

A close-up photograph of a squirrel with grey and white fur, sitting in a wire mesh feeder and eating a nut. The squirrel is positioned on the left side of the frame, facing left. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a red and white striped object. The text "GUARD YOUR NUTS" is overlaid in the center in a bold, orange, sans-serif font with a black outline.

GUARD YOUR NUTS

Carlos Valdeperas

Guard Your Nuts

It was a cool, clear-blue-skies spring day. Only hints of fluffy clouds dotted the sky like dandelion seeds floating along a valley, caught in a mild wind. All sorts of insects and bugs scurried along, either crawling through the underbrush, foraging for food, mates, or homes, or flying about in their flutter and fuss, flapping madly at their wings. The scene was one of many found in this region, where mountain peaks looked down from their heights to green valleys and kaleidoscoped meadows, with their flowers flowering and grasses grazing. But none of this mattered to Russell the Squirrel, the sights might just as well been gray and drab, as all that was on his mind was eating; and more specifically, the crunching of bone.

This crunching of the bone was sending waves throughout his body. It was a disconcerting combination of grating noise and undulating shock-waves that were rattling his nerves. Each crunch was like a large tree landing just inches away from him, behind him, catching him by surprise every time, like crashes following a blind person. Yet Russell crunched on. Every bite unnerved his body from ear tips to the last cell of his tail hairs. Yet every bite brought a gush of warm ooze that also elated his senses and sent his mouth watering like a breached dike. He couldn't stop himself.

Instincts be cursed, the warm goo from the limbed creature's heads was too good to pass up. The days of collecting nuts were becoming far and few between. For one thing, Russell and his kind could not sustain themselves on the various common nuts and fruits that were abundant in the forests. These were too little in size and too scant in quantity. Eating flesh was not instinctive, but it provided much better sustenance. And now, with the limbed creatures proliferating and invading, they made for good, easy eating.

Russell was getting pretty good at ignoring his instincts. Feasting on these gooey morsels, crunching through bone and savoring a warm delight were not part of his original genetic make up -whatever that DNA might have once been. Now he was adapting and learning. It didn't take too many times of uncovering spoiled, putrefied stashes to realize that these limbed, bony, insect-like creatures did not keep for very long at all. *Best to eat them fresh*, he was reminding himself over and over.

Eating these creatures fresh was easy only if the creature was found wondering about alone. More than one of these creatures together made the process... taxing. They were vivacious creatures. They were loud. They were feisty. They were adaptive and nimble. When it came to using tools, they were quite adept. Communication between themselves was as varied as that of the loudest animals to the most subtle gestures and looks of the closest of partners. Finding two together could be a hand full. Come up on more than two together, and things were sure to get dicey.

Russell was thanking his fortune. He'd come upon a single creature, walking a closed in trail with little room to struggle or flee. Plus, this was a female of the species. They made for better eating. Their flesh tended to be more tender -and with no or minimal coats growing from that flesh. As Russell thought of this boon, he dealt with the one negative aspect of these females. The rich, succulent matter inside their globe of bone was shrouded in a long, stringy fur that did not sit well inside Russell's stomach. But here too he had

learned the trick: crush it until nothing else oozes out, then gnaw it at the point it attaches to the rest of the body; spit it out.

Russell had broken out of the thick brush where he had hidden, startling the creature and sending it into a mindless frenzy. The undergrowth bordering the trail was covered in poison oak and various dense cherry bushes, so Russell knew the creature would avoid fleeing into it. Once out and exposed, the creature was faced with Russell's massive body, with his menacing teeth looking down on it. Russell felt a sudden high at the sight of the frightened creature. He could do without all the screeching and screaming, but that was easy enough to rein in.

As a squirrel, Russell was rather large. He could stand taller than a full grown Kodiak; though standing was not Russell's dignified stance. *Let the grizzlies look like these limbed creatures, he would say. I'm a four legged creature... made for walking on all fours.* To him, standing on two legs was just showing your gut. *Nuts, he'd think. Who'd want to show them? And my better form is low to the ground, sleek, and stream-lined.* And on all fours, Russell and his kind were formidable creatures. No wonder they instilled such fear in the limbed creatures. Other than the size, Russell was just like any other squirrel -or so he'd say to himself. *My ears are squirrel ears; my coat is just like a Red's. So what if I'm a little bigger than most... bears.*

"Pttt..." and off went the stringy fur -and the end to the noise. Now all Russell had to do was crunch a few more bones and he could stuff the body into his cheek... and hit the trail. It did not do well to linger. Where there was one of these creatures, there will be more. And as much as he enjoyed their warm, moist fresh and rich innards and guts, he didn't want to risk having a confrontation with more than one at a time.

