

“And We Shall Be Changed”: New York City, September 2001

by Rebecca McClanahan

Friday, September 7

We're at the breakfast table, the cat Leila curled on the chair between us. Donald has almost finished his bagel, but I'm still groggy--the second cup of coffee hasn't yet kicked in--and I'm staring at the living room window, admiring, in a bleary sort of way, the white gauze curtain we recently draped across the top. I look around the room, studying the few possessions we brought with us from North Carolina: the theater posters, my grandmother's afghan, the painting of a long-necked woman standing beside a peacock. I fantasize about planting something in the clay pots our landlords left behind, still filled with soil, on the tiny Juliet balcony.

The white curtain softens the view of high-rise offices and gives the illusion of privacy, although I know the office workers across the street can see us because we can see them. White is impractical, of course, what with the exhaust fumes from the Sixth Avenue buses and the steam from the ancient radiator, but the sheer curtain allows for at least a touch of light. Light is what I've missed most since we moved to the city three years ago. Although sun shines on much of New York--Central Park is sun-flooded, as is much of the Village, and the light scattering across the Hudson can hurt your eyes--, here in midtown, in the canyon of skyscrapers, sun peeks through our apartment shyly, for an hour a day at most.

When the first signs of light appear, I get up from my writing desk and move to the green rug where Leila is already stretched out. I lie beside her on my back, kick off my shoes, let the brightness pour over my face, my feet. Some days I think of my family and friends in North Carolina, the house we sold so that we could afford a furnished sublet here, the hundred-year oaks that shaded our yard, the lost garden and its changing light. But most days I just say thank

you to no one in particular, for this city, for the miracle of millions of toilets flushing all at once, for cheap, abundant flowers and unidentifiable produce on street corners, for the rich broth of languages I hear on my walks, for the public library where the check-out clerk stands on a stool, a dwarf with thalidomide sprouts for arms and a scar down the side of her face, who stamps whatever book I bring to her without asking any questions. New York is a great place to be noticed or not to be noticed, to find yourself or lose yourself, depending on what you need. A few years ago, walking in Central Park, I saw what looked like several small paddle boats floating in the south pond. They turned out to be part of an installation entitled “A-Z Deserted Islands.” The artist had anchored them so that they maintained a comfortable distance from each other without ever touching. The boats seemed to me then and seem to me now to be the perfect metaphor for New York City. Isolation is what makes living here possible. An island can be a refuge, like those islands in the middle of an intersection that keep you safe until the traffic clears.

I look across the table at Donald, who is brushing crumbs from his robe. He brings grace to the most ordinary gesture. It’s one of many things I admire about him--his easy elegance, the serene way he adapts to any situation. He stands to clear the table when suddenly, what was that? A noisy scatter, a crash, a hectic scramble too sudden to trace, and, in a flurry of fur and claws, Leila leaps from the chair and heads for the fireplace, where something dark is skittering across the metal grate, across the floor toward the bedroom. Then a squeal, a screech, and Leila skids around the corner. A mouse, I think for an instant--we’ve had mice before--but no, this was too large, with a sweeping tail. Now it darts from the bedroom toward the front window, leaping onto the white curtain, the theater posters, the peacock painting, then down again, across the floor and into the kitchen.

Donald runs interference while I corral Leila into the bedroom and shut the door, then rush to call the super, a handsome, dark-eyed immigrant from Montenegro whose young wife and five children live in the basement of the building. “A squirrel dropped into the apartment!” I shriek. “What should we do?”

He answers calmly, as if he's been saving the answer for years. "Open a window."

Which I promptly do, and within minutes the squirrel has leapt up to the sill and out to the balcony. I close the window and turn to Donald. "A squirrel," he says, shaking his head in disbelief. "Down the chimney."

"A wounded squirrel," I say, pointing to several drops of blood on the sill.

"On the wall too."

