

Raleigh and the Flying Squirrel Sometime ago

PROLOGUE. Flying squirrels are one of the more adorable and amazing rodents indigenous to Georgia. The folds of skin connecting the fore legs and hind legs, along with an exquisitely designed tail enable it to glide very long distances, like from a tall pine tree to the roof of your house. Their large eyes can be almost as expressive as those of your favorite pet. Being nocturnal, flying squirrels are seldom seen.

Raleigh (a loving, loyal courageous Westie of some notoriety), Gilda, and Don recently had the dubious opportunity to study (albeit briefly) one of these creatures at 4:30 A.M. from the comfort of their bed. Up close and in person, these critters are not all that adorable. Those large expressive eyes are really quite beady. Those aerodynamic folds of skin are reminiscent of a vampire bat. And that "cute" face can look more like "Ben" on a rampage than "Rocky, the flying squirrel". Let me explain.

ACT I. What kind of sound does a plantation shutter make in the middle of the night when jiggled? One person could sleep through it, maybe even incorporate the sound into a dream. To another person it may sound like a D-6 Caterpillar tractor about to crush you in your sleep. As you might have guessed, Don responded in the former; Gilda, the latter. An elbow to the rib cage and a "did you hear that noise?" roused Don from a deep theta sleep to near consciousness. "Huh, hear what?" "That noise in the shutter, Turn on the light!"

Although the lamps on the nightstands are mere inches from the bed, the wall switch controlling the lamps is a good fifteen feet away. When you have a D-6 Cat bearing down on your bed, fifteen feet can seem like a mile. Don sprang from the bed with all the alacrity of a half asleep middle age man. When the lights came on, all eyes were riveted on the offending plantation shutter.

ACT II. What do we see, but a gray head, two tiny ears, and two of the beadiest eyes ever seen this side of hell staring back at us from between the slats. At this point we couldn't tell if it was the ugliest plague infested mouse we'd ever seen or the cutest fuzzy flying squirrel in Dunwoody, Georgia. In this instant, Gilda, as if by magic, levitated to a standing position on the bed. Her eyes were the size of saucers and looked like those of a frightened deer in the headlights of an oncoming car. In the next instant she regained control of her vocal cords and let out a scream that would have raised goose bumps on Alfred Hitchcock. Raleigh, by this time, was on the edge of the bed barking wildly, first at the creature in the shutters, then at Gilda. His hackles were up, his nostrils were flared. He was prepared to defend us to the death.

Don alone remained cool.... Or was he dumbfounded? Gilda, not realizing that Don was already analyzing the situation shouted, "Do something!" It takes a crisis such as this to test a man's mettle; was Don up to the challenge? He bolted from the bedroom to assemble the tools weapons necessary to do battle with the intruder. Animals depend on fear and instinct to protect them in a crisis. Man, on the other hand, has the advantage of a superior intellect to devise a battle plan and the tools of destruction (in this case, all found conveniently in the utility room) with which to carry out that plan. In a few seconds (in retrospect, he should have thought about it a little longer) Don returned with his weapons of choice. In his right hand was a coiled 30 feet of Beam central vacuum hose. In his left hand were a "Cloth World" yardstick and his trusty Daisy BB gun. [OK, the stage is set, the curtain rises. Try to mentally capture this scene.]

ACT III. The antagonist (flying squirrel) upon seeing that Don was getting serious, jumps from the shutter to the finial of a nearby lamp, than to the lamp table, then to the floor and under a chest of drawers. Raleigh leaps from the bed with only one thing in mind; squirrel steaks! Gilda is still standing on the bed (high and dry, so to speak) in a pink flannel nightgown screaming incoherently. Don, our protagonist, clad in his underwear (briefs, not boxers, for the sake of that mental picture) swishes the yardstick under the chest of drawers in an attempt to stampede to squirrel into the hose of the running vacuum. (It is not clear if Don hoped to suck the squirrel through the hose or simply impale it on the end.) The squirrel will not be stampeded. He must be clinging to the underside of the chest of drawers in Batman fashion. Finally he bolts from the chest of drawers to a nearby dresser with Raleigh in hot pursuit. Again Don flails wildly with the yard stick and vacuum hose. One more time the squirrel darts from the dresser, but this time he makes a fatal mistake; there isn't another piece of furniture under which to take refuge. Raleigh, our hero, seizes the moment, and with the speed of a gazelle, the ferocity of a lion, and the instincts of a terrier, renders the enemy DOA with a single chomp and a violent shake. He immediately backs off as if he'd just broken his favorite toy. The episode ended as quickly as it had begun. After things calmed down a bit, Gilda quizzed, "what in the world were you planning to do with the BB gun?" "I thought if he sat still for a moment I could get a shot off" was Don's weak reply. "In the bedroom?"

