

The Mouse Café

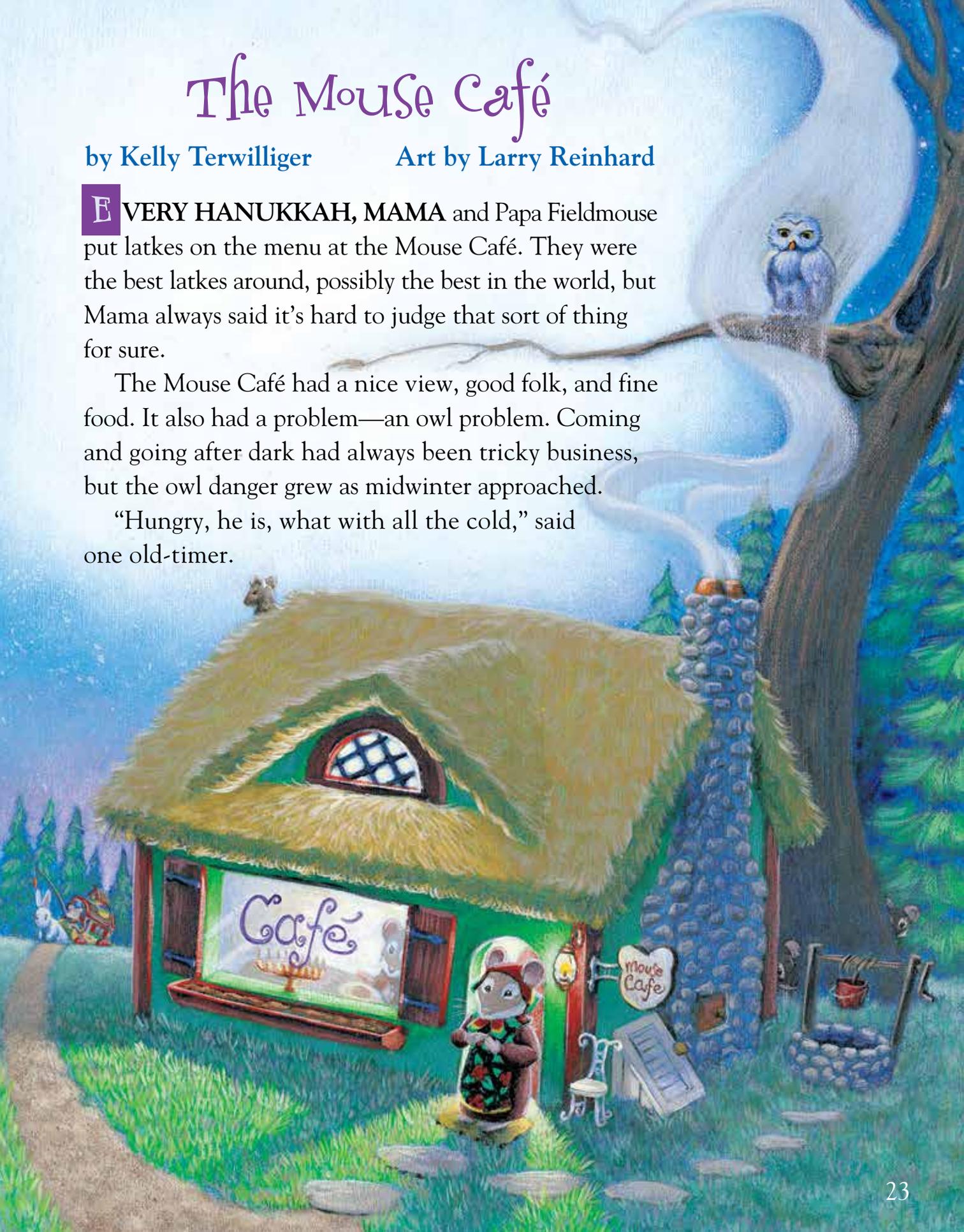
by Kelly Terwilliger

Art by Larry Reinhard

EVERY HANUKKAH, MAMA and Papa Fieldmouse put latkes on the menu at the Mouse Café. They were the best latkes around, possibly the best in the world, but Mama always said it's hard to judge that sort of thing for sure.