The feasting on these creatures did turn into a controlled rage, with little cognitive impulses. It was a primal reaction. Once the crunch of the head was over with, Russell clawed at the material that usually covered the creature's bodies. Sometimes all it took was a few kicks with his front claws and the material would shred away. It was usually the hard, rubbery, foul-tasting covering over the creature's feet that disgruntled Russell into a blistering anger. More than once he simply bit the limbs just above these coverings and left them untouched. *Let the forest scavengers pick out the flesh.*

Many of the current trails through the woods were from these limbed creatures. Rarely would other forest animals leave such obvious and easy to follow trails. These limbed creatures were careless in this sense. They were noisy. Their smell could be followed for miles. When they stopped to roost, they would set up crude, defenseless shelters out in the open. It was a small wonder that they weren't eaten by the other predators of the forest. But the reality was that these limbed creatures were multiplying while the nature forest predators (and pray) were dwindling. Things weren't right; Russell felt very uneasy.

With body in pouch, Russell bounded off, to a secluded, protected place where he could eat in relative safety. The memory of his kin, Otis and Fern, was still very clear in his memory. He'd caught their sent trail a few weeks back and followed. He was a good ways away when he heard their screeches -and the myriad of sounds the limbed creatures made. Otis and Fern had come across what appeared to be a temporary lair of these creatures, and thought they had landed on an easy feast. Russell had just made it to the perimeter of the little valley, still hidden within the cover of trees, and there he watched as a hellish swarm of these creatures seethed out of their nests and fell upon poor Otis and Fern.

Out of each nest crawled two to four creatures. Everywhere there was screaming. Everywhere there was color as loud as the creature's noises. Their nests, set on flat ground, away from the cover of trees or brush, were made of some shinny, bright colored material that did nothing to help it blend into the surroundings. And they strewn the area with all sort of strange artifacts. *They bring fire... and contain it*, thought Russell with apprehension. *Fire is bad.*

Amongst all the screaming, screeching, and shrills of agony, Russell heard Fern's call to Otis. This played over and over in Russell's head for nights on end. In all the fray and conflict, Fern had called out to Otis, warning him, "Guard your nuts!" And this call of warning played out in Russell's mind, in slow motion, along with the sight of Otis spewing his nuts out across the clearing. Everything went red from then on for Russell. A scary silence followed; nursed only by the sound of the flow of the nearby babbling brook.

It was not the first conflict between Russell's kind and the strange, dangerous limbed creatures. The encounters had grown dangerously frequent and ever more violent; to the point where Russell was having to travel long distances -often at great risk- to find another of his kind. But like three days ago, what he was finding was not pleasing.

A month earlier Russell had left his home ground and traveled south in search of a mate. His loins demanded attention. It was well past the time of year to seek a vessel for his seed. As a mostly solitary male, his home ground was large and mostly desolate of eligible females and competing males. But his travels took him much further than once did, and with grim results. Baggins Squirrel was one of the first carcasses he came across. What remained of ole Baggins was a rotten torso and a desiccated, naked tail. Baggins' head with notable large cheek bags was gone. It unnerved Russell to violent nightmares.

Finding dead kin was not the grim part. Sometimes larger predators caught one of the relations unawares. It was part of the natural world. But the deaths were a natural, needful thing. Predators had to feed. And sometimes the predator became the pray. It happens. But ole Baggins had wasted away to skin and bones, feeding only the smallest of foul scavengers of the woods. They had picked at his body through cuts and holes, nibbled on his body from the inside, but the predator that took him down did so only for his head. A trophy. A sick gesture of superiority.

Russell had heard about this strange behavior from Chet and Zina not more than two years past.

"They will hunt great game, only to feed on a fraction of what they bring down." Zina had said with a scornful disgust.

"Mostly, they look for parts to take to display; to show proof of their might. Trophies. It's all they seek. It is sickening."

Chet whispered to Russell how they had just missed getting caught in one of these hunts. "We managed to duck off to meadow and up a rocky hill while Cliff went on down the valley. They kept on with Cliff and left us alone." Tears flooded his eyes as he told the tale. Every word pained him. "We watched from an outcrop on the hill as they chased Cliff down, fire coming out of their limbs; each one tossing Cliff about, until he could take no more." Cliff had put up a fight, but there was no stopping a group of these creatures. They beat Cliff out in the end.

