Squirrel Nutkin

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“She’s crawling,” that was what the school nurse said to Miss Hartney. She slipped off her rubber gloves into the deep porcelain sink we had in the health room and looked over at the librarian who was standing on the scale fiddling with the balances. “Crawling,” she said again, and I knew she meant me, but I wasn’t crawling at all: she only made me feel as if I were down there on the ground with all those other wriggling bodies.

I had seen the first sign in our front yard earlier in the week when I left home for school: the bare ground under our magnolia tree riddled with holes. Like a giant Chinese check­erboard is what I thought. Perhaps that image came to my mind because the holes seemed so purposeful, as though they had been created by design and were not just a random piercing of the earth. And maybe I saw the holes that way because I was ten years old and over the winter had rediscovered the satisfaction of Chinese checkers. I still remember the crazy loopy feeling you get when you jump a whole row of marbles up one side of a star point and down another ... almost like that leap of childhood dreams—the certainty you can float down a staircase without ever touching the ground.
The holes stayed there for days, waiting for something, and we waited too, as light stayed longer and the magnolia began to leaf in a blur of soft green. One day there was a stirring in those thousands of little holes, and in each one a head appeared, slick and blunt as a bullet. In a matter of hours the locusts began crawling from burrows everywhere and soon we couldn’t walk anywhere without crunching their bodies underfoot like so much cellophane.

My parents and I lived in Washington, D.C. then in the section of turn-of-the-century Victorian houses called Cleveland Park. My mother liked to tell me stories of how in the days before air conditioning, people would travel from their homes in the swamps of Capitol Hill to summer in the higher ground of our neighborhood. She used to say she was born too late, how you’d measure time differently when it might take hours to make the three mile trip from the Hill up there by horse and carriage or later on the street car. In her stories my mother imagined long-ago servant girls in frilly white pinafores, their cramped hair held back by stiffly starched headbands, scattering moth balls among the family’s winter woolens in May as soon as the first wave of warm, muggy air came up from the Gulf. Winter woolens: my mind pictures never got beyond orderly piles of mittens, hand-knit and confetti colored, and long mufflers striped like barber poles waiting all summer for the children to come back to the Hill.

Who could call the surfaces of our lives anything but idyllic? The sprawling three story houses in Cleveland Park were built to make life bearable in the hot weather with broad and deep front porches so parents might sit on creaking wicker after the sun went down, slapping mosquitoes and watching the kids stalk fireflies. There were screened-in sleeping porches, too, where the family could lie on cots or rollaways at night ready to catch any faint breeze that stirred air so heavy it could have been cut into shapes like topiary trees. There was balance in those houses: every door or window had its opposite to encourage what breezes there were, and over the bedroom doors, transoms let in air and the security of the night light burning dimly in the hall.

By the time we bought our house on Newark Street in the early sixties, some of the things I’m talking about were memories... except for the summer heat. The neighborhood had gone fashionably seedy and all around us young families like ourselves moved in, mostly Democrats, the fathers working for the press or the State Department or on Capitol Hill. John Kennedy occupied the White House, and his name dominated the snatches of cocktail party conversation we children overheard; no one could yet know about an open limousine that would one day crawl along the streets of Dallas at the pace of a funeral cortège. Our brains had not yet been imprinted with the grainy TV image of the President, half his head blown away, slumped in the back seat.

Mothers stayed home in those days and some shared the cleaning ladies we were taught to refer to as Negroses and not colored. At five o’clock, these women changed out of their uniforms and caught the bus to neighborhoods so foreign to us they might as well have been in some other country. Mornings, as soon as the fathers left their driveways, contractors and repairmen pulled vans and trucks into their spaces. It seemed as if everyone but us was renovating, scraping wallpaper bouquets from the dining rooms, scraping the cast iron tubs with their ball and claw feet, turning maid’s rooms into walk-in closets, installing air conditioning.

When I came home for lunch from John Eaton during the school year, my mother was there, and just as I could have set a watch by the time my dad called me awake each morning, so I could have banked my life on the BLT and glass of milk she set before me at noon. Still I never entered the house without announcing myself first; I never felt certain she would answer when I called her name...

