

# MEET SKIPPY THE SPORTS SQUIRREL!

## A Short Story

HEY, KIDS!  
I'M GONNA  
TEACH YOU  
A LESSON!

FEATURING...



THE BALL PLAYER



THE MAGICAL GIRL

AND YOU'RE  
GONNA  
LIKE IT!!!



THE KITTY HAWK

# ALEX SCOTT



# MEET SKIPPY THE SPORTS SQUIRREL!



By *Alex Scott*

Coach was treating all the kids on the Monroe Panthers to pizza, but Mikey didn't feel like going with them. He took his bat and his glove and started walking home by himself. The game could not have gone worse. When he was on the mound, he could hardly get a single strike. When he was at bat, he could hardly get anything *but* strikes. The eyes of his teammates said it loud and clear: it

was that bastard's fault they lost.

On his way out of the ball field, his friend Masha ran up to him. "Hey, if you're going straight home, don't you want a lift? You can ride with me and Daddy."

"Oh no, you saw that?" He turned his back to her. "Thanks, but I kinda just wanna be alone right now."

"Look, it'll be okay. Everybody has their off days. But are you sure it's safe,

walking by yourself? I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll be fine. It's just a few blocks, and I got keys. And this bat." Mom and Dad had always taught him to be self-reliant.

"Positive? Final answer?"

"Final answer."

"All right," Masha said. "Suit yourself. See you at school Monday."

"See you." He propped the bat on his shoulder and headed down Memorial Drive.

A van drove by. Inside were the Montberg Rockets, on their way to a pizza dinner they had actually earned, a rich and savory prize instead of a bitter and soggy consolation. Mikey hadn't played any differently from normal, and had even beaten them before, so why did they get to celebrate? They just got lucky. Or maybe their coach bribed the umpire. Mikey knew for a fact some of those balls were strikes, and some of those strikes were balls. Wouldn't surprise him if half the batters were on some kinda growth hormones, too. Some of them looked like they could chokehold an elephant.

Mikey wished that van would just roll off a cliff. He had heard that people shit themselves when they die, and he couldn't imagine a finer fate for the Rockets. Twisted and mangled in burning wreckage, covered in their own sewage.

As he treaded up a part of the road without any houses or any cars coming or going, Mikey dropped his glove and swung his bat full-strength into a telephone pole. Birds scattered from the lines. Their chirping and flapping cascaded over him. Why couldn't he have hit like *that* during the game?

The branches of the trees arced over the road with lush greens. A few remaining birds perched back on the phone lines. Nothing up there even cared how he felt.

He sat down on the ground, leaning against the pole. Was it something in his wrist? Did he get enough sleep last night? Could he have had a bigger breakfast than a pack of Pop Tarts?

A voice nearby said, "You seem down, li'l slugger."

"Yeah," Mikey said. "We lost. And I tried so hard. It's so frustrating."

"Well, I think maybe now's a good time to talk about *good sportsmanship*."

"Huh?" When Mikey looked up to see who it was, only panic kept him from screaming his lungs out.

A giant squirrel in a baseball shirt was waving at him, standing on two feet.

Mikey picked up his glove and very slowly stood up. Any false move might mean disaster. He'd heard of these things. The news called them "didascots." Animals, people, even inanimate objects, transformed by

some unknown force into bizarre creatures obsessed with finding some hapless child and teaching them some kind of stupid lesson. They'd started appearing five months ago, and now hardly a day went by anymore without the lunchroom buzzing about the latest poor kid to encounter one of them.

Because if that child didn't want to learn anything, then that child would suffer the consequences.

Mikey had never seriously thought one might come for him. "Wh-what do you want?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? I'm Skippy the Sports Squirrel, and I'm here to teach you how to lose—and even win—gracefully, and make sports more fun."

Mikey began creeping away. "That's nice, but I should really be getting home."

"Not so fast, Mikey." The squirrel's hand landed on Mikey's shoulder. How did it get so close? How did it know his name?! His uniform only had his last name on it! "Now, it's only natural to feel bad after losing a big game. But you can't lose sight of the blah blah blah bling blah—"

Mikey tuned out at that point. It was nothing his dad, his coach, his older brother, and his grandmother hadn't told him before. *It's all just a game. No reason to take it personally. It's not whether you win or lose, yadda yadda*

yadda. All he had to do was smile and nod, and do what the squirrel said, and he'd get to go home. From everything he'd heard, once a didascot appeared, that was your only hope of escaping.

