

Squirrel Girl

Barbara Marquardt

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Dedicated to all the wonderful environmentalists and naturalists, professional and volunteer, that I knew in the Chicago area from the 1970's through the 1990's. I learned so much from them. Thank you.

Prologue

"Back in the best days of the Squirrel Nation, we might have been able to stop this or at least send out the call for help. If we wanted to, we could send a message as far as what is now New York or Georgia or Illinois or Mississippi. They were all connected in those days by a forest that seemed never to end. But we wouldn't have had to call for help, because if one home was lost it was easy to find one just as good or maybe better, and not very far away, either." Just imagining it made the speaker's tired old eyes sparkle.

"Are those places far, Great-Gram? Those places with all the good home trees?" Lambert Squirrel wiped his tears and waited, spiky tail up and mouth hanging open in a big "O."

The wizened old squirrel matriarch thought over his question. "Far back in times that will never come again, Bertie," she finally said. "Millions of lost trees and hundreds of squirrel generations back. According to what my own Great-Great-Grandma told me, compared with those ancient forests, that little wood lot you're crying about would have seemed smaller than a drop of water in those big storm clouds overhead." She glanced up at a darkening sky.

"But our nest was in that woods. I had nuts buried all over there, and the same ground isn't even there. It was all gobbled up by the big yellow machine." Lambert

looked ready to cry again.

"I know, I know." Great-Grandma looked tearful herself. "It's the same story over and over, wherever wild families live and people *want* to live."

She put her old thin cheek on Lambert's chubby one and they stood hugging for a few moments, both of them trying not to snuffle. Then she continued, talking to herself as much as to Lambert.

"I saw Wilmadene Woodchuck wandering around over there this morning looking for her old burrow. She was a pitiful sight nosing around in the ruins made by that huge earth moving machine. But I told her, just like I'm telling you, there's nothing we can do about it anymore except move on and make a new home."

She shook her head and sighed. "I helped Wilmadene find a place under the bushes in the little park by the library. I would have liked to move there myself, but there's already a squirrel nest in every tree, even the ones that aren't really big enough. But my new nest tree isn't so bad. I just don't know how long it will be before somebody decides to get rid of it."

"Our new nest is all right too, but there aren't any other trees nearby to jump into. And maples don't make acorns."

"Maple seeds are delicious, and there's nothing as scrumptiously sweet as maple juice. Anyway, come on, Bertie," Great-Grandma said, "those big clouds are starting to leak. You'd best come home with me till the rain stops. Your mama knows you're with me and safe."

They headed for a solitary, tall tree-of-heaven in a little patch of dust and weeds behind a six-flat apartment building. Trying to reach the sunlight it had grown up scrawny, and the leaf canopy above the buildings was rather thin, so that Great-Grandma's nest swayed with the slightest wind. With the coming storm it was dipping and rising like a great rocker, but the nest had been built for all weathers and would keep

them secure and almost dry.

"Tell me a story," Bertie said. "Tell me some more about the Squirrel Nation."

They snuggled into the comfy nest just in time, as big drops pattered all around them.

Grandma smiled. "In the days of the Squirrel Nation," she began, "the trees were so tall and thick it was like having a roof. It had to rain for a long time before a squirrel on the ground would feel a drop."

"What happened?" Bertie asked. "Where did all those trees go?"

"This happened," she said, angrily poking her paw out the nest toward their surroundings. "Man. And all his lifeless works. They cleared away the places where animal families could live and killed us outright for food or fur or fun. To survive we had to find a way to live in their lands. Most animals couldn't do that, and they're gone forever, or almost gone."

"But didn't the Squirrel Nation try to do something about it?"

"Oh, yes, Bertie. Their leader during some of the hardest times was a brave little orphan called Squirrel Girl. Her tail was bent and had a missing tip, and she was smaller and plainer than most. But she tried very hard, and you and I are probably here because of what she did at the end of her struggles. But she couldn't save the nation as it was. To survive, the squirrels had to change."

"I want to hear her whole story," Bertie said, "starting with when she was little."

"It's a very long one," said Great-Grandma, "but it looks like this will be a long rain, so we'll begin and see how far we get. But I'm warning you, there are good times and exciting times in this story, but there are some scary parts and some very sad parts. Can you take that?"

Bertie nodded yes, but he looked a little frightened and snuggled closer.

She thought a little bit, then cleared her throat and spoke, already sounding a little

sad.

