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The Silver Acorn

The squirrels were busy, very busy. The time of year was approaching when everything would change for them and they had to prepare for what was to come. That particular time was winter. "Now," Clarence's mother said to him, "It will get really cold and the trees will stop making nuts which, of course, are our food. So, because there won't be any for a long while we must collect as many as we can and store them to last us until the warmer weather returns and the trees start making nuts again."

"You said we have to store them, Mum," said the young squirrel, "That's like putting them somewhere safe, isn't it? But where?"

"Well," she began, "If we're lucky we may find a hole in a tree where a branch has broken off, but more often than not, other squirrels will already have filled them with their own nuts. Another way to store them is to dig a hole in the ground and bury them. Then, when we are hungry we just go and dig up one or two. Right, enough talk," she said in closing, "Off you go and start collecting."

For Clarence it sounded to be pretty easy. There were still plenty of nuts around, particularly in the big tree where they lived. These, apparently, were called acorns and they were quite tasty. Scampering along a branch, he made it to the closest acorn and took it from where it was hanging. Next, he ran back along the branch and down the main trunk of the tree to the ground below. There were already a number of squirrels there digging holes and burying nuts, so Clarence set about doing the same. Having finished burying his acorn he was about to go back up into the tree for another when he had a thought. Looking around it all seemed pretty much the same with dirt and grass and leaves. How, he wondered, would he be able to find the spot where he'd buried his acorn? Close by there a small stick. "That'll do," he said to himself. Taking up the stick, he poked it into the ground next to his buried acorn so that he could come back to it. And he decided it might be best to bury any other acorns in the same area: his own little below-ground store.

The idea seemed like a good one until he returned a short while later with a second acorn. The stick was still there poking up out of the ground, but right next to it was an empty hole. Someone had stolen his acorn! Clarence tried a few more times, only to discover the thief or thieves had been at it again. At this rate he would never have a store of nuts for the winter. Tired from all of the scuttling up and down the tree and digging holes for no good reason, he figured he'd call it a day and ask his mother in the morning how to solve his problem. There was an acorn right next to him and he realised he was hungry, so he picked it and began to eat. "At least no-one's going to pinch this one," he mumbled through a mouthful of nut.

Being so tired Clarence went to sleep almost straight away to be awakened suddenly in the middle of the night. The branch he was on was shaking and there was a fearsome roaring sound in the air. A terrible storm had arrived. He could hear crashes close by as branches from trees were torn off and tossed around. Then some of the trees were uprooted and fell over. It

was very scary. Clarence called out for his mother, but if she answered he never heard because of the noise from the storm. As well as the wind there was something worse. Bright lights flashed in the sky followed by loud bangs as thunder and lightning added to the chaos. A really loud crack right overhead resounded and a bolt of lightning speared down into Clarence's tree splitting it down the middle. He panicked and, as every other squirrel was doing, he scampered to the main trunk, ran down it and out into open ground. Where to go – was anywhere safe? The frightened squirrel had no idea and he just raced off into the night.

Because it was dark he didn't know where he was going, dashing from one place to another, taking shelter under shrubs and bushes when he came to them. Eventually it was all too much and he fell asleep. The sun rising woke him and he looked around. The storm had passed which was good, but what he saw worried him. The immediate area was strewn with fallen branches and trees but none of it was familiar. There was no sign of his tree, although there were many others still standing. Maybe there might be nuts in one of them and he really needed some food. He tried a couple but they weren't the right sort and neither had anything he wanted to eat. So off he trudged through the devastation in search of a tree like his old one. After a long while Clarence had all but given up when he spotted a shape in the distance, a large spreading tree that had promise. The closer he came, the more excited he became. Yes, it was the right sort of tree! And there was movement among the branches, small creatures scampering up and down and along branches.

Stopping before it, he gazed up the massive trunk into the foliage above and from where he was he could see acorns. About to climb the trunk he heard a gruff voice: "What do you think you're doing? This is our tree. Go and find your own."

"But..." Clarence started, "I'm lost and I don't know where my tree is; and I am so hungry. Couldn't I have just one or two of your nuts?"

"No!," growled the older squirrel. He paused momentarily for thought, then tossed the acorn he was holding onto the ground in front of Clarence. "That's the best you're going to get. Take it and clear off, kid." With that he scuttled further up the tree to find another nut.

Clarence had a mind to eat the nut straight away because he was so hungry, but there was no knowing when he would find another so he decided it best to wait. Turning away from the tree and the unfriendly squirrel he began walking back the way he had come. Maybe there would be another tree of the kind he wanted. All he could do was keep searching. The day wore on and it seemed he would never find the sort he was looking for; then, as before, there in the distance was that familiar big and spreading shape. Hopes were rising for a while until he came close enough to see that this particular tree had no nuts or even leaves. It was completely bare. With a huge sigh, Clarence slumped down and stared glumly at the acorn in his paws. As the last nut he might ever eat he intended to enjoy it; at least he would try.

He had barely taken the first bite when a voice startled him: "You appear very sad, dear," said a squeaky, croaky voice. "Whatever is the matter?"

