

MISTLETOE

One Year in the Life of An Eastern Gray Squirrel

by

Jim Conrad

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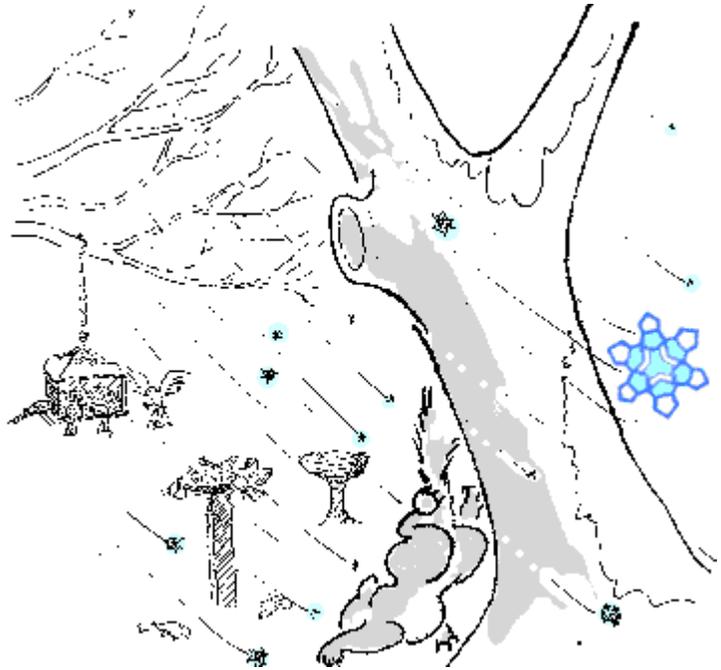
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JANUARY (THE SNOW)

The big jump, four legs spread wide, tail streaming afterwards... Our squirrel -- her name is Mistletoe -- sails from the Black Oak toward the house, for an instant almost flying through dark, early-morning sky.

Landing lightly at the rooftop's lower corner, she silently bounds for a few seconds along the green metal gutter, then leaps into the Sugar Maple. Scrambling downward through the tree's black maze of leafless branches and twigs, in seconds she reaches the resting spot on the trunk four feet above the ground. Here she clings, her whole body pressed close to the cold bark, her fuzzy tail pointing straight toward the sky, nothing between her and the sunflower seeds on the ground but fear.



For, somewhere inside the hedge of Privet bushes there may be something dangerous hiding, something like a cat which in half a second can rush from the shadows and kill. As Mistletoe waits, glancing from side to side again and again, all the time she is aware of this:

Something in this new day feels strange. The morning's icy air tingles with anticipation. Every wild creature on Peace Hill and in the entire city must smell and taste and feel this troubling something.

So busy, so busy, so busy is every bird visiting the Alexanders' feeding station. The Carolina Chickadees, the Tufted Titmice, the Blue Jays, the Purple Finches, the Mourning Doves, all stuffing themselves as if never again will they have a chance to eat. How greedily these birds push and peck at one another and nervously flit from spot to spot.

The weather is not good. At 8:00 o'clock on this unsettling morning the sky grows darker, not lighter. However, even as Mistletoe clings to the Sugar Maple's trunk, this hard-to-talk-about feeling in the air is crystallizing into something understandable. Yes, out of this fearful-looking sky, carried on bone-chilling breezes that just now are beginning to stir, there begin to fall amazingly large, widely spaced snowflakes.

In slow motion they fall, not hurrying to reach the earth at all. Soundlessly they shatter onto the ground, leaving powdery, white splotches looking like teaspoons of white sugar dumped for no good reason. Because the ground is frozen, the snowflake-powder doesn't melt.

The Alexanders' backyard is surrounded by a dense Privet hedge and tall trees. Since Jan, the mother, loves to watch birds from her kitchen window, just outside her window stand two bird feeders and a birdbath. One feeder looking like a basketball-size, four-sided, plastic lantern dangles from a low-arching branch of the big Hackberry. The second feeder is just a wooden tray nailed to a post stuck into the ground.

Mistletoe's favorite visiting place is beneath the second feeder. That's because every morning Jan scoops a heap of store-bought sunflower seeds into this feeder. As soon as she returns inside Cardinals and Blue Jays swoop down and gorge themselves. But these are messy birds who often knock as many seeds onto the ground as they eat. Therefore, if a squirrel noses into the spongy carpet of empty sunflower-seed hulls that for years has accumulated below the feeder, it's always easy to find a few unopened seeds! And how plump, and oily, and tasty those wonderful sunflower-seed kernels are...

All at once Mistletoe leaps onto the ground. Through the falling snow -- it's coming down much harder now than just a minute ago -- Mistletoe makes her way onto the sunflower-seed-hull carpet.

Within seconds she snuffles up an unopened seed, rises onto her haunches, and with her front paws rotates the flatish seed until it's right for biting into. Instantly her sharp incisors split the seed coat, the pale kernel plops onto her tongue, and the two seed-coat halves drop unnoticed onto the ground, adding themselves to the ever-deepening carpet.

Such is our squirrel's appetite that even as her cheek-teeth grind the sunflower kernel into oily pulp, she searches for another seed. She finds one, eats it, and then finds another and another. And now the snowflakes are smaller than before, but coming down much harder, and the wind blows leaves across the lawn.

Hey...!

Dark images among snowflakes, something fast-moving, maybe something dangerous... Ears laid back, eyes wide with panic, tail jerking, in an instant Mistletoe is back on the Sugar Maple's trunk, poised to escape even higher... But...

False alarm. Only a noisy flock of House Sparrows streaking around the house's corner, then settling into the Privet hedge. Nothing to worry about. Once the heart slows enough for our squirrel to think, back onto the ground and the seed-hull carpet she goes.

Soon the whole backyard fills with the hissing of millions and millions of small, dry snow-pellets showering onto frozen ground. The pellets bounce into Mistletoe's eyes and onto her sensitive whiskers, and wedge themselves in her fur. Now entire trees shudder and

sway in the wind and the snow comes in fast-moving waves. All this sound and commotion fills Mistletoe with an urge to find shelter, to be someplace quiet and familiar, to be in her home...

Up the big Sugar Maple's trunk she goes, then through the limb-maze, then the big leap, the run along the gutter and finally with a short hop she lands on the cable-TV wire leading from the Alexanders' house. At first the going is easy but away from the house's shelter, above Chesterfield Avenue, Mistletoe finds slippery ice encrusting the wire, and now the wind rages with anger and spite.

Too late Mistletoe understands that her claws are no good on ice-glazed wire. Too late she comprehends that in this wind it's impossible to turn around and go back.

For a long time Mistletoe hugs the swaying cable, the furious wind whistling around the wire, growing ever stronger, snow stinging her eyes. Finally, very slowly, she begins pulling herself forward. What else can she do? How she wants to turn back. But, there's just no...

Arrrrrrgh!

Thirty feet above Chesterfield Avenue's pavement a mighty blast of tail-twisting wind rips our squirrel from the wire. Like a helpless gray rag she's carried for long seconds suspended in nothing but angry wind, blowing all the way onto Mrs. Taylor's lawn.

Oof!

Her bushy tail has saved her. Like a small parachute it has carried her sideways in the wind, from over the highway, to drop her onto Mrs. Taylor's grass. A thin-tailed cat or a big dog wouldn't have survived this fall but our Mistletoe is just shaken. Now more than a little shaken our squirrel streaks toward home, straight across the street's slick pavement, and she's lucky no car is coming.

Soon Mistletoe feels beneath her paws the old Hackberry tree's familiar, warty bark. Up, up, up she climbs, all the way to the den-hole beneath the big, horizontal branch. She is upset and desperately needs to be with her den companions. How she needs the security and safety of home!

The instant Mistletoe pokes her head into the den-hole's darkness, she feels better, smelling familiar odors.

Inside the old Hackberry the den is shaped like a ten-foot-long teardrop that's narrow at the top but ample and flat-bottomed below. Pulling herself down the den's narrow neck, Mistletoe feels the ridge of hard, smooth wood pressing against her back, and dry, crumbly heartwood sliding beneath her belly. These familiar sensations calm and please her.

Reaching the den's bottom, her companions' odors blossom around her. Just by sniffing she knows that all the other squirrels are here. Chickweed and Blacklocust smell dry and warm, but Cocklebur's scent is that of a wet and upset squirrel, so the storm had caught him outside, too. Yes, all the feelings and aromas and sounds of home are here, and they are good...

Now inside the den floor's darkness Mistletoe curls into a ball that touches all the other balls of gray fur there, and exchanges feelings, warmth and odors with them.

Before our squirrel sleeps, more than once she chuckles softly, and contentedly sighs.

FEBRUARY (THE CHASE)



Mistletoe pokes her muzzle into winter's brown leaf litter sniffing for acorns. Even before she snuffles up her first snack, along comes Cocklebur.

Cocklebur has followed Mistletoe all the way from the den. Now he's hanging on the Sugar Maple's trunk but he's not glancing from side to side looking for danger. In fact, he doesn't even seem interested in chasing our squirrel from the acorn-finding place, which is exactly what he usually does. No, Cocklebur simply hangs on the trunk, gazing at Mistletoe as if she had three heads!

Mistletoe doesn't understand. In Peace Hill's squirrel community, Cocklebur is a higher-ranked squirrel than she, for in the past whenever there's been a tail-flicking, growling, and foot-stomping spat, he's always been the winner. It's only natural that right now Cocklebur should chase Mistletoe from the good eating place. Therefore, what's he doing just hanging there looking all goggly-eyed?

For almost a minute Cocklebur stays there with that funny look on his face, sniffing the cold air. Then he bounds onto the ground and, like a cat sneaking up on a mouse, begins slinking toward Mistletoe.

Our squirrel doesn't at all understand what's happening. However, she does know that she's hungry, and that Cocklebur isn't really threatening her, so she just keeps foraging for acorns. And all the while Cocklebur creeps toward her, slowly and deliberately, curiously flicking his tail in short, nervous jerks...

When he gets close, Mistletoe doesn't stop feeding. She doesn't know what to make of all this. Maybe if she just ignores him...

But before Mistletoe can forget the crazy-acting Cocklebur, he's sneaked around behind her, gingerly poked his nose beneath her tail, and taken a nice deep whiff!

Outraged and confused, huffily Mistletoe scrambles into the Privet hedge.

At a leisurely pace, his tail slowly and curiously waving in the air, Cocklebur follows her. Something in his expression says that he'd like nothing more in the whole wide world than to take at least one more whiff...

Though Cocklebur doesn't see where Mistletoe has escaped to, he smells her trail. In fact, Mistletoe's odor is something of which Cocklebur simply cannot get enough. Fairly nonchalantly now he follows our squirrel's scent to a rock where seconds earlier Mistletoe had paused. He touches his nose there, and inhales. As Mistletoe's soul-pleasing, feminine odor blossoms all through his slightly dizzy head a shudder-causing thrill flushes through his body. Catching a glimpse of Mistletoe climbing high into the Elm tree, Cocklebur begins moving toward the tree's trunk, grandly waving his high-held tail.

From the far side of the feeding station the young, low-ranked male squirrel called Hawthorn notices that a little chase is shaping up so he decides to join it. When Cocklebur clambers up the elm's trunk, Hawthorn tags along behind him. Hawthorn also seems to consider this just a half-hearted chase, not anything serious, just a chase after a female.