"And all they only wanted his head." Zina could say no more after that. It tore her up. It was wrong. The hunt was for sustenance. Death was for survival. Killing was done only for necessity. To Zina, the creatures were some sort of evil come to defoul the land.

"They hunt for fun," Priscilla had muttered to Russell while he rode her some 14 months ago. He'd just happen to run across her path and stopped for a tryst and quick, carnal romp. They'd said little to each other, but what she said was much what Russell was hearing everywhere he went -these limbed creatures were taking over the land, bringing death and destruction with them.

It used to be that guarding your nuts was all the worry one had. Well, that and FINDING them. *Guard your nuts*, Russell mused on the words. His mother use to say it as he and his brothers began foraging off on their own.

"Find your self a good wooded area. One with a nice, big hickory or old oak. Make it your home. Then stash them nuts all around. Make it so you have many places, full of nuts. And guard them." Their mother said little to them but these words she said to them with great earnest and gravity.

"What?" Russell's humorist brother would ask his mother with a lost, innocent look. Then he'd pounce on Russell, landing a blow to the groin and yelling, "these nuts!"

That brother was gone now. He'd gone north, in search of "nuts and honey," as he would say. Whether he was out there, alive and well, there was telling. The thought of what was was bringing Russell down. *No nut lasts for ever*, he told himself.

Russell grinned at hearing the chirr of a Kaibab Squirrel rushing along. The big eared squirrel had frozen in place at the sight of Russell. Only its white, bushy tail moved; twitching with fright (and a ting of hostility). The forest was full of creatures. Many lived, pray or predator, in balance with its surroundings. Death came to all, but there was a purpose to it. Destruction of house and home happened; fires came to take away and floods could wash away everything in sight; but it was a natural process. What the limbed creatures brought was a disorder and destruction with no reason. Deep down Russell was a creature of the wild, just like the little Kaibab, the Red, and the Gray.

"Guard your nuts," Russell said to it, sending the Kaibab scurrying away. "Guard your nuts."

If only that was all I needed to worry about, Russell reflected. The weight of all he had seen so far was slowing him down. *It is my nuts I need to worry about... and my head. Keeping them intact and attached.* He moved on, with these thoughts swirling about.

The rushing of the little Kaibab made Russell want to run through the woods; to climb and jump and frolic like the little ones.

The Grays just scurry up a tree and these limbed creatures don't give them a second look. Russell chided the world. *The little Grays. What am I? Like them, but not. Not Sciurus carolinensis or Tamiasciurus hudsonicus.*

The who's and why's of his kind never bothered him before. But now they bothered. He'd seen little reds and grays get caught and killed by predators; he'd noticed a few pelts from the little distant cousins in the limbed creature's camps. But not heads, not trophies. It was wrong.

"Guard your nuts!" Russell screamed in warning, and rushed on. Chirps, whistles, and chirrs followed as he cut through the woods.

He'd traveled far from the little place he once called home. He had given up his large, low-branched Butternut tree, a rare and fine specimen of its kind, giving him years of nutty treats without fail, to seek out a companion. He tried traveling north, risking cold and

hunger, only to find infestations of the limbed creatures living in strange, stone and cut-wood places where once were open valleys, green meadows, and verdant mountain passes. So he turned south.

Along the way he did find some familiar faces. But these were few (and many were jaded, isolationists and social misfits).

"Ther ain't 'nough t'eats," went Earl Squirrel. He'd talked on and on about the harshness of the area, yet dismissed the idea of moving on with a hostile indignation. "Been here n'these 'arts alls my life. I'd not be goin' nos where." And so Russell moved on, leaving Earl in his woods, alone and wasting away.

Now Russell was traveling well south; into barren fields and flat expanses. Much of the green he was used to living around was far behind him. Ahead was low brush, dry dirt, and meager, sad-looking twigs of trees not fit for much else than tinder. *Why did I give up my home?* He mused sadly. *I miss my ole Butternut.* Pangs of a past too far behind to recover were hitting him like a bad case of the gastric heaves. He missed his little place in the woods.

