

Folk Stories From Around the World

WINTER TALES

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For the third time, the bear returned. With a beating heart, the youngest daughter put the crown on her head. It shone flame-bright as she climbed onto the bear's back. He bounded deep into the forest. "Have you ever sat softer?" he asked.

The princess held on to the bear. She felt the powerful muscles moving beneath her. She sunk her fingers into the thick fur. "No! I have never sat so soft."

"And have you ever seen so clear?" Beneath the blazing crown, the girl's hair was full of wind. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes shone. She could see the whole forest, laid out before her. "No, I have never seen so clear!"

"Yes, you are the one," the bear said.

They leapt through icy rivers, splashing sparkles, the princess laughing with delight. They slid down slopes and rolled in the snow. They climbed the hills, and sat side-by-side in the sunset. They slept, curled together, in mossy hollows. In the mornings, they greeted each other nose-to-nose. Until at last they came to the home of the white bear.

Rising from the black branches was a palace of white, its turrets shining in the winter sky. Inside, the rooms were bright with silver and gold, and soft with silken pillows. The bear went out, and the princess kept the fire alight.

When it was night, the bear returned. But, in the darkness, when the princess reached out to touch his fur, she touched not paws, but fingertips. By night her bear-husband was a human man, though she never saw his face.

Within the year, the princess and the bear had a child. But no sooner was it born than the bear king took it away, and the princess did not see her child again. This happened three times. The princess begged her husband to explain, but he just shook his head. "I cannot. I'm so sorry."

The princess was heartbroken. "All day long I am alone. I long for family."

"Very well," said the bear, "we will visit your parents."

When her mother heard the princess's tale, she cried, "A bear that changes at night is not a real bear. There's magic at work. Perhaps he's a troll! Take this candle. When he is asleep, light it and see his true face."



That night, the princess lit the candle. Beside her lay not a troll, but a prince. She leant to kiss his brow, and three hot drops of wax fell onto his skin, and he woke. "What have you done?" he cried. "If you had loved me, just as I am, the troll hag's spell would have broken. But now her magic tightens and I must become her husband."

He pulled on his bearskin and sped away. The princess grabbed his fur, trying to haul herself onto his back, but the bear was so fast all she could do was hold on. Through the forest, she held on, though thorns tore her clothes and scratched her skin. But at a bend in the path, he swerved, and she was thrown onto the ground. The bear was gone.

The princess walked and walked through the forest, until she came to a cottage, and she knocked at the door. Inside was an old woman and a young girl. "Have you seen a white bear?" the princess asked.

"Yes," said the woman, "he sped by here a day ago, but he was going so fast you won't catch him. Come in and rest." The princess rested her weary feet by the fire, and smiled at the child. The child came closer, hugging a cat to her chest. She looked at the princess, with shy eyes. "Hello little cat..." said the princess, and she began to talk to the child. They shared stories of animals they'd seen in the forest, and birds they'd heard in the hedgerows.

The little girl took out a pair of silver scissors. She began to play with them, snipping the air. With every snip, reams of cloth rippled from the blades; green silk, red velvet, white wool. The girl looked at the princess's torn clothes, and she asked the old woman, "May I give her a gift?"

So the princess left the cottage with the silver scissors.

The princess walked through the forest, until she came to a second cottage. Inside was an old woman and a young girl. "Have you seen a white bear?" the princess asked.

"Yes," said the woman, "he sped by a day ago, but he was going so fast you won't catch him." The child bounded up to the princess. "Look what I can do!" She turned a wobbly cartwheel. The princess clapped her hands, delighted.

The child took out a golden cup. She began to play with it, tilting it in the air. As it tipped, it filled with a drink; hot sweet blackcurrant. The girl looked at the princess,

and asked the woman. "May I give her a gift?"

So the princess left the cottage with the golden cup.

The princess walked on through the forest, until she came to a third cottage. Inside was an old woman and a young girl. "Have you seen a white bear?" the princess asked.

"Yes" said the old woman, "he sped by here this morning, but he was going so fast you won't catch him. Come in and rest a moment." The girl showed the princess the treasures she had found in the forest; a white feather, a yellow leaf, an acorn cup. The princess looked at every one. She thanked the girl for showing them to her.

Then the child took out a snow-white cloth. She flicked it through the air and when it landed, it was covered with good things to eat. The girl said to the old woman. "She looks hungry; may I give her a gift?"

So the princess went on, the scissors and the cup wrapped in the cloth.

She walked and she walked until she came to the edge of the forest, and before her now rose a wall of rock, glazed in ice. She reached out a finger to touch it, then drew it back in pain. The sharp cold stung her skin. The rock was smooth as polished glass. The princess craned her neck, but she couldn't see the top. "It's impossible!" she sighed.

At the foot of the mountain was a fourth cottage. The princess knocked. A woman answered. She was dressed in rags and hungry children pulled at her apron. "Come in," said the woman.

"Though I have nothing to offer you but stones. I'm warming them in the kettle – I tell the children there are apples cooking and it quiets them for a while."

With a snip of the scissors, a tip of the cup, and a flick of the cloth, the family were soon clothed and well-fed. "Thank you for your kindness," said the woman. "In return, I will help you. My husband is a master smith. He will make you a set of iron claws, to climb the ice mountain."