I glance at the wall above the sofa where the theater posters have been knocked askew: smears of squirrel blood. And dark red spatters on the peacock woman painting and on the gauze curtain. Donald heads for the kitchen. When he returns, sponge in hand, he quietly reports that there's blood there, too, on the floor, the cabinets. We try out scenarios: Was the squirrel injured in the fall, or did he scuffle with Leila? How did he get down the chimney in the first place? There are five floors above us, five other fireplaces into which he might have dropped. Five below us too. Why ours? And what was he doing on the roof of a midtown building, anyway? The park is several blocks away, across two busy intersections.

After cleaning up the blood spatters, Donald showers and dresses. We check the balcony, where the squirrel has burrowed into one of the clay pots. "He needs to rest," Donald says, reaching for his satchel. I confirm our plans to meet after work at the photography center. It's the last few days of Sebastiao Salgado's exhibit "Migrations," and I don't want to miss it. After Donald leaves, I release Leila from the bedroom--no sign of blood on her whiskers, her paws--and after a few minutes she settles into one of her favorite spaces, the edge of my desk, atop a manuscript. I put on my writing uniform--old shorts, tee shirt, slippers. Years ago I learned that if I dress in my worst clothes and don't comb my hair, I won't be tempted to go out for a paper or a bagel but will get straight to work and stay at the desk longer.

The traffic on the avenue is roaring, but the air in the apartment is stale and close, so I crack the window a few inches, switch my white noise machine to the forest setting, and sharpen a pencil. Suddenly Leila hisses, lifts her head. I glance to my left. The squirrel is squirming

through the open window, his dark glassy eyes darting side to side. I run to the window, shoo him back out and slam the window, hard.

That's when it comes to me: The squirrel has nowhere else to go. He's trapped on the balcony, five stories above the street. Inches from me, he's trembling, raised up on his back legs, his wounded paw held tightly against his pale gray chest. Leila hisses, moves toward the window. The squirrel crawls back into the clay pot. I pick up the phone and call the super, who says he has no idea where the squirrel came from. "Don't touch it," he says, as if I would touch a squirrel. I've heard the stories--I know they can be vicious when attacked, not to mention rabid. They're fiercely territorial. The super advises me to call "the city." I know what that means, so decide to wait and talk it over with Donald tonight. The squirrel might be dead by then anyway. He already looks dead, curled in the pot in fetal position, or what I imagine a squirrel's fetal position to be. With his head and feet tucked out of sight and his tail encircling his body, he resembles a Daniel Boone cap. He's breathing, but barely.

* * *

The sky is still light as we step out of the exhibit and onto the street. I feel dazed, stunned by Salgado's images: worn faces, bent backs, crowded boats and wagons, packed train cars stalled on tracks, veiled women, starving children peeking out from beneath filthy blankets, one-legged men struggling down rubble-strewn streets. Traveling for seven years in forty-seven countries, Salgado documented the global cycle of displacement and migration. His artist's statement articulates his goal: "I hope that the person who comes into my show and the person who comes out are not quite the same." Walking up Sixth Avenue, Donald silent beside me, the Dow Jones end-of-week losses scrolling in neon two stories above our heads, I wonder aloud how our city has escaped the sort of devastation so many others have recently suffered. Donald shrugs: "Just lucky, I guess." But nothing stays the same forever, he reminds me.

That was Salgado's message too. Cities like New York and London and Paris, Salgado said in a recent interview, are now "the towns of the past." The "towns of the future" are Manila, Bombay, Sao Paulo, cities that used to have four or five million people but now have fifteen

million or more. Migrants follow the food source, literally and figuratively. They're running not only from something but also toward something, call it opportunity, progress, a new start. That's why Donald's grandparents settled in New York after emigrating from Russia by way of Switzerland then Canada then Chicago. It's why my friend's ancestors came from Poland, and why my paternal grandfather as a child walked with his mother and younger brother across the Kentucky border into Illinois, carrying their possessions on their backs. Salgado was born on a farm in Brazil, moved to a small city when he was five, to a larger city when he was fifteen, then to the metropolis of Sao Paulo, and then, for political reasons, to France. "Today," he says, "I am still a foreign person living in a foreign country."

