

## **Shirley Bishop's Tale of Magic Pies and Witches: Hank and Ginger Go Snipe Hunting**

Deep in the rolling hills spreading out from the Appalachians, a poor new farmer and his wife left their office jobs in the city to move into a small farmhouse atop a hill. They had two children, a boy named Hank and a girl named Ginger. They had brought all the food and money they had when they moved to the farm, but after the first winter, supplies were already running low. The earth had produced for the inexperienced farmer but not well. The first year's crop of tobacco had grown puny and dried small, so the farmer and his wife had enough to buy a few staples weekly, like bread and milk, but not much else. The rest of their money had gone into mortgage payments on the land and to have a heifer slaughtered to keep meat in the freezer for the year.

And so the children were always fed, but the variety of abundant food was absent. Hank and Ginger, who heard and saw the children of their neighbors feasting on treats and the sweets of the hot July sun, jams and cakes and watermelons, longed for a sugary treat to coat the length of their tongues. They complained often and loudly to their father and mother, who quickly grew tired of their complaints. One day the father said, "You two are lucky you have food at all, since we must grow it to survive." This made the children complain even louder and hardened his resolve to make them appreciate the joy in life that comes from hard work and stewardship.

Late one evening, after the children were in bed, the mother and father complained about the daily nagging they endured from their children. What the children did not see was that their parents suffered just as much, if not more. The father and mother both knew that it would be several seasons before the farm would be fully productive. They would need to limit treats until they could afford them without danger of starvation. "What will become of us?" the farmer asked. "How can we live a life without moments of happiness to quell the bitter taste of hard work?"

"I have an idea," said his wife. "The children are strong and will survive anyway. Their youth can give them patience. We, though, are older and have fewer years, and fewer joys, left to us. When I go to town for groceries this week, I will buy us a watermelon, and we will eat it all ourselves!"

"That seems very cruel," said the farmer. "We should share it with them or not have it at all."

"Do not feel guilty," she said. "For the land to respond well to you, there must be joy in your heart. Without some of the sweetness of life, how can you find joy? The children will survive and not know the difference, and you'll be rejuvenated."

The farmer did indeed love a good watermelon more than any other treat, but his guilt worked on him. *Would there not be enough for all of us? What if the children discovered us?* Yet his wife nagged, every day, up until she left for the grocery that week. Before she left, the farmer said, "Wife, buy the things that we need, and if money remains, buy our watermelon. But, it must be a good price. Pay no more than four dollars for it, or else we will have to neglect something else."

She agreed and returned from the grocery with a small melon she had found in a manager's special bin. It was small but round and bright green. It had been flattened completely on one side as it grew. She had paid only three dollars for it. She quickly hid it in the deep freezer to cool while the children played down by the creek.

The melon was clearly too small for the four of them, so the farmer began to feel a *little* less guilty about deceiving his children. He imagined he could smell the sweet flesh of the cooling melon in the freezer even when he was out in the yard. After all the groceries were put away, his wife approached him. "Husband, we must find a way to have the children away from the house, so we can eat our melon."

The farmer, however, began to have second thoughts and wondered if he should simply give the delicious fruit to his children. His wife saw the doubt on his face and knew that he was wavering. "I will get them out of the house," she said, "and we will eat our lovely watermelon while they are gone." The farmer agreed because he knew he could not sway her.

The mother called Hank and Ginger to her and said, "Children, I know that we do not have many treats to eat and little to give you beyond the most basic foods. And I know children, I know the great cravings you have for sweets and tarts. If you can find me what I need to make a snipe pie, I will cook one up for you right away!"

Now, the children did not know what snipes were or what snipe pie was. They thought, since they had only recently moved to the country, that it must be some new great thing that people in the country would eat. "Momma, we will bring you all the snipes we can find if you will tell us what they are and where they are," said Hank.

