

Aloysius's Secret

Aloysius had a secret. It was a wonderful secret. Each time he thought of his secret he smiled a happy smile. None of the other rabbits knew his secret. None of the squirrels or chipmunks knew his secret. In fact, no one in all of Peaceful Meadow knew Aloysius' secret.

Some of the other bunnies made fun of Aloysius' name. The first time they laughed at him he ran home crying to his mommy. She hugged him and dried his tears. Then she sat him on her lap, and explained why she gave him such an unusual name.

"The first time I saw you I knew you were special, so I gave you a special name," his mother said, smoothing the fur between his ears. It was always sticking up. Aloysius had even tried putting bacon grease on it. The fat seemed to help, but as soon as he looked at himself in the mirror, *BOING*, it sprang right back up.

Now, in rabbit society it is proper for the mother to name the new bunnies. When his father heard what his mother named him, he said, "Well, now," and smiled a big smile.

Aloysius asked, "But why, Momma? Why did you pick that name for me?" He gazed into her cheerful face.

"I named you after your grandfather," she answered.

"He's the one who fought the giant snake?" Aloysius asked.

"Yes, that's how he lost his left big toe."

"But he won, didn't he, Momma? Daddy said he did. Was he famous, Momma?"

"Oh, my yes. Everyone in Peaceful Meadow knew about Granddaddy Aloysius," she said, kissing the fur between his ears.

"Whatever happened to him, Momma?"

A sad look came into his mother's eyes. A tear trickled down her nose onto her whiskers. Pulling up the hem of her apron, she quickly wiped it away. "Well, son, he went exploring in the great dark forest and was never heard from again." She smiled at Aloysius. "Now it's time for you go out and play so I can set the table. Your daddy will be home soon with something good for us to eat."

An hour later, Aloysius' father came home carrying several bunches of sweet red clover. After washing and cutting off the full stalks, Momma put a generous portion on each plate. Aloysius ate and ate until his tummy was about to burst. Daddy always found the sweetest clover, even if he had to search the far corners of Peaceful Meadow. Just when Aloysius thought he could not eat another bite, his mother brought out a honeydew cake.

Now, Aloysius's mother always makes her cakes with the purest honey. They have won several ribbons at the County Fair. I buy one from her occasionally. They are quite delicious. In any case, Aloysius

licked his lips and asked for a large piece. After eating such a big dinner, his mother wasn't sure if she should give it to him, but he had asked politely. So she did. I am proud to say Aloysius ate every crumb and then some. Afterward he had a bit of a tummy ache.

After helping his mother with the dishes, Aloysius asked his father, "Daddy, would you tell me the story about Grandfather and the giant snake?"

His father took off his reading glasses, laid down the *Peaceful Meadow Gazette* and looked at his young son. "Well now," he said, "it seems to me the last time I told you that story you had nightmares."

Aloysius's nose turned bright red. "That was when I was little."

His father smiled. Actually, it was just last month. But for rabbits a month is a long time. "All right then," his father said. "No more nightmares, though. Your mother works very hard and needs her sleep." Aloysius snuggled tightly against his father's chest. He stretched his pointed ears to catch every word.

His father began. "Long ago, when your grandfather was just a young buck, long before he met your grandmother, he traveled over the hills in search of blackberries."

"And he found some, didn't he, Daddy?" Aloysius asked sleepily.

"Yes indeed. He found the juiciest, plumpest blackberries. He picked and picked. Some went into the basket he carried and many went into his mouth. He ate and ate until his stomach was full. Almost as full as yours," his father said, patting his son's tummy. Aloysius giggled. "Just as he was picking the last berry, he saw the biggest one of all."

"But it wasn't a blackberry, was it, Daddy?" Aloysius said, putting a paw over his mouth to cover his yawn.

"No indeed. It was a big, black snake. Its head was as big as your granddaddy's tail! He jumped back, spilling the whole basket of blackberries. The snake came after him, wiggling this way and that. Grandfather hopped out of the way each time. The snake kept missing him, sometimes only by inches. Your grandfather had great energy, but those blackberries he ate were slowing him down.

"The snake was tiring, too. Your grandfather leapt in a mighty hop, clear over the top of the briars. Just as he landed on the other side, the snake struck. Its fangs ripped into Grandfather's foot. The snake pulled one way and Grandfather pulled the other. Finally his left big toe came off in the giant snake's mouth. Grandfather hobbled home, where your great grandmother, after giving him a mighty scolding, bandaged up his foot all the way to the knee."

Aloysius's father looked down at his sleeping son. "I hope that story wasn't too much for him," he said to his wife, who stood in the kitchen doorway.

"He's growing up so fast," she said. Taking Aloysius into the bedroom, his father tucked him in as his mother kissed him goodnight.