When we return home, Donald goes directly to the window to check on the squirrel, who's still curled up in the pot. He appears to be breathing, though it may just be the breeze ruffling the fur on his tail. Leila, no longer stationed by the window in alert mode, has returned to her accustomed spot on the sofa. Donald pours us each a Scotch and fills a small bowl with peanuts, his nightly treat. Before we go to bed, we agree that if the squirrel is still alive tomorrow, we'll figure out a plan.

Saturday, September 8

In the morning the pot is empty. We peer into the other clay pots and visually search the balcony. No sign of the squirrel. Donald opens the window a little, just far enough to position a hand mirror aimed at our neighbors' window. "He's there," he says. Our neighbors have a small studio apartment that doesn't have a Juliet balcony, only a ledge two or three inches wide. An amazing feat, I think, especially considering the wounded paw--leaping the five or six feet between our windows, several stories above a busy street, and landing on a narrow ledge. I feel relieved. If he can get to their ledge, maybe he can get to another one, and another. Maybe he can escape. But to where? The street below, furious with buses, taxis and foot traffic, half a mile from the nearest tree?

Well, now it's our neighbors' problem. I feel a twinge of guilt mixed with jealousy. They'll probably find a way to rescue him. They seem like the kind of people who will do the right thing. They're opera singers--she's Italian, he's Chinese--and we've never heard anything but beautiful sounds come through the wall we share. Even her sneezes are lovely, inspired, and his practice sessions are welcome interruptions to my writing day. Soon it will be time for him to start rehearsing the baritone solo for "The Messiah," which he performs every holiday season in theaters throughout the country. "We shall be changed, be cha-a-a-anged." It's one of my favorite arias, and I always stop what I'm working on to listen: "And the dead shall be raised incorruptible.....In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....And we shall be changed." Anyone who can sing like that can certainly rescue a squirrel.

Then I remember that we haven't heard any sounds from the apartment for days. They must be traveling again, and who knows for how long this time? Days, weeks? The squirrel could starve by then, or dehydrate. It's bad enough if he dies from a wound, but I have no control over that. Starvation would definitely be on my conscience. I tell Donald that we need to do something, lure him back to our balcony.

"Put some water out," he says.

"I was thinking maybe peanuts."

"My peanuts? My cocktail peanuts?"

"We can get more peanuts," I say.

"If you feed something, it will stay."

"I know." I lean over and kiss him on top of his head. "You're still here, right?"

That weakens him. "Okay, but don't use a good bowl." All the dishes in the apartment belong to our landlords, and in the past few weeks I've broken two. I find some plastic soup containers from the Chinese take-out, fill one with water and the other with peanuts, and slip them through the open window, beside the large clay pot.

"Squirrels aren't pets. Just remember that," he says.

I could mention the albino squirrel my great-grandfather kept in his farmhouse for months, but I don't want to push my luck. "Just for the time being," I say. "Until we can think of something."

I close the window, change into my walking shoes, and head out for the park. I walk there at least four times a week, usually in the afternoons when my work is done--past the baseball fields, the playground, the benches where the homeless gather beneath a canopy of hardwood trees lush with bird song and squirrel chatter. Central Park squirrels are descendants of wild squirrels that lived in this area's forests before the city was founded. They're amazingly adaptable, surviving in an environment not only alien but sometimes hostile. A hundred years ago, when the park squirrel population reached one thousand, park officials hired marksmen to shoot about three hundred of them--at close range, so the story goes. But the squirrels came back stronger than ever, thousands upon thousands of them, and they keep thriving. They follow the food source--not just the acorns and seeds scrounged from trees and bushes but also scraps dropped by human hands. Maybe that's how my squirrel (when did I start calling him mine?) came to us. Maybe he followed a trail of nuts or seeds from the edge of the park, across 59th Street, 58th, 57th, 56th, darting between buses, taxis, and then, when he saw that the food trail had ended, he went the direction squirrels usually go: up. Perhaps up the scaffolding that for two years surrounded the apartment building adjacent to ours.

