**The Forest School**

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Deep in the forest there was a little school made of wood. It had white walls, nine lovely windows, and a red door. It was a perfect little school. This was the beginning of a folk tale that Miss Owl read to her pupils: a wolf pup, a lynx kitten, a little squirrel, a bear cub, a bunny rabbit , a dormouse pup, a fawn, and a boar piglet. The little wooden house in the story was empty, cold, and sad, but the little wooden school was full of happy students ready to do all kinds of mischief. It was a warm and pleasant school. Students were not eager to leave after class, because it was always full of song, dance, music, and games. Naturally, like in any other school, there were also many things to learn, practice, and mend. Everyone knew their job, and Miss Owl made sure everything ran smoothly. Her keen hearing could recognize inappropriate words, and her soft flight would surprise any student she shadowed. She was always fair both in her rebukes and her praises. The wise and expert Miss Owl was taken seriously by everyone.

Students followed their teacher’s instructions, or wanted to, at least. However, the wolf pup could not stop teasing the fawn with loud howling; the clumsy bear cub would often step on the little squirrel’s tail, while the lynx and the boar were always testing each other’s strength. The dormouse slept through the entire winter term, and the bunny rabbit could not learn how to sit still, in addition to which she also nibbled on all her pencils. Miss Owl patiently solved every problem that arose, helped by the knowledge from thousands upon thousands of stories which she kept in chests in the school attic, and selflessly shared with her students. Every day, she told them one of those stories, instilling them with knowledge, wisdom, and strength. They all loved stories! However, when study time came, it seemed her students only wanted to play, dance, and sing. Nothing was ever amiss in the perfect little school deep in the forest.

The winter was long and cold, and the year was at its end. Students were tired of studying and wanted to have some fun. Luckily, plans were under way for the New Year School Party, which was supposed to last until the last person standing. Each student prepared for it in their own way. The wolf pup had been letting his hair grow long and matted since autumn and was perfecting his howls to a guitar tune. The fawn borrowed his father’s bowtie and was practicing step dance. The big bear cub got himself a pair of sunglasses and practiced his drumbeats. The dormouse practiced staying awake, while the little squirrel went around forest burrows, looking for donations in snacks. The boar piglet promised he would not wallow in mud a day before the party but would come in his best striped pyjamas. The bunny rabbit hopped around excitedly and seemed to be the busiest with party decorations for the school, although nobody was sure what she was doing, apart from her assurance that “It’s going to be a surprise!” The lynx kitten acted as security, keeping apart to observe everything, as suspicious and alert as always.

What a thrill it all was! The whole forest talked of nothing but the school party, and everyone was chattering excitedly and making plans to be there. However… all of a sudden… the entire forest went dark! Silence fell. A tumultuous uproar and a blood-curdling shriek sounded from afar. As quick as lightning, fear crawled under every skin and began to prick at animals without mercy. The horrible sound was accompanied by a strange shadow that crept towards them from a nearby hill. It was large and it was loud! The vast, loud being flew towards the forest. The beat of its wings created a strong wind that swept everything before it. Every forest dweller cried, howled, groaned, and began to flee this way and that. Branches and rocks showered from above, carried by the horrible noise and the wind. Birds flew up into the sky and vanished in the windy darkness. Smaller animals crawled into burrows and holes which were soon buried under branches and rocks. Large animals huddled together, shaking and shivering. The strange shadow was getting ever closer, taking a more concrete form. However, nobody could recognize the creature – nobody except Miss Owl! She flew quietly and quickly away to school, skilfully got in through a broken window, and in the attic found a dusty book of strange creatures. She remembered she had seen in there the exact form that was now threatening them… the form of an ancient Wild Beast. The forest seemed to have forgotten that the Wild Beast could wake up and destroy the entire forest if it so pleased! The Owl knew how dangerous the Wild Beast was and felt the pricking of fear, but still rushed to give the book to a roedeer who would take it to the King of the Forest, a noble stag who would know how to protect the forest! But her care was needed first and foremost with the little ones, so she hurried off to her students.

Scared and hiding on the playground behind the school, they whimpered, howled, and yelped. Miss Owl got to them and, one by one, comforted them with her soothing voice, and caressed them with her soft wings.

Reassured and encouraged by her well-known maxim “We can do it together”, they followed her to a safe place where their parents could collect them. Miss Owl’s book and the King of the Forest soon took care of the danger. Leaving with their children, the parents gratefully said their goodbyes and waved to the teacher.

Several days passed. The forest seemed deserted. The Wild Beast did not return, but everyone kept feeling pricks under their skin, and these would not go away. Forest dwellers were fixing their homes and staying close by. Students did not go to school for a while. They helped their parents and played at home until the King of the Forest decided that school activities should continue. Students were not happy about going back. The night before school, the wolf pup quietly whined in his den. The little squirrel wrapped herself up in her long tail. The bear cub snuggled his head between his mum and dad. The dormouse stayed awake the entire night. The bunny rabbit nervously nibbled anything she could get her teeth on. The lynx kitten felt tickles in her sensitive stomach. The boar piglet spent the night wallowing in a muddy hole, trying to get rid of pricks. In the morning, Miss Owl waited for them in front of the red school door. She gently embraced each student. They went in comforted, although they did not know why they still felt pricks under their skin. They only knew they could trust their wise teacher. Miss Owl had an idea how the feeling of those pricks could be lessened: She would tell the little ones a story! That always helped. She picked their favourite story, about a magical tree that fulfilled wishes. In the story, the Wishing Tree always bloomed with the prettiest flowers, bore the sweetest fruits, housed the most colourful birds – it was magic and fulfilled all desires. The students already knew, however, that the tree also carried this sign:

*When making your wish, beware:  
The wish won’t work if for others it doesn’t care!*

They sat huddled next to each other, which helped them feel safer.

“I wish there was a Wishing Tree in our forest,” the bunny rabbit said in a hushed voice.

“That is an excellent idea!” Miss Owl said. “What would you wish for?”

“I would move into the Wising Tree,” the little squirrel said, “and every day I would wish for the pricks to go away from under my skin!”

“I would wish that darkness and the horrible sound never returned!” the fawn said and covered his sensitive ears.

“I wouldn’t even have to think about it – I would wish for a clear night sky all the time,” the dormouse whispered.

“And I would wish I could plant a thousand new Wishing Trees,” the brave bear cub said.

“I would wish the forest could always play rock music!” the wolf pup said.

“My wish would be for the Wishing Tree to walk around the forest and fulfil everyone’s wishes!” the boar piglet said cheerily.

Only the lynx kitten carefully watched left and right, not saying a thing. The teacher asked her, “And how about you, what would you wish for?”

The lynx kitten lowered her eyes and said shyly, “I wish I could always save all of you from any trouble.”

Miss Owl cuddled her, and said, “I’m sure you will!”

Ideas poured out one after the other. Students had more and more coming, until all the pricks went away. They never even noticed the school day was over. The wise Miss Owl took them to the red door of the perfect little school, and saw them off with the words, “The Wishing Tree might be magic, but it is your wishes which do the actual magic!”

Students happily greeted their teacher and left school without the pricks under their skins.

And Miss Owl? She flew to the school’s attic, looking for a new story to tell her brave students.