Several times the two male squirrels catch Mistletoe but each time when they try to sniff beneath her tail she angrily rushes away. Sometimes after her escapes the males pause to sniff the tree bark upon which she has sat.

Cocklebur, Hawthorn, Loblolly, Buckeye, Blacklocust and the old squirrel called Ginkgo... By noon all these male squirrels are pursuing Mistletoe and the pace of the chase has changed. Now they come after her as if they mean to catch her!

Moreover, Mistletoe herself now experiences feelings she's never known. Something new is cooking inside her -- something she can't understand, and something she isn't sure how to handle.

On the one hand, never has she been more upset with her fellow squirrels. On the other, somehow this crazy chase is kind of nice...

And, those males...! One time this morning Hawthorn found a spot on a Black Oak's limb where earlier Mistletoe had rested and more than just sniff the spot he actually gnawed at the crumbly bark, seeming to get drunk as Mistletoe's odor blossomed throughout his head!

Blacklocust hadn't behaved much better. During one hotheaded moment when he was leaping from one branch to another he'd misjudged the distance and tumbled twenty-five feet into a Forsythia bush. He became so upset that in anger he'd bitten the Forsythia's innocent branches. Then he'd raged across the lawn noisily expressing a buzzy complaint.

"*Aaarghhh!*"...is more or less what Mistletoe says when she discovers herself cornered in the crotch of a White Ash tree. She really wants to rest now but those pesky males just won't let her! And now Cocklebur, Hawthorn and the others are coming closer and closer...

"*Aaarghhh!*"she screams again.

With a wild look in her eyes, Mistletoe gapes wide her mouth and snarls. Seeing her sharp teeth, finally the fellows understand that this lady is not simply playing hard-to-get. They decide to kill some time loitering among the tree's branches. Maybe later Mistletoe will cool down. Maybe later she'll let them come closer.

With the males orbiting around her, Mistletoe's conflicting feelings confuse her more and more. However, once she's rested, something inside her tells her to move on, and so she does.

Up one of the elm's branches she bounds, all the males chasing after her. Cocklebur happens to be nearest the branch she climbs so from the beginning he takes the lead. In a couple of minutes -- maybe because Mistletoe is deciding she doesn't want to escape -- Cocklebur catches up with her. Quickly mounting our squirrel from behind, he climbs atop her. Placing his front paws around her ribs just beyond her hips, he squeezes...

However, before they can mate, the old male called Ginkgo arrives. This big fellow with a face scared from many fights lays back his ears, gapes wide his toothy mouth and rushes at Cocklebur, driving him off Mistletoe's back.

Cocklebur makes no effort to defend his right to mate with Mistletoe. He simply slinks away before Ginkgo becomes more angry. Cocklebur is a high-ranked squirrel here on Peace Hill, but old Ginkgo is even higher...

Unfortunately for old Ginkgo, however, before he can mount his lady-love she bounds away and the whole chase must begin again!

The chase, the jockeying for position and the end-of-chase shuffle, with Ginkgo always replacing Cocklebur, and then Mistletoe rushing away.... all this is repeated time and time again. By mid-afternoon they're all dog-tired and the males are more than a little frustrated, so for a whole twenty minutes they call a truce and rest in the upper limbs of an oak tree. However, when Mistletoe decides to move on, all the males once again rush after her.

Blacklocust is the first to abandon the chase. He's the group's lowest-ranking male and during today's chase he's seldom even come close to catching our squirrel. Soon Hawthorn and Loblolly also give up. Then only Cocklebur and Ginkgo are left.

No matter how many times Cocklebur is the one to catch Mistletoe, old Ginkgo never lets him mate. Therefore, finally Cocklebur gives up, too. Maybe on another day he'll have better luck. Maybe other females will smell as good as Mistletoe... And maybe when that happens, this ugly-faced Ginkgo won't be around...

Now inside Mistletoe the thing that for a long time has brewed comes to a boil. Now she knows beyond all doubt that of all the males who have chased her today the one who must mate with her is Ginkgo. At the end of the last chase, Ginkgo mounts her, and somehow it seems right. She does not move away.

On this day in the third week of February, Mistletoe becomes pregnant. In forty-four days she will bear her first set of young.

There... Maybe five yards from the Black Walnut's trunk and toward the house... Yes, here's the old stump... About a yard behind it... Mistletoe pokes her muzzle beneath a leaf, sniffs deeply but only smells moist, chilly earth. She wedges her entire head between a matted-together clump of leaves and soil. Finding nothing, she rears onto her haunches, looks in every direction for danger, then sniffs beneath a leaf, but finds nothing, nothing, nothing...

Finally beneath a decaying, brown Sycamore leaf she detects the faint odor of a buried walnut. She sniffs a little to the left... Now to the right... Yes! Beneath this leaf a walnut is buried!

Working with hard, sharp claws and her mouth, Mistletoe rips through layers of brown tree leaves, decaying wood and dirt until the old walnut, cold and wet, rides securely between her front teeth. Hurrying up the Black Walnut's trunk, she perches six feet high where two big limbs join to form a crotch, a good spot from which she can watch for danger all around as she works.

Of course, a walnut's shell is very hard. However, when Mistletoe was young, for many hours she played with walnut shells, biting them, gnawing on them, learning the shells' fracture zones, the weak spots, and how to chisel and crack them with her teeth. Therefore, now Mistletoe is a walnut-opening expert. Now, just by feeling a walnut's weight in her paws she knows whether it's empty or holds a tasty kernel.

And it's a good thing that Mistletoe knows these things, and that last fall she buried her caches of nuts, for now she needs a lot of energy to share with the babies growing inside her.

MARCH (THE ATTIC)

Among the American Elm's slender, wispy branches they look like glued-on bunches of brown bread-crumbs. On Red Maple twigs they could be clusters of blood-red warts. However, they're just clusters of tree flowers from which small, winged fruits will soon develop. In March, in Mistletoe's town, these are the first signs of spring.



Mistletoe is pleased with these flowers, for nowadays the Alexanders' feeding station is unattended, with no plump sunflower seeds for hungry squirrels. Now Mistletoe must spend very much time searching for caches, and now her caches are getting hard to find. Yes, these plump buds and juicy flowers of American Elm and Red Maple are a blessing for Mistletoe, for they can be eaten.

Today, looking like a gray, fuzzy kite caught in a tree, Mistletoe hangs among the Red Maple's uppermost branches. A cold wind, feeling wet and smelling of mud, causes the tree's big branches to sway like giant tree-arms gesturing grandly toward the sky. However, our squirrel is safe, for her needle-sharp, curved claws firmly anchor her wherever she places her paws.

Again and again our squirrel does exactly this: With her front paws she reaches out, pulls in a twig, and then with her teeth snips off three or four inches of the twig. Then, grasping the sniped-off twig in her front paws, almost like a human eating corn-on-the-cob, she nibbles off the twig's buds. These buds are soft and crisp, for they are filled with green, about-to-unfold leaves, stems, and blossoming flowers. Even the thin, brown bark is soft and juicy enough to nibble. When she's eaten what she wants, she simply drops the stripped twig onto the ground, then snips off another one and nibbles it. If right now you should stand beneath this particular Red Maple, you could count over thirty of Mistletoe's gnawed-on sticks.

After a couple of hours, Mistletoe's stomach is full. She crosses Chesterfield Avenue on the cable-TV wire, leaps into the Black Oak's branches next to the Alexanders' home, and then works upward toward the house's roof. Here she comes level with the attic's ventilation opening. Because she's explored there before she knows that behind the ventilation opening's wooden slats there's a screen wire. She knows she can squeeze between those slats and rest in the narrow space between the slats and the screen wire... It's not long until Mistletoe makes herself at home in that cozy, secret little niche.

As usual, the view through the screen wire, across the Alexanders' attic floor, is fascinating. Large cardboard boxes overflow with old clothes. The boys' forgotten toys and games form an obstacle course, and dusty old furniture and empty suitcases stand forgotten in every corner.

Eventually Mistletoe tires of seeing these things so she decides to continue her journey home. However, as she's turning around to leave, something unexpected happens: Her shoulder rips a small hole in the old, rusting screen wire.

For many years the screen wire has been growing weak and crumbly. Therefore, when Mistletoe paws at the hole, she just makes it bigger. And when she pokes her head through this bigger hole, she tears open a hole big enough for the whole front of her body to squeeze through... It's not long until Mistletoe's fuzzy paws land on the Alexanders' attic floor.

In a wink she scrambles to beneath the first thing she finds -- an old chest of drawers in a corner, filled with old tape cassettes. For a long time she huddles there, quivering with excitement. However, nothing happens. Sitting very still, she sniffs the air and with her eyes searches every corner. Nothing seems to smell or look dangerous... Slowly she works her way across the floor.

The attic's odors could not be more interesting. Never has she smelled pungent cedar-wood, of which the big footlocker is made. For a long time she sniffs it, and then she goes to lick an old pair of leather sandals. She gnaws on one of the sandal's straps, for it is salty, and she likes the salt.

In the floor's middle she finds a coil of thin, metal wire forming a kind of shimmery, silvery arch with both ends resting on the floor. It's something that very few squirrels see during their entire lives: It's a slinky-toy.

Sniffing it, Mistletoe finds it reeking with the odor of rusty metal. Touching it with her nose she causes its tensed coils to shudder and eerily chime. This new kind of weird and unexpected noise sends our high-strung friend racing back to beneath the old chest of drawers.

Mistletoe needs five minutes to work up enough courage to return to the slinky for further examination. Eventually her curiosity grows so intense that once more she steps forward and touches the strange invention with her nose...

Exactly at the moment when Mistletoe's nose makes contact with the cold, rusty-smelling slinky, outside the attic an especially strong gust of wind causes one of the big Black Oak's branches to scrape against the house's wooden sideboards. This nerve-jangling noise behind Mistletoe causes her to jump forward so that she crashes headlong into the slinky's silvery coils!

"Aaarghhh!"

The more Mistletoe fights the slinky-monster, the more her legs, tail, and neck become entangled in its shimmering, rusty-smelling, clanging, ever-more-entrapping coils. Somehow our squirrel regains her feet, then runs across the attic floor dragging the terrible slinky-thing behind her. And what an unbearably loud noise the slinky makes scraping the floor's wooden planks!

Well, a human can hardly imagine how confused, upset and absolutely hysterical a high-strung little squirrel can become. After a minute or so of fighting the slinky-toy, Mistletoe simply collapses from exhaustion and fear. Breathing shallowly, for a long time she lies on the attic's floor imprisoned in the slinky's unyielding coils.

When again her awareness returns, once more she explodes into a furious fit of rolling, kicking and biting at the coil. However, again, this only leaves her in a wretched heap, now with one of the slinky's coils kinked tightly around her neck.

Twice again she comes to herself and fights, but each time she only ends up in worse shape than before. In the end, breathing irregularly and with her speeding heart skipping beats, she lies on the floor completely unconscious and in a state of shock. She does not hear when the attic floor's trapdoor is lowered into the house below and the ladder on the door is unfolded into the Alexanders' hallway. She does not hear these sounds made by two young humans:

"I see what's been making all that noise, Mark. It's a squirrel! It's all messed up in your old slinky!"

"What... ?"

"There's a squirrel up here and it's tangled up in your old slinky. I think it's dead... "

"They get rabies, you know. Don't touch it... "

Paul Alexander, Mark's elder brother, shakes one end of the slinky to see if Mistletoe really is dead. When she remains motionless, the boy cautiously unkinks the wire from around her neck.

