blush and stumble over my words faced with such a beauty as her. "What are- What are you doing here? And who are you?"

Her expression stays locked in a soft smile. "I suppose you could say I'm... Looking for lost souls to help them find their way. And my name? My name is The Damselette."

The Damselette, huh? Not your usual name. Perhaps she wants to keep her real name private - I am only a stranger at the end of the day.

"What about *your* name Miss?" She takes a step towards me, and I take a step back.

"My name is Sandrone." I narrow my eyes at her. "And what do you mean by helping lost souls find their way?"

She may be beautiful, but that doesn't mean I can necessarily trust her. Rumour has it that many a murder has been taking place on a night like this.

"Hmm. You're right, I didn't explain that very well did I?" Her eyes are still sealed shut. Her long eyelashes flutter as she speaks. "I meant I help guide people who get lost around these parts. It happens quite often actually. In fact, you said *you* were lost, right? I can help you get back home if you'd like."

"I've never heard of anyone helping guide people at night. Haven't you heard the rumours?"

Someone her size would be an easy kill; she would probably be dead before she could even scream.

Unexpectedly, she giggles. "Of course I've heard the rumours, Sandrone. But I think that helping those who get lost is more important." Her expression fades to one of sorrow. "Imagine what could happen if a child got lost out here..."

I've never met someone as pure as her before.

"Well, that's quite a stupid reason to risk your life."

"Hmm. Well, I don't mind. So, could I help you get back home?"

What other option do I have? I may be a relatively small woman, but I'm certainly larger than her. If worse came to worse, I could probably fight back enough to escape. Plus, there's the chance she's actually just a kind-hearted woman. A dumb one at that, but, y'know.

"...Fine."

"Great! Come, follow me."

She sharply turns on her heel and leads me forward. The way she walks is unique; her head bobs up and down, and it seems like she's floating more than anything, but when I look at her feet, they're definitely touching the floor. Even more strange than that is the fact she's barefoot.

What on earth have I got myself into? And who is this woman? God, I just want to go home, *please*.

We walk for quite a while before I realise that The Damselette must be very cold indeed, only wearing that thin dress.

"Miss Damselette?"

Yes?" She responds but keeps moving forward.

"Are you not cold?" This is probably the most I've talked to someone recently (not including the times it was necessary, of course).

She stops for a few seconds. "No, this dress is actually quite warm, believe it or not, and I come from a place where winters are far colder."

"Oh, really?"

"Mmh-hm."

So, she's a foreigner. Checks out. She doesn't really look like someone from around here.

As we walk, the smog seems to get even darker, which I didn't even think was possible to be honest. The moon is completely covered, as are the stars. Not even the shadows of the buildings remain. The only thing I can see in this all-consuming darkness is the white dress and pale skin of The Damselette.

There are no streetlamps in this area, which seems unusual. But, to be fair, I've never really left my part of town before.

The rain has all but stopped yet puddles still remain. I stare at the ground, seeing nothing but my own feet, until something catches my eye. The puddles that The Damselette is stepping in seem to be... Glowing? Yes, the ripples in the water have a slight blue tinge and give off a faint light. That's not quite right... As I ponder over the potential cause, flecks of dirt or something get in my eyes. I rub them aggressively, and blink a good number of times for good measure. Then, suddenly the puddles have returned to normal.

Jesus, I must be extremely tired if I've started hallucinating. I hope I'll get home soon.

Wait. I never told The Damselette my address.

"Hey, Miss Damselette!"

"Hm? Yes?" Her voice sounds as calm and level as ever.

"Don't you need to know where I live to lead me home?"

She turns around to look at me - well, she still can't truly look at me since her eyes are shut - and stands there with her arms by her sides. She stands facing me directly for a good few seconds, no smile to be seen across her face before she responds.

"Oh! Well, I've actually seen you a couple of times before around the same spot, so I thought I could just drop you off there, then you'd know where to go."

Her voice is still sweet and breathy, but there's something else there I just can't put my finger on. It just sounds a bit... Hollow. And her explanation doesn't sound completely true either.

A smile is spread across her face, but there's no trace of one on mine. "And you *never* thought to ask for a specific address?"

"Well, I didn't want to intrude."

