

Folk Stories From Around the World

WINTER TALES

Written by Dawn Casey

Illustrated by Zanna Goldhawk

WINTER TALES



*To my beloved dad, who answered the call "Daddy, tell us a story!"
Those magical stories, told without a book, lit my imagination,
and fueled my deep love of traditional tales. - D.C.*

*To my parents, who read me countless fairytales and sparked a
life-long passion for reading, drawing and storytelling. - Z.G.*



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A Note from the Author

Winter has always been a time for storytelling, when the evenings are long and dark, and the fireside calls. After the activity of summer and autumn, winter offers us a time to stop and rest, to draw inwards, to dream and imagine...

Every year, when winter comes around again, familiar traditions are greeted like dear old friends. In *Winter Tales*, I include familiar stories alongside lesser-known offerings, an abundance of old favourites and new discoveries. All of these stories, in their own different ways, celebrate the pleasures and treasures of the winter season, and the qualities within us that warm our hearts through the long cold. There are bears and bunnies, grandmothers and goddesses. There are brothers and sisters, frosts and fires and ice. I offer warm and gentle tales for young listeners and epic adventures for older readers – a book to enjoy with the whole family.

The stories I share in these pages are very old. They connect us back through the generations to a time before our view of the world was so human-centric. A time when heroines and heroes could hear the language of the animals, the voices of the wind, and the wisdom whispered by the spirits of trees. They remind us that the natural world is a community of life, and that every day, miracles are happening. They offer their ancient wisdom to help us learn to live well, as we all make a more beautiful future.

May these tales brighten your midwinter with magic, wonder, wisdom and delight.

Dawn Casey

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THE WHITE BEAR KING

A folk tale from Norway

This tale of the polar bear and the ice mountain comes from the Kingdom of Norway, a land of jagged coastline, high plateaus and deep forested valleys. Glaciers, ice caps and mountaintops stay frozen all year round. Highest of all the walls of stone and snow is Trollveggen – the tallest vertical rock face in Europe.

Once there was a girl who dreamed of a crown. A crown forged of flame-bright metal, crafted in tendrils and leaves of all the trees of the forest; golden oak, silver birch and copper beech. In her dream, when she wore the crown on her head, she felt she was standing in the centre of her world, blessing the land like a queen.

When the girl woke, all she wanted was to wear that crown again.

Her father, the king, had goldsmiths make crowns of every kind, but not one of them matched the crown in her dream. The princess took to wandering alone in the forest. One day, she went further than she had ever been before. She came to a glade, where slanting rays of sun lit the silver birch and the green pine, and made the snow sparkle. There, warming its fur, was a bear. A great white bear!

• THE WHITE BEAR KING •

The princess was not alarmed. She watched the way the bear moved – his strength and power, his ease and grace. She smiled as she watched him playing; rolling and wriggling, nosing the sun-lit snow. He had something in his paws, what was it?

The crown of her dreams! "Oh!" said the princess, "I need that crown."

But the bear answered, "The crown is not for sale, not for money nor gold."

"Please," the princess cried, "I need it!"

"I will give you the crown," said the bear, "in return for your company. Will you come to the forest with me and agree to be my wife?"

The princess looked beyond the limits of her father's lands, to the dark forest stretching far away, wild and unknown. She looked into the bear's deep brown eyes, and saw gentleness there.

"Yes," she said, "I will."

"Then in three days' time, I will return," said the bear.

When the king heard of this agreement, he summoned his bravest guards. When the bear returned for the princess, he was met with a rain of arrows from the king's army. But the bear batted them away like flies.

The king saw that his army was no use; the promise must be kept. It was the tradition in those times for the eldest daughter to marry first. So, the king sent his eldest daughter to the bear. Grimacing, she clambered onto the bear's back and he began to run. "Have you ever sat softer?" asked the bear. "Have you ever seen so clear?"

"Yes!" said the first sister. "In my mother's chamber I sit softer. In my father's palace I see more clearly."

"Then you are not the one," said the bear, and he shook her down.

Three days later, the bear came again. The king sent out his second daughter. She clung onto the bear's back. "Have you ever sat softer? Have you ever seen so clear?"

"Yes!" said the second sister. "In my mother's chamber I sit softer, and in my father's palace I see more clearly."

"Then you are not the one." He shook her loose.





• THE WHITE BEAR KING •

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 fuz, 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 WHITE BEAR KING •

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.

• THE WHITE BEAR KING •

“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 prince 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.

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

• TANUKI'S GOLD •

"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.



• TANUKI'S GOLD •

This went on for many years. Until, one day, the tanuki said, "You have been so kind to me. If it wasn't for you, I would surely have perished long ago in the cold. I wish there was something I could give you to repay your kindness."

The old priest laughed. "Oh, dear Tanuki, you have a good heart. But I have no need of things. I am a priest. I have given up the pleasures of this world. My neighbours give me all the food and clothes I need. Thank you, Tanuki, but I need nothing from you."

But the tanuki asked the old priest the same question again and again. At last, the priest relented. "As you are so keen to give me a gift, I will share one thing with you: if I had three gold coins, I could take them to the holy shrine, and pay for prayers to be said for me after my death, so that I might enter the Western Paradise."

That evening, the tanuki did not come back. Nor the next. Nor the next. The priest stood at the door, peering into the night. "Oh, I was a fool to ask for gold!" he thought. "What if Tanuki tried to steal gold for me, and has been killed. Perhaps, even now, he is lying dead in the snow." Every night the priest prayed for the little animal.

Years passed with no word from the creature. Until, one winter's evening, while the priest was deep in prayer, he heard a noise from outside.

"Nyasaw!" There in the moonlight was the little animal.

"Tanuki! Come in, come in! I'm so glad you're here! Where have you been?"

Tanuki held out his paw and there were three gold coins, just as the priest had wished. "I knew you wouldn't want stolen gold. So, I journeyed to the isle of Sado, where men mine metal, and I gathered the rocks they left behind, and I made these for you."

"Oh, Tanuki," cried the priest, his eyes glistening with tears. "Thank you." He held the coins to his head, a sign of great respect. "I am truly grateful. And yet, I see now, dear Tanuki, that the thing I treasure most, is you."

From that day on, whenever winter came around, the tanuki returned to the old priest's hut. In the glow of the firelit room, they sat at peace, listening to the purr of the flames, warm and content, each enjoying the company of a dear old friend.





THE MITTEN

A folk tale from Ukraine

The rhythm and repetition of this cosy folk tale is especially good for young listeners. Its themes of acceptance, welcoming newcomers, sharing and cooperation offer timeless wisdom for readers young and old. Perhaps you know somewhere special, such as a grandmother's lap, that has a magical ability to expand, so that there is always room for a little one.

It was deep winter. The wind blew cold and the snow fell fast. Inside, by the warmth of the fire, sat a little boy. His grandmother was knitting him warm woolly mittens. Clickety-click. Clickety-click.

Wrapped up warm, the boy ran out to play. He rolled and climbed and slid. He made footprints and handprints. As he played, one of his mittens dropped in the snow.

A wild wind whirled and the snowflakes swirled. The little boy, tired and cold, ran back home to warm his pink hands by the fire.

As night fell, the wind whistled and wailed. By and by along came a squeaky mouse. Brrr, she was cold. The mouse sniffed the mitten. It was warm and cosy. She snuggled in.

• THE MITTEN •

By and by, along came a hoppity frog.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"

"All right," said the mouse. "Come on in!"

The frog crawled in. So now there were two.

They were quite content together.

By and by, along came a lollopy hare.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"

"All right," said the mouse and the frog. "Come on in!"

The hare wriggled in. So now there were three.

They were quite content together, if a little close.

By and by, along came a prowly fox.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"

"All right," said the animals. "Come on in!"

The fox squeezed in. So now there were four.

They were quite content together, if a little crowded.

By and by, along came a howly wolf.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"

"All right," said the animals. "Come on in!"

The wolf squashed in. So now there were five.

They were quite content together, though now rather squished.

By and by, along came a tusky boar.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"



• THE MITTEN •

"All right," said the animals. "Come on in!"

The boar nosed in. So now there were six. They were quite content together, packed in tight.

By and by, along came a grumbly bear.

"The snow is cold, and your home is warm.

Please can I come in, out of the storm?"

"All right," said the animals. "Come on in!"

The bear heaved and squeezed, growled and grunted, and squished himself into the woolly mitten.

And the mitten streeetched... and bulged... and BURST!

The seven friends ran helter-skelter into the winter night.

The bear found a cave, and the boar found a bog. The wolf found a wood, and the frog found a log. The fox found a den, and the hare found a nest. The mouse found a house, and somewhere to rest.

Inside the house, by the warmth of the fire, the little boy watched his grandmother sitting and knitting. Clickety-click. Clickety-click. A brand new pair of warm woolly mittens, to replace the ones he had lost.

And, this time, the boy had a ball of wool of his own. His grandmother showed him just what to do. By the warmth of the fire, his nimble fingers worked; he wove a long strong length of cord. He made a string for his new mittens, to keep them together, so they wouldn't get lost in the snow.

Clickety-click. Clickety-click. Grandmother knitted and knitted. All the way...

...to the end...

...of the yarn.





A CLOAK FOR THE MOON

A Jewish folk tale from Poland

In the summertime, when the evenings are light, many children are in bed before nightfall. The long dark evenings of winter offer people of all ages a special chance to appreciate the stars and the moon that light the night sky. Throughout history, people have looked up at the sky in wonder, and their wonder is reflected in shining tales that celebrate the magic and the mystery of the moon.

Up in the sky, the moon was cold. She wished she had a winter cloak to wear; she dreamed of being wrapped up warm.

All around the world, people were wrapped up against the weather. The moon looked down and saw grandmas in cosy shawls, and fine ladies in flowing coats and gloves of leather. She saw men with scarves pulled up over their mouths and hands thrust deep into pockets. She saw children bundled up round as bread rolls. Even the Arctic hare was wearing her white winter coat.

• A CLOAK FOR THE MOON •

Up in the sky, the moon dreamed of a warm cloak. But down on earth, the scientists said, "Impossible! It can't be done." Because, of course, the moon is always changing: sometimes she's a slender curve, sometimes she's round and full. How could anyone possibly make a cloak to fit her?

But there was one young man, a tailor, who loved the moon. He loved her radiance, her mystery, her magic. "I'll do it," he said. "I'll try."

