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It's in the Water

And Other Stories

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Hit-and-Run

Based on a true story of how one lie could lead to another and...

Monday, July 27, 4pm

ood afternoon, it's Barney Fracas coming your way with music, weather and news from WBLD-AM 1540 on your dial. From the heart of America's Dairyland we've got you covered. Let's start off with a little Roy Orbison, and his ' Pretty Woman'." (Music plays)

"It's a beautiful day, 78°. We can expect showers this evening continuing on into tomorrow morning... *Excuse me*. This just in. There has been a terrible accident on Highway 97 about 5 miles north of town. The police are saying that a car has hit two small children on bicycles. One of the children, a girl, has been killed and a boy was severely injured. A passerby found them and called an ambulance and police from a nearby farmhouse. The ambulance has been dispatched but we have no word on who caused it or who the children are. We will give you more information on this as soon as we have it. WBLD-AM, your news source in Central Wisconsin."

Monday, July 27, 6pm

"Good afternoon. It's Barney Fracas coming your way with music, weather and news from WBLD-AM 1540 on your dial. From the heart of America's Dairyland we've got you covered. Breaking news. Authorities have learned the names of the two children who were struck today as they

rode their bicycles north of town on Highway 97. Nancy Jacobs, nine, was pronounced dead with a broken neck when she arrived at the hospital. Her brother, David, 7, has severe head injuries and is in a coma at St. John's Hospital. He also has multiple broken bones. John and Mary Jacobs learned of their loss when their children did not come home from an afternoon ride and they called the police. It is still unknown who struck the children. If you have any information please call this radio station or the police. And now, for all the children, Peter Paul and Mary's 'Puff the Magic Dragon'." (Music plays)

Monday, July 27 10:58pm

"This is Barney Fracas signing off after an evening of music, weather and news from WBLD-AM 1540 on your dial. Remember to tune to 1540 to get the latest news about the two children who were hit today while riding their bicycles north of town." (The radio station theme song plays)

Tuesday, July 28, 4pm

"Good afternoon. This is Barney Fracas coming your way with the latest news on the tragedy that is gripping Central Wisconsin. Police have discovered black paint on both bicycles that may have come from the car or truck that hit the two children yesterday as they were riding their bikes on Highway 97 north of town. Nancy Jacobs, the little girl who was killed, is at the Frederick Funeral Home. We are asking for donations because her parents, farm hands, can't afford to pay for her funeral. Please send your donations to the radio station, care of the Nancy Jacobs fund. Our prayers go out to the Jacobs family for the recovery of David at a time like this. David is reported to be coming out of his coma, but does not remember what happened. Once again, if anyone saw anything—happened to be driving along Highway 97 around 3:30pm yesterday—to please call the radio station or the police with whatever information you have. It will be clearing this afternoon and the high will be 67° just before sunset. I'm playing this one for all the little children that we have lost and especially for Nancy and David, 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone' by Bob Dylan."

Wednesday, July 29, 4pm

"Good afternoon. This is Barney Fracas coming your way with the latest news on the tragedy that is affecting us all. Those of us at WBLD in the entire community are trying to rally around the Jacobs family in their loss. Beginning tomorrow at noon, well-wishers can view the body of Nancy Jacobs at the Frederick Funeral Home. As you know, her parents are very poor, so we have set up a fund, the Nancy Jacobs Fund here at the station for her and her family in their time of need. The police still do not have any leads as to who may have caused the tragedy. If there is anyone out there who knows anything, please call the station or the police. We know you have the family in your prayers but we need your help to help us find whoever did this terrible thing. Please help us bring them to justice. It is sunny and pleasant and 75°. We can expect weather like this through the weekend. And now, for all the little children, especially Nancy and David, 'Chitty Chitty, Bang Bang' from the MGM movie soundtrack."

Thursday, July 30 2:15am

"Crisis hotline. How may I help you?"

"I... I... don't know. It's for my friend, Jim. I'm worried about him."

"Worried? Worried about what?"

"Well, it's... it's just that he... he can't sleep. It's bothering me."

"What's your name? I'm Tony. I'm here to help."

"I'm Ken, Tony. But it's about Jim."

"I know, Ken, but I'd just like to know who I'm talking... you know... so we can share."

"I get it, Tony. Well, it's Jim that's got the problem and he's bothering me. Keeping me awake too."

"Is Jim drinking? Is he taking pills or drugs? What's keeping him awake?"

"I don't know. He had a couple of drinks before he went to bed, but he always does that and sleeps like a rock. Since Monday though, he just tosses and turns and doesn't sleep. Keeps me awake. Makes it real hard for me to concentrate." There was a real sense of desperation in Ken's voice. (There was also a strange *familiarity* that Tony couldn't quite pin down.)

"Well, is Jim depressed over something? Did he lose a girlfriend? Tell me Ken, is there anything happening in his life right now that would make him lose sleep?"

Ronald W. Hull

"No, Tony. He's... Not that I can think of. I think he's getting sleepy now. He's calming down. I'm going to hang up. Is that all right? Is it okay if I hang up and let him sleep?"

"It's okay. It's your call. Remember, I'm always here at 11pm to 7am Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays on your crisis hotline. Bye for now. Call me if you need to."

"I will. Bye."

Tony thought, "that voice is sure familiar."