It might be a talking car that wanted you to buckle your seat belt, or a talking dog telling you not to do drugs, or a talking lunch bag, or a talking spring, or the ghost of Benjamin Franklin, or anything else under the sun. For whatever reason, they thrived on treating you like the biggest idiot on Earth, and could incredibly dangerous if you didn't cooperate. Just last week, a boy in Canada wound up in the hospital when a talking socket wrench magicked away all the nuts and bolts in his mountain bike. Another fell into a coma when an eel decided to prove its point about beach safety by electrocuting him. And Mikey had heard that a little girl in Florida got eaten by a giant talking jack o'lantern when she tried to get away from its lesson on suspicious candy. All anyone found was a single hand holding a trick-or-treat bag.

Someone on the news had once compared it to a Japanese folk belief that an animal or object that gets left alone long enough will gain magic powers and become a yōkai. Whether or not this was the case with Skippy here, those buck teeth of his looked

mighty sharp.

Mikey wished he'd called Mom. Or gotten a ride with Masha. Or even joined the rest of the Panthers for pizza. Anything but this.

Skippy the Sports Squirrel turned his head and looked down at Mikey with big, empty eyes. "Do you understand, Mikey, my boy?"

"I, uh, yeah—I understand." Mikey was sweating harder than he did during the game. "Everybody on the other team did their best the same as me, so I shouldn't resent them for winning. I did my best, and my teammates probably don't really blame me the way I think they do. And it's only a game. We'll always have the next one. It's not the end of the world."

Skippy nodded, narrowing his eyes. "Hm. That all sounds right, but I feel like we're missing something."

"Wh-What could we be missing?" Mikey said. "I guess, um... So like, I feel bad now, but it doesn't necessarily mean I'm gonna feel bad later."

"No, that's not it. Can you repeat to me the three rules of sportsmanship I told you?"

"Three rules?" Great, so maybe smiling and nodding wasn't the best idea anymore. "Um... Sure... Rule number one..." Mikey sent his eyes straight up. "Stop and admire the weather?"

"You weren't listening, were you, Mikey?" Skippy said. "I don't like it

when people don't listen to me. You know what I'll do if it turns out you didn't listen, Mikey?"

"No."

"You see these teeth, Mikey?" Light glinted off the blades of his incisors.

"Yes."

"Good. Because they're sharp enough to rip a little boy's throat out if he's not a good sport."

Mikey's knees quaked. "Um, Mr. Skippy, sir, I thought squirrels mostly just ate acorns?"

"Yup, and I'll bite those off *first* if I find out you weren't listening. You'll learn your lesson then, won't you?"

Mikey drifted his glove in front of his lap. If he didn't do something quick, he was about to become another news report... another rumor in the lunchroom.

Very slowly, he removed the glove and held it under his armpit.

Tightening his grip on the handle, he swung the bat at the squirrel—

—who caught it, wrenched it from his fingers with a twist of the wrist, and threw it across the road, all without breaking eye contact. "That's too bad," Skippy said. "I really thought you were going to be a good sport."

There was one thing left Mikey could do, and it was the one thing he'd managed to do well today, on the rare occasion he managed to actually hit something, if only they didn't get caught or turn out to be foul balls. But



he was still the single best runner in the Panthers, and he ran like hell.

He only looked back when he reached the top of a hill. Skippy looked like he'd just been nonchalantly watching, unconcerned by Mikey's speed. Then, in the blink of an eye, he broke off running on all fours, his pupils glowing bright red.

Mikey cut across the street, through the lawn of Miss Nadia, into the woods behind her house. One nice thing about having parents who believed in kids being independent was that he knew just about every hiding place and shortcut in the neighborhood. He and Masha and their friend Dirk played in these woods all the time.

Problem was, Skippy was a squirrel, and squirrels like to climb trees. And right now he was nimbly loping from branch to branch, keeping up with Mikey's every step. "Big mistake, Mikey!" he yelled.

