

The Rabbit in the Moon (A Japanese Tale)

Every night the Old Man in the Moon looks down on Earth to see how his animals and people are doing. He smiles to see them resting after a hard day's work. He winks at sleeping children. He hovers over rivers and lakes, lighting the waves and the shore. Then he sails on to other lands.

One night long ago, the Old Man lingered in the sky over a forest in Japan. The animals below seemed to him to live in peace and harmony. Suddenly he spotted a monkey, a fox and a rabbit who were living side by side. The Old Man began to wonder about these animals that he knew only by sight. After a while he began to long to know them better.

"Which of these friends is the kindest creature?" he asked himself as he watched the rabbit dash across the fields. "I wonder which is most generous?" he said softly as he watched the monkey swing from a tree. "I wonder what they are truly like," he said as he watched the fox paw at the forest floor to make his bed. "I need to know more about my creatures."

The Old Man floated a while longer, but finally his curiosity got the best of him. "I must go and see for myself," he said, and because the Old Man in the Moon is a magical creature, he was able to transform himself into a poor beggar. In this disguise he floated down to Earth.

He walked through the forest until he came to the clearing where the monkey, fox and rabbit lived. When the creatures saw him, they looked up at him with bright shining eyes.

"Good day, sir," the rabbit said. "How do you do?"

"Welcome to our forest," said the monkey, and the fox bowed low.

"Oh, friends," the Old Man said, leaning heavily on his walking stick, "I am not doing well. I am old and poor, and I am very hungry. Do you think you could help me?"

"Of course we'll help," the monkey chattered.

"We always help our friends," the fox agreed.

"We'll fetch some food for you," the rabbit added, and without a moment's hesitation, the three ran off, each one in search of food to offer the poor beggar.

The Old Man sat down and leaned against a tree. Looking up into his sky, he smiled. "These are good animals," he said to himself, "and I am curious to see who is most generous."

Before long the monkey returned, carrying an armload of fruit. "Here you are," the monkey said. "The bananas and berries are delicious. And take these oranges too, and these pears. I hope you will enjoy my gift," and he lay his fruit before the beggar.

"Thank you, my friend. You are kind," the beggar said, and before he had finished speaking, the fox raced into the clearing. He carried a fat, fresh fish between his teeth, and this he laid before the beggar. Again he bowed.

"My friend," the fox said, "I offer you a fresh fish to ease your hunger. I hope this will satisfy you."

"You also are kind," said the Old Man. "I never knew how kind the forest animals were."

"Of course we are kind," the monkey said proudly.

"And we are skilled at finding food," the fox added.

Now all three sat waiting for the rabbit to return.

Meanwhile, the rabbit dashed this way and that through the forest, but no matter how he tried, he could not find food for the beggar. At long last he returned to the clearing.

"Friend," the monkey cried, "you have returned!"

"I have," the rabbit said sadly, "but I must ask you to do me a favor, dear friends. Please, Brother Monkey, will you gather firewood for me? And Brother Fox, with this firewood will you build a big fire?"

The monkey and the fox ran off at once to do as their friend asked, and the beggar sat quietly by, watching in wonder.

When the fire was blazing, the rabbit turned to the beggar. "I have nothing to offer you but myself," he said. "I am going to jump into the fire, and when I am roasted, please feast upon me. I cannot bear to see you go hungry." Rabbit bent his knees, preparing to jump into the fire.

The beggar at once threw away his stick and cast off his cloak. He stood straight and tall and proud, and the animals, seeing this strange transformation, began to shake with fear.

"Don't be afraid," the Old Man said. "You see, Rabbit, I am more than a beggar, and I have seen that you are more than generous. Your kindness is beyond price, but you must understand, I wish you no harm. I do not want you to sacrifice yourself for my comfort. I will take you home with me, where I can watch over you and make sure you are never harmed."

The Old Man in the Moon lifted the rabbit into his arms and carried him up to the

moon. The monkey and the fox watched in amazement, but they were grateful, for they wished their friend no harm.

If you look carefully at the moon when it is full and bright, you will see the rabbit living there in peace, resting in the Old Man's arms, helping him to watch over us all.