Thursday, July 30, 4pm

"Good afternoon. This is Barney Fracas bringing you the latest news on the hit-and-run of the two children of the Jacobs family on Monday afternoon. Nancy Jacobs will be laid to rest in the Westside Cemetery at 4pm tomorrow afternoon. Father Ivan Sebastian of St. John's will preside over the funeral at the Frederick Funeral Home at 2pm the family wishes to thank everyone for their outpouring of generosity, but is asking that only family and friends attend the funeral because of the limited space and their need for privacy. The public is welcome, however, at 4pm at the cemetery. Police still have no leads and no one has come forward with information leading to the arrest of the person or persons who did this terrible crime. Once again, we are asking you to remember where you were and what you were doing about 3:30pm on Monday and if you remember seeing or hearing anything out of the ordinary that could lead us in the police to who might have done this. It remains sunny and 82°. Tomorrow it should be about the same at the cemetery. We recommend hats or umbrellas to keep off the hot sun. And now, for all the world's children, an old favorite by Saxie Dowell, sung by Kay Kyser, 'Three Little Fishes'."

Friday, July 31, 2:03am

"Hello, crisis hotline. How may I help you?"

"May I speak to Tony? Is Tony there? Can I speak to him?"

"Tony's off tonight. How may I help you?"

"That's okay. I... just want to talk to Tony." [Click—he hung up]. Friday, July 31, 4pm

"Good afternoon. This is Barney Fracas at the Westside Cemetery. WBLD-AM 1540 is offering this live report as a public service to the

It's in the Water and Other Stories

community. The hearse carrying Nancy Jacob's body has just arrived here at Westside and the pallbearers are about to carry her casket to the gravesite. You can probably hear in the background the music being provided by the community band that plays weekly in the Central Park bandstand. Father Ivan Sebastian of St. Joseph's is leading the family and the procession to the gravesite now. Once they arrive we have a microphone set up so that you can hear all of Father Sebastian's words as little Nancy is laid to rest. Listen now to the music and to the father's words. I will only interrupt if necessary to let you know what is happening."

Saturday, August 1, 1:47am

"Crisis hotline. How may I help you?"

"Is this *Tony*? This is Ken. I have to talk to you."

"This is Tony, but I'm on another line. I'm sorry, but I'm the only one here. Can you call back, or... can I call you?"

"No... No... You can't call me. I'll call you back." [Click].

Saturday, August 1, 1:55am

"Crisis hotline. How may I help you?"

"Tony, this is Ken. I have to talk. I have to talk!"

"I'm sorry Ken, but I'm still on that call. Can you call me back in 10 minutes?"

"I can. But I... I..." [Click—Tony accidentally hung up on Ken]

Saturday, August 1, 2:05am

"Crisis hotline. How may I help you?"

"Listen, Tony. This is Ken. We've got to talk. Don't hang up..."

"I'm here, Ken. Got rid of that call, finally. How can I help you?"

"It's Jim. I'm so worried about him. He hasn't slept a wink since last Monday. He started taking sleeping pills, but they aren't working."

"Ken, I'm worried about Jim too. Is he drinking and taking the sleeping pills at the same time!"

"Yes. But it's not doing any good. He still isn't sleeping." There was an undertone of desperation in that familiar voice.

"Can you put him on the line? It's dangerous for him to take sleeping pills with barbiturates. He could *die*."

"I... He just wants to know what he could do to get to sleep. Do you have anything that you can do to help him?"

"I don't know. I'm not a doctor. All I can do is talk to him, and try to find out what's causing him to lose sleep."

"I think I know... Ah... well I think I know. You know that accident that happened last Monday?"

"Yeah—that hit-and-run where that little girl was killed?"

"Well... I think he knows something about that accident."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he drove through there about that time. He always does—going to work."

"What kind of *car* does Jim drive? They said there was black paint on the bicycles."

"I don't... I don't know. Don't know what kind of car he drives."

"You tell me that Jim is your *friend* and you don't know what kind of car he drives? Anyway, it doesn't matter. Is it *black*?"

" Well... I guess you could... could call it black. I think it's a Buick. *That's it*—a black Buick."

"Tell me, Ken. Is there anything else you noticed about Jim or that car?"

"Well, I saw him on Tuesday, I think, touching up the paint on the front of his car."

"And you didn't think it had anything to do with the accident?"

"That car is almost new. Jim had an accident with it right after he got it, and the body shop gave him that touch up paint. I... He is always uses it to cover up every little scratch. He's real proud of that Buick."

"Sounds like Jim has a real *problem*, Ken. He may be the hit-and-run driver. Can I talk to him?"

"He's not here. I was just calling about him, that's all. I... He just couldn't sleep."

"Well, I'm not a psychiatrist or lawyer. There can't be that many black Buicks sold in town the last couple of years. I could call the police and they would be on it right away. I really need to talk to Jim. Sounds like he's got a real problem."

Tony could hear sobbing on the other end of the line. Finally, Ken came back on the phone. "Tony, *I lied*. There is no Jim. I just couldn't bear it. I had to talk to someone. Thank God I got to talk to you. It's worse than you think. I'm not Ken. I made him up too. It's all been a pack of lies. I've been lying to myself ever since it happened. Ever since I hit those kids

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because I was fiddling with my radio trying to get Stevens Point and not paying attention where I was driving like I did in that first accident." [More sobbing]

"After I hit them, I just kept going. I could see them in the ditch in my rearview mirror, hoping that they would jump up and be okay. But, I had to be to work at four. I'm always on time. I give them the news, the weather, and music that I've carefully picked out before the shift. I couldn't afford another accident on my insurance. I'm a role model for the community and I couldn't have that... that *stain* on my reputation. I was shocked when I heard that the girl died and the boy was so badly injured. But once I started lying I just couldn't stop. One lie led to another until I had convinced myself that I could come in every day and broadcast that awful news without affecting the radio station, the community, or me. It's just that I couldn't sleep. That's why I called you. Jim couldn't sleep..."