After the nurse told me I couldn’t stay at school that day, she gave me a white envelope and phoned my mother to say she was sending me home. Perhaps she asked her to come and get me; I don’t remember anymore. This much is fact: those locusts covered the sidewalk and the grass and the street. There was nowhere I could step without crushing them and all the while I was walking, more blunt bullet heads kept slowly emerging from their holes. The air was filled with a strange insistent singing that came in waves as if the sound were riding on the sea.

I once read somewhere that families like mine get by because they manage to convince themselves that what happens in their houses everyday is normal, but if normal means I believed for a moment that we lived the way my friends did, then the experts have it all wrong, because I knew early enough that what went on in our house was shameful and strange. Each time I left the Cohen’s house or the Glenn’s and walked back home to mine, each time I climbed the crumbling concrete steps and stood in front of the storm door with its flopping screen, it was as if I were in a fairy tale, about to pierce the briar hedge or step through the magical door into another country, but the land I entered lay on the dark side of enchantment, and I hadn’t a clue as to how to break the spell.
When I got home with my letter from the school nurse, my mother was at the dining room table smoking and doing her clipping. She had a pair of heavy shears she was always misplacing and she used those to cut out various articles from magazines and the Post and the Star.

She collected recipes and home decorating ideas, gardening advice, articles on education and vacation suggestions. The clippings were supposed to be filed in folders, but she never quite got to that stage before another day had come and with it more magazines and two more daily papers to add to the stacks. The clippings danced and fluttered and fell to the floor whenever the front door opened or a breeze stirred the window curtains, and after a while many of the articles simply shredded under our feet.

I gave my mother the note from the school nurse and she put it on a pile of newspapers without opening it. "Well," she said, "I thought I might run up to the Giant before lunch. Do you mind? I'm not deserting you, am I?" She was a sweet looking woman, scarcely more than five feet tall, though she had shared it with anyone. She would tell me about the Shirley Temple curls she had as a child, of how her mother would spend an hour each morning first brushing out her hair and then dipping her comb into a tumbler of water, forming each golden sausage around her finger. "Oh how I wriggled and fussed," my mother said, "and Mama would tell me, keep crying and I'll miss it all up and we'll just start over, and she meant it, too." Maybe that's why my mother never bothered much with my hair. She let me grow it long, though, and I was proud of it. I kept it smooth and shiny with a wire brush my father bought me, a hundred strokes each night, and it fell to my shoulders in waves with barrettes to hold it back on either side.

Now it was the hair that had me in trouble. After my mother left, I opened the school nurse's envelope and read every word of the bulletin from the D.C. Board of Health. It said head lice could happen to anyone, that it had nothing to do with cleanliness, but who could believe that, living as we did? Now I knew what the school nurse meant when she said I was "crawling." In the World Book encyclopedia I found two photographs magnified to show the louse's crablike legs and hooked claws. I mixed up everything I read about head lice and body lice and soldiers in World War I and even though I didn't know what "pelvic area" meant, I could suddenly feel spider legs creeping around all the secret parts of my body. My hair was alive, my scalp itching, but I couldn't scratch for fear of finding those bugs under my fingernails. I ran upstairs to my bedroom, threw myself onto the bed and howled.

After a while, when my mother still hadn't returned from the grocery, I went into the bathroom. In the shower, I poured Listerine on my hair. If it could kill germs, it could kill head lice. Then I shampooed with half a bottle of Halo and water as hot as I could stand it. I just stood there, letting that water scald the lice until I was sure everyone of them had to be dead. Under the bathroom sink, I found a can of Liquid Hairnet, and after I had combed out my newly washed hair, I sprayed it into a solid mass that moved from side to side when I poked it with my finger. I wasn't taking any chances.

My mother didn't appear to notice my hair when she got back from her errand, but then she often had a way of seeming to be in another place, her eyes just slightly out of focus behind her thick glasses. She didn't exist. She said, "Darling, have you had your lunch?" even though she must have seen the BLT she had set out for me earlier was still sitting on the plate. I simply shook my head with its stiff aureole of entombed, doomed lice and said, "No, I'm not hungry." My mother lit a cigarette. She said, "Burka's saved this nice wooden wine box for me. Wasn't that dear of them?"

I liked to do my homework on the dining room table after dinner where I could keep an eye on my parents. From there my father was visible, stretched out on the living room carpet looking up at the ceiling and smoking cigarettes while nearby on the sofa my mother sat with a book or magazine in her lap. Each time she finished a cigarette, she would take a final profound drag as if she were giving up smoking for good. Then she'd empty the ashtray into a metal wastebasket at her side.

