



The Noel Stories

The Nutcracker



For many families nowadays a visit to the ballet is a special Christmas treat. Everyone loves The Nutcracker, with its spectacular moonlit scenes of battling mice, toy soldiers, and a fabulous, dancing Sugar Plum Fairy. Here's a chance to read a retelling of the German tale by E.T.A. Hoffman that inspired the dreamlike ballet.



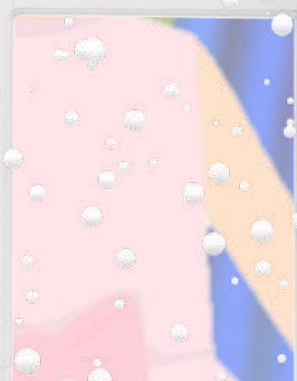
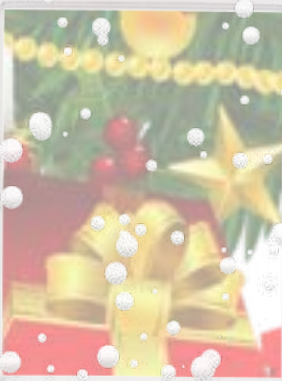
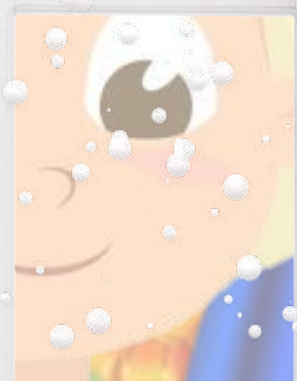
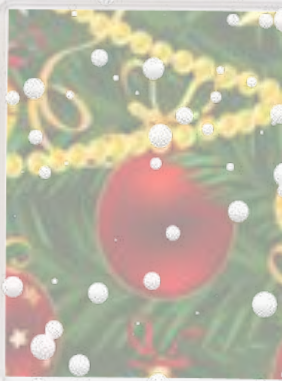
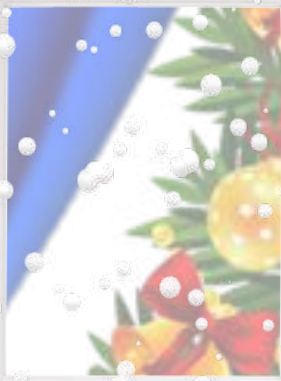
What's interesting for me is its reminder that Christmas can be frightening for children if it becomes a grand social affair for adults. We begin with our heroine, Clara, hiding behind a curtain to escape the Grand Ball that her parents have organised. Later than night she dreams herself to be in the place where every child wants to be at this time of the year – the Land of Sweets.



Once Upon a Time

Clara knelt on the window seat, half hidden by the heavy curtains, and pressed her nose against the cold glass of the window. Outside, the night was still and full of mystery, with great feathery flakes of snow falling silently out of a dark sky.

Behind her, the room was bright and warm and full of cheerful sounds.



Each year, on the night before Christmas, Clara's parents gave a splendid party and invited all their friends, old and young, to join in the celebrations. They were friendly people who liked nothing better than to fill their house with happy guests.



But Clara, who was shy and awkward with strangers, found it all a little frightening. So it was that she was hiding behind the curtain, wishing that she could fly out of the window into the quiet darkness and float magically over the rooftops with their soft white blanket of snow.



Reflected in the glass she could see the moving shapes of people dancing and, beyond them, the glow of the big Christmas tree in the far corner of the room.



“Clara! Why are you hiding there?” She sighed as her brother, Franz, came bouncing onto the window seat. He took hold of her hand and pulled her down into the noisy room.

“Oh, Franz!” she protested. “Can’t you leave me in peace?”

“No, I can’t,” he said, “because Mother has sent me to find you. She has some friends who have just arrived, and they want to see you.”



