

A Tale of Two Squirrels

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ISBN: 1452862737

ISBN-13: 978-1452862736

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DEDICATION

To children of all ages who see the marvelous
in the mundane, the beauty in everything
around, and dream even while awake. The
world is a wonder; live it.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the kind support and help of many individuals and organizations. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of them, especially to the members of my SCBWI critique group. Your encouragement and knowledge helped greatly.

THE MORNING

Effie, still resting up in her drey, snuggled in the moss and grass she had collected last fall. She curled her tail around her head. She wasn't ready for the early morning camaraderie of the woods. There was a rustling in her nest. Effie's eye popped open and hoped whoever it was would go away. Then, there was the unmistakable caw of an annoying crow. She quickly crawled out and found the large, black bird. He was trying to pry a twig from her nest, possibly to use in his own. She chattered angrily and waved her tail. The startled crow leapt into the air, and flew off without its treasure. The crows always had a great eye for hawks and all the squirrels relied on them for

extra safety. Effie just didn't like it when they tried to take her home away piece by piece.

The spring chatter began as it normally did. The robins perched on a nearby branch and melodiously sang to the rising sun. They had just returned to the neighborhood from their winter homes. The chill in the air was starting to fade more each day and the small clumps of snow on the ground faded with it.

Many of the squirrels scampered through the trees. The males eagerly chased the females, possibly with hopes of mating. Effie was more interested in a few more hours of sleep.

The woods this time of the year were a bustle of activity. It seemed the mild winter left many more inhabitants than in previous years. Effie's tree was a home for many besides herself. The large oak gave protection and warmth to a kind porcupine, a few other squirrels, and many birds. By far, the scariest of all her neighbors was Major, the horned owl.

Major lived near the top of the tree in an elaborate nest. He kept to himself most of the time and only left his nest at night. Many animals were afraid of him. He could silently swoop onto unwary creatures and turn their

night into everlasting darkness. Sometimes Effie would find clumps of small bones and fur at the base of the tree--a sure sign that Major had a hearty meal the night before. After Effie's mother went missing, she was fearful the bones might have belonged to her. Effie didn't know why his name was Major. Was it a title? Was it to describe his size? Her mother never told her what it stood for except that he could be a "Major" problem for her if she stayed out too late. Since her mother's warning, Effie always made it home before dark.

Only one animal was scarier than Major, Buteo the hawk. He hunted during the day when squirrels were far from the safety of their nests. If an animal caught a glimpse of Buteo over their shoulder, they never lived to tell the tale.

From her high perch, Effie scanned the woods for danger and possible breakfast options. Mr. Nibbler, the porcupine, was crawling out of his hole in the roots of the tree, so Effie climbed down to him. Normally, he came out of his hole in the evening. Effie wondered why he ventured out now.



“Good morning Mr. Nibbler,” she said quietly, so as not to startle him. He was old and sluggish from stiff joints. He squinted up at Effie and attempted to rub the sleep out of his eyes.

“Oh, good morning little lady,” he said in a muffled tone that Effie imagined was from having a mouth too small for his teeth. “Smell that air; crisp and fresh and full of pine.”

“I think that is because you have some sap stuck to your nose,” she said, pointing to her own nose. She remembered her mother telling her to, “always give Mr. Nibbler a wide berth.

It is both polite and less painful.”

“Ah, so you are right.”

He rubbed his nose with his paw and slowly licked each claw clean of the sticky sap, savoring every nuance of the flavor. His eyes glazed over and Effie imagined he was thinking back to a memory of bright, green shoots bursting from rusty bark. Mr. Nibbler was a connoisseur of trees in the forest and could tell you, just by the smell, where you last wandered. Effie loved to test his nose with her journeys. He could map out her whole route perfectly. Except one time when she walked too close to a spooked skunk. Mr. Nibbler began to ask about her day, but was so insulted by the stench he refused to speak to her for a week.

“What brings you out at this hour?” asked Effie.

“Oh,” he said, “I thought I heard a ruckus. It might have been in my dream, though; I can’t be too sure.”

“Any news from last evening?” she asked.

“Oh, not much,” he said, “The otters have been getting word from the cranes that there may be a storm coming. They flew in from the west a couple of days ago and the weather was

extremely bad.”

