

## Death in a Nut (Traditional)

Jack and his mother lived in a cottage beside the sea. Jack's father had died when he was young. Jack's mother took care of the house and did the washing, cooking and cleaning, and Jack tended the vegetable garden and the pigs, chickens and goat, but the best thing he liked, was going down to the beach to look for things washed up by the sea, driftwood, nets and other treasures. And fishing he loved fishing, and he was a good fisherman, so there were always fish to eat and extra money from those he sold at the village market.

Early one morning, Jack knocked on his mother's door with a cup of tea, but there was no reply. He knocked again, but there was still no reply, so he opened the door. His mother was lying pale and still, and could barely speak or take a sip of tea.

"I'm not well Jack," said his mother, " and I haven't been well for a while.. He's coming to take me soon..."

"What, do you mean, who's coming to take you?"

"Death. It's my time and Old Man Death is coming to take me."

"Nooo! You can't die, you're all I've got. I love you. No-one's taking you!"

"Hush now Jack, I have to rest so you'd better go. Why don't you go down to the beach and have a walk . You like that..."

So Jack obeyed his mother as he always did and walked down to the seashore.

### **Turn turn, turn**

It was autumn and the fields were full of golden yellow wheat, waving in the morning breeze. The fruit trees were laden with apples and pears, their branches bent down with the weight of the ripe fruit, and plump cattle grazed contentedly in the paddocks. Bees buzzed lazily about looking for the last blooms to deposit their offerings of pollen. When Jack got to the beach walking along thinking about his mother,

suddenly he saw a dark figure in the distance. It was an old man dressed in ragged back robes with a hood covering a sunken face and he was carrying a

scythe. As he got closer Jack saw that his face was withered up like a skull and instantly he knew that it was Old Man Death.

The old man stopped and quite politely asked him the way to the next cottage.

"Nooo!" cried Jack "you're not going there, that's my mother's house."

"Well," said the old man, "she's ill and in pain. It's natural you know. It's time for her to go."

"Nooo! You're not taking her!" and with that Jack grabbed his scythe and smashed it on the rocks.

"Young man, you've done it now," said Death and the two of them piled into each other, trading fearsome blows, whack, whack, whack, with Jack leaping into the air to hit the old man. And then, the strangest thing started to happen. Every time Jack hit him, Death got smaller and smaller, until he was smaller than Jack's little finger and could fit in the palm of his hand. Jack looked around and spied a hazelnut shell on the beach, with a hole where a squirrel had taken the kernel, and he squeezed Death into the hole and plugged it up with a stick. Then with one mighty heave, he threw it far into the ocean and watched it bobbing away on the waves, and then he ran home.

When he reached the cottage he heard the sound of his mother's singing coming out of the window, and when he went inside his mother was up and doing the dishes. Jack said nothing of what had happened on the beach

"Goodness me, I feel so much better!" said his mother, "go and get some eggs and we'll have them for breakfast."

So Jack went into the henhouse and came back with half a dozen big brown eggs. His mother took an egg and cracked it on the side of a bowl. Clunk! It wouldn't break. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Neither would any of the others.

"That's funny," said his mother, "it's a though they've turned to stone. Go and get some vegetables and we'll have them instead."

So Jack went into the garden and pulled up some nice plump carrots, some turnips and a cauliflower. But when his mother tried to chop them, the knife just skidded off.

"Strange." said his mother, "They've gone just like the eggs. Go and kill one of the chooks. We'll roast that instead."

So Jack caught a chicken, but no sooner had he wrung its neck, it unwrung itself and off went the chook, flapping and clucking."

"Mum! I can't kill it." cried Jack.

"Oh, give it to me." said his mother, grabbing a cleaver. " I'll chop its head off."

But no sooner had she chopped off the chickens head than it flew straight back onto the body. Every time she chopped it off it jumped straight back on again.

"How peculiar." said Jacks mother, "Here, take this money and go and get half a pound of bacon from the butcher."

So Jack put on his scarf and walked into town. When he arrived, there was a noisy crowd milling around in the town square, but Jack went straight to the butcher's and plonked his money on the counter.

"Half a pound of bacon please Mr Butcher." said Jack.

"There'll be no bacon today my lad, can't kill a pig, not even with my sharpest knife. As soon as I slit its throat, the blood stops flowing, the cut heals up, and off he goes, oinking and grunting. Same with the bullock. Soon as I cut its head off, its back on again. Its as though nothing will die now. The whole town's in an uproar. You mark my words boy, somebody's been up to something."

Then Jack realized. He ran straight home. He told his mother the whole story about how he had fought death and imprisoned him in the nut.

"Oh Jack!" she said, " you shouldn't have done that. I was ready to go this morning. Death is a friend, not an enemy, we need him to survive. If nothing dies, then nothing can live. Nothing can be born or grow, there's no food or nourishment. There's a time for everything Jack. I've taught you everything I know, and you can look after yourself. Its time you made your own way in the world. When I'm returned to the earth you can tell my stories to your own children. Now go and find that nut!"

## Turn, turn, turn

So Jack ran down to the beach and searched for the nut. He searched and searched for three days until finally he sat down bone weary on a rock. And that's when he saw the hazelnut with the stick in the top bobbing away among the waves. He waded in, grabbed the nut and pulled out the stick. Out came Old Man Death grumbling and rubbing his aching limbs.

"You broke my scythe Jack." he said, " You thought by getting rid of me you'd solve all your troubles, but you just made more, didn't you ..."

Jack looked around and found the broken scythe. He mended it with some string and set it on the old man's shoulder. Then Death looked Jack straight in the eye and asked him politely again...

"Which way to the next cottage Jack?"

This time Jack told him and watched as Old Man Death walked slowly up the beach and out of sight. Then Jack walked home again. This time, however, there was no singing coming from the cottage window and the kitchen was empty. Jack climbed the stairs to where he knew his mother would be, lying in her bed as cold and pale as the sheets. He bent and put his ear on her chest. There was no breath or heartbeat – she was dead.

Jack called all her friends to the cottage and they drank and had a feast. They sang her favourite songs and told her stories. They remembered all the good times and some of the worst. They cried a little and laughed a lot. Then they took Jack's mother to the churchyard and buried her in the earth.

Then Jack went back to the cottage and gathered a few of his belongings. He found the bag of coins they always kept for a rainy day and set off to find his own way in the world.