

The Clever Foursome

An Advent Story
Fourth Sunday of Advent

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“So much for all your scheming!” The crow stared at the closed window.

The squirrel eyed the woefully few nuts in front of her and sighed. “It was going so well. Now I will starve after all.”

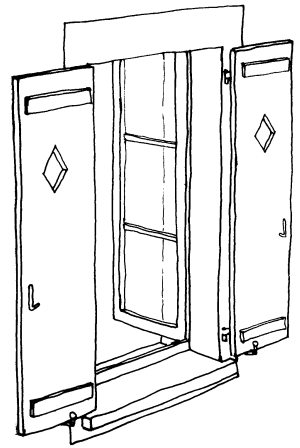
“Why all this moping? I always get in through the window of the front room,” said the magpie unruffled.

“Are you sure?” After all the setbacks, the squirrel barely dared to hope. “I don't know how many more cold nights I can take. I don't have a warm nest like you.”

“Sure you have. There is an abandoned nest a few branches up and on the other side of the tree trunk,” the magpie said to soothe the squirrel. “I haven't seen the woodpeckers for a few weeks now.”

In the twilight, an uneven black oval was the only visible sign of the entrance. She explored the inside of the hollow with her front paws. It was deep. She barely reached the bottom before she had to let go with her hind feet. She curled up on the wood that soon warmed to the touch of her body. If the deal held and she could fill this refuge with nuts, she would not go hungry this winter.

At first light, the squirrel flitted passed the crow to the closed window. She could not see much past the



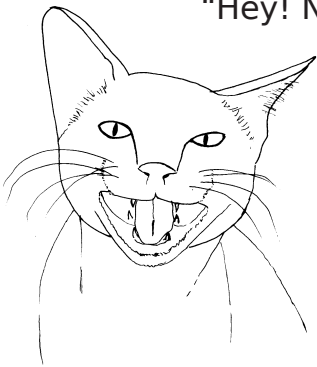
cat who lay on the sill and pressed his nose against the glass. Impatiently, the squirrel jumped back onto the nearest branch and paced its length.

“Stop fidgeting. I want to sleep,” complained the crow.

Finally, the cat turned his head and the squirrel barely had time to hide behind a few twigs before Niklaus opened the window. “What is the matter with you, Mouser? Why are you in the cold attic and not on the warm stove?”

Niklaus scratched the cat between his ears before he left. A few moments later the squirrel heard the door close.

She darted past the cat, jumped onto the first sack she found and started to chew through the coarse fabric.



“Hey! Not so fast! Our deal only stands if I get my roast!”

Behind her the magpie soothed the cat. “Don't worry about the closed door. I'll fly through the window to get my tinsel.”

With her first haul, the squirrel slipped out between the magpie and the distracted cat.

“Which means that you will get your tinsel. But how will I get my roast?”

“Just wait at the door and meow and scratch when you hear me croak. I'll wait inside until Niklaus opens the door. When he sees me, I'll escape through the window with the tinsel.”

“Seems to be your lucky day,” purred the cat

when the squirrel ran past him again. “Time for a nap in the warm kitchen.” He jumped out onto the closest branch and disappeared.

The squirrel sat on her tired hunches and stuffed the last nuts into her cheeks when the door creaked behind her and the floor vibrated with each heavy step.

She sprung to her feet, tripped over a nut and tumbled to the floor. “Hey you thief!” Nuts crunched under Niklaus’ shoes.

The squirrel raced to the window and leaped to the nearest branch.

“What a mess! Looks like you have stolen enough nuts for the entire winter.”

The chuckle in the last words slowed her wild flight and she looked back. With a smile on his face, Nikolaus placed a few nuts on the small ledge outside the window before he closed it.

With a full belly, the squirrel kept watch on the front room window. Head and belly rested on the branch and her arms dangled over it.



Her eyelids were drooping again, when a rustling noise roused her. Niklaus’ wife stood at the window and shook out her feather duster. The squirrel barely breathed until the woman stepped back. Listening to every noise from the house, the squirrel prayed that the woman would leave the window open when she was done.

Finally she heard the door latch snap in place. “It’s

time, magpie. The window is open and the coast is clear.”

The magpie appeared in the open window with its first beak full of tinsel as the crow landed next to the squirrel. “One. Two. Three. Four. Five.” he counted. “And now the fun starts.”

The cat yowled in the house, a door slammed and a second later the magpie shot out of the window. The tinsel flapped behind her like a banner in a storm.

The cat jumped onto the window sill, hissed and snarled. Niklaus stepped up behind him just as the magpie disappeared among the branches.

“Oh Mouser, you poor kitty. And we blamed you for the mess last year.” He lifted Mouser on his arm and stroked his back. “How can we ever make it up to you. Oh, I know, you will get at least two slices of the roast and some treats right away.” One of the cat's eyes closed to a small slit while the other winked at the squirrel before he was carried off.

Lazily, the squirrel gazed up at the strands of tinsel that stirred in the breeze. One after another they disappeared as the magpie wound them around the fine branches sticking out of the nest.

On one of the branches close to the kitchen door, the crow impatiently hopped from one foot to the other. Finally the door opened and Niklaus placed the cat food on the doorstep. The door had barely closed behind Niklaus when the crow flew down and gorged himself on it.

The air grew cold and the squirrel finally roused herself from her stupor. She climbed up leisurely to her new home.

Inside, she curled up, not caring that the nuts made for a bumpy bed. “Now I am ready for winter to come.” She closed her eyes and happily fell asleep.



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