The Squirrels in Our Backyard

I’m not quite sure what happened. I’m not even sure that I want to know, because the implications are something I’ll have a hard time living with . . . if they’re true.

In the Spring, our backyard in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina, blossoms. The azaleas, rhododendron, dogwoods, hollies, wild flowers, oaks, even the fescue all come back to life. Our winters aren’t long, definitely not by northern standards. We once lived near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for five years, and the winters there seemed to last for six months. I remember going through five to nine cords of wood each winter. In North Carolina we’re blessed with even seasons, three months each. The winters aren’t harsh, but the summers can be brutal from time to time. Usually, just when you’re sick of the cold, or more likely the heat and humidity, it will change. All in all, a beautiful place to live.

Now, we live in a suburb, like many Americans. The lots here are fairly large, ours is almost an acre and a half. When we bought the lot it was completely covered with oaks, holly and dogwoods, a few knarly pines, but mostly oaks. Patty and I had to cut quite a few oaks to clear enough room for the house. Twenty years later we wish we had cut down a few more. The oaks have gotten much bigger and we didn’t know that we were inviting neighbors to share the land and the trees with us.

Everyone that lives in God’s woods understands that we just share space with His critters. City dwellers go to the zoo to see wildlife. In the south you just step out onto your back porch. In the morning and evening you’ll see deer feeding on your azaleas, or your garden if the oaks will give you enough sun light for a garden. Raccoons and possums like to sleep during the day and feed when the sun goes down. You’ll hear them scurrying around on the porch or deck in the middle of the night. Kind of like the commercial that shows the near sighted woman letting her cat in through the sliding glass door in the middle of the night, only it’s not her cat. Birds are out at the crack of dawn. Their morning songs and a spring breeze drifting in through the window while you sleep in on a Saturday morning are one of life’s great pleasures.

Then there are other creatures . . . squirrels.

Now, I’ve never had a particular problem with squirrels, live and let live I say. Occasionally, they do a suicide dance in the road while you’re driving and I’ll slow down for them, but I decided a long time ago that I’m not getting in a wreck over a damn squirrel. We have a hickory tree beside the driveway that has put more than one dent in my truck. I swear the squirrels used to sit up in the top of that tree and wait for me to get home. No sooner than I’d turn off the ignition than a big hickory nut would bounce off the hood right in front of my face. I’d get out and stare up into the tree and be greeted with chittering that I took for laughter.

Like I said, live and let live, until this year.

About five years ago we decided to convert our deck into a screen porch. Before, if it rained, no deck. If it was too hot, no deck. If the bugs were out, which was nine months of the year, no deck. Basically, the deck was unusable most of the year. That finally changed the year before Patty was diagnosed with breast cancer. We found a contractor that would frame the whole thing up and attach it to the roof for $6000. We subbed out the electrical and roofing and finished the rest ourselves. The whole thing was sheathed in cedar and looked exactly like it was built with the house. I added a tile floor. We added six foot screens, rails and of course a ceiling fan. In other words we had a lot of sweat equity in this screen porch and we loved it. No bugs and no direct sun, it was perfect. We sat out in the mornings and drank coffee and read the paper. Deer would run through the yard going where ever it is that deer go. In the evening it would be cicadas and lightning bugs and a glass of wine, or two. We’d talk about how this was our favorite room in the house.

Now Patty loves bird feeders. Every time we’d go through Lowe’s or Home Depot she’d stop and look. Not at the large ornate bird feeders, the little ones that you had to mount on a shepherd’s hook and jam in the ground. Over time they began to multiply; one on either side of the porch in little planting beds, another out by a St. Christopher statue by a large oak tree. Sometimes she’d have little humming bird feeders that would get tossed about at night by raccoons and possums going for the seed in the bird feeders. We’d always had squirrels. They seem to come with the trees, like a living ornament. I always called them tree rats and told Patty that if they had a tail like a rat, people would shoot them on sight.

The trouble started this spring. It had been a mild winter and we soon noticed that one or two squirrels had turned into nearly a dozen. It was like a gang had moved into the neighborhood. The cat was even intimidated. He would only go out early in the morning and after it got dark. When they decided it was time to feed they ran off all the birds and took over the feeders. They would hang from the small ones and drain the seed onto the ground. An alpha squirrel would curl up inside the large feeder and eat until there wasn’t any more seed.

Patty and I talked about this and I decided to get the bb-gun and shoot the top of the bird feeders to scare them off. At the same time Patty started removing the small bird feeders at night and placing them inside the screen porch. This went on for a while, with nobody getting hurt, until the squirrels decided to escalate this confrontation.

I leave for work while it’s still dark and she leaves a little later after the sun comes up. When she went to hang the small bird feeders outside for the day she found a squirrel on the screen porch. Being a good southern woman she got the broom and took care of business. After chasing him around for a while, she propped open a door and shooed the frightened squirrel outside. While cleaning up bird seed and shells that were scattered around the porch she noticed that two large, squirrel sized holes had been ripped in two screen panels. When I got home that afternoon she met me at the door and said she had bad news. Now, I’ve been working in nuclear plants for over thirty years, including five years at Three Mile Island after the accident, so I don’t get rattled very easily.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, I’m fine, it’s the porch," she replied, as she turned and headed for the back of the house.