But Aloysius was only pretending to be asleep, because he had a secret. He was going to go into the great dark forest to find his grandfather. Now, this would be no small task, because even though he didn't want anyone to know, Aloysius was afraid of the dark. However, he had chosen a night when the moon was at its fullest. Gathering up his shoes, Aloysius placed a note under his pillow. His mommy would find it the next morning when she came to wake him.

Carefully pushing up his bedroom window, Aloysius dropped his shoes and socks on the ground below and slipped outside. The dew was cool and wet on his feet. He stooped down in the shadows of the house to put on his socks and shoes. Taking great care, he hopped across Peaceful Meadow, straight past the sleeping woodchuck's house.

Aloysius avoided the pond, as it is a well-known fact that frogs never sleep. At the edge of the forest he stopped, his heart almost pounding out of his chest. Before him was a tree so tall its top surely touched the clouds. Gathering his courage, Aloysius quickly jumped into the dark forest. A great barn owl swooped low over his back. "Who cooks for you?" it called.

Aloysius ran. He hopped over logs, under thickets and across a stream. Then he stopped under a large sycamore tree to catch his breath. Trembling, wet and completely lost, he began to cry. Why hadn't he listened to his mommy? She always told him to stay out of the great dark forest or he would get lost.

He heard a rustling noise. Maybe it was the giant snake coming for him like it tried to get Grandfather. Aloysius flexed his back legs, ready for the biggest hop of his life. Just when he was ready to spring, he heard a small, squeaky voice. "Are you all right? Do you need assistance?" Squinting down into the tall blades of grass, Aloysius saw a tiny chipmunk. The little animal barely came up to Aloysius's knee. "My name is Chester and I live right over there," the chipmunk said, pointing to a big, flat rock. Aloysius didn't see any opening; however, there was one.

"Oh please, could you help me? I'm looking for my grandfather. He came into the forest a long time ago. Now I'm lost looking for him."

"This grandfather, what does he look like?" Chester asked.

Aloysius thought and thought. How could he describe his grandfather? Then he remembered what his mother said. "He looks like me, only older and his left big toe is missing. He fought the giant snake."

"Missing a toe, is he?" Chester asked. When Chester spoke, a whistle came out through his large front teeth. Aloysius had never heard anyone speak like that. He started to laugh, but his mother and father always taught him to be kind. So he didn't laugh or say anything about Chester's speech impediment. This being the first chipmunk Aloysius had ever met, he didn't know all chipmunks speak with a whistle. Something to do with their large front teeth, I presume.

"Come with me!" Chester shouted. Suddenly Chester was off, running so rapidly Aloysius could barely keep him in sight. He hopped as fast and as long as he could, with no idea where he would land. One time he came down a big, fat beetle.

"Excuse me," Aloysius cried out as he hopped away. The beetle just glared him, then crawled under a rock.

As he bounced along, Aloysius became frightened. The dark forest seemed to close in on either side of him. He wanted to stop. Then he remembered his mother's sad face when she spoke of Grandfather. Finally, Chester halted in front of a large opening in the ground near a huge pine tree. Unable to stop, Aloysius jumped over him. Chester disappeared down the hole. Aloysius carefully leaned forward and peered into the darkness. The moon had gone behind a cloud, so it was of no help to him. Suddenly, light flooded a spacious room at the bottom of the hole as Chester switched on a tall floor lamp.

"Is this him?" Chester asked, whistling through his teeth. He pointed to what looked like a large bundle of fur in the corner. The fur moved and two large, frightened eyes blinked up at Aloysius. Aloysius knew immediately that he was looking into the eyes of his grandfather. He tried to speak, but a lump in his throat made his words come out in a whisper. "Grandfather?"

Peaceful Meadow was not peaceful. It was in an uproar. Everyone from the youngest to the oldest was searching for Aloysius. Mother was the first to see them. She stopped in mid-hop, almost falling backward onto Aloysius' father, who followed close behind. She ran and hugged Aloysius first, then she took a long look at Grandfather and hugged him too. Father shook Grandfather's paw. Everyone was smiling.

"Well now," Aloysius' father said, standing up very straight and tall. "That was very brave. I'm proud of you, son."

After recovering from his fright, Grandfather became his old self again. He suggested they hold a party in Aloysius' honor. "What a splendid idea," Aloysius mother and father said in unison. In unison means at the same time. Everyone in Peaceful Meadow was invited. Aloysius ran back to the great dark forest to get Chester. The two boys ate and ate until their tummies were stuffed, and then they ate some more. Afterward, Aloysius and Chester lay on the bank of the pond and made up stories about the fluffy clouds floating by. Aloysius enjoyed the party. He loved his new best friend, Chester. However, what he loved best was having his grandfather back home.

The End