Monday, August 3, 4pm

"Good afternoon. This is WBLD-AM 1540 station owner and general manager Clyde Adams. I know you are all expecting to catch Barney Fracas, but I have the sad regret to tell you that Barney turned himself into the police this morning and confessed to the hit-and-run death of Nancy Jacobs. You can expect a major thundershower this evening and...."

9/18/06

Three Little Fishies http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/lyrics/fishies.htm

The Present

Sometimes, all it takes to achieve greatness is a little help.

It was late in the afternoon and the wind turned colder, turning the pelting rain into wet, fluffy snow. Jeremy felt warmer though, because it was so miserable in the rain with his old coat nearly soaked through to his sweaters and underwear. Still, he couldn't feel his hands and his feet were numb nearly to his knees, making his shins hurt as he pulled his hood down tighter around his ears, shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets, and trudged on his rounds through the nearly vacant streets of the poor side of the city. At least the gangs weren't out to harass him.

Jeremy had nothing in his pockets for his day of trudging. Usually by this time, he'd found some vegetables thrown out by the grocery stores, and, if he was lucky, expired canned goods, dry goods, and even, old meat. He'd even stoop to taking someone else's partially ate meal, still in the bag from one fast food or another. Had to feed his family. In this neighborhood there usually weren't any easy pickings like aluminum cans—most people saved 'em. But whenever Jeremy would find metal of any kind he would take it to the dealers for some cash. Tried every payphone that he found. Heard that you could catch awful diseases that way. But, every once in a while, picked up loose change that people forgot. There were some vending machines on his route that his small hands could reach up into and get some chips or a candy bar for free. Jeremy hated doing that because it was just like stealing from the deli's or from some of the winos or druggies sleeping in the street. Never did that. But the streets were empty. With his hands frozen like they were, there was no hope of getting any vending machine food today. And

daylight was running out... Jeremy's mother's last words still ringing in his ears, "Don't you dare come home with nothin', ya hear?" as he went out the door hours before.

"I won't!" Jeremy had responded in his youthful, cheerful way. He meant what he said. And that's why those words began to taunt him now, as time grew short and he was still empty-handed. He'd get a whipping coming home empty. It had happened a few times before. Mom was desperate. She used to be pretty. But he was to blame. Jeremy had come along in her 16th year when things were going great for her in high school, and she decided to go out with this guy, still nameless, who raped her.

Mom's parents were so upset when they heard she was pregnant, they threw her out of the house. She had to quit school, eke out a living with odd jobs and had Jeremy in the emergency room of the city's welfare hospital. Jeremy, with no last name was given one by his mother because she wanted to erase the rape and her parent's scorn from him. To make it more legitimate, she assumed the same name, cutting ties from her family forever.

His Mom always chose the wrong man to take up with. Jeremy remembered fights with yelling and screaming and slamming doors with Mom ending up crying and bleeding. All he could do to help at those times was hug and hold her and feel her shaking and sobbing while he cried. Jeremy had two younger sisters, Sunny and Flower, both by different nameless men. The last man, who she called Johnny Red, left just when Jeremy was getting out of school in the spring. Jeremy loved school, was good at math and loved to read. He wrote stories about the wonderful places you read about in books and showed them to his teachers. It was about a week before school was over and they were going to have a picnic at the zoo, when his mother pulled him aside and told him. "Jeremy, you are my young man. You are the man of the family now. I need to have you go out, every day, and see what you can find or earn for us, for your sisters. You know I've got to stay and take care of them. I'd work if I could, but I can't earn enough to pay somebody to take care of you. And besides, nobody would hire me the way I look. So it's up to you, Jeremy. You've gotta find a way to keep us alive until you grow up and provide for us with a real job."

After that, they moved from the dingy little apartment they were living in to a garage apartment with a concrete floor that was getting colder every day. Jeremy found dirty old rugs to put down on that cold hard floor. There was no bathroom and the only heat they had was from the oven of the old gas stove. Sometimes, after the girls went to sleep, Jeremy would see his mother dress up and go out for the night. She always returned before dawn.

Sometimes smelling of liquor and cigarette smoke. Sometimes stumbling and cursing. Sometimes with money she hid, but not from Jeremy's sleepy eyes.

It was getting dark and all the streets and alleys were bare now. The regular garbage pickup had occurred that morning and with the storm there was no activity to add to the dumpsters. Days like this and the onset of winter had made Jeremy's job hell. In the summer, in sneakers and jeans, he could cover the territory quickly. There was a lot of trash to scan. Once in a while he would find bills or coins on the street. And he could always pick up a few bucks helping people clean up their yards, pull weeds, paint a fence, or sweep in front of a store. Jeremy was always watchful of gangs who would swoop down to beat him up and take his hard-earned findings. In the fall, after the kids went back to school, Jeremy often longed to be with his classmates, but enjoyed the freedom of raking leaves and finding treasures in the warm afternoons.

This was the last alley before heading home with his mother's words screaming in his head. As Jeremy turned the corner, he spotted it right away—gleaming gold—under a streetlight next to a familiar dumpster. Jeremy rushed to it, hardly believing his eyes. Before him was a large box, covered with gold wrapping and a velvety red bow on top. Jeremy had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life. What was it doing here, in this dingy neighborhood? Somebody must've lost it. Maybe it fell off a car or truck? Jeremy couldn't find any car or boot tracks near the box. Snow had gathered up around it, and, the box made the alley glow like the decorations downtown. Why hadn't anyone found it before? He didn't know. And then he saw the card, covered in snow, tucked up under the bow. With numb fingers that made it feel like he was opening the card with his wrists, Jeremy pried the card open. In bold red letters, in the streetlight, the card read, "This is for you. Take it home. Use it well."

