

The Day the Squirrels Trembled (Non Fiction)

Even if you've never marveled at the skill of a squirrel high up, leaping, almost flying, from tree to tree; or been aghast as one falls from a great height and thwunk, sits up, stunned, looks about, then scurries off; even if you've never been outsmarted trying to protect that bird feeder in the yard from a devilishly clever furry fellow; even if you think a squirrel is just another pesky varmint in the rodent family; even if you really hate squirrels; I think you should listen to this squirrelish tale.

The most common squirrel in Northern California is a large reddish brown creature with an abundant bushy, often Irish auburn tail. It seems, at least to me, this fellow has become more prolific here in the past decades. His reddish hue can be seen out any window of our home most days, in trees, on high wires, on rooves, sometimes playing tag with a pal or mate, eating fruits, nuts, sitting in the deciduous tree sifting through seeds. Indeed come late summer this squirrel thinks there is a deep winter coming and he starts feeding like there's no tomorrow, even though we're lucky if we get one day of frost of a winter. By November he's as fat and contented as you'd ever want to be. Ready to hang out indoors through some rain and fog that he'll pretend is a Noreaster of a blizzard. Just these days the squirrels are finishing off the last unpicked apples from my fecund apple tree, carrying them off high into the Monterrey Pine: it's November 19.

On November 13, 2001, the President of the United States, George W. Bush, signed an executive order authorizing the formation of military tribunals to try suspects in his War on Terrorism. The tribunals have the power to execute. The suspects can not have a civilian lawyer, they have no recourse to appeals through our Judicial system and evidence can be placed against them in secret. In fact there is no guarantee that any evidence meets U.S. or international standards of veracity. The evidence is not discoverable, and the providers may avoid cross examination, unless the tribunal should decide otherwise. Some people blinked. Even some in the media and a rightist New York Times columnist shuddered out loud. That was something new. A Law Professor at the University of Illinois, Champlain who specializes in International Law reported, the next day, that this Executive Order violates two Geneva Conventions from the 1940s and 50s to which the United States is a signatory. He, in fact, claims that if the U.S. uses such a tribunal to try suspects it could subject the President and the U.S. Government to prosecution by International Courts for war crimes and crimes against humanity. I wouldn't know about that.

The next day, in a somewhat forlorn mood over our lost rights, I set out on a morning bike ride. From my house, about 50-75 feet above seal level, I ascended North on Spruce street into the East Bay hills to Grizzly peak boulevard. This street winds along at the top of a North-South ridge line some hundreds of feet in elevation that runs down the entire eastern edge of the San Francisco Bay along the Hayward Fault Line. After reaching Grizzly Peak I would head south about 1.5-2 miles. Then, I would turn back to the right and snake my way steeply down toward the commercial center of town.

But as I rode along Grizzly Peak, just before I reached my turn, there was a red squirrel lying to my right next to the curb. He had apparently just been struck by a car for his tail was still

jerking in spasms of pain or terminal neurologic discharge. One morning earlier this year, as I pulled my car away from the curb at home heading to work, I had found another struck squirrel blocking my path in the center of the road. On that occasion I stopped the car in the middle of the street, examined the squirrel, found him breathing and not squished, and placed him under a bush at the side of the road. When I returned later, he was gone leaving no trace, a medical success story.

Today, November 14, however, this squirrel had probably, as they say, bitten the dust. In any case he was off to the side and there was no reason to stop.

I took my usual right turn onto Shasta and began the steep winding descent. I had gone no more than 200 yards when suddenly a squirrel darted out from the right side and found himself trapped between me bearing down and an oncoming car moving up the street. The squirrel darted left, right, left, right, stopped looked death in the eye, then ran and escaped just before the front wheel of my bike reached his frenetic trajectory. "Wow", I thought to myself. "We've all had bad hair days, but the squirrels are definitely taking a beating today."

Speeding down the mountain with a stupid grin on my face I was concocting how I would try and turn this into a dramatic story to tell my wife back home. I got only a few blocks further down this mile plus run when out of nowhere flew another squirrel. Whapppp! He went head first right into the side of the front wheel. The squirrel bounced backward, regained his poise and ran off in the direction from which he had come. Only good fortune save me from disaster. One second sooner or later and I could have gone over him and turned over or had him caught in the spokes.

Now, I'm sure you can imagine where this is going. You may, perhaps, easily chalk this up as just an unfortunate 3 squirrel day. But let's get serious here. The odds just aren't too good on that explanation. In my furry mind, I remember that squirrels are indeed rodents. And I believe that the poor squirrels got old George's message all too clearly. In fact, a lot more clearly than many earthlings who love their country. You just won't convince me otherwise. And having heard that Georgy message, the greater family of squirrels, who have on occasion been accused of terrorizing bird feeders and rooves, began to tremble in fear, and like their brothers and sisters, the rats, they figured it was time to flee from a sinking ship. Unfortunately (for them and us) they just have nowhere to hide.

Marc Sapir, MD