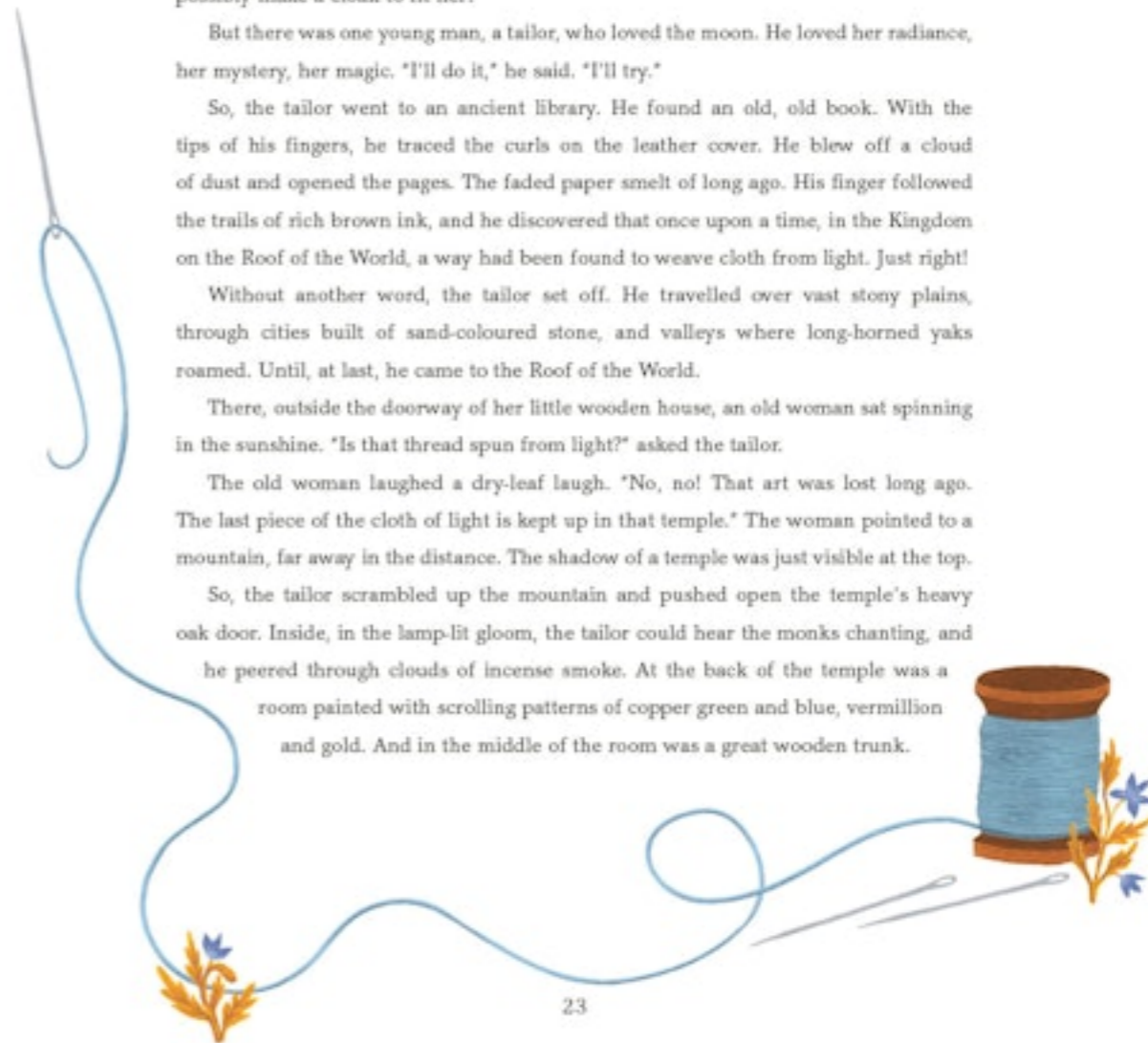
So, the tailor went to an ancient library. He found an old, old book. With the tips of his fingers, he traced the curls on the leather cover. He blew off a cloud of dust and opened the pages. The faded paper smelt of long ago. His finger followed the trails of rich brown ink, and he discovered that once upon a time, in the Kingdom on the Roof of the World, a way had been found to weave cloth from light. Just right!

Without another word, the tailor set off. He travelled over vast stony plains, through cities built of sand-coloured stone, and valleys where long-horned yaks roamed. Until, at last, he came to the Roof of the World.

There, outside the doorway of her little wooden house, an old woman sat spinning in the sunshine. "Is that thread spun from light?" asked the tailor.

The old woman laughed a dry-leaf laugh. "No, no! That art was lost long ago. The last piece of the cloth of light is kept up in that temple." The woman pointed to a mountain, far away in the distance. The shadow of a temple was just visible at the top.

So, the tailor scrambled up the mountain and pushed open the temple's heavy oak door. Inside, in the lamp-lit gloom, the tailor could hear the monks chanting, and he peered through clouds of incense smoke. At the back of the temple was a room painted with scrolling patterns of copper green and blue, vermillion and gold. And in the middle of the room was a great wooden trunk.





• A CLOAK FOR THE MOON •

The tailor knelt before the trunk. With trembling hands, he lifted the lid. Inside was a scrap of fabric no bigger than his hand. It was too small to make a cloak for a mouse, let alone a cloak for the moon. Exhausted, he slumped down with the tatter of cloth in his hand and cried. He cried for his long journey, his wasted time, his broken dream. He cried and he cried until he fell asleep.

He dreamed he was curled inside a cocoon, like a caterpillar, and he was pulling a thread from his own body. And when he woke, there was something as fine as silk, lying on his lap. The fabric had grown. He looked up and saw the moon through the temple window. She was shining her light on the cloth. And the more the moon shone, the bigger the cloth grew.

The tailor smiled to himself. He took out his sharp scissors, and his needle and thread and he began to snip and stitch and sew. Just as the tailor had dreamed, he made a cloak for the moon as light as the clouds and as bright as the stars.

High in the sky, the moon slipped on her new cloak. It was soft and snug, warm and wonderful.

On winter nights, the moon still wears her mist-white, star-bright cloak. And oh, how she glows! The tailor lay bathed in moonlight and felt glad inside – he had helped the moon to shine her brightest, just as we all do when we follow our dreams.





THE NUTCRACKER

A tale by E.T.A. Hoffman

E.T.A. Hoffman's story about the nutcracker is a Christmas favourite in many countries and has even been turned into a famous ballet. Nutcracker dolls were first crafted in the forested slopes of the Ore Mountains in Germany. During the long, cold winters, people spent their time carving all kinds of creations from the plentiful wood of the forest. Many of these traditional crafting methods were handed down through the generations for hundreds of years. Nutcracker dolls were given as gifts, especially at Christmas time, when nuts were a seasonal treat. They were hand-painted like toy soldiers – to guard the family and protect the home.

It was Christmas Eve at last! In the drawing room, the grown-ups were putting up the tree. In the parlour, the sideboard was laden with festive food on the best china; there was hot punch and a whole fish, stuffed and baked. There was bread, studded with citrus, golden with marzipan. There were plump pieces of gingerbread, made with honey and spice, shaped like bells and hearts and stars.

Clara and her brother Fritz were not allowed into the drawing room, or to touch any of the food, until everything was ready. Fritz hopped from leg to leg, bristling with excitement. Clara gazed at the sugar plums, glittering like frosted jewels in the cut glass dish.

At last, a bell rang, and the children were allowed in. Clara gazed in wonder. The Christmas tree twinkled with a hundred candles; their light sparkled on the gold and silver apples and the pale straw stars that dangled from the dark branches. Then there was hugging and kissing and cries of "Merry Christmas!", and Fritz only screwed up his nose a little when the perfume-scented aunts planted their lips on his cheeks. Then all the family, mama and papa and aunties and uncles and grown-up cousins and baby cousins bouncing on knees, joined together in song. There was dancing, hand in hand, up and down, round and round; skipping and spinning and breathless laughter. Then games; running around blindfolded until they all flopped down amidst the children's cheering to get their breath back.

After supper, the grown-ups stirred their coffee cups and passed round chocolates in rustling twists of golden paper until, "At last!" said Fritz, with feeling, it was time for presents.

"Now, Fritz," boomed their Godpapa Drosselmayer. "See what I have made for you." Herr Drosselmayer was a skilled toy-maker. He could make a ticking cuckoo clock or a tinkling music-box. He made clockwork gentlemen that bowed to one another and clockwork ladies that danced, around and around. Godpapa Drosselmayer was the kind of uncle who knew how to find a coin in your ear, or tie up your handkerchief to make it into a floppy bunny. "For you..." He presented Fritz with a troop of bright tin soldiers, with shining gold buttons.

On the double, Fritz arranged them into battle formation, clip-clopping the cavalry horses around the table.

"And for you..." Godpapa Drosselmayer presented Clara with a wooden doll with a dashing red frock coat and smart black boots. "Look," said Drosselmayer. "Pass me a nut." He put the nut between the figure's wooden teeth, and lifted the wooden cloak. Crack! The shell broke clean in two, and a whole round nut rolled into his open palm. He handed it to Clara. It was creamy and crunchy. Clara cradled the Nutcracker doll in her arms. She liked his friendly face and his charming smile.

"Hello, Nutcracker. Look, Mama, his eyes twinkle when I talk to him."

Mama smiled. "What a lively imagination that child has."

Clara chose the smallest, roundest nuts from the bowl for the nutcracker to crack, so that he wouldn't hurt his teeth.

Fritz was marching past. "Let me see!" He snatched the nutcracker from Clara's hands, and jammed the biggest, hardest nut he could find between his teeth. Crunk! The nutcracker's jaw fell slack.

"Oh, Fritz! You've broken him!" cried Clara.

"Huh! A nutcracker that can't crack nuts!" Fritz flung the figure down and went back to his toy soldiers.

"Oh, Nutcracker, don't worry. Fritz doesn't mean any harm, his manners are a little rough, that's all. I'll look after you." Clara took the ribbon from her hair, and bandaged the nutcracker's jaw. She made him a bed from an empty box, with tissue paper blankets tucked up to his chin.



That night, Clara couldn't sleep. She crept down the creaking staircase to check on her wounded doll. In the drawing room, the only light was the lamp turned low, the only sound, the quiet ticking of the clock. Clara sat beneath the tree, cradling the nutcracker in her arms. Ding, ding, ding... the clock chimed midnight. But what was that? A scritch, scuttling sound, low down behind the wall. A mouse! Clara watched in horror as a flood of mice poured, squeaking, into the room, and arranged themselves in battle formation. Then, from under the floorboard, there came a mouse as big as a rat, with a long, scaled tail and a crown upon his head – the Mouse King! The mouse army advanced. Clara fell back in fear. But behind her came another sound – the nutcracker! He bowed to Clara, then advanced upon the mice with sword aloft. Clink, clink, clink. Down from the table leapt the tin soldiers, marching to his defence.

But though the soldiers were many, they were outnumbered. The nutcracker fought gallantly, but he was wounded and the Mouse King was soon upon him. Without a thought, Clara took off her slipper, and flung it at the king. Her aim was good.

Boof! The mouse was down. And in an instant, all the mice disappeared. "Oh, nutcracker!" Clara ran towards him, and, what was this? She blinked in wonder – the nutcracker was growing taller and taller, as tall as Clara's uncle, as tall as a prince! Or perhaps it was she that was shrinking? The Christmas tree towered above them like a forest giant.

"You saved my life," said the nutcracker. "I'd like to thank you." He held out his hand and Clara took it. Then he led Clara to a sleigh, which just a moment ago had been a cardboard-box-bed. Beyond the towering tree they flew, through white pines, over sparkling snow. The winter forest was a-whirl of dancing snowflakes.

At the edge of the forest, the nutcracker led Clara along a path of smooth white cobbles. There was a cool, clear scent in the air. "Mint!" Clara exclaimed. "Why, they're not stones at all, they're sweets!"



• THE NUTCRACKER •

"This is the Land of Sweets," said the nutcracker, and Clara feasted her eyes as they walked past rivers of honey and lakes of hot punch, and a village made all of gingerbread. The walls were thick ginger slabs, the roofs were white sugar-snow and the glass in the windows was made of fruit-flavoured sweets; lemon, cherry and blackcurrant. "It's very pretty," said the nutcracker, "but they suffer with terrible toothache."

Now a palace of marzipan rose before them and there was a dainty tinkling sound, like the chiming of tiny glass bells. A fairy appeared. Her dress was plum-pink and sprinkled with sparkles of pixie dust. Clara curtsied and the Sugar Plum Fairy smiled.

The fairy led the way to a grand ballroom. "Be seated, and we will dance for your delight," she smiled. Music rose from an invisible orchestra and one dance followed another. There were Spanish dancers in rustling golden dresses. There were dancers in Arabian silks, swinging themselves around and around. A gingerbread mama lifted the hem of her skirt and little gingerbread children skipped out and danced around her.

Even the flowers of the earth woke up and danced, circling together like a garland.

For the last dance, the Sugar Plum Fairy held out her hands for Clara and the nutcracker to join her. Clara felt as light as a fairy herself, as the nutcracker waltzed her round and round. As the dance came to an end, the nutcracker bowed to Clara. She sank back into her marzipan throne and closed her eyes, in a golden daze of happiness.

Ding, ding, ding... The clock chimed eight. When Clara opened her eyes, she was back in the drawing room. And there was Fritz. "Wake up Clara, it's Christmas morning! And look! I woke up early and I helped Godpapa Drosselmayer to mend your nutcracker." In the flickering firelight, the nutcracker's eyes twinkled.

Had it all been a dream? Or was it the magic of Christmas? I'll tell you a secret... Magic is all around us, when we look at the world with wonder.