Most nights they would both sip whiskey from water glasses and I could hear the buzz of their voices low and quiet. Sometimes when I came in to ask a question about an assignment or just to check on them, I would see my mother sitting on the sofa sitting through one of her boxes, tears dripping down her face, her nose running, a cigarette smoldering in a beanbag ashtray perched on the sofa arm. Once I remember her saying, "things just got away from me, that's all," and my father lay there with his hands behind his head and said, "You've
gad to let go of things, Squirrel, just let them go." I realize something, now that I've thought about it for so long, something I don't think my father ever understood: they just weren't speaking about the same "things" at all. At 2 a.m., long after the houses on our street were dark and he had helped my mother to bed, my father would sneak out to the trashcan on the street and dump the dripping sacks of bones and vegetable peelings he had filched from the kitchen.

The morning after I'd shampooed the head lice, Miss Chase our principal was standing at the door to my classroom waiting for me when I got to school. "This way," she said, and I followed her down the corridor to her office where she motioned me to a chair and told me to wait. In moments the last stragglers were gathered into their places; the halls were empty. I could hear the rise and fall of voices and I knew it was the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance coming from all the classrooms. In my head, I said the words, too, but when I came to the words "under God," I prayed that He would take away the head lice and just let me go back to school.

When Miss Chase returned, she carried an old paint smock like the ones we brought to school in kindergarten made out of our fathers' cast-off button downs. She made a great show of putting it on over her dark dress before she slipped on a pair of red rubber gloves and gingerly picked up a strand of my lacquered hair. The wooden clock on her office wall clicked off the minutes; I could smell my hairspray and the Johnson's baby powder mixed with stale sweat from under her arms. I remember that now and how she gave my shoulder a little push before she reached for the phone to call my mother.

We walked home down Reno Road, my mother and I, the whine of the cicadas so thick it seemed to drive a palpable wedge between us. My mother had changed from her usual Bermudas to a wrap-around skirt for the visit to school; she tapped a Camel from the pack of cigarettes in her pocket and sucked in the puff of smoke that hovered around her mouth. "Bitch," she said, "bitch, bitch, bitch," and I was certain she meant me. She had never cursed at me before; that word put me outside her protection somehow, as if she were speaking to someone who had never belonged to her.

When we got home, my mother got it in her head to wash my hair in the kitchen sink. In our house that wasn't such an easy thing to do. For one thing, she had to clear away the dirty dishes first. She stacked them on the drain board shoving aside rinsed out Campbell's tomato soup cans and empty tins of cat food, and when the tower of dishes threatened to fall over, she slammed it suddenly to the floor. The clatter was terrible; I felt the sound in my back teeth. And then, something seemed to give way in her. She turned and swept more soiled cutlery and drinking glasses, frying pans, a large stockpot and glass measuring cups off the kitchen table. I said, "Ma, Ma, please stop that; I'm scared," but she kept flailing her arms, brushing something away from her face.

For once, she needed to see surfaces; I understood that even in my terror as she kicked at bowls encrusted with dried cat food and knocked the old Crisco cans of bacon grease off the stove. In a moment, our cat appeared and began licking the salty fat seeping from the cans onto the floor. My mother wasn't finished. She yanked open the refrigerator door with such force that the announcements and cartoons pinned there by magnets spun off and sailed away. I never went in that refrigerator for fear of the exotic and treacherous plants that bloomed there in cartons of cottage cheese or cans of tomatoes. Now she hurled catsup, bottles of milk, pickles, jars of jams and jellies, eggs—anything breakable—onto the floor. Now I was sure our neighbors would hear and call the police; I was afraid to leave her, afraid to stay.

But when she started for the cupboards, threatening to lose her balance on the slippery linoleum, I yelled, "Ma, please, stop it!" She turned and with a fury I had not seen in her before, she slapped my face. I still remember it, not the physical pain but the deadened sound it made, the smash of flesh against flesh. And that seemed to calm her or chasten her; I don't know which. She washed my hair in the sink then with dish washing detergent, one hand pressing down the back of my neck, the glass and pottery shards crunching under our feet. In a strange way, I was grateful for the feel of her hands on me performing a task as homely and familiar as a shampoo. This was what mothers did for their children; this was the way things had sometimes been before.