"In a way, it started with a death. When Squirrel Girl's mother died so that her little daughter could live." Great-Grandma shook her head in sorrow. "The little tyke was still learning to jump from branch to branch--which is what caused the trouble--but she was old enough to vow to herself, after the death, that now she would have to be not just good but special. She wanted to do something with her life that would make her mother's sacrifice less of a waste. She didn't know what she would do, but she knew it would be something that would help others, just as her mother had always helped her."

"One minute the little furry scamp was a mischievous child with a doting mother, and the next she was a terrified orphan, vowing to do whatever would have made her mother proud."

"The last innocent and truly happy moment of her life was right before she leaped to a branch that looked to her to be thick and sturdy. But it was as dead as her mother would soon be, a branch just waiting for the little bump of her landing to help it break off and crash to the forest floor. Squirrel Girl scratched and banged herself going down, and landed hard on the forest floor, right next to the broken-off branch."

Bertie interrupted. "But how could her mother die just because Squirrel Girl fell?"

"Be patient," Great-Grandma said sternly. "And let me tell this my way. I was just getting to the part about the hungry hawk overhead. You've never seen those huge, fierce birds, because we live in a city, and they love wild places. They also love to eat little furry animals."

Bertie shivered. "Oh, no. This really is going to be scary, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Great-Grandma, "Full of danger, just like all life. Now be still and pay attention. And calm down. It might help to close your eyes and try to picture the beautiful place where all this happened. Start by imagining lovely trees and shrubs and

grasses and flowers everywhere, with no houses or roads or cars. That is the world your ancestors knew. A green world, not yet ruined."

Bertie's eyes were still open, and they looked unhappy. "What about that hawk?" he asked. "Should I imagine that too?"

"Not yet. And stop worrying, Bertie. I'll get to it all, I told you, and there's no need to be frightened of what happened so long ago," Great-Grandma said, giving him a squeeze. "This history doesn't just tell what we lost, it also tells what we kept. Our homes may not be all we want, but we still have homes. We're alive and dry and safe, with full bellies and families that love us. Now close your eyes and imagine the lovely place where Squirrel Girl lived as a baby."

Chapter 1

Some of the youngest animals, and the displaced ones, new to Mapleway Woods, didn't know which of the amazing stories about Squirrel Girl were true. One thing that everyone agreed on was that she was different. Growing up, she had tried things no one else had even thought of, much less done. Since she had gone off on her adventures, many tales had been told about her, but they kept changing, becoming more and more fantastic until Squirrel Girl's friends couldn't see her in them at all anymore.

And so it was that when a message had arrived by passenger pigeon from Squirrel Girl that very morning, saying she was coming back home today, and she had something to tell them, the news had created an uproar. Everyone had something to say, something to ask.

The poor passenger pigeon was so tormented with questions that ruffled feathers stood up all over her body. Members of the gentle dove family cannot manage to sound angry, no matter that they may be steaming inside, so the passenger pigeon, who happened to be called Palomita and who was Squirrel Girl's best friend, could only express her impatience in coos, which never put anyone off. She was a gentle soul, but nevertheless she left in a great huff, unable or unwilling to answer anything. "Ask her yourself!" was all she would say.

The hum of gossip was almost strong enough to start a little breeze blowing. All the old stories that anyone could remember about Squirrel Girl seemed to be whirling

around, gaining wind as they went, as missing parts were filled in by the tale teller's imagination.

At the core of the fabrications, there was at least one certain truth, one thing in particular that made Squirrel Girl different. Squirrel Girl had been a child with a million questions, and the main one had been "Why?" Sometimes she figured out "why" and other times she just added the question to a long list in her mind of things she wanted to find out some day. Before she was grown she had started planning a great trip, an adventure, in which she would finally discover the answers to her "whys."

It was never good enough for her to be told "because this is the way it has always been" or "Squirrel children are just supposed to learn what their elders do, not question or change it."

No. If you told Squirrel Girl to hide a nut a certain way, she would immediately look for a different, better way, or try experiments to find the best way. And if she should chance to come upon a better way, she would give no one any peace until she had done her best to convert him to her new improved method.

She was a difficult squirrel, no doubt about it. It was said that there were many who would hide if they saw her coming. Not that she was mean-spirited or bad. She was just a nuisance, always stirring things up.

