

The Snow Machine

Julie and Peter were on holiday. They were spending a few days with Grandfather Jacob, who lived in a big old creaky country house—where nothing *ever* happened.

Even though it was winter, the weather was very mild, and not a single flake of snow had been seen. Worst of all, it was almost Christmas. Christmas without snow, knick without knack—it just wasn't right. And it was the same all over the world. Children from Tunbridge Wells to Timbuktu were crying out for snow, snow, and more snow. Some had even sent letters, complaining about it to their headmasters.

"Do you think it will *ever* snow, Grandfather?" Peter asked.

"It will snow," began Grandfather, "when it will snow, and not a moment before."

Later, Julie, Peter and Henry the dog were all outside.

"There's nothing to do," Peter said.

"What do you want to do?" Julie asked.

"I *want* to make a snowman," Peter answered. "But there's no snow. It's not right. It's winter. There's supposed to be snow."

"I know. We'll have to do something about it," Julie said.

"What do you mean?" Peter asked.

"You'll see," she said. And then Julie turned to Henry the dog.

"Henry, go back to the house. Go on. Go watch T.V. It's time for the news." Henry the dog loved watching the news. He was a very well informed dog. He looked up at Julie, and then at Peter, and then ran off towards the house.

"It's not time for the news," Peter said.

"I know, but we have to go somewhere—and if he knew, he might tell Grandfather."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

And with that, Julie took hold of Peter's hand and ran, almost dragging him across the lawn.

When they were only half way to where they were going, Peter guessed where they were going.

The garden shed. It looked like an ordinary garden shed, with small dusty curtained windows on one side. But Peter had never been inside before, and it seemed, to him, more like a church. Inside, there were spades and a shovel, a rake and a bucket, a hammer, nails, screwdrivers, screws, a saw, tangled string, twisted wire, packets of seed, plant pots, a bag of cement, an empty card board box, a lawn mower, a pile of old newspapers, pieces of wood, two fishing rods, a butterfly net and an Egyptian mummy. But the children hardly noticed any of this. There was something else. There was a biscuit tin. An ordinary biscuit tin.

"So that's it," Peter said. He had never been in the garden shed before.

"Yes," Julie said, reaching onto a shelf to take it. The tin was golden with a picture of red roses on the top. Julie opened it.

"There it is," she said, taking out a rusty old key.

"Put it back," Peter pleaded.

The children were in bed. Moonlight shone in through the window. Julie was waiting for Grandfather to settle downstairs. Finally, she whispered, "Peter, are you asleep?"

"No, but I wish I was," he grumbled.

"It's time to go," Julie said, taking the rusty old key from under her pillow. It was the attic key.

"I don't want to." In the attic, you see, there was a trunk, and in the trunk there was always magic. And it was the kind of magic that gave a small boy the hairy-scaries.

"*Don't be a baby,*" Julie answered, climbing from bed.

"I'm *not* a baby," Peter said in a baby voice, wishing he could stay in bed and suck his thumb.

"Come on!" Julie said, and pulled the covers off her brother.

Peter groaned. He hated the attic. He hated the hairy-scaries.

Along the passage they crept, quietly up the stairs, where Julie unlocked the attic door. Soon they were inside, and next to the dusty old trunk. They pushed open its heavy lid and peered inside.

"Magic mittens!" Julie whispered a whisper of joy, reaching inside to get them.

"Maybe they're *not* magic," Peter contradicted. "You don't know."

"We'll put them on and see." She handed him one of the pairs. And with the mittens on, QUICK AS A FLASH, Julie and Peter disappeared.

They found themselves in an empty kind of place.

"Where are we?" Peter wondered aloud. It was cold. They were standing shivering in the middle of empty flatness. No Hills. No trees. No nothing. Nothing but grass, stretching as far as far could go—and maybe even further. Before Julie could answer, they heard a voice from behind.

"Well howdy dowdy do," it said, in a squeaky squeaky squeak. The children turned around, and saw what looked like a teddy bear with rabbit ears, a rabbit tail, and a rabbit smile.

