

Raccoon's Redemption

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Welcome to Once Upon a Meadow. Our stories are written for the ear, so for those able, we recommend listening while reading along. Transcripts may contain minor errors; please check the audio before quoting.

Once upon a time, there lived a community of creatures, who shared a meadow, with a stream running through it. There was Bear, Rabbit, the Squirrels, and Raccoon. One day in early spring, not long after the snow had melted, the Squirrels raced into the meadow together, flicking their tails furiously—especially Gray Squirrel.

“We’ve been robbed!” Gray Squirrel shouted, at least as much as squirrels can shout.

Bear began growling, and Rabbit ran in frenzied circles, as rabbits tend to do when they’re excited. Raccoon, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“What was stolen?” asked Bear.

“Our acorns are missing,” Brown Squirrel replied. He scowled at Rabbit, who was still running madly around the meadow.

Suddenly there was a loud thump. Rabbit’s dashing had taken them under a bush. And they collided with Raccoon, who’d been hiding there. The animals gathered around the tangled pair. A dozen acorns were scattered across the ground.

“Raccoon’s the thief!” declared Gray Squirrel, “She was sneaking off with our acorns.”

Brown Squirrel was also upset, but rather less so than his hysterical boyfriend. “Well, raccoons *do* tend to be crooks.”

“And killers,” added Bear.

“Well, that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” said Rabbit. They had finally caught their breath from all that dashing. Rabbit understood how easy it was to get carried away.

“Ok, ok,” said Bear, lifting Raccoon by the scruff of the neck. “So, how should we punish this thief?”

“We should forever ban *all* raccoons from our meadow,” declared Gray Squirrel. He flicked his tail in self-satisfaction.

“But how should we punish *this* raccoon?” wondered Brown Squirrel aloud, as he watched Raccoon dangle from Bear’s paw.

“We should put her in prison,” said Gray Squirrel. “We could make her live in a cave. Bear could guard the entrance.”

“Slow down,” said Rabbit. They twitched their nose thoughtfully. “If we put Raccoon in a cave, how will that help? Because then we’ll have to feed her. And when we let her out, she still won’t have any food stored, and she’ll have to steal – *again* – in order to eat.”

“I’ll just eat *her*,” Bear proposed. He wasn’t keen on spending his days guarding a cave anyway.

The animals fell silent. Bear’s suggestion seemed too extreme, but they were out of ideas. Eventually, Gray Squirrel spoke up.

“Maybe we should give Raccoon a chance to explain herself,” he said.

“*Fine*,” said Bear, setting Raccoon down in the grass. “Why did you steal the acorns?”

“I was so very hungry,” answered Raccoon, “It was a long, cool winter. I couldn’t dig in the deep snow for roots and grubs.”

“It’s spring now,” said Rabbit, “You can find roots and grubs.”

Raccoon hung her head. “I’m too weak to forage for food,” she said.

All of the animals began to argue.

(The animals talk over one another).

Then they stopped and looked around, but Raccoon was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s run away,” said Brown Squirrel, shaking his head.

“Now, how will we punish her?” growled Bear.

And then, from beneath a bush at the edge of the meadow, emerged Raccoon. She tottered on her hind feet and carried a package wrapped in leaves. When she got to the center of the meadow, the other animals exploded in shouts.

(Sound of animals shouting).

Amid all the yelling was one small voice that only Rabbit could hear, thanks to their big ears.

In a faint voice, Raccoon said, “I’m so sorry.”

And then Raccoon handed her package to the Squirrels. They unwrapped the leaves. Inside were all of their missing acorns. There was also the scraggly root of a wild carrot and a creamy white beetle grub.

Raccoon had slumped onto her side. Her ribs showed through her fur. She had used the last of her energy to dig into the soil to try to make up for having broken trust in the meadow community.

Brown Squirrel handed the carrot to Rabbit and the grub to Bear. Next, he gave half of the acorns to his partner. Gray Squirrel was about to start munching when he stopped and twitched his tail in thought. Then he pushed a share of the acorns over to Raccoon.

“What you did was wrong,” Gray Squirrel said, but he didn’t feel the need for revenge anymore. He realized that the other animals had also been wrong.

“We didn’t think about your hunger in the winter, so we should also accept

responsibility for having put you in a desperate situation. I want you to eat our acorns—and then you can pay us back when you're strong again.”

Then Bear grumbled, “Come on, Raccoon, I'll break open a log for you. We'll find some juicy grubs to put a little meat on your thieving bones.” But he smiled when he said this.

Raccoon began to cry, because sometimes tears come when you feel very bad, or very good, or some of both. And then Rabbit began dashing madly in circles, as rabbits tend to do when they're excited. Rabbit was overjoyed that the animals were friends again.

The next autumn, after Raccoon had fully recovered, the meadow animals held a meeting to figure out how to make sure that none of them would go hungry in the coming winter. They liked various foods. Some ate roots and grubs, others ate nuts and leaves, and a few ate other animals (but they never ate their meadow friends, of course). They realized that their favorite foods overlapped. So, they decided to check on one another during the winter and distribute what they had saved up. That way, nobody would be put in the awful situation of needing to steal in order to survive.

Of course, if it was going to be a long, hard winter, they knew there would be only so much food to go around. But they'd share what they had and feel hungry together until spring came. It wouldn't be easy, but nobody would starve.

With the days growing shorter and the leaves turning golden, the animals didn't know who would require help in the coming months. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that each of them knew they could count on the others.