The next day, the princess stood at the foot of the mountain. She put on her claws. I wonder, as she flexed each finger into its iron tip, did she feel the deep growl low in her throat? Did she feel the fierce protective power of being a bear?

Step after step, paw after paw, she climbed the unclimbable mountain.

At the very top of the mountain stood a castle. And at the window stood the troll hag. She was built like a boulder and had a granite scowl.

The princess sat beneath the window and began to play with the silver scissors. Sumptuous fabric slipped from the blades – purple silks and golden velvets. "Give me those!" shouted the troll hag. The wedding was in three days' time, and what a wedding gown those scissors would make!

"The scissors are not for sale," said the princess, "not for money nor gold. But I will give them to you, in return for one night with the prince."

The troll agreed, for she had drugged the prince with a sleeping potion, and no matter how hard the princess shook him, he did not wake up.

The next day, the princess took out the cup. From its lip flowed pale ale and fine wine. "Give me that!" shouted the troll hag.

"The cup is not for sale," said the princess, "not for money nor gold. But I will give it to you, in return for one more night with the prince."

The troll hag agreed, for again, the prince was drugged, and no matter how loud the princess shouted, he did not wake up.

But next door, the carpenter, making the feasting table for the wedding, heard the noise. And he told the prince.

On the third morning, the princess shook out the soft snow-white cloth. Upon it lay a feast fit for a wedding.

"Give me that!" cried the troll hag again.

"The cloth is not for sale, not for money nor gold. But I will give it to you, in return for one final night with the prince," replied the princess.

On the third night, when the prince drained the drink the troll hag had given him, he held the syrupy liquid in his mouth until she left the room. Then he spat it out.

As night darkened, the troll sat listening. Was that a noise, in the prince's room? She took out a long needle and pierced it deep into the prince's arm. But the prince did not flinch. "Humph!" The troll hag slammed the door behind her. The princess, hiding in the shadows, opened the door and the lovers were reunited at last. Together, they made a plan.

In the black of night, the prince woke the carpenter. They crept down to the bridge, in front of the castle. One by one, they unscrewed the bolts and broke the planks. The next morning, the day of the wedding, the troll hag came stomping over the bridge, leading her bridesmaids behind her. Crack! The bridge broke. With a shriek the troll hag fell. She sunk like a stone in the deep water of the moat and was never seen again.

The prince and the princess returned home together and, on the way, the princess stopped at the three cottages the princess had visited and collected the three little girls – their very own children. At last the princess understood; the prince had taken the children into the forest to keep them safe from the troll hag. Little did he know the part the children would play in helping their mother to break the spell.

At long last, their wedding was celebrated, with feasting and dancing, music and merrymaking. The three daughters sang loudest of all. They both lived long and happy lives, reigning together side by side; the White Bear King and the Flame Bright Queen.





TANUKI'S GOLD

A folk tale from Japan

The 'tanuki' is a member of the dog family that lives wild in the forests of Japan. Like its cousin the fox, the tanuki is small and agile, with a pointed snout and short legs, but its silky fur is striped, like a badger or a racoon. The tanuki is famed in legends of old Japan as a magical creature – one favourite tale tells of a shape-shifting tanuki who could change into a kettle, and perform amazing acrobatics, bringing great good luck. This tale celebrates the way that when winter weather keeps us indoors, we feel especially grateful for the company of dear friends.

'Mukashi, mukashi' – very, very long ago, an old priest lived alone. He spent his days in prayer and meditation. He never needed to bother with earthly things for the local people brought him clothes and food, and patched his roof in the winter.

One winter's evening, the priest was deep in prayer. He knelt before the statue of the Buddha. He struck his bell and listened to the sound resound until it stilled to silence.

'Nyaaww!' What was that? From outside came a pitiful sound. The priest opened the door, and there, shivering in the cold, was a tanuki.

"Your holiness!" implored the creature. "Please, may I come in and warm myself by your fire? It's bitterly cold."

The priest's eyes opened wide in surprise. He knew that tanuki hibernate in winter. "Why aren't you in your burrow?" he asked.

"In winters past, the freezing frost and mountain snow were nothing to me. But now I grow old; I feel the cold in my bones. Please, let me in."

"Of course, of course!" said the kind-hearted priest, full of compassion.

The tanuki lay thawing by the fire, eyes closed in exhaustion, wet fur steaming gently. The priest continued his prayers.

The tanuki slept by the sunken hearth all night, and in the morning, he padded away. The next night, the tanuki returned. And the next, and the next. He brought with him fallen sticks and dead leaves for the fire, and the old priest grew fond of the sight of him, sleeping by the hearth. The white fluff of his tummy rose and fell with the gentle rhythm of his snores.

The priest noticed that when he gazed upon the tanuki, asleep in such deep peace, he felt peace in his own body, too. His breathing slowed. His gaze softened. He stroked the creature's silky fur. Sometimes, the priest sat and sipped a bowl of green tea, and the tanuki curled beside him. Its warm weight was comfortable – it made him feel content.

When winter was over, and white snow gave way to pink blossom, the tanuki came to the hut no more. But when winter came around again, the tanuki always returned, and the old priest greeted his old friend with a glad heart.