Walking back, I turn the corner onto our street and look up to see if he's returned to our balcony. But no, he's clinging to the neighbor's window ledge, his tail quivering, his head tilted toward the sidewalk as if considering his fate. Is a squirrel capable of weighing options? He seems to be, glancing now to the street below, now over to our balcony. Can he smell the soil in the clay pot? Maybe his nose remembers the dirt where he burrowed last night. The wind is picking up. If he knows what's good for him, he'll come back to our side.

But what if he decides there's no way out but down? "Look," I say in desperation, grabbing the arm of the gray-haired man who's sweeping the sidewalk outside our building. Startled, he turns to me. I don't know the man's name, but he resembles our super--perhaps an

uncle--and I've seen him inside the building, emptying garbage cans, wrapping the cardboard recyclables with twine. I point to the ledge: "There's a squirrel up there." The man smiles nervously, the kind of smile you give to feral-looking people on the subway, to humor them long enough to make your escape.

I point again, more vehemently this time, but the man just shrugs. "No English," he says. Maybe he's only recently arrived in the city, like the super's younger brother who helped out last year. I haven't seen an older woman helping out, so maybe he came here alone and now lives with the super's family. I've never been in their apartment but I've seen all the shoes stacked neatly on shoe racks outside the door: men's work boots, children's sneakers, women's and girls' clogs in the latest fashion.

The man shrugs apologetically and goes back to his sweeping. Of course he goes back to his sweeping. What else can he do? English or no English, he's as helpless as I am. From this vantage point, there's nothing else to be done--short of fashioning a squirrel rescue net, an option I actually consider for an instant in a flash of cartoon logic that quickly burns itself out, replaced by an equally ridiculous yet very real instinct of, what? Tenderness, a feeling of maternal responsibility for this little rat-like creature? He looks so small and vulnerable, so visibly terrified, against the backdrop of the city buildings.

I hurry up the stairs--because of my claustrophobia I avoid elevators whenever I can--and look up the number for the animal control department. After all, I am a taxpayer, and for all they know, the squirrel could be a pet that escaped while I was cleaning windows. I'm sure they've heard stranger stories. They've got the equipment, the know-how. Surely they'll have a plan. I dial the number. A recorded voice tells me to push "one" for English, then another voice tells me that all lines are busy and I should just be patient. Soft music starts up, a third recorded voice tells me it won't be long now, and then a real live voice comes on. The man sounds very young, with a smooth Hispanic accent. I start in on the story I've rehearsed--about my pet squirrel who's trapped on the balcony--but the man is responding so sympathetically, with just the right amount of "yesses," "hmmms" and "go ons," that I decide I just can't lie to him.

“Okay,” I say. “He dropped in through the chimney.”

“Don’t touch it,” he says.

“That’s where you come in,” I say, launching into my plan: Together we catch the squirrel and then release him into the park.

The line is very quiet. “Hello?” I say. “Are you there?”

“I’ll be truthful. If we catch the squirrel, we won’t be releasing it.”

I thank him for his help. What did I expect? He’s an animal *controller* not a rescuer. I don’t ask him to describe the procedure. Lethal injection? A tiny gas chamber? My great-grandfather shot squirrels for food--my mother remembers eating squirrel stew and fried squirrel, which she describes as very tasty--and even sold the skins when times got hard. “He loved animals, though,” she said.

The phone rings. It’s my older sister from California who calls at least once a week. Jennifer, like my other sisters, believes in things like fortune telling, homeopathic remedies, animal totems, crystals, Feng Shui. So when I tell her about the squirrel, I’m not surprised that she suggests that the universe may be trying to tell me something. “Sometimes animals come into our lives to call attention to some aspect of ourselves we’re not taking care of.” I listen, more than a bit skeptical. It’s hard to embrace someone else’s beliefs, even your own sister’s. Still, it’s hard to deny the way the squirrel literally dropped into our lives: a dramatic entrance, to say the least. I tell her, sure, go ahead and do some research. See what the books say. In the meantime, I’ve got more pressing matters. There’s a real life squirrel trapped on the ledge, and I need a plan.

