

TOM AND PRETTY

COZY

Our next story about Tom also takes place in a church, albeit a completely different one. Tom's parents always "dragged" him along to church with them. I say dragged, because I don't suppose Tom would have gone over there by himself!

You see, he didn't quite know exactly why it was that his parents wanted to visit that place so badly. He understood going to the supermarket. They bought bread there, and sweets, and cheese, and... peanut butter. Because of course they had to eat.

He understood going to school. Why, everybody went there. It was fun! So why would he miss out on it? But church! Well, his parents had explained about God and all but Tom had never met Him before. So it really went a little above his hat.

Not all the boys he knew went to church. But some did (no doubt dragged by their parents). And some girls, too. And one day, Tom met a very special one...

It was on a very special day. Or actually, on a very special night; Christmas eve, his parents called it. Outside it was snowing, so you can imagine it must have been pretty chilly. Tom had to wear a heavy jacket, and a scarf, and because his hands couldn't stand the cold, even mittens.

All dressed up like that, Tom went to church. Very important, on Christmas eve, it seemed. Tom didn't mind going to church on the whole, because he liked the singing. And on Christmas eve! It seemed like people wouldn't stop singing!

A peculiar thing, to sing. You just opened that same mouth you could use to talk, whisper or cheer - and some people used it to shout or scream - and out would come this beautiful, melodious sound. A sound that somehow did something to you. It made you feel great! And there were so many songs. You could go on singing all your life if you wanted to.

But the people in the church on Christmas eve didn't do that. They sang one heck of a lot, but then finally they stopped, and then it was time for Tom's parents to



talk to people and everybody was wishing everybody a Merry Christmas and Tom got a bit bored. He was very tired now, it being way past midnight. His mom had told him during the day that on Christmas eve you had to go to church in the middle of the night and had tried to make him take a nap, but Tom hadn't seen the point - and he found himself too much of a lively boy to sleep when it was still light out. But oh! He understood his mom a lot better now. Why hadn't he listened?

Yawning these huge, sleepy yawns he wandered off by himself to a corner of the big church. And there was this beautiful marble lady statue there in a special space that seemed made just for her. Tom imagined that she must be very important, to be standing in the church like that. And there were pictures on the walls to her side, some very old. Pictures of boys and girls. Tom was just about to take a closer look, you know; to see if he recognized anybody, when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello!" the someone said behind him, in a melodious voice.

It was a little girl dressed all in blue. A very exceptional kind of blue, Tom had never seen it before.

"Sort of like the color of the sky, on a bright summer day," Tom thought.

"Hi!" he said, shyly, because it was a very pretty girl, with rosy cheeks and brown curls down to her shoulders.

"Who are you?" he asked, "I've never seen you in school before, or in church."

"Of course not, Tom." she answered brightly, "I'm not from this town. I'm from somewhere else. And it's actually pretty cozy, up there. But I did live here once, you know. And I was feeling sort of homesick. That's why I came back. Just for a little while... I figured, it being Christmas time and all - and they make a pretty big fuss of it, back there - just maybe they won't notice that I'm gone."

Tom didn't get that at all. Why, he could understand about being temporarily forgotten, just like he was now. But any second now, his parents would remember him, and come looking for him.

"What's your name?" Tom asked, all of a sudden.

That question made the girl extremely shy.

"Well, I did have a name, once," she finally giggled, "but it's been long forgotten. You see, up where I live, names are not important anymore."

Tom didn't know what to say to that.

"But I know," she continued, "it's so terribly impolite not to introduce yourself. And I always think of myself as being Pretty Cozy. So why don't you call me just that?"

"Pretty Cozy?" It was the strangest name Tom had ever heard. But then Pretty Cozy was the strangest girl Tom had ever met.

"Hey!" went Pretty Cozy, her voice ringing with enthusiasm, as if she'd just had the wildest idea. "Why don't you go with me? It would be so nice to show somebody new around. Up there, there aren't many of my age, you know."

Now Tom, aside from being a very curious little boy, was also usually a very obedient one. So he told Pretty Cozy that he'd like to, and very much, but he'd have to see his parents about it, first.

"Oh, rubbish!" said Pretty Cozy. "We'll be gone and back before they know it." And she started towards the big side doors of the church, which were only partially opened because of the cold. And then she turned around and beckoned, smiling the loveliest smile Tom had ever seen. It was a smile he just couldn't resist. So when she turned around again and was suddenly gone, Tom ran after her through the church doors and all at once stood outside, his feet sinking inches deep in snow. Forgetting all about his snug jacket, hanging on the racks at the entrance of the church, he peered into the darkness, in all directions.

And then Tom saw the sparkling blue of her dress, standing out against the background of the woods. He started following Pretty Cozy. He wasn't really thinking, or surely he would have noticed how very cold it was and have remembered his jacket and the fact that he was being disobedient.