Jeremy looked around to see if anyone was watching. All he saw was blowing snow in the streetlights. He went to pick up the box, but it was too heavy to carry. Luckily, inside the dumpster was a large cardboard box with holes in it for carrying that was just the right size. Jeremy slid the package inside the cardboard box, and, with the new snow, was able to pull the box along behind him. He had two or three blocks to go, but the closer Jeremy got to home, the lighter the load got and he was singing to himself as he kept up his rhythm all the way to the side door of the garage. By that time, both his hands and feet were warm from his exertion.

His joyous entrance startled Jeremy's mother and sister huddled in the dark close to the oven to keep warm. But when they saw the box, the girls were jumping up and down for joy. "Let's open it up! Yes, let's open it! Let's get it *inside*!"

They had to unlock and open the heavy old wooden garage door to get the box inside. It creaked and groaned and the snow blew in, but together they got that big box inside and the door closed behind. As if it were a precious heirloom, Jeremy's mother carefully removed the velvet ribbon from the box, remarking, "I could make a scarf from this," as she folded the ribbon carefully and placed it aside. It turned out to be one of those trick packages with a top that was easy to remove so they did not have to unwrap the box, just lift the cover off. In the candlelight that was all they had at night, the glory of what was in the box emerged. There were dolls, books, and winter coats, and boots for the girls. In containers there was sliced turkey, ham and roast beef, potatoes and gravy, stuffing, and vegetables fresh fruit, all the makings of several holiday dinners for a small family. The girls cheered, Mom cried, and Jeremy wondered what was next. A small, jeweled box with a hairbrush, makeup, and other things that a woman would need caught Mom's eye and her tears turned to glee. The quality of these items was like that of the finest department store. "I ain't never seen anything like this." She cried.

The only thing left in the box was a knapsack. Jeremy thought it would be very useful for his daily rounds rather than carrying an old pillowcase like he usually did. When he lifted the knapsack it was quite heavy. When Jeremy reached inside, he felt something hard and rectangular. A laptop computer emerged from the knapsack. Jeremy's Mom lit up. "Hey, that's sure looks nice. I bet ya could get a lot for it at the pawn shop." She had already sealed the laptop's fate.

Undaunted by his mother's crass remark, Jeremy opened the laptop up and found the button to turn it on. "It's a computer, Mom. Here, let me show you how it works." When the screen lit up, it lit up the whole room like a light bulb. As Mom took the food out of the box and began heating some of it on the stove, Jeremy ran through some of the tutorials on the computer with his sisters watching in utter amazement at his skill with the machine.

"Now *now*, put that thing down and have some hot food. You can play with it tonight, but tomorrow you must take it to Shapiro's and see what you can get for it. You're a man now and you have to leave toys behind." Jeremy could see the tear in his mother's eye, matching his, as he bravely held out

his plate to get some of the best tasting food he'd had in a long time. After a hot meal had warmed their bellies, Jeremy and his sisters crawled under the covers and played games on the computer until the battery died. Jeremy slept well that night even though his mother, once again, used the fine things she had to make up and sneak out into the cold night.

Early the next morning, after eating some of that good food and drinking hot tea his mother made, Jeremy dutifully put the laptop in the backpack and headed out into the bitter cold morning. One of his first stops was Shapiro's. Jamie, old man Shapiro's son, was at the counter, peering intently as Jeremy removed his pack and brought the laptop to the countertop. "How much can I get for this?" Jeremy asked shyly.

Jamie Shapiro picked the laptop up, turned it around, opened it up and pushed the power button. Nothing happened. "This here looks to be a used computer—doesn't work. Where did ya get it, *kid*, steal it? Not much call for these things in this neighborhood. If ya stole it, it'll fall on my head. Tell ya what. I'll give you 20 bucks for it. Keep it in the back so if the police come in they won't see it. *Deal*?"

Jeremy could taste the money. Twenty bucks would go a long way—feed them for the best of a week. Still, he knew that computers were worth a lot more than that. He held out his hand to take the computer back.

"Twenty-five dollars, and that's my last offer." Jaime croaked as he struggled in a little tug of war over the laptop. Finally, Jeremy had it back in his hands and put it back into the backpack. As he was going out the door he could hear Jamie screeching, "Thirty bucks?" And the door closed behind him.

An hour walking in the cold found him at the public library. He stopped there regularly to warm up, drink some water, go to the bathroom, and read a book before heading back out into the cold these days. Going straight for the children's section like he usually did, Jeremy put his backpack on the table and started browsing for a good book to read. Mrs. Clancy, the morning librarian, came over to see how he was doing like she usually did. The motherly type, Mrs. Clancy sometimes gave him hot milk or cocoa on cold mornings like this when there were no other children because they were all in school. Mrs. Clancy was supposed to report truants, but she knew Jeremy's circumstance. Besides, it was awfully lonely in the library otherwise that time of the morning. She knew he was a smart kid and the reading as good for him—as good as school.

"What's that you've got. A new *backpack*?" Mrs. Clancy was the last one to ever suspect that Jeremy would steal anything.

"I found it last night in a big gold gift box, right on the *street*! A note said that I should keep it. We got food and everything. You should see what else was in the backpack." Jeremy replied excitedly. He quickly pulled the laptop computer out of the backpack to show it to her. He wanted to be happy for Mrs. Clancy, but his tears gave him away.

"What's wrong? This is a mighty fine gift. From the looks of it, I'd say this computer is worth over \$1000, maybe much more. It's top-of-the-line. There is nothing to cry for."

"My Mom says that I have to sell it. I took it to Shapiro's and they said they would only give me \$30 for it. That's a lot of money, but I really want that computer and don't want to sell it for any money." Jeremy was openly crying by then.

