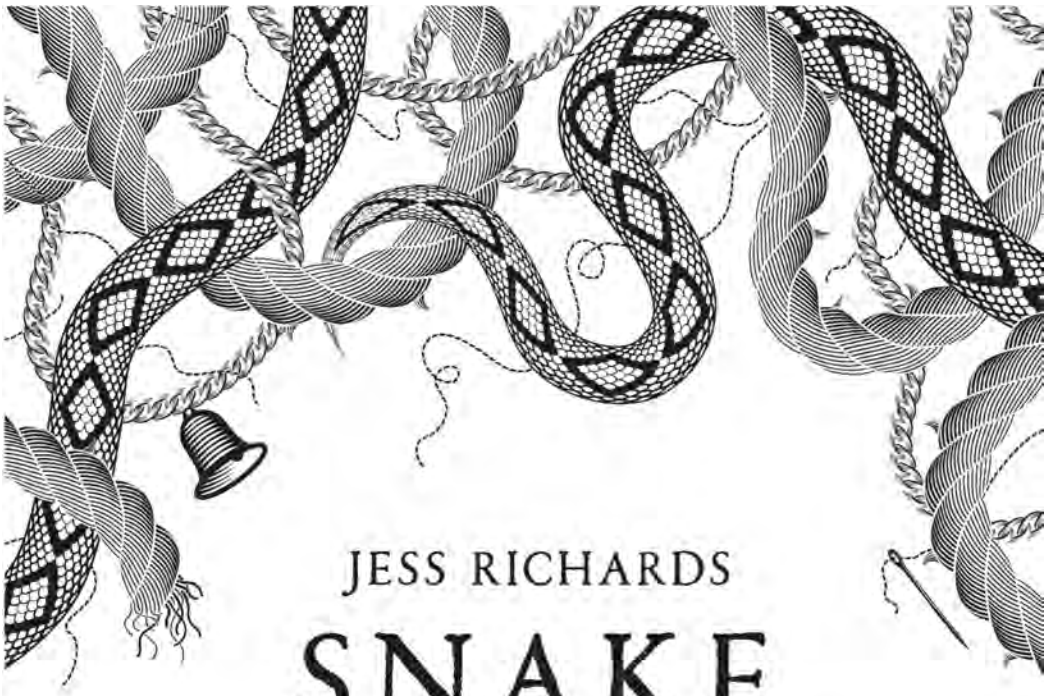


# SNAKE ROPES





JESS RICHARDS  
**SNAKE  
ROPES**



SCEPTRE

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Sceptre  
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4447 3783 7  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 4447 3784 4

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable  
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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

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For Kate,  
because she makes up words:  
Mitt nitt jub.

and

for Mr Blight,  
who lives in the Thrashing House:  
a man I've never met.



## Mary



The tall men in boats are coming. I see them through the window, close to the beach. My little brother is sat on my lap. Him puts his hands on the table, leans round and looks up at me. His brown eyes have my reflection inside.

I smile at him, stroke the curls on the back of his head where they need a wash. I say, 'Sorry Barney. I've got to get you hid, they're coming.' He grips on my neck hard, buries his face in my hair and I carry him across the room. He is so warm and I want to hang on to him, but I put him down by the cupboard door, and his face trying to look all angered makes me want to laugh, but I dun.

I hide him in the cupboard behind the boxes. Give him a blanket to keep him warm. Tell him, 'Shush now, and dun even breathe if they opens the cupboard door.'

The tall men are all skinny and pale, with long dark coats and black hats with big brims on them. They give us goods for our stuff. Trade they calls it. Da says it be more like theft and if we lived on a main land we'd get a lot more than what they give us. We've got to survive on what we can get. No one here goes to the main land, and no one wants to. Our boats aren't strong enough, we dun know the way, they can't understand

us, we're fine as we are. We have so many reasons; them stretch as wide as the distance to cross to take us there.

I stand at the window watching. Nine boats long and thin, like the men. Two in each one, rowing with long oars. I sort the piles of broiderie, put the ones them will like best on top. Da's left the fish out in the cold room, ready for the tall men.

Barney grumbles loud in the cupboard so I call out, 'Now dun fret, you'll not be shut in the dark for long, it's just till them've gone.'