Clara reluctantly went with him to find her mother; then she stood patiently while people patted her on the head and said how much she had grown. They all looked very much alike to her, the men in their dinner clothes, the women in their silken dresses; until the last visitor arrived.



He was quite different: a strange man, old and bent, with a dark patch over one eye.

Clara's parents greeted him with affection, and he did not pat her on the head or say that she had grown. Instead, he fixed his one bright eye upon her and said, very softly, "Ah ... this one is special."



Behind the old man came servants carrying tall boxes. The guests crowded around to see what could be inside, and there were cries of wonder when they were opened.



Out came a tall soldier and a pretty girl, followed by a Harlequin and a Columbine. They were life-size dolls, and when the old man wound them up with a huge key, they danced together to the delight of the guests.

The children tried to join in and, when the dancing was over, clamoured for the dolls to be wound up again.



But instead, the lights were dimmed so that the Christmas tree could be seen shining in all its glory, and from beneath it Clara's parents took presents for all their friends.



As the children opened their beautifully wrapped packages, Clara felt a hand upon her shoulder and turned to see the strange old man holding out to her an oddly shaped toy.

“This is a special gift,” he said, “given only to one who will know its true value.”



It was an ugly wooden doll with long thin legs, little, short arms, and a head far too big for its body. It had a funny face and a mouth full of big teeth. It was certainly not a pretty toy, but there was something so comical about it that Clara loved it at first sight.



She turned to the old man with a smile that lit up her face. “Oh, thank you,” she said. “I think he’s lovely!” “He is useful, too,” said the old man, and he reached for a nut from a piled dish nearby.



Taking the doll from Clara, he showed her how to fit the nut between the big teeth and crack it by squeezing the legs together. Clara was enchanted and so were the other children who crowded around, begging her to crack nuts for them. But Franz grew jealous; he hated to see his sister be the centre of attention.



Suddenly, he snatched the Nutcracker from her hands and, throwing the wooden doll upon the floor, jumped on it.



Clara was in tears until her father came to the rescue. He threatened to send Franz to bed if he did not behave himself and restored the battered toy to Clara. Poor Nutcracker! His paint was scratched, and his wood was dented. His comical face was more lopsided and uglier than ever, but Clara only loved him more.



She bandaged him with the white ribbon from her hair and, rocking him in her arms, she crept back to her hiding place behind the window curtain.



The party lasted late into the night, with tired children sleeping where they fell, until their parents gathered them up to take them home.

When all the guests were gone, Franz and Clara were carried up to their nursery to be tucked into their beds.



As her father lifted the sleeping Clara from her window seat, the battered Nutcracker fell from her hands and was left behind unnoticed on the floor.



The lights went out, the fire died down. Time passed, and the whole house grew dark and still.



Clara awoke suddenly in the middle of the nights: it took her a few moments to realise that she was in her bed. She sat up and felt around her for the Nutcracker, but he was nowhere to be found. She thought of him, lying alone in the great drawing room downstairs, and she could not bear it.

Climbing out of her warm bed, she put on her slippers and tiptoed across the nursery.



The moon had come out, and as she went down the wide, cold staircase, she could see the world beyond the landing window house and showed her the way. Softly, she turned the handle of the drawing room door.

