



Magic at Midnight

It was almost seven o'clock in the evening when guests arrived at the Frederickson house. Everyone brought something for the Christmas dinner: chocolate cakes, sweet popcorn, homemade candy with dates, sauce for the turkey – aunt Fran's specialty, and freshly-baked bread from cousins Richardson's bakery. Actually, the bread nearly fell into one of the deep snowdrifts in the garden because the cousins were throwing snowballs at each other when Mr. Frederickson opened the door.

It was Christmas Eve. It was the first time after his wife's death,



two years ago, that he had decided to celebrate Christmas. The Frederickson twins were in seventh heaven when they heard their father's decision – they had really missed Christmas a lot. However, Lara, their twelve-year old sister didn't want to have anything to do with Christmas. The twins helped their father all day long: they picked a Christmas tree and put it in the sitting-room, they decorated the house, went shopping, and even tidied their rooms and chose some notes for the Christmas songs. Lara took a gloomy view of all that fuss and kept moving from room to room so as to avoid talking to anyone. She got truly angry when they decided it was a great idea to put the star on top of the tree. Why, it was her and her mother that always did that! Lara then snapped at them, she said that she didn't want to know or hear anything about Christmas, dreams or celebrations, and she locked herself in the room. For her the world had ended two years ago and she was very sad and terribly angry with her father and the twins for smiling again and trying to do all those favourite things they had done before. Couldn't they see that everything was different now and mother was gone...

However, it was Christmas Eve and the house was full of friends and relatives. Everyone was having fun: they were talking and laughing out loud so heartily. Lara went downstairs with the guests but she didn't say a single word all evening. She didn't say anything to aunt Fran while she was laying the table (not the way her mother used to do it). She didn't taste the chocolate cake although she loved it. She didn't sing a single Christmas carol even though she liked singing with her mother and father but now it was only her father at the piano.

As the evening advanced, the songs were sung, the delicious



dishes were eaten, and the guests were now saying their goodbyes. The Frederickson boys went to bed and Mr. Frederickson went to the kitchen – he had to clean up. The house was finally peaceful again, so Lara decided to sit next to the Christmas tree for a while. She felt like sitting in the light of the Christmas lamps with her favourite story, “The Nutcracker”, and decided to have some homemade candy with dates - she had put them in the pocket of her dress earlier. That was what she used to do with her mother every Christmas Eve. While she was turning the pages of the book and listening to the clinking of the dishes in the kitchen, Lara drifted off before she knew it.

She was startled by the chiming clock measuring twelve beats. Lara rubbed her eyes. Was it really midnight? She must have fallen asleep by the Christmas tree. She listened. The house was silent. There was no sound coming from the kitchen either. Mr. Frederickson must have gone to bed long ago. Lara stood up and headed towards the stairs and up to her room so as to follow her father’s example. Then she remembered she had some candy in the pocket of her dress, so she took one in her hand. Along with the candy, there was some sort of paper there. It turned out to be a little piece of paper. She didn’t remember putting it in the pocket of her new dress. Lara opened it up curiously and read “Nothing is what it seems to be, but it is what it can be...” Her eyes filled with tears. Those were her mother’s words!

Lara dried her eyes and looked at the tiny piece of paper once again. It was then that the stairs underneath her started moving, the house shook, the steps below her disappeared... Lara started falling further and further down until she finally dropped on a pile of sugar candy.



She wondered where she was. Lara got up, dusted off her clothes and timidly looked around. She saw streets made of homemade cookies, a milky bubbling stream with chocolate biscuits, and further ahead – a snow white ice-cream hill with a wonderful ice palace on top of it. There was a big sign perched on the slope of the hill. It was made of chocolate shavings and read “Welcome to Sugarland”. How strange... her mother used to call the kitchen that way the days before Christmas. It was there and then that they all used to prepare piles of pudding, sugar sticks, her favourite homemade date candies, crispy walnut biscuits, gingerbread and so on. That was a long time ago and it was never to happen again.

However, Clara was now in the real Sugarland. She felt excitement envelop her – she was to taste all those delicious things and no-one was going to tell her off for having spoilt her dinner. So she decided to walk all over Sugarland and taste a bit of everything. While she was walking and tasting the dark chocolate curb in the street, also dipping a finger in the streams full of apple punch or milk with biscuits, a group of gingerbread cookies came out of somewhere and they were in a great hurry.

“Hey, little girl, have you by any chance seen any walnut cookies around here somewhere?” one of the gingerbread cookies asked her in a ringing voice, “They’ve disappeared again!” she spread her hands.

“What do these walnut cookies look like? I’ve already tasted so many things that I am not sure if I remember it all.” Lara answered apologetically.

