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MENAGERIE

# The Dog, the Squirrel and the Moment of Brilliance

By Pamela Gwyn Kripke    October 11, 2014 12:02 pm

Menagerie: Just between us species.

Charlie makes a certain squeal when he is hunting. Granted, he hunts from behind the glass of our front door most of the time, or from the top of the damask couch, on point. But he is prowling, nonetheless, and scary, formidable. Confident.

If he hunts from the back door in the kitchen, which looks out onto the wild kingdom that is our yard, I generally let him at it. Otherwise, he will scrape through the wood, and I will have to buy a new door. Mainly, he hunts for squirrels. He would really like to catch one, I can tell. I can tell because I have learned about hunting, having had to live in Texas for 16 years and two months and four days. Soon, when my daughters have both left for college, I will be able to return alone to New York, where hunting entails apartments, and eminence and bargains on pointy slingbacks. Here, people pursue animals, and they know about them. They know about muskrats, armadillos, hawks. They really know about hawks.

The squeal begins when Charlie, who is a dog, spots a target in the trees, on the grass, atop the neighbor's bird feeder. Charlie has a flexible neck. The sound is sped up, frantic, pitched like the squeak of metal.

Last week, I heard it from inside the house. It seemed more frenzied than usual. Someone is in danger, it strikes me, someone smaller than a 15-pound schnauzer-terrier. I am a pacifist. I do not like when countries drop bombs, or people fight. I

can't watch boxers hit each other in a movie or on television, even though hitting is the basis of their activity. Killing animals with guns sickens me. At the Home Depot here, they sell huts on stilts that people take to the woods and sit in, in the sky, waiting for days for deer to pass by. Then they shoot them dead and drape them on their trucks, like rugs. My previous dog, Twyla, a New Yorker like me, didn't hunt. Wouldn't think of it.

Charlie, though, he's a Texan. The squealing intensifies. I push open the back door and run around the side of the house, where he is pacing back and forth at a clip. A portion of the house, about 10 feet, is a solid brick wall that connects to two other walls perpendicular to it. Just under the gutter, a squirrel clings to life, sideways, his body parallel to the earth. As he scampers right, Charlie mirrors him below. Left, left. Right, right. Squeal.

I scream at him to come inside. "Are you crazy?" he says. "This is it."

"Please, stop what you are doing," I plead. The squirrel is stuck, unable to jump onto either adjacent wall, or climb over the gutter to the roof. His only way is down. He knows it. His eyes find mine. Help me.

"Charlie, you are better than this," I beg, squealing myself. "Stop! Oh my God!"

He pounces onto the wall, and then backs up into position. The squirrel is motionless, waiting, perhaps, for the inevitable. Charlie ignores me. His nostrils flare.

"Cookie!" I shout. Cookies always work.

"Not this time, Mama."

I throw a ball. Charlie would trample an infant for a ball. He watches it, restraining every muscle in his legs, keeping one eye on his prey. I roll it again, fast. Charlie takes two steps toward it, and then turns back. The squirrel attempts a dash down the brick but stops cold and retreats. Chicken. It is a game of chicken. I am in my daisy pajamas, screaming at two animals. The neighbors will arrive soon, or law enforcement.

I throw the ball again, farther than before. Charlie takes off, sprints the 10 feet and grabs it in his mouth. The squirrel senses opportunity, runs a diagonal nearly to the ground. Charlie drops the ball and fires back. No time. Back up the wall. Deadlock.

They stare at each other. Their chests billow. I wonder what I will do to dispose of the carcass. Finally a use for my Northeastern snow shovel, more than a talisman now. Charlie squeals again, staccato, incessant. The squirrel garbles; his tail flicks. Then, out of nowhere, he shoots straight down in a whoosh and, from three feet above the lawn, dives onto his predator's back and springboards onto the grass ahead of him. The squirrel runs for his life alongside the house and makes the turn into the yard, headed for the tree by the fence. Stunned, Charlie is two steps behind, growling, racing like a thoroughbred, in pursuit like I've never before witnessed. I scramble behind, hanging onto my pajama pants, hearing myself cheer, "Go, little squirrel, go! Go!"

At the right moment, he pushes off the ground and catches the bark of the tree, then his breath, and moves up the trunk into the first branch he sees, safe. Brilliant.

I grab the back of a patio chair, incredulous. Charlie grabs the trunk. "I'd say you were outsmarted," I tell him.

No response.

I sit down on the back steps and lean against the door. A cardinal, hot red, flits across the fence. A beetle creeps along the stone. More than a hundred feet in the sky, a huge Texas hawk perches atop a tree, like a figurehead on a ship. My ship. I don't want to say that I am like the squirrel, because that would be trite and mostly presumptuous, given his remarkable pluck and fortitude under what seemed like insurmountable odds.

I am no squirrel. But I sometimes feel a little like he must have, challenged in ways I wouldn't have thought possible, yet inspired to figure things out because I know I can, and I had better, for all sorts of reasons. It is just what you do, whether you are a bee or a jaguar. Or a girl.

“We will see you again, little squirrel,” I call up into the tree. “Come, Charlie. Let’s go inside.”

*Pamela Gwyn Kripke is a freelance writer. She is at work on a memoir about her escapades with the many animals she has known.*

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