***The Bunny Slippers* by Emily @ forthebookish.com**

**WE WERE TUCKED** under the tree on Christmas Eve.

There we sat, waiting all night, until light finally filtered through the windows. Footsteps thumped down the staircase. *"Faster, Jonah!" "Mom, wake up! " "It's Christmas!"*

*Christmas.* The word was new to our velvet pink ears, but we marveled at the excitement it brought to the home. It must be something wonderful, after all, if it brought us to Lily.

A pair of small hands reached under the branches and grasped us by our tails - little folded over pieces of cotton, stitched onto our heels. *"Bunny slippers!"* A voice breathed, in awe. *"Just what I wanted!"* And that's when she slid her bare feet into the folds of our bodies. We shivered; the feet were like ice. No wonder we were needed.

And then something incredible happened - *we were moving!* Sliding across slick wood floors, padding down a carpeted hallway. I glanced at my identical twin (identical except for the fact that she was molded to fit a left foot, and I right), wondering what she thought of it all.

And then - *imagine this* - we were flying! It was a short flight, but magical indeed. Our ears tucked underneath something soft - a *blanket,* we soon learned. The blankets shifted as we flew into the air once more - and then back down. And then up, up, up - and then down. We were *jumping!*

*"Mom, wake up! It's Christmas! Mama, come on-!"* and then stampeding down the stairs, *here we go again...* we finally criss-crossed on the wood floors. We watched in anticipation as the hands fumbled underneath the tree. *“A dolly! A toy soldier!"* Squeals of delight floated through the house. We would have described it as nothing short of a miracle. But then, we hadn't seen anything yet.

My left ear lifted, sensing an unfamiliar noise from the right. It creaked and then, from the corner of my right eye, I saw two heavy black boots. I scanned them for eyes or ears, or at the very least a tail, but there was nothing. Just blackness. We slid across the floors and flew into the air. But it wasn’t like the flying we had done earlier, when we landed on soft white sheets. Instead, we were flung into the air by the owner of the black boots and spun around.

*“Daddy!”* There was the sweet voice again. It melted into our cotton ears, like music to the deaf. *“Lily!”* Laughter and screaming and more squealing. *What chaos!* But it was contagious. It was bliss to be spun around, melodic to hear the squeals and shouts of happiness.

*“Did you know, mama?” “Yes, baby, I did.” “What was Europe like, daddy?”* Stories passed around the room. Something odd dripped onto my ear. I tried to shake it away, looking to my match to see if she, too, felt it. She stared back at me, confused. There it was again. It was… *wet.*

*“You don’t have to cry, Lily.” “I know, but we didn’t get a letter for months, dad.”* From my position on the wood floors, I watched as the small hands that pulled us up by our tails that morning wrapped themselves around the man with the black boots.

*“Dad, look at my new soldiers! “And my books!”* Several other voices scattered about the room, and we slid to the floor again, Lily’s small hands folded around our eyes. We perked our ears, straining to hear the voices again.

And so it went the rest of the glorious day: not once were we separated from the dainty feet. When the house became dark again, we sat beside Lily’s bed and stared in wonderment at each other, thrilled at the possibilities of what the next day would bring.

For weeks, the routine was the same. We went wherever Lily went. We sat at the dinner table, where the family talked about the man with the black boots’ shiny gold star pinned on his uniform. We heard stories of adventure and knights in shining armor while Lily’s mother read bedtime stories each night. Lily stumbled over words in the books, but alongside her, we taught ourselves to read. Sometimes we caught glimpses of newspapers sprawled on the floor while Lily and Jonah read the comics. Big words like *combat neurosis, shell shock,* and *exhaustion* intimidated us, but we were much more interested in the comic section.

One afternoon, we scanned the cartoons on the newspaper from our position in the air. Lily and Jonah sprawled on their stomachs on the living room carpet when there was a knock at the door.

*“Henry! It’s been awhile.”* Voices carried from the front door, and I lifted my ears, interest piqued. *“You as well, John. It’s good to see you again.”* I recognized that voice anywhere. The man in the black boots. But who was the other voice?

*“I dropped by to get your business card. Are you back at the law firm yet?”* What in the world was a law firm? I glanced at the left bunny, bewildered. *“Next week. I’m eager to get back.”* Lily, ignoring the conversation from the front of the house, pointed to a comic on the paper and giggled, nudging Jonah. *“I’m afraid I don’t have any card with me at the moment. Could I just give you my number?”* Number? The stitching on my mouth drooped. Weren’t Lily and Jonah curious about the conversation as well? It seemed to me the man in the black boots and his friend were speaking in code.