“Well, they’re a bit angry. We’re looking for them because it’s

going to get dark soon. We must return to the ice palace at the end of every day, that palace over there – on top of the ice-cream hill. These are the rules of the Sugar Fairy – she runs our country.”

“Ha!” Lara exclaimed to herself. That was another strange coincidence. Back home the walnut cookies used to disappear all the time and mother used to say that she wanted them back in the cupboard with the rest of the cookies by the end of the day.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t seen them. Could you please tell me how to find the way home? I’m already full and it’s Christmas tomorrow, so I have to go back home before morning comes.”

“Of course! Go to the Sugar Fairy’s palace. She’s the queen of our country. She’ll show you the way.”

Lara thanked them and headed towards the palace. The Sugar Fairy was a real beauty: she was all made of sugar, she was wearing a beautiful dress covered with coconut shavings. She smelled like orange peels - just like Lara’s mother’s favourite crème. Lara felt so good that she forgot to ask how to find the way home and instead, started talking to the fairy. The hours went by and the palace was gradually filling up with the cookies, cakes, and gingerbread cookies that were coming back, and even the walnut cookies showed up. It was quite noisy and funny but a disturbing thought pierced Lara all at once. If she stayed for a little longer, she might never be able to leave. Everything was so beautiful and delicious there. The girl thanked the Sugar Fairy for her hospitality and all citizens in this sweet country - for the warm welcome. Then she asked how she could go back home before Christmas.

“Unfortunately, I do not know,” the fairy shook her head.
“However, you could ask our neighbours from Fairytale Land. It is easy to get there. When you walk out of the palace, walk ahead along the cookie pathway. There is a door at the end of the pathway. It will take you to a dark corridor but do not be scared. Walk along the corridor for a little while and you will reach our neighbours. They will surely help you. Good luck!”

Lara waved goodbye to everyone and walked along the cookie pathway. She kept walking and thinking if she was dreaming or it was all true? “Actually, there’s no way of dreaming of eating such

delicious candy and cake, so I’m surely NOT dreaming,” she said to herself. Besides, those two coincidences reminded her of how her mother and she used to make chocolate pudding. The Sugar Fairy looked like her mother but she wasn’t for a very simple reason: mother always knew everything and she used to find an answer to each question that Lara asked her. The fairy didn’t know how to help her return home, so she wasn’t her mother, and no-one could ever be.

Lara sighed heavily. She had reached the end of the pathway. She opened the door and stepped into the dark corridor. Darkness



enveloped her. She felt so lonely that she wished she could go back home to her father and the twins as fast as possible. So she hurried along the corridor. She put her hand in her pocket to check if the note was still there and she tripped into her skirt. She rolled a few times down the corridor and bumped into a threshold. Lara stood up, dusted off her clothes, and knocked at the door. The door opened and there was the Tin Man with a shining little heart.

“Welcome to Fairytale Land, young lady!” he greeted her with a wide smile. “How can we help you?”

Lara recognized her favourite character from the book *The Wizard of Oz*. She bowed courteously and answered: “My name is Lara and I would like to go back home. I was in Sugarland and they directed me to you, so I hope you can help me.”

“Young lady Lara, walk along the yellow pavement straight to the palace of the Great Oz who might have an answer to your question. Some time ago he helped me when I was looking for a heart, and he also gave the Lion courage. Therefore, he will probably help you too. While you are walking, you will meet a lot of fairytale characters and Oz will tell you a story or two. We have stories about courage, love and travels. I can even see Kai and Gerda sliding with their sleigh while waiting for the Snow Queen,” the Tin Man said proudly.

“But I am in a hurry. I don’t have time for fairy tales.”

“Oh, Miss Lara,” the Tin Man smiled, “There’s always time for fairy tales!”



Lara stared at him.

Every year on Christmas Eve when the twins’ eyes and her own were closing, they would all go into the library, they would sit around the fireplace, and their mother would say in a tender voice “Darling (that’s how she called Mr. Frederickson), there’s always time for fairy tales!” Then they would all read their favourite fairy tales and they would always start with “The

Nutcracker”.

That was the third strange coincidence on that unusual night.

“Well,” Lara sighed, “I guess I have some time for fairy tales. Do you know whether Oz can change stories?” Lara asked full of hope. She really wanted to go two years back and change her own story. It seemed possible – at least as much as giving a heart or courage to someone.

“Unfortunately, the past never changes. We only learn from it. What we can do, however, is continue living our stories further on. That is what the elves do up there in the book workshop.” The Tin Man pointed to a tall hill.

“I understand,” Lara nodded sadly, “Thank you for your help. I’m going to Oz now.”