Now, I’m expecting a branch sticking through the roof or something like that. We have one huge oak three feet from the porch, one of the ones we should have cut down twenty years ago, and every once in a while it’ll drop a branch four inches in diameter. So I’m braced for the worst as we enter the porch. Looking around I don’t see anything wrong.

"I don’t see anything," I said.

"Look at that!" she replied and pointed at the screen panel on the far side of the porch.

Walking over beside the screen, she points at the base and says, "Look at the hole. That’s how they got in."

I’m wondering if we’ve been burglarized as I ask, "Who got in?"

Now most men know that the thought processes of women are different than men, especially wives. They assume you’ve picked up on what they know even if they haven’t told you all the facts. Men, being somewhat slow on the uptake need the facts.

"A squirrel! A squirrel got in the screen porch this morning and I had to run him out. They came in through that hole and made another one over there," she said and pointed at a screen on the other side of the porch.

After looking at both holes I sighed and said, "Damn, we’ll have to get them both replaced. That’ll be $300."

These screens are six feet wide and five feet tall. Definitely not a DIY project and I didn’t want to just patch the holes.

"I’ll call the guy up tomorrow and find out when they can get by," I said, as I left the porch and headed for the fridge. A cold beer after work is part of my routine and $300 worth of squirrel repairs would probably require a second one.

"I thought you’d be really mad," she said, as she followed me into the kitchen.

"No, I’m not mad, but the squirrels have got to go. Taking all the seed is one thing. Destroying property is something else," I replied.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"May have to shoot them," I said.

"Yeah, right!" she huffed, as she turned and headed back toward the woman cave.

"You just make sure you don’t store bird seed on the porch anymore," I replied.

At our house we have a Woman Cave and a Man Cave. She records wedding, toddlers, pets and decorating shows on her DVR in our bedroom. Stuff I wouldn’t watch on a bet. I record military, action, history, and science stuff upstairs in the Man Cave. Trust me; it cuts down on a lot of arguments after work when we’re both still stressed.

Walking upstairs, I stared out a window into the backyard. Sure enough, three squirrels were ravaging the bird feeders. One acrobat was hanging from the small feeder by the oak tree and spilling the seed onto the ground. One was just below him, helping himself to the feast. The third one was curled inside the large feeder. Typical!

"Time to up the ante," I said, as I retrieved the BB gun from the hall closet.

Now, you can sting a squirrel with a bb gun by shooting him in the hip. It would take a head shot from up close to kill one, and I wasn’t at that point yet. I like to shoot, but I don’t like to hunt. I shot on NC State’s Rifle Team back in the day, and was an expert marksman in the Army, but I don’t like to kill an animal for the sport of it. I did it when I was young and I didn’t like it. I have a lot of friends that love to hunt, but it’s not for me.

"It’s time to nip one and see if they take the hint," I said, as I quietly cranked open the upstairs window. The fat squirrel in the feeder was still happily engaged in filling his belly. Lining up the shot I held in a light breath and slowly squeezed the trigger. That fat squirrel burst from the feeder and ran for the bushes. The other two joined it and scurried up the same oak where I knew they had their nest.

"Oh yeah, who’s your daddy," I smugly said as I cranked the window closed.

Thirty minutes later, as I was happily watching a UFO show, Patty appeared at the door.

"I thought you were going to do something about the squirrels?" she asked, as I hit the mute button.

"I did. I popped one and ran off the whole crew," I replied, as I stared at a UFO over San Paulo.

"Really! Look out the window," she said.

With a sigh, I got up and walked up to the window. There weren’t three squirrels in the back yard, there were eight. The rest of the afternoon was spent sniping squirrels. My Man Card was in jeopardy and it was time to take action. Patty, of course, retreated back to the Woman Cave to watch Toddlers and Tiaras.

It quickly became obvious that the squirrels weren’t taking the hint. The bb gun was stinging them, but not enough to keep them away from the seed. I had a problem and the next day it got worse. Patty called me at work with a squirrel update. One had gotten back on the screen porch, where there wasn’t any seed as I had directed, and had shat all over her porch. Now it was serious. The old saying, "If Mama ain’t happy, then nobody’s happy" is a true statement that any male human above the age of three is well aware of and Patty was pissed.

One thing that I didn’t mention was that Patty was on the rifle team at NC State also and she was a natural. So if I couldn’t get the job done she was more than willing to do it herself. Luckily, she was rusty, because my Man Card was starting to fray at the edges and get brittle. At this point they, meaning the squirrels, had to go. I still didn’t want to kill them, but it was rapidly becoming me or them. So what does a man do in a case like this? He gets a bigger gun that’s what. The next Saturday I went to Dick’s Sporting Goods and bought a pellet gun with a muzzle velocity of 1200 feet per second (fps). The daisy bb gun had a muzzle velocity of around 200 fps, so this was a major upgrade. As soon as we got back home I took it out of the box. I didn’t read the instructions. Men hate reading instructions. It’s a sign of weakness. So it took me a while to figure out how to cock the weapon. It wasn’t a lever action or a pump action. The barrel actually was hinged and broke in the middle. Fifteen minutes later, after a quick peek at the instructions, I figured out how it worked. Placing a pellet in the chamber, I readied the weapon and stepped outside for a test shot. Unluckily, there were no squirrels in sight so I lined up on an oak in the back about forty feet away and pulled the trigger.

I was stunned. I was expecting a little pfffft like a bb gun and it was as loud as a 22. I quickly looked around and ducked back into the work shop.