"I think I see it breathing," Paul says. "I think it's just unconscious. I'm going to bring it downstairs."

"What're we going to do with it?" Mark asks.

"I don't know."

Downstairs, Paul lays Mistletoe onto the hallway floor. For a long time the boys discuss what needs to be done. Several ideas are considered and rejected before they decide to wrap Mistletoe in a towel and leave her beside the warm-air vent on the kitchen floor. For

a while they stand looking down at their motionless, uninvited guest. Eventually Mark returns to the living room to play Space Invaders on his computer but Paul remains sitting at the table, keeping an eye on Mistletoe.

However, nothing happens. After a twenty minute vigil, Paul kneels beside Mistletoe, decides that probably she's going to die and that there's nothing else to do but wait for their dad to return home. Then they'll decide what to do with the body. Paul shrugs and walks into the living room to see how Mark is doing.

Through a fog of pain and confusion Mistletoe pulls herself forward, the warm towel slipping off her back, her mind not understanding the images forming before her eyes. Bookshelves, potted plants, chairs, a glowing computer screen, a couch with two boys standing on its seat...

"If it's got rabies, man, we can be in big trouble... "

"Maybe if I can kick the door open... "

"Careful! It's looking at you real funny... "

"If I can just reach the storm-door handle... "

Natural light and cold, wet air flood through the open door and the air carries with it familiar odors. Mistletoe drags herself toward this fountain of hope. She passes through it, stumbles across the porch's floor and as she tumbles over one step after another what a joy are these odors of mud and wet grass...

It's dusk. The wind has quieted down. A cold drizzle's freshness revives Mistletoe's strength. Gradually our squirrel orients herself. Soon she's headed toward the big den-Hackberry.

Descending into the tear-shaped den, she immerses herself in odors and touch that are as familiar to her as anything can be. She curls next to Cocklebur, Hawthorn and Loblolly, stares into the darkness, and at last finds the day's end in sleep.

APRIL (CHANGES)

In April, Mistletoe is a testy, grouchy squirrel. On a recent morning as Hawthorn clambered out of the den, one of his legs brushed our squirrel's head. This so annoyed Mistletoe that she actually bit Hawthorn's foot. Another time, just because Cocklebur awakened, turned over and disturbed Mistletoe's rest, she growled at him threateningly. And day after day our squirrel's dreadful temper grows worse...

Finally the day comes when Loblolly no longer can stand it. He leaves the den with no intention of returning. On the cable-TV wire he crosses above Chesterfield Avenue, passes through several trees, and then climbs high into the Silver Maple next to the Taylors' house. He's had his eye on an old leaf-nest here, one abandoned by a squirrel last year. Now he'll patch it up and live in it himself.

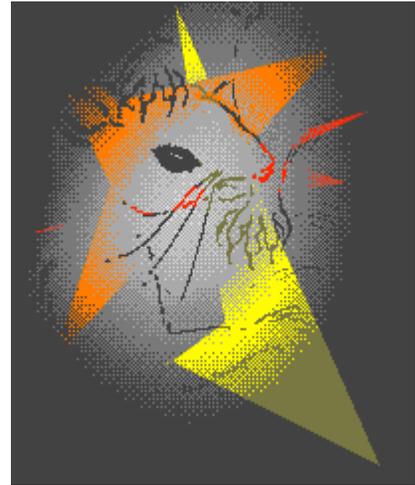
The very next day Hawthorn also takes off. In a Hackberry beside Peace Circle Park he also finds an old leaf-nest and moves into it. Now neither he nor Loblolly will have to suffer more of Mistletoe's abuses.

With high-ranking Cocklebur, it's a different story. One day as Cocklebur returns from gorging himself on tree flowers and expanding leaves, on the big horizontal limb above the den he meets Mistletoe, and she's growling and looking mean. She's jerking her tail stiffly, laying back her ears and making it very plain that from now on no squirrel other than she is welcome in the den.

Cocklebur is not used to such low-ranked squirrels as Mistletoe barring him from where he wants to go. Hardly paying attention to Mistletoe's threats he starts to brush past her. However, the moment his plan becomes clear, Mistletoe gapes wide her mouth, bares her sharp teeth, and snarls. Long seconds pass, her eyes blazing with rage, and then she lunges at Cocklebur. Cocklebur draws back, more from confusion than fear.

However, they don't fight. Something in Cocklebur tells him that resisting this female's crazy behavior would be pointless. Besides, the weather has grown pleasant so maybe he, too, would be more comfortable in a leaf nest... Cocklebur simply turns tail and leaves, not to be seen in these parts soon again. Now Mistletoe has the whole Hackberry den all to herself.

During the days that follow, Mistletoe allows no squirrel, no matter how high its rank, to come near the den. One day, not knowing how unwelcome he is, a year-old male wanders across Chesterfield Avenue to sniff in the leaf litter beneath the den-Hackberry. From her perch on the big horizontal limb, Mistletoe spots him, flicks her tail stiffly, then rages head-first down the Hackberry's trunk. The young male, knowing trouble when he sees it, tries



to escape across the street, but a car is coming so he ends up running along the highway's curb. He trips over a discarded Coke can, and with a loud "oomph!" falls flat on his face.

He pays for his clumsiness. When Mistletoe catches up, she bites him at the base of his tail, and her bite isn't just a little nip. Her sharp teeth cut clean through the tail's skin, shattering the bone.

In such a way Mistletoe bestows upon the hapless squirrel a tail that for the rest of his life will follow him a little crookedly.

In Mistletoe's belly, for many days a certain fullness has grown and grown. And so, on the forty-fourth day after our squirrel mated with Ginkgo, that fullness drains from her body and pools into the nest beneath her. On this day, in the moist darkness at the bottom of the tear-shaped den, Mistletoe gives birth to three pink, hairless baby squirrels.

Each weighs less than an ounce -- about the weight of eight pennies. Their eyes are not yet open and still they are earless. They're helpless and completely dependent upon Mistletoe to keep them alive. It's a good thing that Cocklebur, Hawthorn, and Loblolly have left the nest, for they'd only be in the way. Of course, that's exactly why nature has made Mistletoe so hard to live with the last few days...

If earlier Mistletoe was a storm full of hate and meanness, now for these three tiny creatures she becomes a fountain of love and tenderness. Now she spends many hours curled around them, keeping her soft underbelly placed so that the babies can suck milk from her.

The warmth in Mistletoe's body flows into her babies by way of her milk. The babies return that warmth by snuggling their naked bodies against her soft underbelly. In such a way, during these days Mistletoe knows a feeling as great and beautiful as any animal ever can.

Lying in the darkness at the bottom of the teardrop, nestled next to her young, Mistletoe hears certain sounds. In the den's darkness she cannot see her babies, but she hears them sucking milk and breathing.

On cold nights when April's winds blow, the old Hackberry's branches knock and scrape against one another and the straining branches moan and pop. These noises carry all through the tree's body. To Mistletoe inside the tree's trunk, they seem to come from all directions. Sometimes, when the wind is greatest, air streaming through thousands of slender twigs makes an eerie whistling inside the den. However, these sounds only increase Mistletoe's sense of being cozy and safe.

During the first two weeks of the babies' lives they stay curled in their nest, awakening only to take milk. In their third week, fur starts covering their bodies. Gradually their eyes and ears open. Only after nearly a month will they open fully.

Often Mistletoe must leave the nest, for now she must eat not only for herself but also for her young. She must eat nuts and seeds and buds so that her body can make milk for her babies.

Last month Jan Alexander had been in the hospital, so she had not kept her bird feeders filled. Now she's home, however, and now each morning she leaves plenty to eat in the feeders. As she convalesces she spends many hours sitting at the kitchen table, watching birds and squirrels. One morning, as Mistletoe perches below the sunflower-seed feeder, an April shower comes along. With the first drops, Mistletoe bounds to beneath the birdbath next to the big Sugar Maple, where she finishes the seed she'd been cracking open. This done, she climbs into the Sugar Maple to begin her trip back to the den.

Now in late April the trees' leaves have fully expanded. On a limb beneath a dense canopy of leaves, Mistletoe finds a nice place sheltered from the rain - - a good spot in which to rest. And the spot is comfortable indeed. In fact, it's so comfortable and dry that our squirrel pauses, look around, then lowers herself for a rest. These April showers come and go so quickly, so maybe she'll just stay here until it ends... Atop this limb she can lick her paws and scratch her underbelly and maybe even stretch out and take a brief nap... The babies are asleep and don't need her at the moment... Restful here... Cozy... Time to snooze... Only the bushy tip of Mistletoe's tail sticks out from beneath the leafy canopy...

Aaaaaaaa!

Exploded from off the limb, Mistletoe crashes through branches! Falling! Pain!

A few days earlier the female Cooper's Hawk began migrating northward from southern Mexico. Now she's tired and hungry. Sailing above this city when the rain began, she decided to land in a certain tree on a certain hill. During her descent she saw the tip of Mistletoe's tail sticking out from beneath the leafy canopy... Now with needle-sharp talons the Cooper's Hawk has stripped the fur and flesh from the tip of Mistletoe's tail...

On a tree branch across Chesterfield Avenue the female hawk cranes her neck over her powerful chest to see what kind of small mammal she has succeeded in capturing. A sense of frustration flushes over her as she realizes that all she has is a fuzzy nothing, hardly bearing enough flesh to think about.

On the ground, Mistletoe lies sprawled on her belly, her head bent as if she were listening to something deep inside the earth. The end one-third of her tail no longer is bushy and soft, but now is a stiff, bloody finger of bone. The Cooper's Hawk looks down from her perch, sees the disabled animal, and leans forward preparing to plummet on swept-back

wings toward her prey, but then another actor comes onto stage: It's Tinkerbell, the German shepherd living next door.

Aroused from her mid-morning sleep by Mistletoe's scream and the sound of our squirrel crashing through layers of leaves and brittle twigs, Tinkerbell can't believe her good luck. For a long time this old dog has wanted to catch a squirrel, so now through rain and wet bushes she slips and slides into the Alexanders' feeding area, breathing hard and barking.

Mistletoe can't figure out what's happened. But Tinkerbell's enraged barks chop away at her numbness. Slowly and with pain our squirrel begins to understand that something has gone terribly wrong.

Bark!

A barking dog signals danger...

Bark bark!

In Mistletoe, the need to feel tree-bark beneath paws, to escape upward...

Bark bark bark!

Tinkerbell runs right up to Mistletoe, then almost flips over her own front legs when she puts on her brakes. A squirrel should run, Tinkerbell supposes, not travel in circles clawing at the air like this crazy creature does. This screaming, clawing thing with a bloody tail could be dangerous! What does a dog do with a sharp-clawed squirrel that doesn't run away?

Hysterically Tinkerbell barks and barks, and bit by bit our squirrel understands the world around her. As Tinkerbell barks and the Cooper's Hawk watches from across the street, Mistletoe drags herself through pouring rain toward the American Elm's trunk.

"Hey, what are you doing, Tinkerbell?" Jan Alexander stands in the kitchen door.

Tinkerbell, pleased to have brought a human's attention to the bizarre situation, considers her responsibilities fulfilled. Profoundly relieved and with a huge smile on her face she gallops up to Jan, ingratiatingly licks her hands, turns around and barks at Mistletoe once more.

