

ADRIENN VADADI

Catkin Tales • The Forest Birthday

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CATKIN TALES

The Forest Birthday

[illustration]

ILLUSTRATED BY VIVIEN MONSZPORT

[illustration]

PAGONY

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The Spring Breeze

There is a bush in the forest. In the spring, soft, fluffy little catkins flower all over it.

Once, a playful little breeze came and rustled the bush, tickling all the catkins until they giggled and guffawed. Then the breeze had an idea. It picked up the plumpest catkin on its back and rolled it, and spun it, and then, when it was plonked down on the ground, two tiny little catkin kids jumped out of the fluffy pod. A girl and a boy, a sister and a brother, Pipi and Patti.

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The breeze huffed and puffed around them playfully before it made off to breeze about elsewhere. Pipi shouted after it,

'Hey, what about the rest of the catkins?'

'We need some friends!' Patti added indignantly.

'Shhhh,' whispered the breeze.

Then it wheeled around in a broad arc, ducked and somersaulted, and tickled two more catkins off a branch. It twisted and turned them, but quickly got bored with all that and just abandoned them in mid-air. Pipi ran to the right, Patti ran to the left, trying to catch their friends.

Pipi spread her arms wide, 'I'll catch you!'

'It's a soft landing!' Patti squealed.

'Howzat!' Sprout landed neatly in Pipi's arms.

'Whoopsie-daisy!' Silky plopped down right onto Patti's shoulders. The catkin kids went crazy, whistling, laughing and jumping about.

But then, from up above, a timid little voice called out. 'Will anyone catch me?' The catkin kids looked up and saw that someone was still swinging from a branch.

'We'll catch you, too!' They called up to the girl. But the mischievous breeze was playing tricks on Bloom. It didn't twirl or spin her as it had the others, so she was only half-way out of her fluffy fur coat.

'My legs are stuck. I can't jump. And I'm scared too' she whimpered.

Pipi untied her apron, the boys grabbed the four corners tightly and spread it out under Bloom. She swung once... swung twice... and on the third swing she closed her eyes, pulled her legs up... and let go of the branch.

'Yikes!' She screamed, turning and spinning downward until she landed on the apron with a bump. Once there, she stretched herself out, and as soon as her feet touched the ground, she began to dance about in the silky-smooth grass with the other catkin kids. Bloom's skirt was the only thing that was still fluffy about them, but she didn't mind a bit, it twirled so nicely when she danced.

THE SWING

Deep in the heart of the forest Pipi and Patti found a hollow oak tree to make their home in. They quickly spruced it up. Pipi laid a soft moss mat on the ground, and Patti rolled in a round stone for a table and a chestnut for a chair. They made a pantry shelf from bark and packed it with hazelnuts, rose hips and dandelion flowers. The stove was quickly in place and the beds ready in a jiffy.

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They have even got a treasure chest with a snail shell, a deck of leaf cards, some glittering stones, some pine needles and thread in it. But Pipi was just not satisfied. 'It feels so empty here,' she said, standing in the middle of the den, 'we need something else'.

'But what?' Patti asked.

Pipi said nothing, but turned on her heel and ran out of the door. Patti did not want to be left behind, so he ran after her.

They hurried to find Bloom, who lived tucked away in a large hollow among the flowers in a clearing. When Pipi and Patti arrived, the catkin girl was weaving a wreath of flowers in the meadow.

'We've come for a rope,' said Pipi.

'Two!' added Patti.

'For a rope?' Bloom asked, reaching up. She caught a couple of strands of feather grass that were dangling down and twisted them together to strengthen them. She made two ropes and gave one to Pipi and the other to Patti.

Pipi and Patti were delighted with their feather-grass rope, so they hurried on their way. First, they went to Sprout's place, down by the bank of the stream. He was busy sliding on the roots of a tree.

Pipi shouted over to him. 'We're looking for a seat.'

'A comfortable one!' added Patti.

Sprout jumped down to the water's edge and fished a thick stick out of the stream.

"What are we supposed to do with that?' But while Patti was scratching his head, Pipi had already had an idea.

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They went to find Silky, who was sitting under a sloe bush, carving a flute with his little knife.