"Snipes are rare and hard to catch," said their mother. "You will have to be patient and clever to catch one, but they are so delicious that you will hardly believe that they came from anywhere but the Lord himself!" The children's eyes widened. Their mother gave Hank a burlap sack and a baseball cap. She gave Ginger a whistle. Then she gave them their instructions. They were to go to the tobacco field farthest from the house, since snipes like to live as far away from people as possible. They were to wander deep into the rows of tobacco, now tall as a man. Hank was to hold the sack open and wait for the snipes to run in while Ginger, blowing the whistle, would call them closer. "Snipes are drawn to the sound of a whistle," their mother told them, "but be very patient because snipes are timid."

During the heat of the early afternoon, when the watermelon would taste the most wonderful, the wife asked the farmer to lead the children out to the tobacco field at the edge of the property. The children were never allowed to go there alone because it was so far. The children were playing marbles when the farmer interrupted, and he seemed so out-of-sorts that Hank simply gathered all the marbles up and shoved them in his pockets to avoid making his father angry.

Once they had arrived at the field, the farmer told the children, "Come back to the house quickly after you have done what your mother asked of you. The fields can be dangerous at night, and the coyotes will find you."

As their father turned and walked back to the farm house, Hank's head filled with the imagined pleasures of eating snipe pie. He wondered if they tasted more like strawberries or apples. "Sister, follow me and stay close. It will be easy to get lost in all this tobacco." And Hank was right, for the Burley was already four feet tall from an unseasonably wet summer. Ginger stayed close behind him. Hank knew that the field was long and wide and that they could easily lose their way. He suddenly remembered the marbles in his pocket and decided to use them to mark their path back to the edge of the field. Every few feet he dropped one onto the soil between the rows. Even though the leaves of tobacco were broad and created much shade, enough sunlight filtered through to make the tiny marbles glint cleanly and brightly along the path.

Once they had wandered far enough through the stalks for Hank to drop his last marble, they set about collecting snipes. Ginger began with short, crisp whistles, but no snipes came running. Afraid to wander far from her brother and become lost in the field, she stayed close. She tried whistling lullabies, sparrow and robin calls, and even cattle calls, but no snipes. This took quite a lot of time, and the sun began to set. The children began to be afraid.

Meanwhile, at the farmhouse, the farmer's wife fetched the watermelon from the freezer and brought it and a large knife from the kitchen. The farmer and wife sat at a weathered, red picnic table while he split the small melon cleanly in two with a sharp blow from the knife. The melon cleaved cleanly, the full ripeness of its juices dripping down on the table and through the cracks between planks. "What a delicious looking melon!" his wife exclaimed.

They each took half, and his wife greedily cut chunks of dripping melon from the rind with a butter knife. Pink juice slid from her chin, and she barely paused long enough to fully taste the flesh. The farmer seemed less enthusiastic now. He ate a piece of melon, but it felt grainy and gritty in his mouth. He wondered if the melon had begun to turn, but his wife did not seem to notice. As he thought of his children out in the fields, he added salt to the flesh of the melon to make it more edible. This worked for a bit, but the melon did not end up as wonderful as he anticipated. Instead his half tasted bitter *and* sweet, leaving him unsatisfied and feeling guilty for tricking his children.

As the sun set several hours later, the farmer and his wife became concerned, as their children had not yet returned from the tobacco fields. The farmer was just about to set out and look for them when they heard a faint whistling across the holler. Sure enough, Hank had used his marbles glinting in the twilight to bring the children back home.

Reunited with their parents, the children wailed that they had found no snipes, and Ginger cried many tears. In her imagination, she had been tasting the sweet and delicious snipe pie all day long, and now she would never have one! The farmer was worried about his children when they were gone, and he was overjoyed to see them back home.

"Never fear, children," the wife said. "There will be more snipe hunting soon enough. Give them a few days to come back, and you shall try again!" The children went to bed and had fitful dreams of sweet cakes, jellies, and pies.

Several days passed and the farmer's wife made another trip into town for groceries. This time the watermelons were not cheap, so she picked out a large musk melon with deep furrows and quickly hurried home.

Once again, she sent the farmer with the children out into the fields to snipe hunt. This time, too, he felt guilty as the first time. In for a penny, in for a pound, he figured, so because he had agreed to the plan the first time, he went along with his wife the second time.

