

Stanley Squirrel

Saves the Solstice

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Illustrations by Chad Bruce

Every day during Woodland School recess, the squirrels would scamper through the trees. Little Stanley Squirrel would trail after the other squirrels, but he could never quite keep up.

When the gray squirrels – with their bushy gray tails – leaped onto a tree, the limbs would sink beneath their weight then snap back. “We do the bounce!” they’d cry.

When the red squirrels climbed to the tippy top of the trees, they would chatter so loud that the bird chicks would fly to another part of the forest playground. “Fly away, fly away,” the red squirrels snickering after them.

Stanley longed to enjoy himself the way the other squirrels did. He most envied Foxy, a giant fox squirrel who would climb the tree next to a shed, then jump down to it – thud – causing the rickety little building to shake. “Who’s the boss, fur balls?” Foxy would sneer as he strutted across the roof.

Stanley’s tiny size and stubby little tail embarrassed him. Self-conscious, he’d slink off to the edge of the forest and practice soaring from one small pine tree to another. A flying squirrel, not even half the size of the others, Stanley couldn’t jump or thump, but he hoped one day to fly. Day after day, he would put on the special daytime flying glasses his mom had made and leap into the air. He practiced flying by extending all four of his paws and using the web of skin that ran down his sides like a parachute. “I have my own kind of wings,” he’d whisper to himself.

One day, the other squirrels followed him. They watched him make his small but courageous leaps. Bullies often ridicule what they don’t understand. They lined up in the trees and made fun of Stanley.

“He’s such a runt the branches don’t even move when he lands,” taunted the gray squirrels.

“Look. He wants to be a bird, but those aren’t real wings,” mocked the red squirrels.

Hearing the commotion, Foxy followed the sounds. He lumbered onto Stanley’s branch, almost breaking it. “Why do you wear those goofy sunglasses, runt? Are you trying to be cool? You’re not. I’m not even sure why the teachers let you into squirrel class.”

A bell rang. Recess had ended.



“Let’s go,” barked Foxy to the others. He looked at Stanley and scowled, “Loser!”

When they left, Stanley stayed on his branch, sniffing. The tears in his eyes made his glasses steam. Because he could see very well in the dark, the daylight hurt his eyes. His parents made him wear the sunglasses his mom made to protect them. He hated those glasses.

“The other squirrels will never like me,” Stanley moaned. “Maybe I am a loser.”

At home that night, Stanley told his parents what happened and how it made him feel. “Oh, honey,” his mom said and hugged him. He felt better with her webbed arms wrapped around him like a blanket.

“You are not a loser, son,” his dad said in a stern voice. “One day, the others will see you for what you are.” He smiled and continued explaining, “With their shiny teeth and big fluffy tails, those other squirrels have it easy. But, if you keep practicing your flying, you’ll have a chance to impress other animals along your way.”

“And what’s the most important thing we’ve taught you?” His mom asked.

“Be kind,” Stanley grinned. His big eyes sparkled. Scampering off to his nest for the night, Stanley smiled at his parents. “I’m going to practice my soaring every day,” he vowed to himself as he fell asleep.

Two months later, snow covered the ground. Excitement grew as all the animals gathered to celebrate the changing of the seasons. Each year, the animals found the prettiest tree in the woodland.