'Could you carve our seat for us Silky?' Pipi asked.

'It is so lumpy now it would give us both numb bums if we sat on it,' Patti explained.

Silky turned the thick stick over in his hand.

'Whichever way I look at it, I just don't see how I can make a seat out of this,' he said.

Pipi just smiled, and while Silky was chopping away the bark, and carving and polishing the stick, she explained everything from start to finish. Then, finally, she bowed deeply to say thank you, grabbed Patti's hand, and they were gone in a flash.

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When they reached the den, she tied the ropes to either side of the seat, stood on a chair and attached the ends of the ropes to the ceiling. The swing dangled there in the middle of the room, just as Pipi had imagined it. Patti jumped straight onto it and began to swing backwards and forwards. '*Swing high, swing low, watch Patti swing, see him go!*' and he howled with laughter. He would happily have kept on swinging until the sun went down if Pipi had not said, 'I know a much nicer song!'

Well, with that they swapped.

*'I do love flying on my swing,
higher and higher than everything.
I start after breakfast
And swing till night
To swing on a swing is pure delight!'*

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ROSE PETAL APRON

A great storm was brewing, and the wind began to whizz and whistle around! Pheeeeeew, whooooooooooooo, shhhhhhhhhh!

It blew into the catkin den too and snatched the tablecloth off the table. 'The washing!' Pipi suddenly remembered.

She rushed outside to gather in the things that had been drying out on the clothesline. But the wind picked her up, too, and then the clothes. It biffed and buffeted poor Pipi, tugging and tearing at the aprons, shirts and stockings.

'Whoops!' Pipi lunged for a stocking as it made off.

'Hey!' She caught the sleeve of a passing shirt.

'Yikes!' She clung to the aprons.

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But the wind whipped away one of the aprons, the pink one, so quickly that Pipi couldn't catch it, no matter how much she jumped and waved her arms. 'Whoooooo!' whistled the wind, 'wooshhh!' it whispered, then yanked the apron off the line and carried it off on its back, 'pheeewww,' it stormed off with its prize.

'My rose petal apron!' Pipi wailed, but no matter how much she jumped about and tried to catch it, the wild wind would not let her get close. It just biffed, buffeted and barged her about.

The rose-petal apron disappeared behind the trees, out of the clearing, and over the hill. The storm was gone as suddenly as it had arrived. Pipi slumped down among the mushrooms and began to cry.

Just then Patti arrived home.

'Whoopee!' he squealed, 'I rode home on the wind!'

But when he saw Pipi huddled beneath the mushrooms, his smile faded.

'My rose petal apron!' Pipi stuttered between sobs, 'the storm took it!'

'We have lots of others' said Patti, comfortingly.

'But the rose petal apron is my favourite,' cried Pipi, inconsolably.

'Well,' said Patti, jumping up, 'we had better go and look for it then.'

He set off after the wind, through the trees, across the clearing, and up the hill. At the top of the hill he gazed out into the distance. In a far bend he saw that the wind was still playing with the rose petal apron. It blew it up into the clouds, then out over a wheat field, then it drifted far, far away, out across the ocean. Patti yelled after it,

'Hey you! Storm! Blow that apron back, or I will give you what for!

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But the storm only giggled, gusted and whistled even more fiercely at the catkin boy! Patti thought for a moment, then dashed home, took out the butterfly net and stood in front of the hole. When the wind swooped back on its journey around the world, he held the butterfly net high, and bingo! He caught the rose petal apron, just like that. The storm roared on and Patti plopped himself down beside Pipi.

'Here's your apron, now you can dry your eyes!'

BIRD FEATHERS

Old Mr Greyshanks dropped a feather. Patti found it and was chuffed to bits. He kept it in the treasure chest and took it out to look at it every day. 'If I only had another feather,' he said to himself, 'I could fly like a bird!'

Then, to make his dream come true, he went hunting for another one. First, he found a stork's feather, but it was much longer than the first one. Then he saw a small striped feather that might have belonged to a goldcrest, but that was too short. What could he do? He had to get one from old Mr Greyshanks. So, he set out to find his dear old friend.