"Squirrels again!" Jan says, shaking her head. "First one in the attic and now this poor thing with its ugly tail... "

Soon Mistletoe descends toward the bottom of her tear-shaped den. She wraps herself around her babies. Her tail hurts. She is very upset. The den's black air smells of wet fur, fear, and warm blood...

MAY (THE GREEN TRASH CAN)

Grounge, grounge, grounge, grounge, grounge...

The Grackle -- a foot-long, black bird with a long tail -- says something upsetting is going on.

Grounge, grounge, grounge, grounge, grounge...

First Hollyhock peeps from the den hole and then Ivy and Persimmon appear there, too. Their mother, Mistletoe, forages on the ground nearby. Understanding the *grounge* calls as the bird's danger signal, she rises onto her haunches and looks around. When the calls continue she rushes up the Hackberry's trunk to the big horizontal branch above the den, pauses, and looks around.



Inside the young Box Elder tree growing up through the Privet hedge below the squirrels' den tree, the mother Grackle calls from a limb beside her nest. Though the Box Elder is short, bushy and filled with deep shadows, Mistletoe can see that the nest is loosely constructed of straw and situated in a fork of the tree's trunk about ten feet off the ground.

Now the mother Grackle's ever-louder, ever-more-urgent distress call draws seven other Grackles into the scene. Landing in the Sycamore's lower branches, they see what's going on inside the Box Elder below: Something down there slithers toward the Grackle's nest! Now the seven new birds call, too, but instead of *grounge, grounge, grounge*, they cry with loud, angry-sounding *check!* sounds.

As the unwelcome, shadowy thing in the Privet hedge keeps climbing toward the nest, two of the new Grackles sail down near it and flit from branch to branch all around it. Drawn by the commotion, a Robin comes and perches six feet above and to one side of the nest. However, it remains silent and makes no effort to get closer. Moments later a Kingbird swoops in, perches ten feet above the nest, opposite the Robin, and neither does it move or make a sound. Peace Hill's entire bird community seems interested in what's happening here!

Neither can Mistletoe unglue her eyes from the drama taking place right below her family's den. For a better view she scrambles onto the big horizontal branch where, nervously flicking her healed but odd-looking tail, she keeps watching and watching...

Yes, the slithering thing is long, slender, blackish with light-colored speckles, and covered with glistening scales. And how relentlessly this shadow-creature inches upwards, second by second drawing nearer and nearer the Grackle-mother's nest...

Draping one loop of itself on a certain branch and then pushing its head higher, then draping another loop on the next higher branch, then pushing its head higher still, then another loop on another, higher branch... the Black Rat-snake expertly and irresistibly ascends toward the nest of straw.

Aww, aww aww!

Two Blue Jays glide in from nowhere. Frantically they scream their alarms and with outrage flit around the terrible visitor. However, even this doesn't prevent the serpent from sticking its stiff head six inches above the Grackle's nest.

With black, unblinking eyes, for a long time it stares silently into the Grackle's nest. Then, very slowly it bends its head downward into the nest's cavity, and soon the rest of the body follows. All the creatures watch as the snake's body coils around and around inside the nest. Is the nest empty, with the snake only entering for a rest? Or, right now is the snake squeezing in its coils a helpless Grackle nestling? Only the snake and the mother Grackle know that for sure.

Once the Black Rat-snake's whole body lies coiled inside the nest, almost immediately the Blue Jays and Grackles grow silent and end their flitting about. They perch briefly and look at one another as if to say, "There's nothing else we can do..." and then they all fly away, the mother with them. The Kingbird then also leaves. Only the Robin remains. Like a statue it perches staring down into the little Box Elder's shadows. Long it sits, neither it nor the snake moving at all. Then, finally, the Robin, too, flies away, leaving only Mistletoe, Hollyhock, Ivy, and Persimmon watching.

Now it's certain. In Mistletoe for days the urge has grown to find her family a new home. The three nestlings have grown so that now the den is cramped. Also, day and night, tiny, blood-sucking fleas crawl beneath the squirrels' fur, leaving sore, itching spots, and the warming weather only makes them worse. Yes, even before this snake moved into the neighborhood, there were reasons to move, and now...

The following morning, one nestling at a time, Mistletoe carries her nestlings to a new home. While being carried, each infant squirrel instinctively wraps its legs and tail around Mistletoe's neck, holding on.

The new home, just up Peace Hill from the Alexanders' house, is a leaf nest placed in the fork of a Black Walnut's trunk about thirty feet off the ground. Though the nest was built by another squirrel last year, it was put together so soundly that Mistletoe only needed to patch it up a little. From below, the nest looks like nothing but a messy heap of leaves and twigs. However, to Mistletoe and her young, it feels like a summer cottage with a fresh view, fresh air and no fleas and no snakes! Here's how such leaf nests are built:

First, where a tree-branch forks, a sturdy, stage-like platform is woven of leafy twigs. This platform's surface is then firmed and leveled out by piling upon it odds and ends of grass, moss, tree bark and leaves. Finally, atop this platform, green leaves are woven among small twigs to form a domed roof. The "room" beneath this covering is about sixteen inches wide and twelve inches deep.

Hollyhock, Ivy, and Persimmon just can't get enough of their new view. They can see the picnic area atop Peace Hill where humans sometimes eat sandwiches, throw Frisbees, and sunbathe. On the one-lane street passing beneath their tree's limbs, humans come walking, bicycling, and jogging.

Maybe the most fascinating fixture of their new neighborhood, however, stands at the street's edge exactly beneath the old Black Walnut. It's a green trashcan. In the middle of the day, humans park their cars beside the can while they eat, talk and laugh, and loud music pours through the car's open windows. Yes, to these three young squirrels, nothing could be more spellbinding than the world of the green trash-can.

A human's arm emerges from a car window and something is dropped into the can. And this something, instead of falling lightly like the usual Styrofoam or paper, plummets and plops! The car's engine starts and the vehicle moves away, leaving our squirrel in an exquisite state of curiosity. Down the Black Walnut's trunk she scrambles, right up to the green trash-can's base.

Mistletoe leaps high enough for her head and front legs to make it over the can's rim. She swings around her bottom half high enough for one toe of her right paw to catch on the rim, but then she misjudges how hard she needs to push herself upward and promptly plunges herself head-first into the can's interior.

Of course, suddenly finding herself squirming and thrashing inside an unstable, shifting, crackling heap of white napkins, Styrofoam cups and hamburger cartons, our high-strung squirrel freaks out. She writhes and wriggles even harder, and thus she sinks only deeper and deeper into this weird miscellany of items smelling intensely of mustard, ketchup, onion rings, and hamburgers.

Finally Mistletoe stops fighting. Suspended in the can's dark quietness, gradually she calms down. In fact, gradually Mistletoe's anxiety transforms into curiosity.

Six inches before Mistletoe's snout, half wrapped in cellophane, lies a partially eaten Twinkie. Sniffing this object's oily sweetness, our hungry squirrel's odd-looking tail involuntarily flicks with satisfaction. Greedily she takes it with her mouth, half walks and half swims across the shifting trash's surface, pulls herself over the can's rim onto the street, and scurries back up the Black Walnut's trunk.

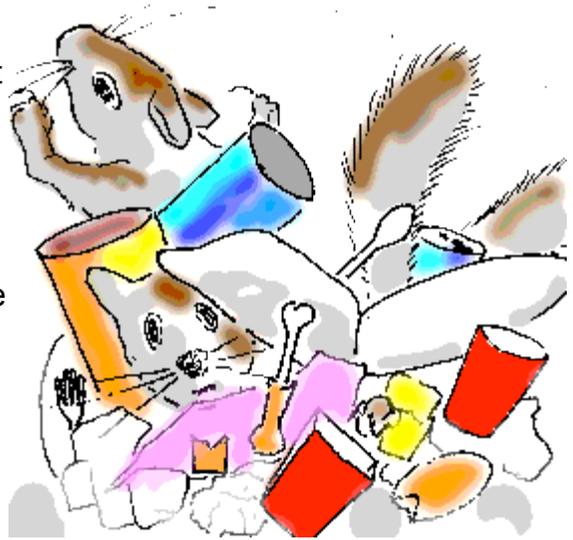
Only when she's safely on her favorite perch with the crumbly creation firmly between her front paws does she take her first bite. Instantly the Twinkie breaks in two and its sticky goo oozes onto her whiskers. She gulps down what she can and then with her paws tries to wipe away the greasy cream. However, the goo only spreads onto her paws and sticks messily to her face.

In the end, our squirrel smears Twinkie crumbs and goo all over herself. For most of the afternoon she perches in the Black Walnut licking herself clean, from time to time gazing downward, contemplating the delicious mysteries of the green trash-can.

JUNE (PLAYING)

By early June Mistletoe's young also have discovered the green trash can's pleasures. Inside it they burrow through a world of napkins and paper boxes, playing a 3-D game of hide-and-seek. Best of all, sometimes scattered through the mess they find goodies on which to nibble.

When a morning's trash-can games are finished, the three young squirrels perch on the big, curved branch beneath their new nest, sniffing and licking one another: Hollyhock's left ear smells like Pepsi Cola! Ivy has grape-jellied toes! Just sniff that streak of yellow mustard on Persimmon's tail!



Other times, the young squirrels play chase in the Black Walnut. Up and down, around and around, one after the other, around and around, up and down... The three squirrels are a team and one squirrel never strays far from the others, and every squirrel's happiness depends very much on how much attention it receives from its nest mates.

Even rain doesn't keep our squirrels from their games. If a squirrel meets a leaf with a drop of water dangling from its drip-tip, it's a good discovery. It's something completely new and it suggests plenty of tantalizing possibilities for play.

For instance, such a droplet can be lapped onto the tongue (how cold!) or simply allowed to soak into a fuzzy paw (how wet!). However, the funniest thing to do with water droplets is to run onto branches with hundreds of wet leaves, every leaf holding its own shimmering droplets -- and then to jar the limb so that all the silvery droplets shower down through the air below... And if you run through lots of wet leaves how chillingly drenched you become! And after a good chase through wet leaves, how wonderful to perch on a limb in warm sunlight...

When not playing, sometimes the young squirrels "go to school." On foraging trips, Mistletoe shows them how to find food, and what to do with it. Of course, one important food-finding place is the Alexanders' feeding station, where the nestlings become sunflower-seed-opening experts.

Classes take place inside the trees, too. Among the boughs of several kinds of trees Mistletoe shows how fruits and seeds can be eaten, and demonstrates the special techniques needed for dealing with each. Yes, nowadays Hollyhock, Ivy and Persimmon spend many, many hours learning how to be squirrels.

One day Mistletoe and her family go on a field trip. Descending the Sugar Maple's trunk beside the Alexanders' feeding station, Mistletoe notices a small bird-nest inside the Privet hedge. Four feet high, it's a Yellow Warbler's nest. The Yellow Warbler is a five-inch long, yellow bird with rust-colored streaks on its chest. Its neat, little nest is constructed of fine, interwoven grass-blades, fuzzy thistle-down, and silver-gray fibers from the stem of the dogbane-weed. Seeing this nest, Mistletoe leaves her family at the base of the Sugar Maple and climbs into the Privet bush's slender branches. Soon she's peeping over the edge of the Yellow Warbler's nest.

Inside the nest, covered with soft, brownish down, sit four tiny Yellow Warbler nestlings. Shocked and confused when Mistletoe's head suddenly looms above them, the nestlings cower in their nest's bottom, not moving, and not making a peep. And what can they do when Mistletoe bends her head into the nest, takes a nestling into her mouth, and drops to the ground?