The tall men dun move to speak to one another. Silent as shadows, everyone says, but when the tall men do speak, them pick the words what'll get what them most want. Not like us folks what live here, we sometimes chatter out whole bunches of tattle. Perhaps we should lock just a little behind our lips, then we'd get more back.

I've got to be watchful with Barney. Three boys on the island were took in the last three months. Three men what go drinking with Da, each of them sons are gone. Dun think them've got blown off the cliffs, we all think it were the tall men what took them.

Since our Mam died we struggle to get by. Da gets fish from out the sea and I do broideries for selling to the tall men. My broideries are lovely, everyone who sees them says so. I do all the flowers what grow in the summer before the wind sweeps them away, and all the butterflies. Mam left boxes and baskets full of threads and linens. Them said at her funeral that she were the best broiderer this island's ever seen. She taught me some before she died but I got better quick; Da said we'd be eating grass and drinking air if we were to live off just him fishing. Him says now I'm sixteen, I'm old enough to trade with the tall men alone.

I did well last month – the batch I'd stitched raised the tall men's eyebrows and got us more goods from them than the month



before. The colours sang in the sunlight on this table, as if my hands had stroked them into the fabric, rather than jabbed them through with the needle. Some pictures are more difficult to bring to life than others, pulling and drawing, pulling and drawing.

Not a sound from the cupboard. For a three-year-old, Barney is good and quiet for me, when him knows I mean it. I cross the room, whisper at the door, 'Them're coming. Keep quiet, good boy.'

'Dun like it in here, is dark and smelly.' Him snuffles.

Hims bunny doll lies on the floor next to the cupboard door. I scoop it up, open the door a crack; hims brown eyes are all teary behind the baskets of linens. Him reaches out hims hands.

'Here's your moppet. Just stay put. I'll cradle you when we're done.' I close up the door.

A few women have brought them trade down to the beach, and are handing over woven rugs and baskets to a pair of tall men what're stood by the boats. Fourteen of the tall men walk up the beach in pairs, them head to the path what leads up the cliffs, to other homes of folk what do trade. One pair of tall men come towards this row of cottages. Them need the agreement of two to make the decision of one. Just as we're suspicious of them, them dun trust us not to argue, especially where them goods are concerned. Them coats might be covered in seaspray and salt when them have crossed the surging waves to get here, but them are well stitched, as if somewhere on the main land there's a great old woman who sits there with needles for fingertips, stitching in straight perfect lines, with the threads tucked away so them will never escape.

The knock, four raps on the door. Four raps again.

I open the front door.

‘Miss Jared,’ says the tall man in front. I swallow a laugh, everyone here calls me Mary.

‘I’ve got the broideries ready.’ I step back and sweep my hand towards the tabletop by the window. I wish the sun would shine in and make the broideries look alive. Today they look dull and faded.

They lean over the broideries, long pale fingers fondle them. I wonder why they don’t take the girls, only the boys. Something boys can do what girls can’t. But what that could be I have no idea; everyone knows boys are only of use if they take to farming or fishing.

One has a pair of glasses balanced on the end of his nose and I wonder if he wears them out at sea. He glances at me over them, without a squint. Can’t be that badly sighted then.

‘These are quite . . . elaborate.’

‘That’s what you wanted last time.’ I bite my lip.

‘Slightly overexpressive,’ mutters the other one, his eyebrows raised.

‘You said . . .’

‘Not *this* extravagant. Not what was meant.’ His voice is low and steady.

‘Just tell me the price you’re suggesting.’

‘The women won’t like the more . . . elaborate ones. It’s the simple ones we can sell.’

‘The ones you passed over last time?’ My voice sounds shrill and both the men straighten up, near enough hit their heads on the beams.

‘We are at the behest of fashion, Miss Jared. We can give some as tokens, as gifts, if women choose to buy the plain ones. They want rustic.’

‘So you’re saying last month they wanted drama, now they’re wanting dull?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Well, I dun know how them can change fashion faster than I can make them. Why them can’t just stick with thems likes from last month for a few weeks more.’

A thud from Barney, in the cupboard.

I stamp on the floor.

Them dun notice.

I fold my arms. ‘So, how much?’

‘Ten units for the lot,’ says one, hims lip twitching.

