

The Snow Woman

The young man followed his master through the freezing wind. Just up the small hill and a hundred yards off was the ferry that would take them closer to home.

The winter storm had caught the young man and his master many miles from their village. It had been a cold autumn so the master and his apprentice had had to venture farther and farther afield to attend to their trade of wood-gathering.

Reaching the top of the hill they both saw with some relief the ferryman's cabin. They had crossed the river early that morning some miles downstream. The weather had turned so bad, neither men thought it possible to reach the bridge before the worst of the storm hit.

Snow flurries swirled at their feet and the wind howled in their faces. As they went down the hill it felt, to the young man, that the hill had turned upside down and he was again climbing it.

The old man, wearied by his heavy burden, fell to his knees in front of his apprentice. The young man quickly reached his master.

“We must abandon our packs if we are to make it.”

The master, breathless, nodded his agreement and the young man helped him unstrap his pack of wood. Shedding his own pack as fast as he could, he helped his master to his feet and ushered him towards the shelter of the ferryman's hut.

The storm was reaching its full strength as the young man, nearly carrying his master, made the shelter of the shack. The door was whipping wildly on its hinges.

Propping the old man inside, the young man secured the door as well as he could. The wind was not through with it yet and whistled through the cracks and pounded at its frame.

Wrapping his master as well as he could, the young man covered himself and laid down next to the old man to weather out the night.

He slept soon after lying down. The old man never stirred. The wind howled, piling up snow against anything that would not bend to its will.

Sometime in the darkness of the night the door came open and banged hard against the wall. The young man shot up. Snow whirled in. It seemed to be lit from an unseen light source. The young man just could make out its intricate swirls and gusts in the blackness of the stormy night.

Thinking himself still in a dream, he began to see the snow form a shape, a human shape. Never quite becoming solid, the shape took on the appearance of a woman. A woman so beautiful she could not be mortal. Her hair of blowing snow whipped and curled. She was robed in only the swirls and eddys of snowflakes billowing around her shape.

The young man did not move from fear and awe of the terrible beauty of the scene before him. Immobile, he watched the snow form move forward smoothly, as if she were on wheels. She looked down on the prostrate form of the old man with a look love, concern, and hatred. Slowly, as a snow drift builds, the woman bent over the old man covering him in her snowdrift clothing, from torso to head.

The young man was fear struck. Had he wanted to, he could not have moved nor cried out.

After only a few seconds, the woman made of snow raised her head and looked deeply into the young man's eyes. They stared at each other for a length of time, the young man couldn't tell you how long.

The young man was certain his fate was to be the same as his master's, but as he stared transfixed in the snowflake eyes of the spirit, he saw her look change from one of hunger, to one of sympathy.

Hearing without hearing, knowing without knowing why, he felt her words, "You have been spared, never speak of this to anyone."

A great gust of wind blew straight through the building. She was gone. The young man might have noticed the storm dying off had he not passed out from the sheer cold.

The old man, of course, was dead. The young man, Li, was not unscathed. The cold had affected him badly and it took him several weeks to recover. Under the good care of his mother, he recovered soon.

During the first week he was barely conscious. His dreams tormented him with the horror and beauty of the woman of snow. In his fevered state he was terrified that she would change her mind and come for him. Confined to his sick bed and the small fire his mother tended for him, he did not know that winter had petered out after the great ice storm that had killed his master. Unbelievably, the weather had become mild, heralding an early spring.

Sooner than he should have, young Li returned to his work. His elderly mother had been taking his place while he was incapacitated and he could no longer let her take that burden.

It was not without some sadness that Li tied on his pack and headed into the forest. He was now the master and he knew that he would always miss the stern guidance and quiet companionship of his own master.

Spring was warm and prosperous that year. Li made a good business. Late in the season and the peach blossoms were falling like water, Li was returning home carrying a load of wood on his back when he came upon a young woman on the road. The pretty young woman had broken a strap on her shoe. Li stopped to help her.

With gratitude in her beautiful face, she thanked Li for his aid. Unfortunately, Li was only able to temporarily fix her shoe strap, but he invited the girl to his home so that his mother may mend her shoe properly.

The young beauty accepted and gratefully thanked him again.

“If you do not mind me asking, where are you traveling to by yourself?” Li asked politely.

“My parents died over the winter and I am traveling to the city to where my aunt lives. She works for a rich merchant and can find me a place there as a maid.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” young Li said with feeling. “It was a most harsh winter.”

The young woman nodded her agreement. They walked on quietly for awhile through an orchard, green and blooming.

“Young miss, what is your name?” Li asked.

“Mae,” she answered looking at the tree blossoms.

Li’s mother greeted the girl kindly and agreed immediately to mend her shoe. But as the afternoon was far gone, she said, “Young Mae, why don’t you stay the night here. There are no towns you’ll reach before nightfall. Please stay with us.”

Mae readily agreed, for Li’s home was neither fancy nor rich, but it was warm and well-tended. It had been built in the time of Li’s mother’s grandfather and was lived in and loved.

Upon accepting the old woman’s offer, young Mae joined her hostess at the hearth to help prepare the evening meal.

The next morning, Li left at first light. His mother had made him his customary bowl of rice and drink of tea. Mae was left sleeping. When Li left he was certain that she would be gone long before he returned home. He felt a small sharp pain in his heart when he thought of the young woman. One did not often meet with such beauty and kindness. He stifled a small sigh for what could not be, adjusted his pack and attended to business.

When he returned late in the afternoon, with a bulging and heavy pack, he found the two women combing out dried straw. Mae had not left as she had planned. When Li remarked at her change in plans his mother answered simply, “She offered to help me with the washing and once we were through it was too late to make it to the next town on foot. She will stay with us tonight.”