The idea was to find Ronda and Ray Squirrel's place; Big Ray's clan. They'd set out to find a place to build a family in warmer lands. "My hide ain't thick enough for them cold winters," Ray would complain. "Let's head south some and find us a nice place to make some young." That was Ronda's solution. And so in time, they headed south. Russell and others had bid them well. All assumed the couple had left the world. Now here was Russell, risking life and limb, to find them. *I must be out of my wits,* Russell scolded himself.

Traveling through the shadows of deep canyons, Russell made good time. His muddled coat, black and browns blending together, faded easily into the surrounding landscape. And the trail he was following was relatively smooth and level. Food was scarce, though, but he did not worry. A few days earlier he'd feasted on two of the limbed creatures. The encounter had caught Russell by surprise -which would be an understatement for the two galvanized in fright creatures. Luckily, Russell reacted quicker... and had them for a grand meal.

It was a good meal, too. Not a lot of the fibrous covers these creatures liked to put over their bodies. When he had come up on them, the two creatures were laying on the ground on top of a blanket, entangled together by their limbs. The smell of coitus was deafening to his senses. It beat at him, loud and vicious, adding to the whirlwind of the dealing with the two limbed creatures. He was having to deal with their incessant screaming and screeching. The female of the two smelled particularly ripe -she was loud in more than a vocal sense. The odor gave Russell a queer quiver in his groins -and a nauseous wave in his gut. But the female's reaction to him, as if he were some vile, insidious, mindless and blood thirsty creature made him not want to even consider exploring that nether region quiver. *Feast and move on,* he told himself.

Uncivilized! Russell's mind turned a bit soft at the female's smell. He did stomp down on the male, *just to contain him a bit.* One quick swipe, a beautiful, subtle left hook was enough to set the male back on the ground and a little pressure on the chest, with sharp claws just fractions away from breaking skin was all it took to subdue it. Now the female.

"What!?" he bellowed at the female. "Oh, SHUT UP! Would you please." The female's mouth remained open, but the din from it and the frenzy of her actions ceased.

"Now isn't this better? We can talk without causing unnecessary eardrum ruptures or giving me an irresolvable migraine." The female just stared at Russell; wide eyed, with a

dumb, lost look to her. *I know these creatures are half way capable, he told himself, surely they comprehend speech.*

"What do you call your self?" Russell asked. No answer came.

"Do. You. Have. A. Name?" He tried speaking slower. Enunciating his words loud and clear. But still, the female looked on mutely.

I am talking to an imbecile. Why did I think these creatures were worth my breath? Russell had felt a brief moment of hope; maybe he could commune with one of these creatures. That brief gaffe of a thought dissolved as fast as a puff of smoke in the wind when one of the female's appendages made contact with Russell's snout. It was a weak blow. There was no mass to it. The creature's thin limbs carried little force. A flexed branch swinging back carried more might than what he felt from the female's blow. It was the surprise of it; it was the gumption from the creature. That was what struck Russell. The female had some guts. Or maybe she was just nuts.

"Ouch" Russell bellowed. "What the heck are you trying to accomplish? How can you think hitting me will help you?" He thought: *you are such a weak, puny thing. You have a better chance by trying to run.* With that in mind he stepped away from the female. "Run," he told her.

She didn't run. The only movement was a spastic puckering of the lips that looked an awful lot like a Goldfish in a stagnant, thick like soup broth water fish tank, sucking at nothing for oxygen. At one point she did try to kick Russell in the groin. For that, he nudged her with his nose, knocking her down, flat on her back, legs spread. The odor of estrus mixed with sweaty fear filled Russell's senses. *What am I doing?* He wondered to himself. *Move it along,* he told himself.

While the male wriggled and writhed on the ground, looking rather grayish and weak, except were rivulets of dark red blood had streaked out of his body and down toward the ground, Russell lamented over the situation. *Death is there to keep us honest;* he recalled the words from a song. *Remind us we are free. But, are any of us truly free?* He was bound by his primal need to feed, but did he have to kill these two? While pondering this he turned his attention on the male. Jade green eyes locked on to him. A look of wonder and fear shock Russell at his core.

The male spoke. Muddled words at first. Then the noises, grunts, and moans turned to words. A word. A name. "Alvin?" the male was saying.

"What?"

"Alvin, Simon, Theodore," replied the man. A twisted grin showing on his lips. "Alvin!" the man tried to shout. The name faded into coughs and fits.