“Is that so?” Effie asked.

“Yes, yes. The neighboring woods were quite a shambles after the storm passed through them. Trees blown down and animals displaced from their homes. And the flooding, oh, don’t get me started.”

News always traveled through the forest by the birds. They told of coming storms, new babies, and dangerous predators. Once, a blue jay told Effie’s mother of the otter’s new litter. The bird strutted and boasted as if the babies were his own. “What a fine clutch of chicks she has,” he said. “They are all healthy and so is the mother.”

Mr. Nibbler looked up at the sky. “The storm must have passed to the south. But we should be on our guard all the same.” He bid her farewell and returned to his den.

THE OTTERS

Effie scampered through the woods to the river. During the warmer months, the Dogwood and Elderberry bloomed, but now small buds just started to form. The decaying leaves, from last fall, were wet and caked to the ground and the damp earth was cold to the touch. The closer she came to the river, the more frequent she saw the otter's prints. The otter family was polite and playful. Mrs. Otter was a big gossip but never spread rumors. She hated lies, and if she didn't know all the facts of the story, she would go right to the source for them. Effie's mother would get updates from Mr. and Mrs. Otter and share stories of parenthood. If the otters heard of

inclement weather, Effie wanted to know more.

Effie jumped up to a low, bare branch to be safe from frolicking otter pups. All too often she was knocked down in one of their games of tag. She spotted one of them loping along the bank in the soft mud. The other two played on a floating log in a small eddy of the river. Mr. Otter sat farther down the river fishing, while Mrs. Otter cleaned out the den. Their den was a cliff side home where a tree washed out from a flood many seasons ago. A large rock gave little room for the roots to grow, but plenty of support for the otter's dwelling. One piece of stone jutted out quite far and the otters enjoyed basking in the sun on their patio.

Effie waved to Mrs. Otter as she approached. "Hello," she said.

"Hello Effie, how has your foraging been?" asked Mrs. Otter.

"Okay, I guess. It is still early in the season so most of my favorites have not come out yet. Mr. Nibbler said that there may be a storm coming soon, is that true?"

"Well," said Mrs. Otter, "the cranes, who flew in a few days ago, said that there were some terrible winds that were difficult to

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navigate, along with icy rain. Mr. Otter has been finding a lot of debris from up river. I can only imagine how much damage there was. I have noticed a heavy chill in the air even though it is warming up.”

Both Effie and Mrs. Otter looked over at the river. They heard some splashing. The otter pups now played pirates and the youngest was walking the plank.

“Dears, do be careful not to float too far off,” warned Mrs. Otter. She continued pulling

dead leaves from the den hole while they talked. She found a scraggly pinecone in the leaf litter. "How on earth did this get in here? Good grief, those pups bring the silliest things home. Ask them to catch a fish and they come back with a stick. I'm sure this pinecone is the very reason Mr. Otter didn't sleep well last night."

"What is this?" asked Effie as she picked up something from the discard pile. The plastic six-pack holder was stretched, but still intact, with a few otter pup teeth marks. "It can't be a net, the holes are too big."

"Oh, the boys were playing tug-of-war with that yesterday," complained Mrs. Otter. "They found it floating down the river and should have left it alone. Bobby got his head stuck in it twice! He's a sweet boy, but not too bright."

Mr. Otter returned to the den with a large fish in his mouth that dragged on the ground. The gray scales were dull and its cold eyes stared into oblivion.

"I got a good catch," said Mr. Otter, crawling up to the patio. "Oh, hello Effie; will you be staying for breakfast?"

Effie looked at the fish Mr. Otter placed on the stone patio and wondered how anyone

could eat such a smelly thing. “No thank you, Mr. Otter.”

“What was I thinking? I know you don’t care for fish. I did happen to spy a large cache of nuts up river. They must have come from the neighboring wood after the storm. They are littering the whole bank.”

“Maybe I will check it out. Thank you, Mr. Otter,” Effie said, and clambered up to the top of the bank.

“Keep your nose to the wind, Effie,” called Mrs. Otter. “There is no telling when the weather will change for the worse.”