*“Here’s a pen and paper. It’s five-five…”* the voice trailed to an end.

Lily straightened her knees and pulled herself off the floor. I grumbled at the movement as it momentarily interrupted my eavesdropping. *“Five-five… uh… I - I can’t remember.”*

*“Oh. Well, that’s alright, Henry, I’m sure you have more important things on your mind. I’ll look it up in the phone book and give you a call. Next week.”* The door creaked shut behind the mystery visitor.

Lily stretched and slipped us off her feet. *“I’m going upstairs to read, Jonah.”* For days we sat in the living room, seemingly forgotten by our owner. And then, our small world expanded.

We left the house.

*“Absolutely not.” “But mom, why?” “Lily, you cannot wear those bunny slippers to Mrs. Owen’s New Year’s Eve party.”* Our noses twitched as a heavenly smell wafted from the oven. *Brownies.* Delicious as they smelled, one thing our manufacturer didn’t give us was mouths.

*“Daddy, can’t I wear my bunnies to the party? I want to show them to Maggie!” “Aw, Catherine, let her wear them. There’ll be no harm done.”* I always liked the man with the black boots. With a sigh, Lily’s mother relented. *“Oh, alright. But you’re not wearing them to school.”*

And so we were shown to Maggie. The world outside the house was brilliant. Something green and scratchy tickled our fabricked soles. And then we climbed into something moving with wheels like the model cars Jonah played with. When we arrived at the *Mrs. Owen’s New Year’s Eve party* in question, we discovered the floors were no different than the kind in Lily’s house -- only much more crowded.

Boring brown clogs and black sneakers surrounded us. Noises sounded all over the room; laughter and chatter and the clinking of glasses. It was more hectic than Christmas morning. For the first time since being packaged in a box with my twin and shipped off to a large department store, I wished I had paws to cover my ears. I let them fall forward in attempt to quiet the noise.

While Lily moved us about the room - upstairs, downstairs, even outside - I squeezed my eyes shut and let the chaos fall to the background, like Jonah’s building blocks falling in slow motion.

If I thought the party couldn’t get any louder, I was wrong. Soon everyone began chanting strange words in unison - *“five, four, three…”* even Lily squealed in delight when the room reached *“one”* and erupted in laughter and shouts. *“Happy new year! Happy 1945!”*

And then: a piercing noise so sharp and shrill, we flew into the air as Lily jumped, startled. *“The smoke alarm!”* she cried. If it weren’t for the fact that my stitched-on eyes lacked tear ducts, I thought I might have cried myself. I was ready to go *home.* But Mrs. Owen (presumably the host of the party, whom I had soon discovered smelled strongly of citrus perfume) squealed, *“Don’t worry, everyone! It’s only my pie!”*

Lily’s hands flew instinctively to her ears, and I wished I could do the same.

I didn’t know what pie was, but I didn’t like the way it sounded. *“Oh, blimey, it’s burnt!”* Mrs. Owen screeched. We shifted on the floor as Lily spoke in a hushed tone, *“I’m glad about that. Mrs. Owen’s cherry pie, blech!”* The girl beside her giggled. Though her shiny black shoes were sadly missing eyes, her compliments on our gray velvet earlier in the night endeared us to her.

The screeching finally cut short; I relaxed and peeked at my companion bunny, whose own ears had flopped down in relief.

Lily’s voice floated down to our ears again. *“What’s that?”* I sighed as we were moving once more. *Wouldn’t her feet ever tire of standing tonight?* The floor changed from newly waxed hardwoods to plush carpet, the light dimming as Lily led us down a short hallway. *“Dad?”* The man in the black boots was crouched in a corner at the end of the hall, shaking back and forth, *over and over.* I shut my eyes. His movements made me dizzy. Whimpering wasn’t something I expected the black-booted man to ever do; but there he was, shaking like a madman, low moans coming from somewhere in the back of his throat.

*“Daddy?”* Lily whispered. I let out a breath of air, comforted by the soft carpet and Lily’s hushed tones. The party mayhem faded to the background as I let myself drift away. I barely registered the fact that we were moving again - no, not moving, *running.*

*“Mom! Mom, dad needs help-”* Lily stood breathless in the midst of the party, tugging on her mother’s shirt sleeve. *“What? What is it, Lily? Okay. I’m coming.”* Lily’s mother followed close on our heels as we skipped up the steps again.

*“*Catherine*, is everything alright?”* My nose crinkled. The pungent scent that hung in the air told me this voice belonged to Mrs. Owen. Well, *now* I was alert. I peered at my twin, but she had long fallen asleep. I envied her that.