The Mouse Café had a nice view, good folk, and fine food. It also had a problem—an owl problem. Coming and going after dark had always been tricky business, but the owl danger grew as midwinter approached.

“Hungry, he is, what with all the cold,” said one old-timer.



“Depressed,” said another. “When I get glum, I eat. So does he.”

“I don’t fancy being an owl’s comfort, myself,” said a third.

And so as Hanukkah approached, the Mouse Café stood empty. Every window had a menorah waiting to be lit. Every table had dreidels waiting to be spun. Possibly the best latkes in the world sizzled in the kitchen, but nobody came.

“It’s all right, Mama,” said Cheese and Whisker. “We can have Hanukkah with just us, you know.”

“Of course,” said Mama. “But there are lots of lonely folks out there. It’s a shame we can’t celebrate together.” She lit the menorahs. The light glimmered in the empty café, and faint, mysterious music floated up from the path outside.

They heard a tap on the door.

“Who could that be?” said Papa, as he rose to answer it.

An old gentleman mouse stood on the step. White flakes dusted his coat. It had begun to snow.

“Come in,” said Mama and Papa. “Please, warm yourself!”

The mouse hung up his coat and sat down. Cheese and Whisker brought him warm cider and a plate of latkes.

“Ah!” he said, taking a bite. “The best latkes in the world!”

“Oh,” said Mama, “It’s hard to judge that sort of thing for sure.”

The holidays are over! Pack everything up.



Wait! Which box does this go in?



That’s the menorah—a special holder for nine candles—it goes in the Hanukkah box.



Don’t forget the dreidels—the spinning tops!



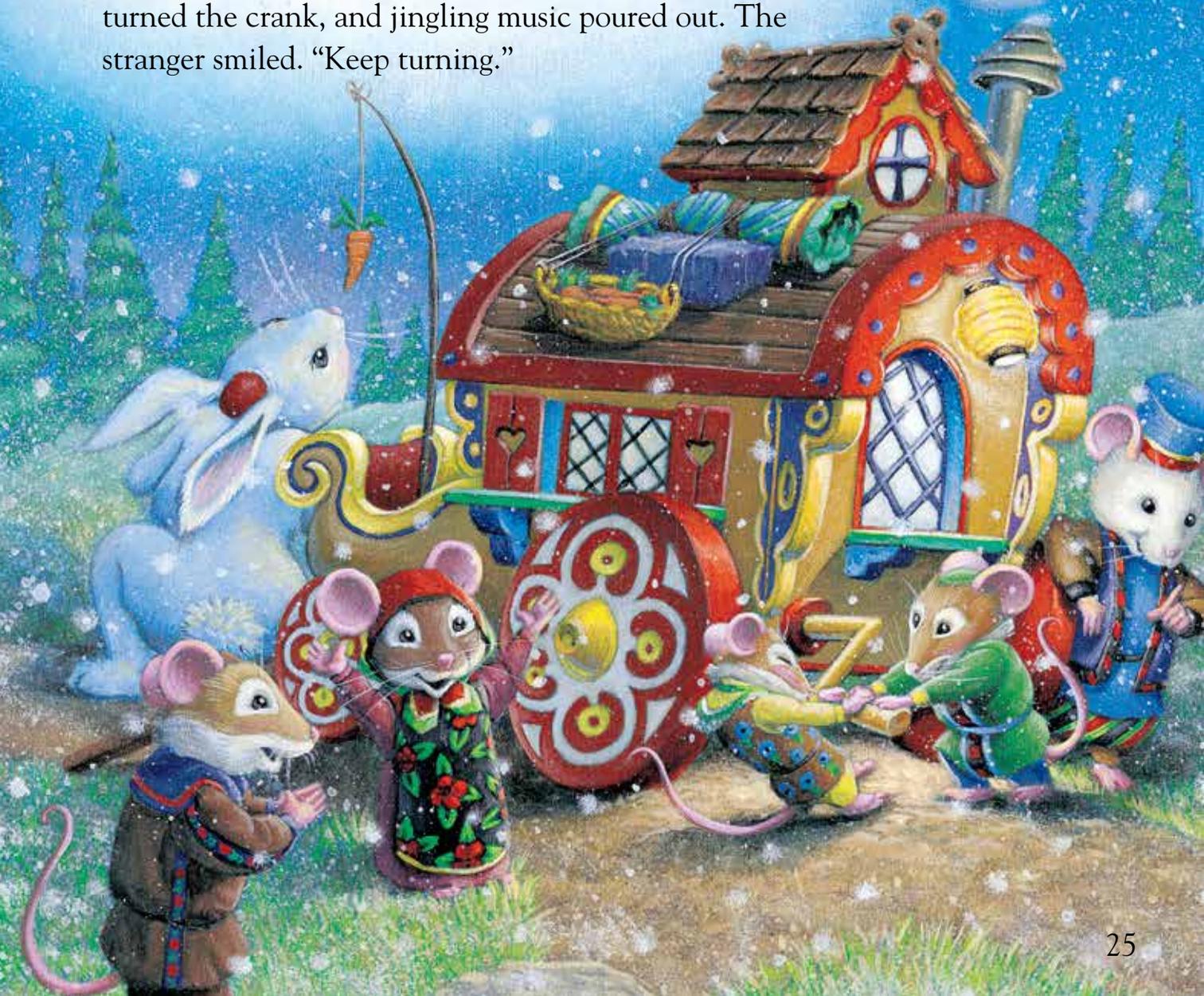
The old mouse nodded. "Such delicious latkes, and nobody here but me. It does seem a shame, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Papa. He explained about the owl. "Folks are afraid to come," he concluded. "I can't blame them."