"Listen, Damselette. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No!" For a brief flash, her face contorts into something strange, but it reverts back as quickly as it had changed. "No. Of course there isn't. How could you even think that? I'm just trying to help you."

I don't feel like I should question her any further, so I think carefully about my response before I even open my mouth.

"You're-You're right, let's just, uh, keep walking, shall we?"

The Damselette smiles at this and continues to move forwards.

There's definitely something wrong here, but what can I do? It's so dark, and I'm not familiar with the area. If I try to run, I'll just get more lost and probably be in more danger.

It's getting much, much colder as we walk. The wind's picking up too. My dirty blonde hair blows into my eyes, and my skirt billows in the wind. Goosebumps begin to emerge on my arms and legs, even with my thick coat covering me. God knows how The Damselette is faring. Then again, I get the feeling she's not affected by the cold, somehow.

We walk in silence for around another 10 minutes (give or take), before things start to get really strange. The material underneath my feet begins to change. The wet concrete begins to feel more plush, powdery in a way, and far colder. Yes, it's snow that I'm walking on. The ground becomes slippery, and I find myself almost stumbling a few times.

But the snow doesn't make sense. A lot of things this evening aren't making sense, but this is certainly the one I have the most concrete evidence against. First of all, it hasn't snowed here in years, maybe even decades. Secondly, this is a large build up of snow, but there's been no reports of any snow falling today or yesterday.

Additionally, there are bare trees surrounding us. Last time I checked, there weren't any areas with trees like this near me.

I should run. Yes. I think I'll die if I don't. None of this makes sense, none of this should be real. Yet here I am.

The Damselette is acting as if nothing has changed; in fact, she's begun to hum a tune. It sends a chill down my spine. Don't get me wrong, she sounds incredible - her voice sounds just as beautiful as she looks - but it's so clear, so piercing that it feels more like a threat.

That's it. I'm going to run. I don't know where, but I'm not staying here any longer. Why oh why hadn't I run earlier?

I'm getting so tired. My pocket watch told me I'd been walking for the better part of three hours before it had broken a while before entering the snowed-over area. My pace has slowed, and my eyelids are getting heavier than ever.

"Sandrone? Would you like to take a break?" The Damselette turns around and looks at me with her eyes closed, and her eyebrows knotted together. "You seem to have wandered quite far; we've still got a way to go."

"No, I'm-I'll be fine." I respond.

This is it; this is my moment. I should run now before I get too exhausted to go any further.

Yes, now. Now, I'll run. Right now.

...

I can't. There seems to be something magnetic about whatever The Damselette is humming, because I can't seem to turn away from it. My legs won't obey me. They just keep following her.

This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

The wind is getting even stronger, to the point it burns. There's no rain, but tiny chunks of ice seem to be hammering into my skin, carried along by the wind. The temperature is still dropping too. My hands are as white as a sheet of paper, and I have a slight purple tint at the end of my fingers. My eyes barely open, I try to walk forward, but with every step I take, the wind seems to push me right back. If The Damselette doesn't kill me, this cold definitely will.

Just when I think I'll collapse on the spot, The Damselette turns around. She seems unaffected by the harsh conditions as she stands watching me. Her long, shiny hair blows around her. I can just make out her features - she's standing in a place where the darkness almost completely consumes her.

Now she's starting to twitch. Not just her either, the whole world seems to be glitching. Her head jerks to the side. A tree falls to the ground. She takes a step forward. Whole chunks of earth disappear, leaving holes leading to the void in their wake.

It's clear that this woman, or thing, is not human. "Please, have mercy-"

Her eyes open. They're wide, much wider than a person's. Coloured a bright red, her eyes are locked onto me with an intensity I've never felt before.

Then I'm falling into the void.

Surprisingly, I'm not falling for long. Soon, I land in a thick pile of snow. It's still dark in this new place, but not as dark as it was before.

The moon shines brightly above, with constellations lining the sky. No, the *moons* shine brightly above. Either side of the largest full moon, there are two other crescent moons. On any other night, I would have found this very strange indeed, but tonight it seems to be the most normal thing I've seen. I'm just wondering why we've changed locations again, and she hasn't just finished me off already.

There's no way to describe the temperature. It's like there's no temperature at all. It's neither cold, nor warm. There's no wind either.