THE POINSETTIA

A folk tale from Mexico

The red-leaved poinsettia is a familiar gift during the Christmas season. The plant is native to Mexico, where it was used by the Aztecs to make a rust-red dye. Later, the flowers were used in Christian nativity processions. In Mexico, in the days leading up to Christmas, people remember Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem with the *las posadas* celebration. Each evening, a small child, dressed as an angel, leads a group of children through the streets. At each door they sing a song, asking for room at the inn. On Christmas Eve, *las posadas* culminate with a special procession – the children lead their families into the church, carrying the figure of Baby Jesus to the nativity scene.

High in the mountains of Mexico was a village of whitewashed houses with red tile roofs. The white church had a tall tower, with three arched windows, and in each opening hung a great bell. Within sound of the bells, lived a little girl named Maria.

It was Advent; the time the villagers prepared their hearts and homes for Christmas. Every year, on Christmas Eve there was a special procession through the village. All the children carried lit candles to church. In the church, the nativity scene awaited.

• THE POINSETTIA •

But, for now, the wooden manger was empty. Only on Christmas Eve would the figure of Baby Jesus be placed on the soft hay. On this night, all the children of the village offered a little gift, placing it before the manger with tender care.

This year, Maria felt especially proud because she was helping Mamá to make a beautiful new blanket for Baby Jesus's crib. Maria helped Mamá look for yarn at the market. She squished the balls of wool in her hands, and held them to her cheek, to find the softest one. "This one!" she cried, nuzzling her face into the fluffiness.

Next, Maria helped Mamá to pick the ragged weeds that grew by the roadside. Their leaves were dull green, but Mamá said they made a good dye. Maria helped Mamá stir the dye, and watched as the yarn slowly changed colour. She helped string the yarn onto the wooden bars of the loom, and wind the yarn around the shuttle. Mamá eased the shuttle through the strings, and row by row, the blanket grew.

But the next day, when Maria came back from her neighbour's house, calling "Mamá, I'm home!", there was no answer. "Ah, Maria," said Papa, "I have something to tell you. Mamá was sick, I had to take her to the doctor." Maria's face was full of fear.

Papa stroked her cheek. "Don't worry, she will be well again, but for now she must rest. She will stay with your auntie Monica. Just until she is strong enough to travel."

The next day was Christmas Eve. Maria looked at the loom, the unfinished blanket. It wouldn't be ready. Unless... Could she make it?

Maria picked up the shuttle and wove it in and out, just as she'd seen Mamá do. But the more Maria pushed and pulled, the more the weaving twisted and tightened. The loom was a tangle of yarn. Maria felt her eyes fill with tears. Tomorrow, she would have no gift to give to Baby Jesus. The tears spilled down her cheeks and she cried.

The next day, Maria watched the procession passing by from the shadows of the bushes. The children were dressed as angels and shepherds – their flickering candles echoed the twinkling skies. Maria wished she could pick a star from the sky, like a flower from the earth. A star would be a good gift for Baby Jesus, to hang above his cradle.



• THE POINSETTIA •

Maria did not join the procession. She watched two old women walk past, arm in arm. One whispered to the other, "You can almost hear the angels!" The other tilted her head, and heard the children's singing drifting on the night air. She smiled. Maria thought of cherubs with round singing mouths and shining angels with wide protecting wings. But still, she did not follow the procession.

"Maria," said a gentle voice. Maria looked up; there was a woman she had never seen before. "I have a message for you. Your Mamá is healing. All is well. It is Christmas Eve..."

"I can't go into the church," said Maria. "I have nothing to give."

The woman smiled at Maria, her eyes bright. "Maria, any gift you give from your heart is precious."

"But what can I give?" said Maria, looking around. She saw a patch of weeds growing nearby, the ones she and Mamá had used to dye the yarn. Surely weeds were not good enough? Maria looked up for the woman. But she was gone. Maria picked a handful of leaves and carried them into the church.

As she walked down the aisle, she heard the children whispering to each other, and she kept her head down. "What is Maria carrying? Leaves?"

Though her cheeks were burning, Maria carried the leaves to the nativity. She knelt before the scene. There were the figures of Mary and Joseph, the donkey and the ox. Upon the soft hay of the manger, the Baby Jesus lay. Upon the roof of the stable, above the cradle, Maria placed the leaves. She closed her eyes to pray.

A gasp of wonder. Whispered voices. "It's a miracle!"

Maria opened her eyes; the green weed was tipped with a star of flaming red. Above the cradle of Baby Jesus, the star flower shone. When the people came out of the church, every weed in the village was tipped with a flaming flower, like a thousand shining stars.

That is how the plant that we know as the poinsettia got its name – La Flor de Noche Buena – the Flower of the Holy Night.





WEE ROBIN RED BREAST

A folk tale from Scotland

In many countries, robins are a familiar presence in gardens all year round. In autumn, the robin's song has a subdued, wistful tone, but around Christmastime his song becomes stronger, as the robin seeks a mate. Robins are one of the few birds to sing through the winter. They are known for their curious natures and, if we are mindful in our movements (especially if we are digging in the soil, where earthworms live), robins are unafraid of coming close to humans. These qualities, as well as their distinctive orange-red breasts, have made the robin a beloved feathered friend.

Once there was a robin, a little round robin with a red breast. It was Christmas morning. And what a glorious morning it was! The dips and hollows were white with frost and the grass glistened with dew. The beech and the bracken were warm-brown in the morning sun and the earth was breathing out mist.

The robin was so full of joy that he couldn't help but sing. He perched on the branch of a briar and sang his cheerful song. And below the tangle of brambles, padding along on velvet paws, came a pearl-grey cat.

• WEE ROBIN RED BREAST •

"Meoww..." The cat stretched luxuriously. She arched her back, so the robin could see her pretty markings. "Little Robin, little Robin, where are you going so early this morning?"

"I'm away to the castle, to sing for the king," said the robin.

"Mmm... a worthy journey. But, before you go, hop down here... Upon my neck is a ring of beautiful white fur. Come closer and see for yourself."

But the robin replied, "No, no, Mistress Cat. For I've seen you worry a mouse, and I've no wish to be worried by you!" And away he flew. The robin journeyed from branch to branch, over the gorse and over the heather until he came to rest upon a bank of grass at the edge of a field. He hopped here and there, pecking in the earth beside the hedgerow.

At the other end of the bank was a gled, a hawk, perching on a fence post, tilting its tail to balance in the wind. The hawk shuffled along the fence with its black talons, closer to the robin. The robin hopped further away, for there was a look in the hawk's eye that he did not quite like. The hawk looked over his hooked beak. He arranged his slate-grey feathers, so the robin could see the pattern of rich rust bars beneath his wings.

"Little Robin, little Robin, where are you going so early this morning?" asked the hawk.

"I'm away to the castle, to sing for the king," said the robin.

"Ah, I wish you luck on your journey, but, before you go, hop over here, and I will show you what a curious feather I have upon my wing. Come closer and see for yourself..."





• WEE ROBIN RED BREAST •

But the robin replied, "No, no, Master Hawk. For I've seen you pluck the feathers from a linnet, and I have no wish to have my feathers plucked by you!"

And away he flew... into a thorny thicket where the hawk could not reach. So the hawk took flight, soaring over the open countryside. When he was gone, the robin flew on. He went swooping over the thistles and sweeping past the sheep, until he came to rest upon a flat face of rock. The north wind ruffled his feathers and he puffed up his plumage. On the wind came a musky stench, rising from underneath the rock, and from out of a hole came a pointed nose, long quivering whiskers and two pricked ears.

Fox swung her splendid tail from side to side. "Little Robin, little Robin, where are you going so early this morning?"

"I'm away to the castle, to sing for the king," said the robin.

"Ah, a noble quest. Before you go, hop down here; at the tip of my tail is a patch of white. Come closer and see for yourself..."

But the robin replied, "No, no, Mistress Fox. For I've seen you catch a wee lamb, and I have no wish to be caught by you!" And away he flew.

He flew and he flew, from branch to branch, oak and ash and thorn, until he reached the grey stone castle of the king. There he perched upon the windowsill of the king's bedchamber. But in the ivy underneath the window ledge, someone was already singing! Someone round and brown with an upright tail; little Jenny Wren. The robin greeted the wren politely with a nod and a bow. The little wren bobbed a curtsy.

Together they sang a winter song. The king and the queen came to the window to listen and the winter singing made their hearts rejoice.

Still today, if you listen carefully, you can hear the midwinter music of Robin Redbreast and little Jenny Wren.



THE LITTLE BLACK CAT

A folk tale from France

This tale takes place on the day of St Sylvester, 31 December. Many European countries celebrate this day with traditional customs. In some Alpine villages, masked figures known as Silvesterchläusen go from house to house dressed in elaborate costumes of greenery. They ring giant bells and sing yodelling songs, to wish people a happy New Year. In many places in Europe, it is still popular to go to a rural spot for one's health, like the friends in this story.

It was the last day of December. In a village at the foot of an alpine pass, in one wooden house, a fat tabby cat stretched on the hearthrug, warming his fur in the firelight. In another, a couple clinked their glasses and cut themselves a slice of chocolate-chestnut log, whilst a ginger tomcat lapped from a saucer. Next door, a kitten played, pawing the decorations dangling from the tree.

But outside, the wind howled and the last brown leaves rattled and shivered on the trees. The rain lashed in slanting sheets, hissing on rooftops and spattering windows. Under a hawthorn bush, a little black cat shivered. This little cat had no home to go to; he was all alone in the cold. Freezing water drenched his fur and trickled into his ears.

• THE LITTLE BLACK CAT •

"I don't feel very well." He sneezed. "That's it! I'm going up to the mountain." Up on the mountain the air was clear, the water was pure, and healing herbs grew wild. So, off he went, up the steep and stony path, out of the village.

Before he'd gone very far, he met a grey goose. "Good morning to you, Grey Goose," said the little black cat.

"Good morning," said the goose. "Where are you going, on the last day of the year?"

"I don't feel very well, so I'm going up to the mountain."

"Oh, may I come too? I've eaten too much rich food. The walk will do me good."

"You're most welcome," said the little black cat. So off they went up the steep and stony path, two friends together.

Before long, the two friends saw a white woolly lamb, standing in the doorway of an old barn.

"Good afternoon to you," said the lamb. "And where are you going, on the last day of the year?"

"I don't feel very well, so I'm going up to the mountain, and Grey Goose is coming along for the walk."

"May I come too? I've been inside for days. I need some fresh mountain air."

"You're most welcome," said the little black cat. So off they went up the steep and stony path, three friends together.

Before long, the three friends came to a meadow, and a big brown cow gazed at them over the hedge.

"Good evening, Mama Cow," said the little black cat, for he saw that the cow had a fine round belly, and would soon give birth to a calf.

"Good evening. Where are you going, all together on the last day of the year?"

"I don't feel very well, so I'm going up to the mountain. My friend Grey Goose is coming along for the walk, and so is White Lamb."

"May I come with you? The mountain herbs will be good for my growing baby."

"You're most welcome!" Off they went up the steep and stony path, four friends together.

• THE LITTLE BLACK CAT •

Soon, dusk fell, and the world turned grey and blue. The little black cat shivered. But up ahead, he saw a light, and he padded towards it.

The light came from the window of a wooden house. The little black cat stretched up high. But it was no good, he couldn't reach it. The cow cried, "Lamb, climb up onto my back. Cat, climb up onto the back of Lamb. And Goose, you climb up onto Cat."

The friends wobbled and wavered. They breathed and balanced. The little black cat looked in through the window. His wet nose smudged the windowpane. Inside, there was a wooden table, a bench and a single bed, with a red blanket tucked in tight. In the hearth a failing fire cast a thin light. By the fire a little old woman sat on a rocking chair. She was rocking back and forth, talking to herself.

"Ahh, all alone. Alone, on the last day of the year. Without even a cat to keep me company. And oh, I'd love a cup of cocoa. But no cow, so no milk. And it is cold. If only I had some wool; I could knit myself some woollens, but no..." She shifted herself on her hard wooden chair, and the four friends watched as a tear trickled down her cheek.

On the back of the lamb, on the back of the cow, the little black cat looked up at the goose. "Do you know," he said, "all of a sudden, I don't need the mountain anymore." Goose flapped off. Cat sprang down. Lamb scrambled to the ground. Cow shook herself. The little black cat began to mew. The old woman got up, and opened the door.