"Oh crap, that won’t do. The neighbors will be calling the law," I said, as I began packing the weapon back into the box.

After that it was time to hit the internet. The first thing that I found out was that Wake County considers any pellet gun with a muzzle velocity >600 fps as a firearm and it can’t be discharged within 300 feet of another house without written permission of the owner. Yikes!

So I started looking for a weapon with a legal muzzle velocity. Then I found out that manufacturer’s rate pellet guns by loudness, from 1-5. Legal muzzle velocity or not I knew that if it was loud the law would be showing up in the driveway. More research showed that a bb gun is rated as a 1 so I needed a weapon that was less than 600 fps and a 1-2 in loudness. What I found was another Daisy. Muzzle velocity 350fps, loudness 2. The pellet has three times the mass of a BB and is pointed at one end. Perfect, the squirrels were in big trouble.

After getting the new weapon home I tried a test shot at one of the small bird feeders. It has a thick plastic side and from 40 feet the pellet punched a clean hole through the plastic. I set up in the same window upstairs and waited. The squirrels had scattered when I had pulled into the driveway, but within fifteen minutes they started to reappear in the back yard. I watched the fat one waddle across the yard and climb into the large feeder. I waited until it began to eat and then took aim. I wasn’t going for a warning shot this time I wanted a clean kill. One shot, one squirrel. The squirrel was oblivious to what was getting ready to happen. I released the safety, sighted, took a shallow breath and slowly squeezed the trigger.

The squirrel lurched from the feeder and fell to the ground. Righting itself, it just sat there.

"Damn, it’s not dead," I mumbled, as I began to reload.

I opened the window wider and looked down at the squirrel. The head slowly turned up and it just stared at me. The look wasn’t anger or pain, it was shock. It knew that something had just happened, but it wasn’t sure what.

Taking careful aim, I shot again. Center of mass is what the Army teaches. Don’t try for a head shot, just center of mass. The squirrel seemed to shudder, then slowly turned, and began to crawl into the bushes behind the large feeder.

"This sucks, this just sucks," I said, as I reloaded again, but the squirrel was gone. I rushed down stairs and into the back yard. I had to put this animal out of its misery.

The squirrel was gone. No body, no blood, no screeching or chittering. It was quiet, no squirrels to be seen or heard. I knew I had hit it twice, and I knew what the pellets would do, but I hadn’t killed it cleanly. The same sensations I had had as a child came over me and I knew that killing a defenseless animal, even a property damaging pest wasn’t in me. I couldn’t get the look on the squirrel’s face out of my mind.

That was one week ago. We haven’t seen a single squirrel anywhere in the yard for one week. It’s as if they decided to leave. It was just too dangerous and they decided to migrate to a safer area. What happened? Why did they break into the porch and then come back the next night to do nothing other than shat? Individual decisions, collective decisions, it’s like dealing with an intelligent species. Here’s what I think happened . . .

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Rakna was old for his kind. He had seen six winters, all of them filled with cold and hunger. His father-father had told stories of a great storm when even the mighty oaks had fallen in the wind. He had been young then and had listened politely, but looked at the huge bole of their home tree and shook his head. He had seen the huge two-leggers fell such trees with noise and magic, but the wind . . . he didn’t think it possible. Besides, it was summer now and time to fatten the children and get them ready for their first winter.

It was early morning and the nest was still filled with the kits. All four were huddled and twisted around Meryl, their mother. They had been born very early in the spring, right after the frost, as was the way with their kind. Meryl was pregnant once again. More babies were due in less than a dozen rises. These four would be pushed out to find their own way in the world. They would squeak and complain and hang around for a few days, but Rakna would be firm, he always was and eventually they would wander off in the woods to start their own families.

Meryl had been his mate through five winters. They both had been evicted when young and quickly learned that winter was much more bearable when curled around another warm body. She was a good mother and never complained when he came seeking her for comfort. The kits came after one cold time and before the next, as kits do. She usually had three, though this time four for only the second time. That time they had lost one kit to the two-legger's cat, but he was fat now and seldom hunted. He had always thought it strange that the two-leggers kept such a vicious killer in their nest. But he supposed that they were so large that they did not fear him.

Rakna turned as the kits began to stir. They would be up soon and scurry from the nest in search of food. Their hunger at this age was voracious and he encouraged them to feed until they couldn’t hold anymore. Even little Leyda, the runt of the litter, would eat until he had to push her up to the nest. Marna and Barka were inseparable, but ate little, by kit standards. He had to constantly warn them of the cold and hunger to come. They would roll their eyes and look at each other. Kits! They’ll learn the hard way. Sheesh, on the other hand needed no pushing. He was the eldest kit and by far the largest. A full stomach never slowed him down. He could run circles around the other kits and would leap from tree to tree with absolutely no caution. That concerned him. Sheesh had no fear. No fear of the cat, no fear of the hawk and no fear of the two-leggers.

Rakna’s father-father had told him that his father-father had lived in these woods when the two-leggers came to build their nest. Rakna could not imagine any creature living that long, but he knew that they had not changed as long as he had been alive. They were hard to tell apart, but he learned that the smaller one’s bark was higher pitched and she smelled of flowers even when it wasn’t spring, so they called her Flower. That made no sense to him, smelling of flowers in the dead of winter, but that was the least confusing thing about the two-leggers. The larger one smelled more like an animal and he called him the Brute. His bark was deeper and harsh. He worked amongst the trees, planting things, growing the short grass. It was very confusing. Some things he tore out of the ground, other things he planted. Rakna found no sense in it. They were all plants that grew and died under the Hot Bright. What difference did it make what grew where, but that was the way of the two-leggers.

