

ICICLE CARNIVAL : A FESTIVAL OF FRIENDSHIP

Look at him over there. No actually don't look. Close your eyes and listen. Listen to the swoosh, swoosh, swoosh the sharp silver blades make as they slice through the ice with loops and turns. Then a sudden whoosh to a stop sprays a burst of particles of ice up into the cold night sky.

Moe is out there every night. He's the last one under the twinkling golden lights spinning and twirling before he closes down the rink for the night. Taking a few laps around building up to super high speed he launches into a double axle with wings stretched out and his bill pointing up practically touching the stars right here in our backyard. Now who ever thought a duck could perform such a feat?

"Nice one Moe," I yelled as he touched down with ease. "You should be in the Olympics."

"Oh hey there
Sneaky, hope I'm
not keeping you
awake," Moe said
skating over. "I'm
still trying to get
that triple. But no
luck tonight.
Thought I'd take a
few spins before I
shut her down for
the night. Beautiful
night out here under
the moonlight."



"Enjoyed watching the show Moe," I said heading to my nest. "Night."

Moe has been trying to nail that triple axle jump for weeks now. One day while watching him I thought to myself, Sneaky the Squirrel, you should learn how to skate. I mean if a duck can do it why not me? Moe gave me a few lessons and every now and then I get on the slippery stuff for a twirl or two. But I take a lot of spills. Good thing squirrels have big bushy tails to land on. Also like a lot of us animals this time of year I'm carrying around a bit of extra padding to protect myself as we head into winter. Besides I'm way better at sweeping up the ice than skating on it. That's why I'm in charge of the Zamboni, the big machine you drive over the ice to make it smooth like glass.

Moe the Mallard grew up skating on the river about a half mile from the garden backyard where me and my family and all my plant and animal friends live. Man is Moe fast. He's known around here as Never Ever

Slow-Mo Moe. Every year Moe comes up from the river and runs the skating rink during our Icicle Carnival. Not all ducks migrate south you know. Some do but here we have more than enough food to go around so Moe can stay warm, fed and extra feathery. Ducks also got an extra layer of body fat and soft down fluff under their waterproof feathers so they are in good shape for the cold.

There has been a lot of last minute migrating going on this week. All day long this place is crazy. Snowbirds fluttering in and fluttering out. All kinds of birds giving their wings a rest before continuing on their journeys. More than 350 species of birds migrate south every year rather than stay here in North America to wait out the winter. They go to all sorts of places. I know some Sparrows who have a condo in Arizona. Owen the Oriole who lives here and his family travel all the way to Central America. A group of Warblers a few doors down fly hundreds of miles to camp out on a fancy cruise-liner in the Caribbean for the winter

months. They have their own pool, play shuffleboard and take day trip excursions.

The next morning Carmine the Cardinal greeted guests checking into the Birdie Bed and Breakfast that she runs. "Now remember check out time tomorrow is 10 a.m. on the dot," Carmine told a family of Tanagers. "I'm expecting some Wrens half past three and I'll need to do some cleanup before they check in."

Carmine always sends her guests down to our Icicle Carnival to enjoy our rides and contests making her place the most tweeted about pitstop along the annual migration sky highway. You can see why. Carmine's place is decorated perfectly with tiny white lights and the deepest emerald miniature Evergreen Trees. In addition to the welcoming ambiance, Carmine makes a mean frozen mealworm pancake. Birds got to eat, particularly before making a long journey.



Speaking of worms, there's a whole marvelous winter break world taking place underground this time of year too. Believe me every worm is not getting gobbled up. Many yards below this yard, there is a crazy twisty underground system of elevators and subway cars that take worms

and other insects down deep into the soil where they stay until spring. They have bookstores, delicatessens, movie theaters and very slimy splash parks for the kids run by the slugs. Snails hibernate but not the slugs. If you aren't traveling this time of year or hibernating you are really living it up, or down, in the case you are a worm, beetle or slug.

"Watch it you rascalion rascals!" Carmine yelled to Roofus and Ruby the raccoons. "That is enough! You almost took out my entire front porch!"

