

The story below won the first Square Dog/BBC Radio 4 Northern Writing groups short story competition, and was broadcast in June, 2006.

It was also awarded the overall fiction prize in the Aesthetica Arts Magazine competition and published in December, 2008.

## SQUIRRELS

Winifred-May sits, as always, watching the squirrels.

Her chair is set in front of the long window, facing the trees where the squirrels climb and squabble and play. And there she stays, rapt, observant, missing nothing, taking it all in with mild, faded eyes, eyes of baby-blue, blue as the sky she only sees from the safety of the Ward.

For Winifred-May doesn't go out, won't go out, hasn't been out in sixty years. Nothing exists for her but that view of ancient trees, the leaf-cluttered grass, and the squirrels.

Winifred-May can't or won't speak, never has, as far as anyone can remember, but her ears are keen—hears what she wants to hear, some say. She's in the world, yet not of it, asking nothing, needing nobody. Life on the Ward passes her by: only the squirrels touch some small deep-hidden part of her. And when they are elsewhere, feeding or foraging, or nurturing young, she looks at the birds instead, without really seeing them, because she only has eyes for the squirrels.

Lost in her own world she watches, leaning forward, hands clenched, eyes following their quick, darting movements: holding her breath when they venture close to the

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window, gasping with delight when one sits up holding some small object between its paws.

The staff have tried, many times, to persuade her outside. “Go on, Winifred-May,” they urge, “take some titbits, talk to them. They’re tame, they’ll soon get used to you...have’em feeding out of your hand before you know it.”

But this is a step too far for Winifred-May: terror confines her, as if closer proximity to the squirrels will make them disappear. And when they do disappear, when darkness falls, she is lost and fearful as unseen demons claim her.

And come the worsening weather of Autumn and Winter, there are days on end when the squirrels retreat to warmth and sleep and shelter, and then Winifred-May sits lost and fearful that they may never come again. Throughout those short, dreary days she keeps her vigil, eyes fixed upon the bare branches, until sunshine or hunger tempt the squirrels out, bringing her world back into balance.

Strong, cold gusts shake the trees: the draughty old hospital shifts and rattles.

Unexpected snow comes biting, borne on the wind.

The night-staff arrive, bringing a blast of frigid air in with them. Helen, the Staff-Nurse, rubs her scarlet hands and stamps her tingling feet.

“Bloody weather,” she grumbles, “and me without me boots and gloves! Get the kettle on, somebody!”

Charge-nurse Joan Harris beams round her Ward like an indulgent granny, and the smile is returned manyfold, because, surely, everyone loves Joan, with her kind face

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and her comfortable figure and her halo of white hair. It seems that her pockets must be filled with treats for the patients and sweets for visiting children, her bag with half-knitted bonnets and booties for other people's babies.

The Dayroom, though shabby, is warm, cheerful with flowers brought by visitors. Oils and pastels and water-colours brighten the walls—fruits of the Art-Therapy Class. Curtains are drawn at the long windows, occasionally stirring as the icy wind seeks entry round ill-fitting frames.

The staff are fully-occupied: Helen with a fretful patient and the rest in search of hot drinks. Big, grizzled Jack heckles an imaginary speaker, and pale Annette lies curled in an armchair, earphones on, sucking her thumb along with an endless, barely-audible beat. A quarrelsome game of Scrabble is in progress at the table while the television blares, ignored, in its corner. And Winifred-May shuffles, in down-at-heel slippers, measuring out her own private Hell.

Over the years, she's had hours of therapy (difficult with a non-speaking patient) and umpteen sessions of ECT, plus every new drug on the market—but no amount of counseling or medication will bring her back from wherever she went all those years ago.

Charge-nurse Harris intercepts her, smiling, pulling her close into her own comforting bosom. She strokes the white, candyfloss hair.

“Been watching the squirrels again, Winifred-May?” she asks kindly. “Verminous little bastards,” she adds. “*I'd* skin the lot of 'em. Or poison them. That'd be slower.”

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Winifred-May flinches, averting her gaze, and Nurse Harris shakes her, hard. The smile never wavers, doesn't touch her eyes.

“Look at me when I'm speaking, you old bitch!” she says pleasantly. And Winifred-May turns her blank blue gaze back again.

“*That's* better!” Still the concerned tones, the fond smile. “*There's* a good girl. Well, now, I'm telling the gardener to shoot all the squirrels. *First thing in the morning.* And hang their miserable pelts from the trees! What d'you think of *that?*” Each word is enunciated with controlled, vicious squeezes to the frail shoulders—Nurse Harris never leaves bruises. And Winifred-May giggles, high and thin and wild. Laughter is all she has, because crying has never helped, and never will.

Nurse Harris hugs her closer: Helen's approaching.

“Oh! Think it's *funny*, do you? Well, little lady, we'll have to see about that, won't we?” Then releasing her grip, she smooths Winifred-May's hair and goes off to see about the evening medication.

She's been six months in charge of this Ward. She's read the notes, over and over, seen the records dating back sixty years from the time Winifred-May was admitted, aged thirteen, on the grounds of “Uncontrollable Moral Deviancy.”

Nurse Harris detests Winifred-May, with her blank stares and her shuffling and her mindless giggling, and she hates the squirrels, too, filthy tree-rats with their disgusting grey fur and their sharp claws and their scurrying, And she's determined to get *some* reaction out of the old cow--a scream would be nice. And she'll do it, too, because she's got all the time in the world, night after long dark night.

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And Winifred-May resumes her shuffling, overwhelmed with a new horror she can't express.