Suddenly it dawned on Russell what the man's fit was all about. "I'll show you Alvin," he whispered. His words coming out like the sound of claws against a chalkboard. Russell leaned over the prone man, gave him one last sniff, and bit his head clean off. The crunch of skull gave Russell the willies, but the taste of the gooey brains excited his appetite. He fed on. With the goo of the head gone, the torso came next. A peculiar hint of aged smegma made Russell leave the male's legs for the scavengers of the wild to clean off. That particular aged taste was not anything like aged wine or aged cheese; both rendering a succulent treat and delight, which was not what Russell had found while dining on the limbed creature. Luckily, it was just a hint of aged funk.

Now she runs, Russell reflected as the female suddenly tried to elude him. She didn't get far. In two bounds Russell was on her and she was done away with a similar

alacrity as the male. There was a hint of that aged something on her as well, but Russell figured it was from transference, while the two entwined in the act of copulation. He left behind her legs as well, just because. Once again full and well satiated, it was time to move on. Time to continue on the trail, towards a new land.

The trail was hardly a trail at all now. It was an endless expanse of low brush, some sharp and menacing, laid out everywhere along the open land, that went on and on like a pre-dawn wee in too-cold-for-sack-exposure weather, worsened by howling winds. It just kept going and going. Russell was fit to gouge out his eyes and beat his head with a large rock until it resembled a heap of runny scat freshly laid. He missed the trees. He missed the closeness of a forest; the familiarity (and bounty) of large trees.

Then he met Cleo. Cleo was a homely little creature, with sharp, masculine features and a cold and slightly grating disposition. There was little to praise Cleo for. There was no hidden beauty under the rugged exterior. No sweetness in her words. No gentility in her care. Not a bit of wisdom to heal a troubled mind came from her, nor was there any wit flowing out of her to lighten a heavy heart. What she was was a female. The first female Russell had come across in a long time. In lieu of interlocution, friendly banter, gossip, or any other such pleasantries, they partook in some bestial copulation.

"Well, sweet thin', I'd needed me some of that." Of course she had to talk afterwards, they always seem to want to do that. "Joe Junior's come by nearly a years back and gave me some young'em, but notin' since. This gal has needs." She tried to caress him and rekindle his sensual drive. Russell squirreled away from her.

"Where did you say I could find the clan?" Russell asked as he put some distance from Cleo. "Just follow that ridge trail?"

"Yes'm. Just along that a way. You'll run into the fam'ly along that'a ways." She pointed to the low ridge that broke out of the otherwise flat landscape. "You find papa, you tell him I's miss him... and he should come out som' time and visit his chidren." Russell nodded and told her he'd do just that. Family was important.

Russell presented the best cold and distant front he could muster and made to move on. As unrefined as Cleo was, she did possess the right equipment to satisfy his primitive cravings. "Thanks," he said meekly.

"You see my useless John-Ray, you's tell him to take you to his papa. He ain't doing nothing 'cept make bad with his cousin, spread'n more chil'en along the valley. No reaso' he can't lead you out to papa and leave little Clara-Belle to rest her body." That little bit of information left Russell to reflect as he walked away.

I just added a little fresh DNA to this harem. Russell realized that this clan he was encroaching in on was a true family affair. But they may be the last large group of his kind. *And I've just added my seed to the pot.* So he kept traveling on.

The ridge was much further away than it seemed from Cleo's valley. That wasn't a problem. What was unsettling Russell was the increasing intrusion of the limbed creature's reign. Their influence was everywhere. Several times over Russell had to cross one of their works. Laid along what should have been lush valleys or expanses of grass were these flat surfaces, reaching away into unknown distances. Some looked to consist of stone ground down and set flat on the ground, giving a level surface for miles upon miles. Others were made of a mixture of what appeared to be rubble and a dark, tacky, substance that seemed

to repel water. Whatever the substances, they all had markings along their length. Yellow and white ran along the length, as far as Russell could see.

Nearing the gloaming of that first day Russell came across another of those paths. He'd met up with Cleo's John-Ray a ways back, and the young squirrel had enlightened Russell on the purpose of the strange works. "Paths," John-Ray had blurted with a childish glee and a jaded revulsion. "They move along them to get from place to's another, riding inside these boxed contraptions that spew fire and smoke as they move along." The thoughts that crossed Russell's mind while he heard this tale was that John-Ray may have been smoking something himself, but he played along.

"Well I'll be," was all Russell could muster when, coming up on another of those paths, he caught a glimpse (and scent) of one of those "boxed" contraptions. And there was indeed a strong, lingering odor of burning long after the creatures had passed on.