‘Well, I think I’ll hang on to them till them come back *in* fashion.’

Him breathes in like I’ve just jabbed hims chest with one of the needles.

I stamp to the front door and open it. The wind blows in the smell of the sea. I stare at the floor, twirl a strand of my dark hair around my finger and pull, hard.

‘Twenty, then. You wouldn’t want to be seen as a charity case, I’m sure.’

‘Dun care about being seen as a charity case, we’ve got to eat.’ I glance up at hims cold blue eyes and swallow hard.

‘Thirty.’

‘Twenty-five, final price.’

‘Take them.’ I smile. ‘Do you want to do the fish? It’s out in the cold room.’

We go around the side of the cottage, and the cold room door sticks – the wooden door is guarding the fish. I can feel the tall men’s eyes on me. My hair, my waist, my backside as well, no doubt. Them’re all eyes, the tall men, each and every one.

I yank at the door as hard as I can, it whaps against my boot and springs open. In the dark, the dead fish eyes ogle me from the half-cask barrels. It’s so dark in here and I’m shivery just

stepping inside. Ash, soot and straw are spread all over the walls to keep the ice frozen. It works. Da's left the fish sorted and packed in the barrels I wrench out of the ice in the floor. Five heavy barrels and them dun even offer to help.

Pulling the last barrel out, I hear the back door slam and glance at the side of the cottage. 'So then.' I glare at the two tall men. 'What am I getting for this lot?'

Them move further away, so them can see the whole lot of fish all together. Them hiss prices back and forth and glance up at me every so often. Taking them time, as always. Just want to get a good long stare at a single young woman. The wind musses my hair up and I dun bother getting it off my face. I wipe my pink wet hands on my dress. I stink of fish. Good.

Eventually a trade is offered, I needle them up a little and settle. It's a good job Da's got a daughter, for the tall men offer far more for what girls and women make with our hands than what fishermen drag out of the sea.

I've got enough sense to do the best trade I can, and also enough sense not to help them once them've paid. The tall men take the broideries and go down to the boats. When them come back, I get them to put all our goods on the path by the front door. I count them up while the tall men come back and forth to drag the barrels of fish down to them boats.

I take some of the jars and cans of main land foods into our cottage and put them just inside the front door. The jars and cans are worth one unit each. I go outside to get more of the goods. There's a box with the words *exotic fruits* printed on the side.

'What's this meant to be then?' I call out to the tall men who've just grasped another barrel of fish.

The tall men look up. 'Five units.'

'But it's strange-looking things I'm sure can't be eaten.'

‘Happy enough with them on the mainland,’ says the one with the glasses.

‘Joyful, no doubt, to send them to us,’ I mutter.

Them carry on hauling the barrel, and I knock on a yellow thing shaped like the sun, but squashed. ‘What’s this then?’ I hold it up.

‘Melon,’ calls out one, and them both stare at me like I’m simple, so I take the box indoors, put it on the table by the window and go outside to get the rest.

There’s a tin of varnish and a pot of white paint worth three units each, seven boxes of matches and two packets of fire-lighters. There’s a small sack I’ve never seen them bring before. It’s got red words on it, but I dun know what’s inside, for the words are in foreign. Dun ask them about that one. Maybe the foreign will make sense later, when I’ve opened up the sack.

The three units of ice are in great sacks made from the clear shiny stuff them call plastic, thick layers of it. I put it in the cold room and kick the door shut behind me. I watch the two tall men emptying the last of the barrels into the crates in them boat. The tall men never forget the ice, for it’s needed to keep the fish fresh. Still have to trade them for it, but. Main land folks must stink of fish. Whole lot of men here do fishing, and there’s a fair few cold rooms on the island, as well as a smoke-house. But the fish is all traded, for none of us like the taste.

I think the tall men must have one great huge boat what picks up all nine of the oar boats. Them keep it just over the edge of the horizon. For if them dun have a quicker way to get from the main land to here than just oars, then the ice would melt on the journey.

Not that I’d say anything to the tall men, for however them do it, them’re the only folks what bother to brave the distance to us.

Back inside, I watch the tall men roll the empty fish barrels back up the beach to the cold room. Them leave them stacked up outside, so the other tall men know them've got our trade and dun come knocking twice.

