g. martinez

cabrera
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Return of the Squirrel Man</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author Notes</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Return of the Squirrel Man

No one here knows why he chose us. Sometimes it seems that he appeared in a dream and then decided he liked us enough to stick around after we all woke up. For about a year, he liked us enough that even when he left for a couple days or a week at a time, he’d end up coming back to us. Now, even though we have a bunch of TV news people camped out in town waiting for him to return, we don’t let ourselves talk about him—not with them and not with each other. It’s an unspoken rule that we keep to almost religiously. People like to forget the unpleasant things in their lives and that makes sense. But sometimes I get this need to talk about him and the time he spent with us. It’s like when you got a sore in your mouth and even though it makes no sense, you keep fooling with it anyway. Maybe that’s just what people do. People aren’t always sensible, after all.

As was our habit, we didn’t ask him much when he first appeared in town. We would come to know things about him just by seeing him every day, and for a while that was enough. He almost always wore the same clothes, so we knew he didn’t have much money. And he seemed to like being outdoors more than anything else. He could climb trees with an ease that almost made you question what you were seeing—that skill of his made him an instant hit with our kids.

He lacked that ease when he was inside, though. Then, he was mostly jumpy—like a kid who’d had too much candy. Normally, this wouldn’t have gone over very well with us. Fidgeting is one of those qualities that make a person seem suspicious, and we’re not ones to trust outsiders very easily. We live and work in one of those small towns where you don’t get a lot of visitors. At night, our homes make up little constellations that people pass on the interstate, and during the day, the dun color of our buildings make us almost invisible against the hills we’re backed up against. You’d think, then, that we wouldn’t be too accepting of a man who was always wearing the same clothes and who didn’t talk about himself and who preferred to be outside all the time. But the truth of it is that from the start, we considered him to be one of our own.

Maybe part of the explanation for this is that he caught us in a lie—a lie that we’ve told ourselves so long that we’ve come to think it’s a secret only known by us. Before him, we took it as a given that the world would pass by our town and never once think about us. There were times, sure, when we thought it would be nice if someone new would come around and ask us questions about ourselves and listen to our stories. If you live around the same people all your life, you never get the chance to surprise yourself. Everyone thinks they know everything there is to know about you, and you, in turn, start to believe that that’s even possible.

But then he showed up. It wasn’t just that he was new to us. There was also something about the way he watched us, and how his eyes seemed to take in very detail. Though he was a nervous man, he calmed down when we told him our stories. Whenever we spoke, we could see that he was concentrating on us. He would force his legs to keep quiet and his hands to stay still in his pockets for the duration of our stories. He was so focused on us that it didn’t take long before we got used to the attention and maybe after a while, we even started to need it.

Nobody who’s not from our town believes me when I tell them that for the year he lived among us, we never once asked his name. For the first couple months, we were so excited to have
someone new to talk to that we never asked him about himself, and after that, it just seemed rude. He was already one of us.

As a result, we never referred to him by name. But it should be said we never called him the Squirrel Man, either. That’s been the doing of the local news folks who’ve been staying with us ever since they got wind of what happened. They’re waiting for him to arrive in cuffs in the back of a police car. A monster who took advantage of a small town’s trust: that’s the story they’re looking to tell because that’s the story we’ve given them. They’ve been waiting now for more than a month.

Watching them kind of reminds me of those church-goers who talk about waiting for the Second Coming. I even heard that some folks from Hollywood are coming up to make a movie about him—The Squirrel Man, that is, not Jesus.

My wife would kill me for saying this, but there are similarities between the men. I’ve been thinking this lately. Both Jesus and the Squirrel Man were peculiar and both had a lot of people who loved them for how peculiar they were. It’s not every day you meet someone like that. Both of them made a lot of people feel loved and both had a lot of people who didn’t want them to leave. You can’t take it too far, I know. Jesus is Jesus and the Squirrel Man is who he is. And there is the simple fact that Jesus never did anything as horrible as what we’re accusing the Squirrel Man of. But still, it’s interesting to me when you can find similarities between people. It’s a habit of mine, I guess.