He came across the elderly gentlebird by the hundred-year-old oak tree. He was looking for something to eat amongst its roots. He fluttered here and there, pecking and eating. Patti hid behind a big, mossy stone, and spied on him from there, plotting and planning all the while. Then he suddenly had a very naughty idea.

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'I'll sneak up on him from behind, and then when he's not looking, pow! I will tug a feather out of his tail!' And that is what he did. He crept quietly to the front, and then, when old Mr Greyshanks' attention was elsewhere, he reached out to steal one of his tail feathers. But suddenly, Bloom's voice rang out, 'Good afternoon, everyone!'

The little catkin girl slid between Patti and old Mr Greyshanks and curtsied. Patti stood up straight, he was blushing from head to toe. Then he blurted out 'Good afternoon! Good afternoon!' in embarrassment.

'What are you up to?' Bloom wondered out loud.

'I was just... I was just...' mumbled Patti. Mr Greyshanks didn't reply, but began to fidget instead. He shook himself and dropped a feather on the ground. 'Who wants it, who wants it?' he chirped.

'I wonder who?' Patti exclaimed with a wink. 'Not me, I collect flower petals!' Bloom said shaking her head, and as suddenly as she had arrived, she was gone.

Mr Greyshanks squinted in Patti's direction. He stretched out his hand and the bird dropped his feather into it. At home, Patti climbed up a tree with both his feathers. Hanging on tightly to them, he held them out like wings and jumped, he was in the air! He flapped and fluttered, but catkin-style, of course.

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CATKIN DAY

'Catkin day! It's Catkin Day!' chirped Mr Greyshanks all over the neighbourhood.

'Its Catkin Day!' Pipi said, jumping out of bed.

'Its catkin birthday,' Patti chimed in.

Catkin Day is the most beautiful day of all. It's the birthday of every catkin. And so, Pipi and Patti made the bed at lightning speed and started to rush about.

'I will make a cake,' announced Pipi, 'you can collect wild strawberries'.

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Pipi ground some flour, drizzled honey into it, then cracked a quail's egg into it, too, stirring and beating the mix. She wanted the sponge cake to be ready by the time Patti came back with the strawberries. Patti jumped into his boots, grabbed a basket, and set off, hunting for strawberries as he strolled through the forest. He wandered through deserted shady corners and over mossy rocks until he finally came to the sunny edge of the woods, and the meadow that the strawberries loved best of all.

'Oh, but I do love this place!' said Patti and patted his tummy. He crouched down and began to pick strawberries.

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'I'll just pop one in my mouth instead of the basket... one in my mouth... yum, one in my mouth, yum... one in my mouth, and one in the basket!'

So, Patti picked and picked, and by the time all of the strawberries had vanished, he was full, but the basket was not. There were only a few strawberries in the basket.

Patti counted six strawberries. 'That won't be enough for a cake!'

In the end he decided to take just one home, that would be a lovely decoration on top of the cake on its own, so he might as well eat the rest. Yum, chomp, ahhhhhh, burp!

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Long before he reached home, he could smell freshly baked cake on the air.

'Hi-di-hi, I'm home!' Patti entered the den through the open door.

'Hand over those strawberries!' said Pipi reaching for the basket, but when she saw just one lonely little strawberry she frowned. 'If you had whistled a bit instead, then we would have had some strawberries here instead of just in your tummy,' she looked at Patti regretfully. What shall I put on the cake?

'Plums!' Patti exclaimed.

'The plums are not ripe yet!'

'Then nuts!'

'We have munched all the nuts, there are none left.'

Patti scratched his head, then he ran out of the den, soon returning with a beautiful bouquet of colourful flowers. There were yellow dandelions, white-petalled chamomile, orange spurge, and even a purple wild pansy. Pipi carefully plucked the petals, dotted the icing with them, and stuck the one strawberry that Patti had brought in the middle of the cake. And it was done! Pipi and Patti were off to their birthday party.

Sprout brought lavender syrup, Bloom tied a neck chain, Silky played a beautiful song on the flute. Old Mr Greyshanks, Bluetit, Chaffinch, and all the other birds twittered and chirped. It was so much fun that the catkin kids all danced till it was dark! Then they said their goodbyes, shook hands, gave each other birthday bumps, and wished each other many happy returns of Catkin Day.

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