

THE SNOW BABY

By Terry Jones

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AN OLD WOMAN once wished she had a child. But she had never married, and now she lived all alone in a bare cottage beside a dark wood.

One day, however, around Christmas time, when the sky was yellow and heavy with snow, she looked out of the little window by her bed, and thought she saw the evening star.

‘That’s strange,’ she said to herself, ‘to see the evening star on such a stormy night. It must be a lucky star.’

So there and then she made a wish. I can’t tell you what she wished for, because she never told anyone, but I think I can guess—can’t you?

Now, as it happened, the light that the old woman had seen was not the evening star—in fact it was not a star at all, but a firefly. The firefly overheard the old lady’s wish, and felt very sorry for her. So it flew to the place where all fireflies go to fetch their lights, and told its comrades what it had heard. And they all agreed to try and help her.

Well that night it began to snow from the black sky onto the black ground, until—as if by magic—the ground turned white, and the morning broke over a different world.

The old woman woke up and put on her shawl. Then she took a shovel and cleared away the snow from her door.

When she looked at the pile of snow she’d made, she smiled to herself and said: ‘I don’t think the evening star has granted my wish—so I’ll make myself my own baby.’

And she spent the morning making the pile of snow into a snow baby.

That night, she sat in her cottage and felt very lonely. So she went to the door, and looked out at her snow baby.

‘Tomorrow is Christmas Day,’ she said to her snow baby. And here am I all alone in the world, and nobody cares whether I’m alive or dead—except you. And you’ll be gone when the snows thaw.’

Then she climbed into her bed, and put out her candle.

A moment later she woke up and looked out of her window. She could hear a sound like tiny bells jingling far, far away, and she could see a strange yellow light all around her cottage. She could not see, but above her all the fireflies in the world were gathered together on her roof. The last one had just arrived, and now they all flew together to form one single ball of light.

The next moment, the old woman couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched a glowing ball of light descend onto the heap of snow that she had shaped like a baby. The light landed where the baby’s heart would be. Then it poured into the snow baby and filled it top to toe!

The instant it did, the snow baby opened its eyes and looked around.

‘What are you doing out there in the cold?’ said the old woman. ‘Come in at once.’

So the snow baby stepped unsteadily down from its little mound, and toddled towards the cottage door.

The old woman rushed to the door, flung it open and lifted her snow baby up in her arms. She kissed it and held it tight.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘I will not be alone this Christmas.’

Then she tucked the snow baby up in her own bed, and bustled about the cottage to make everything ready.

The next morning the snow baby awoke to find a stocking hanging at the end of the bed.

‘You must look in your stocking and see what St Nicholas has brought you,’ said the old woman.

So the snow baby opened its stocking. Inside there was a chocolate medal, a wooden man on a trapeze, an old doll with one eye missing, a mince pie and an apple in the toe.

When the snow baby had opened all its presents and played with its toys, the old woman said: ‘Now we must have our breakfast.’

So she sat her snow child on the other side of the table, and they both ate a little toast and drank a little warm milk.

Just then they heard the church bell sounding across the snow. ‘Now,’ said the old woman, ‘it’s time we went to church.’

So she dressed the snow baby up in a woollen hat and muffler and a knitted woollen coat, and off they went, through the snow to the little church on the hill.

No one noticed the old woman and her snow baby, as they slipped into the back of the church while everyone else was on their knees. The two of them sat close together in the very back pew, holding hands. When the moment came, they stood up and sang the carols. Then, before the end of the service, they stole out again, before anyone else saw them.

Then the old woman and her snow baby ran back through the snow, laughing and shouting and throwing snowballs at each other.

When they finally got back to the cottage, there was a good smell coming from the old woman’s oven.

‘Now we must eat our Christmas pudding and mince pies,’ said the old woman. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t got a goose or a ham pie to offer you.’

But the snow baby didn’t seem to mind at all. They both sat down and ate the happiest Christmas dinner that the old woman could remember since she was a child.

As they finished, night began to fall, and the snow baby grew tired, and the light with which it was filled grew dimmer—for the truth is that the fireflies needed to fetch new lights.

The old woman looked rather sadly at her snow baby.

‘Must you go?’ she asked. And the snow baby nodded. ‘Well, thank you for keeping me company this Christmas,’ said the old woman. ‘I wish it could have gone on longer . . . but there it is . . .’

And then the first wonderful thing happened. The snow baby got up from its chair and came across to the old woman and kissed her.

And then the second wonderful thing happened. It spoke. 'Goodbye,' it said.

Then it went out of the door, and the old woman watched from her window, as the snow baby climbed back onto its little mound of snow. Then the fireflies came out, one by one, and flew off dimly into the night to fetch new lights.

And the old woman fell asleep, nodding to herself as she remembered all the things she'd done that Christmas Day with her snow baby.

The next day, the sun shone, and the snows had gone. The old woman lit a fire and bustled about her little cottage. And when she felt brave enough, she went out of her door, and swept away the last heap of snow that had been—for a short time—her very own snow baby.