"Hello," the children chirped together.

"If you don't mind me asking, what exactly are you?" Julie began in a "don't mind me asking" kind of voice.

"I a Trog," answered the Trog. "But what you?"

"We're children," she told him. The Trog looked at Julie and Peter, and Julie and Peter looked at the Trog. "I'm Julie and this is my brother, Peter," she said finally.

"I sure you is," said the Trog. "My name Floppy."

"That's a nice name," Julie told him. Floppy gave a nod and a wink to show he agreed.

"Ask him where we are," Peter whispered to his sister.

Peter had always been a bit scared of Teddy bears.

"Do you think you could tell us where we are, Floppy?"

"I is thinking so," Floppy nodded. Julie and Peter waited for him to tell them, but Floppy just stood there, as if he were waiting for a number seven bus.

"Where?" Julie asked.

"Oh, North Pole."

"*The North Pole?*" Peter was amazed. "But there's no snow here. There's supposed to be snow at the North Pole."

"Well that right. The lemprob is, is the Snowy Machine."

"The Snow Machine? What's that?" Julie asked.

"You no know? The Snowy Machine make snow for *whole* world. This year though, something no work."

"So that's why there isn't any snow in England!" Peter realised. "And it's nearly Christmas"

"Yes. But we go inside, have some tea. It get chilly."

"Inside? Where?" Julie and Peter looked around again, but all they could see was grass, blowing this way and that, like toy soldiers who had drunk too much beer.

"Just there," Floppy pointed. The children looked, looked, and looked again, but there was nothing to see.

"Where?" Julie thought it was all rather odd. "I can't see a house."

"Well well well," he shook his head, "no a see house."

"It's not a house to see?"

"No."

"What is it then?"

"A smelly house."

"Pardon?" Julie mumbled.

"A *smelly* house. A house for to *smell*." Floppy told them.

"Smell?" Julie wasn't sure what Floppy was saying. And as for Peter, he wasn't even sure what *Julie* was saying.

"Smell," he repeated. "Try. Take big sniff."

Julie began to sniff, and then Peter began to sniff. "Sniff sniff," they sniffed. "Sniffy sniffy sniff," they went. And do

you know what? They discovered that they *could* smell the house. They could smell how big it was, what colour it was, how many windows it had, and where it was. They couldn't see it with their eyes, but they were seeing it with their noses!

Inside the house, Floppy introduced Julie and Peter to three of his friends.

"I like you meet Doppy, Noppy and Kip. This Julie, and this Peter. They is, er, *children*." Floppy said "children" as if the word tasted of medicine. Now to the children, all three Trogs looked—and sounded—exactly like Floppy. Lucky then that they each wore a different coloured hat. The Trog with the red hat, who might have been Noppy, but was probably Doppy, poured tea for everyone. As they drank away, the Trog with the green hat, who might have been Kip, but was probably Floppy, had an idea about an idea.

"Well well well. I having idea," he began. "Maybe Julie and Peter help us with lemprob."

"Yes, yes, yes. Lemprob. Maybe," the other three said, all at the same time. The Trogs had squeaky weaky voices, and everything they said, no matter how serious it really was, came out sounding like fun. Julie was sure the Trogs would make great math teachers.

"What's the lemprob?" Julie asked, completely puzzled.

"Snowy Machine is lemprob. Big lemprob."

"Oh, you mean *problem*," Julie realised.

"That what we say," the Trogs all said together. "Lemprob." Julie knew the Trogs were serious, but it still came out sounding like fun. That's what happens when you have a voice like a Trog.

"Now, we crinkle and crankle with why, but Snowy Machine no make snow this year. We no know why. Is true."

"Can we see the Snow Machine?" Julie asked.

"See Snowy Machine? No. Sniff Snowy Machine? Yes." And the Trogs took Julie and Peter out of the house, and straight down the garden path to a big building that smelt quite like the

biggest building they had ever smelt. "This where Snowy Machine live," the Trog with the red hat, who might have been Doppy, but was probably Kip, told them. And in they went.