Chip, chip, chip, chip...!

Returning to her nest, the horrified mother Yellow Warbler drops the beakful of cankerworms she'd planned to feed to her young, cries her alarm call, and all the other birds at the feeding station pause in their eating and look around. The mother Yellow Warbler spots Mistletoe and her family, and takes off after them. Mistletoe, still with the baby bird in her mouth, leads her family up through the Sugar Maple, and with the big leap, onto the roof. As the squirrels scamper toward the roof's far corner, the mother Yellow Warbler ineffectually dive-bombs them.

Chip, chip, chip, chip, chip...!

Only when the squirrels cross the house's rooftop and skulk into dark shadows beneath the closely overhanging Black Oak's boughs does the mother warbler's concern for her remaining nestlings cause her to break off the attack. Briefly she flits and calls from one spot above the house's crest, but this does not good. Then she rushes back to her remaining nestlings in the Privet hedge.

She is not on hand to watch when Mistletoe, Hollyhock, Ivy and Persimmon eat her baby.

Running, bounding, leaping through great empty spaces, sailing through the wind, their paws pat-pat-pat-pat upon tree branches, bark flying, leaves shaking, the chase, the chase, the chase, three young squirrels around the trunk and around again, up and down, across the ground, nip-and-tuck, get caught, tussle, tumble, chuckle and then chase again, running, bounding, leaping through great empty spaces, and experiencing a thousand shades of green...

But, what's this? Seeing something interesting, Hollyhock stops in his tracks, and so do his playmates. Suspended among weeds beside the street below them, it's something

white and funny-shaped. Curiosity-struck, the three squirrels clamber down the tree and sneak toward their discovery. It's a discarded plastic harness from a six-pack of bottled root-beer.

Persimmon skulks toward the silent oddity but before coming close enough to sniff, abruptly he leaps backward, as if he expects the plastic refuse to snap his nose off. Hollyhock approaches next; he's braver, and he touches his nose to the thing. Then Persimmon returns and he sniffs it, too, but comes no closer. Finally Ivy arrives, sniffs and adventurously pokes her head through one of the six big, round holes.

Nothing on the other side...

But, in withdrawing her head, the plastic harness catches behind her ears. With her back paw, Ivy tries to push the thing off, but the paw just slips through another of the harness's holes, so now her head is stuck in one hole and a hind leg is caught in another. With her other back paw Ivy takes another swipe at the uncooperative trash, succeeding only in entangling her other back paw in yet a third hole.

Now the situation is no longer a game. Now Ivy understands that she is ensnared in this wretched thing, as if it were a trap.

Instinctively Ivy flicks the danger signal with her tail, sending Hollyhock and Persimmon scampering up the tree. Seeing her brothers running away, Ivy also wants to run, but when she tries to follow she only trips over the harness and falls onto her side. Discovering herself so frustratingly helpless, she screams, paws and bites at this terrible, white, plastic monstrosity, and rolls over and over, clear into the weeds beside the road.

Several times this hysterical fighting exhausts her, leaving her lying and panting, but each time she revives and battles the harness again. However, each fight leaves her weaker, and each rest is longer than the last. Finally the time comes when she lies semiconscious among the weeds, her eyes half open, and her heart beating irregularly.

Slowly her alertness returns, for she is a young squirrel with amazing resiliency and, though she no longer has the energy or spirit to fight, to her surprise, she finds that if she holds her head to one side and slowly and carefully tries to stand up, she can actually regain her feet!

Once she does stand, what a strange sight she is, for now her head and a front leg emerge from one hole, her tail and back leg poke through another, each of the other legs also is caught in a hole, and the rims of the two remaining holes rise above her back as if they were white, plastic, butterfly wings.

Despite her ridiculous appearance, Ivy finds that if she moves slowly she can actually walk. She approaches the tree trunk on which her brothers await, eyeing her suspiciously. Perhaps, if she continued to take her time, she could even climb the tree to be with her

brothers... Ivy eventually manages this, inch by inch, until she's on a large limb with her brothers around her.

As if to make sure that this is still his sister, Hollyhock draws near Ivy and sniffs. Then Persimmon also sniffs. Each brother sniffs beneath Ivy's tail and then each sniffs her plastic wings. Much calmer now, Ivy licks the single paw she can reach, and grooms herself as best she can.

Before long, almost as if nothing has happened, the three squirrels decide to return to the leaf-nest. They take the American Elm route, Ivy with her plastic wings coming last.

Arghhh!

High on the pathway to home, deep within a Black Oak, the brothers turn to see Ivy hanging in midair, a plastic wing snagged on the stump of a broken-off twig. Ivy screams and squirms and for a long time the others orbit among the branches around her, but they cannot help. The Blue Jay comes with its nerve-wracking alarm calls. Tinkerbelle the dog saunters up beneath the tree, sets her rear end on the ground, and watches. Mistletoe comes, too, but neither can she do anything to help. No, no one can undo the hapless Ivy hanging in her plastic snare, like a parachutist hung in the air.

At dusk, Ivy sinks into the final stage of shock. And so, the rest of the family returns home.

JULY (THE DUMPSTER)

A one-lane alley behind stores with junky back-lots... the rear entrances of a bicycle shop, a photography shop, a computer sales office, a beauty salon, a restaurant specializing in Mexican food... Behind the Mexican-food restaurant a large green dumpster filled with trash...

In mid summer, with Persimmon and Hollyhock almost grown and needing very little attention, Mistletoe finds herself filled with the urge to explore. Roaming the alleyway between Peace Hill Park and the backsides of stores facing West End Avenue, our squirrel sees things completely new to her. And this big dumpster behind the Mexican food restaurant is as interesting as any discovery could be.



Maybe Mistletoe's thinking goes like this: If the small, green trash-can beneath the Black Walnut tree on Peace Hill is such fun, then surely this huge, green dumpster behind the Mexican-food restaurant can be even more fun! In less than half a minute, Mistletoe finds herself treading atop the biggest, most fascinating mound of paper, bottles and tin cans she's ever seen.

Soon our squirrel is tunneling through a fantastic mountain of crazy-smelling trash. And what odors and tastes! She licks an empty olive-oil can until not a drop of oil is left. She nibbles a green and puckered chili pepper until her lips and tongue tingle with burning. Sniffing an empty tequila bottle, she shakes her head with disgust. Finding a half-eaten tortilla, she devours the whole thing, and then goes on to find scraps of tamales, tacos, chorizos, and chicharrones...

Then, outside the dumpster, there comes a grinding and a certain kind of roaring, ending with the entire garbage container heaving from a hard jolt. Caught in darkness deep inside the garbage, Mistletoe frantically begins digging upwards, but for some reason "upwards" seems to be changing direction!

The whole dumpster vibrates and creaks and turns onto its side... Crazy with fear, Mistletoe discovers herself and the garbage around her avalanching to one side. Pickle jars, empty taco-shell boxes, and empty hot-sauce bottles tumble over and over, and Mistletoe tumbles with them, and everything cascades like rushing water in a waterfall! Abruptly everything crashes into a heap, pressure and more pressure comes from the side, and there's no way for a squirrel to understand that now she and the garbage have been emptied into a garbage truck.

For a while there's silence, but before long there comes another soul-shaking grinding and even more pressure. Most terrifying, however, is that the most penetrating of all the odors around here is the stench of the garbage truck's rusty metal sides. It's the same stink she smelled that day in March when she became entangled in the horrible metal slinky... ! More than any odor, to Mistletoe, this smell of rust means danger and pain!

Several times the rumbling returns, more pressure is felt, and then finally there comes a different, very long rumbling, that to Mistletoe seems never to end. When it does end, it's only moments before once again Mistletoe's whole world begins tilting, and once again she and everything around her avalanche outward and downward. Suddenly blinding sunlight mingles with cascading napkins, bottles, cans, cardboard boxes, and our squirrel a single speck within the storm.

Tumbling, Mistletoe tries to run in mid air. The first instant her paws strike something solid, her strange-looking tail sticks straight up, and she trips, slides, scrambles, and flees, in whatever direction her head is pointing, never once looking behind her.

At last she can run no further. She sees a dead tree, climbs it and looks around.

The city's garbage dump is a vast hole in the ground. No living thing is visible anywhere, except that in one corner of the pit a human on a bulldozer nudges dirt over a huge mound of trash. The sun is bright and the heat is unbearable. No wind. A horrible stench. Mistletoe perches in her dead tree looking and looking, but nothing... nothing... looks or smells at all familiar.

When at last our squirrel feels brave enough to descend to the ground, she heads away from the clattering bulldozer. At the dump's edge she scrambles up a steep earthen embankment with weeds growing at its top. Hesitatingly she enters the weeds and quickly becomes disoriented in the large abandoned lot. For over two hours she wanders aimlessly through tall grass and ragweed, circling without knowing it; when finally she emerges from her jungle, she finds herself next to a highway.

It's a very busy highway, a limited-access four-laner, with an endless stream of coming and going cars. On Peace Hill Mistletoe has learned not to cross such roads so now she runs along the highway's grassy shoulder, the weedy field on one side and the traffic on the other. The cars pass frightfully near, but Mistletoe cannot stop running.

Noise from the passing cars, heat of the late afternoon, the endless, weedy highway shoulder, discarded bottles, cans... on and on and on our squirrel travels, until at dusk she finds a bridge. It's a concrete bridge beneath which are angles and corners where a squirrel can hide.

At dawn the next morning Mistletoe sees that the bridge crosses a large river. Not far away lies a farmhouse, a barn, and a large fenced-in pasture in which cattle lazily graze, and beyond the pasture, a woods.

Mistletoe bounds toward the big pasture. Sliding through the wire fence surrounding the pasture and embarking upon the sea of grass, Mistletoe finds the grass heavy with dew; now the dew's wetness and coldness send shivers through Mistletoe's body -- shivers that mingle with other shivers caused by our squirrel's growing anxiety. Anxiety, yes, for in this land Mistletoe is an intruder, and it's natural for any squirrel to feel uneasy when trespassing onto unknown territory.

Five minutes of bounding through the wet grass brings Mistletoe to the woods on the pasture's far side. She pauses to gaze at the woods, for suddenly she finds within herself conflicting feelings. What dangerous thing might await her now there in the woods? Yet, being in an open field like this also is dangerous...

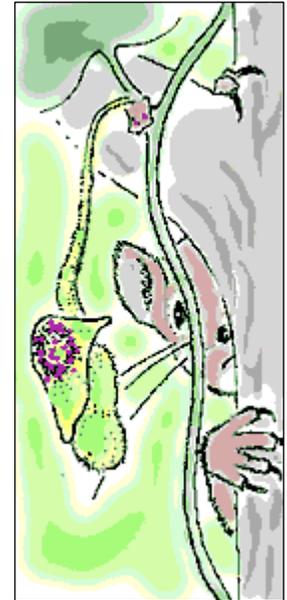
Compared to the widely spaced park-trees on Peace Hill, these trees grow so closely together that they make a dark green wall. Here greens are so dark, and shadows are so deep...

Our squirrel moves into the woods. In her mind now there are no thoughts of the past and none for the future. Her only thought is to climb a tree.