"Good evening," said the little black cat. "May we come in?"

The old woman beamed. "You are most welcome!" She kissed the lamb and scratched the cow and stroked the grey goose. She picked up the little black cat in her arms.

So, the four friends stayed with the little old woman, and they never did go up to the mountain. The goose shook out her loose feathers, and the old woman made a soft cushion for her hard chair. The lamb gave the old woman warm wool to knit a shawl. The cow gave birth to a fine calf, and every evening gave the old woman creamy milk for a cup of cocoa. And, by the fire, the little black cat sat on the old woman's lap, and purred.





THE SNOW MAIDEN

A folk tale from Russia

Have you ever woken on a winter morning to find feather-ferns on the windows, and the grass bright with ice? Sometimes, while we are sleeping, Father Frost visits the land, transforming it with his sparkling winter magic. In olden times in Russia, the Snow Maiden and Father Frost were said to live deep in the winter forest. Nowadays, these two spirits of winter still visit children in Russia every New Year's Eve.

Once upon a time there was a man and his wife who longed for a child. They often sat by the window, watching the neighbours' children play. Through the dusk-blue cold the children flew on their sledges, scarves streaming, careering downhill and landing in laughing heaps, slipping and shrieking with delight. Snowballs sailed, snowflakes feathered, one boy scooped up a handful of snow and ate it, savouring the delicious way it stuck to the roof of his mouth, then melted into nothingness. The old woman smiled fondly. She looked up at her husband, and there was a twinkle in her eye. "We could go and play in the snow?"

• THE SNOW MAIDEN •

When the sun set, the village children were called indoors, but the old couple stayed outside, patting and smoothing the sparkling snow. Together, they had made, not a snow-man, but a snow-child, a girl.

The old man sniffed. "My nose is cold. Come on, let's go in."

They ate their bread and soup by the stove and outside, the darkness deepened. From out of the birch forest came a sound like the clink and tinkle of icicles, and the air was sharp, like needle-tips. Amongst the silver trees came Father Frost, the air crackling in his wake. He touched the tip of his crystal staff upon a tree, and exquisite crystal-white bristled over the branch. He touched it to a blade of grass, and the grass stiffened and glittered. He touched a leaf, and the leaf grew snow-star fur. He touched the lines and curves of stalks and seeds, the spines and spikes of leafless plants, and they turned bright white. Then he saw the maiden of snow. He touched the hem of her snow-robe with the tip of his crystal staff, and her snow-eyes blinked, blue as the winter sky.

That night, the old woman looked out upon the moonlit snow and gasped. She grasped her husband's arm. "Our snow-girl!" She let out a breath. "She's alive!"

The old couple ran out. The snow girl saw them, and her lips curved in a smile. With tears in her eyes, the woman took the snow-girl's cold hand, and led her inside.

The snow maiden was as beautiful as the sun sparkling on the snow. Her robe was embroidered with frost ferns and crystal stars.



• THE SNOW MAIDEN •

The presence of the snow maiden blessed the old couple's days. They loved her dearly, though she was different from the other children. She loved to wander alone in the white woods. She loved to sit by the frozen lake and gaze at the pale cold beauty of the moon. But she didn't play and frolic in the sunshine. The only time she danced was when the shepherd boy played his flute. His notes drifted and blew, lifted and flew, and the snow maiden swayed, as delicate as a flake of snow.

Each day, the shepherd boy called at the cottage, imploring the snow maiden to come dancing in the forest with the young folk. The snow maiden longed to go with him, and feel her own cheeks flush warm, like the other dancers. But she was a being of snow and ice. Her heart was frozen. So she stayed alone, hiding in the shaded glades.

Soon the snow started to melt, and patches of green began to show. Snow slid from the trees in soft slumps. Birds sat in pairs and sang amongst the budding branches. The snow maiden watched the shepherd boy smiling as the little children danced to his whirling tunes; skipping and spinning and flinging their arms, flopping dizzily down, panting and laughing. The snow maiden's heart was aching. "Oh, Mother Spring," she called. "Grant me the gift of human feeling, even if only for one moment."

A gentle breeze stirred the trees, a shower of blossom petalled the snow maiden's hair like a spring garland. And when the shepherd boy called, and held out his hand, she took it. That afternoon, they danced to the music of Mother Spring. The snow maiden was in his arms, bright-eyed and rosy cheeked. But as she grew closer to him and their lips met, her heart melted. With a soft sigh, the snow maiden faded into mist. The old couple and the young shepherd were sore of heart. For it takes courage to live with an open heart; to feel in full the love and the loss.

The snow maiden returned to her grandfather, old Father Frost, and each year, in the heart of winter, they return to the old couple's village, gliding over the earth in their carriage drawn by wind-white horses. Wherever they go, they bless the land with the bright beauty of winter.





THE SILVER PINECONES

A folk tale from Germany

The silver fir tree, which grows in the frozen north of Europe, is the original Christmas tree, revered long before the Norway spruce became popular. At Christmastime in the Harz mountains of Germany, it is a tradition to gather cones from fir and pine trees and paint them silver. Strings of silver pinecones swing from the mantelpiece and silver cones hang from the Christmas tree, where they swirl and shine in the firelight. And if you ask the old grandfather, sitting by the fire, how this tradition began, he will tell you this story. ...

In an evergreen forest in Germany, there once lived a mother, a father and their seven children. The father worked in the mountains, mining the silver that lay deep underground in the hidden hollows of the earth. One hard winter, the man fell ill. He lay in bed, too sick to get up. He could not go into the forest to hunt, so the family had no meat. He could not go into the forest for wood, so the family had no fire.

One day, the wife picked up her basket and walked up into the forested hills. "I will gather some pinecones. Perhaps someone will buy a few at the market in town. If not, at least they will give us a bright fire."

• THE SILVER PINECONES •



The woman hadn't gone far from her house when she came to a thin group of trees.

In the amber light of the setting sun, the beech leaves glowed like embers. There were a few green spruce amidst the brown beech and bare birch.

The woman bent to pick up the few cones that lay on the ground – they were cold from the damp earth; small and hard and tight.

As she did so, she felt the strangest sensation, as if someone were watching her. She turned, and there, low in the shadows of the mossy rocks, was a little old man, with a long white beard. His face was weathered and his eyes glinted like shards of crystal. "Those cones belong here," he said. "Where their seeds can grow into trees."

The frightened woman dropped the cones.

"Go further on," said the little man.

The woman clutched her shawl around her neck. The air was cold on her bare face. The sun was sinking and the sky was changing from gold to grey. Black rooks wheeled and cawed overhead, flying home to roost. How the woman wished that she were going home, to her familiar fireside, instead of up the hill, into the dark.

Far above, the woman could just make out the rocky top of the hill, cloaked in mist. Up ahead stood a forest of fir, thick and dark, still and silent.

The woman felt hushed, as if she were walking into a church. Here, the trees stood taller than houses. Their cones grew upwards, like candles.



• THE SILVER PINECONES •

Their soft-bristled branches brushed the sky. Their crowns whispered with the wind; singing the old songs. The upturned tips of their arms cupped the stars.

'Like hands' thought the woman, gazing upwards. 'Open hands.'

The ground beneath her feet was thick with the spines of fir and everywhere, amidst the toadstools, lay long brown cones.

She bent to pick up the cone at her feet.

'Owl!' she cried out loud. A fir cone had hit her back. 'Oh!' And another.

A hail of cones pelted from the trees.

'Bewitched! Bewitched! This place is bewitched!' she cried.

The woman grabbed her basket and she ran. But the more she ran the heavier the basket grew, until her arms were stretching in their sockets, and the handle bit into her frozen fingers.

At last, she was home. With a shuddering sigh, she swung the heavy basket onto the table. Pinecones spilled from her basket and rolled across the scrubbed wooden table. Every one of them was pure silver.

'What magic is this?' cried the woman, half afraid.

'Fear not!' said her husband, examining the pinecones. 'I believe that you have met with Gubich, the king of the dwarves.'



• THE SILVER PINECONES •

The woman kept seven of the silver pinecones – one for each of her seven children. The children helped her to carry the rest of the cones to the market, and they returned laden with packets and parcels. That evening, the family sat down to bowls of rich steaming stew and bread hot from the oven. They held hands around their old wooden table and they gave thanks.

"Tomorrow, you must go back to the forest, and thank the king of the dwarves for his gift," said her husband.

The next day, the woman offered her thanks to Gubich. The little man smiled, his eyes crinkling and twinkling in his brown face. "The forest is rich with gifts," he said. "Here, pick the leaves of this plant. Brew a tea for your husband."

The woman looked doubtfully at the grey-brown seeds and deep toothed leaves; dusty and ragged. But the little man kept watching her, and nodded his head, so she began to pick. The leaves were soft, like faded velvet.

"Perhaps he means to poison us?" said the woman later that night, eyeing the green liquid as it bubbled in the pot. It didn't look like the tea she bought from the market. "Have faith!" said her husband. "Gubich means us well."

Every morning and every evening, the man drank the bitter brew. Day by day, colour returned to his pale face. Light returned to his dull eyes. Strength returned to his weak body. He was well again.

From that day on, the family were healthy and wealthy. They kept the seven silver pinecones on the dresser as a reminder of Gubich's kindness. When the children grew up and found homes of their own, they each kept a silver pinecone on their dressers. And their children passed the cones on, and so the story spread, and the fir tree was always remembered with great respect. So that even today, families far and wide gather pinecones and paint them silver, and string them on the mantelpiece or hang them on the Christmas tree, where they swirl slow and shine in the firelight.



THE APPLE TREE MAN

A folk tale from England

Have you heard that on Christmas Eve, come midnight, animals can talk? Did you know that on Twelfth Night, apple trees are honoured with hot cider and songs? This folk tale from Somerset, England, celebrates these old beliefs. In olden days, and still today, it is tradition on Twelfth Night to wassail the apple trees. Twelfth Night is the last of the twelve days of Christmas – according to our modern calendar, it falls on 6 January. Perhaps you know an apple tree that would like to be celebrated on Twelfth Night?

There was once a man who was the eldest of a long line of brothers. He'd been out in the world working since he was a lad.

When his father died, everything went to the youngest son, as was the custom in those parts. The youngest brother doled out bits and pieces to all the family but, when it came to the eldest brother, all he gave him was their father's bony old donkey and the ox that was lame in the leg.

Their father had also left the family an old tumbledown cottage, with a couple of ancient apple trees standing round it. The apple trees never gave any fruit.

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"I'm going to buy myself a grand house in town," said the youngest brother. "You can live in the old cottage if you can pay me rent for it – every month, on the dot."

Well, the eldest brother never grumbled. He just set to work to make the best of it. He went out along the hedgerows. He cut the long grasses to feed the donkey. He picked the healing herbs to make an ointment for the ox's sore leg.

Over time that old donkey began to fatten up, and that lame old ox, his leg began to heal, and he picked himself up and began to walk again.

The eldest brother patched up the stable to keep the animals warm from the cold, and took them to the orchard to graze. There, they manured the ground.

Well, the apple trees liked that! They perked right up. "Bless you!" the elder brother said to the trees, "You're flourishing a marvel!" He almost thought he heard the trees respond. Perhaps it was just the wind.

Autumn turned to winter and the wind blew through the cottage, rattling the windows and banging the doors. The elder brother's nose was red, his fingers raw. His younger brother said, "I don't know why you bother with those old trees. Chop 'em down, I say; burn 'em for firewood!"

But the elder brother cut only the dead wood and the broken branches, to give the trees room to stretch.

When Christmas came, and Twelfth Night, the eldest brother kept up the old custom of wassailing – blessing the trees. He went to the very oldest tree, where the spirit of the orchard lives, and poured warm spiced cider over the roots, and hung sopping cider-toast in the branches for the robins.

He banged and clanged pots and pans, to scare off any impish spirits.

And he sang to the old tree:



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Here's to thee, Old Apple Tree,

Bloom well, bear well.

May you bear,

Apples fair.

Hats full, caps full,

And pockets full, too.

And pockets full, too!

Spring came, bringing with it warm sun and soft rain. Soon the apple trees were abuzz with bees. Over summer, hard little apples grew and ripened in the sun. Come autumn, the trees around the cottage were laden with fruit – a treasure trove of apples.