"Oops, sorry Carmine," Roofus shouted as he and Ruby zipped past like a flash of lightening on the zip line nearly crashing into Carmine's house. The Summit Plummet Zip Line, designed and operated by those two, started at the tippy top of the Juniper Tree and zipped riders all the way down dropping them into a massive pile of snow smack dab in the middle of the yard.

The Summit

Plummet is one of
our most popular
Icicle Carnival
attractions.

“Loooooooook out,”
a fluffy white
bunny shouted
speeding past in
an inner tube
blasting over snow
moguls as she
almost collided

with the raccoons. That’s Bouncy. She’s the sweetest, fluffiest, kindest
bunny you’d ever meet. But she’s a daredevil in that inner tube. Rides it
all day, every day and into the night. It’s her absolute favorite ride.



We got the idea for the Inner Tube Luge Ride from the young gardener boy who lives here and tends to this backyard garden. He invented this ride last winter during a snow storm. Went flying off the deck down the



iced up stairs, blasted through the yard clear over to the gate. Laughed hysterically all the way. Bouncy watched him in awe.

"You okay Bouncy?" I asked as I climbed off the Zamboni at the ice rink.

"Whooooo hoooo! That was a close one," Bouncy shouted back already into her next launch down the luge ready to take her chances with the raccoons again.

Now if you aren't into thrill rides we got a lot of other stuff happening at the Icicle Carnival. There's a snowball throwing booth where you can try to hit the bullseye and drop Polly the Opossum into a dunk tank. We keep the water heated so Polly doesn't catch a cold.

We also have a penguin belly slide competition every Sunday at two o'clock. And for those more interested in the arts, the beautiful Winter



Roses designed marvelous ice sculptures for all to enjoy. They spent days getting every groove just right using only their pointy thorns to chip away at the ice. This year they made a human sized igloo, a dolphin, an incredible ice column maze and a spaceship.

We also have our own snow cone and ice pop stand. It's not your typical flavors. We cater to the most sophisticated wildlife palettes. We use whatever parts our herb friends can spare. The young gardener boy moved them into his greenhouse for winter. The greenhouse is especially important this week as we heard a big snow storm is headed our way. While the herbs are pretty hardy they are much safer from wind and cold in that perfect warm potting place.

Rosemary, Mint, Thyme, Sage, Oregano, Chives and even Lavender all make super yummy icy treats. We got that idea one day watching the young gardener boy too. He sliced up a lemon, scooped some snow in his hand and squirted the juice right on top. Then before he sat back in his inner tube to enjoy it he mixed in some mint leaves. When he was gone we all gave it a try. And we found out you only need a smidge. Big flavors come from little plants. We never take too much so the herbs can stay healthy and happy.

We try to
make sure
everyone's
got enough
to eat here
so all fall we
gather food
to put in a
big sharing
bin. We
collect nuts,
seeds, twigs
and whatever



bark our trees are okay with us taking. When we can't forage so good
because of the winter cold and things like ice and snow we use that big

bin to keep us nourished. Without it we'd really be skating on thin ice.

That means we

would be in real trouble.

"I can barely keep up," Carmine said searching the yard for any frozen grub she could find. "Those Canadian Geese from Monday ate me out of house and home. Not to mention all that honking."

Carmine had a legitimate concern. Sometimes our food supplies run low. Just like humans we have to get enough food and rest. And birds have this thing they go through called hyperphagia. That's a fancy science name for stuffing your face with as much as you can eat before setting out on a long and many times challenging migration journey. You'd think that extra weight would weigh them down but they catch a wave on all these wild wind currents to keep going sometimes thousands of miles.

Our greenhouse also has some winter plants we can nibble if we need to.

We got a few lettuces, some cabbage and a posse of parsnips that taste



even yummier with a little frost. The turnips can get a little grumpy so we

only go there if we really need to. Plus those root vegetables can make you burp a lot.