The staff settle round the table with drinks and sandwiches. Tracy, the Auxilliary, lights a cigarette, and talks again of the prowler who's been sighted in the hospital grounds which are wooded, rambling and largely unfenced; difficult to keep anyone out, or, for that matter, in. The intruder has been spotted several times, peering through windows and lurking in doorways.

Several mornings ago, he pounced on one of the early cleaners and dragged her into the bushes: she only escaped by biting his hand. Tracy glances towards the one uncurtained window, and shudders.

"Me boyfriend brings me now," she says, "right to the door. You still bussing it then, Joan? Ain't you scared?"

Joan laughs. "Like to see him try it on with me! I'd kick him you-know-where!" Displaying a well-covered arm, she makes a threatening fist.

Tracy nods towards Winifred-May. "She seems het-up tonight, poor ole thing. Must be the full moon. She's ever such a sweetie really."

Nurse Harris eyes the small, shuffling figure. "She is that," she agrees. "Can't think what's up with her. I'll have a word with her later."

The wind is frenzied now, lashing the trees, harrying the clouds to obscure the moon. Thin and cruel and ice-loaded, it whips the snow into trees and doorways and

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unprotected eyes. In their dreys, the squirrels drowse, dreaming out the storm, and Winifred-May sleeps fitfully, wondering if they're cold, if they're hungry.

And then the voices begin, raising the ghosts, saying those terrible things.

*Come on, Winifred-May, give us a smile! Must've smiled at him, you dirty little slut!*

*Thirteen years old! No wonder they put you away!*

And sees and feels again the high bed and the harsh lights and the terrible, unrelenting pain.

*Did you like it then, Winifred-May? Was it better than playing with dollies?*

Searing agony and the terrible, slippery thing there on the blood-soaked sheet.

*Whose was it then? Your father's, your brother's, your uncle's? Maybe you played with all of them?*

And the pale, bloodied face and the open eyes, eyes of baby-blue that look once into hers before closing for ever.

*It would've been a monster. Better that it died, Winifred-May. Your fault. Because of what you did.*

And Charge-nurse Harris tiptoes away, well-satisfied, to make herself a coffee.

Then Winifred-May giggles. And giggles. Because if she starts to scream, she'll never stop.

Winifred-May looks upon the empty garden and the stark, snow-laden trees. Wind gusts round the loose old windows; powdery snow dances above the drifts where Spring lies trapped beneath winter's covering.

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And she cocks her head, listening, as the voices chitter in her head.

Squirrel voices, high, thin and desperate: weaker than last time, and cold, cold, cold. Cold and hungry. The poor squirrels are so hungry. Who will feed them, how will they live? And who will save them from the man with the gun?

She must help them. Help them feed. Help them live. Help them come again.

The Staff are busy, the Day-Room empty. The half-latched door blows open, inviting, swirling snow across the lino. And Winifred-May, in flimsy nightdress and slippers, takes a deep, shuddering breath and ventures out to scatter crumbs upon the frozen ground.

Moments later, Helen notices the open door, peeks out, spots the ghostly flitting figure, and screams.

“What *did* she think she was *doing*?” Over cocoa, they shudder to think what might have been.

But Winifred-May is oblivious: not even the whisperings of Charge-Nurse Harris can penetrate. The voices are stilled, sleeping safe now, because she’s saved them.

When Charge-nurse Harris doesn’t turn up for her shift the following night, Helen is more than a little annoyed. After all, struggled in herself, didn’t she? Bloody inconsiderate. Could have rung so’s they could arrange cover. A good job it looks like being a quiet night. Even Winifred-May looks calmer, not pacing or muttering, in fact

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she's actually *sitting*. And Helen could swear that she's *smiling*, calm, contented, happy even. Bless.

Charge-nurse Harris, however, has been permanently delayed.

She's stiffening nicely, beneath a heavy fall of fresh snow under the rhododendrons, nose and mouth and fingernails full of soil from being forcibly pressed into the ground. By morning, she'll be as perfectly preserved as a frozen turkey, all her juices intact, her numerous wounds staunch. And when she's eventually discovered, she'll look almost presentable—until she defrosts.

Her clothes, though shredded, will still be on her body, and her bag beside her, everything intact and with no sign of robbery. The police will be very interested in the bag's contents: quite unpleasant and not at all your average middle-aged woman's kind of things. Especially the photographs.

No weapon will be found, nor any evidence of sexual assault. The police will redouble their hunt for the nocturnal prowler, an obvious maniac who could strike again at any time: they will draw a complete blank.

What will baffle the pathologist, however, and haunt his dreams for years to come, are the bites. Great raw lumps of flesh, he will discover, are missing, as though gouged out by wild, ravenous animals. Whatever they were, he will muse, dined well, for this was a fleshy, well-nourished woman.

And then, looking closer, he will find the puzzling imprints of teeth, tiny teeth, and, across any unbitten skin, a random pattern of small, clawed feet. Professional or not,

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he will permit himself a private shudder as he considers Cause of Death: this being his first-ever case of someone apparently eaten alive.

Winifred-May sits quietly in front of the window, eyes fixed upon the trees. The snow is gone, the sky clear, birds and buds seeking the welcome sun.

The emergent grass looks artificially green after weeks of winter-white. Slowly, cautiously, a squirrel peeps from the bole of the biggest tree and freezes, scenting the air. It is followed by another, and another and another: all of them sleek, glossy and plump. They have surely wintered well. They pause, and preen. Grey fur on grey trunk, poised against a sky of baby-blue.

And Winifred-May smiles as the grateful voices murmur in her head, and then settles down to watch the squirrels.