So when it came to the story about how she had been orphaned as a wee babe, there were those who wondered if she had somehow been at fault. There were even those who said--because of the way the tales about her had been embroidered over time--that perhaps such a tragic event had not really happened, or that her mother had simply died of old age in an ordinary way.

Even some of those who had actually been present when Squirrel Girl was really and truly orphaned were critical. They said that the child simply didn't listen to her mother, that was the trouble. But then, no, some of the others said, the fault was with

Squirrel Girl's ancient mother, who should have kept a sharper eye on her rambunctious daughter. The child, the only one born alive in that surprise birthing of her old age, was just too much for her.

According to her best friends, Squirrel Girl was a precocious but innocent infant, and no one had blamed her. Few had blamed her mother either, since that sweet squirrel lady had given her life for her babe.

"Shame on you," Nutta Nestmaster Squirrel scolded those who blamed the mother. A little crowd of forest animals had gathered in a sunny opening where a tree had fallen, and they were enjoying the beautiful day, foraging and gossiping. "The same thing could have happened to any of you," Nutta went on, "though I'm not sure you would have all given your life to protect your child."

Nutta was one of the oldest squirrels in Mapleway woods, and she had once been the best friend of Squirrel Girl's grandmother. When she was still a girl, Nutta had left with her family to go to an older, richer woods. Last year, however, men had come to Nutta's old forest to cut down the trees and carry them away. Nutta had lost both her home and most of her family, who had been trapped when the men burned the leftover brush to clear the land for farming.

And so Nutta had returned alone to Mapleway Woods. Her old friend, including Squirrel Girl's grandmother, had passed on to the spirit world by this time. Though Nutta had tried many times to get the true story of how Squirrel Girl had been orphaned, everybody had a different version of that tragic event.

"Squirrel Girl's mother acted very bravely, as far as I've heard, and we should praise and not blame her. Now," Nutta continued, "who actually saw what happened?"

"Let me tell," said Cleoka Catbird. "I was hiding in the dogwood, chatting happily with myself and thinking about lunch, when it started. I was enjoying the day madly, it being so fine and sunny and mild, and I had already had a good breakfast and..."

"No," said Nutta, "You'll never get to the point. There was a crowd there, so someone else should be able to tell it straight."

"I...I...I don't like speaking," Rosenibbler Rabbit said softly, pausing to investigate a possible flea on her flank, "but I feel that I should. Not only was I there that day, but I think I was the one that the hawk was trying to catch. I had been feeding on a delicious clump of strawberry leaves, just enjoying the warm sun on my back fur and the sweet flavor of the young leaves, when a frightening dark shadow with flapping wings appeared on the ground in front of me, still small enough to run from but too big and close for freezing to do any good. I felt sure I had been spotted. I headed for the brambles, since they were a little closer than a hole."

"I saw you run," said Fliptail the chipmunk, "and I wondered what took you so long to notice and get moving. I had started chirping a warning when that hawk was just a speck. But you just kept stuffing strawberry leaves in your mouth. And it looked like you even had your eyes closed for a second."

"I did." Rosenibbler looked embarrassed. "I don't do that anymore. It's stupid and dangerous. But you know, when something tastes especially delicious, you just want to close your eyes and focus on it."

"A chipmunk would never be so careless," said Fliptail. "It's like asking to be a snack." He thought a minute. "Well, maybe safe in my home, with a very special nut or berry. But never ever out someplace where I could be seen and eaten!"

"Did you see everything that happened?" Nutta asked Fliptail.

He shook his head sadly. "No, by the time Hawk got close enough to kill, I was hidden. I'm too small to take chances. But Squirrel Girl herself told me it was her fault. She wasn't paying any attention to the danger, even when I was chirping and Rabbit was running."

"I saw it all," said Lakefeather Bluejay, "and I would have called my family to try

to mob that hawk out of there if I hadn't had little ones in the nest that I didn't dare leave alone. I was screaming my 'Jay! Jay!' warning even before Chipmunk got going. But nobody pays any attention to me."

"Because you're always screaming about something," Rosenibbler said very softly.

"What was that?" asked Lakefeather.

"I said you're always good about seeing something. Can *you* tell us exactly what happened that day?" Rosenibbler asked.

"Yes, of course. What happened is that everyone ignored me, and there was a tragedy!"

"But," asked Nutta, "did you see how Squirrel Girl got to the ground and how her mother saved her and then died?"

"No, not all of it, because I never took my eyes off that hawk from the time he was the size of dust to the moment when he grabbed up the mother, killed her, and carried her off. I missed seeing how the two squirrels got spread on the ground like targets, with the mother on top."