Lara set out for the Royal Palace of Oz. On the way there she kept meeting characters from her favourite fairy tales – the ones their mother used to read to them every night before they went to sleep. She remembered how they all used to snuggle around the fireplace in the library reading book after book and how funny it used to be when the twins started fighting about which fairy tale they should read next. In the end, it was always she who, as an elder sister, used to settle the argument. She would usually choose a story they had never read before, so the magic would live on. On Christmas Eve, their father would always alter his voice and make funny jokes while their mother would read and reread the same magical stories over and over again in her warm voice. Lara was never going to forget those precious moments when the whole family was together. Fairy tales were

always going to take her back there.

Lara reached the end of the pavement. There was nothing to be seen around, not even a fairy tale character. She decided she was lost and got a little bit worried. She suddenly noticed the little fair head, just like an ear of wheat, belonging to a boy who was running as fast as he could towards a fox with a fluffy ginger tale. How happy they looked! Lara ran towards them to ask about the Royal Palace of Oz.

“Hello, I’m Lara and I have to return home before Christmas. I am looking for Oz so as to ask him to help me but I think I’m lost. Can you please tell me which way to go?”

“Hello, Lara,” the boy greeted her politely. He was dressed like a little prince. “You’re not lost. The Royal Palace of Oz was right here, but he flew away in an enormous balloon. Once a year, just before Christmas, he flies away to look for new fairy tales for the elves in the book workshop. That’s why he’s not here now. Can we help you somehow?”

“I don’t know how to get home. My father and the twins will be worried if I’m not there. I wasn’t particularly good with them before they went to bed...” the girl admitted sadly.

“We don’t know how you can get back home,” Fox said, “But there is a land near ours, it’s a little bit of a sad place but they might know how to help you there. Go to Forgotten Toys Land.”

“How can I get there?”

“Walk to the end of that forest. You’ll see a door there. It’s always left ajar. Walk through that door, but don’t close it behind you.”



Fox explained. “Do you like secrets?” she suddenly asked. “I will now tell you something very important: “Nothing is what it seems to be, but it is what it can be...” That’s what fairy tales teach us.” The fox smiled mysteriously.

“Another coincidence,” Lara shivered. Those were her mother’s words. Lara embraced Fox and the Little Prince, and went on, repeating to herself: “Nothing is what it seems to be, but it is what it can be...” She was holding the folded piece of paper in her hand in her pocket. She had to find a way to go back home.

Lara reached the door and cautiously squeezed through. She found herself in a room where there was a big Christmas tree and a few forgotten toys under the green branches. She recognized the Lego she had received on her first Christmas. Years later her mother told her how her father was even more excited than her when they gave her the present. Lara and her father loved building castles and houses, then taking them to pieces, so as to make a house for the whole family. They used to roar with laughter every time the house collapsed and they had to start anew. She wondered where that Lego was now.

The exquisite porcelain doll that she loved so much was leaning on the Christmas tree, she had only one leg now. The twins had broken the other leg once when they wanted to show Lara how her doll could be a soldier. She was so angry with them that she didn’t talk to them for a week. Finally, they collected all their pocket money and bought a new doll for Lara. That’s how much they loved her. That was Forgotten Toys Land and there was no doubt about that. It was the first time since the beginning of her journey, that Lara had felt truly sad about her father and the

boys. How she wanted to be back with them, to play and laugh once again at each and every mischief the boys would come up with. Lara hadn't laughed for such a long time...

She kept looking at the toys under the Christmas tree and she remembered so many funny stories with her brothers and how they were always trying to make her laugh in all sorts of crazy ways whenever she felt sad. They would sometimes put their soldiers' clothes on her dolls or scatter the dominoes all over the house. The dominoes were lying on the ground around the Christmas tree here, so Lara knelt down to pick them up, just as she used to do with her father once the game was over. When she picked up the last of them, Lara stood up and looked around to see if there was anyone she could ask about the way home.

In the furthest corner of the big room, just behind two train compositions, Lara noticed an elderly toy maker who was bending over an old music box. He was tinkering with its mechanism while huffing and puffing. Lara approached him quietly and asked: "What do you do?"

"I repair toys. I'm Mr. Steiner and I run this country," the master answered, not giving her a single look. He took another screwdriver. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Lara and I want to go back home before Christmas. Could you please tell me which way to go?" she asked courteously.

"Unfortunately, I haven't got the slightest idea. I repair forgotten toys all day long and I have little time left for walks. You must be coming from Fairytale Land?"

Lara nodded.

"Alright then. You must not go back there because no mechanism works well if it moves back."

"What does that have to do with it?" Lara was irritated.