Turning to catch a glimpse of his visitor, there right next to him was another squirrel. It was a lady, a really old one by the look of her. "Lots of things," replied Clarence. "The tree where I used to live was destroyed in the storm; I've lost my mum and all of my family; and probably worst of all I can't find anything to eat. I don't know what's going to become of me. Who are you, by the way?" he added with a frown.

"I am Granny Smith," squeaked the old voice. "And you can stop worrying about food. Majestica will provide all you need."

"Majestica?" Clarence repeated. The old squirrel indicated the tree beneath which they were sitting. He glanced up. "I don't see any nuts, and the tree looks dead."

"Not dead, my dear," said Granny Smith. "She's just resting, and rightly so. Majestica has been here for as long as I can remember. Many years ago I was given the task of caring for her and she served the squirrels living in her well. Now, however, she has reached the time when she needs rejuvenating."

"What's that?" queried Clarence.

"It means she must live anew as she used to," explained the old squirrel, "And you have come along in time to help her."

"Me?" puzzled Clarence. "I don't know anything about rejuver-thingy. What can I do?"

Granny Smith raised a paw indicating the branches above. "High in the very top Majestica keeps her special nut, a silver acorn. I am too old now to climb up all that way, but you are young and can bring it down."

"What then?" asked Clarence.

"First find the silver acorn and bring it to me," said Granny Smith.

"Okay," said Clarence with a nod. In moments he was scuttling up Majestica, higher and higher. It seemed there was nothing up there but bare branches, certainly no acorn of any description. Then he spotted it above him glinting in the sunlight. It was silver alright – very strange. With a shrug he made it up through the top branches and took the silver acorn from where it was hanging. Hurrying back down to the ground he placed it before Granny Smith and asked: "What now?"

"Now, my dear, you must bury it," she said.

"What, like so it can grow into another tree?" suggested Clarence.

"Oh no," chuckled the old squirrel. "That would take far too long, years actually. Majestica can rejuvenate much quicker than that; *if* you bury her silver acorn in the right spot."

"How will I know where that is?" asked Clarence.

"By looking, my young friend. The spot is close to Majestica's trunk," she explained. "Go around it and look carefully. You will know the spot when you see it."

Although it was a big trunk Clarence took his time as he went round it checking for anything that was different from the rest of the ground, but it seemed all the same. Eventually he was back where he started. Granny Smith was still there, so he said: "I couldn't find the spot."

"Believe me it is there," stated the old squirrel. "You'll just have to look harder."

Clarence started off again, the second time looking not only at the ground but also at Majestica's trunk, at least the lower part of it. Then he saw something unusual, a short twig poking out which surprisingly had a green leaf on the end. As there were no other leaves on the tree he figured this one was showing him where to dig, and he raced back to tell Granny Smith. "Well done," she said with a smile. "Now, take the silver acorn and bury it deeply as far down as you can reach."

Clarence scuttled back to where he had seen the twig with the green leaf. Putting the silver acorn to one side, he began to dig, pawing the dirt and pushing it behind him. He dug so deep that his chin was almost touching the ground; then he felt something hard. Even though he didn't know it, he had come to one of Majestica's roots and figured this must be the place to plant the silver acorn. Lowering it carefully until it sat on the hard object, he scraped the dirt over it to fill the hole. That done, he went back and reported to Granny Smith. The old squirrel nodded her satisfaction. "Now all we have to do is wait. Let's find a comfortable place in Majestica, and I am sure she will reward you for your kindness."

Sure enough, part way up the tree there was an acorn, not silver but an ordinary one which Clarence was certain wasn't there before. "Eat it, then sleep," squeaked Granny Smith, "And in the morning you will see the fruits of your work."

Clarence didn't think he would be able to sleep at all, but he did; and when he awoke the sun was rising and shining on an amazing transformation. Majestica's branches were covered in green leaves and there were acorns galore. The young squirrel was speechless; not so Granny Smith. "There is one more task for you," she said, "A very important one. As I am far too old to care for Majestica anymore, I pass the job over to you. Tend her well, Clarence, and she will look after you and your family when you have one..." He was going to ask how she knew his name, but the old squirrel had gone, just vanished before his eyes.

Years passed by and as Granny Smith had said he eventually had his own family. There was plenty of food for them, too much really, so whenever other squirrels came along looking for a new tree, Clarence invited them to stay. Majestica seemed happy with this and continued to grow acorns for them all; even, surprisingly, during the colder months. So, neither Clarence nor any of the squirrels living in his tree had to worry about storing nuts for the winter.

He often wondered what had happened to Granny Smith. Maybe she had gone away to live somewhere else; but, although he had no real reason to believe so, he liked to think the old carer had actually become a part of Majestica. Was that possible he wondered? Well, he thought, a silver acorn had brought a dying oak tree back to life overnight. If that was possible, anything was. Having come to that decision, just before he went to sleep each night he would whisper a soft: "Goodnight Majestica, and goodnight Granny Smith."