∴

As is the case with any relationship, over the year he was with us, things started to change. At some point, he stopped being just the friend we could tell our stories to. He started being the person we told stories about. He had this way of vanishing unexpectedly, and while waiting for him to come back, we passed hours trying to figure out where he was and what he was doing. Then we started having dreams about him, and after that, we started telling each other what we saw in those dreams. Some dreamed he lived in a shack out in the hills off the old highway—an old piece of land that one of the big oil companies and the state are always fighting over. Others dreamed that he lived in one of the caves on the other side of Rocky Peak. Some of the church-goers, they said that God was speaking to them through their dreams, telling them to pray for the Squirrel Man and his tormented soul. They believed that his absence was due to week-long binges and days of debauchery. There was no shortage of stories when it came to the Squirrel Man, and the longer he stayed away, the more confident people became in what they believed about him.

For the most part, the dreams were mostly harmless. But there were times when he stayed away from us for weeks and we started feeling the little pricklies on our necks, the beginnings of something like anger. We wanted to know that we weren’t the only ones dreaming. We worried that maybe when he left us, he’d forget us. It wasn’t fair and in our dreams, we started accusing him of things as a way of getting back at him.

Food started disappearing from our markets about that time and the store owners started grumbling. Nothing too obvious—small sacks of flour, a couple boxes of health bars that no one
ever ate. But then more expensive stuff started going missing as well: five-pound bags of sunflower seeds, a case of peanuts. No one ever saw him at the market, but that didn’t stop us from pointing fingers. If he climbs trees like a damn squirrel, then it seemed reasonable to think he ate like one as well. Only the church-goers defended him. They tried to dream tolerant dreams that lined up with the ideals they tried to live by when they were awake. As a result, they dreamed that God was still calling them to save his soul. They told the store owners to calm down. “What does it matter,” they argued, “a few pounds of food that no one eats anyway. Maybe he needs help. Real help. Spiritual guidance.”

The shop owners and the church-goers weren’t the only ones arguing. When the Squirrel Man stayed away for any amount of time, we all started in on each other, blaming our neighbor for not being nice enough to him. We blamed our kids for not giving him enough attention when he climbed our trees. We looked for any reason to explain why he was staying away until he’d come back to us, and then we’d forget our dreams.

There were still arguments when he came back. Toward the end of the year, whenever he’d reappear, we started acting like divorced parents fighting over a child. We argued about who would get to buy him a drink or a cup of coffee. We fought about having him to ourselves for a meal at home. Some of us even asked our children to give up their beds so he could spend the night. No one complained though. Our sons and daughters would’ve given anything to be able to brag to their friends about having him as a guest. There was nothing we wouldn’t do for him. Looking back on it, maybe that was the problem.

∴

During his last week with us, just before he disappeared, the Mayor realized how desperate we’d become and he instituted a daily lottery to decide who would have the honor of hosting him each night. We never asked him if that was alright with him. He’d made us suffer by leaving us. Staying with us in our homes was the least he could do.

Even with the lotteries, the fights got more vicious and the lottery caused more disappointment as the week went on. We didn’t care, and we were too busy fighting to see that he did. As a result, the more we wanted him around, the more he stayed away from us. By mid-week, he started climbing our trees not only to entertain our children, but also as if he was trying to get away. By the end of the week, it was like he was scared of us, and maybe, like he was judging us.

No one likes to be judged, let me tell you. What we did, we did for him—all that fuss, all the care we put into picking out meals for him and making sure he was comfortable when he slept over in our beds. We loved him; there’s no need to mince words. And when you love somebody, you don’t want to be judged or feared. And more than anything, you don’t want to be left behind. So we came up with an idea.

On the morning before he disappeared, we were sitting around the diner barely talking to each other after the Mayor announced the lottery winner for that day. The Squirrel Man hadn’t arrived yet, but everybody was thinking about him. Then someone yelled out that it wasn’t fair that we were making all this fuss while he was just going to end up leaving us like he’d done before. We
knew it was true. He never told us and we never asked him, but still we recognized the signs that he was getting ready to leave us again. His legs were starting to get antsy—more than usual—when he sat down with us. And even when we wanted to tell him a story, something that no one else had heard, he seemed distracted. That’s why as soon as one of us said what we’d all been thinking, the whole room agreed: we needed to convince him to stay.