“Well, of course it has to do with it. It’s not good if a toy or a person moves backwards, one should always move forward. If a toy has stopped, I fix it and it moves on. That is why it is important that people as well as toys must be fixed – so that they can move on,” Mr. Steiner said and took another screwdriver. “Sometimes they cannot move on..” Lara sighed, “As much as we want them to.”

“Maybe we don’t want it that much. There is always a way,” the master said and screwed a bolt.

There again! Every time something was in Lara’s way and she was on the verge of giving up, her mother would say: “Lara, there is always a way!”

The girl hid her eyes and started crying. The master was startled. He wasn’t used to having someone crying in his own land.

“Come, now, come! It’s good there is always a way.” He put the music box he was repairing in the girl’s hands. The mechanism was fixed and Lara heard her favourite lullaby playing there, in Forgotten Toys Land.

“I’m not sure how I can help you.” He pointed to the opposite side of the room. “Nightmare Land is behind that door over there. It’s a land of nightmares and fear, so they can’t possibly help you there. Why don’t you have some rest here with me?” He wound up the music box again.

Lara’s eyes felt heavy. She sat at Mr. Steiner’s workbench. Why not have some rest indeed...if she had to walk through Nightmare Land so as to get back home? She would need all her

strength in that land. She was so tired, she had done so much today: she had eaten delicious things in Sugarland, she had talked to the fairytale characters, she had been in a hurry to get back home all the time. She missed her father and the twins so very much, and her mother too. While she was drifting off, she thought “I will go back home and I will tell them how much I love them - I won’t forget it this time! And I won’t be cross with the twins when they decorate the Christmas tree, but only if they break a toy. And I will help father with the Christmas cake – just as her mother used to. Yes, just the same way... how much I miss her.” One final tear dropped down Lara’s cheek and she fell fast asleep.

Sometime later, no-one can say how much exactly, Lara felt soft snowflakes falling on her nose and she opened her eyes. She found herself amid a snowy pathway covered with fluffy snow. The snowflakes were lightly and gently falling down the edge of her dress. That couldn’t possibly be Nightmare Land but it wasn’t Forgotten Toys Land either. How had she ended up there, amid a snowy fairy tale? “Well, Mr. Steiner must have carried me here while I was sleeping,” Lara said to herself, “Even though he looked a bit cross, he was a very helpful master.”

“Thank you, Mr. Steiner!” Lara cried out loud, but no-one answered.

For just a tiny second, she thought she could hear the music box melody coming from somewhere far ahead. Lara looked around. There was a wide snow path in front of her. Mr. Steiner had said that she had to move on, so that was what she was going to do. She was sure she was going to be home soon. Lara hurried ahead

with quick steps. While she was walking, she remembered that she might still have some candy in the pockets of her dress, so she checked. There was some candy there and the tiny piece of paper. “Nothing is what it seems to be, but it is what it can be...” she read, “ and what it could be, depends on you and you only, Lara. It is important that you believe in miracles, that you have someone to share them with, that you always have a candy in your pocket - just in case you feel hungry. I am here for you. I love you. Father Frederickson.”

Lara started crying, then she started laughing. Then she was in tears once again.

“My father, father Frederickson, and the twins! I will tell you everything! I can’t wait to tell you!” Lara cried out and she read as fast as she could along the snow path.

She was running, laughing, falling, up again and running, panting, moving on. Finally, she reached a door which looked exactly like the door of her own room. There was a sign on the door. The sign was made of tiny fluffy snowflakes and it read ‘Dreamland’.

“That must be the last country,” Lara said and took hold of the door handle.

Suddenly the clock chimed, Lara jumped up and rubbed her eyes. She was at home, right under the Christmas tree where she had fallen asleep the night before. The sun was peeking through the windows, there was the scent of delicious food all over the house, the twins were still asleep, clinking and clanking came from her father’s study – he was probably finishing up with the

Christmas presents. Lara smiled widely and put her hand in the pocket of her dress. She took out the little piece of paper and one last candy. She ate the candy, left the paper under the Christmas tree, and said do herself: “Nothing is what it seems to be, but it is what it can be...” What a wonderful dream I had! I must surely tell my father and the twins about it. She ran down the corridor, rushed into father Frederickson’s study and embraced him.

“Father, if you only knew what happened to me last night, at midnight – pure magic! Miracles, Christmas miracles! Merry Christmas, dear father! Merry Christmas, everyone!” Lara shouted out loud and woke the twins up. Still sleepy, they came to the doors of the study. Everyone sat around Lara and listened to the stories of her unusual adventures.

The Christmas sun turned every snowflake into a diamond. The family in Frederickson house was going to celebrate Christmas for the first time in two years because they knew that the scent of jam and orange peels would never leave their hearts.