I slid my eyes shut again, my ears flopping as Lily rushed to her father’s side. I focused on the movements and forced the noise to dwindle. We were crouched down now, the low moans close to our ears. And then it turned it to *screaming.*

*“We’re right here, Henry.”* Lily’s mother’s voice rose above the screams, coated in comfort and concern.My eyes popped open. *“It was only the smoke alarm.” The man in the black boots was*

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*“*Catherine*.”* Mrs. Owen again. *“I think it is time for you and your-”* she sniffed. *“*reckless *family to go on home now.”* The screaming turned back into moans; the rocking continued. Jonah’s stiff black sneakers turned the corner. *“Mom?” “We’re going home now Jonah.”*

*“Honestly, Catherine. It seems your husband needs some…* rest*.”* Mrs. Owen’s voice was clipped and tight. We were still for a few moments. I lifted my eyes as far as they would go and watched Lily’s wringing hands. If I had a stomach, I felt sure it would be clenched; as tight as Mrs. Owen’s voice.

There was a rustling as Lily’s mother knelt to face her eye-level. *“Lily, take Jonah to the car now.” “Yes, ma’am.”*

As we descended the stairs, my wish was granted: silence had settled over the entire house like a fog. But this wasn’t the silence I longed for just moments before. I’d never heard silence quite so loud.

The silence followed us like a cloud hanging threateningly close over the head of one of our favorite comic strip characters. It followed us to the car, and at home, even when were safely tucked in a corner of Lily’s room. It stayed in the morning, when we swung underneath the breakfast table, spoons clanking against the children’s cereal bowls above. And it was there when Lily peered around the door of the room where we first toppled onto the bed early Christmas morning.

As we crept towards the bed, I realized this time there would be no jumping. Instead, we stood by the bed skirt, staring and staring and staring… my ears picked up on the ticking of an alarm clock. The crackle of the record player Jonah was playing downstairs. Slow, steady breathing from the man in the black boots, who was curled on the bed beneath several quilts. *“Daddy, when you wake up, I’m going to read you my school book. I think you’d like it.”*

Days passed, and Lily forgot about us when we fell off her feet underneath the table. It was then that I realized perhaps the factory was right not to give us mouths. I could only imagine the secrets of the world that would be unveiled if all bunny slippers could talk. One quiet afternoon when Lily and Jonah returned to school, a strange man came by.

*“I’m Doctor Seymour,”* he introduced himself.

*“Henry James,”* the man in the black boots replied. *“And this is my wife, Catherine.”*

From our spot underneath the table, I saw Dr. Seymour reposition his legs. *“Mr. and Mrs. James. I’m here to discuss your diagnosis, Mr. James. It is a strange sickness one in three soldiers suffer from. Recent psychologists call it ‘*combat exhaustion.’”Exhaustion? The man in the black boots was tired? Lily’s parents didn’t interrupt as Dr. Seymour continued. *“It is a new form of neurosis. Some symptoms may include memory loss of important details - phone numbers, events. Another is reliving the event when a certain noise or place causes a memory. The smoke alarm at the party, mister, triggered a variety of neurosis we call the ‘terror state.’”*

*“Well-”* Mrs. James’ voice broke in. *“Surely my husband will recover soon.”*

*“I will be administering a sodium pentathol that will ease your troubles, sir. In the meantime, take it easy.”*

For months, the man in the black books *“took it easy.”* One day, he even came home from the law firm with a briefcase and collapsed on the sofa. *“I can’t even take care of my family, Catherine,”* he bellowed. Lily stood just beyond the wall of the living room, holding her breath. *“I can’t stop shutting down at work. I feel like I’m drowning and - and just want to* let go*.”*

*“Dad?”* We slid around the corner and faced Mr. and Mrs. James. The man in the black boots lay on the couch, arms splayed above his head. Mrs. James stood with her hands on her hips beside him. They both jumped at the sound of Lily’s voice. *“Are you going to be okay?”*

*“Lily.”* Mrs. James stopped, visibly shaking. *“We’re going to be alright.”*

*“*Really*?”* Lily’s voice rose to a crescendo. *“Because it doesn’t look like we are. The kids at school say dad must have been a misfit from the start to break down like this.”* I watched Lily, sympathetic. Her hateful tone made the kids at school sound vicious. *“And I’m starting to believe them,”* she huffed. *“I need you.”*

Mr. James said nothing, but Lily’s mother took a tentative stepped forward, arms outstretched. *“I need to speak with your father alone. I promise we are going to discuss this as a family this afternoon.”* Her eyes welled with tears.

