

# The Winter Wolf



**By Cliff McNish**

*Illustrations by Trish Phillips - Design by Michael McNish*

**E**ach winter, when the last snows fell, the great wolf came to the centre of the forest, and wept.

Always at midnight he came, raising his anguished howl to the tree tops.



Neither the blackness deterred him, nor the wind, nor the spite of frost.

The cry of the wolf could not be ignored. So heart-breaking was it that even baby sparrows, tucked beak-to-beak inside their nests, awoke and wondered.



'Does the wolf weep from hunger?' they asked their mothers. 'Or is he lonely? Perhaps he is cold? Does he even have a home?'

'Fools,' their mothers answered sharply. 'Listen not to the wolf's endless weeping. He is a killer, like all his kind. Beware the wolf, for he is large, his appetite is endless and his bite means death.'

Next morning badger, oldest of the forest animals, gathered the youngsters together.

'All wolves are tricksters,' he declared. 'Each year for as long as anyone can remember this one has come to the forest and wept, his head flung up to the stars.'

'But why does he weep?' the youngsters asked.



'He is waiting for one of you silly children to take pity on him, that's why,' Badger growled. 'He is after your trust, so he can get close to you. He intends to eat you up!'

'Eat us up?' cried the youngsters, shivering with fear. 'Then what should we do?'



'Stay away from him!' Badger warned. 'And whatever happens never, ever turn your back. The moment you turn your back on a wolf he will pounce.'

Hearing this, all the young animals of the forest trembled, scurrying back to their safe nests and beds.

All, that is, except one.

A young squirrel crept out to see the wolf. The wolf's endless sobbing had woken him in the night and, despite badger's warning, he knew he must look upon the howling creature for himself.



Hopping lightly from tree to tree, the young squirrel settled on a high branch above the wolf, taking care not to get too close.



'Wolf, Oh Wolf,' he whispered down, 'I cannot sleep. Why do you cry so loudly that you disturb my dreams?'

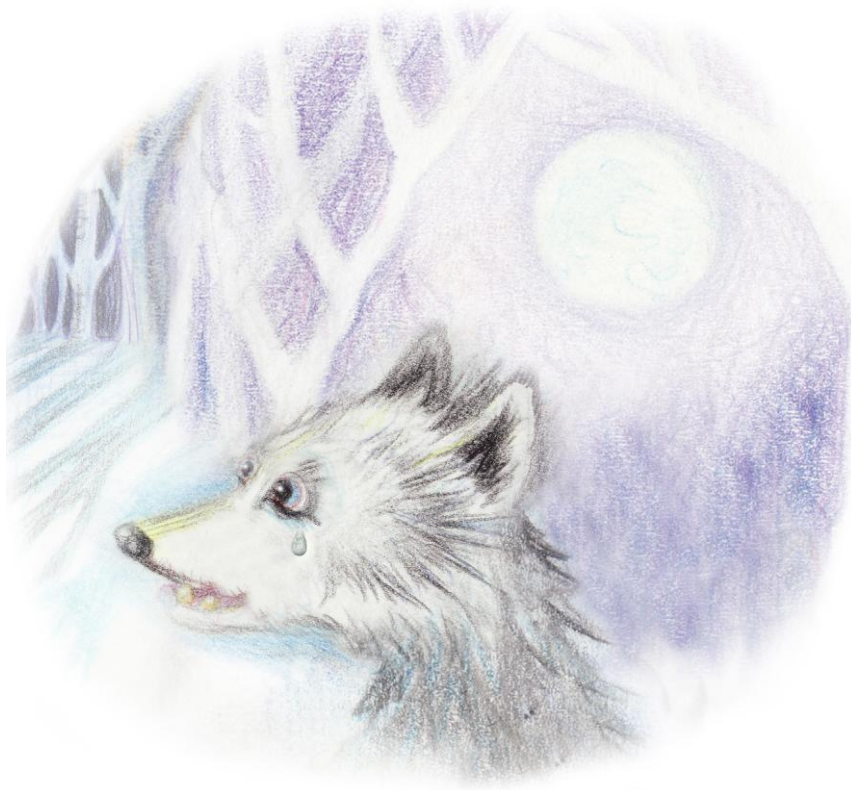
The wolf raised a face messed with tears.