THE UNEXPECTED

Effie had to agree with Mrs. Otter. There did seem to be a chill in the air. She scampered along the bank, jumping over the clumps of debris. She could see where Mr. Otter had been fishing. His heavy prints in the mud left a trail to the cold water. The river in this part of the forest was narrow and quick. The water rippled over the multitude of rocks on the bottom where crayfish darted between them. Most animals crossed at this spot and the trampled bank on both sides led to worn trails through the brush. Farther up, the river widened near a beaver dam. Effie had no clue how long the river was. She knew it opened to a deep lake downstream. A lake so big, she

could not see the other side even from the walnut tree near the shore. Her mother took her there many times to collect the large nuts. Effie liked the flavor of the walnuts, but disliked burying them. They were bigger than most nuts, which meant you had to dig a bigger hole.

When she came to the spot Mr. Otter had mentioned, she found many nuts for the picking. That was until she got a closer look. Nothing but shells were scattered around; most from acorns. Round, brown heads with bumpy berets on them. Several large branches lay along the bank, as well. The oak that lost these branches took a hard hit. The branches were thick and ripped from their trunk, leaving splintered ends. Effie knew the nuts could not have come from these branches. Most trees were practically stripped clean by late fall. These nuts must have been stored in someone's burrow. Possibly some uninvited visitor raided their stores while the owner escaped through the back door. She could tell, by the tracks, that other animals had investigated the scene but then moved on their way.

The woods were peaceful, with the gurgling



of the water and the birds singing, until Effie heard a strange snapping sound. She could not tell what direction it came from. She hoped it wasn't Buteo coming for lunch.

Just then, a thin wisp of a branch fell right next to her. A dark squirrel followed loudly behind it. He landed with a thud right on top of Effie. Breath left her lungs and she struggled to right herself.

"You really need to be more careful," gasped Effie.

“I’m so sorry,” the other squirrel said. “I didn’t jump far enough to grab the branch. Here, let me help you up.”

The small paw that reached for her seemed very dirty until she looked at its owner. He was a squirrel, but his fur was black as a crow from head to toe. He was like a shadow, except for one thin white whisker. It was so bright against his dark coat, reminding Effie of a shooting star she once saw streaming across the late night sky. His eyes, just as black, were large and polished.

“What’s wrong?” asked the squirrel.

Effie stared at the unusual squirrel, perplexed. He must have experienced this look before because he dropped his shoulders and shook his head.

“Yes, I am a squirrel,” he said, exasperated. “I’m just darker than you.”

“Darker?” she said, “If you had a stripe, I would have thought you were a skunk. My name is Effie. What’s yours?”

“Simon,” he said. “I’m really sorry I fell on you. Will you forgive me?”

“Oh, sure,” Effie shook her head and wriggled her body right down to the tip of her tail, “I’m just glad you weren’t larger or you

would have squashed me flat.” She smiled.

Simon followed Effie as she foraged for food. He came across a half-buried pinecone in a pile of damp leaves. He picked it up and surveyed the prickly cone. “Hey Effie, I found something to eat. Do you want some?”

“Oh, thank you. That is very kind of you.” She accepted a seed scale and nibbled. As they ate, Effie studied Simon. He was very fit and handsome. She especially liked how different he was from the other squirrels in the forest.

They wandered together most of the morning scavenging food and telling each other about their homes and neighbors. Simon explained he was from the northern woods, near a little village. There were farms and a church near the edge of the wood.

“I always enjoyed climbing the farmers’ trees and eating the apples,” he said. “My drey was near the stream in a fat conifer that hung over the water. When the storm came through, it ripped a branch from the tree and my home fell into the river. I can’t believe how cold the water was. Only after I climbed on top of a floating branch, that was my floor, did I realize how lucky I was.”

Effie listened intently.

“I glanced back at the tree,” he continued, “just as the storm’s lightning struck the top branches. I would have died if my home had not fallen. I rode out the storm by clinging to the branch and floating down the river. When I finally reached the shore, my first thought was to get to high ground and find some food, then figure out where I was.”

Effie concluded that he had been climbing in the trees to get a better view of his surroundings when he fell out of the tree and into Effie’s life.

“Are you going to go back to your home?” she asked.

“There is no home to go back to,” Simon answered. “The tree toppled to the ground after the lightning hit it and is probably burnt away.”

“You can stay in mine, if you want. At least, until you make another home.” Effie said as she uncovered the remains of a nut buried the previous year.