Sheesh popped his head up from the nest, sniffing the morning air.

"Did Flower fill the flyer’s food?" he asked, as he stood and stretched. Flower was the name they had given the smaller two-legger. She was always the one that came and filled the feeders.

Marna groaned and mumbled," Sheesh, get off me."

Sheesh jumped to the top of the nest, stretched again, and hurled himself into the sky. Rakna sighed as he looked downward and saw Sheesh extend a paw and grasp the last branch possible to avert a sixty foot fall. He scurried down the tree in great circles and leapt to the ground near the closest feeder.

"Ack, she hasn’t filled them today," Sheesh said, as he sniffed around for any seed on the ground below the feeder.

"Then go find some nuts. They’re everywhere," Rakna shouted down at his eldest kit.

"Too much work," Sheesh said to himself, as he glanced over at the large feeder in the center of the yard.

"I love the seed. It’s sweet and spicy all at the same time," he said, as he ran across the yard and leapt to the top of the large feeder.

"Out of the way, squirrel coming through," he yelled, as he shoved a male cardinal from the far side of the feeder.

"Arrogant kit," the cardinal chirped, as he flew around the large feeder.

"You have no manners. I was here first and we can share," the cardinal continued, as he landed on top of the feeder and peered down at the young squirrel.

"The only thing being shared is between this paw and this paw," Sheesh replied, gesturing first with his left front paw and then his right. He then proceeded to rake the remaining seed into his mouth with both paws.

The cardinal chirped in disgust, circled the feeder twice and flew into the canopy overhead.

"Rakna, you need to teach that kit of yours some manners," the cardinal yelled as he flew past the squirrel’s nest.

"My apologies, Skynar," Rakna replied, as he bowed his head in embarrassment.

Meryl’s yawning face appeared above the top of their nest.

"What’s he done this time?" she asked, as she finished crawling out from under the other three kits.

"Greed and disrespect will do for starters," Rakna replied, as he scratched behind his right ear.

"We’ve had worse, Rakna," Meryl said, as she began scratching his neck with both front paws. She knew that this always calmed him down when he was angry at one of the kits.

"That won’t work this time," Rakna said, as he brushed one of her paws away. The other one began scratching under his chin. He began to purr when she began working over a rough patch of skin just healing from a cut.

"Now you sound like that big, fat cat the two-leggers keep. He always makes that sound when Flower comes out and picks him up in the dark time and carries him into their nest," Meryl replied, as she began nuzzling his right ear.

"No respect. First Sheesh, then the cardinal and now you say that I sound like a cat," Rakna said, while still allowing Meryl to nibble his ear.

"Well in that case," Meryl replied, and hopped back into the nest. "All right lazy paws out of the nest, straighten your fur and then it’s time to go find some delicious nuts for breakfast."

Meanwhile, Sheesh had finished up the remainder of the seed left in the large feeder and had dropped to the ground in search of any spillage.

"Oh, these are wonderful!" he exclaimed, as he scooped up a sunflower seed. They had recently appeared in the seed that Flower added to the feeders.

He quickly stripped the outer shell with his teeth and crushed the delicate meat with his molars. The delicate flavor washed across his senses causing him to close his eyes in delight.

The sound of the porch door slamming caused Sheesh to look up. He sat up, still at the base of the large feeder, and popped a second sun flower seed into his mouth. He could see Flower examining one of the small feeders located on a stick beside her nest. He could smell her scent and could hear her barking to someone. Then he caught a second scent, much fainter, but distinctive. The cat was with her.

Sheesh backed slowly into the bushes behind the large feeder. He wasn’t afraid of the fat, old cat and this was an opportunity to have some morning fun. He crouched down and felt the breeze in his face brush his whiskers. The cat wouldn’t be able to smell him. As long as he was very still the cat would never know he was there.

The cat left the porch and entered the short grass. Sheesh was very still, not even a whisker twitched. He could see the cat sniffing the cool air, his ears pivoting to catch every sound. The cat strolled across the grass, sniffing the scent of every animal that had crossed the area during the night. He turned as Flower barked at him, the sound one long confusing rumble. The cat seemed to know what she said, because he stopped and sat up as she bent and scratched his head. They both were close to him now, very close. So close he could have jumped on the cat’s back.

Sheesh exploded from the bushes, running right by the startled cat. Flower keened a high pitched wail. He felt the cat’s claw rake through his fur as he bolted past him. It all happened so quickly, yet in his mind it was in slow motion. He felt the mulch slip between his toes as he accelerated, the cat’s head snapping in his direction, the eyes growing dark and huge, the snarl of its fang filled mouth. Its paw reaching for him as he passed, claws extending from their sheaths and he was gone. Sheesh was up the nest tree in a flash, bark tearing loose beneath his claws. His heart was pounding in his chest as he stopped on a branch and looked down. The cat was five feet up the side of the tree, his hate filled eyes glaring up at him.

"Too old, too fat, too slow," Sheesh cried, as he scurried back down the tree and stared at the cat. They clung on the side of the huge oak, face to face, the cat hissed.