Sunday, September 9

When I smell coffee brewing, I crawl from the covers. Leila jumps from the bed and follows me into the living room, where Donald is sitting in the middle of the floor with the cat carrier in front of him, slipping a piece of twine through the front latch. He’s already dressed,

and the Sunday Times is on the coffee table. “He’s back,” he says, motioning to the window. I walk over and lift a few slats on the mini-blinds. The squirrel is sitting on his haunches beside the large clay pot, his front paws lifted. The two plastic containers are knocked over, and there’s no sign of the peanuts. Leila circles the cat carrier, sniffs, then runs to hide beneath the futon. She always hides when we bring out the carrier. I don’t blame her; usually it means a cab trip across town to the vet’s.

“A brilliant idea,” I say after a few sips of coffee, when Donald’s plan becomes clear to me: We put the carrier on the balcony, thread the twine through the window opening, and wait.

“Then, when he comes for the peanuts...,” Donald says, jerking the twine. The door of the carrier slams shut. “The tough part will be latching it. If an animal’s cornered, he’s likely to bite. I’ll put some gloves out.”

“He’s really quick,” I say.

“We’ll put the peanuts way back into the carrier, to buy us some time.”

Donald opens the window, which sends the squirrel scurrying to the railing. He sets the carrier on the balcony, sprinkling a handful of peanuts deep inside. Then he positions the carrier so that we can see through its gated door, and threads the twine back through the window.

I station myself on the floor by the window, my hand grasping the end of the twine. The squirrel lifts his head; his nose twitches. He’s so close I can see his white chest pumping small, quick breaths. There’s no visible wound on either paw, but it’s hard to tell since both are curled up tightly. I stay as still as I can, barely blinking. The slightest movement and he’ll be out of here.

Donald sits on the couch and starts reading the Times, beginning with the front page. I always go for the real estate section. It’s my addiction. Even though I know it will be years before we’ll ever be able to afford our own place, if even then, I can’t seem to help myself. I fantasize about townhouses, duplexes, maisonettes, prewar and post-war apartments, every kind of dwelling except a high-rise. I like being close to the ground, to use the stairs instead of the elevator. I used to spend every Sunday touring the open houses that were within walking or

subway distance. But after awhile it got discouraging to see that the places we could afford weren't places where we could imagine ourselves living. Besides, it saddens me to be in someone's apartment when they're not there. You start wondering why they're leaving, where they'll go next, and if the new place will feel like home. Donald says I take all of this too personally. But he wasn't a military brat, he doesn't know how it feels to have to leave a place just when you're starting to feel comfortable. In one Harlem brownstone, which looked as if it had been emptied in a hurry, I saw a drawing on the wall of a tiny, dark bedroom. It appeared to be a child's drawing, a crayoned replica of a rack with hooks. Above each hook, in a child's loopy printing, was a label: "belts" above one hook, "purses" above another, "necklaces" above another. It broke my heart. Some little girl's plan, it seemed, had never had time to materialize.

Donald finishes the front section and picks up one of the New York guidebooks we keep on the coffee table. "It's our day off," Donald says. "We can't stay here all day waiting for a damned squirrel." The "damned" is for my benefit, a kind of verbal bluster he puts on when he feels he's losing ground.

He's right. We need to see the sights. Once I'm out and about in the city, I enjoy exploring the neighborhoods, museums, and galleries, but unless I'm coerced, I'm content to stay in the apartment or to visit the neighboring haunts I've come to think of as mine: the park, the Y, the Japanese florist, the Korean greengrocer's, the Chinese laundry, the Irish pub. "It's a beautiful day," he says. "How about this?" His finger is on a page marked City Island, a small town in the Bronx that the guidebook describes as a mariner's village reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Maine. They'll need to revise their description, I'm thinking, since we've recently turned another century. Things change--in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. A now-extinct Indian tribe, the Naskapi, called themselves "the people from the place where things disappear," but lately I've been thinking that all places are places where things disappear. That's what Salgado was saying with his photographs.