If squirrels did not have fur, Simon would have seen her blush. However, since they do, it did not reveal her feelings. He looked at her and smiled.

“Thank you,” he said, “I was planning on

looking for a new home, but I would never have finished before nightfall. Do you live very far from here?"

"Not too far, we can go there after we eat," she said.

After nibbling on various nuts and a few rose hips, they headed towards Effie's home. They scampered along the ground and chased each other around the trunks of large trees. They hung upside-down by their hind feet trying to get a good look around the rough bark. These moments of play comforted Effie. It had been a while since she had a companion.

The sun was at its highest point by now. The chickadees called to one another through the trees while a doe was bedding down in the cool moss until the sun was lower in the sky. Most of the journey home was carefree and pleasant. Suddenly, Effie caught a familiar scent on the wind. She climbed higher to get a better smell. She realized a fox was closer than she liked, so she whipped her tail furiously back and forth. She chattered loudly to warn others of the fox's presence. Simon quickly joined her warning and the creatures of the forest took alarm.

Some nearby blue jays harassed a crow

near their nest. They soon took up the call and swooped down to get a better look. They spotted a fox surveying the scene before him.

“He’s under the bush! Look out! Look out!” they cried.

A cacophony of warnings filled the area. With his presence revealed, there was no way he could sneak up on his target. The fox crawled out from his hiding place and slinked off deeper into the forest with the blue jays in pursuit.

Effie and Simon had to be alert at all times. Danger could come from any direction.

THE WARNING

Effie and Simon made sure the coast was clear. With no predators above or below, they continued home. They stopped at some leaves rustling on the ground.

“What is it?” asked Effie.

“I’m not sure,” said Simon. He leaned closer to get a better look and smell. A shrew popped her head out of the leaf litter and wiggled her long nose and whiskers at Simon.

“Be careful of where you’re walking! Out of my way!” exclaimed the shrew.

“Well, there is no reason to be so rude,” said Simon.

“I have to hurry and I don’t have time to chatter it up with you two. Don’t you know

there is a storm on the way?” the shrew said, shaking her claw at them.

“We knew a storm hit the north woods last night, but why are you so worried?” asked Simon.

“The network’s been a buzz about some violent weather. It is heading this way. If you two were smart you would be huddled in a hole somewhere riding it out until the sky was clear.”

“The network?” the squirrels asked in unison.

“Yes, the network,” the shrew stood there with her paws on her hips. “The underground, the association, the alliance; it is the organization of animals that harbor under the earth. You’re tree squirrels, so I guess you must not know about it. Just as the birds pass along information about upcoming events, so does the network; except, we are more precise,” the shrew boasted.

Effie and Simon stood there befuddled.

“Oh, what am I doing wasting my time with you two?” said the shrew, “You need to get to cover. The storm will be here soon.” The shrew disappeared beneath the leaves and wriggled into an underground labyrinth for safety.



“Well, what do you think?” asked Simon.

“I think we better hurry to the drey,” said Effie. “If this storm is coming as quickly as that shrew said it is, then we don’t want to be out on the forest floor.”

The two squirrels scurried up the nearest tree with Effie in the lead. They leapt from branch to branch as fast as they could to cover the distance quickly. Even though they were in a hurry, they needed to be on the lookout for other dangers. Effie caught sight of her drey

and she stopped to look back to inform Simon. He had stopped on the branch behind her with a worried look on his face.

“What is it, Simon?” she asked.

“Did you notice the wind?” he asked.

“What wind?” she looked about, very confused.

“Exactly,” he said, “there isn’t any. It is the calm before the storm, and look at that sky over there. It’s as black as I am.”

Simon was right. The clouds that gathered in the sky bubbled with anger. They stretched so far, Effie could not see their end in either direction. The silence made Effie uneasy.

Three crows appeared from the black sky and flew over Effie’s tree. They were cawing out a warning to the residents below. “Take cover! A storm is approaching!” They circled the area, repeating the alarm and then flew on ahead of the storm.

Two does jockeyed for a position in their race to the thick scrub and startled a flock of mourning doves hidden in the tall grass. The doves flew into the air, whistling their cries of panic. A herd of rabbits, nibbling on new shoots, heard the commotion and bounded off for shelter of their own. Their white, fluffy tails

whisked through the grass and disappeared under a hedge of holly. Other creatures flew, scurried, leapt, or ran for cover.