"They call 'em autosmobiles," John-Ray beamed with a buzz of someone who just moved up ladder of social importance. "Their young sometimes call 'em cars. I's heard some of them called their boxes trucs and pickups." John-Ray radiated with excitement. This was probably the longest articulate, rational conversation he'd had in a long time. Russell smirked inwardly. He listened on.

The box things moved on round things that rolled over the lined flat surfaces. They moved very fast and could carry several of the limbed creatures cradled inside. Russell didn't like it. He didn't like that theses paths were everywhere. He didn't like that the creatures could move, in masses, so rapidly. He didn't like that linger stench. He wasn't liking anything.

John-Ray left Russell with Jimmy-Rob, a younger cousin, brother, nephew. Russell only knew that they were kin. *Best not to ask too many questions*, Russell told himself. And so on he went along the ridge with Jimmy-Rob. Jimmy-Rob's guidance didn't last long. Coming down a slight slope into another barren valley he stood on hind legs, looked around with eyes of a stoner, and scampered off. Moments later, drawn by a screeching, crashing, crunching sound, Russell caught a glimpse of Jimmy-Rob. Or at least parts of him. The parts that took to the air.

One of the boxed things, rather solid, powerful thing, from the look of what remained of young Jimmy-Rob, came in contact with the youngster, and decimated him. Russell only knew the bits to be those of Jimmy-Rob because they still smelled of his geeked-up musk. (Jimmy-Rob partook of 'shrooms and special herbs -to the point where they were a fundamental part of his diet; His life, really.) What Russell could not find, beyond small bits and pieces, were signs of the wheeled, box thing. Only its stench lingered.

And it was this sad but limited tale that Russell relayed to Jacky-Reed and Carla-Beth, the next youngsters he came up on along the ridge trail.

"Papa said Jimmy-Rob was always chasing after bad thin's; one day he'd chase the wrong thing."

"Sorry," Russell said without much feeling. The sight of fluttering fur floating in the air like dandelion seeds and body bits no bigger than a fist being all that was left of the young Jimmy-Rob still had Russell flustered and frazzled.

By mistake, grasping for some way to change the subject, Russell had asked about their relationship. "Cousin" and "brother" came the conflicting answers. He didn't inquire further.

A few more JR's came and went along the trail. It amused Russell -and helped set his mind on something less dark and gloomy. Eventually he made it to Ronda and Big Ray's main camp. It was a stark, foreboding place. Russell had been away from big, friendly, embracing trees, the forest's verdant, damp, shadow world, and high-peaked mountains for far too long. His body ached for them. His mind thirsted for them. *I can't stay*, he told himself.

"Thank you," he told his hosts. He went on to say that he'd brought news from beyond and touched base with old kin, but that he needed to continue to travel, to see how the world was changing and how they may fit into the changing landscape.

"We have a good thing here," Big Ray said. "There's plenty of room for you. You want to settle down, make a family of your own? Stay, take one of my girls. You want two? Have 'em. Young? Old? You name it. Stay." Big Ray's mild, jovial demeanor changed, taking on a more earnest, somber tone. "Perhaps you want different, hmm? You a young, vibrant loner, 'haps you prefer some male companionship... no problem." Leaning in, Big Ray added, "just mix your spore a little here and there with the girls. You know," he winked at him, his vivacious continence returning, "to keep the family thriving and blended." A pat on the shoulder meant that there was nothing further to discuss -only a yes was needed.

"Oh wow," Russell replied while getting up, "you make some great offers." Russell clicked his teeth as if to say it was a hard choice. "But I'll be moving along. I must." And with that he departed. *I must guard my nuts*, he whispered in a fake coughing fit.

A day out of the main camp, Russell met Candy-Barbie. "Call me Lucy," she told him. He spent the night with her. *Just adding a little more fresh DNA to the mix*, he thought, with a hint of cynicism. Lucy was at least a bit more appealing, despite that now familiar gloom, that subfusc look that the female's of Big Ray's band seem to carry on them like a dark gray sky on an usually bright, sunny beach. *A new wave Pop band, with their bright colors, outlandish, brilliant, and flamboyant styles, somberly and lifelessly playing the blues*, Russell lamented. It was as if Candy-Barbie, Lucy, sang the tunes with a melodic voice, allusions of sweetness and beauty breaking through, but voicing lyrics of murk, sullenness, and dejection.