The children, for their part, were as eager as ever. The summer had been so long and so hot that they longed for a sweet treat of any kind. This time, the children had been floating sticks down the creek and watching them race, so the only thing that Hank had with him were a few saltines as a snack. He crumbled them up in small chunks and used them to mark a path through the tobacco rows. Hank and Ginger hunted snipes for hours, and finally the sun began to set. Ginger became worried they might not find their way back this time, and Hank said, "Don't worry, sister, we will wait until the moon rises and we will be able to see the white spots of crackers against the dark earth."

But when the sun went down, the children couldn't find a single cracker crumb. The squirrels and birds had eaten some, but the rest were hidden from the moonlight under the tobacco leaves. The children were lost, and Ginger began to cry.

Meanwhile, the farmer and his wife dipped huge spoonfuls of melon from the rind. The musk melon was truly delicious, and the sweet juices ran down their chins as they ate. They heard the distant whistle for a long time out in the fields, but toward dusk, the whistling stopped, but had not come any closer. The farmer began to worry they had made a huge mistake and wanted to set out across the farm to look for the children. His wife stopped him, warning him that coddling the children would spoil them. She wanted to let them find their own way back and convinced the farmer she was right.

Back in the fields, Hank noticed a change in the wind as the land began to cool in the night. He detected a faint hint of strawberries. "Ginger!" he exclaimed, "Do you smell that? Even if we don't make our way home tonight, maybe we can at least find something delicious to eat!" And they set off, following their noses, in the direction of cooking strawberries.

The children came out from the rows of tobacco to unfamiliar territory. Across a small rise and through a white clapboard fence, they saw a small farm house with light streaming from the kitchen. They knew there were other farm houses in the countryside, but they had never seen another one near their own. As the children quietly approached, they found the source of the beautiful and sweet smells.

Along a pair of open window ledges set four pies, cooling in the air and drifting a breeze of strawberry, blackberry, persimmon, and apple. Hank, crouched on a small stump beneath the window, knew that he smelled more inside. From where he crouched, he could not see inside the house, but his nose told him that there were cakes, jams, jellies, melons, and more pies through that window. Even more, his gut knew, and it growled and hissed under the open windows. Ginger tilted her arm over her head and daintily tried to pinch a piece of crust from the

strawberry pie. Hank leaned up and took a big whiff of the blackberry pie. Suddenly, they heard a voice from inside:

“Nibble, nibble, is it a fly?  
Who’s that nibbling on my pies?”

The children replied:

“The wind so mild,  
The heavenly child.”

They each began to take pieces of the crust from each pie. Hank was about to lift the whole apple pie when suddenly the porch door opened and out stepped an old woman. “Good Lord, children! What are you all doing out here so late? Come on inside where it is safe, and we will get you back home by morning.”

The woman led the children inside and fed them every joy imaginable. They ate fried biscuits, country ham, fresh sausage, angel food cake, pickled pears, and a slice of each pie. They were so stuffed that they nearly fainted at the table, but the woman led them to the attic where she had prepared two soft beds. The children laid down like they were in heaven and fell fast asleep.

The old woman only pretended to be friendly. She was really a wicked witch who used to live in the city and had moved here to avoid competition from other witches. All witches love to eat little children and puppies, and the old woman was no different. She knew that children wandered all over in the countryside, and when she could catch one, she always had the biggest feast of the year. Ginger looked a bit scrawny, but Hank had potential. So she planned to fatten him up and make a roast while Ginger would help her make the meals. “They will make tasty morsels!” cackled the witch.

At sunrise, the witch grabbed the sleepyheaded Hank and dragged him out to a shed behind the house. She barred the door and felt no pity in her heart for his screams for help. She shook Ginger awake and told her. “I’ve locked your brother out in the corn shed for I plan to eat him. But first I want to fatten him up. Get out of bed and hurry up to get the eggs and make some for your brother. Once he’s fat enough, I’ll eat him.”