"Now *now*, Jeremy. There must be a way we can deal with this. I tell you what. I just happen to have a \$20 bill in my purse that was just burning a hole in it anyway. What would you say if I gave you that twenty so that you would have money to take home to your mother, and I put your computer away for you in the closet where I think there's a plug for you to charge it."

"The \$20 isn't a gift, Jeremy. It's just that this old lady has got to learn these newfangled things. And you kids just pick them up out of thin air. I'll pay you \$20 a week if you will spend a half-hour every day teaching me how to use that word thing and other stuff they say is so fantastic on these computers. *Deal*?"

Jeremy's tears disappeared as quickly as they'd come. "That's a *deal*, Mrs. Clancy!" And he gave her a high five.

Thirteen years later, as the young CEO of an online phenomenon, Jeremy looked out of his 40th floor office to see the gray skies of the late afternoon and new snow falling. He and his staff had been working feverishly all day to fill over 100 gold boxes with goodies, topped with a red velvet bow. As night fell and everyone working in the city went home, his rented vans spread out over the poor parts of the city to find the places to drop their boxes. Jeremy himself placed the last box, next to a beat up old dumpster beneath that same old streetlight where he had found his present thirteen years before. He shed a tear in remembrance and raced off to join his family in the suburbs. He couldn't wait to see Mrs. Clancy again, joining them for the festivities.

12/24/08

Brian Bushytail and the Urban Forest

Texas State Highway 288, also known as the Lady Bird Johnson Highway, approaches downtown Houston from the south. Its wide median was merely grass until about 2006 when an ambitious project planted a forest of mixed conifers and deciduous trees, bordered by grasses and accented by flowering trees like Dogwood, Crape Myrtle, Mimosa and Magnolia.

Because of the tragic end that most squirrels come to, this children's story is for older children who can understand the true life and fate of squirrels in the dangerous city.

ather round now and listen to the tale of Brian Bushytail and the urban forest. The tale begins when Molly, Brian's mother, was a young girl. While her family lived in a vacant lot in an old oak tree in a poor part of town, Molly knew nothing of being poor, because she and her brother and sister lived well in the old tree with broken branches. Molly's mother scurried about amid the trash and tall grass and gathered food for them to eat and grow. More and more, Molly grew adventurous. There were mean cats and dogs in the neighborhood and her mother taught her to always be wary of them as she ventured out to gather seeds and nuts. After a couple of close calls with loud screeching tires, Molly also learned that cars were very dangerous. They came up swiftly without a sound and

would surprise you. Once, she looked up and saw a pit bull staring at her. She jumped so high she landed in a tree just out of reach of the leaping dog's vicious fangs.

It wasn't long before Molly grew up. There was a young squirrel named Charlie Bushytail that she fell hopelessly in love with. Her mother warned her about hanging out with young, inexperienced squirrels, but Molly would have none of her mother's complaining. Even though Charlie lived two blocks away near the Lady Bird Highway, they managed to meet almost daily to play and gather food in the trees and lawns between. One-day, Charlie was playfully chasing Molly when she suddenly changed directions and dashed across a street. Charlie was close behind, but she heard tires screeching and when she turned to look back a car drove off and Charlie was dead in the street. Molly was so sad she cried all the way home. Her mother was no help, only chiding her for not being more careful about cars. She found herself going over to where Charlie lived every day to remember him. From there, she could see the Lady Bird Highway. It was always filled with cars going very fast. Sometime, she couldn't remember exactly when, a magical thing had happened. A forest had suddenly appeared in the space between where the cars were going up and down the Lady Bird Highway. There hadn't been a forest there before, just grass, but now there were many trees and grasses of many kinds.

As time went on, Molly's belly grew bigger and she needed a lot more to eat. She found herself in Charlie's neighborhood more often searching for food and spent very little time playing. It was autumn and she felt the urgency to make a nest. One warm autumn afternoon she was working in the sunshine by the Lady Bird Highway when she heard a terrible crashing sound. After that, there were many sirens and flashing lights. She didn't pay much attention because those sounds were common in the city. However, one thing was different. The cars had stopped on the highway. They stopped for a long time. Molly had never seen them stop so long. Her youthful curiosity got the best of her and soon she was investigating, running between the tires of the cars on the highway, headed directly for that mysterious forest on the other side of the stopped cars.

It was amazing what she found. There were acorns, pecans, hickory nuts, and other nuts and seeds of many varieties. Molly went busily about her way burying her finds wherever she could. She could not believe all the food. This was like finding heaven in the middle of the city. She couldn't wait to get home and tell her mother, her brother and her sister. It was getting dark when Molly decided to go home. Just she started to cross the

highway, the traffic began to move and soon the cars were going too fast for her to scamper between them to the other side. She was trapped! In the days that followed, Molly grew very lonely and tried many times to cross the highway. Each time she turned back because the cars were going too fast. She explored up and down the forest for as far as she could go, but always had to turn back. She was very hungry now, so glad she had so much food to eat. She made a nest in a pine tree to sleep in at night. One morning, when she awoke, there were four little baby squirrelets in the nest with her. She stayed in all that day and the next feeding her young and enjoying their wiggly movement when they weren't asleep. She named them, Brian, Betty, Becky, and Betsy Bushytail. She knew the girls' names would be confusing, but she didn't care. She named them all in honor of Charlie, her first and only love. While the girls' names could be considered confusing, there was no mistaking Brian. He was much bigger and stronger than his sisters and hogged his mother's milk.

Soon, with a new soft gray furry coat and his eyes finally open, Brian was stepping out into his newfound world, the urban forest. The sound of the traffic did not bother his ears. He was born with that sound in them. Still, he could hear a pine needle drop. His sense of smell was so keen that he could distinguish a nut from a discarded French fry at 20 yards. The constant smell of gasoline, burned tires, and exhaust did not bother him at all. They were just a part of living in the urban forest. Sometimes, when he wasn't hungry, which wasn't very often, he and the girls would gather trinkets that the motorists had thrown by the road. Molly warned him that some of those shiny things, like bottle top caps, could cut him, but he paid her no mind.