'Young squirrel,' he said, 'I shall not tell you why I cry. I must not, for your tender heart could not bear it.'

'Please tell me,' the young squirrel begged. 'My mother has warned me to stay away from you, but I must know why you are crying so.'

The wolf bowed his enormous neck.

'I weep for my dead child,' he said at last. 'Many years ago the two-leg hunters came into the forest and killed all the wolf cubs too young to run away. My son was amongst them. He did not even live long enough to see his first spring flowers. That is why I cry, young squirrel. That is why I cry so.'



The wolf spoke these words so quietly that the young squirrel could barely hear him. To do so, he scampered off his safe branch onto the trunk of the tree, bringing him closer to the wolf.

'They say you are a killer, Mr Wolf,' he whispered. 'They say you have taken young and old. Is it true? Have you done bad things?'

The wolf pawed the melting snow thoughtfully.

'I have done ... questionable things,' he said. 'Indeed, I have killed often. To live I must eat, and the nuts and fruits of the forest cannot fill my belly.'

The wolf scraped at the snow, and the young squirrel scuttled nervously back.

'Yes, you are right to keep your distance,' said the wolf. 'Stay where you are. When my little son died all those years ago he was afraid, too. I have no wish to see the same fear in your eyes. I could not bear that.'





At those words, the young squirrel crept hesitantly forward again — though he still stayed out of the Wolf's reach.

'Wolf, Oh Wolf,' he said, 'I now understand why you are weeping. You are grieving for your lost son, as any father might. But why have you grieved for so long? Will your sorrow never end?'



The wolf hung his grey, shaggy head.

'How can my sorrow end when no one will grieve with me?' he said. 'It is six years since my son died. I have not forgotten him. I will never forget him. I will weep alone, as I always do, for who else in the forest will share my tears?'

The wolf uttered these words in such a broken, desperate voice that the young squirrel felt his heart clench.

'May I stay with you?' he asked. 'I am only small, so I cannot weep loudly, but if you allow me to stay nearby, perched in this tree, perhaps my tiny cries will comfort you.'



'Yes,' the wolf said quietly. 'I would like that very much.'

And so, all of that night, the wolf wept, and the young squirrel shed tears with him, whispering words of consolation as best he could from the tree in his small, high-pitched voice.

When morning came the young squirrel rubbed his eyes. He was so weary that he could barely wave his tail goodbye.

'Thank you for sharing this night with me,' the wolf called up to him. 'Will I see you again?'

'Yes,' the young squirrel called back. 'I don't want you to be alone.'



