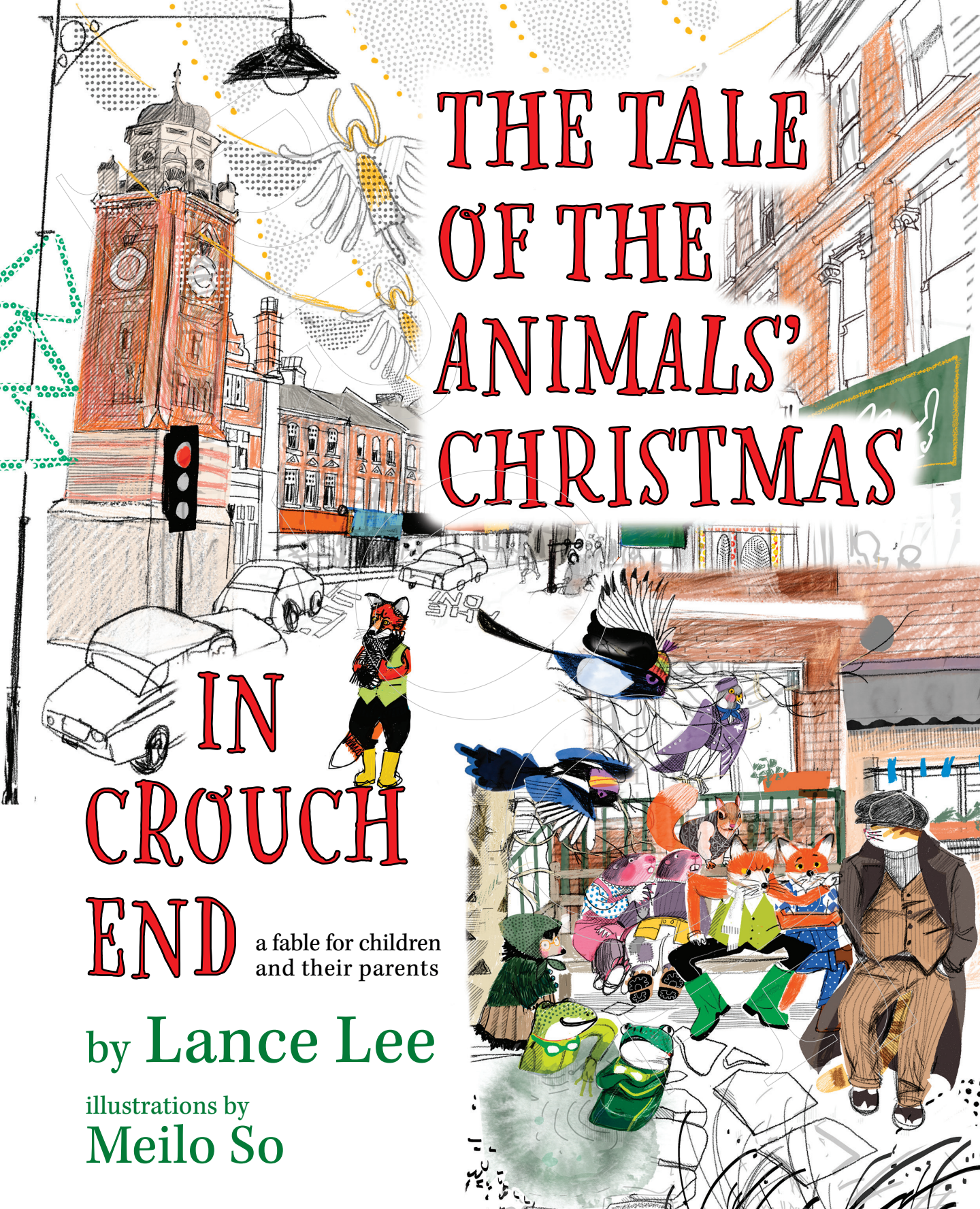


THE TALE OF THE ANIMALS' CHRISTMAS IN CROUCH END

a fable for children and their parents

by Lance Lee

illustrations by Meilo So

THE TALE OF THE ANIMALS' CHRISTMAS IN CROUCH END

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by **Lance Lee**



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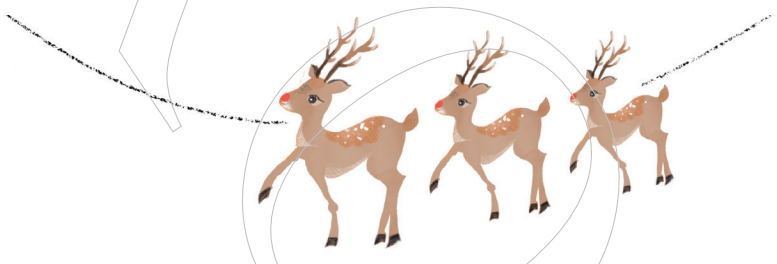
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LWL BOOKS

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for Jeanne
and
Alyssa & Heather, Hansjorg
and
Milena, Thomas & Sam



These illustrations
are dedicated to
Peter Dobbing.

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1

A Fateful Encounter



Once upon a time—

No—

Recently some unusual Animals in Crouch End in North London celebrated Christmas for the first time.

Even more strangely they were led by Rufus the Red Fox.

The front door to his home is hidden by the great mallow bush at the foot of Milena's deep yard. Clouds of pink blossoms cover it in the summer. Thickly tangled branches continue to hide his door in the winter.

Milena lives with her Mum and Papa and a bowl of goldfish and her younger brother, Thomas. Sometimes she exchanges notes with Tinya, a Fairy. The lives of the Animals in her yard are unknown to her, although sometimes she sees Rufus.

Her family is as mysterious to the Animals.

Rufus is famous among the local Animals for his colourful waistcoats. Belinda the Wood Pigeon nests in the poplar tree in

one of the garden's far corners. Sometimes Rufus tries to catch her for dinner.

He is a Fox after all.

In the other corner is a greenhouse where Rufus suns in the winter when the garden is too waterlogged for Milena and her brother Thomas to cross.