The best way to get to City Island is by car, which will require an hour's bus ride into Queens, where we keep our twelve-year-old Toyota parked on a street outside our friends'

apartment. It's too expensive to keep a car in Manhattan, but we like having a car close by in case we need to escape--for a weekend, a day, or permanently, if things don't work out with the sublet or with Donald's new job. We've not used the car as much as we originally thought we would. For the first few months I thought I couldn't possibly breathe on this, well, island. I hate thinking of Manhattan as an island. If I entertain that fact for more than a minute, I'm gripped with a physical pain, like a fist pounding the center of my chest. One of the best things about living in midtown, with no view of the water, is that it's possible to go for days without remembering that you're marooned on a tiny strip of land with millions of other people, and that the only way out is through a few tunnels and bridges that, in the case of some catastrophe, would be grossly insufficient as escape routes. And the boats and ferries would fill up fast.

If push came to shove, I suppose you could swim. Roosevelt Island is close enough, but then you're back where you started from: an island, just a different one. There's no lack of islands near the city. Some are tiny, with strange-sounding names--Hog Island, Cat Briar Island, the Chimney Sweep Islands, Rat Island. Each day, part of the prison population from Riker's Island, the largest prison on earth, are ferried then bussed to Hart Island, more commonly known as Potter's Field, where they dig graves for the unidentified or unclaimed. The first person buried in Potter's Field was a young immigrant woman who was born at sea, was later orphaned, and died in a Manhattan hospital. Since then, there have been more than 750,000 burials. If Hart Island wasn't closed to the public, I'd like to go there just to see what it's like, to see how they mark, or don't mark, the anonymous graves.

Monday, September 10

I wake thinking about islands. I write in my journal *island*, *insular*, *isolation*, then throw on some shorts and a tee shirt and go to the bookcase where we keep the twenty-volume Oxford English Dictionary Donald gave me for my fiftieth birthday. Yes, the words are connected, as I'd suspected. I scan the page, skimming over entries. Island of Reil? This is news to me, the name

for the center of the cerebrum. Strange to think that a group of cells can float in the middle of other cells that are completely different in structure; even stranger they can all co-exist peaceably within the same body.

“Almost,” Donald says, and I look up from my desk. He’s dressed for work, kneeling beside the window with his hand on the twine. The gate on the carrier is shut.

“So the third time wasn’t the charm after all,” I say. When we got back from City Island late yesterday, the peanuts were gone. We replaced them and kept watch for nearly an hour. The squirrel kept lifting his head from the pot, but he didn’t budge. I watched from a distance, just barely out of what I estimated to be the squirrel’s sight line, and when he scuttled into the carrier, I hurried to the window, but he was too quick. This morning the squirrel’s been bolder, perching beside the gated door, even partially entering the carrier while we stand within inches of him on the other side of the glass. Twice I reached for the twine, but the squirrel scampered out.

“That’s it,” Donald says as he heads for the door. “We’re not a squirrel restaurant. Catch him by tomorrow, or we’re calling the city.”

After he leaves, I open the window and the carrier gate, repositioning the twine for the next attempt. Across the street, office lights start coming on, one at a time. A young woman enters a cubicle, switches on the fluorescent tube above her desk. She walks to the window, sips something from a cup, stares out toward the street. She has lovely hair, dark and heavy.

The phone rings. I stand up and walk to the desk. It’s Jennifer again. “You’re up early,” I say. It’s five-thirty in California.

“I couldn’t sleep.” She asks about the squirrel and I fill her in. “It’s very possible that the squirrel may be your totem,” she says.

Great, I think. Just what I need. A dirty, common, beady-eyed, nervous rodent. Why not a hawk, a tiger, a peacock? Something regal and wise, or at least beautiful. But I know enough about animal totems to know you don’t choose them. They choose you.

“The squirrel is all about balance,” she says. “Balance and preparedness.”

“I’m already balanced,” I say.

“Between aloneness and society,” she continues. “Give and take. Squirrels aren’t solitary creatures. They’re sociable, playful.”

“I’m playful,” I snap. True, I suppose I could be more sociable. I used to be, back in North Carolina. I get tired more easily here. New York is a tiring city. You see it on the faces of people in the subway, on buses, in restaurants and diners. Even those of us who don’t have to push carts, sleep on the streets, work twelve-hour shifts, live four to a room, or commute hours a day by bus or train, look tired. There’s just so much to take in. No wonder we seal ourselves off. “It’s hard to know how much to save for yourself and how much to give away,” I say.