Afterward, I stood near the open kitchen window, shivering and crying. The back of my dress was soaked by the sprayer, and water leaked down my forehead from under the towel my mother had wrapped around my head. I looked at her. She had a way of moving her head and upper body all of a piece when she was drunk as if it were an underwater plant slowly undulating from side to side. She said, perhaps by way of an apology, "What are we going to do? Miss Chase is calling the Board of Health on us if we don't get rid of the lice. What are we going to do? Things have just gotten away from me." She brushed invisible gnats away from her face. "How will I clean up this mess?"
It seemed to take hours for my mother to comb out my hair. We sat at a picnic table in our backyard, my back leaning into her chest. Dead locusts littered the table top and lay under our feet like desiccated autumn leaves. "Have I ever told you that you have my hair," she said, curling a strand around her finger. Here and there a single locust barely alive called, "Ch-ch-ch," like some tiny wind-up toy. When all the knots were untangled, I went up the back stairs and crawled into bed and dreamed that out of the soil that was my scalp, orderly rows of holes appeared and in each opening a giant louse emerged, eyes bulging in its strange bullet head. In the background I heard my father and the clash of cymbals: lid and trash can, lid and can.

When I awoke, the late afternoon sun slanted through my bedroom window. My mother had scotch-taped a note to the mirror on my dresser: "Gone to the thrift shop. Lunch in kitchen. Love you, Mom." This was no surprise to me. She always went to the thrift shop when she needed cheering up. I can still picture her there where she once took me so many times before I began to refuse to go anywhere with her. She would be happy, slowly making her way through the narrow aisles, (she never seemed to be aware of that depressing mixture of baked-in sweat and moth balls that made me gag), pulling from under a heavy pile a particular fabric that caught her eye. She liked flowered blouses with Peter Pan collars from Best & Company and pleated wool skirts and Shetland sweaters, just the sort of clothes our neighbors wore and might give away when the sweaters started to pill or the navy skirts got so the cleaners couldn't get the stains out anymore. I wouldn't wear the things she brought home for me; bad enough to imagine her leaving the house in a dress someone on New­ark Street might recognize. Mostly she stuffed the clothes in already overflowing bureau drawers and closets and didn't look at them again.

I read her message once more, searching for some deeper meaning, but the carefully shaped block letters were as anonymous as a ransom note. The house seemed strangely quiet for that time of day: no workman's hammer or lawn mower or the voices of children playing catch in the nearby empty lot. I might have been the only creature left in the world. Even the locusts had ceased their singing. In a way, I was glad my mother had gone out; when she came home with another shopping bag of clothes to add to what she already had, perhaps she would be feeling good again and able to forgive me for the shame I brought her.

I stripped my bed of its sheets and pillowcases and pulled from their racks in the bathroom any towels I could find, just as the Board of Health booklet had instructed. In the dank basement, the place my mother called "the black hole of Calcutta," where the bare ceiling was so low I could reach up and touch the jumble of wires and pipes, I skirted more of her wooden crates, broken chairs, rusting lawn furniture, shelves of canning jars filled with moldy tomatoes left by the previous owner. Piles of soiled clothing lay near the washtubs, and the washing machine was filled with washed blue jeans, half dry and evil smelling. I dropped my bundle on the cement floor and suddenly realized how very sad I felt; if I tried to talk to my dad, it might sound as if I were telling on my mother. I couldn't think of a single person in the world who could help me.

And so I came up out of the cellar with a plan to help myself. I went straight to the dining room first and when I couldn't find what I was looking for among the clippings and papers, I tried the kitchen, skirting the mess where the egg yolks had already hardened to solid yellow smears on the floor. The cat followed me, yowling. I noticed that my mother had cleared a place at the table and my BLT and milk sat on a bright-checkered placemat. Did she really think that a sandwich could appease my hunger?

In the living room I found what I needed in my mother's mending basket along with a single torn sock stretched on a darning egg. The scissors were heavy in my hand, solid. It seemed to me that what was about to happen felt like a ceremony or a sacrifice. It needed words, a prayer, but I knew of no prayer for what I was going to do. Outside the cicadas had taken up their call again, celebrating another cycle; the singing was louder now, demanding, pouring in through the torn window screens, filling every corner of the room. And then they came to me: the words I had to say. "You're right," I whispered. "I do have your hair." I gathered a lock of it in my fist, opened the scissors close to my scalp and began to cut through the tangle.