The elder brother patted the trunk of the old apple tree. "Thank you, Old Man," he said. The tree bowed and bent low, so the man could pluck a round rosy apple.

The elder brother took out his pocket-knife and cut a slice. At the centre was a perfect star. He smiled and took a bite. It was crunchy and crisp, juicy and sweet.

But, though he loved the apples and he loved taking care of the trees and the animals, none of that paid the rent. Oh yes, the youngest brother would have his rent, on the dot!

Well, one winter's day, the youngest brother came to the orchard. "Tomorrow's Christmas Eve," he said, "and come midnight, beasts talk, so they say. There's treasure buried hereabouts, we've all heard tell. And that donkey's been here donkey's years – if anyone knows where that treasure's hid, its him." He turned to the donkey, "I'll be back... I'm going to spy on you and find out!" And off he went.



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The next day was Christmas Eve. The elder brother got up early to fill the mangers with a double feed of hay and hang holly and ivy in the stable. On the horizon, through the silhouettes of the bare trees, the sunrise shone palest blue and petal pink. His breath rose in white clouds. It was good to be out early on a winter's morning.

In the evening, he hauled in a good ash branch for the yule log. Then he lit the fire and he took his last little drop of cider from the autumn apples, and warmed it over the flames. It was spicy-sweet, mulled with honey and cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg. He curled his cold hands round the warm mug. And he went outside to the orchard to give it to the apple tree. He went to the very oldest tree and poured his cider over the roots. And he sang:

Here's to thee, Old Apple Tree,
Bloom well, bear well.
May you bear,
Apples fair.
Hats full, caps full,
And pockets full too.
And pockets full, too.

Well, out in the silent night, the elder brother heard the Apple Tree Man, the spirit of the orchard, answer. He heard a voice call out, from inside the tree! "You take your spade, and dig down under this here root, and see what you can see."

So the elder brother fetched his spade and he dug, through the crumbling soil and round the knuckles of flints. There, he found a wooden box. And inside the box, gold. Treasure as golden and overflowing as a harvest of autumn apples. "You take it," said the Apple Tree Man. "Keep it. 'Tis yours." So, the elder brother did just that.

Not a moment later, a cascade of bells came ringing out over the midnight fields, from the distant church tower. The youngest brother came running, in a terrible



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hurry. Sure enough, the donkey was talking to the ox. "Do you know," the donkey was saying, "someone is eavesdropping on us?"

"How unmannerly!" said the ox.

"He wants us to tell where that treasure is hid."

The youngest brother's eyes gleamed.

"But he'll never get it," said the ox. "Cause somebody else has already got it."

And that was all the youngest brother ever heard of the treasure. As for the elder brother, the animals and the apple trees, they all lived together, in peace and happiness.

And still, to this day, in the West Country, where the land is fair with apple trees, the old ways of wassailing are kept alive. Every year, on Twelfth Night, folk gather round the oldest of all the trees, where the spirit of the orchard lives, and they sing:

Here's to thee, Old Apple Tree,
Bloom well, bear well.
May you bear,
Apples fair.
Hats full, caps full,
And pockets full, too,
And pockets full, too,
Hurrah! Hurrah!



SISTER AND BROTHER

A folk tale from Siberia

Siberia is a land of ice and snow, midnight sun and northern lights. It contains the coldest inhabited place on Earth, with temperatures dipping below -60°C . Long blizzards can uproot trees or break off chunks of ice, sweeping a person out to sea. All over Siberia, old tales tell that every lake and river, every tree branch that rustles, every wind that passes has its own 'voice'. It is the fearsome Blizzard who causes the snowstorms, when she shakes the snow from her tent.

Far, far, far north, at the edge of the world, the land is snow and the sea is ice. The sun is drawn across the sky by a reindeer. Here, on the Arctic tundra, a family lived – a girl and a boy and their mother – in a warm choom tent.

The mother put up the tent and made the fire and sewed the clothes of reindeer fur. But there was no father to herd the reindeer or catch the fish or hunt the geese. The children's father had died in the springtime, so the mother did all the work. And as she gave so much and received so little, she fell ill.

She lay inside the choom, by the dwindling embers of the fire. "Son, the fire needs wood. Go out and fetch some," she said.

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Outside, Blizzard whistled and howled, and shook the tent so it creaked and groaned. The boy pretended not to hear and snuggled into his deerskin blanket.

"Daughter," said the mother. "The fire needs wood. Go out and fetch some." But the girl was too busy plaiting her long black hair. With a hissing sigh, the fire died. The last spark rose through the hole in the top of the choom and landed on Blizzard's cloak. Fzzt; there it burnt a black, jagged hole.

With a howl, the tent flaps burst open and Blizzard whirled in. The mother stretched out her arms to protect her children, but Blizzard just breathed over her with icy breath, and the mother's outstretched arms became wings – she was transformed into a screeching seagull.

The mother was whisked away to the place where Blizzard lives – the ice choom at the top of the highest mountain. There, Blizzard blew on the gull, and she changed back to a woman. The mother was given an ice needle and snow cloth, and there she sat, trapped, sewing, with stinging fingers – a new cloak for Blizzard.

Back at the family's choom, the children were arguing. But there was no point fighting, their mother was gone.

The sister and brother shivered and huddled together through the night. And in the morning, they set out to help their mother.

From up in the sky, the sun looked down. He shone brightly and lit up the path for the children.



The sun sent the children a gift; one, two, three golden arrows. The boy wrapped them in a deerskin and tucked them into his coat.

The brother and sister walked for a long time, surviving on tiny blueberries and tart cloudberry. At last they came to the edge of the tundra, where the first green pines and dark larches grow on the low slopes. From out of the trees, they heard a desperate mewing, and out sprang a fawn, a young deer. It was running; something, close behind, was chasing it. A wolf, its silver pelt flat in the wind as it ran.

The boy drew out the first golden arrow. The arrow flew... and the wolf turned tail. The little deer trotted over to the children. The girl knelt and sang to him:

Nye-eye, little deer,
Nye-eye, little ears,
Nye-eye, little nose,
Nye-eye, little deer.

The deer had been separated from its mother and was afraid to be alone. It trotted along with the children on their journey.

From high on her mountain-top, Blizzard could see the little group coming. And she sent someone to stop them... THUD, THUD, THUD! Blizzard sent the giant, Sleep. As he drew nearer, the children began to yawn, and their legs grew heavy, and their eyes began to droop. But they knew that if they went to sleep in the snow, they would never wake up again. So the girl, she began to sing. Her song floated like snowflakes and sparkled like sleigh bells. The giant began to yawn, and to stretch, and he slumped down, fast asleep. The children tiptoed around him and went on up the mountain.

Then, from out of the trees came the soft click of deer hooves, and there was the fawn's mother! She knelt down and the children climbed onto her back. The deer walked with the children for a long time. At last, they came to the edge of the forest, where the deer mother set the children down, and trotted home with her fawn.



The low slopes of snow were behind them now. The children climbed and they climbed, and before them appeared a deep, wide ravine.

The girl stood at the edge of the ravine and kicked down a stone. Clatter, rattle, nothing... She couldn't hear it reach the bottom. Looking down made her stomach lurch as if she was falling and would never stop. Now, the girl could have sat down and despaired. Instead, she chose hope. She took her knife and cut off her long black braid. She plaited it into a long strong rope. Her brother tied a loop in the end of the rope, and threw the lasso, and it hooked over a rock on the far side of the abyss. The girl looked at the rope, swaying above the ravine. Could she make it to the other side? She took the first step. The rope held.

High on the mountain top, Blizzard saw that the children had almost reached her, and she sent Darkness. In an instant, it was night. The girl was balancing on a rope over the abyss in the dark. She couldn't see which way was up and which was down. The boy drew out the second golden arrow. It flew through the darkness, a call for help... And the sun answered. He sent down his three bright brothers to help the children, the Northern Lights. So, the children walked, not in darkness, but lit by dancing colours.

At the other side of the abyss was Blizzard's ice-home. Howling, she swooped down upon the children, to sweep them off the edge of the cliff. But the boy fired the third golden arrow, and it flew straight to the heart of Blizzard. With a swirl of steam, she was gone. Then, there was their mother, free, hugging them and kissing them and telling them how proud she was.

The little family journeyed back to their deerskin choom. And there, together, the boy and the girl tended the fire to warm their home and keep their mother well.



THE MOTHER OF THE SEA

A folk tale from Greenland

Winter in the Arctic is long: the sun disappears from the sky at the end of November and does not return until January. For months, there is no sunlight and the sea freezes. Hard weather makes hunting challenging. The tale of the Mother of the Sea is known in both Canada and Greenland. As this spirit of the sea has no human fingers, she relies on the help of human beings to keep the waves of her hair clean and well cared for. When we give her this care, in return she ensures that sea-creatures thrive in abundance.

Once, when the days were short and the sea was frozen over, some children were playing together, inside a little house of stone and skins. There was one boy who was an orphan; one of his relatives had adopted him as a foster son. The boy said, "Let's play calling up spirits!" The young ones swilled the floor with salt-water, to clean any bad smells that might keep the spirits away. The boy took off his sealskin jacket and hung it over the doorway, to block out the light.

The boy began to chant. The little ones huddled together. Their eyes grew wide with fright – beneath them, the earth slab tiles of the floor were shaking, lifting, rising!

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The children leapt up and ran for the door. The boy would have run too, but his feet wouldn't move. They were stuck to the ground. "Take down my jacket! Let in the light!" Only when the light streamed in did the earth settle, and the boy could move again. When the grown-ups returned, the little ones ran to their mothers, calling:

"Anana! The floor was moving!"

"The tiles were flying!"

"Spirits, Anana! Spirits!"

The elders were astonished, but it was a hard winter; the sea was frozen and hunting was impossible. People were hungry. Could the orphan boy help call up the food spirits?

"Try again," the elders urged. "Just try..."

So again, the boy began to chant. From outside, there came an answering sound – a low, loud grumbling huff. The boy went to the entrance of the house. The radiant snow reflected the moonlit sky, making the world glow blue. He saw, coming closer, a polar bear walking on the ice, and a walrus swimming underneath – two helping spirits. The bear seized the boy in his jaws, then flung him to the walrus. The walrus caught the boy and sank down with him, through a crack between the land and the ice. The walrus flung the boy to the bear. The bear flung him back again. Back and forth they carried him, down, down, down to the bottom of the sea. There, the bear threw the boy down. When the spinning of his head slowed, the boy opened his eyes. Amid the swaying seaweed of the ocean floor, he saw a house. On top of the entrance passage stood a fierce dog, snarling and growling, baring its sharp teeth. The passageway was as narrow as a knife edge. But the boy was not lacking courage and he went in.

Inside, there was the sound of sobbing. The boy could just make out the figure of a woman, lying on the platform ledge, her face turned towards the wall. He reached out to her, touched her long hair. It was loose, tangled and matted with dirt. The woman shook him off, glaring. She was stronger than any human. "Why have you come? What can you do to help me?" she pushed him away.

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But the boy kept reaching out to her. He touched her face; her ears and her lips were all clogged with dirt. Gently, the boy wiped the filth away.

The woman looked at the boy sadly. "Can you can help me?" she asked. "My hair..."

The boy picked up a bone comb. With gentle patience, he combed out the tangles and the dirt from her hair. Stroke by stroke, her hair became smooth. The woman was calmer now. "Thank you," she said. "Before you came, I had been neglected. When you return, tell your people: take care of the sea. Keep the waters of the ocean clean."

The woman took an eagle wing from a peg on the wall and stirred the smoking oil lamp, so it began to burn bright. Now the boy could see that the walls were hung with animal skins, like the ones used for making covers for boats. The deeper parts of the room were still in darkness. "Now I can help you," said the woman. "Let me see..." and she stirred the lamp brighter. The boy looked, wide eyed, as little creatures with blunt stub noses began emerging from the walls, first one, then another. They waddled, in a long line, out through the passageway.

As the last creature left, the boy heard them calling, outside, kah-kah sa-sa, and he knew then that they were ice birds. A great flock of ice birds flying up to the surface of the ocean for the hunters to catch!