“That’s where preparedness comes in. The squirrel saves nuts for the winter.”

“Exactly,” I say. And we’ve done that, socked away enough for several cold winters. Plus we have our Toyota, our escape plan. “You can never be too prepared, is my motto.”

“You can’t prepare for everything.” She’s right, of course. It’s impossible to prepare for the unexpected; that’s why it’s called the unexpected. “But squirrels are adaptable,” she reminds me. “They survive. Believe me, there are worse totems.”

For the rest of the morning, I play hide-and-seek with my totem. I plant peanuts; he takes them. I reach for the twine; he runs. “Your hours are numbered,” I say aloud, then catch myself. If I keep this up, pretty soon I’ll be joining the squirrel lady on the bench beside the south pond. There’s a pigeon lady, too, and even a rat guy who hangs out at the shallow part of the pond. “You shouldn’t encourage them,” a man in a business suit yelled at him one day, but the guy just kept sprinkling the pretzel crumbs. Can a rat be a totem? I guess there’s something for everyone out there.

In the afternoon I return to my essay about Salgado, but I can’t focus. It’s a gorgeous day, and I’m itching to get to the park. Salgado would approve, I’m sure. When he’s not taking photographs, he’s planting trees, trying to save the rain forests in his homeland. He may live in France now, but his heart is in Brazil. I fantasize for a moment about planting a tree on the

balcony. Could it grow tall enough to confuse the sparrows that sometimes perch on the railing? Would they build a nest in its branches?

Now a horn is blaring down on the street, and other horns are joining in. What is it this time? I go to the window to investigate. A fancy sedan is stopped in the middle of the street, sideways, blocking the yellow cab behind it. A tall, well-dressed black woman gets out of the sedan and marches over to the cab. She's fuming, screaming at the cab driver that she's just trying to park her car but he won't give her an inch, and how is she supposed to back into the space with him right behind her like that, blasting his horn? The cab driver, who looks middle-eastern, jumps out of the cab and stands nose to nose with the woman, shouting something I can't make out. I'm thinking it might come to physical blows. "Go back where you came from!" she screams, and someone on the sidewalk below my window--I can't see who it is--applauds.

So much for my theory of paddle boats and islands. Go back where you came from? What would that mean for New York? I imagine the streets emptying like they do when you show a film in reverse, time sucking us backwards, the sky filling with bodies, all of us hurtling back to where we came from: the cab driver back to Saudi Arabia or Pakistan; the super and his wife and children, linked in a chain of hands, flying out of the basement apartment and into the air above the Atlantic, heading toward Montenegro; the ashes of Donald's grandparents reconstructing into bones, skins, cells, then swirling back to Chicago, Canada, Switzerland, and finally into the small village outside St. Petersburg; all of us disappearing, even me, sucked through the streets of New York and down to North Carolina then South Carolina, to Maryland, California, then back into Virginia, Texas, Illinois, landing finally in Indiana, in an isolette in a small hospital in Tippecanoe County, my thumb in my mouth, and still the film keeps running backwards, a hundred years, another hundred years, another. Where are they now-- the streets of New York, the town of the past, the land where things disappear? No more. All that's left is forest, some Indians mending nets and stalking wild game, and a few hundred gray squirrels, high in the trees, building their lopsided nests.

Tuesday, September 11

Strange, the way things happen while you're busy doing something else. Donald is out the door, having left early to walk the twenty blocks down Fifth Avenue to work. It's a glorious, crisp morning, and I've opened the window to catch a breeze, but I'm in my writing uniform and my hair is standing on end so I know there's no chance I'll be showing myself in public. Later, maybe, before animal control arrives with whatever contraption they'll arrive with, I'll tidy myself up, but for now I'm at the desk with Leila in my lap. Across the street, a light comes on in a cubicle, and the dark-haired woman walks to the window and looks out, holding a cup in her hand but not drinking, just staring out as if waiting for the morning, or her life, to begin.