Molly was stern in her admonishment to the kids, especially Brian. "You do not remember your good father, but Charlie was a wonderful and adventuresome squirrel. I loved him deeply. But he was not careful or cautious, and sadly, he died." A teardrop appeared in her eye. "I want your kids to promise me that you will not venture onto the road unless you are accompanied by me. Do I make myself clear?" Charlie acknowledged by clucking, shaking his tail, nodding his head, and giving her that look that always assured her that everything was going to be all right. And then he *forgot* and went out to play.

Bigger and stronger than his sisters and the only boy, Brian always ventured the furthest the fastest. Soon, he was conquering every tree in the forest, even the tallest ones. He learned to hide in the pampas grass that lined the forest so that his sisters couldn't find him. He learned that the

pampas grass was as far as he should venture. Beyond that, there was grass and the highway. Sometimes, cars would stop in the grass and he could hear people talking and see red lights flashing. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but they always got back in the cars and drove away. No people ever came to the urban forest. Molly and her brood were the only squirrels there. Brian felt like he was king of his own forest!

Every night when they slept in the nest, Molly would describe dangers that they should beware. "Be careful of the cat. Cats are very smart and will sneak up on you. Sometimes, they hide in bushes. Remember, if you bite a cat, hard, it will drop you and you can run. You are faster than the cat and can climb higher. Don't be afraid of the cat, but be wary. There are no cats here, so we are safe from them. Dogs are different. One dog is not a problem. Dogs will always let you know when they are coming and they are slow and clumsy. If one does catch you, bite him in the nose and run. Dogs are such cowards when bit in the nose. Never let a pack of dogs catch you. They can't climb trees like cats.

"Most birds are a nuisance because they don't like us. Mockingbirds, blackbirds, and crows will peck at you, but all you have to do is hide in the crook of a tree, or better, a hole in a tree and they can't reach you. Soon, they will tire of pestering you and fly away. But hawks and eagles are different. If you see them circling above or sitting on a tall tree across the highway be wary and be careful. They will carry you off and feed you to their children. Possums are mean, like raccoons, but if you stay away from them, they will stay away from you. There are no snakes in the forest, but if you see one, beware. Some snakes like to bite and eat us." Brian was dozing. He didn't know what any of these creatures looked like and his mother was boring him with her constant preaching.

One day, there was a big rain, so they stayed in the nest as warm and dry as possible. All of the traffic stopped on the highway. It was the first time that Brian had ever seen the cars stop. The cars were there a very long time. After the rain finally quit, Brian and his sisters ventured out into the wet, soggy forest floor to play. As usual, Brian was in the lead as they neared the underpass that marked the northern edge of the forest. Suddenly, up over the wall came the most terrible creature they had ever seen. He was about their size with short black fur and a long tail with no hair. His nose whiskers twitched a lot as he ran toward them in an erratic pattern from side to side. Scared to death, Brian led his sisters back to the nest. "Mama, *Mama*! This terrible animal is chasing us! Please, what do we do? We are so scared!" Brian and his sisters were all shaking as they huddled around Molly

for warmth and comfort. Molly took one look out the nest and declared, "Oh, I forgot to tell you about them. That's a *rat*. Rats are real common here in the city. They are very nasty and you should never let one bite you. Up here in the trees, they can't reach you. One rat like that is no problem. But a pack of rats can be big danger. Always run and climb a tree if you see rats."

So they stayed in the pine tree that day to watch the rat. Traffic started moving again. The rat seemed to be running around aimlessly looking for something. After a while, Brian got tired of watching the rat and started practicing jumping from tree to tree. All of the trees in the forest were very young and close together. When Brian would jump to one, it would whip back and forth and he would have to hang on to keep from being thrown off. It was all great fun. His sisters weren't big enough to make those leaps, so they stayed by their mother all day. Sometimes, Brian would slip and fall to the ground. When that happened, he was lightning quick to climb back up the tree, making sure that dirty rat wouldn't catch him on the ground. Finally, he was tired of playing around and went back to the nest for some warm milk and a good night's rest. The next morning, as soon as the sun came up, Brian left the nest and climbed to the top to look for the rat. He could see the rat lying by the road. The rat was dead because some grackles were picking at it. The rat must have tried to cross the highway and didn't have a mother to tell it not to. Somehow, Brian felt sorry for the poor rat. He blamed it on the rain. If the rain hadn't come and caused the cars to stop and if his home had not been flooded by the rain, and.... Brian stopped trying to think of why the rat died. His head hurt from all the thinking. Besides, he would never know for sure.

Later, when they were playing in the trees, and Brian was at the top of one, he heard the cars horns honking, tires screeching and smelled rubber burning. His curiosity up, he looked eagerly to where all the noise was coming from. He could see dogs running in out of traffic, causing the cars to try to stop suddenly from hitting them. There were five of them and they were big. His mother had shown him dogs before lying on the lawns across the highway. But he had never seen so many together and coming his way. Very soon, the dogs were in the forest and running back and forth. Brian chirped to his sisters to get in the trees. Becky and Betsy made it, but a dog caught poor little Betty just as she leaped for a tree. The dog grabbed her in his teeth and shook her like a toy, and then threw her up in the air. The other dogs caught her in their sharp teeth and shook her and threw her back up in the air again. Soon, Betty was lifeless and the dogs grew tired of playing with her. They all took off toward the other side of the highway with tires

screeching and burning as cars tried to avoid hitting them again. Brian hoped that a car would hit one, but it didn't happen. As quick as the dogs came they were gone. Brian and his mother and sisters rushed down to help Betty, but it was too late. Betty was dead. Molly began to push leaves, pine needles, and sticks over her dead baby's body. Brian and his sisters joined in. They were all crying. Later, back in the nest, Molly told her remaining three children that death was a part of life and that Betty had a good life for as long as she lived.

