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Squirrel Quarrels

\\ BY GLENNA ANDRADE \\

Of course, my neighbor Debbie and I were fooled by those other residents on Aquidneck Island: the cute gray squirrels. We always smiled as they scampered over the lawn, furry tails a-flagging and we'd nearly faint for their safety as they swung through the trees. We even walked softly to avoid disturbing their naps when they sunned on our deck rails in summer: They were at their cutest when they sat up and begged for peanuts at our kitchen doors.

We even gave them names, like Ringo, then Ringette, and then the Ringettes and then the rest of the squadron marched in-and so Debbie's oak tree became the barracks.

However harmless they appeared, we discovered their penchant for mischief. At first, we merely snickered when the squirrels pilfered the birdfeeder. However, after they began to sprawl across it and eat until empty, we tried different styles of birdfeeders. Even though the new feeders were guaranteed "squirrel-proof," the squirrels learned to lift the lid and scoop out the seeds or gnaw through the tube. After a half-dozen trials, we eventually hung one feeder that closed upon their weight; however, the squirrels shook it so violently that the seeds spread over the ground as for their conquest banquet.

Eventually, the skirmishes turned into sneak attacks. When we refused to toss out peanuts, they attacked like ninjas in the night. They sliced through our screens with their claws and gnawed on our shingles. Worse yet, some squirrels over-wintered in Debbie's family boat and chewed up the wires and teakwood. I feared her husband would forget he was a pacifist. In spring, the squirrels feasted on our emerging blooms. Overnight, the tulip bed became rows of green sticks. I saw many a squirrel scurry away, crocus blooms hanging from its mouth. Even though we dusted the blossoms with black pepper or sprayed hot sauce, these measures lasted only until the next rain. We were doomed to be flowerless.

In the fall, Debbie and I engaged in stronger tactics to save our bulbs. Overnight, our gardens were so full of holes they looked like they'd been hit by miniature IEDs. Once, I planted 200 crocuses in my garden that were crunched in less than a week, and Debbie lost a whole drift in her front lawn. So we took new measures. She buried her hyacinth bulbs six inches deep beneath chicken wire; unfortunately, one squirrel brazenly left the wire on her doorstep. Later on, we found that our underground wire made our planting of other flowers nearly impossible. We discovered too that digging bone meal into our bulb planting was like issuing a call to the mess hall.

We thought we'd outsmarted them when we changed to the more unappetizing bulbs. Since lilies and daffodils were borderline-poisonous and the alliums stank like onions, we felt smugly safe-until the squirrels spit them out after one bite. And then, in retaliation--they'd hide the bulbs under some leaves where we'd find them the next year, now scowling like shrunken heads.

Just this year, Debbie *even* tried camouflaging her daffodils under new autumn mums; sadly, she found her plants uprooted and the cavities empty.

And then the squirrels brought in the big gun.

"Have you seen what the critters did to my garden?" I complained to Debbie a couple of months ago. Craters appeared everywhere.

"It's only Phil," she sighed.

"Phil who?"

"Phil, you know, like Punxsutawney Phil--who predicts the end of winter."

"Oh, no!" I envisioned a knee-high rodent with big teeth. "Not a roundhog!"

"Yep," she groaned. "We have lost the battle altogether. The squirrels have brought in the heavy artillery."

But that was weeks ago and now Phil has found a better banquet elsewhere. And although Debbie and I continue to defend our gardens, we still smile covertly at the squirrels' playful antics and note that they are gardeners too, planting gourds and acorns for us to admire even though the seedlings appear in strange places in the yard.