



Winter's Bugle

Owen Townend

Fable, Magic

A fool came to our village at the end of each year. He was a tawny-haired scrawny scamp with middle teeth missing at the top and bottom of his mouth. They made a perfect a hole.

It was for his bugle. He kept the rusty instrument at the end of a string which was wrapped around his neck. He strode up on his bound feet one day, climbed the smooth rock at the entrance to our village and held that bugle high.

“With this, Winter’s Bugle,” he declared, “I shall bring the bitterest chill!”

“Fool!” we shouted, “It is already cold! Look at the children! See how they cling together for warmth!”

Nevertheless the fool grinned, revealing that ridiculous gap. He brought the bugle to his lips and blew.

It was a terrible sound like cats fighting and struggling in a mud bath.

“Away, fool!” we shouted, “Away with you! Life is hard enough without your lies and your bugle!”

The bigger men of the village chased him away. At first the fool ran as if his life depended on it but then, at the last, he turned back and showed that hole in his smile before disappearing into the deep dark woods.

That first winter we were scared. A fool he may have been but there was something of the devil in his confidence. We huddled close and waited for the winter to be even more bitter than the last.

The days passed and the light within them slowly lengthened. As we moved into the new year we all but forgot the fool.

Alas though, he returned. He still had that bugle, still climbed that smooth rock. He looked us each in the eye once again and declared:

“With this, Winter’s Bugle, I shall bring the bitterest chill!”

We decried him. He puckered his blistered lips and blew out another caterwaul. We chased him out. He

disappeared. We feared.

Still the winter never worsened. The year would start again and we would return to our lives and forget about the fool and his winter bugle.

This went on for many years. The fool passed from boyhood to manhood to old age. Even though his back was curved and his eyes would barely open, he struggled up that smooth rock and held high his bugle.

As village elder I stepped forward, pointing my own wizened finger.

“Fool!” I shouted, voice quaking, “You have promised the bitterest chill for many years now and nothing ever comes! If that bugle brings anything then it is nothing more than a breeze! And we stand against it! Every time!”

As he brought that bugle to his lips, his bound feet lost their balance and he fell off that rock and landed hard on frozen earth.

The fool was dead. I had the bigger men of our village bury him somewhere in the deep dark woods that he seemed to come from.

The bugle must have fell away from him. I found it rolling between two of our mightiest oaks later that day. Rolling. I could feel the wind picking up. I heard it: not the hollow whistle that usually announced its arrival but a familiar wet screech.

It almost deafened me. I hobbled straight back to the village and told everyone to hurry indoors and stay there. A snow fell. It did not start gently, it came down with a fury I had never seen in all my years. The powdery white piled high and was topped with a sleek and deadly crust.

All the while the wind blew in through our windows, rattling our walls and threatening to steal the very roofs from over our heads.

I knew that this was the bitterest chill that had been promised. I thought about the fool out in the woods, disappearing yet again, maybe forever now.

He was still a fool. He had lied to scare us, to make himself feel important. He had never understood.

Only winter can announce itself. Only winter can blow its own bugle.

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