"Get careless, little squirrel, turn your back one evening and my claws will take you down and I’ll rip out your throat," the cat growled, as his arms began to shake from the effort of holding his body against the tree.

"Too old, too fat, too slow," Sheesh whispered to the cat.

"You better drop down before your claws fall out," Sheesh said, and turning, flipped his tail in the cat’s face and scurried up the tree.

The cat dropped to the ground, never taking his eyes off the squirrel, his tale flipping back and forth in anger.

Sheesh ran up the tree all the way to the nest. Stopping on the branch beside the nest, he began to preen himself and inspect the torn fur where the cat had grazed him.

"You’re a foolish kit to bait the cat like that," Rakna said, as he dropped from above and landed beside him.

"Just a little exercise after a good feed, Father," Sheesh said, and continued to lick the light scratches on his side.

"When I was young there was a kit my age in an adjacent nest. He was huge for a kit and never stopped growing. By the time we had passed our first cold time he was as large as that cat down below," Rakna said, as he brushed aside Sheesh’s fur and looked at the shallow scratches.

"His name was Mojar. He was the biggest, strongest, fastest squirrel I’ve ever seen," Rakna continued.

"He was as fast as you and twice my size. Like you he was arrogant and feared nothing. He was famous for jumping a huge dog and crippling his fore leg with one bite. The dog never touched him. Soon after that we found out that the two-leggers had a cat in their nest. He was young like us, wild and fast. He could run up the trees like a squirrel," Rakna said, as the others appeared from the nest to listen to the story, one they had never heard before.

"The cat loved to hunt, night or day. He took down small flyers, dug blind eyes from the ground and would eat them alive, slowly. It was when he killed Meeke that the trouble really started. Meeke was a kit with Mojar. She was a foolish kit with no sense of caution," Rakna said, and looked over at his other kits.

"Mojar was enraged. All he thought about was killing the cat. He would attack any squirrel that tried to calm him down, scratching and nipping until they ran away, even me," Rakna said.

"One summer day the two-leggers left, as they usually do, and the cat remained outside. It was very warm and the cat, looking for a shady spot, lay down at the base of Mojar’s tree. Mojar made it his business to always know where the cat was and waited, head down, half way up the tree. It was eerily quiet. No birds or crawly things not even a breeze rustling the leaves broke the silence."

"Mojar waited until the cat’s breathing slowed and he rolled to his side. Then he began to creep down the tree, every paw move slow and silent, careful not to dislodge the smallest piece of bark and warn the cat."

Rakna had their attention now. Every member of his family was staring at him, even Sheesh.

"The cat was laying on his right side, facing away from the tree. Mojar waited until he was three feet above the cat then hurled himself downward with a screech that froze my blood," Rakna said, and shivered as the distant memory flashed through his mind.

Rakna paused, scratching behind his left ear.

"For Sky’s sake, Rakna, finish the story!" Meryl said, while thumping her front paws against the tree branch.

Rakna stretched while making sure they were all still attentive.

"The cat had never been asleep. He spun to face upwards while Mojar was still in the air. I could see Mojar’s gaping jaws. His incisors were huge. He had intended to rip through the cat’s neck like a ripe hickory nut. But all that changed in a flash. The cat was just as big as Mojar and even quicker. The cat danced aside and slashed Mojar’s face as he landed where the cat had lain. Mojar ignored the pain and hurled himself at the cat’s chest hoping to bury his incisors in his mid-section and eviscerate him. Once again the cat’s quickness saved him. Mojar’s jaws snapped shut on air and his flank was deeply raked by a slashing claw," Rakna said, and turning aside sagged down against the tree branch.

In a whisper, he continued, "The last slash had ripped Mojar open. Holding his innards with his left paw he circled the cat. The cat sat up and began licking Mojar’s blood from his right paw, his eyes never leaving Mojar’s face."

"Mojar knew he was done, but his hatred overrode any sense of self preservation. He rolled his eyes and started to fall over, then hurled himself at the cat once again. The cat leapt to the side, but Mojar’s incisors sank into the cat’s left paw. The cat howled in agony as the two began to spin in a circle. Mojar refused to let go as the cat’s other paw ripped his face again and again," Rakna said, his eyes wide, gesturing with both paws.

Rakna turned and began to walk away.

"Father, what happened? You have to tell us what happened!" said little Leyda.

"The cat ripped Mojar’s throat out and then ate half of him. It’s the way cats are, Sheesh," Rakna said, as he turned and stared at his eldest kit.

"It’s the same cat that you played with just now. He walks with a limp and holds up his left paw when he sits. He’s old, fat and slow, just like me, but if you make one small mistake he’ll rip you apart," Rakna said, as he began to climb to the highest limbs of the home tree.

They all quietly fed that day staying away from the feeders, even Sheesh. Rakna’s story had spooked him. He had seen death in the cat’s eyes and told himself he would be more careful in the future. But he was young and today’s lessons are tomorrow’s forgotten memories.

The Hot Bright was setting as Sheesh perched on an upper branch of the big oak beside the two-legger's nest. He was stuffed to the point of bursting after gorging on hickory nuts. They were a little green, but still so sweet. Not as good as Flower’s best sun seeds, but not bad.

He glanced down and saw Flower remove the small feeder from the stick placed in the soil beside her nest. Sun seeds fell from the feeder as she placed it inside the screened place.