The Snow Machine looked like a crazy tangle of pink pipes with a chubby face at one end.

"Look, a face," Peter said.

"Well of course. The Snowy Machine no like ordinary machine. He alive."

"Alive?" Julie found the revelation, to say the most, stupendous.

"Yes. The Snowy Machine always take long holiday for summer—this year he visit Saharara Desert, it hot there—and then, when he get back, he start making snow ready for Christmas. Children count on him. One two three. Not to mention Santa."

"Santa?" Peter asked.

"He said not to mention Santa!" Julie told him. "Now settle down, and be quiet for a moment." Peter could be quite a nuisance sometimes.

"This year though, he no make one flake."

"No one flake," the other Trogs repeated.

"We no know what do," Floppy concluded.

"Can he speak?" Peter asked.

"Speak?" The Trogs giggled. "No be silly." The idea of the Snow Machine speaking was, after all, quite ridiculous.

"So he's alive?" Julie said to herself.

"Very," the Trogs all said.

Julie was thinking, "Now, why won't he make snow this year? Why oh why oh why?" It was definitely hard work, all that thinking. It was just then that Peter said something so clever, it sounded strangely stupid.

"I bet he's forgotten what snow is."

"Don't be stupid," Julie said. But the Trogs had opened up there eyes wide, and were jumping up and down on the spot. They were either very excited, or had cold feet.

"Forgotten!" said Floppy.

"Forgotten!" said Doppy.

"Forgotten!" said Noppy.

"Forgotten!" said Kip.

And then all together, "That be it!"

"See," Peter said. "I'm *not* stupid."

"Oh," Julie said.

"But what can we do to make him remember?" the Troggs wondered.

"We'll just have to show him some snow," Peter said.

"Oh," Julie said.

"Put it in his mouth, let him taste it, and I'm sure everything will be all right."

"Oh," Julie said.

"But no," the Troggs squeaked. "There no more snow left in all world. Mr. sun melted every bit."

"Well we can give him something that's *like* snow," Peter said.

"Oh," Julie said.

"What?" The Troggs wanted to know, and so too, for that matter, did Julie.

"I know," Peter said. And he told them.

"Oh," Julie said, looking at her little brother. She could hardly believe he was having so many good ideas. She could hardly believe he was having *any* good ideas. Peter was the best hard to believe brother in the whole wide world. And this was his moment of glory. He was standing tall and strong. He was standing proud and triumphant. He was also putting out his tongue at Julie and wiggling his fingers.

The nearest people village was quite far away, and there was only one way to travel there: the two children were sitting in a large basket, which was fastened with cords to three huge magic blue balloons.

"When you ready, just be saying magic word," Floppy called

out. "And bon voyage." The Trog's English might be bad, but their French was excellent.

"I don't like it," Peter grumbled. He was starting to wish he'd never had so many good ideas. "I want to go home."

"*Don't be a baby,*" Julie told him, and cried out the magic word. "**HIPPOPOTAMUS!**" Immediately the balloons tugged at the basket, and off they whooshed. WHOOOOOSH they went, up into the sky. WHOOOOOSH WHOOOOOSH! Or maybe it was SWOOOOOSH. But one thing was certain: Peter didn't like it. Not one bit!

Hours later, the children saw a small village far below. The houses looked like toy houses, but soon the balloons were taking them down. And not a Sunday afternoon kind of down. No. This was more like a Saturday night kind of down, when you're supposed to be in bed, when you sneak outside to play with your best friend—who always gets you into trouble. Faster and faster. Saturday night down. Trouble. The air whistled about their ears. Their bellies climbed up to say hello to their tonsils. They were falling at a terrible speed.

"Were going to crash!" Peter cried.

"Yahoo," Julie answered.

"You're crazy!" Peter cried.

"*Don't be a baby,*" Julie answered.

