



## Chickaree

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It was a bright summer day, rays of sunshine pierced through the covetous green leaves, their greedy hands intertwining to cast an intricate dance of shadows. Rolling along the mottled gray pavement, I glanced over at Henry, who casually strolled with a bag of popcorn in one hand, and his rolling backpack in the other. Thunk, thunk, thunk, went the bags, the separations in the cement creating a rhythmic cadence to our stroll. I glanced over at him, the sun illuminating his dirty blond hair and making his clear blue eyes shine.

"What's up?" he asked, catching my eye.

"Just want some popcorn," I replied, eyeing the almost empty bag.

"In that case... Think fast!" he yelled, tossing a kernel in the air with his boyish grin. Missing it, I scowled and bent down to grab it and throw it at his face. But as I reached down, a small blur of fur darted past and snatched it up!

"What on earth?!" I exclaimed, astonished. Staring back up at us curiously, was a young squirrel devouring the fallen kernel. We stared transfixed for a moment. Abruptly, the ball of fluff jumped up and scrambled up Henry's jeans, undoubtedly in pursuit of more popcorn.

"Whoa!" Henry shouted, stiffening. All three of us froze, startled. Not to be distracted, the small critter resumed its quest. Feeling the sudden urge to help, I slowly and carefully extended my hand toward the tiny creature and gently picked it up. Upon closer inspection, I realized that it was just a baby.

"It might have rabies," Henry warned, a fearful tone in his voice.

"This little thing? Not likely, it's only a baby. No way it could have rabies already," I replied. Henry looked down at the large Bambi eyes and the tuft of white fur on the squirrel's forehead. He stared mesmerized, and I could sense his reservations crumbling.

"Not likely," he agreed.

With our new friend, we continued strolling down the street toward our neighborhood, taking turns feeding and holding the playful young squirrel. By the time we reached our street, we concluded that it must have fallen out of its nest and run to us in search of care and food.

"Take him to your house," I said as we reached my house. "I'll be right over once I tell my mom."

"Sure thing," Henry replied, excited for the chance of some alone time with the squirrel. I then dashed inside, dropped off my backpack, and yelled at the top of my lungs, "I'm going outside!!!"

"Just be back by dark!" came the muffled reply, and I ran to Henry's.

Upon arriving, Henry had set out a small saucer of milk and a handful of cashews and almonds, watching as the ball of fluff frolicked in the grass, running and rolling around us. The little squirrel occasionally looked over its shoulder and stared at us, as if to ask, "Why aren't you joining in?"

As time passed, the squirrel grew tired and curled up in my lap. I looked down at it, thinking, "Aren't you adorable?"

"What do we call him?" I asked, gazing down at the little nose peeking out of a ball of gray fur.

"Nutters?" came the reply, but I was horrified by the suggestion.

"Just a squirrel," he replied defensively. Ignoring him, I continued brainstorming a name. After throwing a few names back and forth, I looked at the squirrel and tried to sum up its personality and appearance in one word. Suddenly, it came to me.

"Chickaree," I said, looking at Henry. A smile slowly spread across his face.

"It's perfect," he agreed, and we turned to gaze at the squirrel.

"Chickaree," I breathed.

We continued to play with Chickaree and learned more about him. We discovered that he couldn't climb well due to his weak claws and that he preferred cashews and almonds to milk. As we grew to know him, he grew to know us, learning where to go for extra snacks (Henry) and who was more likely to play with him (me). We played for hours, chasing the leaves that the wind kicked up exploring each other's personalities. Chickaree was loving and full of joyful life, frolicking and cuddles in turn. It did not take long for us to forget how recently we had found each other; Chickaree was already a resident in our hearts. As the sky turned from blue to purple and finally to indigo, we got up to go, and a thought came to me.

"Is Chickaree staying here tonight?" I asked.

"My parents won't let him stay, so no," Henry replied with a downhearted shrug. I nodded, then stood and reached over to pick Chickaree up.

"Then you can walk with us home," I said, as we began our journey to my house. When we arrived, I told my mom about the new friend who had so quickly won us over.

This wasn't the first time that baby animals had come back to our house. A year ago, my sister had brought home a baby bird she had found on the sidewalk with a broken wing. My mom said we couldn't keep it in the house, but we could keep it outside on the patio. Sadly, the bird was eaten by a hawk a few nights later. Woefully, I remembered standing behind my sister as she cried, wondering what had happened, only knowing it was awful.

With this in mind, I prepared Chickaree a box, one that no hawk or predator could get into, and a blanket to keep him comfy. Saying goodbye to Henry, I went to sleep that night with dreams of waking up to Chickaree the next day.

The next morning, I woke up early, eager to start a new day with my new squirrel. I ran down the stairs, excited to start a new day of shenanigans. Throwing open the backdoor, I hauled out his box with a glowing smile.

"Chickaree?!" I exclaimed excitedly.

Nothing.

There was no sound response, no faint scrape of claws on cardboard. No ruffle of fur on fabric. No squeak or chirp.

Terror flooded my body, I scrambled to open the lid. But upon opening the box, I discovered the limp form of the friend I had grown to love so much in so little time. I crumpled, clutching his cold form to my chest.

"No!!!" I shouted, holding him tighter.

"No." I repeatedly looked down at the still form. I fell to my knees, my limbs weak, unthinking. The numbness started at my fingers, I could no longer feel the soft strands of fur. It quickly spread up over my shoulders, straight to my heart, strangling it in a tight icy grip. I dreaded telling Henry the news, I could barely face it myself. But then, I noticed the slight rise and fall of his chest.

Hope surged through me, erupting like water from a broken dam, washing away the cold talons of grief. I looked down at the squirrel, feeling his limp, cold, form. Immediately, I clutched him closer, sharing my warm body with him. My mother had hot bags filled with rice beans and cherry stones. I ran inside to find one, hoping that it might restore Chickaree's temperature. My family asked questions, but they all blurred together. I only had eyes for



Chickaree. I didn't notice my tears or the burn in my throat until they splashed against his fur and I could barely breathe. I then curled up with him and the hot bag, praying to anyone who might listen.

My family came through asking if I was okay, then came Henry. We didn't speak, but we understood each other, sharing feelings of hope, despair, and anticipation; both of us going through the same pain and sorrow. After an hour of taking turns cuddling him, the bag cooled leaving only the cold still form of him behind.

The funeral was small, just Henry and I, under the trees. Another day, just like the first, but this time taking turns filling in a grave. Each fistful of dirt was another shadow over my heart, there was no dance this time. As I stood over Chickaree's grave, I realized how much he had taught me in such a short time. He had taught me about love, about caring for another, and about loss. I had never known such deep sorrow until that moment, but somehow, I knew that it would stick with me until I too, succumbed to darkness.

After Chickaree's passing, I spent a lot of time thinking about him. I missed him terribly, but I also felt grateful for the time we had together. We never knew what killed him, but we take comfort in the fact that his last day was a happy one, surrounded by those who loved him. I would never forget him and the lessons he had taught me. As time passed, my family and I moved to a new town, and I made new friends. However, I knew that the special time I had with two best friends would forever be dear to me. Today, 8 years later, Chickaree remains in my heart, a symbol of the enduring power of friendship and love, as well as the strength I had gained through loss.