

SPIRITED SQUIRRELS



Once there was an old man who lived in a stone house in the mountains. His friends were the animals. He would call to them, “Klk, klk, klk. Come, my wild friends.” Shy deer, bold moose, black-winged magpies, and a small red tree squirrel came to eat from his gnarled hands.

The red tree squirrel lived in a fir tree with branches that sagged over the old man’s porch. The man scattered seeds for the birds, but he hid special peanuts behind a shovel for the little squirrel. The squirrel kept her biggest cache of seeds and nuts in a tall metal can on the old man’s back porch. She worked very hard through the summer and filled the can to its brim.

“Klk, klk, klk,” the man called, and the feisty squirrel jumped from a tree branch right into his arms. The old man chuckled as she ate nuts out of his pockets. Then she took a few more and scurried off to hide them in the metal can.

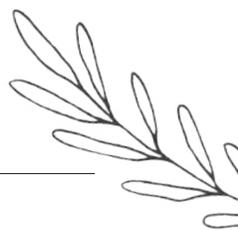
One autumn night raccoons rummaged noisily on the old man’s back porch. When sunlight spilled through his window, the man heard the small squirrel’s shrill cry. “Chchchchchchh!” She had discovered that the raccoons had tipped over her cache in the night and stolen all her food. She faced starvation in the snowy months ahead.

The man scooped her into his hands and whispered, “I’m sorry, little one. I know how hard you worked.”

The small squirrel ignored his comforting words and wiggled to get away.

The man whispered again. “Don’t you know that I am the one who put all those nuts behind the shovel in the first place? Trust me. I won’t let you starve.” The squirrel squirmed harder, screeched, and bit his finger, as though blaming him for not protecting her cache.

Surprised, the man gently put her down and wrapped a bandage around his finger. A big tear rolled down his cheek—partly because the squirrel’s food had been stolen, but even more because she didn’t trust him after all this time.





The little red squirrel kept right on screeching into the winter. The wind howled. Snow swirled and sifted down like powdered sugar over the stone house, and into the empty metal can on the porch. As icicles grew thicker from the eaves of the stone house, the red squirrel grew thinner in her nest.

She missed the man's soft voice. She wished that she hadn't bitten him. She called weakly for his help, "Chcht . . . chcht." But thunder suddenly crashed, smothering her faint cries.

But the wind picked up the squirrel's cries and carried her plea to the old man. He had sharp ears and knew the voice of his small friend. He smiled broadly. After the storm had passed, he placed fresh nuts in the metal can. Then he called her. "Klk . . . klk . . . klk."

The small squirrel pricked her ears. She gathered her strength and struggled through the snow to the metal can. The man stood there, holding peanuts in his gnarled hands. She rubbed her nose against his fingers.

Each day for the rest of the winter, she found the metal can filled with nuts again. She grew plump. In the spring she had two downy babies. Thanks to her cache, she was able to feed them and herself.

As aspen trees threw out light green leaves, the old man called his wild friends, "Klk, klk, klk." Shy deer, bold moose, black-winged magpies, and the small, red tree squirrel trusted his gentle voice and came again to eat from his hands. The old man scattered seeds for the birds, but he hid peanuts behind a shovel for the special little squirrel.

Sometimes the man put a peanut in his shirt pocket. The little squirrel scampered up his long white beard to snatch the nut. And sometimes she nestled in his pocket, next to his beating heart, and fell asleep.