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"Enough!" said the Mother of the Sea and no more creatures emerged. When they had passed, the boy saw that the passage was now wide, and the dog was wagging its tail. Again, he was thrown along by the bear and the walrus.

At the boy's relatives' house, the elders were singing and singing for him, singing for his spirit to return home. "Light! Light! Light the lamp!" The flame flared and the relatives saw that the boy's body was wounded by the teeth of the bear and the tusks of the walrus. The lamp was put out again, the singing went on and on, hour after hour, to heal the boy.

After nights and days of singing, the boy's wounds began to heal, and the wind changed. A strong wind howled from the south-east. The sea ice began to break up, creaking and scraping, clashing and gushing. Through the cracks – kah-kah sa-sa – great flocks of ice birds emerged. With whirring wingbeats they flew fast and low over the sea, their white feathers flashing beneath their black wings and blunt beaks.

The hunters ran out with their spears and returned with their kayaks full. Everyone had enough to eat. The boy always remembered the words of the Mother of the Sea; keep the waters of the ocean clean.

That is the end of the story; and now the winter is a little less long.





THE SNOW QUEEN

A tale by Hans Christian Andersen

The Snow Queen is not a traditional folk tale but an original story written by Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen. It has become a classic, and inspired many more stories. Some say that the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by English writer C.S. Lewis, is inspired by Anderson's Snow Queen, and there have been countless plays, musicals, opera, ballets and films inspired by the winter tale.

Once there was a dark mirror, forged by goblins, full of sharp magic and black ice. In the mirror, everything that was real and true and beautiful was clouded, and all the hungers of the human heart were distorted. Those who looked into the mirror could not see straight and they saw only the worst of things.

One dark day, the mirror slipped from a goblin's hands and shattered, smashing into a thousand pieces. Slivers and splinters, no bigger than grains of sand, flew far and wide.

In a city of high steeples and ringing bells, there lived a girl called Gerda and a boy called Kay. They lived next door to each other and loved each other like a brother and sister. Up on the rooftops, the balconies of their attic bedrooms met, and their parents

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had put out wooden boxes and flowerpots, and planted roses.

In the summertime, Gerda and Kay played in the rooftop garden, amidst the scent of roses and the golden hum of bees. In the wintertime, when it was evening all afternoon, they sat by the stove with warm milk and the good smell of baking and Grandma told them stories. Sometimes they opened the blue cloth cover of the storybook and put it flat upon the rug, and lay side by side looking at the pictures.

One winter afternoon, the sky was lead-grey and low. Outside the window, silently, the clouds began to let go and drift into the world below.

"It's snowing!" cried Gerda.

The snow was falling slow and steady; settling on the roofs and the railings and the frozen earth. Sharp shapes softened. All the world was hushed.

Kay pressed his face to the window. Now the snowflakes swarmed like silver bees.

"Do they have a queen?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Grandma. "The Snow Queen is as beautiful as a snowflake and as sharp as ice." Kay pressed his forehead to the cool glass. There she was! A woman, tall and slim, dressed in dazzling white. Kay stared. Her sparkling gown was made of a million starry snowflakes. The spikes of her crown glinted with splintered light.

"Ow!" Kay gave a sudden cry. "My eye! There's something in my eye!"

"Let me see," said Grandma, putting on her spectacles.

"Ha!" Kay laughed. "You look just like an owl in those glasses! An ugly old owl!"

A splinter of the dark mirror, as cold as ice, had lodged in Kay's eye, and frozen the love in his heart. Everything looked ugly to him now – everything except the perfect symmetry of the snowflakes. Kay caught them on the cloth of his coat. He marvelled at their crystalline geometry. He sighed. "If only they didn't melt."

Kay watched each night for the Snow Queen. And when she returned, slicing through the snow in her silver-white sleigh, Kay hitched his sledge to the back of it. Faster and faster they flew, leaving the glowing streetlamps far behind...



Below them, the ice creaked and above, black crows cawed. Kay's ears hurt, his nose dripped and he couldn't feel his fingers. With a jolt, the sleigh lifted into the air. They flew high in the clouds, through roaring winds and over dark forests where white wolves howled. Kay tried to say his prayers but he could only remember his multiplication tables. His teeth chattered with cold and fear.

"Here," said the Snow Queen, holding open her snow-white cloak. "Come closer." Climbing onto her white cushioned seat and leaning into her furs felt like sinking into a snowdrift. The Snow Queen kissed Kay's brow once and he was numb. He no longer felt the cold. In fact, he felt nothing at all. The Snow Queen kissed him twice, and he forgot Gerda, he forgot home, he forgot everything.

Back in the city, the year had rolled to spring and Kay still hadn't returned. "Perhaps he drowned in the river," people said.

"Kay is dead!" Gerda wept.

"He's alive!" shone the sun.

"Dead!" Gerda sobbed.

"He's alive!" sang the birds.

"Dead?" Gerda wondered.

"Alive!" laughed the flowers.

"Perhaps he is still alive then?" said Gerda. She went to the river and took her new red shoes and dropped them into the water. "Please," she whispered, "give Kay back to me." The river did not answer, except in gurgles and ripples, but it brought a little bobbing boat to the shore where Gerda knelt and she climbed in.

The river carried Gerda far out of town, through fields and meadows, until she came to a garden, with an orchard ripe with ruby-red cherries. An old woman was in the garden and she saw Gerda.

"Oh, dear child! What are you doing all alone on the river?" She hooked the boat with her crooked stick, pulling Gerda to shore. Gerda stepped onto the soft grass of a summer garden, fluttering with butterflies. No storybook picture had a richer paintbox of colour; pastel clouds of blossoms bloomed together with bright summer flowers. In the garden it was always summertime, for the old woman was an enchantress. She took Gerda into her little thatched cottage and gave her plump cherries. As Gerda ate, the old woman combed her hair with a golden comb. With every stroke of the comb, she combed away her memories. Gerda forgot Kay, she forgot home, she forgot everything.

The enchantress was not evil, but she was lonely. Gerda's sweet nature and her bubbling laugh delighted her days.

"Just keeping her here for a little while won't hurt," she told herself. Gerda played in the garden, listening to the flowers tell their tales. But one flower seemed to be missing from the garden, and it was only when Gerda saw the flower on the old woman's hat, that she remembered.

"Roses! Kay! Oh, I must go!" and she ran, barefoot, out of the garden. Outside the enchanted garden, it was winter. Along the snow hopped a great black crow. "Oh, help me, please!" cried Gerda. "Help me find Kay."

"I did see a boy," said the crow, "a handsome lad. He married the princess, in the castle." The crow pointed his black beak towards a distant palace.

So Gerda travelled to the palace. She crept up the winding stairs, into the royal bedchamber. But when she peeped beneath the bedcovers there was a different boy lying there. The prince and princess listened sadly to Gerda's story. They were moved by her tale, and to help with her quest, they gave her a soft muff to keep her hands warm, good stout boots, a fine white horse, and a coach of solid gold.

Gerda set off again. The coach rattled away from the palace and into a dark forest. Hiding in the trees was a band of robbers, and when they saw Gerda's coach gleaming in the moonlight they surrounded it. A robber woman dragged Gerda into the snow and held a knife to her throat. "Ow!" The woman cried out; her daughter had leapt onto her back and bitten her!

"Mother!" said the girl. "Don't kill her!" The robber girl had a red cap and a knife in her belt and her dark hair smelt of wood-smoke. "She will stay with me and be my friend." She stared at Gerda's polished boots. "What pretty things." She stroked the fur muff. "I'll have them."

Croaking ravens flew through the open walls of the robbers' tumbledown castle. Gerda and the robber girl slept on the earth, in

straw that smelt of summer. The robber girl asked Gerda question after question, and Gerda shared her story. While she spoke, the woodpigeons in the rafters called to her. "Coo-coo, we have seen Kay, riding in the Snow Queen's sleigh..."

"Then I must go!" Gerda sprang to her feet. The robber girl looked at Gerda with her head on one side. "You're not so timid, after all." She gave Gerda back her boots. "You'll need these. And here, take him..." Tethered to the wall was a reindeer, a bright copper ring round its neck. Gerda clung onto his antlers as he lurched away, and she turned, waving farewell to the girl.

Together they leapt over moors and marshes, they rode through dark woods and valleys of shining snow. They followed the North Star to the top of the world – to Finland – where they came across a humble hut where an old woman lived. "Yes, I know the way to the Snow Queen's castle," said the woman. "And I know a wise woman in Lapland who might help you..."

On they rode, further north, to Lapland. There they found the wise woman. The reindeer looked at her with such pleading eyes that her own eyes twinkled. "Don't you see?" she said to the reindeer, "I can give Gerda no greater power than the power of her own heart. If she cannot free Kay, we cannot help her. Carry her to where the Snow Queen's garden begins. Put her down by the bush with the red berries."

Before long, they came to the red-berried bush standing in the snow, and the reindeer set Gerda down. She kissed his velvet nose and he galloped away.

Like darts, an army of snowflakes came spinning towards her. Gerda joined her hands and she prayed. She prayed and she prayed and her warm breath steamed from her mouth in billowing clouds. The clouds shifted and grew, they became white angels, circling Gerda in a ring of protection.

In awe, Gerda stared up at the crystal castle of the Snow Queen. Spiked ice spires pierced the sky. The walls of the castle were driven

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snow, the windows, cutting wind. White walls glittered, and glowed blue-green in the fire of the Northern Lights. The palace was beautiful, but it was cold and bare. There were never any gatherings or celebrations here, not even a little bear's ball, where the wind might make music and the polar bears might show off their grand manners.

Gerda crept through the great gates, hardly daring to breathe. She crept through the ice-halls, to the heart of the castle. There was a frozen lake, like a dark mirror. There was Kay! And, towering above him, stood the Snow Queen. Gerda pressed herself to the wall, and watched, her heart beating with hope and fear. With a swirl of her cloak, the Snow Queen leapt into her silver sleigh, and flew off to powder the mountain-tops with snow. Gerda shivered, and let out a shudder of breath, as the shadow of the sleigh swept over her head, leaving Kay alone on the ice.

"Kay! Kay!" Gerda ran and flung her arms around his neck. But Kay sat unmoved. He did not recognise her. His fingers were stiff with cold. "Kay? Kay!" Gerda wept and wept. Hot tears poured down her cheeks and onto Kay's face. Kay blinked. He blinked again. "Gerda?" Her warm tears had melted the ice in his heart. Kay's own tears began to flow now, warm and clean, washing away the splinter from his eye. Then Gerda and Kay were hugging and crying and laughing, all at once. Even the shards of ice danced for joy. And when they lay still again, they formed a word: eternity.

Hand in hand, Gerda and Kay left the castle of the Snow Queen behind them. At the bush with the red berries, there was the faithful reindeer, waiting for them.

The robber girl, in her bright red cap, sat astride the horse. "I was tired of staying at home. I'm going north or, if that doesn't suit me, somewhere else. Farewell!" And she rode out, into the wide world. Gerda and Kay travelled south on the reindeer's back, calling out their thanks to all who had helped them on their way.

At last, they came to the city of high steeples and ringing bells, where Grandma threw her arms around them. "You're safe! You're home!" Up on the rooftop garden, the roses opened their petals, and bloomed.





RABBIT'S GIFT

A folk tale from China

In some parts of Northern China, it is so cold, for so long, that when snow falls it stays frozen, and over the winter months the snow grows deeper and deeper with every snowfall. It is an old tradition in Northern China for families to stock up on staple foods, such as cabbage and turnip at the start of the cold season, to keep the whole family well-fed all winter. An old Chinese proverb says: "Eat ginger in summer, eat turnip in winter, and there's no need for the doctor." (The vegetable known in China as the winter turnip is known in Western countries as the daikon radish).

On the peaks of Cold Mountain, the forests were breathing out mist. The old path went winding into white cloud. In the fields, the thatch huts were robed with snow.

An ancient plum tree stood knotted and gnarled, battered by the wind. Deep in the roots of the tree, lived a rabbit. He was hungry.

So, he hopped out of his hole, to look for something to eat. He dug away the sparkling snow with his paws and there he found two winter turnips. They were long and muddy-white, with a froth of pale leaves.