THE STORM

The faintest of breezes touched Effie's whiskers. She searched the trees for the wind in the leaves. Not far away, the leaves of a tall Cottonwood fluttered in the approaching wind. Somewhere in the distance, thunder announced its arrival. Effie looked at Simon with concern. They needed to hurry. Her tree was too far away to jump through the branches. A meadow separated them from the safety of her home. They scrambled down the tree trunk and sprinted across the small meadow. They were easy targets for any predators that still lurked around. She wanted to get to the drey and be secure before the wind picked up. Once they reached the base of

her tree, she took a quick peek in on Mr. Nibbler. He was deep inside his hole, so she called down to him.

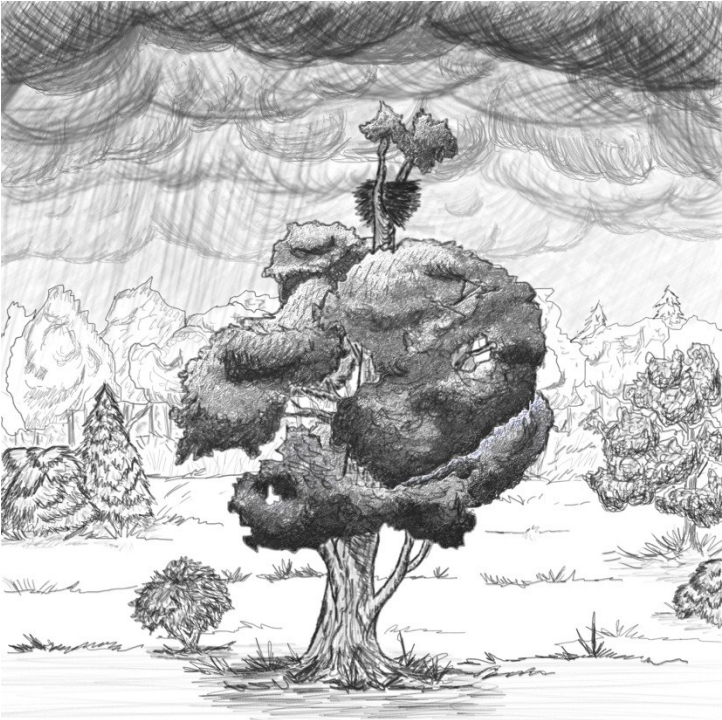
“Mr. Nibbler, are you...?”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. Get yourself to your nest,” he muffled.

The squirrels climbed up the tree as the wind started to pick up. Birds huddled close to the trunk for safety. When the squirrels reached Effie’s nest, she crawled inside and began to make sure everything was secure. Simon crawled in after her and curled up in the corner. Thin wisps of breeze leaked in from one side and Effie blocked the hole with a leaf and some straw. When she was sure it would hold, she curled up next to Simon and they both grabbed on to a branch for safety. The wind blustered through the leaves. Smaller branches creaked outside the drey. A rumble of thunder approached, and they could both feel the tree vibrate from the sound waves.

Effie heard a strange and frightening sound. Something dropped on the nest! There were loud thumps heard all around as hail started to fall at the leading edge of the storm. It picked up in intensity and the whole tree swayed in the strong wind. Rain intermixed with the hail

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and the thunder crashed above them. The hail became louder and blocked out the sound of the wind. A large, frozen chunk crashed through the drey, barely missing the frightened squirrels. A gaping hole opened through the ceiling and the floor.

Effie's nest had withstood many rainstorms and even a blizzard. It had been a haven for her since she was born. After her mother went missing, she continued to care for it. Now it seemed like her life was falling apart around

her. She wanted to fix the hole left by the hail, but Simon held her tight against him.

“Don’t let go of the branch!” he shouted over the storm.

They heard the debris of other trees blowing past the nest and soon the nest itself lofted into the wind. Simon and Effie clung to the branch with all their might. The storm furiously ripped through the woods. The black clouds made it look like night and Effie’s face stung from the pounding rain.

“I don’t know if I can hold on much longer,” she cried.

“Hurry,” Simon shouted. “We need to get to that nest for safety.”

Effie saw the place Simon indicated. Major’s large, looming nest held fast to the tree.