The stranger was quiet. "I have an idea," he said. "Come with me!" He led Cheese and Whisker outside. A painted house on wheels sat in front of the Mouse Café.

"My home," the old mouse said. It was beautiful. Near the back was a crank. Cheese and Whisker stared.

"Turn it," said the old mouse. Cheese and Whisker turned the crank, and jingling music poured out. The stranger smiled. "Keep turning."



Carefully, he opened a door on the side of the house, and out popped a tiny stove. He lit it, waited, and nodded. “I will be back,” he said. “Keep turning the crank, and no harm will come to you!”

It grew darker. Eyes peered from forest shadows, but no one dared to come out.

The old mouse returned with Papa and a bowl of grated potato. “If you will fry up a latke here on my stove, we shall attempt my plan,” he said.

“Isn’t this something!” said Papa, examining the stove. He waited while the oil heated, then dropped in a dollop of potato. It smelled delicious! Cheese and Whisker turned and turned the crank. The music tinkled into the night like stars while the snow fell softly around them. Then a low hoot echoed across the meadow. The mice froze.

“Keep the music going, my friends,” said the old mouse softly. “Never fear! And you, sir, flip that latke as high as you can.”

Papa gave the latke a mighty flip, and it went twirling up, up, up into the air. When it came down, it was dusted with snow that had not yet fallen. The owl hooted once more, closer this time.

“Again!” whispered the mouse. So the little mice turned the crank, and Papa flipped the latke even higher than before.

“One more time!” whispered the old mouse. The latke soared. As they watched it fall, a dark shape swooped out of the trees and snatched it from the air. With a low hoot and a flap of enormous wings, the owl flew away.





There was silence—Cheese and Whisker had forgotten the crank. Then a cheer went up from the edge of the wood. At least for a while, the owl was gone!

The next night, they did it all over again. This time Mama fried the latkes and flipped them into the sky. Again, the owl swooped by to grab one before flying off. And so it continued: each night, forest folk waited while the music played and the latkes flew until the owl had made its Hanukkah catch and soared away.

¡Caramba! We have a lot of holiday stuff.



By the time we pack it all up it will be the holidays again!