But just because that squirrel could climb, didn't mean he could see everything. There was a huge willow behind the Cordoza house. He and his friends had used it for hide-and-seek so many times they had to ban each other from going near it. Mikey ducked behind it, and slipped into a hollow under the trunk before Skippy could clamber around. Between the trunk and the curtain of branches, there shouldn't be any way for Skippy

to see him from up there. All he needed was for Skippy to get away. Mikey pitched a rock out, and the noise sent Skippy further ahead.

But Skippy had already caught him by surprise once today. Mikey couldn't afford to relax. He darted through the Cordozas' back yard and leapt over the fence as Mr. Cordoza yelled at him from his window.

He turned at the sidewalk, and right away, nearly ran headlong into a strange flying creature.

"Ahh! Another one!" Mikey threw his glove at it.

The creature swerved out of the way. "Hey, watch it!" It was a gray cat with wings like a hawk. A kitty hawk. Might be cute, if Mikey weren't so terrified. "I'm here to help, you know!" it said in a high-pitched voice.

Mikey backed away. "Yeah, right, bullshit! Stay away from me."

Suddenly the kitty hawk spun around. "It's coming! Hold still!" It waved one of its paws, and a cloak of soft light dropped around it and Mikey.

Skippy sprang out from behind the house next door, searching this way and that, teeth bared, ready to tear into Mikey's flesh. But he didn't find him. He looked straight at him and the kitty hawk, but didn't notice them. Skippy bounded away.

"You *are* here to help," Mikey said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lola. And I need to call my friend." Lola pointed her paw straight up in the air. A small firework shot out and popped into a star-shaped mass of sparks. "There. She should be here any minute."

"Who will?"

"I think she's your friend, too. You know Masha?"

"Masha?!"

And a minute later, Masha came riding down Leonard Street on her bike. She was holding Mikey's baseball bat across her handlebars.

Lola let the light curtain fade out. "Masha, I found him."

"Oh, I'm so relieved." She got off the bike and carried the bat over. "Here, Mikey, I found this on Memorial. For a minute I thought the didascot got you. Don't worry, I'll take care of this."

"Take care of what?" Mikey said. "I thought those didascot things were weird enough, but what the hell's this?" Mikey pointed at Lola.

"Masha calls me a miniscot," Lola said. "And I come from the same universe as the didascots. See, a fissure opened into your world recently, and some of our energy started seeping out and latching onto things here, and something about humanity's psychic energy is causing them to turn into those bizarre busybodies. Once we figured out the problem on our end, I came here to help you guys stop them."

"Okay, I think I understand that," Mikey said. "But you're stopping them just by yourself?"

"No way," Masha said. "They've been recruiting kids all over the country. Lola's just the one that teamed up with me."

"Teamed up how?"

A voice bellowed through the neighborhood. "Mikey! Time to learn your lesson!"

"I think you're about to find out," Masha said. She tossed the bat aside and pulled a cell phone and a selfie stick out of her purse. Only the selfie stick was much more ornate than the others Mikey had seen, with a feathery design similar to Lola's wings. Masha extended the stick, attached it to the phone, then opened up an app.

A thin voice said, "Ready for command."

Masha said, "Light of justice, shine within my heart!" She grasped the stick like a sword and thrust into the air. "Activate!"

A light brighter than the sun shone from the cell phone.

When it faded, Masha was wearing a silk dress with puffed sleeves, a ruffled skirt, and a pink collar and gloves. Red ribbons pulled back her curls. The tip of the selfie stick had turned into a rounded jewel, and the phone had moved closer to her hand, where a kind of hilt and pommel had formed.



"What the hell?!" Mikey yelled.

Masha swung her wand with a flourish. "Magical Masha, at your service!"

"He's almost here!" Lola said.

Skippy the Sports Squirrel came barreling around the corner from Carolina Avenue, and made a beeline for Mikey.

Masha sent a light out from her wand, and it formed a line between Mikey and Skippy. The squirrel slammed into an invisible wall, his fur pressed flat. The collision was strong enough to feed energy back into the wand, shocking it out of her hand. It landed in front of Mikey as Skippy slid to the ground.

"Bastard's stronger than I thought," Masha said.

Mikey picked up the wand, intending only to give it back to Masha. She was the one who knew how to use it, after all. But as soon as he laid a hand on it, it sent energy coursing through him. Suddenly, his uniform changed. It had become a far grander version of itself, with gold fringe, jeweled buttons, and a scarf that made a cool ripple in the wind. His cap had become a batter's helmet.