From the diner we marched like soldiers to our homes and to our jobs and we told our kids and our wives and our bosses, we told anyone and everyone we saw about what we’d decided. And all of them were so excited that their faces turned every shade of pink and red, and some people’s faces even went all the way to purple.

He must’ve sensed what was going on because he didn’t show up that day like he usually did. We looked for him all over. We looked for him at the park and on the streets. We even looked inside the church, though we knew we wouldn’t find him there. By late afternoon, we almost gave up, thinking that maybe we’d missed him and that we’d have to wait until he came around again. But then I had an idea.

I’m not one to brag. I’ve lived here my whole life and why it is, I don’t know, but I’ve always tried to avoid looking at the world as if I had much to do with its workings. It’s just the way I am. But that day, it was me who changed our town for good. While everyone around me was giving up, saying that we were just going to have to wait, I couldn’t let it go. And then it dawned on me what we had to do and I called everyone I knew and told them to do the same.

By evening, we had chopped down every tree in town—even the old knotty pines that had lined our blocks for longer than any of us could remember. The sight of our treeless streets, it gripped the belly. Those fallen trees laid flat on the ground like corpses on a battlefield. They’d sacrificed for a cause they didn’t understand and didn’t want to be a part of.

Soon after, we had him. He’d been hiding out in the older trees by the pond, waiting for the sun to go down so he could run away from us. But a Squirrel Man without trees to hide in doesn’t get very far.

He wasn’t anxious or nervous-acting when we brought him back to the diner. I remember noticing the difference, though with all the excitement, I didn’t ask myself why he was acting so funny. Even his hands, which usually moved around every which-way, hung at his sides—lifeless. We were so happy to have him around that it wasn’t long before we started hugging him. No one said anything. It just happened. Like children playing with a doll, we took our turn holding him and only reluctantly let go so that the next person in line could have his turn. Pretty soon, we realized we just couldn’t hold him tight enough. It was like being hungry in a way that no meal could ever satisfy. So we started holding him closer, and pressing him to our chests.

It went that way all night and all day the next. Everything stopped in town. We didn’t go to work. Our children didn’t go to school. We didn’t eat or drink anything because all we needed was to hold our friend and let him know how happy we were that he had decided to stay with us forever.

It’s a miracle to love someone, and maybe that’s why we were so caught up that day that we didn’t notice him leaving us the way he always left us: sudden and unannounced. The realization crept up on us the way a sunset does. You’re in the light one moment, and so lost in the beauty of all those colors off in the horizon that you don’t realize how, out of nowhere, you’re surrounded by darkness all of the sudden. That’s what him leaving us was like: it was like a terrible darkness.
We started to pull away from his body—slowly at first. No one saying anything. Soft and quiet and respectful. And if his leaving us wasn’t bad enough, we saw that he’d taken a couple of our little ones as well.

Was it his way of getting back at us? He didn’t seem the vengeful type, but then again, we took his trees from him. What I know for sure is that at some point after seeing the two little bodies on the ground—the Hoyt twins who weren’t more than ten years old—some of us started to scream. A terrible noise we made that night as we pointed at the two little bodies crushed almost to the point of being flat. Like the rest of us, they’d been trying to get close to our friend, but at some point, they must have fallen under the weight of us. Now their eyes were closed and they looked as peaceful in expression as the Squirrel Man did.

Out of respect for Edward and Mary, the parents, we don’t let ourselves talk about that night, but I’m willing to guess that there are at least a few of us who are jealous of those children and the fact that they get to be with him forever. As for where our friend went off to with those little ones, people have their theories, but no one really knows. And no matter what my wife and her church-going friends seem to think, they don’t know either.

What I can say with some certainty is that he’ll never be coming back again. My wife would disagree, her believing in the Second Coming and all that other stuff that happens along with it. But like I said before: Jesus is Jesus and the Squirrel Man is who he is.
Author Notes

g. martinez cabrera currently lives in San Francisco with his wife and her cat. He holds degrees from Columbia and Harvard Divinity School and has had journalism published in The San Francisco Bay Guardian, The Columbia Observer, and other on-line publications. His short fiction was featured on the public radio show, Voices, and has appeared in The Externalist, Verbsap, Cantarraville, The Broome Review, and Drunken Boat. Currently, he is working on a collection of short stories and a novel. He lives, electronically at www.g-martinezcabrera.com and occasionally blogs at www.taoofboo.com.