His mother never looked up, or even changed her tone of voice. Li knew. Li could tell that his mother had a plan and Li had a sinking feeling he knew what it was.

After Li had unburdened himself, his mother suggested that Li should accompany Mae into the village so that she could buy one item or another that she needed. Li was very shy with Mae, as she was with him. They barely spoke at all, but often enough they caught each other stealing glances. The evening after dinner was very enjoyable to all. Li worked on weaving straw sandals. His mother and their guest attended to their sewing. Each of them told funny stories and Mae told them of a strange spirit that haunted her old village.

The next afternoon when Li returned from his work, he was not so surprised to see that Mae had not yet continued on her journey. Li's old mother was taking advantage of having a helping hand around the house and had asked Mae to help till the small garden. Li saw that not only had the two women tilled an extra five rows, but had been busy weeding and planting.

They were still working in the garden when Li arrived, both soiled and messed from their hard work. Li and his mother exchanged greetings, but Mae hid her face as much as she could from him. He was hurt by her rejection. His mother seeing how his face fell, intervened. "Mae dear, why don't you go wash up. I think we are done here for the day."

Mae ran off. Li nearly went after her, but his mother kept him. "She's just embarrassed to be seen by you looking so soiled. Let her clean herself up and she'll be attentive again."

Li stared at his mother. His suspicions had been true. She was considering Mae as a prospective bride. His heart swelled with love, but his belly quivered in fear. What if the beautiful Mae rejected him? He was only a lowly wood collector, he would always be poor.

Later, when he saw Mae again, his fear trickled away. She smiled so gaily and was so sweet and gentle, that he was happy his mother had made such cunning plans. Before the night was through, his mother had asked Mae to become his bride. Mae, as befit a girl about to be married, blushed deeply and declined her worthiness. In the end, she accepted. Mae and Li were soon married.

Theirs was a happy marriage and Li prospered. They had 10 children and never feared that they would not be fed or clothed. Mae's beauty never diminished, her smiles becoming only more charming with time.

Their happiness and success was the envy of the village, but neither Mae nor Li ever gave a care as to what people thought. It was to each other that they belonged.

One warm summer evening many years later, long after they had buried Li's mother who had lived to a happy old age, long after the terrible snow storm that had taken the life of Li's master, Li and Mae were sitting cosily by

each other, sharing a lamp. The children were all in bed and Li was putting the final touches on a new pair of sandals for their youngest daughter. Mae, as was her usual employment in the evening, was embroidering a piece of silk. Her embroidery was so delicate and fine that she often made a modest small side income by selling her work.

Li watched fondly as she made her tiny, even stitches. Bending over her work, she chanced to look up at him. There eyes held the gaze for many seconds before Mae gave him one of her sweetest smiles and turned back to her work. Li, sitting back contentedly and smoking a pipe, was reminded of the woman he saw in his dreams the night his master was frozen to death in that coldest of winter storms.

It had been many years since he had even thought of the event and many more since he had remembered his vision of the snow maiden. He laughed a little in thinking of it now. After so many years finding his youthful hallucination a source of enjoyment. It was like the scary stories his family often shared as they sat around the fire on cold winter nights. Odd, he thought, that he had never remembered to tell of his cold vision so many years before.

“Mae dear,” Li began. Mae put down her work and looked up at him with her usual cheerful face. She blinked her eyes several times as she refocused away from her work. “I don’t think I ever told you about the night that my master died. I was reminded just now when you looked up at me.”

Mae’s face lost its usual cheerfulness. It became a stoic mask. Li took no notice as he was lost in his remembrances. “You know he died the winter before you came to us. It was the coldest night I think anyone can remember. Getting caught in the storm, my master and I had found shelter in the old ferryman’s house—before they put in a bridge at that crossing.”

Li was truly lost in his memories. His eyes looked away into the dark corners of the house. A trick of the light made it appear that a scattering of snowflakes were falling. “Before the night was through, my master was dead. But sometime during the night a curious thing happened.”

A chill wind blew through the house, blasting the remnants of the day’s heat. Li shivered and pulled his light robe around him more closely, but he did not lose his concentration. “I had a dream, a feverish vision if you will, of a woman made only of snow. She came into the hut and bent over my master, like you while you work. I thought she was coming for me for certain, but when she looked up at me she changed her mind.”

“What a fantastical dream to have on such a night,” Li chuckled. As his reverie ended he became aware of the fierce cold that had descended on the room. The light from the lamp had dimmed almost to extinction. Li, growing fearful, looked around for his wife. Mae appeared before him, but no longer Mae. While the room was a still as deep cave, Mae’s hair swirled about her. But her hair was no longer the lustrous black it had been since he had known her. Now it was as white and grey as a tree in the winter. A faint luminosity lit up her face. It was her own face, but now

where her gleaming black eyes had been was the swirl of snow. Standing before him, she took off her kimono to reveal clothing of icy robes, crystal and white.

Li was struck motionless with fear as the woman made of snow towered above him. Her face was contorted with rage, but softened with pity. In a low voice, almost the sound of the wind, she said to Li, “You were never to speak of that night. The spell has been broken.”

A noise issued from the next room, the sound of a small child stirring. The woman made of snow looked up at the doorway. When no further noises issued she turned back to Li. “If it weren’t for those beautiful children in the next room, I would kill you now. Let not one hair on their heads be harmed or I will make you pay for it.”

A blizzard moved through the room and then there was nothing. The woman made of snow was gone leaving only a quickly melting trail of snow flurries in her wake.