

PEANUT

The city's gray sky leaked dim warmth into the park. Limp grass stalks, faded to yellow, pushed through the muddy infield of a neglected playing diamond. Oak trees, older than the city, erratically lined weather-beaten lawns that surrounded a man-made pond. It was too wet for skating, too cold for ducks.

Samuel scrunched inside his dirty-white tattered overcoat, in long need of dry cleaning. Two and a half decades ago, he had purchased the coat at great cost. The uneven washed-out park bench slats caused him to constantly squirm. He clutched a grease-stained brown paper bag with his right hand, while holding a peanut in his left. He had chosen that particular peanut with careful thought. From its size, it must hold more than the normal two-count.

Samuel had left his glasses on his night stand –they weighed heavy on his ears, he told himself –but by squinting, he could see the green, squat shrub some fifteen feet in front of him on the other side of the gravel path. The shrub was one of many a local Boy Scout troop had planted with great fanfare in the spring. The shrubs were now quietly dying. They marked the boundary of the city park from the Expressway. Samuel turned down his hearing aid, so as not to hear the traffic, but discovered its batteries were dead.

Underneath the shrub, a squirrel alternated its stance quickly, from sitting calmly on its haunches to suddenly spreading its weight on all four paws, as if responding to signals in the wind and ground Samuel could not perceive.

“Like a cat burglar,” he thought, with a mental grin.

Big for its kind, the squirrel watched the prize in Samuel's hand with eyes as deep and as solid-black as a judge's gavel. Its long, long bushy tail stayed tall as it swished through the air.

"Like a lookout on a street corner," Samuel said aloud. The squirrel didn't react.

A lengthy deep scar marred the squirrel's right side. Samuel had seen that scar several times, here in the park. From that wound, Samuel felt a kinship with the animal. Samuel envisioned him as swaggering, bold, and ruthless; defending his territory with the dogged determination of a neighborhood gang lord. If the squirrel chose to relax and settle down, others would sense it. They would gather on his border, hooting at first, barking their shrill cries, mocking him. Females would desert him.

The drizzle forecast for the morning made the air feel moist. The Senior Center would not open until 11:30. It always served Sloppy Joes on Thursdays, with green beans and a fruit cup. If he got to the Center first, he would be able to switch the television to "Montel Williams." If he arrived late, "Guiding Light" would be commandeered, followed by "General Hospital." The women would chatter and bicker about people who did not exist.

The squirrel sniffed in Samuel's direction. Samuel said nothing, holding the oversized peanut firmly between thumb and forefinger. The other three fingers grouped together tightly, obscuring faded tattoos. The squirrel moved its angular head several times, in several directions, before emerging from the shrub's shelter. Pausing for long seconds, he approached Samuel with the bouncing gait efficient only with squirrels.

Samuel allowed himself a slight grin. He waved his peanut hand in tight circles as

he leaned forward at an awkward angle. He looked to his left, then to his right, before allowing himself to say aloud, “Here, sport. Here, guy.”

The squirrel stopped, holding his ground. Over on the Expressway, a car blasted its horn once, then twice. Neither man nor squirrel moved.

Samuel’s back ached. He sneaked a peek at his watch. The little hand was on the eleven, but the big hand was between the four and the five.

“C’mon, c’mon.”

A sudden breeze, bitter and chill, swirled around them both. It seized scattered leaves into a tight, yet ragged, miniature tornado. Immediately, the squirrel raised itself off its paws and squealed. He turned quickly and bounced across the path, past the shrub. He scampered to the nearest oak tree, vanishing within its boughs.

Samuel sighed and cursed. He tossed the peanut down on the ground before him.

“Like you’ve never seen leaves before.” With his face impassive, he pushed down with his ringless left hand on the bench, grunted, and heaved himself up. His right hand still gripped the grease-stained paper bag.

Hatless head bowed against the wind, Samuel tried to hurry his steps, even though he detested Sloppy Joes. The peanut remained on the ground. As Samuel walked away, he heard a squirrel’s triumphant bark.