Contrary to common belief, he is not a grumpy old man—YET.

About the Work

I used to drive I-5 between LA and San Francisco a lot when I was in my 20s, and like a lot of city dwellers, I never gave much thought to the people who lived in all the tiny towns in between. Sometimes I would get out and eat at some fast food place at a rest stop, and maybe there was an attractive girl behind the counter who caught my eye, but I never chatted because I was shy and because, sadly, she wasn’t real to me. I was too busy moving through, and she was standing still, a part of a community that I was too blind to see.

This blindness on my part was the first spark for “The Squirrel Man.” In the story, I wanted to think about the kind of town that many of us don’t think about at all, and I wanted to give the people who live there a voice and a person to listen to that voice. What I ended up with was a mysterious visitor paying attention to a town of people who had grown accustomed to being ignored.

I chose to write the story from the townspeople’s point of view because I wanted to explore how people—all people—come to be addicted to attention. I think a lot of us dismiss celebrity culture as unserious and ridiculous. But if you look at it in a different way and see all those reality show stars as more extreme versions of ourselves and our need to feel listened to, then celebrities become a little less removed from us and a lot less silly.

As for the style of the story, I was reading a lot of Steven Millhauser at the time, and I was purposely copying aspects of his technique: the unnamed narrator speaking for a group of people is one of the things Millhauser does often and well. I still am not sure why this voice gives me the creeps, but it does, and I thought it would be a good way to tell this story, which attempts to blend the fantastical with the real.

The only thing I would add here is a comment about the role of the fantastical in fiction. For some reason I find myself sometimes struggling with whether or not this kind of fiction is as valid artistically as fiction that deals with reality in a more straightforward way. In a world where “based on a true story” is a selling point, and where non-fiction often sells better than novels, the message seems to be that people don’t go to fiction to help them understand their world because they want “real” and “true to life” narratives. Fiction, so the argument goes, is play and imagination, and who has time for that with all the problems we face on a regular basis?
Now, if that’s true for “realist fiction,” then it would seem that stories that show something fantastical are even more out of touch with what people want and need. All of which leads me to want to make a case for fiction, and specifically for non-realist fiction that deals with what I will call the magical. Magic, here, should not be confused with Harry Potter or fantasy stories (though I like both). No, what I want in my stories is for a type of magic that is more subtle and internal. I want the fiction I read and write to create situations in which very typical, very human characters face something a little off from reality. The goal is to show how people truly are, and I would say that good fiction of this type might do this better than even the most reality-based book of non-fiction.

Reading fantastical fiction, when done well, should make a reader see things in her own world that she may have missed or taken for granted. The experience is akin to the person who almost dies in an accident and as a result, looks at the world anew. The extraordinary experience teaches us how to understand the ordinary day-to-day stuff of our lives. Admitting this might be dangerous for a writer with literary ambitions, but in a way I am trying to write stories that return the reader to another time when miracles were real. I don’t mean to say that they happened. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t, but the belief that miracles could happen at any moment made miracles part of people’s reality, and that openness made people more receptive to those experiences in their lives that may not be miraculous but that are extraordinary all the same. That’s the kind of logic I want as the foundation to my stories.

I’m not a religious person, but I believe that people are better off when they see their lives in terms that go beyond the mere physical and rational. It makes people more open and, arguably, more human. In short, I just want to write stories that make readers enter worlds that are not limited by what we usually call the “real.” You can call this kind of thinking spiritual. But I like magical better. As for my stories, you can call them anything you like.

**g. martinez cabrera on the Web**

[www.locowriter.com](http://www.locowriter.com)

[www.taoofboo.com](http://www.taoofboo.com)


[www.verbsap.com/09winterfiction/cabrera.html](http://www.verbsap.com/09winterfiction/cabrera.html)

[bbs.sfbg.com/2008/10/01/bend-sinister](http://bbs.sfbg.com/2008/10/01/bend-sinister)