AUGUST (THE RIVER)

On Peace Hill, Mistletoe had been an expert at living among such upland trees as Hackberries, Black Walnuts, Black Locusts, Honey Locusts, Red Maples, and American Elms. However, in this woods -- this bottomland woods on the edge of town called Bryant's Woods -- the trees are of species Mistletoe never has seen. Here grow Shagbark and Pignut Hickories, Pin Oaks, White Oaks, Mulberries, Beeches and Black Cherries.

Mistletoe doesn't possess the special talents and knowledge needed to use these particular trees as food. Certainly this woods must harbor fruits, nuts, berries and other things a squirrel can eat; but how does a squirrel who's never seen these things know what's edible? On this first day of August, Mistletoe's first full day in Bryant's Woods, our squirrel find herself very hungry...



Late in the afternoon, Mistletoe discovers a hole in a big Shagbark Hickory. Since it's similar to the Sycamore-den on Peace Hill, for the first time since arriving in this forest she finds herself feeling glad about something. However, the very instant she pokes her head into the hole she smells another squirrel. Then squirrel-paws scrambling on tree-bark are heard. She looks up and sees the old, high-ranked female named Sumac rushing toward her, flicking her tail threateningly. Terrified, Mistletoe races to the forest floor and disappears into the woods.

This is just the first of several such incidents, for gradually Mistletoe learns that in this woods all the den trees already are taken by other squirrels. In the end, she settles for a weather-beaten leaf-platform. In it she feels vulnerable and uncomfortable, but she is far too discouraged to repair it.

Moreover, on Peace Hill, Mistletoe had known each of her squirrel neighbors. She had been keenly alert to the fact that some squirrels ranked higher than she, and some ranked lower, and always she had conducted her travels and behavior with the strictest attention paid to that ranking. On Peace Hill, Mistletoe had ranked higher than every other squirrel younger than she.

However, here, she sees that even squirrels much younger than she hold their tails high and confidently move from place to place, for they know where to hide if danger threatens, and they know where to find food... Thus even when Mistletoe meets squirrels younger than her own offspring she feels inferior to them... In fact, in this woods, Mistletoe feels inferior to every squirrel.

Now come a long series of days, each day feeling like a week or a month to Mistletoe. Though sometimes by luck Mistletoe finds a mushroom, some berries, or maybe a nest with eggs or young birds in it, such finds are rare. As the days pass, our squirrel grows

skinny and ratty looking. She is a low-ranked, cowering, slinking rodent just barely surviving.

Sometimes at the edge of the woods Mistletoe perches high in a Cottonwood tree, gazing toward the east, across the open pasture. From here she sees that to the north lies a large field of corn, and to the south there's an even larger field of wheat. The river flows along the woods's western boundary, so Bryant's Woods is a kind of island surrounded by water and broad open spaces. There in the Cottonwood, Mistletoe yearns to leave Bryant's Woods, to find Peace Hill, or at least somewhere better than here. However, as would be any squirrel, she is terrified of the idea of crossing open fields; for, in open fields, if trouble arises, where is a tree to climb? Days pass, and Mistletoe's yearning to leave only grows.

By the end of August, no longer can Mistletoe bear to stay in Bryant's Woods. At long last desperation and hunger call forth in her a piece of wisdom with which she was born, but which until now she's never used. That wisdom declares this: If on one side of a river life is bad, then swim to the other side...

On Bryant's Wood's western side, now Mistletoe thrusts herself into the wide river.

It'll be a long swim. With eyes fixed on the opposite shore, Mistletoe swims toward the sun, even as the river's current sweeps her downstream. On and on she paddles, the muscles in her legs and back soon starting to ache. Weak with hunger, soon both her energy and her spirit run low.

On and on and on and on and on and on and on... Where is the opposite shore? Water splashing into nostrils... can't keep mouth closed... swallowing water... feeling sick...

Out of the eye's corner something floating is glimpsed not far away. It's only a waterlogged piece of driftwood but Mistletoe swims toward it, places her front paws on it, and it barely keeps her head above water as she rests.

Long minutes she rests, the river's current carrying her irresistibly downstream, but finally something inside her tells her to swim again, and so she does. Earlier she swam toward the sun so now she swims toward it again.

Now, when an animal lives through terrible moments, sometimes its mind does strange things; the same thing happens with human minds. Thus you must overlook this lapse in Mistletoe's story, for it can only be said that the next thing Mistletoe knows, she is awakening on a muddy bank; she cannot remember how she arrived there.

The riverbank's slick, brown mud glistening beneath the noontime sun... head water-clogged and filled with fishy odors and the mud smell... eyes almost swollen shut and caked with mud... very weak... the heat is awful... sick... Mistletoe drags herself to the top

of the bank. Growing before her there' a thick, woody stem of a wild grapevine. She pulls herself onto the stem and haltingly, painfully climbs up it.

Up, up it goes, up into trees it goes, much higher than she had thought it could. High into the top of a tall Box Elder tree she climbs until finally she finds herself with cool, fresh wind streaming around her. How peaceful is the sound of Box Elder leaves rustling in the afternoon wind. Here Mistletoe finds the strength and will to groom herself... she rubs, scratches and licks off the disgusting mud.

From here Mistletoe can see a long way off. Her Box Elder is one of just three trees rising above dense brush growing along the river's bank. Next to the three trees lies a big field of corn. The cornfield's rows stretch to a dark line of trees half a mile away. The wind makes silvery waves in the ocean of tall corn. Understanding that this little clump of Box Elders is no proper place for a squirrel, Mistletoe glances at the cornfield, then at the distant line of trees, then the cornfield, then the trees...

After resting and grooming for most of the afternoon, down the Box Elder's trunk Mistletoe goes. She enters the cornfield and bounds down the alley between two straight, very long rows of corn standing six feet tall.

Now, the open areas between rows of corn deep inside a big cornfield create a strange and in some ways beautiful world. It's fairly easy to travel between the rows, for the land is flat and there are few weeds -- mostly, it's just grayish, naked, shady soil. Flecks of sunlight filter through the canopy of corn leaves and, when the wind blows, sunlight flecks flash on and off all over the floor. The corn's blades are long and slender so they arc above the alley in a graceful, even majestic manner. Above the canopy of green corn blades lies nothing but open blue sky.

Through an endless monotony of green cornstalks Mistletoe travels on and on, long traveling down the same alley. Minutes and hours she travels, sometimes resting, constantly yearning for the safety of a tree. Late in the afternoon turkey vultures fly in circles overhead, coursing lazily on convection currents of hot air rising invisibly above the field. Long, long, long is Mistletoe's journey.

Rouuuwww, rouuuwww, rouuuwwwwwwwwww...

The male cicada calls for a mate. Hearing this, Mistletoe knows she's nearing the forest, for cicadas call from trees.

Chuuuuuuuuuk-duk-duk-duk-duk-duk...

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a bird that nests in bushes and grapevines is claiming his woodland territory. His call gladdens Mistletoe.

Through the sound of rustling corn-blades now Mistletoe hears wind in tall trees; she smells the forest's mustiness and feels its gentle moisture. The Wood Thrush and the

Wood Pewee call, as do the Orchard Oriole and the Carolina Wren. They are all singing, for now the sun touches the horizon, the day's heat is withdrawing, and the forest's animals are perking up after a too-hot afternoon.

Mistletoe bounds through a thicket of Cane and then she climbs up the first big tree she encounters. Up, up, up she goes, almost dead with exhaustion but feeling exuberant and glad. Right off, high in this very first tree, Mistletoe finds a hole that would make a perfect den. Hardly able to believe her good fortune, she approaches the opening and sniffs.

But, before she can react to what she smells, she hears something behind her. Turning around she sees the old female called Sumac, coming to chase her away...

The river flows in a great curve. In the morning when Mistletoe began swimming, the sun lead her away from the woods to the river's other side. But while resting on the driftwood, she had been carried around the great curve so that when she began swimming toward the sun again, it was in the direction from which she had come. Mistletoe is back in Bryant's Woods...

And now to Mistletoe it seems as if no hope remains in the whole world.

SEPTEMBER (THE APPLE)

Pop pop pop pop pop pop pop pop pop...

Having never heard this sound, Mistletoe's ears perk straight up. She rears onto her haunches, looks toward the sound, and nervously flicks her scalped tail.

Pop pop pop...

With the noise growing louder, a Blue Jay issues its alarm call, then flies away. All through Bryant's Woods a thousand animals grow tense and sit unmoving, alert to any danger that may attend this loud, unexpected intruder. Poised like statues, they wait and listen, wait and listen...



From Mistletoe's leaf-platform at the woods's edge she sees that the noise comes from an old, green tractor chugging toward the woods from the direction of the farmhouse across the pasture. The tractor pulls a wagon on which sits a young female human. Once the tractor and wagon draw near the woods, the girl rises and stands on the moving wagon's flat bed.

Pop pop pop...

Next to the fence between the pasture and the woods, not far from the cornfield's edge, the wagon jerks to a halt; the girl almost loses her balance and she and her father laugh. These are the first human sounds Mistletoe has heard since arriving in Bryant's Woods over a month ago.

From atop her leaf-platform Mistletoe watches the humans with ever-growing curiosity. In contrast to Bryant's Wood's other squirrels, who are confused and very upset by these visitors' arrival, Mistletoe is pleased. The loud humans remind her of happy days on Peace Hill when long ago she was a squirrel with her own family... Now Mistletoe hears the father make his sound:

"Well, Joanie, if we're going to cut firewood, we'd better get to work!"

"Why don't we just sit for a while and look at things?" the girl asks, only half joking.

The father smiles but doesn't reply. He climbs onto the wagon, picks up a chainsaw and hops across the fence. Placing the chainsaw on the ground he then bends over and draws several times on the starter-rope.

Having tumbled from the den-hole during the big hickory's fall, it's one of Sumac's three-week old nestlings. Its eyes are only partially open and its body only thinly covered with fur.

"Daddy, can I keep it?"

When at last the tractor and wagon return to the pasture's far side, the forest's birds and squirrels come out to look at what has been done. Skunks, raccoons, opossums, and the fox will survey the damage when darkness comes.

It is not known what happened to Sumac and her remaining three babies, for they had been in the den of the old hickory when it fell, and the tree landed with its den-hole against the ground. Neither can it be told what will happen to the baby squirrel who fell from the den. It's needs are very specific -- it needs Sumac's milk. And it needs to live wild in the forest.

While her father had worked with the chainsaw, the girl had thrown something onto the ground next to the cornfield. Of all the animals in the woods who saw this, only to Mistletoe had it been an event important enough to remember. It reminded her of the many times she had seen humans toss garbage into the green trash-can on Peace Hill. Thus, no sooner than the humans are out of sight, Mistletoe climbs down her tree to look for the girl's discarded thing, hoping it might be a greasy corn-chip, or maybe an oily French-fry with tomato ketchup on it, or maybe even a crumbly Twinkie.

Yes! An apple core. Mistletoe has eaten this kind of food before; her spirits soar. Greedily stuffing the core into her mouth, she rushes with it into the lower branches of a Catalpa tree at the woods' edge.

But even before Mistletoe begins gnawing on the core, Wahoo comes climbing up the Catalpa's trunk, expecting to have the food for himself. Wahoo is an aggressive, year-old male who more than once has chased Mistletoe from food and good perches.

However, this time Wahoo is in for a surprise. He remembers Mistletoe as an inferior, cowering, insecure individual who runs from any threat at all. But now something new is going on inside our squirrel's head. Having this apple core reminds her of an earlier time when she enjoyed plenty of food, and when it had been she who knew where all the good hiding places and trails were, and she who had been of a higher social rank than most other squirrels. In those days, if a young squirrel like Wahoo came along, it would be she who flicked her tail in defiance and as a warning, and he would have run away!