All he wanted to do, and all he did, was follow that sparkling blue, that loveliest of smiles. But how odd! He never seemed to be able to catch up with Pretty Cozy. Her dress appeared and then disappeared just as suddenly in the instant he headed in that direction.

All of a sudden Tom remembered how tired he was. And Oh! It was so cold. It was one of those nights in winter when the sky is clear and the moon is up. Around Tom, the woods seemed very dark. And then suddenly Pretty Cozy was right next to him. Tom was a bit angry:

"It was not nice of you, Pretty Cozy, to tease me like that. Especially when it's so cold." "Cold?" There was absolute wonder in her voice. "Whatever are you

talking about, Tom? I don't feel cold at all. I'm feeling pretty cozy, as I usually do. And anyway, it's been such a long time since I had a little fun."

Tom was too tired to argue.

"Hey!" said Pretty Cozy. "I'll show you something really neat."

She grabbed Tom's hand and before he knew it, they were floating. And again Tom forgot about his tiredness. He forgot about being angry with Pretty Cozy and he almost didn't dare ask:

"Are we flying?"

Pretty Cozy obviously was delighted with his wonder. She nodded, beaming with her smile. But Tom only believed it when he looked down. There were the tree-tops, and Pretty Cozy and he were floating ever higher.

She showed him how to move in the air, making the same movements they taught you in swim class: One good pull with your arms, and: Swish! You would glide a long way forward. Swish! And paddling your arms to the side, as Tom found out for himself, you could make loop the loops - small ones, and bigger ones - and your tummy would feel very strange.

Weird, he didn't feel the cold anymore.

And then he heard the singing! Even more beautiful than they did in church. So beautiful and wondrous was this singing that Tom wanted to get closer.

"We're very close now to where I come from!" said Pretty Cozy, and she seemed so happy that Tom couldn't help but feel happy, too.

Then he saw them; the singers. They were floating around, just like him and Pretty Cozy. They didn't move around too much, though, as if they were quite content to just float quietly in one place. Most of them were very old, some younger. Everyone was dressed in the same sparkling blue, and so close to them, their voices - not stopping for a minute - sounded like bells, bubbling chimes into the air.

The further they went, the more singers they found, and Pretty Cozy whispered solemnly:

"They're singing the Christmas Eve praise. It's almost over now. I'm glad I got back in time."

Then the singing stopped. But the sound did not go away! The air was still full of it when Tom saw a fold in the sky, sort of shimmering, towards which a singer would float... and disappear! All the singers were now retreating. Their glorious

sound, still hanging in the air, finally began to fade. It took a while, but the number of singers got less and less. Finally, it was their turn. Pretty Cozy floated towards the fold, holding Tom by the hand. And a figure in white materialized before it...

This was not a singer, Tom felt. This was somebody higher up. It seemed like the person was telling Pretty Cozy something, because she was looking at him intently, although his mouth wasn't moving. As the figure hovered before them, Pretty Cozy turned a sad face to Tom.

"They won't let you in, Tom. They say it isn't your time yet, and that I have been a selfish little girl."

Tom looked at the man in white, and he knew somehow that whatever this man said, he would be right.

"I need to take you back now, Tom," said Pretty Cozy, "or else you might get lost."

They turned away, but the man did not leave. Tom thought that he would be waiting for Pretty Cozy when she got back.

Tom didn't make any more loop the loops, as he sensed that Pretty Cozy was in a hurry. They flew back to the woods and settled down, exactly where they had left off.

Suddenly Tom was incredibly cold again, even colder than before. He was also so tired that he could just barely keep his eyes open. Pretty Cozy led him back to the edge of the forest, where the church stood. She would go no further. They could hear some excitement going on in the church. Tom was shivering.

"You had better go inside now, Tom. They're looking for you. Luckily you will only get a cold."

As if on command, Tom started sneezing.

Pretty Cozy said:

"I hope you're not mad with me."

And in between sneezes and sniffles, Tom answered:

"The flying was neat. Maybe I'll get the chance to visit you again, some day."

At that Pretty Cozy just chose to smile her pretty smile. And that is the last thing Tom remembered of her.

Tom did get very sick. His very worried parents took him home, and two weeks passed before Tom went to church again. And on that day, Tom saw Pretty Cozy for the last time.

In the very corner where he had met her, over by the lady statue and all the pictures, he saw an old lady fiddling around. He scuttled closer to see what she was doing.

She was very old. Ancient. She was taking a picture off the wall. Then she saw Tom looking.

"It's my picture," she explained to Tom. "I hung it up there, fifty years ago. It's a picture of my daughter, who died of pneumonia when she was ten. A pretty picture, isn't it? Well, we can't go on mourning forever."

But Tom barely heard the last sentence. For from the picture smiled... Pretty Cozy!

"What is... what was her name, M'am?" he stammered.

"Annabelle." she sighed.

"Annabelle..." whispered Tom.

And so ends the story of Tom and Pretty Cozy, or Annabelle, the naughty spirit that came from heaven.