



The Winter Fair

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Magic

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Once upon a time there was a Mother, a Father and their two tiny twin babies, a boy and a girl. They wanted to move away from the draughty, muddy countryside to somewhere modern and convenient for the shops. After a little enquiry they heard of a house close to the centre of a city for a very affordable rent.

They met the landlord, a small, round, cheerful man who made a great fuss of their babies. He wagged his fingers in front of their faces and pinched their cheeks as though he was testing their plumpness and chuckled and chortled until they finally gave him shy gummy smiles. Such a charming family, he said, and he would gladly have them as tenants. There was only one condition, mind, that they let him store some bits and pieces, odds and ends, sundry trifles for memories' sake from his mother's house. He didn't need or want the stuff anymore but somehow hadn't the heart to sort through it, he was sure they'd understand. It wouldn't need to get under their feet, he assured them. It was packed away tidily enough in the cellar and that was too dingy to serve any other purpose anyhow. The door would be tight locked to keep the little babies safe.

So ... they took the tour, the kitchen was neat and clean, the bedrooms warm and tidy, the bathroom new and shiny. Perhaps, they thought, the landlord was a tad too kindly and smiled a bit too much, a tad too eager to close the deal there and then, but the house was just perfect for them so why look further? They shook his hand and moved in as soon as ever they could.

As the days grew short and colder and winter winds hollowed out the concrete streets and shook the

lampposts, they tucked in snug behind their double glazing, turning up the central heating on frosty nights, almost happy in their new house which felt almost, but not quite, like home. After all, how could it ever feel properly like home when there was a locked cellar door and who knew what beyond it? It disturbed their quiet enjoyment of all the rest. Even as they put up the decorations and plugged in lights ready for the mid-winter holiday it preyed on their minds. Mother had taken to rattling the handle every time she passed and Father had left dints and scratches all along the bottom paintwork, and some of the skirting board besides, with kicking it every morning on his way out and every evening as he hung up his coat.

Well, modern doors are thin as cardboard and cheap locks, brittle – so, on the Eve of the Feast with the babies safely put to bed and fast asleep, Mother rattled its handle on her way to the kitchen and, with a snap and ever so small a pull, the cellar door opened. So, without further ado, they found the light switch behind the door and went down the wooden steps, one behind the other.

The cellar was long and wide, damp and cold and quite, quite empty.

Mother walked over to a wide, deep-set window and raised the sash on the dusty window, “Oh, won’t you look at the view!” she cried in astonishment. “I can’t understand the view from here at all.”

Father, now by her side, said, “No more can I! Upstairs all we can see is the road and the house across the way that blocks our morning light....”

They stood together and looked down onto a cobbled square as quaint as any picture. In the centre of the square a collection of stalls with red, blue and yellow striped roofs bright against low shabby chic houses fronted with crumbling dirty pastel stucco. Ahead, a quaint, squat church with a walled graveyard around the foot of its square tower.

“...but I could have sworn this window is facing the same way as the ones upstairs...”

“...and I never knew we were built on a hill...”

“Are the babies fast asleep still?”

“I can’t hear a peep.”

They stood at the window side by side, and watched as the square began to fill with people in strange costume, some carrying lanterns and candles, others bags or pushing barrows, nodding and waving to friends and neighbours as they gathered together from out the dark alleyways between the buildings or the road alongside the church. To complete the pretty scene, snowflakes started to drift gently down from the heavy sky and there was a bustle to build yet more stalls as the marketplace filled. The Father and Mother were too far away to see what was being laid out for sale or exchange under the awnings, but the bright colours and the agitation of the crowd bedazzled them and a sickening syrupy stench rose up to their window, rich and disgusting, catching their throats but leaving them excited and craving for more.

Mother leaned out and shouted down to a group passing close below them. They turned up their faces, starting and staring in surprise, then threw up their hats in greeting, squealing and hooting with pleasure. Their noise attracted more and more, who came at a run to see what was going on, abandoning stalls and falling over one another in excitement, packing ten thick in a semi-circle around the foot of the house, cheering and pointing and grinning.