Stopping on a limb three feet from Mistletoe, Wahoo looks covetously at the apple core in Mistletoe's mouth and flicks his tail threateningly. However, to his vast surprise, our squirrel does not drop the prize and run away. Wahoo watches as Mistletoe gnaws on her core, looking Wahoo straight in the eye, and giving the impression that she's deciding that

this impudent young male is hardly worth worrying about. Behind Mistletoe, for the first time in Bryant's Woods, a stiff, deformed tail stiffens with unmistakable resoluteness; and now she flicks it.

Getting the message, Wahoo turns and bounds away. Clearly, times have changed. Now Mistletoe outranks at least one other squirrel in Bryant's Woods...

While Mistletoe finishes eating the apple core, the old, high-ranked male whose name is Cypress comes into the area, traveling on the forest floor below Mistletoe's tree. It's lucky for Mistletoe that earlier it had been Wahoo who wanted the apple core, and not Cypress, because for huge, aggressive Cypress, Mistletoe would have dropped the core and run.

Slowly, with the bearing of a squirrel who knows that he is king of the woods, old Cypress passes through the bushes at the forest's edge, saunters across a small corner of the pasture and enters the cornfield. He chooses an eight-foot tall, green corn-plant and climbs up its stalk. Mistletoe has no idea at all what Cypress is doing, so she watches his every movement.

Midway up the corn stalk an ear of half-ripe corn juts from the stalk. With his back paws firmly grasping the stalk, Cypress takes the ear of corn into his front paws and teeth, tears away the ear's green shucks, and gnaws the exposed, juicy, yellow kernels...

Mistletoe hardly believes her eyes! If corn can be eaten right off the stalk, then in this huge field there must be enough food to keep a squirrel from hunger forever!

Without waiting for Cypress to open a second ear, Mistletoe scrambles down the Catalpa's trunk and bounds toward the cornfield. Soon she, too, is opening with her claws and teeth the shucks that envelope a juicy ear of corn. Of course, for the inexperienced Mistletoe, the shucks do not part from over the kernels as easily as they do for Cypress. Nonetheless, it's not long before Mistletoe is filling her stomach with sweet, fresh corn. And this is just the first of many such ears of corn that she will enjoy.

On this September morning, on the same day the humans cut down Sumac's den- hickory, it looks as though Mistletoe's luck may be changing for the better...

OCTOBER (THE VISITOR)

Mistletoe, Wahoo, Cypress, Coralberry, Tupelo, Aster, Fescue, Sweetgum, Foxtail, Mimosa, Pawpaw, Mayapple and Mayapple's four six-week-old babies... During dry, crisp, blue-skied October, these are the squirrels living in Bryant's Woods. And now Mistletoe is an accepted part of Bryant's Woods' squirrel society. She is no longer just the hungry outcast.



Since the apple-core incident with Wahoo and the discovery of corn, Mistletoe has regained enough confidence to challenge other squirrels beside Wahoo. Now she ranks higher than Wahoo, Tupelo, Fescue and Pawpaw. And when Mayapple's nestlings become full members of the community, Mistletoe will rank higher than them, too.

Not long after Mistletoe discovered corn, the woods itself had begun producing its autumnal harvest. Gradually she had developed skills for finding and opening beechnuts, nuts of the Shagbark and Pignut Hickories, and the tiny, hard acorns of Pin Oak... Now each day Mistletoe eats her fill; now she keeps busy burying nuts in the ground.

These days, leaves turn colors and fall to the ground. On the first sunny afternoon after the first night of heavy frost, each breeze brings hundreds of tree-leaves swirling toward the forest floor in avalanches of bright color. Falling, the leaves sound like rushing water in a stream -- but always the afternoon air smells dry and crisp.

Even the birds avalanche through Bryant's Woods. Now many species migrate southward toward lands where hard winters never come. Bay-breasted Warblers, Black-throated Green Warblers, Tennessee Warblers, Brown Creepers, Red-eyed Vireos... all moving south for the winter.

Early one morning when white fog lies more densely upon the fields than ever Mistletoe has seen it, our squirrel is surprised to see the male human from the farmhouse silently emerging from the fog and entering the woods. Carrying something long and slender, slowly he passes through the forest, then squats at the base of a big Blackgum tree. All the squirrels who see him flick danger signals with their tails. Some race into their dens or leaf-platforms while others station themselves on the hidden side of their tree's trunk. In the city often Mistletoe has seen humans walking alone early in the morning and she knows how sometimes they pause and rest; now she cannot understand why the other

squirrels seem so upset. However, she takes the cue from them and positions herself on her tree trunk's hidden side.

Minutes pass. The sun rises higher and the fog begins to lift. A few birds sing, and from time to time a slight breeze sends red and yellow Red Maple leaves floating earthward. Mistletoe, more or less forgetting about the man who has entered the forest, climbs into a fork in her tree and begins grooming. One by one, other squirrels also leave their hiding places; one or two groom and forage in treetops.

Blam!

Tupelo, the squirrel nearest the almost-forgotten human, falls thirty feet onto the forest floor, landing only a few feet from where the human sits, the shotgun in his hand still smoking. The wounded squirrel screams and raises himself onto his front paws. The rear half of his body is paralyzed and limp but with his front legs he tries to drag himself toward the nearest tree.

Casually the squirrel hunter approaches Tupelo, crushes the creature's head with the heel of his boot, picks up the corpse and drops it into a bag slung across his shoulder. Then, passing right beneath Mistletoe who in uncomprehending horror watches from inside her leaf-platform, he walks to the woods's other side. Fifteen minutes later, just as Bryant's Wood's squirrels once again begin feeling secure enough to start foraging, Mistletoe hears two new blasts from the shotgun...

And never again will our squirrel meet among the forest's trees the male called Sweetgum, and the female called Pawpaw.

Blam!

A week has passed since the human's last visit. It's a crisp, sunny afternoon and at least an hour has passed since the human walked into the woods. When the shot rings out, Mistletoe is climbing among her tree's branches gathering beechnuts. And this time she is more than just an observer...

Near her face a twig snaps in two, and all around her shotgun pellets whiz through the dry air. But the human is too far away for a good shot and he's simply missed his target. Terrified, Mistletoe rushes into her leaf-platform, crouches low, and quivers in silence.

The sky is blue and cicadas on tree limbs make droning sounds in warm, yellow sunlight. Mistletoe hears the man below walking through crisp, crackling, fallen leaves...

Blam!

Tatters of mangled leaves spray Mistletoe's face as shotgun pellets rage through her leaf-platform. A pellet splits one of the twigs serving as the platform's foundation, sending wooden splinters shooting into one of Mistletoe's paws. A pellet grazes the left side of her head, plowing a bloody trench from the corner of her mouth to just beneath an eye. Another pellet enters the flesh between the rib cage and shoulder of her right, front paw, ending its journey only when it jars against her shoulder blade. And a pellet severs two toes from her back, left paw.

The pellet that grazes her head leaves our squirrel stunned and unable to think. Mistletoe does not even hear when the hunter reloads his shotgun and takes potshots at three other leaf nests. Sometimes in the past he's knocked squirrels from their nests with this technique...

However, two of the other nests are empty. As the human leaves the woods, walking home across the pasture, it is only Foxtail who lies in his leaf- platform with his spine shattered and his lungs collapsed and useless.

Yes, the hunter really had known better than to try to hunt on a sunny afternoon. Mornings when hungry squirrels are awakening and beginning to forage are much better. And only seldom can squirrels be knocked from their nests. But today had been such a beautiful day and really he had wanted a reason to be outside...

Gradually Mistletoe's senses return. Little by little she becomes aware of a world of blue sky above and dry leaves below, and of intense pain. Her shoulder blade has been jarred so hard by the impacting pellet that the muscles, tendons, and nerves around it throb as if her leg were being mercilessly twisted.

For a long time Mistletoe lies here, blue sky above and dry leaves below. A breeze comes along; she hears Red Maple leaves falling onto the forest floor and she feels her nest swaying in the wind. For the rest of the day she lies in her nest, any movement at all sending pain shooting into her shoulder. When evening comes, the coldness causes her pain to increase.

On the morning of the day after being shot, at last she pulls herself to the edge of her nest and peers into the forest below. Her pain is matched by her thirst. Gazing into the forest below, she feels within herself great conflict. On the one hand, it hurts to move in any way; on the other, she absolutely must quench her thirst.

Thirst wins. But as our squirrel leans over the nest's side, weakened by the buckshot, supporting branches give way and the entire nest collapses. Mistletoe grabs at a branch and holds on briefly, but pain causes her to let go.

Down, down, down she falls, crashing through dry, colorful leaves and brittle twigs. Then all becomes black. When she awakens on the forest floor she lies in a soft blanket of dry leaves.

With almost unendurable pain Mistletoe drags herself into the cornfield. A few days earlier the man had brought his big machines there and the corn had been harvested. Now the field is brown and filled only with stubble. However, the corn-picker has missed some of the corn ears and now finding corn on the ground is easy. Moreover, it's rained, so water pools in tracks left by the heavy machines.

Mistletoe drinks her fill and then gnaws some corn kernels. When darkness arrives, with great effort she pulls herself back into the woods. She crawls into a thicket of Honeysuckle vines. A rabbit is there. Somehow the rabbit understands that Mistletoe means no harm.

NOVEMBER (THE BUCKET)

The loss of two toes on the hind paw has not been of critical importance. The gash between her lip and eye has left an ugly scar but now this does not bother her. The front paw has been bruised by the shattering twig but it's no longer painful. The shoulder is the thing that still hurts, and it hurts all the time, day after day. Climbing into trees is out of the question. In November, Mistletoe is a kind of animal that Bryant's Woods has never seen.



Not with a squirrel's graceful leaps and bounds but with the stiff, laboring gait of a lizard, each dawn Mistletoe drags herself into the cornfield. This new, man-created animal no longer lives in the squirrel's world of air, sky, and treetops, but rather in the turtle's world of mud and roots, and brown, decaying leaves. Now she is not sleek-looking, but rather a creature caked with mud, like a frog with brown warts. Now she possesses neither the energy nor the spirit to be like anything other than a snake, suspicious and vulnerable on the ground.

Yes, Mistletoe has become a grubby, half-dead animal who eats waste-corn, living among dead leaves on the forest's floor. Out the window has gone her rank relative to Bryant's Woods's other squirrels. In Mistletoe's life, now there is no tail-flicking and no being chased by males; now all other squirrels simply stay away from her. Mud and corn, mud and corn, mud and corn... even the Blue Jays scream when Mistletoe comes dragging from beneath the Honeysuckle thicket.

One day after a big rain, the farmer's hound comes sniffing. Mistletoe is eating corn in the field so when the hound sees her it runs toward her baying crazily. But this thing the hound approaches doesn't dart away like the fox or amble in retreat like the skunk. It doesn't drop and play dead like the opossum, nor does it bound toward the trees like a squirrel. In fact, this unworldly creature seems not to care whether it's caught or not.

The wounded side of Mistletoe's face is puffed up, giving it a crooked, screwed-up look. When our squirrel realizes that the hound is coming, she tries to run, but the sharp pain in her shoulder causes her to stumble and scream. She tries to leap, but only manages to sprawl awkwardly onto the ground.