Then I hear a rattle, and glance toward the balcony. The squirrel is climbing into the carrier, his tail flicking side to side. On instinct I rise from the chair, spilling Leila onto the floor, and approach slowly from behind, in no hurry because I'm sure he'll outsmart me anyway. I lean toward the window, calmly reach for the twine, and pull. Easy as that. The gated door slams shut. I grasp the twine tightly with both hands, pull it taut, and hold. Then, my left hand still holding the twine, I reach with my right hand for the glove, bring it to my mouth, and, securing the glove with my teeth, wedge my hand inside. Leila is beside me, hissing, but there's nothing to do but open the window and reach for the latch. The squirrel is squeaking, squealing an unearthly cry, and now his teeth are on the metal grate, gnawing. I snap the latch. It holds.

I carry Leila into the bedroom and close the door. The squirrel is still squealing, a sound like nothing I've ever heard, and all I can think is I've got to get him out of here, back to where he came from. I slip into some tennis shoes, grab Donald's long-sleeved flannel shirt because it's probably cool outside, and with the way the squirrel is gnawing on that gate, I should cover up anyway, in fact maybe I need a jacket, so I slip that on too. I throw an old towel over the carrier and head for the door, down five flights of stairs, holding the carrier away from my body, the squirrel squealing, banging against the side of the carrier.

I'm heading north up Sixth Avenue before I realize how crazy I must look, in shorts and tennis shoes and a jacket, an old flannel shirt hanging beneath it, carrying--what?--some wild thing, a bird maybe, screaming to be let out. A woman with two large dogs is coming towards me as I cross 56th Street, and the dogs begin straining against their leashes, but I hurry on, trying not to look into the faces of the young businessmen in their crisp, tailored suits, carrying their briefcases and glancing at me quickly, then looking away. Now another woman with a dog is approaching, he's growling at the carrier, and the squirrel squeals back something, and why is it I'm the only one going this direction, I wonder, as I cross 57th, 58th, 59th.

My arm is throbbing. At the edge of the park I stop at a bench, beside a homeless guy with a shopping cart. "What you got there?" he says but I don't answer. The squirrel is quiet now--no sound, no movement--and I think for a moment maybe the excitement has killed him, and isn't that just the way things happen? After all the trouble, the five days of stalking and worry, I'll end up burying him in the park. I lift the towel and peer in. He's curled at the back of the carrier, still breathing. Maybe he smells the trees, the acorns. Maybe he senses something. I pick up the carrier and walk down the path that curves beside the pond, past the skating rink and the carousel, looking up into the bluest sky I've ever seen, searching for the highest tree. I find it, a huge oak among other huge oaks, surrounded by several large, smooth rocks. On one, a homeless man is stretched out, the sun streaming over his leathery face, a shopping cart parked nearby. He raises up on one arm and watches me for a while, then puts his head back down.

I set the carrier down at the base of the oak, take off the jacket and spread it on the ground, still damp with dew. I lean back on my elbows and look up. The tree is full and cartoon-green, sunlight flickering through the leaves. The air is crisp, clean. I breathe it in. Is this what morning feels like? I really should get out more. I turn on my side and put my head down, close to the carrier, and look inside. The squirrel is still curled at the back. With one quick movement, I spring the latch. Welcome back, I think, and mean it so much that I say it aloud.

Nothing happens. The squirrel is silent. He doesn't budge. I gather some acorns and place them in front of the open gate. In the distance, a siren starts wailing, then another and another

and another. There must be a big fire somewhere. I look up, but see no smoke, just green stretching in all directions, and the blue sky wedged, in small pieces, between the branches. The old Cat Stevens song comes to me: “Morning has broken, like the first morning. Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.” The squirrel peeks out of the carrier, his head darting side to side, his whiskers twitching. He sniffs at the acorns, then darts out, scurrying toward the base of the tree. A few more flicks of the tail, and he’s skittering up the trunk. Up, up, stopping at each branch to look down, as if he wants to tell me something. His tail quivers, his head bobs, then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, he’s gone. I watch until there’s no sign of him anywhere, just a shiver in the highest branch, beside a patch of blue, blue sky.

Published in The Kenyon Review