Mother was so proud and Father spread out his arms wide as though to thank them for their kind attention. Down below a voice started to sing shrill as a bat and was joined by others tinkling like glass bells pitched at a pain almost beyond hearing and the crowd started to dance. Some left the ground on wings that had been folded under their cloaks, others seemed able to sidle their way through the air without like eels in water. They curved and spiraled through the flurries of snow as though they were a thousand sparks and the market place become a bonfire. Then, all in an instant, they settled softly on the ground again and waited still and silent and watchful.

“We must get the babies! They must see this too!”

“But the air is bitter cold ...”

“Then wrap them up cosy warm as can be.”

“Quickly then, quick as quick...”

So the tiny babies were got from their beds and dressed in mittens and hats and wrapped all tightly up in their

blankets.

When the little family appeared at the window again there was such a shrieking and clapping they felt like royals and it seemed as though the whole sky was filled with whirling, dancing shapes. Their little son's eyes were heavy with sleep, but when he breathed the chill air and heard such a clamour, he puckered up his mouth to wail, but, before he had uttered a sound, an imp (or some such) popped on the sill, gave a lordly bow and held out his arms for the bundle. As though in a dream the Father surrendered his son. Then with a whirl and a waltz he was off the sill and out of their reach. Next, the little daughter was swept out of her Mother's arms, she had felt not a thing, and up and away by a chain of five elves (or something similar) each as fine and delicate as the gossamer strokes of frost on a window pane, looping the loop and tossing her from one set of spindly, gentle hands to another.

"Where are our children now?"

"Don't fret so, they'll come to no harm. There's one of them spinning widdershins and widdershins, round the church tower. Listen to them laughing! Can't you hear?"

"There's the other in a nest of flower petals. Can't you see? They throw snow and it turns all to roses."

"How disappointing the rest of their lives will be now they've flown with the fairies!"

Everything else that passed between then and the morning of the winter feast was lost in confusion. They thought that they might have flown with the fairies too, or perhaps only danced and wandered through the market tasting strange foods, beguiled by every passing glamour or, maybe, just stood entranced. By dawn they were parched with a thirst no fairy drink or fairy laughter could satisfy. The brightness of the market place, the attention and obsequious respect, had left them somehow restless and out-of-sorts. Now the party was over, streams of cowed figures were tidying up and making off with their bundles or trundling carts into a grey morning's sleet away over the arched bridge past the church or fading into the gloom of the lanes.

Mother found herself by the window again with a longing to turn her back on the scene and a restless, irritable baby weighing very heavy in her arms. The square was nearly empty and its lingering stink little worse than bad drains.

“Have you put our son to bed already?” she asked in a flat, tired voice.

“No,” the Father replied. “I still have him here but fast asleep now.”

Mother peeped at the baby he held but it seemed to have shrunk into its blankets. All she could see was a shrivelled little hand and clouded, horny, twisted nails cupping a leathery cheek. She felt a panic like pins and needles pricking a numb limb and whispered as much to herself as to him, “Can that be our baby, really our baby?”

“Don’t be silly, dear. And isn’t that our darling daughter there – yawning fit to burst?” But his voice was thick as though he was drunk or scarcely awake.

She looked down at the bundle she held. The baby she remembered so well had had only two little white bumps in her pearly pink gums that might some day soon break through. This baby had a set of jagged brown teeth and its breath smelt more of flesh than milk.

“No. No. NO! This is not right at all! There’s been some mistake!” Mother screamed from the window, “These must be yours. ”

But her voice echoed back, muffled and low, from a sheen of bricks cladding the ghost of another house obscuring their view to the square.

Father joined in her cries, “Where have our babies gone? Bring them back now!”

But already the square and all it contained were no more than faint shadows somewhere beyond the modern, brick house just across a road from their own. And the last of the fairy folk, almost less discernible now than motes of dust in a tearful eye, unhurriedly finished their business, then vanished away.

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