Seeing this, the hound stops in its tracks, not knowing what to do with such a disfigured, possibly dangerous creature. So the hound simply turns around and skulks away.

Mistletoe has been looking for a better sleeping place than beneath the Honeysuckle thicket. Today she finds one next to the trunk of a Pin Oak near the river; it's a ten-gallon metal bucket lying on its side. The bucket's top has a spout in it large enough for a squirrel to enter, and the bucket itself is dry inside. A few weeks ago a mouse carried straw into it for a nest, but now the mouse is gone. Now this bucket becomes Mistletoe's home.

And little does she know that for this new home she must thank the human who shot her. For, this bucket was brought into the woods by the man so that when he hunts he'll have someplace to sit and wait... wait as his squirrel-quarry forget him, and begin showing themselves...

During the nights that follow, more rain than normal falls. Many nights find Mistletoe lying curled in her bucket listening to raindrops drum onto the bucket's metal sides. From inside the bucket the thunder sounds like distant growling or roaring. A corner of the bucket touches the tree's trunk so sometimes when the wind is strongest and the tree's wood creaks and groans, those sounds pass from the tree into the bucket. To our squirrel, it seems as if she lives in the very belly of a forest-sized ache.

However, our squirrel no longer grows overly excited about mere creaks and groans. When the rain patters on her roof and the sky roars, she is content to be dry, and to know that a hunger-satisfying cornfield lies nearby.

On Thanksgiving Day, a remarkable thing happens. Much too early in the season, a heavy, wet snow blankets Bryant's Woods. When Mistletoe awakens, though the sun has been up for a couple of hours, inside the bucket there is only darkness. And where are the sounds of wind in trees, and of Dark-eyed Juncos trilling as they forage for Giant Ragweed seeds at the woods's edge? Noticing a dim glow issuing through the spout, Mistletoe draws close and sniffs. Where there should be nothing but air, her snout collides with wet, crunchy snow. She paws at it and a little tumbles into the bucket.

In nature, sometimes squirrels dig tunnels beneath snow, looking for cached nuts; the snow-tunneling instinct is something a squirrel is born with so when Mistletoe feels snow beneath her paws, it feels natural to keep on shoving and pushing and digging forward...

As Mistletoe angles her tunnel upward and nears the surface, the snow loosens. The sound of her paws working in the snow acquires a certain hollow tone. When at last the snow's crust collapses, fresh air and brilliant light flood into her tunnel. Mistletoe had not realized how stale the air in her bucket had become; but now it seems that never before

has she smelled air so fresh, so wet, and electric -- as exciting as this air now flooding around her.

Mistletoe pokes her head from her snow-hole and looks around. What she beholds could not be more different from her usual world of mud and brown leaves.

Trees make graceful, delicate silhouettes against the milky sky; how unlike mud-splattered ears of corn and cold puddles of rainwater they are. Breezes shake snow from the branches. This pure whiteness showers earthward gently, silently, gracefully...

From across the snow-covered fields and pastures come crisp and crystalline sounds. At the farmhouse across the pasture, the humans speak to one another:

"You'd better come in now, Joanie," a human says. "We're putting that turkey in the oven any minute. And if you keep playing in the snow, you're going to get a cold, and miss a lot of school."

Later, wind will bring the odor of woodsmoke from the farmhouse's direction. It'll be smoke with a Hickory odor.

DECEMBER (DRIFTING)

For most of autumn and early winter, the weather has acted crazy. Since Thanksgiving Day no more snow has fallen, but the rain seems never to end.

For the most part, Mistletoe now is healed. Though still unable to jump from limb to limb or climb among a tree's most slender branches, now at least she can climb to the fork of a nearby Red Maple's trunk, and perch there like a real squirrel. Besides eating corn from the cornfield, now she can dig and eat nuts that earlier she cached. Each night she sleeps curled in her bucket at the base of the Pin Oak tree.

In the predawn hours of this particular morning -- on the day referred to by humans as Christmas Eve -- outside the bucket there is nothing but darkness, rain and wind. And now, Mistletoe feels her bucket move...

Of course, during the whole month Mistletoe has been living here, never has her bucket moved. Mistletoe lies in the darkness, her muscles taut and her mind alert, the sound of rain splattering upon her bucket.

However, nothing more happens. Just rain and wind and darkness. Eventually our squirrel sleeps again.

The next time the bucket moves, it's a much more violent lurch. The end with the spout on it tilts toward the sky and Mistletoe finds herself lying against what always has been her back wall! Raindrops pepper through the spout.

Mistletoe's only thought is to escape. Taking hold of the spout's rim with the claws of her front paws she stretches toward the opening. But just as her head and shoulders pass through the hole, the entire bucket tips forward and Mistletoe feels the front half of her body plunged beneath the surface of ice- cold water!

Frantically she withdraws back into the bucket, causing the vessel to tip back to its former position, with the opening toward the sky. Two inches of frigid water now pool inside the bucket. Mistletoe's warm, dry den no longer exists.

Huddling quivering and confused in the darkness at the bottom of her bucket Mistletoe's keen sense of balance tells her that the bucket is rotating round and round, and bobbing up and down. Again Mistletoe tries to exit through the spout, but again the bucket tips over. Withdrawing the second time, in the bucket's bottom she now finds four inches of icy water!



Certain substances emit stronger odors when wet than when dry. That's the way it is now with the rusty insides of Mistletoe's bucket. Now the penetrating odor of rust once again sickens Mistletoe and fills her with unspeakable terror. It's the same odor as the metal slinky-toy in the Alexanders' attic, and the rusty insides of the garbage truck's holding area. Fear and sadness and aching cold, and the oppressiveness of the odor of rust saturate every pour of Mistletoe's soul and body.

When at last the milky glow of dawn lights up the spout-hole in the bucket's "ceiling," Mistletoe once again pulls herself upwards. This time, however, she does not try to draw herself all the way outside; she just pokes her head from the hole and looks around.

No forest, no pasture, and no open cornfield. Only muddy water...

The previous night the river had risen from its banks and flooded Bryant's Woods; beneath Mistletoe's bucket the water had pooled deeper and deeper until the bucket had floated upright. On stormy floodwater the bucket had sailed through and out of Bryant's Woods. Now, surrounded by uprooted trees, driftwood, corncobs, and a thousand unnamable items washed from fields, forests, and riverside garbage-dumps, Mistletoe's bucket is carried down the river on brown, cold, swirling waters. And who can say in what district, county, or state Mistletoe now finds herself?

Though in some places the floodwater sweeps across low-lying pastures and fields, and in others it swirls through bottomland woods similar to Bryant's Woods, Mistletoe's bucket always keeps to the river's middle current. Sometimes our squirrel peeps from her prison just long enough for her to see that she is passing through completely unfamiliar territory. Seeing this, she lets herself sink back into the icy water inside her bucket -- and let herself be carried even farther downstream, entombed in her latest rusty trap.

At noon, on Christmas Eve Day, the rain turns to snow and the wind grows even stronger, whipping up waves that churn the bucket and knock it from side to side. Inside the bucket, Mistletoe's terror grows, because now from time to time when the bucket rises onto a wave's crest the wind catches it, setting it on its side as it slides into the waves' trough; when the next wave overtops the bucket, water gushes through the spout. Slowly the bucket is sinking. Six inches, seven inches, nine inches... and all the time, inside the bucket, Mistletoe floats in her own river of sadness.

As darkness approaches on Christmas Eve Night, the snow continues and the wind does not lay. Now water inside the bucket pools a foot deep and Mistletoe has given up trying to look outside.

Suddenly an especially large wave raises the bucket so high that when it slides into the following wave-trough it plunges completely beneath the water's surface. Mistletoe finds herself choking, suspended within a watery, swirling, gurgling fountain of upward escaping bubbles...

Breaking the river's surface, she breathes icy, snow-filled air; she is so cold and numb that instead of trying to swim, she just floats with the river's current, barely paddling enough to keep her snout above the water. However, even Mistletoe's luck isn't all bad. This meager swimming is enough to bring her into view of the river's bank, only feet away through the falling snow.

Half dead and only half willing to save herself, Mistletoe swims toward the bank. As if her body had turned to lead she pulls herself onto the slick mud. The odor of mud, in the cornfield so recently a hated smell, now smells safe and even a little hopeful. Within moments the brutal, snow-laden wind casts a thin crust of ice upon Mistletoe's fur.

A weaker squirrel would not survive. Yet Mistletoe now pulls herself up the steep, snow-mantled bank, crawls through a dense thicket of weeds and shrubs, and steps onto a paved, quiet, snow-covered suburban street. As if some kind of unseen force were pulling her forward, she runs down the street's center, and keeps running past one intersection and then another. Because of the snow, there's hardly any traffic at all, so nothing keeps our squirrel from racing on and on.

Finally the street climbs steeply up a hill. At the top, the street ends in a turn-around, but Mistletoe keeps going, passing first through a yew hedge and then across a small, grassy lawn. As she bounds toward her unknown destination very slowly she realizes that now she is in a place very similar to Peace Hill. Yes, what memories are stirred by these sounds of rumbling traffic out in the city, jets taking off at the airport, and the neighbors' barking dogs!

Silhouetted against the pale, snowy night-sky, a great White Oak stands beside a house. It's the only tree around and it grows not far from one of the house's windows. From the window radiates an orange glow and this light frightens Mistletoe at first, yet such is her desire to climb into the tree that she rushes toward the oak's trunk and climbs.

It's perfect. About ten feet off the ground, there's a cavity in the oak's trunk, and it's not marked with the odor of another squirrel. Inside she finds a dry, spacious den. Never has Mistletoe known such a perfect den.

Mistletoe's hours of being inside the bobbing bucket have created inside her a kind of nervousness -- a restlessness and a tension -- that just lying in the bottom of the dark, quiet den cannot relieve. Thus even before she dries and licks the mud from her fur she climbs back to the den's entrance and looks through the hole. She finds herself with a perfect view into the window from which orange light comes.

Inside, humans sit around a fireplace while orange flames rise from burning logs. Watching through the window as large snowflakes fall around her, she becomes almost hypnotized. Never has our squirrel seen fire! It's something that moves and moves, yet never goes away or comes closer... Somehow, watching the flames calms down Mistletoe. Soon she withdraws into her den and sleeps more soundly than she has for many, many weeks.

"Edna, there's a squirrel out here."

A human makes its noise. It's a male human, standing on the house's patio. The door behind him opens and another human appears. Mistletoe is not afraid.

"Poor thing!" the new human says. "What's happened to its tail?"

"Probably a dog got it or something."

"Do you think we can get it to stay?"

"If we put up that feeder the Taylors got you for Christmas, it just might!"

Watching from the horizontal limb beneath the den's entrance, Mistletoe sees the humans drive a stake into the ground and then place a large bird feeder atop it. Then with immense satisfaction she sees the female human fill the feeder with millet and canary seed and then pour onto the snow a large bag of sunflower seeds.

As soon as the humans return inside, Mistletoe descends the trunk of her White Oak, stamps her feet, and bounds into the middle of the heap of seeds. Inside the house the humans watch from the window through which the night before Mistletoe had beheld the orange fireplace flame.

And so, on this Christmas Day, a tradition begins that during upcoming years will be repeated time and time again. Feeding the wild animals will become something the people in this house do for the rest of their lives.

And Mistletoe is the first of many, many different kinds of animals that will find satisfaction and a full stomach at this new feeding station on Hope Hill.

*** THE END ***