

Adult Short Story Third Place

Squirrel Justice

By Sarah Boone

The squirrel costume had seen better days. The ears were lopsided, one standing up straight while the other drooped, creating an effect that was more cartoonish than fierce. The gray fur on the palm of each hand was falling out, the result of thousands of high fives over the years. There was a small hole behind the left knee, invisible to all but the keenest observers, but in danger of growing bigger with each wearing. The tail, which used to be full and bushy, could now only be described as bedraggled. It looked wet even when it was dry, a few strings of gray fur dragging sadly on the ground.

Molly sighed and pulled the squirrel head over her own head. It wasn't the time to lament the state of the costume.

"It's a beautiful day for baseball!" she said to herself, but her words sounded more like a question than a declaration. This had been her dad's mantra. When he said it, she believed it. The weather, personal aches and pains, a difficult opposition- all this was immaterial. It was always a beautiful day for baseball because baseball was a beautiful game. "Anything can happen!" her dad would add. Before a game began, the possibilities were endless. One's dreams could become reality. This was as true for the players on the field as it was for the fans in the bleachers: a baseball game represented hope. Because the most beautiful thing about baseball was that there was always another game.

The music started blaring on the loudspeakers, Pump It by the Black Eyed Peas. Molly ran through the tunnel, up the dugout stairs, and onto the baseball field. She raised her squirrel arms above her squirrel head and fist pumped to the beat. There were scattered cheers from the stands, which appeared, in her limited vision, to be about a quarter full. Well, it was still early. Surely people would continue to trickle in during the first few innings. Molly pranced up and down the first base line as the music faded out and the public address announcer came on the microphone.

"Ladies and gentleman, your Eastern Fightin' Squirrels!" he bellowed. Again, there were a few claps and muted whoops from the crowd as the team ran purposefully onto the field. This was Molly's cue to get out of the way. She took the two steps back down into the dugout and into the tunnel and took the squirrel head off.

"Crowd's still warming up out there," Molly said, rolling her neck back and forth. That squirrel head was heavy.

"Yeah," Rick muttered, scribbling a note on his game-day clipboard. "You got the T-shirt cannon between innings."

The shirts for the T-shirt cannon today were leftovers from the Mother's Day giveaway. They depicted a pink squirrel holding a baseball bat in one hand and a baby squirrel in the other. Molly peered out into the ballpark from her vantage point in the tunnel, searching for a good section to aim for. She usually liked to shoot the shirts to people she thought would appreciate them, and she prided herself on her aim.

The bleacher seats along the first-base and third-base lines were about half full, small groups of people peppered on the benches. Molly noted a cluster of women; surely, at least one of them was a mother who might appreciate the shirt. In the section behind home plate, there were real seats, the kind that folded down when you sat in them. These seats were numbered and assigned, unlike the bleacher seats, which were a free-for-all for anyone with a bleacher level ticket. At an independent league baseball stadium like this, the price difference was minor, but still, Molly liked to focus her giveaways on the cheap seats.

Out beyond left field was a grassy hill where spectators could bring their own lawn chairs or picnic blankets. The section was out of range for the T-shirt cannon, but Molly took a moment to watch the little kids running around, playing their own games while oblivious to the one happening in front of them. It was there that Molly's dad had taught her everything she knew about baseball. One time, and only once, she had made the mistake of complaining that she was bored at a Squirrels game. "This game takes too long," she whined. Her dad leaned over, as serious as if he were imparting a state secret, and said, "The people who think baseball is boring just don't know what to look for. If you're paying attention, there's a million things going on all the time." From then on, whether they were watching at the stadium or a game on TV (and baseball was always on TV at their house), they would play the "Paying Attention" game.

"Look at that! The coach is telling the left fielder to play deeper," Molly might point out.

"Did you see the first baseman and the baserunner laughing together? I wonder what they're talking about," her dad would counter.

"I think I've figured out the third base coach's sign for steal- watch how he touches his belt, and then his hat, and then wipes his hand down his leg."

"Does that player have the wrong hat on??"

"Look at that little girl's ice cream cone- it's about to fall!"

And back and forth they'd go, all game long, trying to out-notice each other. Her dad was right- as soon as Molly started paying attention, she was almost overwhelmed by how much there was to see.

Today, Molly continued scanning the stadium, playing the paying-attention game with herself while looking for her ideal T-shirt cannon recipient. Out in right field, Molly's gaze landed on a woman in a pink tank top that said "Live Laugh Love." Bingo. The woman was sitting with a man and two little kids. As Molly watched, the kids both tried to clamber onto the woman's lap, reaching possessively up to her face as if they were arguing over who got to grab her nose. The man beside her continued to stare out at the field, seemingly unaware of the chaos his wife was managing. The woman reached around the four arms grappling for her face and into her bag to retrieve several small baggies of snacks. Molly watched her distribute the snacks to her children, who immediately looked happier and moved back to their own seats. Molly had found her mark: this woman seemed like a great mom and had probably been dragged to this game by her husband. She deserved this shirt.