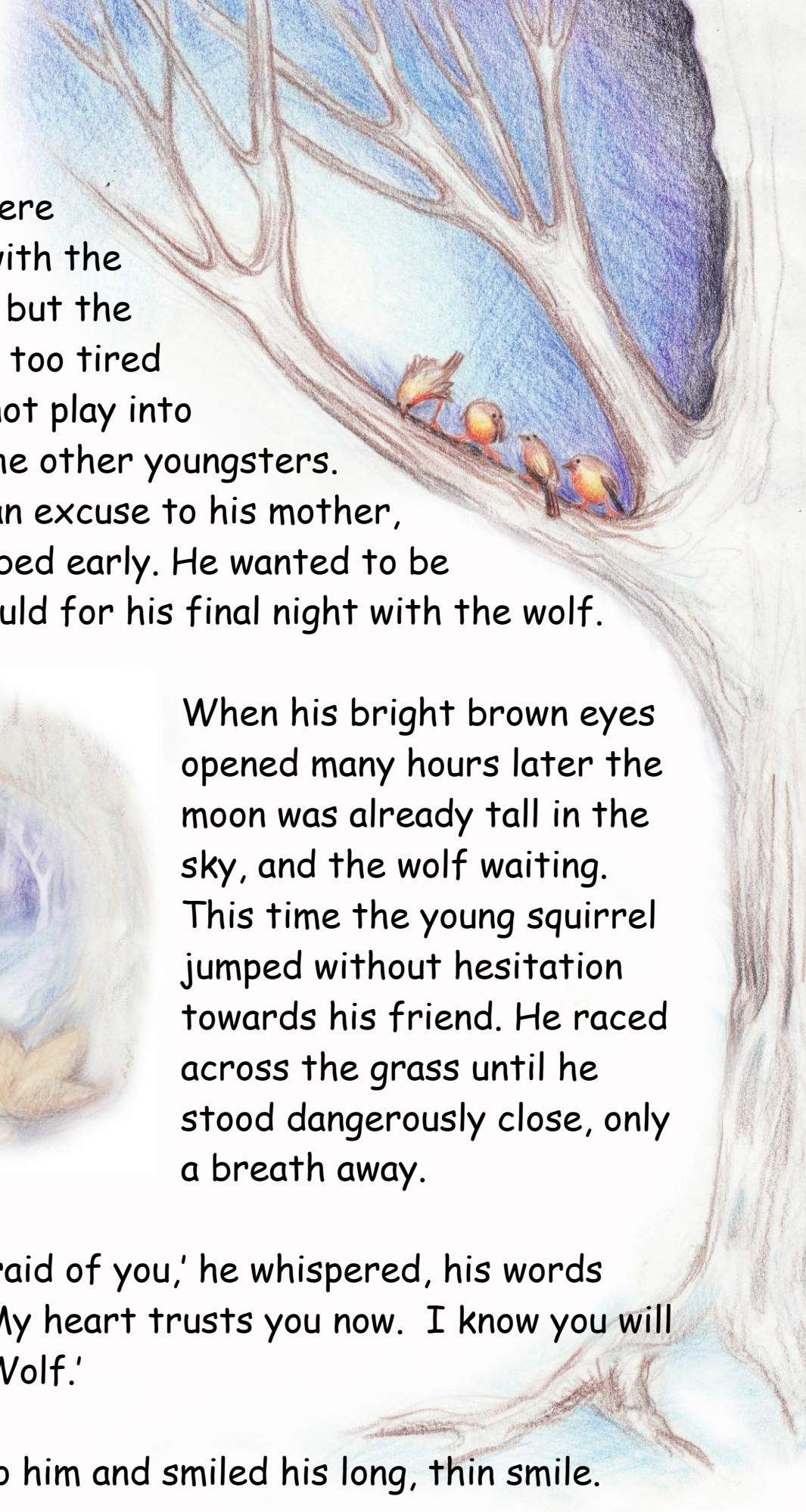
'Then come tomorrow,' said the wolf. 'Beautiful the moon shall be, and the sky full of stars for us. Beneath them we will stand, and shed one final night of tears for my son.'

'I will!' the young squirrel promised from the tree.  
'Of course I will! And together we'll grieve under the moonlight. Hush be with you in your sleep, dear one.'

'And with you,' the wolf replied. And with that he padded quickly away, his white breath pluming the air.



The next morning the snowy trees were wet and dripping with the promise of spring, but the young squirrel was too tired to notice. He did not play into the twilight like the other youngsters. Instead he made an excuse to his mother, and snuggled into bed early. He wanted to be as rested as he could for his final night with the wolf.



When his bright brown eyes opened many hours later the moon was already tall in the sky, and the wolf waiting. This time the young squirrel jumped without hesitation towards his friend. He raced across the grass until he stood dangerously close, only a breath away.

