

## This Year

There once was a year when everything was different. Well, almost everything.

Let's begin with what was normal. The evening, upon which our story commences, looked exactly as a snowy December evening ought to look: glittering, quiet, peaceful. Mouse was sitting in her warm den, snuggled into her favourite armchair made of a beanie bobble, a handful of cinnamon cookie crumbles and half a walnut shell of steaming tea beside her, and watched the dancing snowflakes through a window between two tree roots. All day, flakes had been whirling around out there – big, white, fleecy ones and tiny, icily-sparkling ones, and everything in between – and by now, the snow was reaching higher than the window sill. Every now and again, a stray snowflake landed on the ledge, glittered for a few seconds and melted. So far, so normal.

Mouse took a deep draught from her tea, and then stuck her head outside into the cold winter air. With her keen little nose, she sniffed the snow below her window, and poked the tip of her tail into it a few times. Sighing and with drooping whiskers, Mouse sank back into her armchair and listlessly began nibbling one of the cookie crumbles. Piled up below her window was perfect material for building snowmen. That was the *fourth* time already this year. In any other winter, the Presiding Snow Owl would long since have announced the famous snowman competition amongst the animals of the forest... But not this year.

It had all begun in February, when an unusual number of animals had struggled with something like a particularly persistent cold. Everywhere there was coughing and sneezing and snivelling. But that was only the beginning. A few of the animals suffered from such severe coughing or sneezing attacks as to get into real trouble. The woodpecker accidentally pecked into his own foot while sneezing. The fox, the marten, and three of the little rabbit children got themselves nasty bruises from bumping against the low ceilings of their burrows. Worst off was the bumblebee. Mid-flight, she suffered from such a fierce coughing fit that she went into a tailspin and plummeted headfirst into the pond – thank goodness the frog had been around to help her onto the next water lily!

After this incident, the Council of Animals had been in agreement that, whatever kind of disease it was, it was more dangerous than the common cold, and its spread had to be contained. Following a long and heated discussion, Spokesanimal Raccoon announced a decision: Meetings between animals had to be avoided as much as possible, and den, burrow, or nest could only be left to run urgent errands. The animals of the forest went into lockdown.

Most of the animals adhered to the protective measures, but of course there were also some niggers who thought the new rules were too excessive. In particular the stag was bragging

that *he*, at least, would not allow a ‘measly little cold’ to spoil beautiful springtime. Hardly a week later, the squirrels spent several hours plucking thorns out of the fur of a now rather subdued stag – in a violent sneeze, his antlers had gotten entangled in a blackberry bush.

April, then, brought new rules. Meetings between smaller groups of animals were permitted again, but only if they met outside, kept their distance, and wore masks to protect each other. The spider truly surpassed herself. For seven days and seven nights, she spun tirelessly, until each and every animal had become the proud owner of a custom-tailored spider silk mask (and the spider’s eight legs were very sore).

The new regulations also brought new problems. While foraging, Mouse perchance met the swan who was wearing his bill-mask on his head like a party hat and was very keen to start a conversation about the ‘overcautious scaredy-pants’ in the Council of Animals and their ‘ridiculous’ rules. He came nearer and nearer to Mouse, who had to scurry backwards again and again to keep her distance. But the swan kept following her – for every few steps Mouse retreated, he took a large one towards her. When Mouse finally succeeded in shaking him off, she thought grimly: “Next time I talk to the swan, I hope the lake will have frozen over during the night and trapped his legs!” She was so incensed that she almost vented her anger on the deer which passed at this moment in the opposite direction, wearing its mask like a chin guard.

“Mouse. Mouse!” The sound of her name made Mouse wake with a start. She had fallen asleep watching the snow, her head pillowed on the window sill. Morning had arrived. Pale sunlight was shining onto her whiskers, which were frozen stiff, and onto the mantle of snow covering her garden – in the midst of which stood Robin, tilting her head to the side and looking at her. All remnants of fatigue were forgotten at once. Mouse jumped so hastily to her feet that her ears brushed against the window frame, shook the sleep out of her fur, and exclaimed happily: “Oh, Robin! How lovely to see you! I’m sorry I didn’t recognise you straightaway – I wasn’t quite awake yet. Hang on a second!” Mouse leaned over her armchair, angled her mask, which was hanging in its usual spot on the hook beside the front door, with the tip of her tail, and pulled it over her pointed snout. Robin (of course wearing a mask as well) hopped one, two paces forwards but then stopped in safe distance to the window.

Worried, Mouse looked at the spot where Robin’s feet disappeared in the snow. “Are you not too cold?” she inquired, “I would invite you in for a cup of tea, but...” Her sentence trailed out into unhappy silence, and her whiskers drooped a little.

