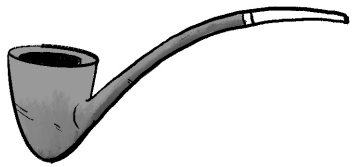
THE SNOWMAN CODE



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1

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For snowmen everywhere

A NOTE TO YOUNGER READERS:

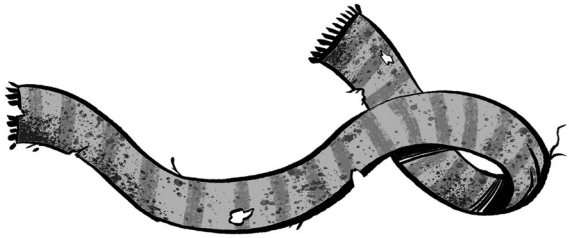
This story is best read when it feels like winter.

That doesn't mean you can only read it when there is snow outside. After all, it doesn't only ever feel like winter because there is snow outside. Sometimes it can feel like winter because there is snow inside.

I hope that if you read this story at such a time, it might warm you. Just the same way it warmed me when I first heard it from some of the people it actually happened to.

A NOTE TO OLDER READERS:

All the above goes for you too.



One

It was the longest winter there had been in over three hundred years.

It had happened because the weather was broken now.

At least, everybody kept saying that was why it had happened.

Even the kids in the school playground said so.

Imagine that: kids with nothing better to talk about than the weather!



Not that Blessing was ever at school to hear the other kids talk about the weather.

She had not been to school since December.

And now it was March.



The reason Blessing had stopped going to school was because she had a problem. In fact, she had three problems, and they were all in her class: Ashby Tregdahornick, Cynthia Smith-Smith and Bartholomew Weaselton.



Those three fiends did not like Blessing.

She did not know why.

Maybe it was because Blessing was always polite and kind.

Or because she was good at art and maths and science.

Or because she could

speak French like a Parisian, whereas when any of those three tried, they sounded like a pack of stray dogs gargling with cough mixture.

Whatever their reason, they did mean things to her.

They hid her uniform after swimming.

They tore up her projects.

They even called her ridiculous names that did not make any sense!

Blessing had her own name for them, and it certainly did make sense.

She called them the Driplet Triplets.

Maybe they weren't real triplets, but there were three of them, and they were always together. And what is a bully if not a drip? And if a bully is a drip then a young bully must surely be a driplet. It was mean to call people names, so Blessing had never actually called them the Driplet Triplets out loud. Still, as far as she knew, there was no rule against thinking it.

If it had been any other season, Blessing would have



told her mum, and the Driplet Triplets would have been in big trouble. They might have even been put into different classes. And if that happened they would probably all have immediately died.

But it was still winter. And Blessing couldn't possibly tell her mum about bullies in winter.

It would make her mum sad, and Margaret was quite sad enough already.

Margaret was already so sad that sometimes she did not even go to work any more.

If she got any sadder, Blessing might be sent away again.



Blessing had been sent away twice before.

Both times had been in winter, and both had been because Margaret had become very sad.

What happened was that Jasmine came to the door and pretended it was just a normal visit. But soon enough an ambulance arrived for Margaret and took her away.



And then Jasmine took Blessing to Miriam and John's house.

And left her there.

It was not Margaret's fault that winter made her so sad. After all, when she was a little girl, Margaret had lived in a country where there was no such thing as winter. Yet here in London she was expected to spend several months of every year freezing cold!

It was a bit much.

If you asked her, Margaret would tell you that the reason she disliked winter was not because it was so cold, or so dark, or even because the whole thing was such a ridiculous idea. She would tell you it was because winter made all the beautiful roses in the Rose Garden in Victoria Park disappear.

And what could possibly be the point of a season that did that?





Not even Dr Kumar had been able to answer that.

Instead, he had prescribed Margaret a special lamp. He had said it was so much like the sun that it would make her feel very happy indeed.

The day it arrived had been like Christmas. Blessing had torn open the box, and then Margaret had plugged the lamp in. They had both stared at it, then told each other that it was indeed just exactly like the sun.

But then Blessing had asked Margaret if she felt happier. Margaret had said she didn't just yet, but she was sure she would by the next morning. After all, the lamp was just like the sun!

But Margaret was not any happier by the next morning.

If anything, she was just a little sadder.

Because the lamp was not really anything like the sun.

After all, it was just a lamp.

And the sun is the sun.





Anyway, that is why Blessing had not been to school since December.

Because Dr Kumar's lamp had not worked.

And the Driplet Triplets were awful.

And she couldn't tell her mum about them in winter.

Because she did not want Jasmine to come and send her away again.



Of course, not going to school was itself exactly the kind of thing that could get you sent away.

Luckily, Blessing was an expert at doing her mum's handwriting, so she had written a note to Miss Hazelworst. It explained that Blessing and Margaret were moving to the outback of Australia to run a kangaroo sanctuary, and nobody would ever hear from them again.

Miss Hazelworst had cried and told Blessing she was the best Year Five student she'd ever had.

Blessing had told Miss Hazelworst the nicest true thing



that she could, which was that Miss Hazelworst was the very best Year Five teacher she'd ever had.

Every morning since then, Blessing had got dressed in her uniform, brushed her teeth, kissed her mum goodbye and set off through Victoria Park as if she was going to school. Then, each afternoon, she came home and told her mum about the things that had happened at school that day. Of course, Blessing had to make all those things up, but Margaret was too sad to notice.

The only real problem with not going to school was that Blessing still had to go somewhere. And not just any old somewhere, but somewhere you could go if you were ten-and-a-half years old, were wearing your school uniform and had only your lunch money to spend.

Sometimes Blessing went to the big museum with the giant stuffed walrus and tagged on to other kids' class trips. If anyone asked her what she was doing, she pretended to be an exchange student from France. Afterwards, she went to Leicester Square and hid herself amidst coach parties of



old people as they entered their matinees at the theatre.

Once, when she was very bored indeed, Blessing even went to the children's hospital and pretended to be a patient. She had to run away when a nurse tried to put her arm in plaster.

On other days, Blessing went to a cinema she had found, where a window in the toilets was always left open. It was only a small window, but it was just the right size that a ten-and-a-half-year-old girl could squeeze through it, so long as it was before lunch. It was warm inside the cinema, and people often left behind nearly full buckets of popcorn that Blessing could eat for lunch. If she watched the movie three or four times, Blessing could easily pass a whole day there.

As long as she remembered to stay out later on Tuesdays, Blessing's system worked very well. Blessing was supposed to go to after-school Art Club on Tuesday, and she loved it so much that even Margaret might notice if she came home too early that day.



Of course, Tuesday also happens to be the day of the week that things most like to change on. Monday is just a little too early in the week for things to change, but Wednesday is a little too late. Tuesday is the perfect day for things to change on, and somehow things seem to know that, and always do their very best to change on a Tuesday.

Sure enough, it was on a Tuesday – a Tuesday when Blessing had even remembered to stay out later – that everything changed forever.