I call, 'Come out Barney, them're done.'

No answer. Him must have fallen asleep in there, or be messing with me.

I cross the room, open the cupboard door. The moppet sits on top of a basket, its ears askew.

Barney's blanket lies there rumpled, without him on it.

My head goes bang bang with the throb in it. I open the boxes at the back, pull Mam's linens out of the baskets. No Barney.

I tear through to the bedroom, look under him's small bed, under my bed, rumple up the bedclothes in case him is hiding. In Da's room, I rummage through the wardrobe where Mam's clothes still hang, but there's no Barney. Back in the main room I check the cupboard again and under the table.

I open the trapdoor in the floor and climb down the ladder into the storm room. Light a candle and check in the shadows. Nothing. I slump down on the floor.

Barney's mine. Him can't be took like the others. Him is too young.

If Mam were still alive she'd be shouting about this. She shouted so often, even when Da gave her a bruise for saying Barney were hers but not him's. Them shared me. Dun know why she wouldn't share Barney as well. Maybe she thought Da dun bother enough with me, so a son would be just another thing for him not to bother about. Or she could have loved Barney best.

I loved him best.

I want to shout like Mam would've done, only I've got all the shouts stuffed in my chest and them dun want to come out. Barney's been mine since Mam died. Da said after her funeral, 'Him is all yours Mary, through an' through. Nowt to do with me, so you got to work hard, do a lot of broideries to keep him fed.'

Always has been my arms Barney wanted.

I've always wanted him in my arms.

In our bedroom, I stuff the pillow from Barney's bed in my arms and squeeze, hard. If I squeezed him this hard I'd stifle the life out of him, but my arms need to do something. Tears pinch up in my eyes. I dun have the time for this, got to move, else there'll be no chance to do anything – the tall men will be gone and there'll just be a blank hole in the world what Barney's fallen through.

I dun know what to do.

What did Annie next door do, when her Kieran got took? I must have known. Weren't long ago. Kieran, fourteen years old, nose thick with freckles, just like hims Mam. What happened then, what did Annie do?

The front door thumps and rattles.

Da's voice hollers, 'Mary, where are you?' all gruff. Him is back much earlier than usual.

I've got to get out before Da sees Barney is gone and decides Barney being gone is all for the best. One less mouth to gannet down not enough food.

Hurling down the pillow, I run to the kitchen, click the latch and get out the back door, around the side of our cottage and down to the beach where the tall men are loading crates and boxes onto them boats.

My boots slip on the shingle, get tangled in the spiky grass, sand gets in the holes and near trips me. I get close enough to

one of the tall men, grab him wrist as he is picking up a crate of ropes, wearing black gloves. His cold wrist feels like he is dead though he is up and walking. Touching his skin sends a judder right through me.

He drops the crate. We both jump back. He turns and glares at me.

I yell at him, 'My brother, give me him back! He is only little – what use is he for you? He is mine, the only one I've got!'

He leans forwards. 'We don't have him. We don't have the others either. If your parents can't afford to feed you, we can't be answerable for their actions, or their blame. We're here for trade as we always have been.'

'We have to go,' says one, shadows in his eyes.

The tall men load up their boats, like I'm not here. I clamber over the boxes and check each boat, all the baskets, every sack. There's nothing being loaded but fish and flour, brown boots from the cobbler, horseshoes and birdcages from the smithy, weavings, woollens, tapestries, stitchings, broderies and ropes. Clothes and cushions for the fancy women's houses what they must change as often as their fashion.

No brother.

All the crying what's stuck in me finds the blank place in the world what he has fallen away through. I fall on the sand, can't see a thing through the tears. Been looking after him so hard since Mam died, I feel like he's Mam myself. I draw my arms around my chest, only there's a hollow where he should be. Tears fall into it; he is not there to cradle. I want to be strong for him, only I can't when he is not here.

A tall man leans over me. He has brown eyes, not like the others. He looms against the grey sky, like a giant gravedigger. I grasp a stone lying in the wet sand and raise my fist, to hurl it at him.



Him grips my wrist. I try to shriek but my throat's stuck. Hims touch sends shivers all up my arm and I can't move my hand. Him pinches out my fingers. It's a big white shell what's in my palm, not a stone at all.