Sheesh waited until he heard no sounds from the porch and scampered down the side of the tree. Still hearing no sound, he leapt to the railing by the deck. Peering inside the screened porch he could see the small feeders, nearly filed with sun seed and his mouth began to water. He crept along the rail and jumped down beside the screen. The small feeders were even closer. He could almost taste the succulent nuttiness of the sweet sun seeds. The hiss startled him so much that he leapt from the rail beside the screen onto the oak and scurried up the tree without looking back. Turning, he could see the cat inside the two-legger's nest staring up at him, its’ eyes large and dark. Sheesh shook himself and hurled himself from the tree. Hitting the ground he ran for the home tree and hurried up toward the nest.

Rakna waited outside the nest in the deepening dark as Sheesh appeared.

"You’re late. You know we don’t stay out in the dark. This is a time for other creatures, not for us," Rakna said.

Sheesh nodded as he stepped past his father.

"I lost track of time, I’m sorry," Sheesh replied, as he hopped over the edge of the nest. Meryl had already gathered the other kits together into a fur ball that would keep them all warm.

Sheesh entered the nest and lay beside the tangled mass of his mother and siblings. Rakna entered moments later and lay back against the side of the nest. Sheesh could feel Rakna’s eyes staring at him, but feigned sleep, not wanting another lecture from his father. The sound of the cicadas, tree frogs and a light summer breeze began lulling him to sleep. Moments later, the feint sound of his father sliding down the nest and curling against his family caused him to open his eyes. A faint aroma caused him to smile and Sheesh lifted his nose sniffing the air for the elusive scent.

"Sun seed; it smells like sun seed," he mumbled. Instantly, the memory of the small feeders on the screen porch leapt into his mind.

His mouth began to water as he crushed an imaginary seed and swallowed. Raising his head, he peered over at his father in the near darkness. He was fast asleep, his face lying against Leyda’s hip. The Cold Bright was low in the sky, but he knew it would be full, not half eaten this night. It would be bright. He would be able to see if he left the nest, if he decided to go see the little feeders, if he decided to go see the sun seed, just for the fun of it.

Sheesh waited, his eyes shifting between his father’s face and the Cold Bright rising above the edge of the nest. Slowly, he sat up and studied the sleeping forms of his parents and siblings. As always, Marna’s muzzle was poked straight up from the furry mass and into the night air, her light snoring proof that she was asleep. After a few moments he carefully separated himself from the group and began easing his way to the top of the nest. At the edge he paused, glancing back towards his father, then slipped quietly away.

Sheesh stood outside the nest and sniffed the cool night air. The Cold Bright still hung in the branches casting shadows across the trees and the grassy yard below. His mouth began to water as he thought about sun seed and began to creep down the side of home tree. He paused half way down, listening and sniffing. He knew that creatures roamed the night that would like nothing better than some fresh young squirrel. Nights past, he had perched on the edge of the nest in the middle of the night when the others were asleep and watched and listened. He had seen creatures scurrying below, some small, some much larger. The most frightening had been the night screecher. His father had called it an owl, a great hunting bird that preyed on their kind, but only at night. That was why he had been told to never leave the nest after dark.

His mind wandering, Sheesh breathed deeply and imagined a field of sun seed spread before him.

"Foolish kit," croaked a voice so close he could feel its breath.

Sheesh scurried around the girth of the tree and paused. He knew that voice. Stretching his neck he peered around the curve of the tree and found the glistening eyes of a tree frog staring at him.

"Foolish kit," the tree frog repeated.

"Nothing good for your kind out here now," it said, and crawled further up the tree.

Sheesh released the breath that he had been holding and shook his head. He knew that he couldn’t afford to day dream out here in the night. Grinding his teeth together, he paused, listened and sniffed the air once again to regain his focus.

Sensing no danger, he crept down the tree stopping three feet from the ground. Once again he sensed nothing and gently leapt to the ground and ran toward the two-leggers nest. All the magical bright inside the nest was off, no sounds could he hear from inside. Quietly, carefully placing each paw, he crept up the stairs toward the webbed porch where he had seen Flower leave the little feeders. Reaching a closed door he stood erect and stared inside. A leap away rested one of the small feeders. He chirped when he noticed a small pile of sun seeds lying beside it.

It was then that he decided. What had been abstract wish to view the feeders became a need, a need greater than any he had ever had. Every warning, every cautionary story his father had ever told him was forgotten. All he could see were sun seeds a short leap away, succulent, delicious sun seeds.

As his mouth began to water, he stood up against the clear wall. He could see through it, but it was solid. He scratched against the clear wall with all his strength, but it did not part. After spinning in a circle in frustration he leapt to his left onto a bed of plants on the side of the porch. He could still see the small feeder. This barrier was different. It was fuzzy, like looking through fronds of moss. Reaching out, he gently touched the surface. It resisted his paw, but gave. Extending a claw, he ripped a small hole in the surface and stepped back. This was his way in.

He hesitated while swallowing drool oozing into his mouth. Then he stepped forward and tore a hole through the screen large enough for him to enter. Squeezing through, he paused, listening and then sniffed the night air. His mind reeled as the overpowering scent of sun seed filled his mind. Leaping from a rail inside the porch, he pounced on the closest feeder. Tipping the small feeder on its side, Sheesh decided that this was how he would spend the rest of his life, gorging on sun seed.