“We can’t go there,” screamed Effie. “Major will eat us.”

“We have no choice,” countered Simon. “It is more dangerous for us to be exposed.”

Effie looked up at the thick platform of twigs and branches. Each year Major added a new layer to the nest, and from where she was clinging to the tree, she could not see the top. She peeled herself from the branch and they climbed to the swaying, owl’s nest. Effie’s tree

was one of the tallest in the forest. She could see far from that height, but now she would not dare look around. The winds buffeted the tree and threatened to rip her from the trunk. Simon dug into the bottom of the nest and excavated a hole that they could squeeze into. At one point, he almost blew away, but regained his grip and crawled into the hole. Effie followed him in and tried to find something to hang onto. She didn't like the cramped space, but at least she was dry. The two squirrels huddled together and Effie watched out of the hole as the storm continued. The sky grew darker and night had fallen. The furious wind blew and the temperature dropped. Simon and Effie stayed in the nest throughout the night. Effie's dreams became haunted by the sounds of ice landing around her and a low hooting. She kept waking to see where she was and to try to get more comfortable. Effie feared they would never see the next morning.

THE MAJOR

When Effie woke, her eyes were heavy with sleep. She ached from sleeping in a cramped position. When she started to stretch, she realized Simon was not next to her. She anxiously looked around, twitching her whiskers and wringing her paws. Had Simon fallen out of the tree, or had she dreamt the entire storm? The sun had not come up yet and she knew she needed to leave the nest before its owner returned. She peered out of the opening and was relieved to see Simon on the ground below. Then she saw the devastation from the raging storm. The tree line looked so foreign to her. Some trees had their tops split right off their trunks. Many

others were missing large branches that rested in the limbs below or littered the forest floor. A large, ragged wound replaced her drey on the tree's trunk. Even now, a woodpecker was probing the damage for tasty, exposed morsels.

Effie's head poked out of the nest and Simon called up to her from the base of the tree.

"Effie, come on down and get some food."

"Are you sure it's safe?" The last thing she wanted was to have owl talons pierce her back as she ate breakfast.

"Yes, and hurry," he said. "I found enough food for the both of us."

Effie made her way down the tree and onto the ground. Simon had collected a pinecone and some seeds he had found. As she sampled the selection, Simon explained that he had gone to search for a suitable tree for a home.

"Many trees suffered heavy damage from the winds last night. We may have to stay in the nest a little longer."

"But an owl lives there and he will kill us if he finds us there. I'm surprised we made it through the night."

"I haven't seen an owl," said Simon. "Perhaps he flew off from the storm and won't

come back.”

Effie didn't believe that was the case. She knew it was only a matter of time before Major would return and make a meal of them.

They spent the day foraging and scouting for a new tree. Many animals were displaced from their homes and they wandered the woods looking for replacements. As the sun drew high above the forest, it warmed the ground under Effie's feet. While she rested, she watched a cottontail chopping down tall dandelion flowers with its teeth and nibbling them up to the bud, where it disappeared beneath a wiggling nose.

With very few places nearby to make a home, the squirrels returned to Effie's tree and crawled up under the owl's nest. They waited until just before dark. Satisfied that no one was lurking above them, they plunged into the depths of the nest. The night slipped by quickly.

Unfortunately, Effie and Simon did not leave the nest early enough the next day. Effie was the first to leave the nest. When she clambered out onto the branch right below it, she found herself in an immense shadow. The shadow had pointed ear tufts and it ruffled its



feathers.

“What are you doing down there?” the shadow’s owner questioned in a deep, gravelly voice.

Effie could not muster the courage to answer. She faced Major, horror contorting her face.

“I have asked you a question and I expect an answer,” ordered Major.

Effie mouthed the words of her explanation but was only able to produce a small, gurgled squeak. Simon hatched from the nest bottom, but Effie blocked the exit.

Simon chided her. "Effie, move out of the way! What's the big--?"

Major dropped down from the top of the nest to the end of the branch occupied by the squirrels. His large, sharp talons gripped at the branch and crushed the loose bark. He took a step towards them and glared with his large, yellow eyes.

"Why were you in my nest?" snapped Major.

Effie regained her voice. "Please don't eat us. We just needed a place to stay from the storm. My home blew away and we haven't found a new site yet."