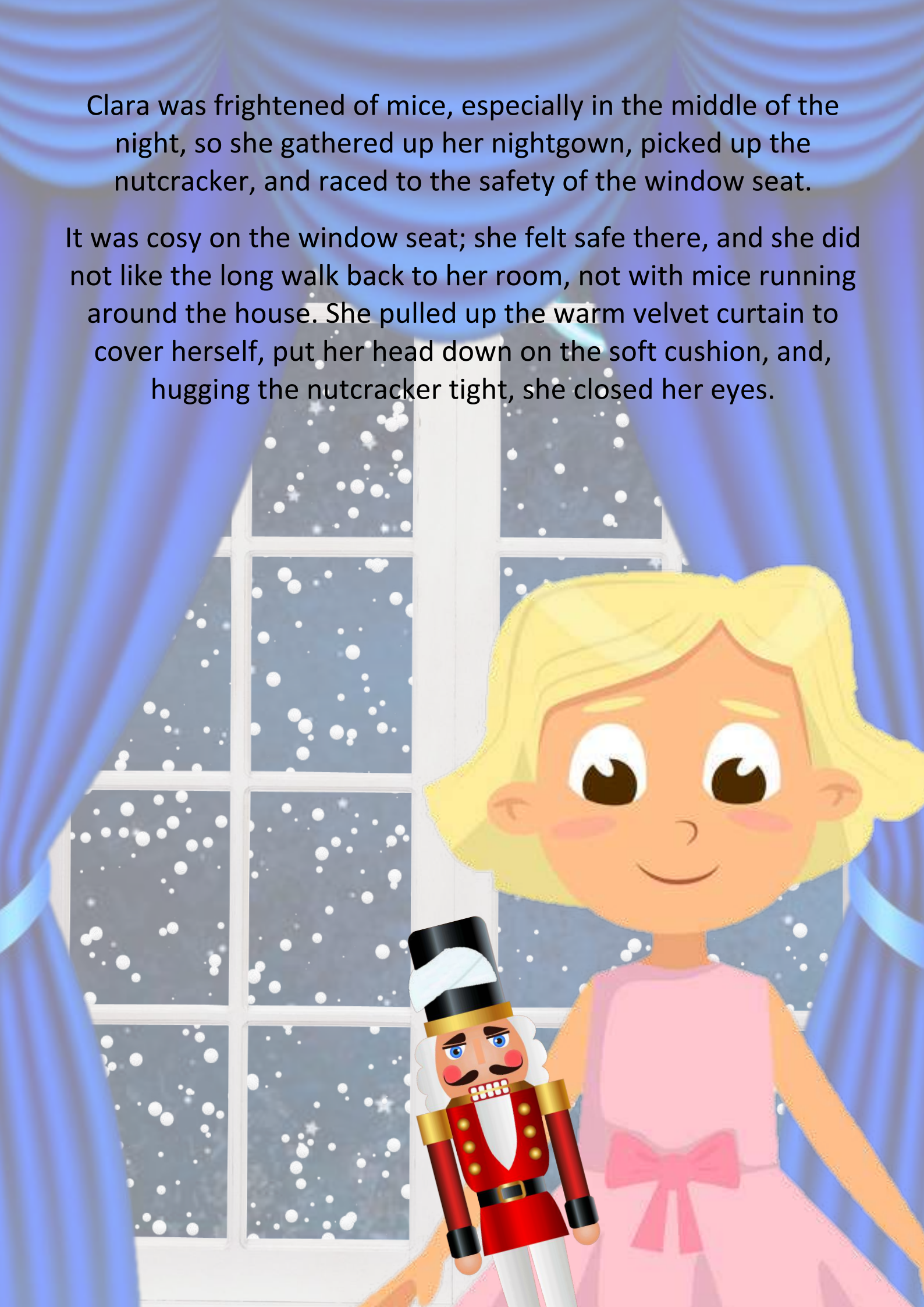


As she swung it open, the draft made the dying fire flare up, filling the room with dancing shadows. Crossing the wide, empty room, she heard a sudden scuttling sound, and a mouse ran across the floor.