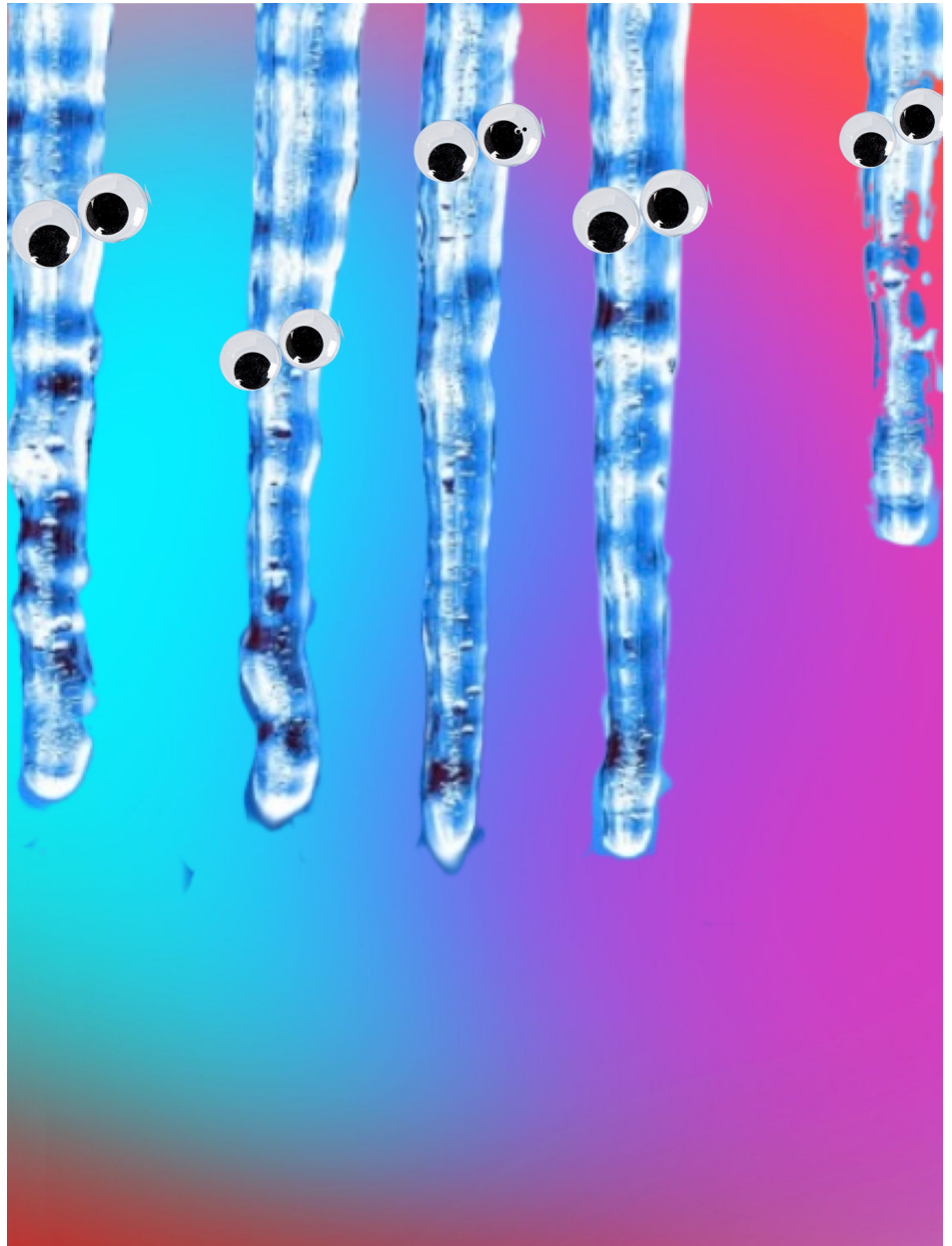
The morning things all started to go haywire Moe was on the ice teaching a group of young succulents how to skate. They weren't listening very well and there was a lot of noise and complaining. They grow in chilly desert temperatures, so most succulents do pretty well in winter and they are lovely skaters when they learn how.

"Mr. Moe I can't stooooooooop," squealed a succulent before it came barreling across the ice looking more like a tumble weed than a cactus and plowing all the others over. Skates were in the air, and everyone was crying. Moe stood there shaking his head.