'I am no longer afraid of you,' he whispered, his words frosting the air. 'My heart trusts you now. I know you will not harm me, Mr Wolf.'

The wolf turned to him and smiled his long, thin smile.



'Then grieve with me this night,' he said, making a low bow.  
'Will you do me such an honour?'

'I will!' murmured the young squirrel, his eyes wet with tears. 'Oh, I wish it more than anything!'



And so, on that moon-drenched night, side by side they wept, until it seemed to the young squirrel that they had been this way forever, stifling the air with their hoarse cries.

Finally the young squirrel could weep no more.

'Dear one,' he said in exhaustion, 'may we stop now?'

'You may stop, but I must go on,' the wolf replied. 'I must grieve until dawn, for that is when the two-legs came. And then I will see the ghost of my son.'



'You will see him?' The young squirrel gasped, his bushy tail standing straight. 'What will he look like? Will he shine? Will he gleam? Will he kiss you?'

'He will come as he always does, skipping like a light towards me,' answered the wolf. 'His face will be tiny, no bigger than a mouse, and he will be blind, for he died before he could even gaze out upon the world. Yet even so he will run freely and swiftly between the trees. He will shout 'FATHER!', and lick the stems of the winter-tired grass, and when he reaches me I will nuzzle him until his legs rise from the ground and his face leaps with joy.'

The young squirrel's heart soared with excitement when he heard these words.



'Oh, may I stay with you until he comes?' he begged, jumping in the air. 'Please, may I?'



'Of course, my friend,' the wolf answered softly. 'There is no-one else I would rather have beside me.'

And so they waited for dawn.

And they waited. And waited.



And as the night stretched on, the young squirrel grew colder. He grew colder and stiffer, until finally his legs were so stiff that he could no longer run, and so sleepy that when the wolf finally whispered, '*Here he comes ... here comes the ghost of my son now,*' the young squirrel barely heard him.

But somehow, with the last of his strength, the young squirrel managed to stand upright. His eyes darted eagerly from side to side.

'Where?' he asked. 'I do not see him! Where is he? Where?'

'Turn around,' said the wolf. 'He is behind you!'

And the young squirrel turned.

He turned his slender back on the wolf.



He turned so that he could not see the wolf at all, only feel his hot breath upon his neck.



And as the wolf, ever so quietly, howled, the young squirrel finally remembered badger's warning, and looked up.

Above him, mouth swinging wide, stood the wolf.

Jaws agape, his teeth glinted against the stars.

'Hello, young squirrel,' he whispered. 'It is good to be close at last.'



Directly into the eyes of the young squirrel the wolf stared, and then, as his eyes widened, he roared.

But softly came that roar. Tenderly it came, for it was not the hunter's cry, but only the cry of love.



And on the wings of that love the wolf's son burst into the forest.

The ghost cub's eyes were shut, but that did not stop him. On his clumsy little paws he broke through the wet grass. A dazzle of light, he headed straight for the wolf, and when they met he buried himself in his father's thick, deep fur, and clung to his huge hairy face, and kissed him.

And nor was that the end. For a brief final time they ventured forth from the snowy trees, into the sunlight. There was no more grief. Together they walked, father and son. And wherever their paws touched the soil white crocuses burst into flower, and spring daffodils rose to meet them, and nothing, nothing could part the great wolf from his joy, nor from the young squirrel who danced like a wild moon between his feet.





The End



To find out more about Cliff McNish's award-winning books go to [www.cliffmcnish.com](http://www.cliffmcnish.com)

Cliff McNish is acclaimed as 'one of our most talented thriller writers' (*The Times*) and has written numerous novels for teenagers and children. His debut fantasy series - the *Doomspell* trilogy - hailed him as a 'great new voice in writing for children' (*The Bookseller*), and has been published in twenty-six languages worldwide. His multiple-award winning *Breathe: A Ghost Story* was voted in May 2013 as one of the top 100 adult and children's novels of all time by The Schools Network of British Librarians.

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