

The Story of a Squirrel

(Based on a True Account)

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The sunlight shone down upon the town. It was early in the morning, yet already the town was filled with lively movement. Little children rubbed their eyes sleepily as they waited for their buses to come and raised small clouds of dust when they kicked at the ground. Older men left their houses all in rush, their wives trailing behind with forgotten lunches, and the teen-aged boys of the town considered playing hooky on such a fine day.

In short, a normal day had dawned upon the pretty borough named for the nearby river that wove its way through the surrounding countryside. A certain lanky young man lived in this town of Bull Run. Tousled red hair ran wild around his face and it looked like not one, but a whole flock of birds made it their business to nest there.

“Mick! You shouldn't still be sleeping at this time in the morning. You know that high school starts earlier than middle school. Get up, now!”

The boy groaned and turned over. He made sure to pull the covers firmly over his head as he did so. The next minute found him lying on the floor, with an irate woman standing above him.

“It's okay, Mom,” he said, hoping to sound reassuring. Mick realized the woman wasn't placated when she didn't smile or move. The irritation writ upon her features hardened the normally soft lines of her face and Mick gulped when he saw his mother's eyes narrow.

“Seriously,” Mick continued. This time he knew he had the perfect explanation. “It takes me quicker to get to school on my bike than it does to ride the bus. If I leave now, I'll be stuck bored at school for like an hour...”

He glanced at his mom who simply pursed her lips and looked down her nose at him.

“Well, maybe not an hour, but a good ten to fifteen minutes at least. So the most logical sense would be for me to stay in bed as long as possible soaking up the sleep I so desperately need to— Ow! Mom!” Mick rubbed his sore ear, now red from where it had been twisted.

“This coming from the boy who played video games until his eyes were bloodshot?” Mick's mother sniffed. “I want to see you downstairs in two minutes flat, buster, or you're grounded once you get back from school.”

Mick's eyes widened. “Yes, Mom.” He threw his blankets back onto his bed and scooted to his chest of drawers as she left the room. He grumbled under his breath.

“What did you say?”

Mick winced. It was beyond him as to how she could have heard him.

“Nothing, mom. Be down in a minute.” As he spoke, he pulled the top drawer all the way out and fished around in it till his roaming hand came in contact with a smooth plastic object. Mick glanced briefly over his shoulder then, certain no-one was watching flipped open his phone. Within a few seconds his message had been typed. Standing in the middle of his room, half-clothed with only a minute left to make his way downstairs, his finger lingered a moment over the send button. Mick shrugged his shoulders and pushed down.

He snapped his phone shut and raced out of his room, grabbing a change of clothes and banging the door on his way out. Mick descended the stairs in a whirlwind and raced to the bathroom. On the way he collided with his younger sister.

“Sorry, Kristy!” he yelled over his shoulder as he entered the small room in a flurry of movement. The little girl was too stunned to react for a moment. She regained her senses rather quickly however and immediately began wailing,

“Mom!!! Micky's running naked through the house again!”

“I'm only half naked,” came the indignant reply.

In the kitchen Patrica sighed. She wrapped her hands around the mug she was holding and took

a sip of tea. Those children gave her more headaches than she could count. If it weren't for her husband who kept her sanity in check, she was sure that the few gray hairs that had begun to show would have been far multiplied in abundance.

Mick sat in class. It was the last class of the day and he was bored. Quick movement caught his eye and he glanced outside. Two squirrels were racing up and down a large oak tree, ascending and descending in rowdy spirals. He shot a glance at his teacher. The old man had just pushed his glasses firmly against his nose, and his left hand held a worn textbook.

Once he had satisfied himself that the teacher was engrossed in marking the blackboard, Mick reached into his desk and retrieved the sketchpad he kept there. The shock of red hair bobbed up and down, alternating between the playful scene outside, and the drawing unfolding beneath his eager fingers.

The bell rang – startling him. He quickly signed his name to the piece of paper and tore it out of his sketchpad. Mick stuffed it and the rest of his work into his backpack and dashed out of the room. Once he managed to escape the confines of the building, the tall boy meandered to the bike racks and casually began to unchain his bicycle. A fellow schoolmate sauntered up to him.

“Hey, Mick, s'up yo?” He saluted with two fingers as he said the words. The redhead grinned and returned the salute in like kind.

“Jason! Not much, 'sides the usual,” replied Mick, clasping Jason's hand. The dark skinned boy looked at the deep creases below Mick's eyes and grinned.

“Your mom kick you outta bed again this mornin'?”

“You know it. I think one of these days my back's gonna go. From shock if nothing else.”

Jason laughed and pushed back the baseball cap perched atop his head. His face was split by a grin, and he ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair.

“So I was thinkin',” he drawled, “wanna head to the park, play a little ultimate frisbee?”