"Okay kids, unravel yourselves before you lose all your thorns," he said breaking up the tangled mess of stems and pokey parts.

Across the yard the icicles were rehearsing a new light show number to the tune of the Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy.

"Let's take it from the top - purple, green, orange, rainbow, rainbow," Drippy the head conductor icicle shouted at the chorus. Drippy held one of his icicle pals sideways like an orchestra baton raising him up and down to the tempo.



Then everyone stopped doing what they were doing when we heard the ear piercing scream. It came from the greenhouse where we found Rose Mary the Rosemary rolling around out of her pot with only a few needles left hanging on her stem.

"Oh my gosh Rose Mary, what in the world happened to you?" I said as we all rushed to her side and Carmine tried to prop her up.

"Why I don't know," Rose Mary said clearly shaken. "I've been robbed. I fell asleep early last night because it's so warm and toasty in here and when I woke up this morning all my needles were gone."

Moe rapidly waddled over just as upset as Rose Mary. "Folks someone raided our food storage sharing bin. We got nothing left," he said.

We all gasped.

"Who would do such a thing?" Carmine cried.

A tiny little Sparrow staying at Carmine's flew onto the greenhouse window ledge and peered in.

"I saw something scary last night," the tiny Sparrow chirped. "I saw it with my own eyes. It looked like a white ghost. It was flying past the skating rink."

Moe, usually the last one of us awake, said he didn't see a thing because he shut down the rink earlier last night because he was flustered that he still couldn't land his triple axle.

"I saw something last night too," shouted Polly the Opossum from the snowball dunk tank. "I was going to tell you guys but I didn't think you'd believe me. But I saw it. I saw its big dark creepy shadow on the fence. It was gigantic, over twenty feet tall, with long antennas coming out of its

head like a space alien. I dove into the dunk tank and held my breath till I thought it was gone. I heard it go out the gate. It definitely was a snow monster."

Now Polly has a tendency to tell tall tales and exaggerate. But we wondered could there really be a snow monster? There are tales of yetis and beasts of the forests coming out in winter but we live in the suburbs and a suburban snow monster doesn't make sense. But something or someone definitely got into our food bin and that was our real immediate emergency.

The Winterberry Shrub bristled over dropping its tiny red berries on the ground and trying not to poke anyone with its thorny leaves. Winterberry looks lovely snow covered but its leaves can really pack a pinch.

“Look the snow monster left a trail of chewed up carrots that leads all the way out of the yard,” Winterberry said pointing his pointy leaf at a trail of chunky chewed up orange crumbs.

Before the birds swooped down for a taste I grabbed a good chunk of carrot for evidence and took a closer look. This was no snow monster. But I didn’t say a word. I suggested we go about our day like normal and when it was time to hunker down for the night keep our ears up and eyes peeled.

Needing time to think that night I did a final ice sweep with the Zamboni. Moe locked up the rink and wished me goodnight. I noticed Bouncy sitting near the ice sculptures so I grabbed an apple slice with a cinnamon stick that I had stashed earlier. I took a seat next to Bouncy by the ice igloo. Multicolored spotlights made it shimmer in a greenish purple glow like the Northern Lights. I took a bite of the apple and

handed it over to Bouncy. She took a bite. I looked her right in her big blue eyes.

"Why'd ya do it huh?" I said sucking on the cinnamon stick.

"How'd you know it was me, Sneaky?" she asked starting to sniffle.

"Your crooked left front tooth gave you away," I answered, pointing to the imprint her teeth made in the apple she just bit into. "That trail of carrots was chomped the same exact way. Bouncy I don't understand. We've all been friends forever. Why would steal from us? That food bin is for all of us to share and that includes you too."

Bouncy buried her long ears in her pink padded paws. I also deducted her ears in the moonlight made the big shadow that looked like the monster antennas Polly saw projected on the fence. Bouncy almost pulled off a perfect crime. With every ride of the inner tube luge she

secretly moved bin yummys all the way to the gate. Then she'd push it to a pile until she was ready to leave for the night. She took the food out down the luge and right under our noses.