When the Hot Bright rose, as it always did, Sheesh sniffed the morning air and realized that he had slept in late, very late. He was surprised that his father had not nipped his ear and admonished him for being a lazy lay about. The nest needed repairing. The nest always needed repairing. Then he sniffed again, and was suddenly, shockingly wide awake. He was not in the nest.

Sheesh found himself curled around the second little feeder. He was so full of seed that when he stood up he almost fell over. His eyes grew wide as he looked around. He was inside the screened porch of the two-leggers. Just as his mind began to clear, he heard a sound and looked to his right. The clear wall leading deeper into the two-leggers nest was moving. As it swung open he backed under a fibrous material that he had seen the two-leggers perch on that was as large as a squirrel’s nest.

Flower stood in the opening, looked down at him and screeched like a great night flyer. Instantly, Sheesh panicked and began to run away, but there was nowhere to go. He leapt against the transparent wall and bounced off. He ran against the screen and clawed his way up, but could not get through. Flower screeched again and began swinging a tree limb with grass on the end at his head. He tore at the screen and began to break through until struck by flower’s tree limb. He defecated in fear as he bounced near her feet and was struck yet again. Hiding under a perch, he shivered as Flower backed away and propped open a clear wall leading to the outside. Seeing his chance Sheesh leapt past her feet and bolted from the porch. All he could think to do was run, and run he did, further into the woods than he had ever been. Past the swamp with the deep wet ground, through the great cut where the snakes lived, past fallen trees and through the grass of other two-leggers nests. His fear was such that he couldn’t stop until he reached the Black Ground. Here was a place sane squirrels did not go. A place of death so gruesome, that to be eaten by a dark flyer was preferred. It was the place of the two-leggers rolling nest; nests that moved faster than the quickest squirrel. Nests that roared and rolled like a nut falling from a tree until it crushed you thinner than the bark of a willow. Flower and Brute had two. He had seen them enter the strange, fearsome things and roll away.

Sheesh stopped and ducked under a large azalea. The Hot Bright was low in the sky, but he could hear the noise of the two-leggers. A rolling nest roared by causing him to bury his face between his paws in fear. His exhaustion near total, he pulled himself further within the bush, curled into a ball and fell into a deep and troubled sleep.

When he awoke, the Hot Bright was on the other side of the sky. The Black Ground was quiet. He couldn’t even feel the rumble from a rolling nest. Sheesh looked around, not recognizing where he was, then scampered to the other side of the bush, looking back the way he had come. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to be back home, to see his mother and father, though he knew that his father would be very angry. He even smiled as the images of his three siblings, Marna and Barka, inseparable, little Leyda the smallest of the litter, shy and prone to stay by her mother’s side, flashed before his eyes. Looking all around and sniffing the air, Sheesh sprinted back the way he had come.

What he found at the nest was chaos. His father was running frantically back and forth along the nest limb. Little Leyda lay wrapped around her mother, whimpering in pain as her mother licked her swollen hip. Barka laid against the far side of the nest his left arm hanging limply at his side. Marna sat beside him, shivering.

Sheesh grabbed his father, jerking him to a halt and asked,"Father, what’s happened?"

"The two-leggers, the big one, the Brute, hurt them with a magic stick that throws little balls," Rakna said, as he pulled away and entering the nest began examining Barka’s arm.

"What? How is that possible? Have you ever heard of such a thing?" Sheesh asked.

"Look at this," Rakna said and reached into the nest. He retrieved a shiny round ball. "This was in your sister’s hip. Your mother pulled it out. We think another one hit your brother’s arm. I think his arm is broken."

Sheesh stared at the round ball as his father dropped it into his hand. His sister’s blood still coated the surface. A weight heavier than the small ball grew inside him. He knew who was responsible for this.

"Father, this is my fault," Sheesh whispered, as he tossed the round ball away.

"What? I blame you for a lot of things, but not this. The two-leggers have gone crazy, but I don’t . . ." Rakna said, then paused, staring at his eldest son.

"What did you do?" Rakna said, afraid of what he would hear.

Sheesh then looked down, too ashamed to look his father in the eyes as he answered," Last night, I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about sun seed. I went down to the two-legger’s nest, to the porch where Flower keeps the small feeders at night. I broke in and ate all the sun seed. I fell asleep. She found me in the morning and chased me. Father, I was never so scared in my life."

He reached out to his father, but was met with a hard stare, not forgiveness.

"Your sister’s wound may fester. If it does she’ll die. Your brother’s arm will never be the same. It will hamper his ability to feed himself. No mate will want a damaged male that can’t feed his mate when she is nest bound," Rakna said, then pointed away.

"Leave this nest. Leave these woods. I don’t want to see you again or hear rumor of you. Now leave," Rakna said, and turned his back on his eldest son.

Sheesh looked across at his mother. Her eyes were filled with tears, as she smiled wanly at him and looked down at his sister. He turned and slowly began the climb down from the home tree. Jumping to the ground he wandered aimlessly across the yard. Finding himself at the base of a large holly tree, he began to climb. A possum family lived in a nest half way up the tree, but they slept all day, only coming out long after the Hot Bright had set. Sheesh crept past the slumbering possum family and climbed near the top of the holly. There he clung for the remainder of the day and into the night.