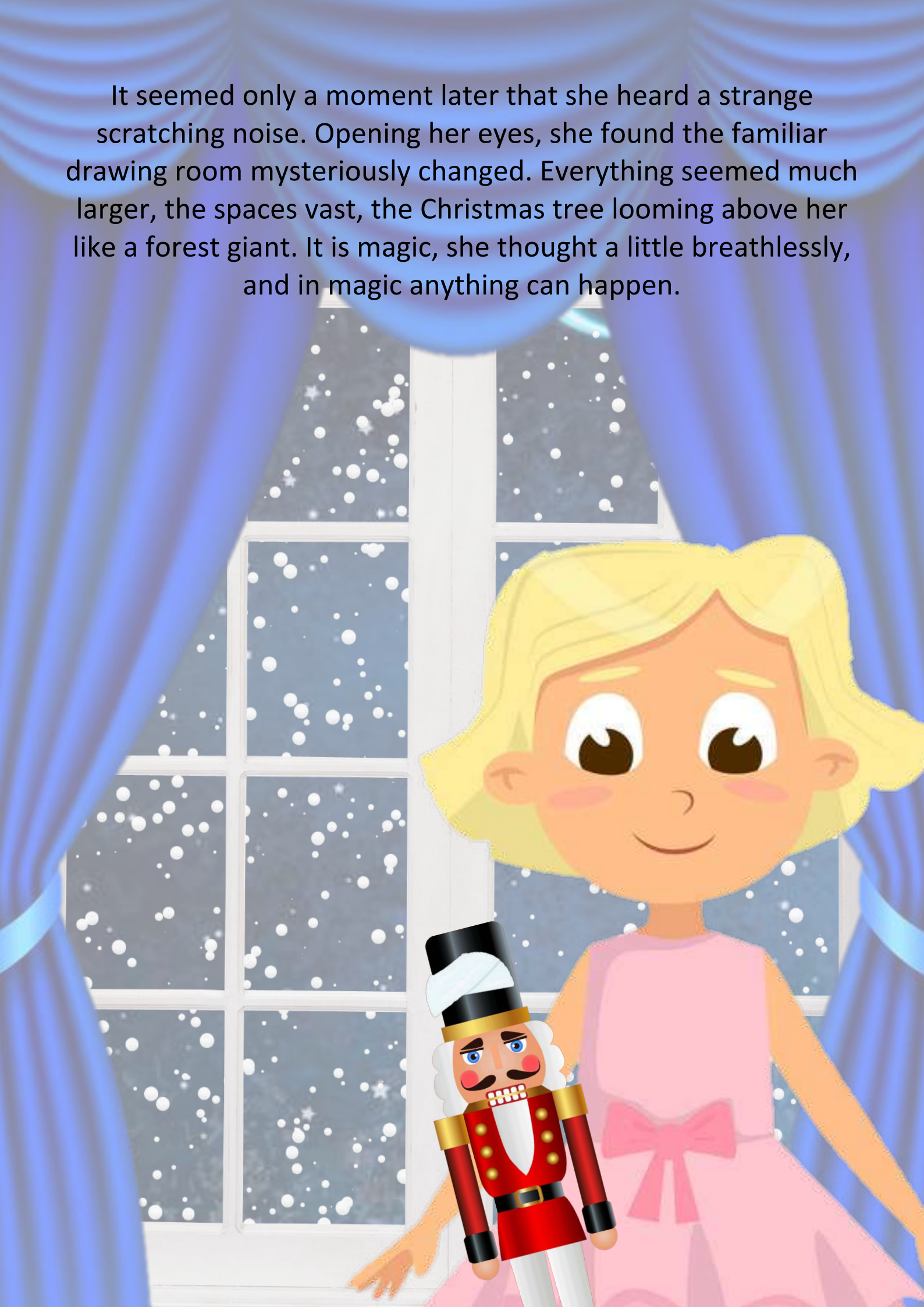


Clara was frightened of mice, especially in the middle of the night, so she gathered up her nightgown, picked up the nutcracker, and raced to the safety of the window seat.

It was cosy on the window seat; she felt safe there, and she did not like the long walk back to her room, not with mice running around the house. She pulled up the warm velvet curtain to cover herself, put her head down on the soft cushion, and, hugging the nutcracker tight, she closed her eyes.