Lily and Jonah were sent out of the house. *“Jonah, let’s go see if Maggie can come down to the lake with us. Wouldn’t that be nice?”*

I didn’t know what the lake was, but if Lily was taking us with her - having managed to slip past her mother unnoticed - then I was happy to tag along.

Dull slabs of concrete were all we got to look at for four whole blocks. Heat crept through our fabric from the black asphalt. And then, the familiar rickety steps from *the New Year’s Eve party.* I recognized the stench anywhere as the door swung open. *“Oh. Hello Lily. Jonah.”* The tight voice that was no worse than nails on a chalkboard to my ears.

*“Hi Mrs. Owen. Can Maggie come to the lake with us to play?”* I stretched my eyes to the sky - or as far as the sky I could see - and noted Mrs. Owen’s legs stiffening. *Hesitating*. *“Well, Lily, I don’t think that’s such a fine idea. Perhaps another time.”*

*“But - but why not?”* Lily sputtered.

*“Have a nice afternoon, children.”* The door swung closed.

I jumped as Lily stomped my fellow bunny. *“One of grandpa’s French words would be useful right now, Jonah,”* she stewed. But we went to the lake nonetheless. We trekked through the unidentifiable scratchy green ground and a sea of trees until a clearing came into view. Several yards ahead, water lapped at the surface of the mud. *“Come on, Jonah. Beat you up to my knees!”*

Lily’s warm, sticky feet slid out of the folds of our fabric, and we were abandoned by the water, watching as she and Jonah waded into the lake*.* I watched in interest, albeit grateful Lily opted to leave us by the water. I recalled once when we were tossed into a machine that spun us around and soaked us down to our padding. I loathed the water. I turned to gauge my match’s reaction to the lake*,* but the spot where Lily had slipped her off in a rush to the water only moments before was empty.

Panicked, I scanned the landscape for any sign of a fuzzy pink bunny just my size - and caught her *floating downstream in the lake.* In that moment, I ached for a mouth - for a tongue, for legs, for *lungs.* If I had those bodily functions, I would have

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like the man in the black boots had at the party. Frantic, I watched in dismay as she widened her eyes at me in alarm. *Help!,* she seemed to be calling. *Please, help!* But there was nothing to be done. Lily and Jonah were floating like silly ducks with their eyes closed, calling strange words to each other: *“Marco!” “Polo!”*

Without my match, I was nothing more than a piece of fabric with eyes - completely useless less Lily be interested in playing *Cinderella* with a missing fuzzy slipper.

Minutes later, Lily waded out of the water - winning a round of *Marco Polo* evidently warranting a grin spread across her face - but as soon as it had come, it slipped away. *“Jonah!”* she wailed, throwing herself into the mud where my bunny friend had once sat. *“Jonah, my bunny slipper! It’s gone!”* My world as I had known it was over.

*“LILY!”* My ears perked at the call, sounding from several feet ahead. I itched to turn and see who the person who was, but of course, my legless body was useless. *“Maggie? What’s wrong?” “It’s your father. You’d better come quick.”*

She forgot me. A second hadn’t passed before Lily and Jonah were on their feet, racing through the foliage, twigs snapping under their feet. I was devastated. Why couldn’t I be a nice, normal stuffed bunny? Why did I have to be a unique pair of bunny *slippers?* That was just it - I was a *pair.* Without the other bunny, Lily didn’t want me.

So there I lay as the light above grew dim. I shivered as the night air soon engulfed me. *Lily would never come back for me.*

*Crack.* I jerked, eyes wide in fear. *Snap.* There the sound was again! *What could it be?* A million possibilities - beasts from the stories Lily read - flew through my mind: a dragon. A bear. A *lion.* A lion! That’s what it was! He had come to eat me and find my bunny friend, too.

But then a silver silhouette emerged through the brush, and I relaxed. Whatever it was couldn’t be a lion. I struggled to make out the figure. It was… *the man in the black boots!* I envisioned a heart *skipping a beat* like the ones in Lily’s books always did.

My eyes watched, unmoving, as he waded into the lake just like Lily and Jonah had. But it didn’t look like he intended to stop at his knees. *What was he doing? Oh no oh no oh no…*

The water rose, higher and higher up his body, until it reached his nose. He stopped moving, falling completely still. Rising from the water, he moved in slow motion until he emerged on the bank. His clothes clung to his skin, sodden.

*“Lily’s bunny slipper,”* he breathed.*”Lily.”* I held my breath, still as I had been all night.

Stumbling up the hill, he touched a trembling finger to my ear, and I couldn’t resist - I winked up at him, full of joy. Falling in the mud, he held me to his chest. *He saved me.* Or did I save him?

**THE END.**