At first his despair was overwhelming. He considered hurling himself from the tree or waiting in the middle of the short grass until a Sky Screamer saw him or going back to the Black Ground and wait for a rolling nest to end his misery. Then he became angry at his father. After all, it wasn’t his fault that he was always hungry. Nor that he loved sun seed. Who wouldn’t? As the Hot Bright began to fall from the sky he became angry at the two-leggers. This was their fault, especially Flower. She was the one that tempted him with sun seed and then began storing it at night in a place where he could still see it and smell its enticing aroma. In his mind he became the victim, not his brother or sister, not his grieving parents and certainly not the two-leggers whose porch he had damaged. It was then that he realized how very hungry he was.

The possums were beginning to stir as Sheesh raced down their tree. The magic lights were still glowing high inside the two-legger's nest, but Sheesh didn’t care. He would go back and eat more sun seed. After all, what did he have to lose? His family hated him and he was banned from living near the only place he had ever known.

Early evening had settled in. A light breeze stirred the dry grass as he scampered across the yard and climbed towards the opening he had made the night before. This time he would eat his fill and then leave. Then he would decide what to do next. As he approached the opening, he paused, sniffed and began looking for the small feeders. He couldn’t see them and his tail began swishing in frustration. He was very hungry.

"She must have hidden them under one of the perches," Sheesh thought, as he began squeezing through the opening in the screen.

After slipping inside, Sheesh paused, then jumped to the floor and began walking through the trees of the elevated perches that the two-leggers sat on. He came on three sun seeds under one of the perches and quickly stripped the hulls from each seed and ate them. Darting from one place to the next he searched the entire porch without finding the small feeders or any more sun seed.

"She knew I’d come after them. She moved them further into her nest," Sheesh said, as he ran around the porch, a feeling of desperation surging within him.

A clear wall lead from the porch, and deeper into the nest. Sheesh peered inside and stood on his hind legs leaning against the glass. On a small table just inside he saw the feeders. He scratched desperately at the clear wall, but his claws that could shred bark from the strongest tree simply slid off. He spun in a circle as tears began to well in his eyes. This brought on a rage that he had never felt as he desperately hurled himself at the clear wall. He bounced off and his head was sore. He sat back on his haunches, twitching as his emotions seethed within him. He knew that he could not enter the nest. Turning, he walked around the porch, defecating as he walked. It was not a conscious thought, no act of revenge, just a biological need. He turned as he neared the tear in the screen and noticed the trail of pellets he had left behind.

"Father would be furious if I did such a thing in our nest," Sheesh said to himself, then jumped to the opening, slipped through and disappeared into the night.

Meryl awoke the next day and scratched her pregnant belly and felt the kits stir within. Little Leyda lay curled against her side and Marna leaned over and sniffed her wound.

"No infection, at least not yet," she thought, as she began licking the surface of the wound. Leyda stirred and pushed her muzzle away.

Marna and Barka lay apart. Barka’s injured arm resting on Marna’s back.

"Perhaps Rakna’s wrong. The arm is broken, but it is straight and it might heal," she said, as she raised herself and eased over the side of the nest.

Rakna was nowhere to be seen and foolish Sheesh had been banned from the nest. Meryl sighed as her stomach growled.

"These kits in me have to be fed and it looks like I’ll have to do it myself," she said, as she looked through the canopy overhead and then scanned the ground looking for her mate. Rakna had been bringing her food as her pregnancy deepened. It was something that he did out of love, not out of need. It was more difficult for her to get around, but not impossible.

As she carefully climbed down the tree she began to scan the ground looking for nuts. It was then that she glanced over at the large feeder. It was overflowing with seed, but no birds had started feeding yet. Rakna had forbidden any of them from feeding in the back yard, let alone approaching any of the feeders, but she was very hungry.

Her heart beat faster as she stared at the seed, and then leapt to the ground.

"Just a few bites, then I’ll go back to the nest and sleep," she told herself as she walked across the yard.

The morning was quiet, even the tree frogs were sleeping. Slowly she climbed the long pole that led to the large feeder. Pulling herself to the top she slid inside and stood upon a veritable feast of seed and began eating.

The impact was so sudden and so painful that it took her breath away. She was hurled from the feeder and struck the ground with such force that she was stunned. Her first thought was that a sky screecher had struck. Dazed, she staggered to her feet and coughed. The taste of her own blood in her mouth shocked her. Hearing a strange sound above her, she sat back on her haunches, and stared upward toward the two-legger's nest. The Brute stood in an opening far above her and slowly pointed a stick in her direction. The second impact struck her chest, knocking her onto her side. Panic and pain in equal measure filled her as she thought of her unborn kits. Rolling onto her side she began crawling under a nearby bush. Every breath was painful as she dragged herself to the back of the yard and into the woods.

The Brute came thrashing about looking under the bushes in the yard, but Meryl had pulled herself into the first layer of woods and lay curled against the base of an old tree stump. Her kits no longer moved and she knew that they would never feel the Hot Bright on their fur. Rakna appeared, chittering and panicked, as he tried to lift her from the ground. She howled in pain, her hind legs growing numb, but the pain in her chest still agonizing. With one paw she grasped her husband and pulled him towards her.

"See you . . . again . . . in the Spring," she said, and closing her eyes, sighed deeply and died.

. . . . .

I don’t shoot them anymore and we don’t store bird seed on the porch. Patty still fusses about the squirrels, but I just shrug and walk away, Man Card be damned.