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He ate one of the turnips. It gave a satisfying snap between his teeth and was hot like pepper on his tongue. Mmm, it was good. But when he came to the second turnip, he felt full. "I know," said Rabbit. "I'll give this turnip to dear old Donkey." So off he hopped through the snow.

But when Rabbit found Donkey's old wooden plough, it was covered in snow, and Donkey wasn't there. "I'll leave the turnip here for him," he said.

Rabbit hopped back home to his warm burrow. He curled up tight, a ball of soft fur, and fell asleep smiling, thinking of the lovely surprise he had given to his dear old friend.


Donkey was looking for food. He couldn't reach the dry stalks hidden deep under the snow. He trotted here and there looking for something to eat. Before long, Donkey found a wrinkled crab apple, hanging from a crooked branch. Crunch! Munch! He ate the apple in two big bites. Mmm, it was good.

When Donkey got back to his old wooden plough, what did he find, but a winter turnip. "Well," he said to himself, "I wonder how that got there?"

But Donkey was already full. He thought of his friend Sheep. "The snow is so deep, perhaps Sheep can't reach the grass. I know..."

Donkey rolled the turnip along with his nose, leaving a wavering trail in the snow. But when he got to the clump of trees where Sheep liked to shelter, she wasn't there. "I'll leave it here for her," he said.





Further on down the way, Sheep was looking for food. She plodded here and there looking for something to eat. Before long, she found a cabbage. The outside leaves were a little brown, but the inside was firm and crisp. Sheep ate the cabbage all up. Mmm, it was good.

When Sheep got back to her clump of trees, what did she find, but a winter turnip. "Well," she said to herself, "I wonder how that got there?"

But Sheep was full. "I know," she said. "I'll give this turnip to Deer." So off she went, carrying the turnip in her teeth, leaving a little row of peg-prints dotted in the snow.

Sheep walked up the rocky mountain. At the edge of the forest, she followed the track through the undergrowth, and found a flat deer-bed in a dense thicket. But Deer wasn't there. "I'll leave the turnip here for her."

Deer was browsing – scraping through the snow looking for grass. She didn't find any grasses, but she did find a young pine tree. Mmm, the pine tasted cool and clean.

When Deer got back to her den, what did she find on her bed, but a winter turnip. "Well," she said to herself, "I wonder how that got there?"

Deer was full. "I know," she said. "I'll give this turnip to a friend, a dear old friend..."

So off she went down the mountain, through the forest and over the fields, all the way to the old plum tree. Deer peeped her head into Rabbit's burrow, but Rabbit was fast asleep. So, Deer left the turnip by his side and crept quietly away.

Rabbit yawned and stretched. It had been a good nap. But now he felt hungry again. "Hmmm... I wish I had a turnip," he said.

Rabbit opened his eyes. And what did he see, but a winter turnip! "Well!" said Rabbit. "A gift for me! I wonder how that got there..." And he ate that winter turnip all up. Mmm, it was good.



THE CHILDREN AND THE SUN

*A folk tale from the
Kalahari Desert, Southern Africa*

On 21 December it is the winter solstice – the turning point of the year. From autumn onwards, the days grow shorter and darker. After 21 December, the hours of daylight increase again. Since ancient times, people all over the world have recognised the importance of the solstice, and celebrated the “return” of the sun in many ways. This tale from the San people of southern Africa’s great Kalahari Desert tells of a time when the earth was always winter-dark, and celebrates the first time that the sun shone in the sky.

Here is a story, from the Kalahari Desert, a land of red earth and dry sand. For countless years, the life of the people of the Kalahari was unchanging. Children rose early to fill their flasks with water and gather wild cucumbers and melons. Little ones went out with their mothers, picking nuts and nin berries. Men sunned their shoulder blades, hunting antelope and ostrich.

But, it was not always so. In the time of the First People, there was no sun up in the sky. It was always cold and gloom-grey, like an endless winter’s night when the

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desert air freezes and frost forms on the brown plants.

There were three boys living then: Kabbo, Karu and Kau. Kabbo was the eldest, Karu was his brother, and their friend Kau was the littlest one.

One day, they were playing ball with a wild melon; small and round and yellow. Kabbo threw it high in the air. Karu squinted his eyes and reached out his hands. Boof! The melon landed in the sand. Karu frowned. “I can’t see!” And he kicked the ball away. The melon went bouncing and rolling through the gloom, towards an old man, lying slumped by himself at the edge of the village, snoring.

Bump! The ball rolled right into the sleeping man. “Eh?” He sat up and he stretched. And as he raised his arms, light shone from out of his body! Hot, bright, radiant light! The children stared at him in awe.

“Grandfather,” said Kabbo. “you have light within you!” The old man snapped his arms shut, and the world shrank back to darkness. “Grandfather,” said Kabbo, “open your arms again!”

The old man glared. “It would burn you like fire! Get away!”

“Grandfather,” said Karu, “please share your light.”

“Away, I said!” the old man growled.

“Grandfather,” said Kau. “Please.”

The old man scowled at the children. He turned his back, and curled up tight.

There was a white-haired woman in the boys’ village, who had lived and lived, and now she was very old and she knew many things. The children went to her hut.

“Grandmother, help us,” said Kabbo. “That old man there has light within him! But he is all closed up. What can we do?”

The old woman sat quite still, listening to the wisdom within her body. She looked at the children’s ball. She grinned. Then she called the mothers of the village together. The young ones crowded round. The old woman announced, “These children are going to help that old man. They are going to help us all. The children will throw that old man up into the sky, to make the sun!”

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The women's faces crinkled with laughter. "Heh, heh!"

The children stood with mouths agape.

"Eh, hey! We cannot do that!"

"He is too heavy!"

"He is too hot!"

"You can," said the old woman, "together." Then she said no more.

Later, the children found the old man sitting hunched outside his grass hut, all alone. They hid; watching and waiting. After a while, the man let out a giant yawn, and closed his eyes. Slowly, stealthily, the children stalked up to him.

Wink! One eye flicked open! The children froze. The old man turned over. The children crept closer...

Blink! Two eyes flashed open! The children held their breath. He settled back down. The children crept closer, closer...

Nod! His head nodded and he began to snore. His arms flopped to his sides, burning light blazed out of him. The children stared in awe.

"Can we?" asked Kabbo.

"I don't know," said Karu.

"I'm scared," said Kau.

The children remembered the old woman's words and her words made their hearts brave, like the leopard's heart. Kabbo took hold of the old man's shoulders. Karu took hold of the old man's legs. Kau took a pinch of buchu herb. He rubbed the leaves, so the soothing scent rose to the old man's nose. The old man breathed deep, and he smiled in his sleep.

"Hold him tight!" whispered Kabbo.

"Lift him up!" whispered Karu.

"Throw him up!" they all called together, and with a great heave the children threw that old man, the sun, high up into the sky.



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The sun-man went spinning through the skies. His eyes were wide with surprise. The children called up to him, shouting:

Oh Grandfather, become the sun!
Be hot! Make the whole Earth warm!
Be bright! Make the whole Earth light!
Shine! Chase away the darkness!

And as the sun flew higher, the sky brightened and yellow sunshine lit up the land. From way up high that old man, the sun, could see the whole world below him, all glorying in his light; all the people basking in his warmth. He saw the old people warming their backs and easing their bones. He saw the women smiling up their thanks, as they set out their clay pots to dry. He saw the men hunting, taking perfect aim. He saw the children smiling and waving. And the sun began to smile. His light shone brighter and brighter within him, until his whole being was smiling and shining.

That evening, for the first time ever, the sun set. The people sang. The women clapped their hands. The men danced, danced, danced. They danced in celebration of the sun. The children beamed with delight. And as time passed, the sun's light shone in every direction, and he grew round.

Now, that story is finished; it drifts away with the wind. But up in the sky, the sun is still here, even in the heart of winter.



THE TWELVE MONTHS

A folk tale from Greece

This folk tale is well-known in northern Slavic lands, such as Russia, Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia. This version, though, comes from Greece. In Northern Greece, up in the mountains, winter brings the snow. High on the peaks of Mount Olympus, the tallest mountain in the land, it often snows all winter long.

Once, there were two neighbours who were both widows. Each one had a daughter. The first daughter, Marianna, helped her mother to bake and cook and wash and sew and spin. She helped take care of the garden and look after the cows. The neighbour's daughter, Helena, never dirtied her hands with work. She sat all day in the chimney corner, adorning herself with trinkets.

Marianna saw how hard her mother worked and how little food they had. One winter's day, she trudged out into the thick snow to gather kindling for the fire. Deep in the frozen forest, she stretched up to reach the fallen twigs caught in the forks of the branches. They would make a good fire. Up ahead, she could see something. A light...



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There, in a clearing, was a circle of low stones and in the centre a fire blazed. Twelve figures were sitting on the stones around the fire.

"Excuse me," said Marianna. "Please, may I warm myself by your fire, just for a moment?" An old man, with a long white beard like a tangle of fluffy seeds, smiled at her. His blue eyes twinkled.

"Of course," said Great January, for that was who the old man was; the twelve figures were the twelve months of the year. Marianna reached her fingers towards the flames. "And perhaps," he said, "you can offer your thoughts to our discussion. Tell me, what do you think of the twelve months? What do you think of, say, March?"

"Oh, March! I love spring. Yellow flowers opening their hearts to the sun, lifting my spirits. That unbelievable green! And oh..." Marianna touched her cheek. "The first time the breeze feels gentle and warm. And the smell of the earth after the rain."

"And what of May?" asked a young woman in a frock of green, a circlet of white flowers woven into her hair. How pretty she was!

"Ah, May..." the girl sighed. "May is so lovely! Waking to the sound of birdsong... Waves of white blossom... Daisy chains and dandelion wishes! Oh, I love May."

The old man nodded, smiling to himself. "What of June, then?" A woman with a dress of delicate pink, like wild-rose petals, turned her head to listen to her answer.

"Mmm, June... Such lushness! Raspberries and roses... The scent of honeysuckle in the warm evening. Oh, June is a pleasure."

"And what of August?" asked an older woman. She was round and plump, with ruddy cheeks and a linen apron, worn soft with age. The girl thought she could smell the scent of fresh baked bread about her.

"Mmm, August... Everything warm and mellow and golden. Trailing toes in rippling water... Sun-lit leaves and drowsy bees... I love August."

The man next to the stout woman stood up. His breeches were beech-brown, and his velvet waistcoat was tawny-gold. "And September?"

"Oh autumn... the harvest! Red apples and ripe berries... Crunching yellow leaves.

The first nip in the air that makes the fireside evenings welcome."

"What of winter, then?" asked the old man. "Winter does not offer such riches."

"Oh, winter!" said the girl. "Winter is the most wonderful of all! There's a purity, somehow, to the bare earth and the clear shapes of the trees... a quiet beauty. And the cold is fresh and true – it makes me feel alive. After all the busy work of summer and autumn, we can be still, and rest. Thank goodness for winter."

The old man smiled. "Well, thank you for your thoughts. You look for beauty and so you find it. Here, take these rocks..." The girl held open her apron, puzzled. "Do not open your apron until you get home."

When the girl opened her apron, every single rock had turned to pure gold. So her family were poor no longer.

Their neighbours soon heard of their good fortune. "Get out there and find those twelve months," Helena's mother told her. "Tell 'em what you think of 'em and bring back some treasure!"

"Ugh!" groaned the girl. "Why should I?"

"How dare you argue with me?" said her mother. "Get out there, this minute!" She shoved her daughter out and slammed the door.

Before long, the girl was elbowing her way through the clearing.

"Greetings," said Great January, raising his white eyebrows. "Can we help you?"

"Yes, I've come to fill my apron, like Marianna," replied Helena.

"Very well. Perhaps first you might help us with a talk we are having?"

"Arguing, eh? Well, what is it?" said Helena.

"No argument. We all have different points of view. I am interested in your view. What is your opinion of the twelve months? What, for example, do you think of March?"

"March!" spat the girl. "Spring? More like winter! Lashing wind, relentless rain. Mud! I hate March."



"Oh," said the old man. "Well, what of July?" A woman dressed in yellow leant closer.

"Huh!" said the girl. "Hot and sticky! Dry and dusty! Ugh, I hate summer!"