Ginger cried and cried, but the witch had a hard heart from all that she had seen in the city and ignored every tear. Ginger had to do what the witch said, and she hoped to somehow save her brother. Each day she prepared eggs, biscuits, gravy, cornbread, ham, and beans for her brother. Each night, she was given the scraps left over, barely enough to survive. At dawn each morning, the witch would go to the corn shed and ask Hank to stick his pinky finger through the crack in the door. She would squeeze Hank’s finger to see if he had fattened up. Hank cleverly stuck out a squirrel bone every day, and the witch wondered why Hank never gained any weight. She had been feeding him enough for two grown men!

After four weeks, the witch simply couldn’t wait any longer to eat those delicious children, so she commanded Ginger to light the wood stove and fetch some water in the boiling pot on top of

it. "I don't care whether Hank is still scrawny or not. Once you get the stove ready, I will slaughter him and cook him!"

"Ooooooh," wailed Ginger. "If only we had not wanted something so sweet to eat, we would not become sweets ourselves. Being eaten by wild coyotes would have been better, for we would have at least died together."

"Spare me your whining," the witch said, "You will be cooked for dinner tomorrow, so you can share your brother's fate. Now get the wood for the stove before I decide to cook you first!"

Ginger ran outside the door and went past the woodpile to the corn shed. She quickly lifted the crossbar and let him out. "The witch plans to cook us and eat us," she said. "Go get a bucket from the shed and hide behind the outhouse. When you hear me come looking for you, shout for your life into the bucket." Hank did exactly as she asked.

When Ginger returned to the witch without Hank, the witch became furious. "He wanted out to go to the bathroom," Ginger replied. "You wouldn't want him to go in your broth would you?" The witch grunted and pushed her aside. The witch left the house with Ginger following and stomped loudly to the door. "Come out Hank!" Ginger cried. "The nice old woman is ready for us to help her make lunch."

When Hank heard his cue, he started yelling, "Help! Help! Someone rescue me!" Thinking that he had fallen into the toilet and not wanting to lose a plump roast, even if she had to wash it first, the witch swung open the door and leaned over the wooden hole.

"Go get me a rope," she shouted at Ginger. Hank yelled louder as the witch leaned closer to the hole to try and see him. Instead of running for the rope, Ginger saw her opportunity. She gave the witch a huge shove on her behind, and the witch tumbled helplessly through the hole. She made a loud squishy thud at the bottom and then died from her injuries.

"We are safe now, brother," Ginger cried with joy. Hank came out from behind the outhouse with his bucket. They had nothing to fear from the witch now, so they returned to her house. Hank filled his bucket with candies and jars of sweet jams and jellies. Ginger filled her apron with delicious fruits and a country ham, and both children fled the house and turned toward where they thought home should be.

They walked for what seemed like hours before they arrived at an unfamiliar small pond. Beside it, in the shade of a chestnut tree, rested a large red dog with long curly hair. The dog stretched out and yawned.

"We are terribly lost," said Ginger. She called out to the dog:

"Help us, help us, big red dog  
Hank and Ginger are so far from home.  
There's no path, not cow or gravel,  
Help us, help get us home."

The dog stood up slowly and yawned again. He walked over to let Ginger get on, but not Hank, since he had been eating all the witch's good food and had become a bit heavy. With Ginger on his back and Hank by his side, the dog took them across the hollow and up to the next ridge where he waited for Ginger to get off his back. He laid down to sleep under the shade of a honeysuckle bush, but the children looked down over the other side of the ridge and began to recognize trees and rocks. They walked a little farther, and they soon saw the farmhouse in the distance. They ran and ran while Ginger blew her whistle the whole way.

The farmer heard the whistle in the distance and wept with joy, for he thought that his children were lost because of his own greed. He had not had a single good thing happen to him while his children were gone. His tobacco had yellowed and at least half his crop had been flooded out. His wife had died. He ran to embrace the children when they returned, and the children presented all their lovely food they had gathered. They prepared and ate the most delicious food of their lives, and the father never again desired fine foods over his family. They all lived together in perfect happiness, even after the sweets ran out.

My fairy tale is done. See the squirrel run. Whoever catches it, can make a pair of socks out of it.

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