"You wouldn't understand," she muttered. "You squirrels have small families. But us bunnies we got baby bunnies hopping all over. There are families all over this neighborhood who don't have enough to eat. They won't survive the winter."

She explained she started helping just a few families, dropping off a few leftover bites here and there at different bunny burrows. But then they all started finding out about her and coming to her asking for help. Now hundreds of bunnies from the backyard all the way to the river relied on her for survival.

"You could have asked us, come to all of us for help," I said.

"Sneaky it just sort of snowballed," she said. "I'm very sorry. I'll get the food back. I promise I will."

I told Bouncy not to worry too much. And I told her very seriously that it is okay when you are in trouble or facing a problem far too big to handle on your own to ask for help. In fact even if it's a little problem or worry you can always ask for help. We are all here for each other. We were to blame too. We were so caught up in our own fun at the Carnival we never stopped to think about our neighbors who might need us. I felt sad. But I told Bouncy I knew someone who might be able to help.

See Moe and me have this pal Sid who lives down at the river. He's a beaver and when I say he lives down at the river I mean down under the river in a den. If there's one thing beavers do well besides gnaw down wood with their big old teeth, it's save food. They got their own winter time refrigeration system. When the river freezes over Sid and his pals eat from something called a "cache," which is an underwater storage freezer for yummys like bark and stems.

In the meantime I dug up some acorns I had hidden to start replenishing the bin. The young gardener boy also must have noticed we were short on supplies because he put out much more food than usual. He sliced apples, pears and oranges. He scattered corn and oats across the Carnival grounds. He refilled birdseed feeders and put a bowl frozen worms on Carmine's porch next to an evergreen. Being we are best buddies and all the boy gave me my very own tin can of nuts. He also repotted all the herbs in the greenhouse and put Rose Mary in a special spot so she could grow back.

Since we were restocked and no one around here likes to stay mad very long we forgave Bouncy and started working on a plan to help all the other woodland families, especially the bunnies, in need.

After a few days the jubilant atmosphere of Ice Carnival returned. The icicle light show concert filled the air with perfectly synchronized chimes and flashes of color. We were all sitting around trying to catch

snowflakes on our tongues as snow gently began to fall. It was square dance night at the rink and laughter filled the air as Moe called out “swing your partner” and “dosido” to all the skaters.



Bouncy came bouncing in the gate faster than I ever saw her move, even on the luge ride.

"Please please help me," she shouted. "Some of my bunny friends are stranded on the frozen river. They were trying to find the Beaver freezer you told me about and got stuck. They are tiny babies. I tried but I can't reach them and if we can't save them oh they will just freeze out there all alone."

Immediately Carmine and a super strong Red Tailed Hawk took flight but the snow was now coming down harder and harder. Fierce and determined they pushed and pushed against the wind but they had to turn back.

"Get your skates Moe," I shouted. "Grab that inner tube too. Load everything we got on the Zamboni."

"Are you insane?" Roofus the raccoon shouted. "It's at least a half a mile to the river. You will never make it."

"Zip it Roofus," I said. "In fact you guys grab your zip line parts and come on. Hurry."

I wasn't sure exactly why we would need a zip line or what my plan was but we were going to save those bunnies.

We all loaded in the Zamboni and steamed as fast as we could out of the garden and down the street into the blustery blizzard. We were lucky all the humans were hunkering down for the storm by their nice warm fireplaces. They were too busy toasting marshmallows and drinking hot chocolate to notice a Zamboni being driven by a squirrel with bunch of raccoons hanging on being followed by an ice skating duck and an inner tube riding bunny rolling down the hill past their houses. What a

sight we must have
been.

It was hard to
keep the Zamboni
on the road. We
slid and slid and
almost hit a few
parked cars.
Things got really
dicey when we
reached the river.

We could hear the
cries of the frightened bunnies in the distance out in the middle of the
river just under an overhead bridge.