It seemed only a moment later that she heard a strange scratching noise. Opening her eyes, she found the familiar drawing room mysteriously changed. Everything seemed much larger, the spaces vast, the Christmas tree looming above her like a forest giant. It is magic, she thought a little breathlessly, and in magic anything can happen.



The scratching sound grew louder, and to Clara's horror, a horde of big, fierce mice came scurrying out of the shadows into the dancing firelight. They ran swiftly all over the room, nibbling at the gingerbread men on the Christmas tree, who had to scramble higher in an effort to escape them. Even worse, she saw a huge rat with a crown on his head, who seemed to be their king.



Poor Clara, her heartbeat fast, and her hands trembled with fear that he might notice her in her dark corner.



Then she heard the sound of a trumpet, and out from a big box marched a troop of toy soldiers, waving their wooden swords in the air. Their leader seemed strangely familiar, with a big head and long thin legs. Clara realized with astonishment that it was her own dear Nutcracker, come to life.



She watched, holding her breath, as a fierce battle took place between the toy soldiers and the mice. Backward and forward they fought across the drawing room floor, until at last the soldiers drove the mice back to their holes.



Only the King Rat and the Nutcracker remained, locked in a deadly duel, and it seemed to Clara that the rat was winning. He had a fierce, sharp little sword, while the Nutcracker had only a wooden one. Suddenly the King rat raised his sword as if he would strike to kill.



Clara cried out and, taking off her slipper, threw it with all her strength. It hit the King Rat and the small of his back, knocking him off balance, and at once the Nutcracker brought the wooden sword down upon his head.



The big rat lay still upon the floor until the mice came out, squeaking sorrowfully, and carried him away into their mouse hole.



Clara turned back to the Nutcracker and saw to her surprise that his strange, big head and long, thin legs had changed. Smiling at her and holding out her slipper was a young and handsome prince.

He knelt at Clara's feet and, while he placed the slipper on again, he thanked her for saving his life and for breaking the spell that had bound him.



“Once I lived in the Land of Sweets,” he told her, “until the terrible day when I fell under a spell and was doomed to spend my days as the ugly Nutcracker. Only when my life was saved by one who loved me in spite of my strange looks could the spell be broken.”



I think I must be dreaming, thought Clara wonderingly. But if she was, she certainly did not want the dream to end.

“Now you must tell me your dearest wish,” said the Nutcracker Prince, “and I grant it.”



At first Clara could not think what to ask for, but then she remembered how she had longed to fly over the moonlit, snow-covered world beyond the window. She told the Nutcracker Prince of her dream, and at once he took her by the hand. A moment later she found herself flying through a cloud of whirling snowflakes into a strange and magical world.