Even though they had covered Betty's body, the birds soon found her and began to peck away. Soon after that, even her body was gone. Brian hesitated for a moment every time he passed that spot, remembering his sister

Brian grew bolder as he gained strength and agility. One bright afternoon he ventured far out into the grassy area beyond the forest. He found some interesting seeds to check with his powerful nose to find out if they were good to eat. They were, and he was sitting there, nibbling away on one when suddenly a shadow appeared below him. He sensed danger immediately and jumped to the side. He saw a flash of talon and felt the thump of powerful wings beating next to him as he ran for the trees as fast as he could, zigzagging like his mother taught him. He could hear the wings and see the talons to the right or left as he ran. Once he was back in the heavy cover of the trees he was safe. The hawk glided to the tallest tree across the highway and sat there until it was almost dark, when he flew off hungry. After that, Brian always checked the sky often for birds, big and small. He was especially careful when he ventured out into open areas away from trees. That hawk came back and sat in the tall tree many days after that. But Brian warned his mother and sisters and the hawk had to eat pigeon to get a meal after that.

It started to grow colder each day and the trees began to change color. The young trees were heavy with nuts and seeds, so Molly and the kids got very busy gathering and burying food for the coming winter. Molly couldn't believe how fortunate they were to have so much food. They had pecan, hickory, sweet gum and oak acorns. There were seeds from several varieties of grasses, crepe myrtle, dogwood and river birch. There were pinecones. All of this made for a varied and nutritious diet, something that most urban squirrels have a hard time getting. Life was good. And then, the traffic stopped again.

There was a loud crash. Cars were spinning everywhere on the highway. Two cars slid into the forest and startled Molly's family harvesting

nuts. They were on fire. Soon, the tall, dry grass by the road was burning and the fire was moving quickly through the forest.

Molly chirped, "Come on children, follow me!" She dashed off toward the broken cars on the highway. Brian was the first to follow, but he kept looking over his shoulder to see if his two sisters were behind. They were. The smoke from the burning grass seared his eyes and made him choke. He kept running even while coughing and choking. He could hear his sisters' coughs behind him too. They sounded so weak compared to him. He hoped they would be okay. Molly dodged in and out of cars that were stopped with people getting out and talking loud. In a minute, they were across the highway and into the yards beyond.

Molly stopped for a moment to let her children catch up and looked back at their home. It appeared to be engulfed in flames. They had lost the harvest and their home. It was a good thing that Molly knew the neighborhood. Before nightfall, they had found a hollow in a huge oak tree, thanking their lucky stars to have a home. The next morning, they started harvesting again. There were live oak acorns and crepe myrtle seedpods, but no pecan or hickory nuts. There weren't many either, so they had to bury them carefully so they could find them when needed. And there were other squirrels. Molly had to protect them from squirrels that already had their territory marked and would defend it. She did the best she could, and in the end, they only had that small territory and the hollow in the tree to live in.

Brian grew more adventuresome and strayed further and further from the nest each day. He felt the sting of BBs as neighborhood kids took potshots at him. After the first one hit, he would find a big tree and make sure that they couldn't get a shot at him from any angle. Crossing the streets, cars would come silently and out of nowhere. He always had to keep his guard up. Molly told him that Charlie was an expert on the high wire. But she cautioned him. "Remember, always leap to the wire and walk along it. Do not touch a branch or a pole or another wire while walking on the wire. I have seen squirrels get electrocuted and it's not a pretty sight. Are you *listening*?"

"Yes Mama. I'm listening very carefully." His eyes were intent and he nodded carefully as he remembered being chased by the hawk and his sister's death. Only by learning from his mother could he stand a chance in this world.

Before long, Brian was a high wire expert. By using the wire, he could cross streets and enter other squirrels' territory without being attacked by children, cats or dogs. He was able to forage for food and get enough in

other areas so that he didn't take from his mother and sisters. He met squirrels too. One that he especially liked was Audrey Auburnback. True to her name, she had a beautiful stripe of auburn down the middle of her gray fur back. Audrey was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen with big brown eyes staring at Brian every time he passed, clinging upside down to a telephone wire. For a long time, that's all it was. They just stared at each other as he passed by. Finally, one day when all the leaves were nearly gone, he jumped to a pole and landed in the yard that was Audrey's domain. Brian approached her cautiously; finally, after much eyeing and neck stretching, he chirped, "Hi, I'm Brian Bushytail from the forest in the Lady Bird Highway." He stopped, too embarrassed to go on.

"Hi, I'm Audrey Auburnback. I've seen you so many times on the wire. It looks scary to me. You must be from far away. I've never heard of the forest in the Lady Bird Highway."

"It's real. My family and I were forced to leave when there was a fire. Maybe I can take you there and show you sometime?"

"Not now. My mama says that I'm too young to venture beyond the yard. But there's so much out there I want to know and I think she's holding me back. I'm grown-up, you know?"

"You sure are. She should be more like my mother and let you explore. I'll be back."

With that shy response and his heart beating wildly, Brian leapt to the pole and climbed to the wire. Too fast—he was out of Audrey's sight looking for food again. Brian was in *love*.

