



Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2021

We are sorry to be writing you at a time when our nation is riven by an irreconcilable conflict unseen since the 1960's, when we fought incessantly about whether the music of the Rolling Stones or the Beatles would last longer (a question only resolved fifty years later by the discovery that Mick Jagger is actually an Egyptian mummy). But this time, as you may know, the situation is much, much worse: there is a vicious war going on between birdwatchers and squirrels.

At first we were blissfully unaware of the problem, having decided to move into our treehouse as a way of avoiding the terrors of COVID, politics, and news about the Kardashians. While we were there, Pat developed a friendship with some of the birds who lived nearby. They would bring her gifts of twigs and worms, and in return she would teach them themes from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was all quite adorable, as long as you didn't mind having a bit of bird poop on your sleeping bag.

Unfortunately the treehouse turned out to be a bad idea in the long run (it doesn't have a roof, and even in Southern California there are occasional rainstorms—although what we call a “downpour” is what your average Oregonian would refer to as “a great day for tanning”), so we moved back into the house. But Pat soon missed her bird friends.

The solution was obvious: she set up a bird feeder outside one of the kitchen windows. It was a simple affair, consisting of a plastic tube full of seeds and a dish below that automatically refilled from the tube. The birds warbled their thanks (in D minor, à la Beethoven) and set to happily pecking away. It was a huge success—in fact, too huge. Because of course one of our resident squirrels quickly discovered the goodies and ate pretty much everything in a single sitting.

But Pat wasn't to be deterred by that sort of minor setback. She bought another bag of food. The birds descended and pecked away. The squirrel also descended and—well, “peck” isn't quite the right word. Pat bought a bigger bag. The squirrel got fatter. Pat bought a fifty-pound bag. The squirrel invited his family.

Pretty soon we were getting regular deliveries. Each Friday a dump truck would pull up and empty its load in our driveway; Pat would shovel it into the feeder as fast as she could open the bags. The squirrel invited his friends and *their* families. A few weeks later Geoff spotted signs attached to lamp posts all over the neighborhood: “Free squirrel food! Party every Friday night!”

It was clearly time for a new tactic. Pat bought a new squirrel-proof feeder online; it hung from the tree on a string that was too skinny for a squirrel to hold onto. That worked for a day or two while the enemy regrouped and figured out a new approach. Then the rascally rodent tried jumping from the tree trunk to the feeder; he missed and immediately fell flat on his cute little squirrel face. Undaunted, he scampered up the trunk and tried again, with the same result. The climb–jump–splat sequence repeated many more times while Pat stood at the kitchen window and cackled with glee (she can do a pretty good Evil Genius imitation when she wants to).

Alas, it was not to be. The next day Pat got up to find the squirrel hanging upside-down on the feeder, happily munching away. But how did he get there? She couldn't figure it out, so she set up a stakeout, waiting for him to return so she could see what she was doing wrong. Hours later, nothing had happened and she needed a quick break to grab lunch. When she resumed her watch, he was back. Foiled again!

Pat, having discovered that squirrel bristles are sometimes used to make watercolor brushes, threatened to pluck the little bugger's hairs out one by one. He chattered at her, reached back to his tail, removed three of the longest ones, and dropped them contemptuously at her feet.

Thus ensued a major battle of wits. Pat monitored the feeder as often as she could, but the squirrel was apparently hiding in the tree and waiting for her to go away. Over and over, he would reappear while she wasn't watching. But humans are smarter than squirrels (we *did* say that it was a battle of wits) so Pat took a standard Kuenning approach to the problem: she spent our retirement money on frivolous and unreliable technology. No way we were going to keep buying extra \$12 bags of bird seed when we could stop the squirrel with the help of a \$3,642.97 video surveillance system! The package arrived on our doorstep the next day, and it only took us a month to figure out how to set it up.

Soon, the mystery had been solved. Now you might be thinking that the squirrel had simply

climbed out on the branch directly above the bird feeder and leapt down onto it. Well, if you thought that you'd be wrong. In fact, he had been doing his *own* shopping. We watched the surveillance tape in amazement as he drove out in a toy fire engine, raised an extension ladder, and scaled it to reach the food.

Pat went back to the drawing board (literally; you may recall that she's been developing her artistic talents). A little rock made it impossible to get the fire engine close enough. The squirrel built a ramp over it. Pat tried a bigger rock; the squirrel climbed it and used it as a launching pad. Pat moved the wall farther away. The squirrel showed up in an airplane. Pat hung wires around the feeder so the airplane couldn't get close. The squirrel appeared at the top of the tree wearing a climbing harness and rappelled down to the feeder.

By this point Xandie was so upset at the absurdity of it all that she decided to flee to Estonia (with help from us to carry her bags). Now if you're like us, you're probably wondering where Estonia is. Sorry, we don't know either; we just got on the plane with her and got off when the conductor walked down the aisle yelling "Estonia! All passengers for Estonia exit through the left door. Don't forget your parachute!" But once we got there we had quite a bit of fun. The highlight was the night we were looking for somewhere to have dinner and decided it would be nice to get some Russian food. Geoff went online and found a promising place that was only ten minutes away from where we were staying. We were about to head for it when (this is true) Xandie said "Um, Dad, that restaurant is *in* Russia." Oops.

We settled for McDonald's.

After a week in Estonia we flew back to the U.S., leaving Xandie behind. No, we're not trying to get rid of her (at least not quite yet)—though she'll be in Glasgow by the time you read this. She claims to be attending a complicated graduate program in both places, although based on her Instagram posts we think she's actually majoring in baking and party hosting.

Oh, and Pat has ordered a bazooka.

Love,
Geoff

Pat

Xandie



The Enemy (watercolor by Pat)



Monitoring the Enemy



In Tartu, Estonia