Him lets go. 'You can't hurt me with *that*.' Hims voice is low and cold. A glimmer of gold flecks around the pupil in hims right eye. Puts me in mind of the gold flecks in Barney's eye. Him smells of salt and dust. Something in the smell makes the sky blink dark for a moment. Then it's grey again. A sharp pain cuts through my belly.

Him turns and walks away. The tall men are done with me. Done with all of us till next month. Them push the boats off the beach and the long oars stir up the waters.

Barney is not in the boats.

Not in our home.

Not in my arms.

My throat gets unstuck and I howl and scream like my heart will clean break out of me. So loud Da comes out of our cottage.

Da gets to me and I feel a sharp bite on my shin. A thick rope lies next to my foot on the sand. It's moving, twisting, glints of teeth woven through the strands. Da pulls me up on my feet and I punch hims big chest and bury my head in hims neck.

'Barney's gone!' I shriek. 'Him's been took.' And everything goes blank and dark.

\*

Da sits beside my bed on the wobbly stool. Slumped over, wearing all greys, him looks like an empty canvas bag.

Him says, 'You've got a fever, Mary. Been talking strangeness

what makes no sense. Brown eyes and blue eyes and bruises. Ropes tied all over you an' the whole island. You know where you are?' Hims tired eyes look at me like I'm going to be gone any moment.

I roll away, face the cracked grey wall and whisper, 'Want him back.'

Da's voice sounds loud. 'Him is gone, Mary, and it's not your fault.'

I know it *is* my fault. Shouldn't have let him get away from my eyes, not for a moment, not even to be hid where I thought him'd be safe.

The ropes come up over the bed. I'm tied to the island and all twisted. I scream and here's the blank dark place again.

I hear my voice . . . 'Da, find him . . .'

'Him is gone . . .'

In the blank dark, blue eyes are everywhere, staring at me.

I shout at them and ask them and cry at them, for Barney.

The back door to the cottage slams.

I'm carrying a fish eye out of the cold room on the tip of a broiderie needle. I grip the needle with all my fingertips to hold the eye steady. The eye blinks. I judder and the eye falls off the needle into a barrel filled with ice. My head is burning hot. Someone wipes a cold cloth over my forehead.

The back door slams in the distance.

'Mam,' my voice says, 'can you see Barney?'

Da's voice is loud in my ear, 'Mary, you're in a fever. Mam's buried.'

'No . . . no . . . no.'

Mam's voice is here. 'This fence is made of threads. Woven with broken lost things. Everything they want to forget.'

'Dun tell me to forget Barney!'

Something cold on my face. A hand, a cloth, a piece of ice . . .  
Da's voice, 'Shush up Mary, you're shouting . . .'  
I call out, 'Mam, can you see where him is?'  
Da's voice says, too loud, 'Mary stop it, it's a fever you're in.  
Mam's gone. Settle now, settle.'

Mam's still talking. 'Forgotten things *will* make a person  
sick . . .'

I'm crying.  
She's gone.

Da wipes the cold thing over my face, says, 'Have a drink,  
come on, there's meadowsweet in this water.' Hims arm holds  
up my back, tilts a cup to my mouth. I clench my lips tight shut,  
water rains all over me. Wet all over . . . Da bangs the cup down,  
and says, 'You dun even *want* to get better.' Him lets go of my  
back, I fall. Down through cloud, rain, fog . . .

Hands reach out from the sky, hold out food, bowls of soup,  
plates of steaming vegetables, stew, I'm getting fatter and fatter  
from eating and I punch my huge belly. It unravels, like stitches  
on a broiderie. All the stitches twist, wriggle like maggots, twirl  
and squirm themselves into the shape of eyes.

I'm in a tunnel of blue eyes.

The back door slams.

Da's voice calls my name from the day Barney got took, calls  
again. Over and over, 'Mary, where are you? Mary, where are  
you? Mary . . .'

Him never called Barney's name.

The blue eyes blink.

Him knew Barney weren't here . . .

Da puts him cold hand on my cheek. 'Come back Mary,  
come home, come back.'

\*

This morning the sun is bright. Da opens the curtain so the light gets in. I sit up slow. Him looks like someone I dun even know.