Driving the Zamboni onto the frozen river I quickly paved a path but we started to see some ice cracks. We worried if we drove all the way to the middle the Zamboni might fall through the ice which was thick enough to hold some bunnies but not a super heavy vehicle. Then I have to hand it to those crazy raccoons. They spotted the bridge above where the bunnies were and took off scampering against the wind with the pieces of their zip line.

Without hesitation they started scaling up the side of the bridge. They secured one end of the zip line at the top and Ruby climbed back down the side of the bridge to secure the other end by smashing a hole and hooking it into the edge of the ice. It was not perfect but it was the only option. They left enough slack in the line to swing into the middle of the river. Then with a "ready, set, go" Roofus Plummeted the Summit ride like never before. He blasted down the line, hovered over the bunnies and scooped them up. But the line broke free from the ice below. It started

boomeranging and swinging back and forth in the air like a pendulum with Roofus barely holding on, bunnies hugging him and screaming.

“Quick Sneaky clear me a longer path,” Moe shouted. “I slammed on the gas and the Zamboni cleared the snow constructing a perfectly smooth sheet of ice until I could go no further as the ice made more cracks. Then I moved the Zamboni out of Moe’s way.

By this time all the river critters were out watching. Sid and his family and dozens more colonies of beavers were watching. River fish were popping their heads out of open ice fishing holes to get a peek. No one could believe their eyes.

Moe backed up and backed up. Then he backed up some more. Head down and wings tucked he made his move. Faster and faster and faster with each dig of his skates into the ice he prepared for take off. Why he must have hit fifty miles per hour.

That's when Moe did it. A quadruple axle. Never done in history to date by any human and certainly not any duck. He just skipped right over the triple he had been working on for months. He went one, two, three, four



rotations in the air. Each spin propelling him higher into the air than the last. A real life mallard duck colored aurora borealis, he danced across the sky and caught them all mid fall just before they would have crashed into the ice. Roofus and the bunnies hugged him and clung to his huge wingspan. Whipping around in a downward spiral of fluff, fur and feathers they landed safely. With the hard stop whoosh of Moe's skates he gently put everyone down and took a bow. The crowd erupted into cheers and applause.

"Well done my friend," I said. "Well done. A perfect score."

As we loaded everyone back on the Zamboni to get out of there we were met with cheers and then a sudden wall. A wall of beavers. It was Sid and about one hundred more beavers. They stood in perfect formation, slapping their tails on the ice as they passed all sorts of river vegetation, sticks and reeds down the line.

"Those little bunnies told us you needed some food," Sid yelled. "This should hold you and all the bunnies over through winter. We'll help you restock come springtime. Share it with all. Now gotta move quickly and get back to our dens. You guys better get going before you're stuck out here too. Catch you in the thaw."

I hugged Bouncy as tears trickled down her fluffy cheeks and dangled like teeny icicles off her whiskers.

"See Bouncy, we are a community," I said. "Some of us got bushy tails, some of us swing from a zip line, some of us people just see as measly little plants. But we are way more than that. We can do anything we set out to do when we work together."

We loaded up that Zamboni and plowed ourselves out of there. We all had to jump off and push it up the final hill home. By that time the snow

drift was almost over our heads but we were all laughing. We lightened the load by dropping off food at every bunny burrow along the way. We had enough to share with deer, foxes and anyone else who saw us. Then we quietly snuck into the backyard. I saw the young gardener boy from his window give me a thumbs up before shutting out his light.

The next morning Moe was up early and already had cleared the ice. Polly had been shoveling and the icicles were all dusted off.

"He was pushing me," a tiny succulent yelled. "Mr. Moe let's do the Choo Choo Train skate. Whoo. Whoo."

All those little plants made a train line behind Moe as he led them around the rink.

"Cowabunga," Roofus and Ruby yelled from overhead zipping into the snow pile with their repaired zip line.



The Summit Plummet was back in business. Bouncy was in the greenhouse watering Rose Mary and the other herbs all wrapped up in spa towels.

Carmine was flipping flapjacks. And if you listened really close you could hear the swoosh, swoosh, swoosh of the skate blades on the ice. What a beautiful winter sound.

THE END