"I can tell you what you want to know." The quiet voice belonged to Victoria Squirrel.

Victoria was a middle-aged squirrel, rather plump. She had a reputation for having the largest and best hidden stashes of black walnuts, which she achieved by cracking them open carefully before storage, and then daintily removing the nutmeats, often in small pieces, to her secret caches.

Many in this group knew, but had forgotten, how important Victoria's help had been to the tiny orphan. Squirrel Girl had been very independent and proud and had taken care of herself, and had even gone on a few short, adventurous journeys before she was full grown, but she was able to be so strong because of the nurturings and teachings

of Victoria, which had begun the very day of the tragedy.

"There never was a more pitiful sight," Victoria continued, "than that baby looking up at her dead mama being carried into the sky by an enormous hawk. It wasn't just that she loved her mother and would miss her. And it wasn't just that now she was alone, without any family or help, when she was too young to know what to do."

"No," Victoria sighed, "what bothered that poor infant was that it had been her fault. Her mama had said to be careful. Yet just minutes before she had been cavorting around the treetops, making leaps to thin or dead branches that experience had not yet taught her were too weak."

"Poor babe! She was so hard on herself. In her mind, she was a worthless disobedient child. She thought her mother had been too good for her, had died because of her foolishness. When Squirrel Girl had crashed to the ground, her mama had taken one quick glance at the situation, at the hawk hurtling down toward her daughter, and had leaped on top of the baby just as the bird spread its talons to attack, so that she was grabbed instead of her child. Squirrel Girl never stopped feeling guilty. I bet she still does."

"You're right. I do." Squirrel Girl herself had arrived. She stepped into the clearing from the brushy edge.

Chapter 2

"Go eat some rats!"

Chica dodged the kick the speaker was aiming at her lovely calico back, then ran back directly toward the very spot on the deck where the foot had been before it was raised. She'd have to time this just right to get the effect she wanted.

The sailor, known by an inappropriately slim name all knew to be false, Jack Knife, had been thrown off balance when his kick missed its target. His upper body wobbled dangerously as his kicking foot lurched toward the deck.

But the deck at that moment was filled with twelve pounds of manic cannonball cat. Much as Jack would have loved to trounce what he had often called a patch-coated, yowling, useless feline, he might as well have been trying to trounce lightning as it struck him. His foot, finding no purchase, went back up in the air, as did his wildly flailing arms. Then his body crashed backward to the deck, a ball that would not bounce.

Seconds later, safe in her hiding place, Chica purred contentedly, smiling as much as a cat could. She had done well.

Jack lay where he fell, moaning and cursing. "Cat." he said after a while, only he didn't just say "cat." He added some very bad words. In fact, most of what Jack said, even when he was happy, was peppered with bad words which don't bear repeating. "Cat," he said again, "I'm going to get you for this. And when I do, when I do, you are

going to be fish food."

He tried to move, to push himself up, but fell back, cursing foully and groaning. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he blinked hard a few times before closing his eyes altogether. He sighed deeply.

He was really a pathetic sight, Chica thought. Impossible, though, to feel sorry for someone who kicked and abused you. She'd have to watch out now. She had no doubt that he would throw her overboard if he got the chance.

Luckily he was slow and clumsy, and she was fast and agile. If not, she would never have tried what she had just done. She shuddered to think what might have happened had she been slower. She'd have been flat as a rug--a very handsome rug, of course--had he fallen on her.

Footsteps. Chica scrunched down farther, hoping she was covered from all angles. She could tell it was Finn approaching, and he was not someone she wanted to cross.

"Blast your eyes, Jack," Finn shouted, kicking the sailor's bloated body hard with the pointed toe of his boot. "This beats all! Sleeping on duty and right on the deck, like you don't even care if I catch you." He kicked Jack again. "Get up before I mistake you for a pig ready to barbecue."

"Aiiee," Jack cried, trying to push himself up. He fell back again with a long drawn out groan. "I'm hurt. Have some pity on me. That blasted cat tripped me again. I know she does it on purpose."

Of course it's on purpose, stooge, Chica thought, just like your kicks.

"She's a ratter, Jack," Finn said, "and we're troubled by rats. She's useful. I wish I could say the same about you."

"She's a good ratter, too," said a voice behind Finn.

Ah, thought Chica, what a savior I have in this Spaniard.

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