Franklin and Francis Frog also live in the garden. Silas Squirrel and his family live nearby, as do Marvin and Mary Mole and their children Mervin, Maxwell, Merton, and Manfred; Miranda, Melissa, Marilyn, and Minnie. Also there are Phil and Polly Magpie, Hilda Hedgehog, and Goya, a very big orange

tiger-striped Tabby who sometimes chases dogs. He spurns cat food and is as eager a hunter as Rufus.

None of these Animals ever celebrate Christmas—that is something known only to *Them*, People. But the heaviest rains anyone could remember changed that *this* year. Rufus constantly lost his Wellies in the mud when he ventured out to hunt, each



step going "Squelch!" "Squelch!" So he caught no one. Unhappily, for he liked his meals fresh—

after all, he is a Fox—

he bought food from The Coop in Crouch End Broadway.

Belinda the Wood Pigeon was hard pressed, too. Wind and

rain tore the berries from the trees and bushes, and even though she heard Rufus going "Squelch!" "Squelch!" she never felt safe on the ground. Recently widowed Hilda Hedgehog didn't trust Rufus either, even though he always behaved like a gentleman with her, if a bit daring. Once he invited her into his home for a glass of wine.

"Who does he take me for," she exclaimed scandalized, "a Hedgehog from Hollywood?"

Secretly she was ninny enough to be flattered.

The rain was hardest on Marvin and Mary Mole and family. Their extensive home spread across several gardens, though not yet into Milena's. But the steadily rising water drove Marvin to move their furniture into ever higher rooms.

This will never do, he thought, sulking under Mary's glare. He called on Mervin and Maxwell, who were getting quite grown up, and built a fateful emergency tunnel under the fence into the hill at the foot of Milena's yard.



There they built a fine, dry dormitory for the children, a fully fitted kitchen, and a cozy bedroom for himself and Mary.