And then, just as the basket was about to smash into the ground, the balloons pulled, the ropes tugged, the basket creaked. With a gentle thud, they were safely down. Julie and Peter climbed out.

They had landed just outside the village, and luckily, no one had seen them. Soon the children were walking to the nearest shop.

"Good day sir," Julie said to the man inside. "We'd like a tub of Vanilla ice cream, please." Peter, you see, had figured out that the only thing *really* like snow was Vanilla ice cream. If *anything* would remind the Snow Machine about snow, Vanilla ice cream probably would.

"I'm sorry," said the man, "we have no Vanilla left. Only

Strawberry. Try the shop down the road," he suggested. And so they went to the shop down the road.

"Good day sir," Julie said to the man inside. "We'd like a tub of Vanilla ice cream, please."

"*Vanilla ice cream?* Absolutely not. I don't sell ice cream here. Ice cream is very bad for children. It rots the teeth and freezes the brain. Absolutely not." Well Julie and Peter didn't argue.

"Silly man," Julie said, when they got outside.

Quite soon, the children realised they had a problem. The village was so small, there were no other shops.

"We'll just have to buy the Strawberry ice cream, and hope it does the trick," Peter said.

"Oh," Julie answered.

At last, Julie and Peter arrived back at the balloons. They climbed into the basket. Julie put the tub of Strawberry ice cream down, and called the magic word. Do you remember what it was?

"**HIPPOPOTAMUS!**" she said, and immediately they began to ascend. Up into the sky they WHOOSHED. Or was it SWOOSHED?

After a long time, Julie said, "We should be almost there now. Ah yes."

"I don't see anything," Peter said, daring to look down for a moment.

"Of course not. You're looking with your eyes! Look with your nose!" Peter took a sniff, "Sniff sniff sniff," and saw the Trog's tiny village far below. Down they went, faster than a falling fried fish.

"I don't like it," Peter moaned. Julie, meanwhile, was too busy laughing to tell him not to be a baby.

Just as the basket was about to smash into the ground, the balloons pulled, the ropes tugged, the basket creaked. With a gentle thud, they were safely down. The Four Trogs were there to meet them.

"How it go?" they all asked.

"Fine," Julie said, climbing from the basket. "It's just that—"

"It's just that we had a little problem," Peter interrupted.

"Lemprob?" said Floppy.

"Lemprob?" said Doppy.

"Lemprob?" said Noppy.

"Lemprob?" said Kip.

"What?" they chimed.

"There was no Vanilla ice cream left," Peter explained. "We had to buy Strawberry. Let's just hope it does the trick."

"Yes," agreed the Troggs.

Inside, Peter began spooning the Strawberry ice cream into the Snow Machine's mouth. And Peter was sure he began to smile.

"If this doesn't remind him what snow is, nothing will," Peter told everyone. With the ice cream finished, they could do no more. "All we can do now is wait—and hope for the best."

"Yes," said Floppy. "And thank you for help."

"That's all right," Peter said, feeling well pleased with himself.

"We have to go now though," Julie said.

Everyone said good-bye to everyone else. Even the Troggs said good-bye to each other! Julie and Peter took off the magic mittens, and, QUICK AS A FLASH, the children disappeared.

With the mittens back in the trunk, and the attic door locked, Julie and Peter hurried down to their bedroom. It was already morning.

"Quick," she whispered, "I can hear Grandfather coming. Get into bed and pretend to be asleep." The two children jumped into bed, closed their eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Just in time. Grandfather Jacob came in.

"Wakey-wakey. Rise and shine."

"Oh, is it morning already?" Julie said, pretending to wake

"Don't be silly," she told him, smiling.

"But it does. *Really*," Julie said. "Come and see."

Mummy put on her coat and boots, and out they all went.

"Taste it," Peter told her. Mummy bent down, scooped up some snow in her hand, and licked it.

"Well I never," she looked up with surprise. "It really does taste of Strawberry! I wonder how that could have happened?" Julie and Peter began to laugh. You see, they knew how it had happened, and now so do you—

but don't tell anyone, will you?