“Sure.” The sun caught Mick's face as he turned and a half smile crept onto it, anchored itself at the sides of his mouth and hung suspended there, rather resembling a hammock on a lazy summer day.

“Did'ya get the text I sent you?”

Jason giggled and pulled his phone out of his backpack.

“I sure did. Nice pic.”

“Yeah.” Mick said. “Sorry I didn't get it to ya sooner. Oh, and JJ,”

“Yeah?”

“Don't giggle like that. It's shameful.”

“Terrence!” Mick shouted. He was in the middle of an engaging game of ultimate frisbee. The boy he was shouting at nodded and sent the red disk sailing through the air toward him. Mick snagged the disk with ease, but stumbled as he caught it and went down. Several of his teammates came running.

“You okay?” asked Jason. Mick nodded.

“Yeah, yeah. Just gimme a minute.” He jogged to a sizable beach tree that resided at the edge of the park, along with many other grand specimens. Mick pulled out the water bottle tucked between the roots of the tall tree, and took a long swig. He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth, then poured the rest of the water over his head. He looked back to the game where six boys claimed one side of the field, five, the other. Mick shook his head a moment. He felt thoroughly refreshed, so he headed back to the game.

“Yo, Mick, what took you so long? We're being murdered out here.” Mick grinned at the boy who had spoken, a blond fellow who was short and a little plump.

“Couldn't do without me could'ya, Isaac?”

“Stop talking nonsense. I could beat the other guys all by myself and you know it.”

“Oh, really?” said Mick. His eyebrow arched as he regarded his blond friend.

“Enough, already,” Jason cut in. “Let's just play, 'kay?”

The rest of the team nodded and took their positions. For a moment all was still. The birds in the trees chirped sweetly and the sound of laughing children floated through the park. Then came the rushing of bodies, twelve pairs of feet pounding into the turf and the little red frisbee was on its merry way again.

This time when Mick caught the frisbee he didn't fall, but instead found himself cornered. Four gigantic leaps carried him away from his pursuers, and into the shade of a maple. He curled his right arm to his body and was preparing to flick the disk to one of his teammates, when he felt an odd sensation. A squirrel from the nearby maple had climbed onto his left foot.

As Mick stared, the rodent climbed all the way up to his shoulder and sat there, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Hey there, little fella,” said Mick in soft tones. “You're not shy at all are you?” Tentatively he reached up and laid a finger on the squirrel's head. When the furry creature didn't shrink back or try to attack him, Mick scratched its head. “Well, I don't think you're rabid, just really friendly.”

The boy smiled and chanced a step. The little animal on his shoulder shifted a moment then relaxed. Tiny claws dug through Mick's shirt into his skin, but the lad didn't mind. Slowly he picked his way back to his friends. Astonishment was written all over their features, and their eyes seemed fit to burst right from out of their sockets. For a moment they just gaped at Mick, who stood tall, rather pleased that everyone's eyes rested on him.

The next instant the boys were darting hither and thither about the park, game forgotten as each tried to procure for himself a tame squirrel. Jason and Terrence were the first to return.

“I give up,” Jason gasped.

“Me too,” Terrence said, and leant on Jason for support. “Those little critters sure are fast.”

He curiously appraised the animal sitting on Mick's shoulder. It was small and grey and had hints of red in its bushy tail. It blinked as he regarded it and its ears twitched, making Jason smile.

“What're you gonna do with him?” he asked Mick, who shrugged.

“Probably take him home.”

“Won't your mom object?”

“Nah, she has a soft spot for these little critters and even if she says no, I can always sneak him in through the window. I really don't think he'll cause any trouble though. Well, see you fellas later. I got one hungry squirrel to take care of.”

After a round of palm slapping and fist bumping, each of the boys parted to go their own separate ways. Once he reached his bicycle, Mick transferred the squirrel from his shoulder to his backpack.

“Sorry, lil' guy. I just can't have you falling off while I'm cycling you know.” The squirrel gave a squeak of protest; Mick patted its head. “Just stay in there 'til we get to my house okay? I promise you'll be safe.”

Then Mick hopped onto his bike and set out for home as fast as he could.

It was strangely quiet when he returned. The lights were off and the boy couldn't make out any movement from within. His first thought was that some exciting event had happened that he wasn't privy too – at least not yet, but as he stood on the doorstep he remembered that his mother had mentioned that Kristy was due for a dental checkup. He started to open the door, when he became aware of a soft rustling. Mick looked down and saw a note taped to it. Curious, the boy detached the scrap of paper from the doorknob and read it.

“Mick, I'm out with Kristy. We're dropping by the drug store on our way home. Just because I'll gone for a little longer doesn't mean you can neglect your chores. Make sure that by the time I get back, the plants are watered, the trash is taken out, the kitchen is clean so I can prepare dinner, and don't forget to do your homework! ~Love, Mom.”