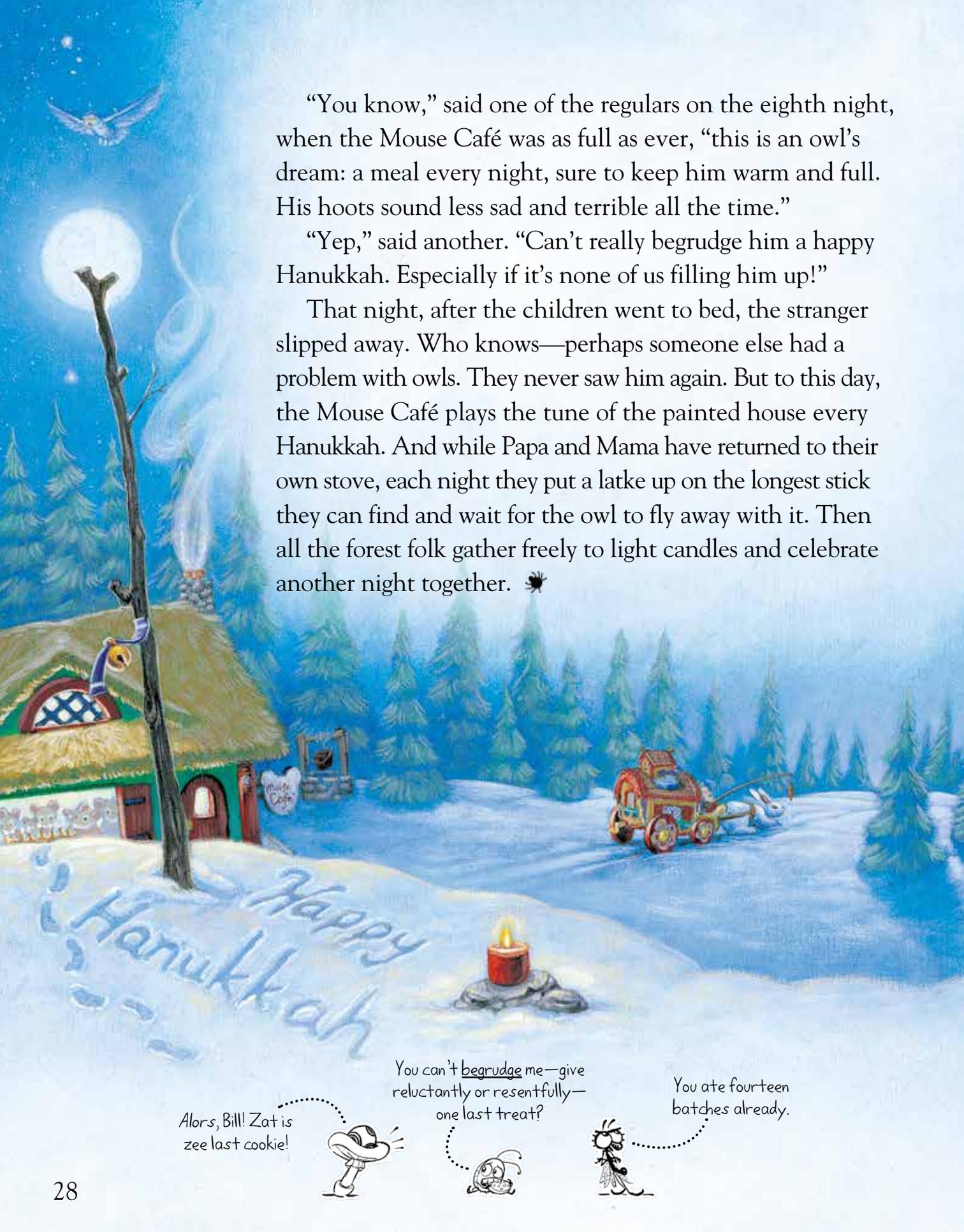
Can't we just leave the decorations up all year?



“You know,” said one of the regulars on the eighth night, when the Mouse Café was as full as ever, “this is an owl’s dream: a meal every night, sure to keep him warm and full. His hoots sound less sad and terrible all the time.”

“Yep,” said another. “Can’t really begrudge him a happy Hanukkah. Especially if it’s none of us filling him up!”

That night, after the children went to bed, the stranger slipped away. Who knows—perhaps someone else had a problem with owls. They never saw him again. But to this day, the Mouse Café plays the tune of the painted house every Hanukkah. And while Papa and Mama have returned to their own stove, each night they put a latke up on the longest stick they can find and wait for the owl to fly away with it. Then all the forest folk gather freely to light candles and celebrate another night together. 🦉



Alors, Bill! Zat is zee last cookie!



You can't begrudge me—give reluctantly or resentfully—
one last treat?



You ate fourteen batches already.