"Well," said a man in russet-red, "what of autumn then?"

"More mud!"

"And winter?" asked Great January.

"Winter? Winter is the worst of all! Runny noses and sore throats. Stinging wind and numbing cold. I hate winter."

"Very well," said Great January. "Then here are your stones." He filled the girl's apron with rocks. "Do not look until you reach home."

The girl hurried away, without a word of thanks. When she opened her apron, what do you think fell out? Dung! Dried up, smelly horse dung. Helena didn't understand.

When Marianna heard what had happened she felt compassion for her neighbour. Helena had never had a chance to appreciate the gifts of the seasons. And so, the very next day, she knocked on her neighbours' door.

"I'm going to walk in the woods. Will you come with me?" Helena looked doubtful. It was cold outside. She frowned.

"I have a good coat you can wear. And I know where a willow grows, down by the river. Its catkins are soft as a kitten's paw." Helena's frown softened. "And the banks are all covered with snowdrops. We could pick some..."

Helena looked at Marianna. No one had offered to show her any such beauty before. She nodded. And together the two girls walked off towards the forest.

Each of the twelve months has gifts for us all, when we open our hearts to receive them.





BRIGIT AND THE CAILLEACH

A story woven from Scottish and Irish folklore

The first of February, halfway between winter solstice and spring equinox, has been considered sacred in Celtic lands since Neolithic times. It is known in Ireland as 'Brigit's Day'; a time sacred to Brigit, goddess of the holy well and the sacred flame. When Christianity arrived in Britain, pagan beliefs fused with the Christian calendar, and the sacred day of the Goddess Brigit became the feast day of Saint Brigit.

Long, long, long ago lived the Cailleach. The Old One. The Cold One. The Old Woman of Winter. Her face was blue. Her teeth were tusks. Her hair was white as frost. In those long-ago days the Cailleach tramped the lands with her staff in her hand and her creel – her basket – on her back, full of stones and rocks. She dropped down the rocks, and they went tumbling to earth, crashing and splashing onto the land and into the sea. That is how she made the hills and the mountains, the highlands and the islands.

The Cailleach had lived for hundreds and hundreds of years, for she knew where to find the Water of Life, in the Well of Youth. Whenever she grew weary, she would tuck up her skirt and wade into the ocean. The sea was nothing to her – it only came

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up to her knees. She would go to the Island of the West, the Island of the Blest. There stood the Well of Youth.

In the morning, at sunrise, the Cailleach lifted off the great stone slab which covered the well. She cupped her hands and drank the cold, clear water, and was revived. The lid of the well had to be replaced before nightfall, to preserve the precious waters. So, at sunset, the Cailleach laid the stone slab back over the well.

After the mountains were made, the Cailleach took her plaid, her great shawl, to the swirling whirlpool of Corryvreckan. She threw in her shawl and tramped it with her feet until the booming of the waves could be heard for miles around. And when her shawl was washed, she laid it on the mountains to dry, and the land was covered with snow. The Old Woman of Winter roamed her white world, with her staff of blackthorn in her hand. Wherever her staff stuck the ground, the earth was frozen cold and hard as iron.

She went wandering through her mountains, followed by herds of red deer. For she was guardian of the wild beasts, the horned herds of goats, the wolves and the eagles. She could even take the form of a wild bird herself – a great grey heron.

For a long time, the world was gripped by winter. But, in the belly of the earth, something tiny was glowing, something tiny was growing. The spirit of spring was quickening. And, on the surface of the earth, in sheltered spots, green grew.

One day, the sun came out and a flower opened. But still the Cailleach tramped the land. Her ice-breath dashed the flimsy petals and her black staff snapped the tender stem. The Cailleach laughed, and her laugh was a bitter stinging wind. Then she put her fingers to her lips and she whistled. She whistled up the winds, her wild winter wolf-winds. From high on the mountain-tops they came. From far in the Northlands they came:

The Feadag, the Gobag, the Sguabag, the Gearan.

The Shriill Wind, the Sharp Wind, the Sweeper, the Shrieker.



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Yowling and howling they came, over the forest, over the seas, whipping up waves, lashing down trees. Branches were torn from the trunks. Rivers rose in flood. The Cailleach laughed out loud. She kicked up her skirts and hurled down her hail. She danced in the storm, like a child in the rain.

But when at last the winds died down and the hail melted, the Cailleach sighed. She rubbed her back. Her bones ached. Her knees creaked. She was exhausted. She sat staring out to sea, and she sang to herself, a sad, sorrowful song:

Oh, I am weary and old,
All alone in the dark and the cold.
When the cold winds blow,
When the cold winds blow.

Once again, the Cailleach hitched up her skirt and waded through the cold ocean to the Well of Youth. She lifted the great stone slab and drank a little. Then the Cailleach saw a soft mossy spot and she sat down there, just to take the weight off her feet for a moment. The Cailleach closed her eyes, just for a little rest...

But before the Cailleach awoke, before she had a chance to replace the capstone, the sun set and the moon rose. And as the moon rose, with it rose the waters of the well. Higher and higher. Until the waters touched the lip of the well. And still the Cailleach slept. And still the waters rose, tipping over the lip of the well, slipping and spilling over the edge.

Swelling and swirling, urging and surging, rising and roaring: a great wave of water curled and crashed over the sleeping Cailleach. As the waters washed over her plaid, her cloak, it began to melt and to trickle away into the earth. As the waters washed over her hands, her grip loosened, and her staff of blackthorn rolled out of her fingers and away, down the hill, where it lodged beneath a holly bush.

As the waters of life washed over the great shape of the sleeping Cailleach, she

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herself was turned into a great, grey stone. For that is what happens to old Cailleachs at the end of their days. The full moon shone on that old cold boulder of stone. Well water fell like the first spring rain. The moon set. All was still.

There was an opening in the hill. And as the sun rose, the opening was lit with light, like a flame blazing. And as the sun rose higher, bathing the land in light, a new goddess emerged. Her dress was white. Her cloak was green. Her hair was red as fire.

The Goddess Brigit came to power. Brigit the Bright. Brigit the White. Brigit the Bringer of Spring.

Now, some say that the Cailleach still sleeps her stone-cold sleep, and that Brigit stays only until summer's end, and then again the Cailleach will wake... But some believe that Brigit is the Cailleach herself, transformed, like a great grey glacier that changes into a bright bubbling spring. The Goddess Brigit had the power of fire within her. The spark of poetry tingled on her tongue. As she walked, she sang, and her song was soft as a spring breeze and bright as birdsong. The heat of healing, and the warmth of crafting, were in her hands. She knelt and dipped her finger in the frozen river, and though it was cold, it began to flow.

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She reached out and picked up the staff of blackthorn from beneath the holly tree. And as she held it in her hand, it began to swell and sprout, and the black wood turned white with blossom.

Brigit looked out over the bare brown earth and she took off her cloak, her mantle of green. Lovingly, she laid it over the land.

And Brigit, Brigit the Bright, Brigit the White, walked out into her green world. Like a dancing flame, she moved over the land, and everywhere she walked the snowdrops flowered in her footsteps.

A gentle breeze whispered, "Spring is coming..."

A brook murmured, "Spring is coming..."

A bird sang, "Spring is coming..."

And so it was. And so it is.



Sources

The White Bear King

'White-Bear-King-Valemon' is recorded by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in their classic collection *Norwegian Folk Tales*. It is a lesser-known version of 'East of the Sun, West of the Moon', the famous tale collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe.

Tanuki's Gold

This story is recorded in A.B. Mitford's book *Tales of Old Japan* (Macmillan and Co., 1871). Tim Myers retells this tale in *Tanuki's Gift* (Marshall Cavendish, 2003).

The Mitten

In *Ukrainian Folktales*, translated by Irina Zheleznova (Dnipro Publishers, 1986), the protagonist in this tale is an old man. I have chosen a child and a grandmother, inspired by fond memories of my own Nana's knitting.

A Cloak for the Moon

This story was first told in the 18th century by Reb Nachman of Bratslav. I was inspired by Xanthe Gresham's oral telling of the story, 'The Moon's New Coat'.

The Nutcracker

The Nutcracker and the Mouse King was written by the German author E.T. A. Hoffman in 1816. In 1890, it was set to music by the Russian composer Tchaikovsky.

The Poinsettia

The Gift of the Poinsettia (Arte Público Press, 1995) is told by Hispanic poet Pat Mora. Father Brian Cavanaugh's book, *Miracle of the Poinsettia* (Paulist Press, 2001), includes the blanket-making motif.

Rabbit's Gift

Bob Hartman retells the tale in his book of animal tales, *The Lion Storyteller Book of Animal Tales* (Lion, 2002), and gives the source as *The Rabbit and the Turnip*, a Chinese Fable tr. Richard Sadler (Doubleday and Company Inc., 1968).

Wee Robin Red Breast

'The Wedding of Robin Redbreast and Jenny Wren', is found in the *Saltire Chapbook No. 4* (The Saltire Society, 1951). In the resolution of the original tale, the birds marry. In my retelling, I simplified the ending to celebrate the birds' winter song.

The Little Black Cat

This tale is a little-known version of 'The Town Musicians of Bremen', recorded by the brothers Grimm. 'The Four Friends' is found in *Folktales of France* by Geneviève Massignon (The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

The Snow Maiden

The earliest known version of this tale, 'Snegurochka', is in Alexander Afanasyev's 1869 book *The Poetic Outlook on Nature by the Slavs*. The tale inspired Aleksander Ostrovsky's 1873 play *The Snow Maiden*, performed with music by Tchaikovsky.

The Silver Pinecones

Myths and Legends of Flowers, Trees, Fruits and Plants by Charles M. Skinner (J. P. Lippincott, 1911) gives a brief version of this story. Ruth Manning-Sanders tells the story in *A Book of Dwarfs* (Dutton, 1963), adding the sick-husband motif and calling the little old man 'Gubich.'

The Snow Queen

The tale was first published in December 1844, in *New Fairy Tales* by Hans Christian Andersen.

Sister and Brother

This story was translated by James Riordan in *The Sun Maiden and the Crescent Moon, Siberian Folktales* (Canongate, 1989).

The Apple Tree Man

This story is preserved by Katherine Briggs in *Abbey Lubbers, Banshees and Boggarts* (Kestrel Books, 1979). This retelling first appeared in *The Children's Forest* by Dawn Casey, Anna Richardson and Helen D'Ascoli (Hawthorn press, 2019). My thanks to Hawthorn Press for their permission to include the story in this collection.

The Mother of the Sea

Versions of this story are found in *Tales and Traditions of the Eskimos* by Henrich Rink (J.P. Lippincott, 1875) and *A Journey to the Mother of the Sea* by Mâliâraq Vebæk, published by Inhabit Media – the first Inuit owned publishing company in the Canadian Arctic. My heart-felt thanks to Dudo Rae, a teacher and writer, and Inuit born and brought up in Greenland, for her help in sharing this tale in a way that is, I hope, accurate and respectful, and in living connection with the traditions of the Greenland Inuit.

The Children and the Sun

This story was collected by W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd in *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (Daimon, 1968). My deep gratitude to Emily Fawcett, who carried my re-telling with her to the Ju|'Hoansi, and received their permission to share this story. My humblest thanks to the Ju|'Hoansi. A portion of the money earned from the publication of *Winter Tales* will be donated to Survival International.

The Twelve Months

My version of this story is woven from various sources, including 'The Story of Marushka and the Wicked Holena' in *The Shoemaker's Apron* by Parker Fillmore (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1920) and *Greek Fairy Tales* by Barbara Ker Wilson (Frederick Muller Ltd., 1966). Thank you to my dear daughter Heather for suggesting the perfect resolution.

Brigit and the Cailleach

This story is woven from folklore from many books, including *Scottish Folklore and Folk-life* by Donald A Mackenzie (Blackie and Son Ltd, 1935). It first appeared in *The Children's Forest* by Dawn Casey, Anna Richardson and Helen D'Ascoli (Hawthorn Press, 2019). Thank you to Hawthorn Press for permission to include the story in this collection. I dedicate the story to my great-grandmother, who lived in the hills of Ireland and was known as 'Bridget Mountain'.