Mick groaned.

“That's a lotta work. Oh well, at least I'll have you around, right?” The little squirrel chattered in agreement. Mick lifted it out of his backpack and entered the dim house. An hour later found him on his bed, diligently working on his homework, squirrel perched atop his shoulder. Mick's tongue peeked out of his mouth and his were brows furrowed in concentration. Suddenly a big yawn split his face.

“Ahhh. I think I need a break. C'mon, squirrel. To the game console.” Mick crossed his room and rifled through a large stack of games until he found the one he wanted.

“What do ya think little guy? Does Metal Gear Solid sound alright to you?” The squirrel chattered and Mick smiled. He slipped the game into its console, pushed the power button and waited while the machine whirred to life.

“Yes! Another PMC fighter down!” Mick crowed at his success. The squirrel on his shoulder squeaked. “Heh, it's okay little buddy, Snake's alright. I'll just feed him some food and watch the hp rise. Huh, speaking of food, you must be pretty hungry. C'mon, time for a snack break.”

The game on pause, Mick and the squirrel headed downstairs. In the kitchen, he rummaged around for provisions. Finding nothing satisfactory in the fridge, he moved on to the cupboards.

“Hmm, crackers, you like crackers? Peanut butter, M&M's, dried fru— wait, M&M's? So *that's* where Mom hid 'em. And they're the peanut butter kind too. This is perfect!”

Mick ripped the bag open and the contents spilled out. The squirrel ran down his body and onto the floor where four or five of the bright objects rested. It scurried over to one and sniffed the candy. One by one, tiny paws gathered up the M&M's and stashed them inside its mouth. Mick laughed at the way its cheeks puffed out.

“You like those, huh? Well, let's get back to the game.”

He placed the squirrel on his shoulder and turned to go. Mick's movement was arrested when he heard the front door open. A bright little voice announced that his sister and mother were home and he ran to greet them.

“Mom, Kristy, I did all the chores, and I'm almost finished with my homework, I was just getting a snack from the kitchen and—”

“Is that a squirrel on your shoulder?”

“Yep. He's a cute little thing, ain't he?”

“Mick, no. It could be rabid for all we know.”

“Aw, c'mon, Mom, he's been with me all day, and he hasn't caused any kind of trouble, so...”

“Oh, please let him keep it, Mom,” Kristy begged. “It's so cute. What's its name, Mick?”

“I haven't actually named him yet, but I was thinking 'Tempo,' 'cause of how quick he moves around and all.”

“Well, if you can keep up with your chores while caring for him, then you can keep him.”

Patrica's statement caused Kristy and Mick to execute a wild victory dance. The woman sighed and shook her head.

“Not done yet,” said she. “Yes, you may keep him, but only for a week. That squirrel is still a wild animal, and wild things die if held captive too long.” She stopped and muttered under her breath, “Including you children, apparently.”

“Thanks so much, Mom! Tempo and I are going to are going to make the most out of this week.”

“I wanna play with Tempo too.” Kristy reached toward the furry creature, and petted his head.

“Okay, but only if you're gentle with him. And you can't do *anything* he doesn't like.”

The edges of Mick's eyes creased as he smiled and carefully transferred Tempo from his shoulder to Kristy's. The seven year old squealed in delight, then stared soberly into the squirrel's dark eyes.

“Hi, Tempo, nice to meet you. I promise we'll be best friends.” The moment was broken as

Tempo climbed onto Kristy's head and made himself comfortable among the bouncing curls. The brunette giggled and reached up to pet the squirrel. Mick grinned, and the two kids headed for the treehouse in the backyard.

“So yup, that's basically what happened.” Three years later found Mick in the same park relating the tale to an upperclassmen. He was a little taller and his voice had deepened. His flaming red hair had faded to auburn, although a few wild streaks of bright orange ran stubbornly through it.

“And for the rest of the week, Tempo sat on my shoulder while I played video games. Kristy did drop by once in a while though, to say hi, and restock the refreshments. Man, it's gonna be sad to leave this place. I'd like to think that Tempo will still be here when I return from college, but...” Mick's voice trailed off and he stared at the ground.

He was startled out of his reverie when his companion clapped him warmly on the shoulder.

“Don't worry man, I'm sure you'll see him again. I bet he's even sitting in these trees right now just watching you.”

Mick smiled and turned his gaze upon the leafy darkness of a nearby ash grove.

“Thanks, Chris. You're a good friend. I won't forget you – either of you.” Mick paused to look at the sky. Soft white clouds were outlined with a baby blue and the light of the sun shone down, strong and warm. Mick turned to his friend.

“Maybe someday I'll come back here and find Tempo. Til then, I won't say goodbye, 'cause we'll definitely meet again.”

The End