EPILOGUE. To this day, we do not know how "Ben" got into our bedroom. In subsequent days, or nights, as the case may be, we realized that a small herd of Ben's friends took up residence in the attic. I can't say with certainty, but strongly suspect each squirrel wore wooden clogging shoes during their nocturnal escapades. Don purchased a humane, live trap (the size recommended for squirrels) and baited it with a delectable hors d'oeuvres consisting of whole wheat bread smothered with peanut butter and topped with black sunflower seeds. The trap was placed in a conspicuous spot in the middle of the attic. Every morning the treats were missing but the trap was not sprung. With each nightly feast the fatted squirrel's energy level and endurance increased. While some of the critters clogged, others took up bowling. Raleigh usually heard them first, then saw to it that Gilda and Don didn't miss the party.

Finally Don decided to play hardball. The humane trap was replaced with a traditional rat trap (the wooden one with red and blue writing that hasn't changed in a hundred years.... because it works). The whole-wheat hors d'oeuvres were replaced with a peanut butter topped carrot slice, which attached more securely to the trigger mechanism. Every night for a week we heard a SNAP!!.... One less flying squirrel in the gene pool. Don found a hole in the soffit the size of a quarter and patched it.

All is quiet for now.



Raleigh and the Flying Squirrel Revisited

Dateline: November 27, 2006

Yesterday, Raleigh, my best friend and companion of twelve years, succumbed to complications from severe pancreatitis. It was the saddest day of my life.

This morning at about 5:30 AM I was in my home office killing time on the internet. Deacon, Whitney, and Peg were with me, but I suspect they were all sound asleep. All of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something streak across the floor not five feet from my feet. You know how your eyes sometimes play tricks and you think you saw something that wasn't really there? Well my eyes weren't playing tricks, because in addition to seeing something I distinctly heard the sound of tiny razor sharp claws ripping through the finish of the hardwood floor at breakneck speed. I jumped up and ran into the hallway with Deacon, Whitney, and Peg right at my heels. We saw nothing. We went down stairs and continued to look around. Whitney saw him first; a little flying squirrel high on the wall of the family room clinging to the grass cloth wall covering. She jumped up on the nearest chair but was still far from striking range. I ran for my butterfly net, which at other times of the year is used to catch those pesky carpenter bees that wreck havoc with wood fenced, trellises, and house trim.

When I returned, the squirrel was still clinging to the grass cloth in another corner of the room with all three Westies barking like the hounds of hell. The squirrel was just staring at me in a most peaceful manner. When I approached with the butterfly net, he didn't even flinch. Surprisingly, I captured him on the first lunge. Now if any of you have ever gone mono a mono with a flying squirrel, you know these critters don't sit there placidly when approached by a human adversary. No, they run, they fly, they bolt like Superman on steroids. How strange! I took him outside and turned him loose. He scampered away in a flash with the dogs in hot pursuit.

Later that morning I got to thinking about it. The last time we had a flying squirrel in the house was the most fun Raleigh ever had. That was about three years ago. What are the chances of encountering another flying squirrel the very day after Raleigh crossed the Rainbow Bridge? And why did the squirrel let me catch him so easily.

We in the West don't, for the most part, believe in reincarnation, so I doubt that it was actually Raleigh. We do, however, believe in signs. Being the engineer geek type, I thought maybe if I calculated the odds of this happening by coincidence, it might shed some light on the incident. It's been nearly three years since the last great squirrel chase; the odds of it happening again are one in three years, or about 1 in 1095 days. The odds of it happening the day after Raleigh died are at least 1000 to one. And the odds of a healthy flying squirrel giving up without a chase are surely 100 to one, at very least. Well when you put this all together, you come up with 109,000,000 to one that this could have all happened by coincidence! No, it's more than that.

I am convinced it was Raleigh's way of telling me, "I'm OK dad, and I'll be the first one to greet you on the other side of the Rainbow Bridge. Don't hurry; I'm having a great time playing with Ali."

Dateline: Christmas morning, 2006

Gilda, the Westies, (Whitney, Deacon, Peg, and Gabby), and I were in the living room opening gifts. I commented, "If Raleigh were here he would be shredding the paper off of his and everybody else's gift right now". Raleigh loved to open all the dog gifts. He would rip the paper off, but never eat any. As soon as he opened one, he would race on to the next one.

Just as I said Raleigh's name, Whitney immediately looked up at the drapes above the window, alert, with eyes darting back and forth as if looking for... a flying squirrel! Gilda and I couldn't believe our eyes! We never teased her or talked about the last flying squirrel episode that would in any way cause her to associate Raleigh with flying squirrels.

I couldn't get it out of my mind. Later in the day when Whitney and I were in the family room, I said, "Whitney, where's Raleigh?" She stood up on her hind legs for at least 10 seconds looking at the top shelf of the entertainment center. I about freaked!

Everything in this story happened just as I wrote it, no embellishment, no exaggeration, and no explanation other than God's will.

Dateline: February 18, 2008

It's been over a year since Raleigh's last goodbye.

He's waiting patiently.

Don





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