"It's tight, my dear," he said, "but it will stay high and dry until better days return."

Mary looked about.

"It's a bit stuffy," she sniffed.

Marvin's fine, gleaming smile sagged.

He never got the credit he thought his due.

He dreamed of the day his sons would be old enough he could establish 'Marvin Mole & Sons, Builders Extraordinaire, Ltd.' For now he dug a ventilation shaft artfully hidden by the great mallow bush, and, to be on the safe side, a few extra drainage tunnels.

It was dreary work.

Mary and the girls meanwhile fitted up 'The Retreat,' as Minnie named it, quite comfortably.

§

Then Marvin built a new front door under the same mallow bush where Rufus hid his. Imagine his shock as he stepped out for the first time and stood face to face with Rufus as he stepped from his.

Rufus was as startled as Marvin.

"Good morning," Marvin said firmly, and smiled a great smile so his sharp, pronounced buck teeth shone. All Marvin's children had his smile. Then he bowed so his great claws swept in front of Rufus' face—one held a long screwdriver, the other a hammer.

"Hm," said Rufus, eyeing this unusually large, well-armed,



and toothy Mole.

"I am Marvin Mole, Builder Extraordinaire," declared the Mole, determined to make the best of it. Rufus was the finest Animal in the neighborhood, despite how he liked his meals, but Marvin had never seen any reason to meet him.

He is a Fox—after all!

"Are you!" Rufus smiled unexpectedly. "I may have a spot of work for you, if you're not too busy. May I show you?" He gestured

into his home.

What sort of Mole does he take me for, looking so lean and hungry? wondered Marvin.

Rufus saw his look.

"I really do have a pressing need for work," he assured the Mole. "It is by far my *most* pressing need. If you would help I would be deeply grateful."

Rufus Fox bowed low in turn to the surprised Mole. By now both were soaked from the steady rain.

"Very well," said Marvin.

But he let the Fox go ahead of him and held his screwdriver and hammer tightly.

Rufus' floors were slimed.

In one room a bed floated in floodwater.

Another room was full of curling wallpaper and dripping crossbeams.

Rufus was untidy, too—piles of clothes left on the ground were soaked and moldy.

He didn't dare use his stove for fear of electrocuting himself because of the water running down his wires.

"Terrible," Marvin muttered as he went from room to room. "Who did the work for you?"

"I did," Rufus admitted.



"Harrumph," Marvin grunted. "It's a rare home on a hill that floods."

Rufus' ears and shoulders sagged.

The pantry was the worst. Marvin turned away from a leg of lamb hanging there that had gone bad. Floodwater had soaked a bag of rice which then had burst. Now stained, yellow grains fattened across the water's surface.

It was awful.

Marvin backed out.

"There is a reason I am a Mole and you a Fox," he said darkly. "All skills are not shared equally. You should have called on me sooner."

"Yes," whispered Rufus. He shrank from the angry Mole.

"This is a big job. This is a busy time of year."

"My country nephew Rupert is visiting me soon," Rufus said plaintively. "How can I tell my sister he can't come despite my promise because things are so— so—?"

"Drowned," harrumphed Marvin.

"I promised he could come *now* to watch the strange, colourful antics of People during Christmas."

Rufus wrung his paws together, ashamed.

"I promise nothing," Marvin said, swayed by the flattery and deference of the Fox. "I'll discuss it with the Missus."

Marvin found his family in their warm, snug kitchen. Tea was on the table. They moved from fear at being Rufus' neighbor to amazement at Marvin working for the neighborhood's most distinguished Animal, its 'Top Dog,' so to speak. This would be an honor for Marvin. It would also be nice to have a friendly Fox for a neighbor.

They had heard the rumors, too, that Rufus had second sight—that he could see Fairies.

Besides, work at this dreary time was not to be spurned. Marvin had led the Fox on telling him this was a busy time of year. They decided Marvin should help him.



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