In the next few weeks, Brian visited Audrey often, bringing her nuts and seeds that he carried in his cheek pouches. She and her mother were grateful for the variety of food he brought because they didn't have all of it in their small territory. There were many mouths to feed and not enough food. Some squirrels were resorting to chewing bark off of trees. It gave them little nourishment and damaged the trees. Brian however, was growing stronger because of all the exercise and the food he was able to find in the wide-ranging area he searched. Still, he longed for the plenty of the forest by the highway. Sometimes he would go there and look across the heavy traffic to where he once lived. There were no leaves on the trees and the grass was scorched black. There was a tear in his eye every time he saw that sight.

He brought Molly and his sisters all the food he could. But, in midwinter when it was coldest and there was very little food to be found,

Molly got sick and couldn't leave the hollow. His sisters tried to keep her warm and healthy, but she grew thinner every day

Molly's last words to Brian were, "I dream often now, Brian. I dream of that forest where you grew up. I want you to go back there, take your sisters and remember me—*Promise*?"

"I promise, Mama." Brian replied, trying to be a squirrel, and fighting back his tears. Her last request spoken, Molly died.

With times so tough, even the girls started ranging far and wide for food. When Becky didn't come home one day, Brian and Betsy understood. She probably had met with an accident. Dogs, a cat, a car, some kid with a pellet gun, or electrocution on a power line. There were many perils in the urban forest. After many days, they knew she was dead.

Returning to the oak tree one evening, Betsy had a bright look on her face. "Brian, you know that slick looking guy from the yard across the street, Sammy Smoothfur? I think I'm falling in love."

Brian frowned. "Now Betsy, you know that squirrel's got many girlfriends. I don't think he'll take care of you."

"You are probably right. But love is love—isn't that how you feel about Audrey? Besides, you'll take care of me."

"You're right. *I will.*" Brian was tired. So he curled up and went to sleep."

Gradually, the days grew warmer and buds grew on the trees. Sometimes Brian and Audrey would eat them because they had nothing else to eat. Audrey's mother trusted her with Brian now because he was a good provider for both families. Audrey's mother was building a nest because she was going to have another family. Finally, one day, she chirped to Audrey, "It is time that you go out on your own. I know Brian will look after you. I have a new family coming and I must care for them." They rubbed noses, hugged, and parted. It was for the best, but Audrey had tears in her eyes all that next day. Brian tried to comfort her as best he could, but he knew how hard it was to leave your mother.

Since Betsy left to live with Sammy Smoothfur, Brian had had the hollow in the oak tree to himself. Now, Audrey joined him. They chased each other, laughed in their own squirrelly way, and generally, had a good time when they weren't searching for food. But there was a great longing in Brian's heart and it pulled him, every once in a while, to the side of the Lady Bird Highway.

One warm spring day after several days of rain, the pull was especially strong. As Brian and Audrey rounded the corner of the last house that

blocked their view of the highway, they were met with an amazing sight. Where the grass had been burned the ground was now covered in the bright blue of Texas blue bonnets. The trees in the forest where decked out in new green, enhanced here and there with white and pink blossoms. Brian was so excited that he began to turn cartwheels and had to stop himself from running across the busy highway into traffic. But he was an adult now and knew that he had to wait. He and Audrey camped out in a large oak tree overlooking the highway and waited. After several days, Betsy joined them. She pined, "I wanted to make a nest, but Sammy would have nothing of it. When I tried to persuade him, he left. I know I can count on you Brian." They all rubbed noses and hugged and Brian told Betsy of his plan to return to the forest across the highway.

After what seemed like a long time, it happened. There was the screeching of tires, the crashing of metal, the sirens, and the yelling of people. The traffic came to a halt once again, and Brian saw their opportunity. "Follow me!" He chirped. Before he knew it, he had dodged in and out among the tires and was running through blue flowers toward his beloved forest. Audrey and Betsy were close behind. It was the most joyous day of his life. He felt like he was back home—and he knew he was.

The nuts they had buried the year before were still there, the soot made everything smell a little burnt and made him sneeze, but he could still find them buried, just where he put them. After they had eaten their fill, it was time to build nests: two of them, one for Audrey and one for Betsy. Brian put Audrey's in the tallest pine tree. On the other side of the forest there was another tall pine tree that he used for Betsy's nest. At first, the sound of the traffic and the horns blowing seemed very loud after being away so long. But, like everything else, they got used to it, and the sounds of the forest were once again their primary interest.

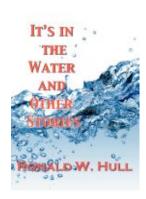
When the blossoms had fallen and the blue bonnets were replaced by grass, Audrey gave birth to three little beautiful squirrelets. The girls, she named Betty and Becky after Brian's sisters, had the Auburnback marking down their backs. The boy, much larger and stronger even as a baby, and the spitting image of his daddy, Junior, was all gray squirrel like his father. Brian was so proud. Soon after, Betsy gave birth to two more squirrelets, a boy, Sonny, and a girl, Susie. Even though their father had left, they were Smoothfurs for sure.

And so, with many lessons learned, Brian and his family lived happily in the forest in the middle of the Lady Bird Highway. The forest grew and the pine trees became very tall and the oaks very broad. Brian grew older

It's in the Water and Other Stories

and saw himself have grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When he was younger he would venture across the highway when the traffic stopped, but there was a time when he no longer wanted or needed to roam. He would climb the tallest tree in the late afternoon and look at the shining skyline of the city, so close, yet so far away. He knew why the people were in such a hurry to race there, for it was beautiful and inspiring—taller than any trees and shining in the sunlight. It must be what the people called *heaven*. Although he had faced many perils and wanted to go see this city, he knew he could not make it. So he would climb a tree and dream of the day when he would go to heaven and maybe get to climb a tree as tall as the shining city in the sunset.

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