

Squirrels

by

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“May I ask what you are doing?”

There is a point on the lifeline of every human story when a simple question, even when posed in relative innocence, can break through a crusted soul and trigger an existential hemorrhage.

The subject of our hemorrhagic study is one Marty Finnegan, age 43, single, a resident of a major metropolitan area still surrounded by farms and forest. Until this point on his lifeline, Mr. Finnegan thought of himself as a contributing member of society, satisfied if not happy, a person who made a point of doing the right thing.

“May I ask what you are doing?”

It was a feminine voice, pointed, not forceful, but the presumption of the question rankled, and the question lingered like an echo in a steel chamber.

Marty Finnegan wasn't used to being caught, or even noticed. Not especially tall, not especially overweight, not especially fit, nor especially good-looking, he had learned there was nothing gained by loosing one's temper. He understood the importance of self-control, so before his honest, visceral response of “What do you think I am doing?” could leap from his mouth he took a quick breath, looked down, and considered the question.

At his age, it was unusual for anybody to ask him the question, “What are you doing?” Unnoticed, his circle of people who would be interested in anything he might be doing was shrinking steadily. It had been many months—okay, more, than a year—since he broke up with his most recent girlfriend, and that had done some serious damage to his enthusiasm. For many more years he felt he had missed the boat with having any kids of his own. Sharing his life with someone special had taken its place on that list of passive events sewn together to make a life for so many people: getting laid off, coming down with a serious disease, or buying a new car because the old one bites the dust. If they happen, they happen, and when they do, we learn to cope.

Without knowing, Marty Finnegan coped by developing antibodies to sentimentality. How many of us do the same? His memories of his own childhood faded so gradually he didn't realize how distant they had become. Over the years he learned to mute his allergic reaction to even “the holiday season,” and he lost the gift of bringing warmth and color to

the past.

He didn't miss that gift because he felt successful in the present. Nobody asked “What are you doing?” at work. For the past seven years Marty had worked at a small publisher that had mysteriously survived—so far—the destruction of the traditional publishing industry wrought by the internet. His title was editor, but he was really more of a copy editor. He made certain that everything looked “right,” that is, professional. Spelling and syntax were in order, sentences were clear, the author's intent somehow came through, although often the authors themselves were not always so clear about their intent. He was quite good at his work, and was sufficiently appreciated for it.

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Bringing order to chaos: that's what. But that had not gone well with Michelle, who worked in the office. He blamed himself for that chaos, and she had brought the order to it, with both learning only that getting involved with people at work can seriously threaten a good job. Both now came to work every day and calmly went about their tasks, but the workplace temperature had plunged. Marty understood his job now depended more on his self-control than on his skill, and he worked very, very hard at curbing his tongue.

“May I ask what you are doing?”

Who among us has not been deeply influenced by our careers, our life-long work, our jobs? It's not that Marty Finnegan consciously decided that making things look good and bringing order to chaos would be his hobbies

and avocations as well as his metier, but naturally his private life could not avoid those habits. What Marty liked to do was to read, and to take care of his yard.

Marty felt he was among peers when he read the great authors, for here were stories and parables with complete thoughts, with neatly bundled themes, with spelling and syntax in order, looking good and professional. He could enjoy them thoroughly, without perceiving that behind competent editing beats the heart of a true author, with original perceptions of the human condition and profound insights into truth and beauty. Perhaps this blind spot was for the best, for he could read the classics free of envy.

He worked the same magic with non-fiction. Everything he read gave him new bricks to place into his wall of understanding the world around him. He felt a twinge of



self-satisfaction with the careful placement and fastidious mortaring of each new fact, and with the unhurried, incontrovertible rising of that wall within his mind. A neutral observer might note that a “wall of understanding” is a metaphor burdened by irony, but reading allowed Marty himself to be that neutral observer and he relished the experience, oblivious to the burden.

“May I ask what you are doing?”

Marty looked up at the ranger. She was not pretty. The forest green trousers led with a hard crease, military style, and stood on black polished shoes. Every wrinkle had been starched out of the grey, short sleeved shirt, and a silver star glinted on the breast pocket. A big, round, wool felt Mounties hat sat on light brown hair pulled back severely into a pony tail. Her brown eyes were small, her lips tight. The morning sun shocked the sky into a crystal blue behind her and Marty squinted up at a shadowy, martial vision, not of order but order’s foul stepsister, accountability

Given his professional habit of order, imagine its incarnation in Marty Finnegan’s yard. If asked, he might say he enjoyed mowing the suburban lawn of his childhood years, although he vaguely recalled only doing it as a chore. More recently he had taken part in the great real estate rush that, for all its subsequent tragedy, did move many unlikely homeowners into their own castles. Marty was converted from a renter of a small apartment into the owner of his own modest house with a small front yard and a larger spread of green in the rear. The desire to bring order to chaos kicked in, no longer limited to professional or intellectual planes, but in real estate, with dirt, turf, blooms, and sweat.