The batter flew out to center field for the third out and the Squirrels jogged off the field. Molly re-headed herself, grabbed the T-shirt cannon, and ran back out down the right field line. As the P.A. announcer launched into his welcome-to-the-stadium spiel, Molly pulled the cord back and released. The T-shirt made a perfect arc in the sky and landed in the outstretched arms of the husband. He grinned and held it up above his head triumphantly.

Okay, give it to your wife, you moron, Molly thought, watching this man act like he had just conquered an army by catching a shirt that she had literally shot directly at him. He held it out in front of him and unrolled it dramatically. Molly watched his face fall as he read the front. You can recover, she thought, directing all her energy towards him to guide him towards the right reaction. *Wow, what a perfect gift for my beautiful wife. Honey, this would be perfect for you. Hey kids, look at what I caught for your mom.* But he took none of Molly's silent suggestions. Instead, he stood up and turned towards Molly.

"Hey, Squirrel!" he yelled, loudly enough that Molly could hear through the noise-dampening squirrel head. "How 'bout you shoot me a shirt that I could actually wear?"

Molly felt her cheeks get hot and was relieved that her face wasn't visible. In her regular life, she hated confrontations, even in situations in which she was clearly in the right. In fact, she would go out of her way to avoid a disagreement. If a friend or colleague was wrong about something, Molly would nod along rather than correct them. When her mom gave her sour gummies for her birthday, she smiled and pretended this was still her favorite snack, even though she had over-eaten them as a teenager and could no longer stomach even one. Her New Year's resolution for the past five years straight had been to speak up more. Easier said than done, as it turned out. But something about being in the Fightin' Squirrel costume gave Molly a sudden burst of courage.

She re-loaded the cannon and shot the T-shirt right to the man again.

“Thanks, man,” he called out. He didn’t even look surprised that she had acquiesced to his request. He was probably used to getting what he wanted, even when it was unreasonable. As he started to unroll the shirt, Molly loaded the cannon and shot another. This time, the man wasn’t looking and the shirt hit him directly in the forehead. He looked up, surprised now, and raised his hands in the air.

“Ok, I’m good, no more shirts, man,” he said, laughing uncertainly.

Molly loaded, aimed, and fired. Another shirt right at his head. Then another. And another. The man’s kids were giggling and screaming, grabbing at the shirts as they bounced off his chest and onto the ground in front of their seats. His wife looked embarrassed - either at her husband’s behavior or at the attention, as most of the fans in attendance now seemed to be staring at her family. Molly shot two more shirts and the section around them broke into cheers.

Still in her squirrel mode, Molly lumbered over closer to the stands. She put her hand behind her left ear (the one that still stuck straight up), as if asking for more noise, hamming it up for the crowd. They obliged with whoops and yells. Molly loaded the cannon and, now within twenty yards of the man, aimed one more shirt at his face. He held up his hands in front of his face, shielding himself. The people around them cheered as the shirt hit him in the nose. Molly raised her arms in victory, then turned and ran back into the tunnel.

“What the hell, Molly?” Rick was waiting for her, his clipboard vibrating in his hands. “Why in the world did you do that?”

“Oh, he deserved it,” Molly said, but she could feel her confidence draining out of her body. It was like she had been on an adrenaline high, egged on by the anonymity of the costume and the noise of the crowd, and now she was remembering that she was actually just meek little Molly. Why in the world *did* she do that?

“What do you mean he deserved it?” Rick asked. “Do you know him?”

“What? No,” Molly said. “He just, he didn’t appreciate the Mother’s Day shirt and he didn’t even think to give it to his wife or kids and he was just so...so entitled and he demanded a new shirt because heaven forbid a man has to wear a shirt with pink on it and I just thought this guy needs to learn a lesson and so...”

She trailed off. The problem, she realized, was that she had been thinking about her dad. Her dad, who would have laughed at the Mother’s Day shirt. Her dad, who would never pass up an opportunity to bestow a gift

upon his wife or children. Her dad, who knew that every day was a beautiful day for baseball, but who would never get to experience a game again.

“Ugh, I don’t know, Rick. I got carried away.”

“Well, we can agree on that,” Rick grumbled. He thrust a water bottle at her. “Here, drink this. Take some deep breaths and get yourself back to normal for the relay race next inning.”

The rest of the game, Molly went through the motions: starting the wave in the bleacher seats, dancing on the dugout to Take Me Out to the Ballgame during the seventh inning stretch, taking selfies and giving high fives while walking around the concourse. But her mind was racing. She, usually such a measured, thoughtful, sensible person, had made a series of rash decisions that she could not fully justify. One part of her lambasted herself for those decisions, while another part felt a bit proud. Was this what it felt like to have a confrontation? To stand up for yourself? To do something that you knew was right, even if- especially if- it made someone else feel embarrassed? In some ways, Molly was jealous of her Fightin’ Squirrel alter ego. She felt like she could act with impunity while in the costume, like some of the “Fightin” spirit rubbed off on her.

When the game ended, Molly undressed quietly in the utility closet. She hung the costume up and placed the head in its oversize box, giving it a soft pat. Maybe her T-shirt cannon antics hadn’t taught that deadbeat guy a lesson, but it had unleashed something within her. She couldn’t wait until tomorrow: another game, another opportunity to do it right, another beautiful day for baseball.