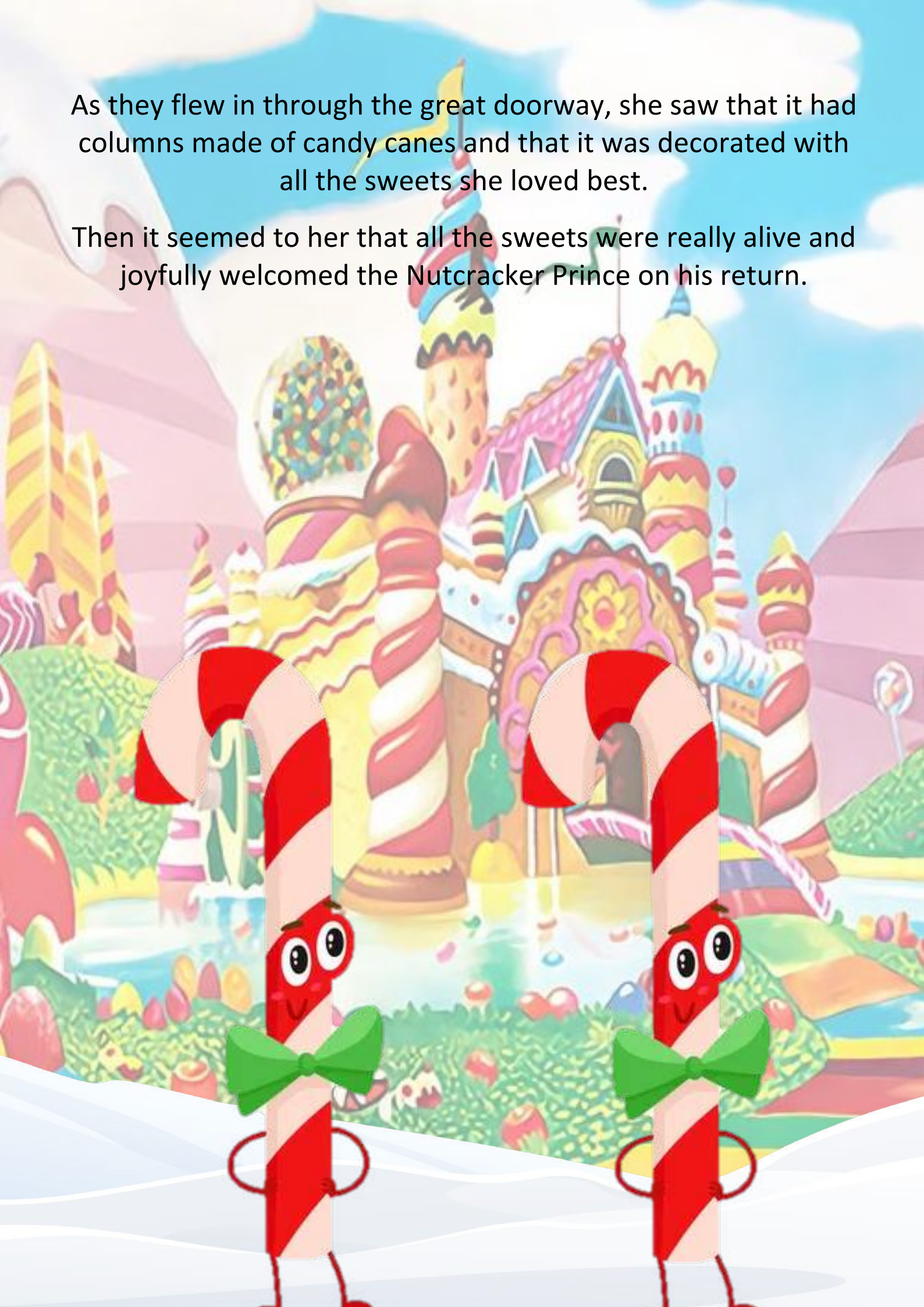


“I will take you to my own kingdom,” said the Prince, and they swooped and soared through clouds and over snow-capped forests until, in the distance, they could see the white pinnacles of a powdered sugar castle rising up out of the snow.



As they flew in through the great doorway, she saw that it had columns made of candy canes and that it was decorated with all the sweets she loved best.

Then it seemed to her that all the sweets were really alive and joyfully welcomed the Nutcracker Prince on his return.



The Prince presented Clara to the beautiful Sugar Plum Fairy, who ruled as queen over the Land of Sweets. He told how she had saved his life and freed him from the magic spell.



When they heard this, all the sweets began to dance for joy, and Clara found that she was dancing with them. Around and around, they went, faster and faster, until Clara grew breathless, and her head was in a whirl.



Then suddenly, the sounds and music died, all was quiet and still, and Clara awoke to the first pale light of Christmas morning.

Her first fear was that her friend the Nutcracker would be gone forever. Anxiously she looked around ...



... but there he was on the window seat, as ugly and as comical as before. She picked him up and hugged him. “Perhaps it was magic,” she told him, “Or perhaps it was just a dream. But whichever it was, I shall always know that you are really a handsome prince inside.”

And, clutching him in her arms, she set off back to her bedroom before the others should wake and find her missing.





THINK

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