“May I ask what you are doing?”

What he was doing, he thought to himself, was simply protecting his turf. The primly-edged lawn in front was regularly watered with a timer, as were the azaleas nestled in a deep moat of redwood chips beneath the windows in front. It was a source of daily relief to come home from work in the evening to the visible order that greeted him as he triggered the garage door opener and drove his Corolla past the greens, browns and blooming highlights of the yard and into the garage. True, the mulch was occasionally disturbed by neighborhood cats and random chips were strewn past the azalea bed edge strip, but Marty could quickly tidy up the little messes before entering the front door.

It was the larger back yard that gradually monopolized Marty’s attention. The fencing of vertical redwood boards was obscured in most places by a trimmed hedge, and the rest of the space was open to the sun and hosted separate raised beds of varied shapes, heights and sizes. Here he took vermin violations more seriously.

At first he blamed cats for the trenches he often found in loose or freshly turned earth, but over time he deduced it was squirrels, seen as cute, bushy-tailed scamps by more naive, foolish people, that would tear apart freshly planted beds, either depositing or withdrawing acorns. He learned these

were not indigenous squirrels like the larger, gray ones to be found in forests to the north. These had reddish fur and tails, a non-native species from New Jersey, far better adapted to survival in urban areas. Once he learned to notice, Marty could see them everywhere: cavorting in pairs or threesomes, tearing through tall trees, on power lines, and along fence tops. A city park several blocks away was clearly spilling over with squirrels, and Marty was shocked when a neighbor three doors down told him at a picnic how her husband fed the squirrels peanuts because he thought they were cute. At least now he knew why he occasionally found peanuts still in the shell buried in his garden.

To Marty, the squirrels were far from cute. Aside from the digging, he found that sprouting acorn oaks were a major weed in the spring and summer, and as his fruit trees began to bear, he found himself competing with squirrels for his own ripening plums, grapes, and persimmons. His one-on-one encounters had not gone well, either. One morning at dawn, as he approached his compost pile in the mist, he was startled by a wild shriek and as he jumped into the air and dropped his pan full of kitchen scraps, Marty saw a squirrel on a hedge just next to the pile screaming in violation. Now, when a squirrel floated down a tree trunk, or scampered into the yard, eye contact was made and the tension between man and beast was palpable.

What bothered Marty Finnegan most was the squirrels’ attitude: they acted like the yard belonged to them! This was a profoundly disturbing violation. He had settled on his profession; he had settled on those few pleasures that still warmed him; he had settled on what he thought were standards for relationships; he was willing to accept what fate had left him on the doorstep. None of this had been planned, but every compromise was also a withdrawal into himself, into a private space where his pride could survive. And that space was his backyard.

Something had to be done.

Within his first year in the house, he had ordered a “have a heart” trap to control unwanted wildlife in his domain. These traps are small wire cages with spring-loaded doors that capture animals alive inside, instead of killing them instantly with a stroke to the back of the head. While he caught the occasional roof rat from the swarms that had the run of the city at night, and even an opossum or two, it was the squirrels that he saw as malevolent trespassers, even as enemies. He determined to trap and dispose of them all! But how?

Who among us would not do good, if we could? Marty saw the brand name of his animal trap as a challenge: “Have A Heart.” When a creature triggered the trap door, it’s fate was not yet decided, but placed instead in the hands of its new master. The trap’s design carried with it an expectation that the offending creature was entitled to a second chance elsewhere, but second chances are never simple. The trap caught rats as well as squirrels, and nobody relocates rats.

Who is to judge, dear reader, which animals are to survive, and which will not?

Thus was launched the great campaign of resettlement. After some experimentation, he settled on an appropriate location to establish a new squirrel colony. A wilderness preserve just off the freeway that he passed on his way to work seemed ideal. It was more than ten miles from his house, so the squirrels were not likely to return, and there were no houses around, so he wouldn't just be passing his problem on to somebody else. And, after all, it was a wildlife refuge, so he was using his "have a heart" trap to accomplish a humane mission. The pieces seemed to fit together.

Marty developed a routine he grew proud of. When a squirrel was captured, he quickly covered the cage with a towel and moved it out of the sun. In the morning he put the cage in the trunk, left for work a little earlier, pulled into a cul-de-sac where signs marked the refuge border, took out the cage, and without removing the towel, lifted the door and watched as the squirrel bolted down a grassy embankment and usually into one of the five or six short scrub oaks that ringed the pavement.

But what, indeed, was he doing? Oh reader, have we not all learned that the true measure of fleeting age is the steady loss of relationships? If we are lucky, we are unlucky, for ultimately we stand as the last of our kind in our world. Our friends and acquaintances fade away, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, and if we live long enough, we will be alone.