But now he had a giant, angry squirrel lifting himself up in a daze. "What do I do?" Mikey said.

Lola used her paw to trace a design in front of her. "Real quick, draw this with the wand."

Mikey pointed the wand at Skippy and carved the design into the air in front of him, the jewel at the end of the wand leaving a trail of light. "Now what?"

Masha came and grabbed the wand and held it with him. "In the name of the forces of Vulu, separate yourself from this creature, that you both be healed."

Somehow, Mikey knew exactly what to say next, and he and Masha said it in unison. "Crystal Feather Blessing!"

A beam shot from the wand. It hit the design, and the design hovered toward Skippy, enveloping him in its light. The form of the giant squirrel dissolved. The light faded, leaving behind a floating crystalline bubble, as well as an ordinary squirrel that lay unconscious on the ground.

"It'll be all right," Masha said. "As long as a cat doesn't find it."

Mikey grinned over at Lola. "You hungry?"

"Barking up the wrong tree, kid," Lola said. "I can't eat Earth food."

Mikey turned to Masha. "And how long have you been a..." He gestured his hands at her. "That?"

"About two weeks. I've been trying to keep it secret, but, well, I couldn't let it hurt a friend, you know? You weren't too bad yourself. That's a good look for you."

"Really?" Mikey said. "I was thinking I looked like if Elvis joined the

Pittsburgh Pirates, but if you say so. And, you know, I gotta admit..." He lowered the lip of his helmet over his eyes a little. "It's kind of embarrassing being rescued by a girl!"

"Oh, embarrassing, huh?" Masha put her fists on her hips. "Well, if that's the worst thing that happens to you today, consider yourself lucky. Maybe I should have let you take care of the giant killer squirrel, you big he-man you."

"No, no, that's okay! Sorry! I'm glad you helped, Masha, really." Mikey pointed at the bubble. "So what's that?"

"That's the remaining connection between the didascot and the squirrel," Lola said. "It'll restore itself and turn back into that monster if we don't break it soon."

"Would you like to do the honors?" Masha said. "He-Man?"

Mikey handed the wand back to Masha and picked up his bat. "With pleasure, Masha."

He curled his fingers around the handle.

With a twist that began in his ankle and built up as it rose through his torso and down his arms, he drove the bat into the bubble with enough strength to hit it right out of the park. It shattered on impact into sparkling dust, and it was an impact that left his fingers tingling. If only he'd made that kind of grand slam at the game.

He lifted his hand in the glitter's direction and raised his middle finger up above the other four.

"Woo, don't hold back!" Masha said, laughing. "Show us how you *really* feel!"

"You didn't have to hit so hard," Lola said. "I mean, we already won. Maybe you could stand to learn a thing or two about good sportsmanship."

Mikey glared again at Lola, and tightened his grip on the bat. "What was that?" he growled.

"Kidding!" the kitty hawk said. "Don't worry, I assure you I have no educational value at all."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way."

Masha spoke into the phone. "Let the light rest." She began to glow again, and soon reappeared in her regular clothes, with her hair once again loose. The wand was just a phone and selfie stick again. "Well, we're still a couple blocks away from your house. Want a lift?" She pointed at her bike. "Or would riding with a girl like me be too *embarrassing*?"

"I said I was sorry, geez," Mikey said. His uniform went back to normal as well—even the dirt and grass stains from the game had come back. "And thanks again."

Lola landed inside the front basket and folded up her wings so they camouflaged as ordinary cat fur. "You know, Mikey, there's more of those didascots out there, and we could

always use more kids like you to help."

"Do I get to wear that Elvis uniform again?"

"Sure, whenever you want."

"And we can fight side-by-side," Masha said.

"Then I'm in." Mikey grabbed his bat and glove and got into position on Masha's bike.

He went home elated. How could he feel bad about a losing game when he'd stared death in its big, glassy,

cartoon eye, and won? Or when he'd opened up a new dimension in his friendship with Masha? Or when he was about to have the chance to stick it to even more of those didascots?

He couldn't wait. Nearly being murdered by a furry monstrosity was one thing. Nearly being murdered by furry monstrosity that wanted to educate him when he wasn't even at school? That's just insulting.

## **The End**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Scott is a graduate of the University of Tennessee, and he lives in Chattanooga. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Education with the goal of becoming a teacher.

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