

A Winter Solstice Tale

By Dirk J. Spruyt.

Once upon a time, in a place called Chapel Hill, there grew a great oak tree. It was a quiet place except for the traffic and except when the Gray Squirrel kids were chasing each other around. The oak tree was their home, their territory, the place Ma and Pa squirrel defended mostly against other squirrels. It was where they found their food—the young buds and flowers in the spring and, in the fall, thousands of acorns, which kept the squirrels busy burying them and digging them up in the winter when other foods weren't available.

The oak tree was where they had their nest, high up in a crotch. They made it of oak leaves. It wasn't what you would call a tight dwelling but it kept them protected from some of the rain and they could lie close together to keep each other warm. Most importantly, the nest kept them out of sight of the hawks and the owls when the oak had lost most of its leaves.



In the summer Ma squirrel had her three babies, Bro, Sis and another who earned the name Clutsy. Clutsy was smaller than his brother and sister, didn't grow as fast and was always getting into trouble. He was happy, unaware of danger and very curious. As a baby his mother kept having to pull him in when he tried to crawl out of the nest and he paid no attention when his parents warned him of danger. He was usually lucky to land on a nearby lower branch when he fell off the one he was on. He sometimes couldn't jump as far as the branch his brother or sister had escaped to when they played tag. So he had many falls but never complained. He wasn't afraid of people and once was almost carried away by a dog.

Clutsy was slow at gathering acorns and got distracted when he chanced upon a beetle, a spider, a centipede or any of a hundred creatures that lived in, on and around the oak tree. He had long conversations with a mole. All

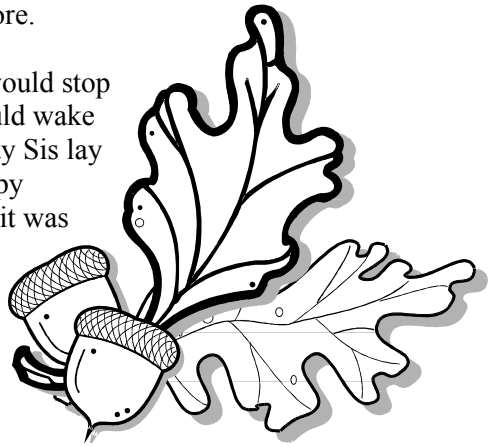
these creatures knew and liked Clutsy. Of course most of them had tucked themselves away in some safe place for the winter but on a bright sunny day some of them would stretch out and be sociable.

It was about the time of the winter solstice on a cold, cloudy day with a light, intermittent rain. Bro, Sis and Clutsy were bored and decided to explore the very top of the oak tree. With the leaves gone, the view was spectacular. Clutsy was thinking about how nice it would be to fly when his sister said, "You're it!" and took off to the end of a branch and jumped to another below.

Clutsy was close behind. When his sister jumped the branch swung away, in the wrong direction, so that Clutsy's jump was short. He didn't make it to a branch below. There was no branch below, not for a long way down. And by that time he was facing up, not down. The branch he might have grabbed struck him on the back of his head and knocked him out.

He landed with a thud and was very still. Bro and Sis came looking for him and tried to wake him up. They went and told their Ma and Pa. Clutsy, though small for his age, was too big to carry up the tree to the nest. He would have to take care of himself. Their mother told them that like some other times, he would come to and be all right. It started to rain and get dark and cold. There were only four squirrels in the nest that night, the longest night of the year. And down on the ground Clutsy got wetter and colder until he was as cold as the ground and a squirrel no more.

As the days and weeks passed, Bro and Sis would stop where Clutsy lay hoping by some miracle he would wake up. So it happened one very still, sunny, warm day Sis lay down next to Clutsy and thought she heard a happy sound that reminded her of her little brother. But it was very faint and coming from underneath where he lay. She went to his other side and she could hear it there also. She called for Bro to come. He said she must be losing her mind. Just to shut her up, he came and listened and, yes, he thought he heard something too.



They listened for a long time. The sound was like a hundred voices saying something over and over, something like—could it be?—something like “Thank you, Clutsy, thank you.” They went back to the nest and told their mother. “Yes,” she said. “The oak tree is saying the same thing.”

“But why? What does it mean?” they asked.

“Clutsy is becoming,” their mother replied, “some of the white, hairy mold and the black mold. He is becoming part of the smallest creatures that feed on and break down the leaves and twigs. He is nourishing the hair roots of the oak tree and will be in all parts of next year's growth, the growth ring on the trunk, new leaves, flowers and acorns. And before another longest winter night comes, something of Clutsy will be part of each of us—happy, curious, and friendly and having no difficulty jumping from one branch to another.”