This process begins not in old age, but much earlier as we make adult decisions about jobs, family, and love. Was our subject not substituting the squirrels he could catch for real people he could not? How strange was it that he learned to recognize male and female squirrels, that he could differentiate between juveniles and adults, or that he sometimes sensed relationships among his serial captives? Just as more of Marty Finnegan's world funneled into his yard, a greater share of his interaction with living things focused on his squirrels.

In almost a year, he relocated perhaps 30 squirrels in this way. One day Marty forgot about his captive prisoner in the trunk and didn't remember until after he had been at work for several hours. He knew he couldn't leave the squirrel there all day, so he decided to take a quick break and drive out to the nature reserve, release the squirrel, and get back quickly. He drove the ten minutes to the reserve entrance, took the cage out of the trunk, carried it to the north edge of the pavement and was kneeling down for the release when a brand new, government-looking pickup pulled up behind his car. Marty was kneeling, his hands on the trap, the towel had come off, and there was the squirrel, waiting for the ritual to conclude.

"May I ask what you are doing?" the female ranger said as she looked down at the kneeling man.

The reader may recall that the wire cage, with the plainly

visible squirrel inside, was on the ground, aimed at the waiting grasslands beyond the paved embankment, and that Marty was kneeling beside it, gloved hands on it, ready to raise the door, so we may forgive Marty's initial wonder at the question that had so obvious an answer. After the pause already described, Marty said, "I am releasing a squirrel into the wildlife refuge."

"Oh," the ranger said disapprovingly. "Why would you do that?"

"Well, I guess I have more squirrels than I need in my yard, and since a squirrel is wildlife, I thought I would bring it to a wildlife refuge. I've brought a lot of them to this spot."

"There's no way it will survive here," she said after a pause.

She slowly raised her gaze and looked past Marty to the horizon. Marty turned and joined her study of the contested area. A soft morning breeze tussled the brittle leaves of the scrub oak closest to them, perhaps 20 feet down a gravel embankment. An almost identical tree, looking stiff and old in the bright morning sun, stood nearby, and three others completed a ring that ended on the south edge of the cul-de-sac. Beyond the trees was nothing but brownish green grasses, casting the pathetic-looking scrub oaks as a failed experiment in forestry. The faceless dried marsh grasses stretched, waist high, folding lifelessly, clear to the horizon, where a thin mantle of dark green edged the sky.

They both looked awhile, each privately scouring the landscape for any signs of life. Marty saw a couple of small black birds dart briefly over the grass and then disappear back into its shelter. Way off, almost to the far-away trees at the horizon, he barely made out a black "V" shape undulating slowly and then disappearing. Probably a vulture, he thought.

"This isn't really squirrel habitat. There are no natural food sources for it," the ranger said. "Most likely, it will be taken by a hawk, or some other predator,".

This was when Marty realized that he didn't really care. He certainly didn't accept automatically that his interlocutor knew what she was talking about, and he considered arguing in favor of the squirrels chances of survival. After all, he had relocated quite a number over the past year. But he just didn't care enough. He had gone to a lot of trouble to give his enemies, his competitors, a second chance by bringing the squirrels here, and if that wasn't good enough, then the hell with it.

"It's the cycle of life," Marty said slowly, trying to mimic a nature documentary.

He looked back down at the confused squirrel and realized there was no way in hell he was taking this squirrel back, or anywhere else, for that matter. After a long pause, he looked at the woman in uniform.

"So, can I let it go?"

She grunted her approval and while she turned, got in

her pickup, and drove away, Marty lifted the door, and the squirrel bolted in a healthy dash to the closest oak and that was that.

He put the cage back in the trunk, got in the car, and slowly drove around the cul-de-sac to return to the freeway. He felt a slow anger build. The virtue he had seen in his efforts to treat his enemies the squirrels with dignity was gone. If all that ranger had to do all day was look for people sneaking animals *into* a wildlife refuge, as opposed to taking animals out, then something was terribly wrong. Your tax dollars at work, he harrumphed to himself.

Lost in hostile thoughts about the cycle of life, he idled his car slowly toward the on-ramp. Unexpectedly, his eye caught sight of a squirrel tumbling down the trunk of the last scrub oak at the pavement's south edge. He stared incredulously as it scrambled through the dirty weeds and gravel up to the pavement. This was not the squirrel he had just released! Today was the first time in almost two weeks

he had undertaken a relocation, and there was no way the one he had just let go could have circled through the grasses around the pavement and climbed this tree clear on the other side. Beside, what motive would it have to reappear after almost a full day of imprisonment? This could only mean that his colony had been successful! Like a Swiss Family Robinson, his banished squirrels had found a way to survive and adapt.

The veteran squirrel had now reached the pavement, where it turned to run alongside the car, sprinting mightily to match the speed of the accelerating vehicle. Unbelievable, thought Marty Finnegan as he watched his former subject's movement. It's as though he recognizes me, and the car. And as he stared down, the squirrel looked up at full gallop and screamed.

"Don't leave me here! Take me back!"

Marty Finnegan gunned the engine and sped away.