Simon simply nodded.

"I'm not going to eat you, Effie," said Major in a low timbre. "I have a full stomach from my last hunt. I couldn't eat another bite. I just wanted to know why I had uninvited guests in my home." He shifted his head to the left and stared at Simon. "Do I know you?"

"I...I...uh," Simon squeaked.

"He is from the woods to the north," Effie chimed in. "He's with me. How did you know my name?"

"I take great care to know my neighbors and my enemies," Major proclaimed. "I knew your mother too, until her unfortunate encounter

with Buteo in the meadow.”

Effie was stunned to find out Major was not the one who had taken her mother away. She had always assumed that she must have fallen prey to him since he was so near. Major ruffled his feathers again.

“Well as long as you are no threat to me, I will go back to my digesting.” He turned on the branch and sprang up to his perch. Then he swiveled his head in their direction, giving him an eerie look with his head on backwards. “You may stay here while you look for a new home, but be sure you stay out of my way. I will not hesitate to have you for breakfast if you become a nuisance. If it is of any help, there is a hollow in an old walnut tree by the lake. I would take it for myself, but it is a bit too cramped.”

“Thank you,” said Effie as she and Simon backed down the branch and bustled down the trunk. She intended to make their stay as short as possible.

THE HUNT

It wasn't until they crossed the meadow and crawled beneath a thorn bush that Effie regained her nerve.

"How far is this walnut tree," inquired Simon, still shaking.

"We could be there by nightfall if we start right away," Effie said.

"I'm ready when you are," Simon agreed. "We can get something to eat on the way."

The two of them clambered through the trees with Effie leading the way. They came to a field the townspeople had cleared. The area was littered with abandoned stumps of trees. They could save time by crossing the open field but that would leave them exposed to all kinds

of predators. The safer route would be to travel around the edge of the clearing. Effie grew tired and they stopped to rest.

“I’m going to go and look for some food,” said Simon.

“What? Well...ok, but don’t be gone long,” replied Effie. “I don’t feel comfortable waiting around here.” She scanned the sky for birds and kept her nose on alert. She was upwind from the forest and it was too easy for something to sneak up on her.

Deer grazed on the opposite edge of the open field. Their ears swiveled in every direction to detect the slightest sound. They started at the movement of a nearby rabbit and leapt into the undergrowth. The rabbit scratched its neck with its hind foot and resumed eating. The hair on Effie’s tail rose, something was not right.

A torrent of calls came from high above the canopy. Jays sounded the alarm. The rabbit lifted its head to see why they were crying and it spied the danger over its shoulder. Buteo was circling for a dive. The rabbit crouched down, low in the grass to hide.

“Run, you bumbling fool! He sees you!” cried a blue jay.



“Make for the trees!” followed his wingman.

The jays tried to distract Buteo by swooping in and grabbing his tail. Unfortunately, each attempt was thwarted by the hawk’s aerial rolling. As the jays got close to him, he would flip over and try to grab them from below. The hawk’s sharp talons grazed a jay enough to scare them off.

Buteo tipped his tail and angled in for his approach. He was in a dive and heading straight for the rabbit. The rabbit started

bounding for the safety of the tree line with all its might. His eyes bulged while he made sharp turns to avoid the attack.

Buteo effortlessly flapped his wings and flexed his talons for the kill.

“Run if you must, my furry friend,” mocked Buteo. “It only makes the meat sweeter.”

Effie watched the white fluff of the rabbit’s tail bounce along the field as Buteo closed in. Her fear glued her feet to the ground and she could not flee for cover. The hawk streamed just feet above the ground when Buteo and his quarry disappeared into the tall, pale grass. A grisly squeal was the only indication that the hawk hit his mark.

Effie’s adrenaline finally loosened her feet and she ran to a nearby tree in terror. She watched Buteo take to the air with the limp remains of the game in his clutches.

“I wish Simon would hurry,” she cried aloud.

“I wasn’t gone that long,” objected Simon from behind her. “What was all the commotion?”

“Buteo was just here and he killed a rabbit,” explained Effie.

“Well, then he won't be bothering us for a while,” he said.

"I'm glad you can be so calm about it," Effie scolded him. *"Was it the same way with my mother? Was it just a game for Buteo?"* Thinking about the loss of her mother made her cry.