Da folds hims arms. ‘You’re through the worst of it. I need to go fishing so we can eat – the tall men’ll be coming back in a week or so. Is tha’ all right, but?’

‘Aye Da, you go, I’ll be fine right here.’

Him is polishing a battered compass with hims jumper sleeve. Hims eyes are so tired. Like them’ve seen a thousand monsters just sitting here with me. But Da knew Barney weren’t here . . . the day him were took.

‘Go Da. I’ll be fine. Da?’

‘Aye, Mary?’ Him puts the compass back in hims pocket.

‘I’m sorry about Barney.’ I watch hims face. It dun change.

Him picks at a hole in hims jumper. ‘Aye,’ him says, quiet. ‘So am I.’ Him gets up, stretches, cracks hims neck and goes. Him dun mean it. Hims life will be easier with just us two working, with no boy he dun love, to teach to catch fish.

So the tall men are coming soon. I’ve been in bed for over two weeks.

Days and nights and days of fever.

Dun believe I’ve lost this much time – Barney missing, with me not able to look for him. I want to cut and rip and unpick all the days what’ve gone, thread them back together so them’re made all over again, but I can’t feel my hands.

Nights and days and nights of not looking. Of no one looking.

I try to stand but the floor shifts around and my legs trip me back on the bed. I try again. And again till I’m all stood up. It takes a while, but I get over to the bedroom door. I go through to the main room with the cupboard with Barney in it, only him isn’t in there. I open the cupboard and look at all the boxes and baskets full of threads and linen. It’s dark in there.

Blank dark.

Ice in barrels. I blink, and it's just the cupboard and all the broiderie stuff Mam had. All the hoops and frames. All the linen she never put pictures on. That's what I do. I make broideries on the linen and the tall men come and take them away. Them take a lot of things away. Them dun take my brother, though that's what everyone'll say, but I know, because I looked.

On the floor by the cupboard, there's a white shell what looks like something I should remember, so I pick it up. I grip hard on the shell. I remember the eyes of the tall man who pinched out the fingers of my hand when Barney were took. Brown eyes. Not like all them others. The gold flecks around the pupil in hims right eye. Just like Barney. Maybe Barney got took into hims face somehow and kept hims own eyes. The smell of the tall man fills my nose. Salt and dust. I snort it out.

I put the shell to my ear.

Listen close; the sea comes in, so close, like it's in the room with me, so close, like it's in my head, filling it with waves.

Barney's voice speaks inside the shell, 'Mary, where's moppet?'  
Just hearing him I cry out.

This shell is precious.

The floor goes crooked. The wall hits against me. I go into our bedroom. Barney's moppet lies on hims bed, its long ears unravelling, one eye hanging off and a squinty mouth.

I bring it to the table in the main room by the window and sew on the eye, only it seems even more wonky.

Getting my broiderie scissors, I cut the whole belly open down the middle. I take some of the stuffing out and put the shell inside. Stitch it up again, like a surgeoner.

Secret now.

I put my ear to it and hear Barney's voice in the shell inside of it. 'That's better Mary,' him says. 'All better now.'

I want to speak back, only my voice is gone.

Too secret to speak of.

I lie down on Barney's bed, curled up with the moppet next to my ear, hear Barney's voice sing la la la like the baby him still is. I listen close, him voice talks and I hear a dreaming place of Barney's. Not the blank dark place in the fever – Barney's dream is all light and the wind blows us up in the sky like butterflies.

Barney's dream is in him voice:

*In this place you an' me dun have to be big or growed up acause we're small like flutterbees. We both little up in the sky. Mam and Da is big. Them creeps out of a tunnel in the grass.*

*Them runs round round round looking for us, we doing hidings in the sky. Them looks up high and sees us. Them pulls fishing net out them hair. Them doing chasings after us. Me and you, Mary, we got our own flutterbee wings, real ones.*

*We go up in the clouds acause we doing laughings what makes the wings flap hard.*

*Mam and Da is leaping – jumping up and up to catch us in nets. Them sees us with brave wings, an' shrieks in them mouths so loud them eyes roll around and all around.*

*We laughing Mary, doing laughings so loud.*

*Mam and Da is leaping higher and higher, eyes all big mad. We not afeart; we know them can't catch us.*