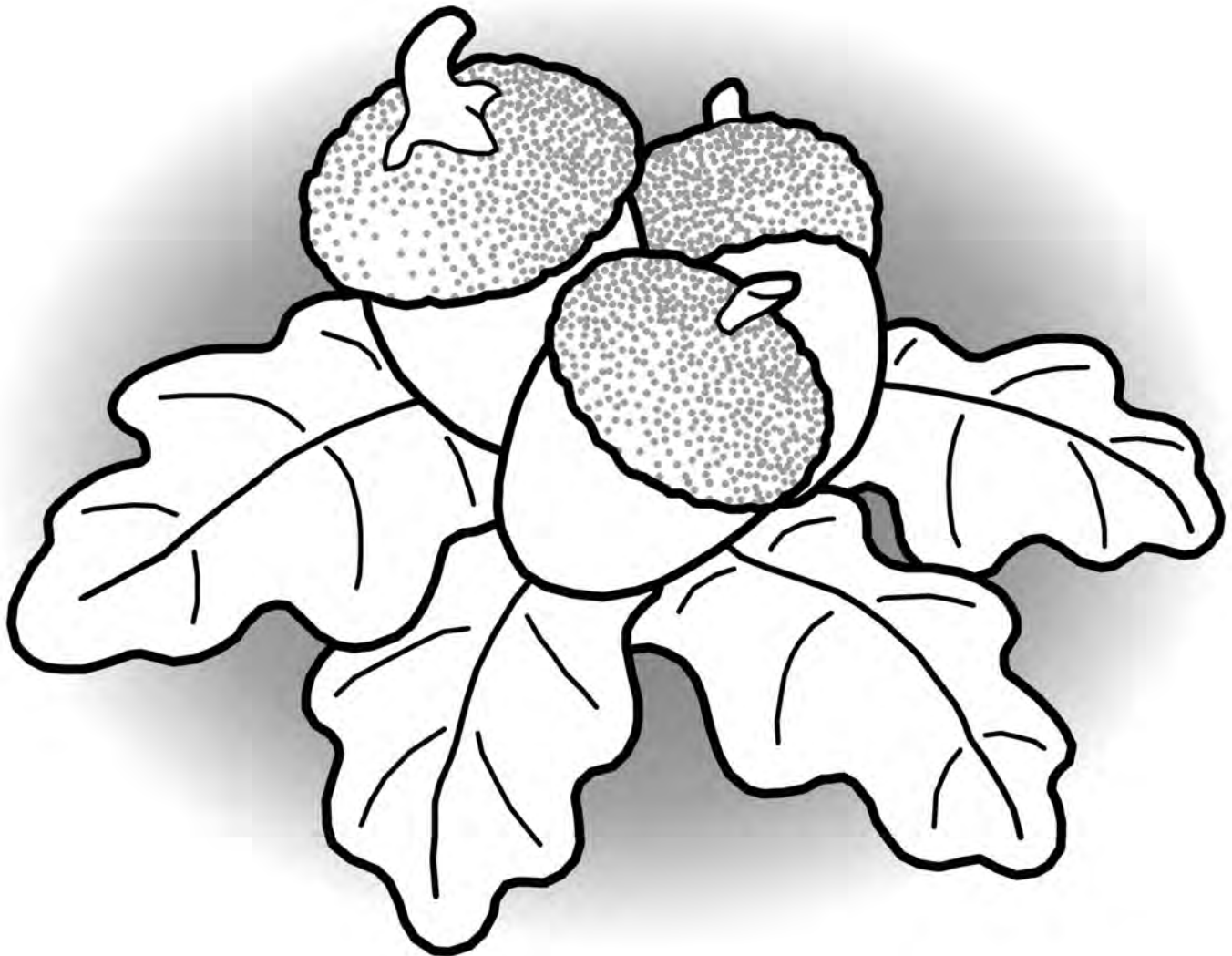
The day of the winter solstice, young critters brought ornaments to decorate the tree. Stanley and his parents arrived early for the festivities. They brought horse chestnuts to tie on the pine's thick branches. Stanley and his mom had painted them gold.

“How beautiful,” exclaimed Ms. Raccoon, who was supervising the decoration. She praised each new item the animals brought for the tree. The deer brought moss they'd scraped from tree trunks with their antlers. The bears brought shiny berries. The rabbits hopped forward with milkweed pods, brimming with silky white seeds. Every animal contributed something as mice scampered up the branches to deck the tree higher and higher with ornaments. In no time, the tree was finished.

“We're done,” Ms. Raccoon announced. All the animals cheered.

A nuthatch chirped, “But what about the star? We flew south to collect fireflies. We brought them back and the woodpeckers made a lovely star to put them in.” Several chickadees appeared, carrying the twinkling star. They tried to set it on the treetop, but it was so heavy they could only fly a few feet before sinking back to the ground.

Ms. Raccoon clapped her paw over her mouth. “Oh, no. We were supposed to put the star on first. If the mice try to take it to the top now, they could break the beautiful ornaments we all worked so hard to make.”



“It’s too heavy for the birds to fly it that high in the air,” the nuthatch said in a sad chirp.

“I’ll do it,” Foxy stomped forward.

“No thank you, Foxy,” fretted Ms. Raccoon, shaking her head. “You’re too heavy for the delicate branches of that pine.”

“Let us do it!” The gray and red squirrels ran forward.

“Every one of you is too heavy,” Ms. Raccoon sighed. “We’ll have just have to sing our way into the new season without any light on our tree.”

All the animals groaned. The bobcat’s meow sounded like she was crying. The fox blinked back tears.

Stanley remembered what his mom had said about being kind. While he could see fine in the dark, he couldn’t allow everyone else’s Solstice to be ruined. And... he had been practicing his soaring.

In a small voice, he said, “I can do it, Ms. Raccoon. If the other squirrels can help me carry the star up that oak tree across the way, I can jump across. I’ll coast with the star over to the top of the pine. I’m small enough that I won’t shake the other ornaments off the tree. Besides, I see really well in the dark.”

Ms. Raccoon smiled down at Stanley. “I agree, Stanley. This is the perfect job for you.”

Moments later, Stanley clung to the top of the solstice tree, the twinkling firefly star firmly in place. Below him, the animals clamored with delight.

Stanley smiled and soared back to the nearby oak tree where the other squirrels waited, feeling a warm glow in his chest. His mom hadn’t told him how nice being kind would feel.

After Stanley and the others climbed down the forest floor, they all sang carols until the sun set. The short bright day gave way to the longest night of the year.