All over the ground, sprouting out of the soft snow, are flowers. I've never seen any like these before. The petals are white, but the very tips are dyed a light blue. They're very beautiful. Sweet and crisp, the fragrance is lovely too.

Other than that, the only other things nearby are some more bare trees coated in a thin layer of white, and some gravestones. Moss growing up the sides, and bunches of flowers left in front of each one, the gravestones seem to spread on forever. The names seem oddly familiar, though.

I can only hear my own shallow breath. Luckily, it's beginning to slow down since I don't seem to be in immediate danger here.

It's quite peaceful here.

Just as I think this, I feel a sharp stab in my stomach. The pain is excruciating, far more than I've ever felt before, and far more than I can handle. The metallic, iron taste of blood floods my mouth. I look down and find myself immediately regretting it; I'm not one for gore. I've been stabbed, that's for sure, but there's no weapon nearby to show for it. Listen, I'm no doctor, but I don't think I'm bouncing back from this one. The wound is causing me to lose mass amounts of blood. The gushing liquid stains the flowers and snow a deep crimson, and I'm beginning to cough up more of the red.

The pleasant smell of the flowers has now been almost completely absorbed by the overwhelming rusty smell of my own blood.

My pulse hammers in my ears, and I have to admit I've been caught off guard. But I don't think my shock is too large - I think I realised quite a while ago I probably wouldn't make it out of this alive. Still, that doesn't mean I want to die. I really, really don't want things to end here, but what can I do? There's no one else here, and no chance of my rescue.

I make the mistake of looking at my wound again. Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick. Growing more red by the second, the snow numbs my fingers as I sit pathetically in the snow, gripping the flowers so tightly, they are nothing more than a crumpled mess of petals. I grind my teeth together to try to lessen the pain.

Then, I hear a voice. It's sweet and breathy yet has a slightly hollow tinge to it.

"I'm sorry, dear Sandrone."

She's extremely beautiful. Not just a bit beautiful either, I mean she's quite literally the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life. Long, straight black hair, which is dyed a deep magenta colour at the ends, frames her small, extremely pale face. Her petite build is covered in a short, white dress, which is stained with blood. The dress itself has a bow on the chest, and is covered in a loose, ripped veil that sparkles in the moonlight. There are a few ribbons, covered in eyes, wrapped around her limbs, and twirled in her hair. She looks like an angel. I can't describe her beauty in words; I never was a poet after all.

The only rather strange thing about her is that her eyes are much wider than a human's, and are glowing a bright red, just like the blood flowing from my wound, and she's staring right at me, with an intensity I've felt once before. Also, she has two pairs of wings on her head, and two larger pairs on her back. These wings are covered in large eyes similar to her own. They also seem to be slightly charred at the ends.

She's wearing that smile which I've become very familiar with over the past few hours.

A crow lands on her shoulder. It also has large, radiant, red eyes.

Her face starts to blur as my vision becomes fuzzier.

I can't tell if she's actually sorry or not. It's pretty clear she's the one who did this to me, so is she genuinely feeling guilty, or simply finding joy in my pain?

The pain has become too much for me. I double over and lie in the snow. My whole body becoming stained with warm blood. Even with my eyesight getting darker, I notice the light blue sprayed onto the edges of the flowers has changed to a bright scarlet.

What an awful way to go, huh?

I'm such an idiot, I should have known not to trust her.

The Damselette begins to walk over to me. The way she walks is quite unique; her head bobs up and down, and it seems like she's floating more than anything. When I look at her feet, I realize I was right, she's definitely floating.

As well as that, even though there are no puddles, every time she takes a step, there's a ripple. The ripples have a slight blue tinge and give off a faint light.

Similarly to how it did before, her body seems to be glitching. Parts of her at times turn into static, sometimes her neck or arms will twitch, and every so often she seems to disappear for a few seconds completely before reappearing. She'll also occasionally freeze for a few seconds, and then I'll blink and she'll be much closer to me.

As she approaches, The Damselette begins to hum her sweet little tune again.

I know I'm going to die, so I just shut my eyes, and try to enjoy my last few minutes of living. The song is very pleasant, but it still sends shivers down my spine.

None of this is fair. I don't want to die. I have so much more I want to do.

At last, I feel her presence right in front of me. I hear the crinkling of fabric as she bends down. Her kiss is as cold as the snow dyed red.