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Saint Christopher and the Bearded Squirrel

I don't recall which birthday it was I knew I had quit counting. There were well wishes from my mother and most of my family. Friends had called to verify a small dinner gathering later in the evening. Katherine was there as she had been for the past two celebrations. She held a small wrapped box in her hand. It looked like jewelry was hidden inside.

"If you are going to propose let me at least shower," I said.

"I don't know you well enough for marriage. Be quiet and open it, you might like it."

I opened it.

Somewhere deep in my chest something began to stir. The coughing became ferocious as if I was trying to cough up a buried memory.

"If you don't like it just say so," Katherine said.

I heard something. It sounded like a voice I knew and cared for. I turned toward it and reached out my hand. She took it.

"Katie, I have to tell you a story. You may not like it."

"It's usually serious when you call me Katie."

"It was."

All my mother's five sons were given silver Saint Christopher's medals that Christmas many years ago. My mother said that since she worked two jobs, and our father was nowhere to be found, we needed protection when she wasn't around.

"Wade, I think you will need this more than the others. You will go to places none of them will go to," Mom whispered.

I learned Saint Christopher was the Patron Saint of travelers. Wherever a person went he traveled to as well and kept an eye on things. I was only eight and could not imagine where I would be going but I would take any help available.

My travels of that time included the woods behind my house. Oak trees lined the creek that flowed into a swamp. Parts of the ground flowed like molten rivers of mud. I saw my first dead animal there in that swamp. It was a cat of some kind. I knew it was not a house cat. Enough of its flesh had fallen away to reveal large teeth and sharp fangs that were designed to kill.

I had lost a shoe in the mud of that swamp. My leg sank almost to my knee and when I finally got it out my shoe was gone. With watch in pocket my arm reached into the muck as far as it could. The shoe was gone and I was left in the situation of explaining how I lost one shoe.

Inside the swamp was an island of solid ground. This island was lined with oaks. The oaks were filled with squirrels and their nest. The squirrels ran from branch to tree, sky to ground. Over time they became used to my presence in their world. Their world became my oasis.

There were games played in the house I lived in. These were games no eight year old should ever experience and never be taught by family.

Word had spread among the neighborhood kids of what took place in that house on Columbus Drive. No one should go there because there was a man there that did things to young boys. I didn't go there, I lived there.

The island in the swamp soon became the place I spent more of my time. It became something of a second home. In many ways it was an oasis. There was no

trouble there. Fear, confusion and doubt were nowhere to be noticed. There were simply squirrels of all types on this island. One had a red beard on his gray face. I called him Willie. He didn't call me anything.

I returned to the streets and streetlights that made the neighborhood. Things were being said and names were called.

"You live in that house? I knew you were weird," Brian, the street's residing bully, said to me.

"I'll give you the first punch."

He started to turn then cocked his fist.

He was on his back and I was on top of him. At some point I got tired of hitting him so I got up. He ran away crying and I just ran. I jumped the creek and tore through the swamp to my oasis.

My elbows rested on my knees and face in my hands. My hands were scraped and bruised but they didn't hurt. Nothing hurt.

I ripped the Saint Christopher necklace off, threw it, and began to cry.

Soon I could not clearly see the world around me. Then my ears caught a rustling of leaves. The short burst of leaves shuffling moved closer and was soon at my feet. I cut off my tears, wiped my eyes, and looked down. At my feet was the bearded squirrel. He moved to my side and sat on his back legs. His front paws picked an acorn and he started nibbling. He sat beside me for what seemed to be hours.

I would never cry again and the games in my house ended that day.

"I never told anyone that story. It ended on that island with a bearded squirrel I called Willie."

I looked down at Katherine's gift.

"Your mother said she had given all of her sons a Saint Christopher's medal but you had lost yours. If I had any idea of what happened I would have bought you something else," Katherine said.

"I think it may be just what I needed."

I removed it from the box and she fastened it around my neck.