"I'm sorry," Simon said. "I didn't mean to sound insensitive. It's just...there is nothing we can do about it now. Come on, let's get going."

The forest fell quiet and the two squirrels continued on their way. Simon had eaten before they left the clearing, but Effie had to scrounge up some food to curb her hunger. The sun traveled across the sky on its familiar route to the western horizon. Shortly before sunset, Simon and Effie arrived at the lake. The water sounded peaceful and cooled the air. Effie could see the large walnut tree along the shore. She was glad they had made it in one piece.

They walked to the tree and climbed up the gnarled trunk. The front door to her new home was halfway up. She crawled in and surveyed the space. Simon sat on a branch outside and admired the view.

"What do you think?" Effie called from inside the hole.

"It's nice," replied Simon. "You can see a lot

from up here and still be hidden by the branches. Does the tree get a good crop of nuts?"

"Yes, from what I can remember. There is even a mulberry tree nearby, to tide me over until the nuts are ready."

Simon watched the setting sunlight play off the lake's ripples. "I have never seen such a big lake. It sparkles...just like your eyes." He turned to face Effie. "I hope I can find a home as nice as this tomorrow."

Effie looked at Simon for the first time since he fell on top of her. It had only been a short time, but she was getting used to having Simon around. He was kind and he made the loss of her mother seem bearable. She was warm and tingly and the thought of Simon leaving made her feel sad.

"Oh, well...I thought you could stay here, too," she said.

Simon's face brightened. "Really? You want me to stay with you?"

"Well...sure," Effie said. "There is more than enough room and..." Effie did not understand why she felt the way she did. "I really wish you would stay."

"Certainly," Simon said. "I was afraid you

would never ask.”

They crawled into the large hole. As the last glimpse of light glittered over the lake, they fell asleep curled up together. They found a new nest and a new love. Now all they had to do was to make it a home.

THE HOME

From far above the Earth, the summer sun crested the tops of the trees, its warm light shone down on the tall grass along the lakeshore. Glistening, wisps of spider silk waved in the cool breeze. They were lifelines of the tiny spiderlings that were off to start out on their own. A cicada began its scratchy opus on the side of the large walnut tree. Effie watched her young children scamper in the tree's dappled shade. Simon showed one of them the best way to bury a nut in the ground. The walnut tree was a welcomed refuge for the two squirrels when they first arrived. Now, with children playing, food in abundance, and safety among the vast branches, the tree was a



wonderful home.

Mr. Nibbler and the Otter family were visiting for the day. The Otters had visited before and Mrs. Otter was very fond of the squirrels' new abode.

"What a lovely view you have," she said. "I always loved the lakeside view. Maybe we should get a summer home here. What do you think, Mr. Otter?"

"What do I think?" questioned Mr. Otter. "When has my opinion ever made a

difference? As long as there is plenty of fish and a dry bed, I will be happy. Maybe we should let the happy couple enjoy the quiet first, before we unleash our brood on their new home.”

Bobby and his brothers splashed in the surf of the lake, playing “keep-away” with a stick. The young squirrels had to keep skittering out of their way.

“Major visited my home during the last full moon,” Mr. Nibbler said. “He informed me that Buteo was killed by a human.”

“Is that so?” replied Effie.

“Yes, it seems he was playing with a quarry of pheasant, when a hunter shot him by mistake.”

“Well, I guess we won’t have to worry about him anymore,” Effie said with relief.

“Ah, but when one predator leaves, another inevitably will take its place. A void never remains a void for long,” countered Mr. Nibbler.

Simon sat in the shadow of his own tail, looked up at Effie and smiled. Simon had filled the void in Effie’s life. She was glad to have another home to call her own and now she could share it with someone special. She was

sure that they could spend many seasons snuggled up together watching the curling waves lap the shore. She could not feel more at home. And what a wonderful home it was.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. T. Baron has a B.S. degree in Zoology and has been teaching children in Sunday school for many years. She has written and illustrated multiple children's books, including *Squirrely over Nuts*, and is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators. She is also the creator of the I Otter Be line of illustrations that can be purchased at her website. She lives with her husband and two children in western New York and sees nature as an outlet to teach children about various issues and entertain them at the same time.