“Trust me, I know,” said Robin, “And normally, I’d love to come in. But it’s better if I stay outside. And it’s not even *that* cold – if I keep wriggling my claws, I should be alright staying for at least a quick chat.”

“I’d like that,” said Mouse, “I really miss our chats.”

“Me, too,” sighed Robin, “My friends are what I’m missing most. And also the communal events and activities with the other animals of the forest.” She lifted one claw and tapped onto the still pristine surface of the snow beside her.

“Just right for building snowmen,” said Mouse and Robin in unison. A quick smile flitted over both their faces. The masks concealed it – but Mouse and Robin knew each other too well not to detect the happy sparkle in each other’s eyes.

“So, you have thought about it already as well,” Robin observed.

Mouse became serious again. She shrugged. “I don’t think there is a single animal in the forest who has *not* thought about it yet. The snowman competition is such a fantastic tradition, something all of us do together every year. And it’s always such good fun – and especially these days, we could use some of that.”

“You’re right there,” agreed Robin, “A little distraction and enjoyment would do all of us good. And after all these months of forgoing what makes us happy and working together so hard, I think we’d have earned a little reward.”

Robin was certainly right about one thing: During these past months, the solidarity between the animals of the forests had been absolutely phenomenal. Wherever you went, crawled, flew, or swam, there were animals who were helping each other out of pickles and finding new ways of being together despite the social distancing. The squirrels dug up all their remaining winter stock to distribute it to elderly inhabitants of the forest, so they didn’t have to go searching for food themselves and could stay safely in their homes. They were supported in this by the hamster who took on the delivery, tirelessly scurrying to and fro between dens and burrows, his well-filled cheeks peeping out on both sides of his mask, and also by the bees, who chipped in with free honey. The woodpecker offered lessons in morse code to everyone who wanted to join in, so the animals could communicate over longer distances without yelling themselves hoarse after a while. (He merely refused to teach the deer, as long as it insisted on wearing its mask dangling down from one ear.) The badger proved himself especially generous when allowing the sick hedgehog to move in with him, after having observed how every time the poor hedgehog sneezed his entire pile of leaves scattered in all directions.

Socially-distanced amusement was also provided for. Every evening, the frogs gave open air concerts. The rabbits used their long ears and a pine cone to play tennis. The newt children and the ducklings played guessing games across the brook, and held races with little boats of folded leaves. The mole relieved the boredom of the boar children by turning his molehill into a stage for puppet theatre performances with tiny figures made of chestnuts. (The

deer joined in as a spectator, too, wearing its mask lengthways over its face and watching attentively through the cut-out eye holes.) The eagle owl came up with a very similar idea and told stories from a different tree every evening, while the animals living close by were listening mesmerised from their doors and windows, and the bear was using his massive paws to accompany the tales with shadow theatre.

These memories made Mouse feel all warm and fuzzy inside. “You’re right,” she agreed with her friend Robin, “We’ve managed so much over these past months by means of solidarity and thinking out of the box.” Yet, a little sigh escaped her. “I just wish we could find a solution for the snowman competition as well. I’ve been racking my brains but I simply can’t think of anything to be done. We can’t gather as we usually do, that’s certain. Of course, everyone could build their snowman in their own front yard, and afterwards all animals could go round and see them on their own or in small groups. But there’s *so many* of us. It would take days for everyone to have a go, and in the worst case, thawing would start and the snowmen would have melted into slush before it would have been everyone’s turn to see them. And we can’t drag the snowmen around on sledges or something like that either – why, they’d fall apart upon coming into contact with the first root or bump. So, basically, we can’t take the animals of the forest to the snowmen, nor can we take the snowmen to the animals of the forest. It’s utterly hopeless.” Resignedly, Mouse propped up her elbows on the window sill and put her chin into her fore-paws.

Robin, too, seemed rather crestfallen and was hanging her head. “So, we’d have to find a way for everyone to be able to see the snowmen without having to come together in one place,” she mused, though she did not sound particularly hopeful.

Mouse smiled sadly. “I’m afraid even your brilliant idea from last winter to use an ice floe as a magnifier so even the snowmen of the tiniest animals could be seen properly by everyone won’t help us in this case. Even if you could find an ice floe as large as the entire lake, the starry sky will probably remain the one thing all animals can see at the same time...”

At these words, Robin suddenly started up and began jumping up and down and beating her wings so excitedly that powdery fresh snow whirled through the air all around her. (To the deer, who was just passing by at some distance, its mask twirled around its left ear like a sash, it appeared very much as if a miniature blizzard was blowing in Mouse’s garden.) “That’s it, Mouse, that’s it!” exclaimed Robin ecstatically, still hopping up and down. “Now I know how to save the snowman competition!”