Russell carried his mixed feelings on him like a sack of rotting potatoes. He had decided to head back north, towards the home he knew. *Back to the trees and the hills*, he brooded. "When was the last time I ate me a big, succulent, earthy, rich nut?" he murmured to himself as he turned north by northwest along an indistinct trail. He knew the answer, really. It had been too long. That was what was weighing in on him: he missed his old life. "I've no nuts to guard." He labored with that thought for miles.

Three times Russell had to cross the limbed creatures' plowed paths. Lingering clouds of that stench of burning waste nauseated him and left him feeling like he was drowning in a mire of rot and decay. The loathing for the limbed creatures just kept on growing, like a cancer eating away at healthy tissue until there was nothing good left. Even the thrill of catching one of the creatures and savoring their sticky head goo was gone. Now that thought that once brought a quickened pulse and a dizzying head rush just made his insides twist and writhe.

A day of driving rain drove him into a burrow on a low hill. He laid in a puddle of cooling muck, thinking things were going from bad to worse. That stench of burning waste

was so thick in the atmosphere he could taste it. It sucked life from the very cells of his body. His sleep that night was made up of fragments; fits of dazed states of half sleep and disturbing, twisted spurts of slumber. There was little rest that came from the hours of dark. But the sun peeked over the horizon as it made its way up into the morning sky, shining life back to the world. It shone down on a drying world; a greening world; a world of hope.

"Nuts!" an exclamation of glee and excitement. Russell had walked out into that sunny new day wet, aching, and generally miserable, and received the revitalizing rays with a perky disposition. Later, towards the late hours of the morning, Russell found his nuts. In a deep valley, hidden from the otherwise flat, barren, and lifeless landscape, there was a paradise of small trees, green, soft grasses, and cool-water pools. Oh, and nuts. There were nuts!

Three days passed there in the paradise valley. Russell frolicked and played like a puppy who just found his tail. The various nuts and fruit abundant in the valley filled and energized him. The multitude of small creatures enlivened and animated his sullen spirit. Leaving the little valley was a hardship, but there was not enough there to sustain Russell; not enough to keep him alive physically and mentally. Russell knew he was an aversion and misfit of nature. The valley was no place for him. He would bring it destruction if he stayed.

On a misty morning, the sun's rays filtering through the thick morning dew, Russell turned his back on the valley. *Guard your nuts*, Russell's thoughts swirled as he walked on, resolved not to look back; not to rethink or regret. It was while he was caught in this conflicting revelry that Russell came aware. It was the smell first; that pungent burning that he now so readily associated with the limbed creatures. It gnawed at his insides. Then came a slowly rising, roaring drone that bore into his head like a protective mother bear rushing at a predator lusting for a defenseless cub.

The actual impact never really registered in Russell's brain. There was no sharp, crushing, beating pain. There were no stars flashing in his head. There was no crying in agony. No yelps. No tears of pain streaming out of wide eyes. Only one thing, one thought swirled and thrashed inside Russell's mind: *nuts!* If there was any life left in him he may have spoken the words, "my nuts!" but Russell was instantaneously scattered along a couple of miles of paved road, broken into pieces no longer resembling a living, thinking thing.

The impact had, in the first millisecond, deployed and ejected the nuts in Russell's cheek like projectiles emerging from a high-power weapon. They flew away from him in a low arch, scattering over the flat surface of the road and into the side fields. For a split second Russell's eyes and mind registered that loss. Had there been time, he may have uttered something like "guard your nuts." Had his body not broken up into a multitude of pieces, dragged and rubbed into the surface of the road for miles, he may have scolded himself for failing to guard his nuts. He may have even said something as simple as "look out!"

But there was nothing left of Russell the Squirrel to think. Not enough neural synapses joined together to relay even a basic electrical impulse. There was nothing to suggest that he ever was. No hint that he was a mutant *Sciurus carolinensis* or *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*; or even patch of fur big enough to hint at a living creature. Except for one piece; a furry thing not much bigger than a human hand, with the peculiar stain, an impression, really, that resembled a big capital "P" with maybe an "e" following it. The "Pe" and the rest of the letters scripted next to it to spell out a name and the smoke spewing, high speed traveling, limbed creature transportation box went into the next valley before Russell's parts settle -and became scavenger fodder.

If Russell could have uttered anything after he met the 16 ton, 88 MPH Peterbuilt, he may have said something like "Peter got my nuts!"

Guard Your Nuts



THE END