Whatever plan Robin had concocted, she kept it absolutely secret. Apart from a few mysterious instructions, not a word escaped her. And that is how it came that on an evening

about three weeks later, Mouse stepped out into her front yard, wrapped up warm in a beanie, hand-knit scarf, and mask, without the faintest idea of why she was to stand out here in cold and darkness, all on her own, and freeze her ears off. A minute passed, then another. Mouse was hopping from one paw to the other with impatience and cold. Another minute. And another. Mouse attempted to breathe into her fore-paws to warm them a little, but realised very quickly that this was rather tricky with a mask over one's snout.

Frustrated, she was about to give up and retreat into her cosy burrow again, when Robin appeared out of the darkness and landed, almost without slowing down, on a holly bush right on the perimeter of the garden. Her momentum made the branch swing and sway so thoroughly, that a few of the red berries fell off, and Robin almost tumbled headlong into the next snowdrift. She caught herself just in time. "Phew!" she panted, readjusting her slightly dishevelled feathers and beak-mask. "I was worried I might be too late, but – oh, look, it's starting!!" she suddenly cried with glee and with the tip of her wing pointed towards the night sky.

Mouse followed her gaze – and what she saw made her heart leap in a way it hadn't for a long time. Glowing up there, clearly discernible on the background of the velvety black of the cloudy night sky, was the image of a snowman assembled from hundreds of tiny specks of light. And not just any odd snowman – *her* snowman! The lametta slung around a slightly askew top hat and the turnip nose covered by a mask didn't leave room for doubts. This was her snowman, exactly as she had drawn him up for Robin two weeks ago – exactly as she would have built him for this year's competition. Now he was glowing and glimmering in the sky above her, easily to be seen from any tree, any clearing, any stream in the forest.

Tears welled up in Mouse's eyes. "Oh, Robin," she whispered. "This is... How did you..." But she couldn't quite find the words to express what it was that made her tiny mouse-heart leap with joy.

Robin understood nevertheless. She gave a frisky, jubilant hop into the air. "Your comment about the starry sky put the idea into my head – lights in the sky that can be seen from anywhere, you know. After our chat, I flew straight to the fireflies and inquired whether they can hover in formation in a way that allows spectators to see patterns from afar. And Freddy Firefly said: yes, why? After explaining my idea to him, Freddy was immediately on fire with enthusiasm – so to speak. The rest was a piece of cake. I collected drawings of the snowman designs of every animal of the forest, and Freddy drummed up his family – lucky for us they're all one huge household anyway – and they studied and rehearsed the choreography for two weeks – and you can see the result right above you now. Oh, look, there's the next one!"

The fireflies' lights indeed went out at this moment, only to shine forth again a few seconds later, now projecting the image of a different snowman. This one was upside-down. "This is the bat's!" cried Mouse and clapped her fore-paws with joy. "*Just like every year!!!* Oh, Robin, this is so very, very wonderful! You're a genius!"

"Ah, well," muttered Robin and abashedly rummaged around in her wing feathers with her beak. "The real artists are the fireflies – they've got all the hard work! And besides, without you I never would have come up with this in the first place. We're a good team, don't you think?"

"Indeed we are!" confirmed Mouse, her ears turning pink with happiness.

Without saying another word, the two friends turned their attention towards the night sky again. One snowman after the other glowed in the sky and faded away again. Diminutive icicles dangled from the tip of Mouse's tail, and gossamery hoarfrost cobwebbed over the Robin's claws, but neither of them noticed the cold. Happiness was warming them from within.

Following the hedgehog's snowman, finally, there came a long pause – so long, in fact, that Mouse began to wonder whether it might not be time to return into her burrow and have a nutshell of hot punch to warm up again.

Then, all of a sudden, the fireflies' lights lit up once more – and the sky filled with snowmen. Each and every snowman that had been thought up by the animals of the forest was now sparkling up there, much smaller and less detailed than they had been when depicted on their own, but instead all of them together now, one huge group in the firmament above.

Mouse swallowed hard. For the second time this evening she felt tears in her eyes. Without taking her gaze off the fireflies, she whispered: "We should make this into a tradition as well."

"Agreed," answered Robin's voice somewhere to her left, and in the same rapt, touched tone. "But an additional one. In addition to the normal snowmen, I mean."

"Yes," Mouse said quietly, "I'd like that very much."

Side by side they stood gazing at the community of the snowmen in the sky, knowing that everywhere in the forest animals were doing and thinking exactly the same as they did: united for the moment through the gleaming images of the snowmen above them.

And, so Mouse thought to herself, no snowman made of fresh, real snow could have glittered any more splendidly than these ones.

The End.