

Polly's Got My Number

A 'nutty' story

By Susan Weiner



"POLLY, ARE YOU HUNGRY? WANT SOME MORE?"
I'M BENDING OVER, COOING AT A LITTLE BUNDLE OF ENERGY. BUT SHE'S NO BABY. POLLY IS A FULL-GROWN GRAY SQUIRREL. MY NEIGHBORS RECKONED THAT MY HUSBAND AND I WERE NUTS WHEN WE STARTED FEEDING THE SQUIRRELS IN OUR BACKYARD.
THEY MAY HAVE STARTED WHISPERING AFTER ALLAN BUILT THE SQUIRREL PALACE FEEDER. WHAT ARE THEY GOING TO SAY NOW THAT I'M NAMING AND TALKING TO SQUIRRELS?

When Allan first started feeding the squirrels, I thought he was a little crazy. But it made him happy to watch the squirrels chow down sunflower seeds in our squirrel palace and swing on our squirrel bungee while chomping on corn cobs slathered with peanut butter, preferably chunky. I raised my eyebrows, but I also smiled. One thing puzzled me, though. The squirrels would scatter before either of us got within ten feet of them.

"Why do they run away? Don't they realize that you're feeding them?" As the first of us to fall under their spell, Allan did most of the feeding. I didn't want to get involved.

This had been going on for a couple of years when I got laid off from my job at a big corporation, putting me at home on many days. Suddenly, feeding the squirrels became more appealing than pre-layoff. Especially when slathering peanut butter on a corn cob dangling from a shepherd's hook meant that five minutes later I'd be rewarded by the spectacle of a squirrel grabbing the cob and swinging as she or he gobbled the peanut butter. I welcomed my escape from calling or emailing folks for informational interviews.

I got into the habit of buttering the corn twice a day for an entertaining break. As I opened the screen door to the back yard, an open jar of "squirrel butter" in hand, an inexpensive set of wind chimes saying *bienvenue* would jangle. One day, as the door closed slowly behind me,

I thought I saw a squirrel jump off the squirrel palace at the far end of our yard and start toward me. Was that a Pavlovian reaction to the chimes? I wondered. But then the animal darted into the hedges and I lost track of it.

After a while, we graduated from purveying sunflower seeds and peanut butter to doling out peanuts in their shells. These delicacies, suitable for burial by squirrels, rated much higher than those perishables.

After a week or so of scattering a handful of nuts on our patio, then going inside to look through the window in the back door, I noticed something.

Was that squirrel coming over to get nuts? I went back outside.

"Polly wanna . . . nut?" I asked in a high pitched voice that I'd use with a baby. People sometimes ask how I know Polly's a girl. I don't know for sure. I can't imagine myself grabbing this wiry critter and flipping her over to examine her private parts. But I refuse to characterize all rodents as "he" and, besides, I like bold women. So my favorite squirrel is a girl named Polly thanks to the eponymous parrot of "wanna cracker" fame.

At first, Polly was skittish. After she'd run to within a yard of me, she'd slow down. She wanted her peanut, but why go any closer than absolutely necessary? Then, Polly reared up, exposing her snow-white belly, and crooking her paw as if to say, "Please, Susan, aren't I cute? I

deserve a nut." When that didn't work, she dropped down on all fours and moved cautiously closer, her liquid black eyes darting about, keeping watch for a stray nut or predator.

"There's a squirrel who'll come when I call her," I said proudly. I might not have found a new, high-powered executive job, but I had made friends with a hungry squirrel. This impressed Allan more than all the highfalutin networking contacts I'd made.

You know those romantic ads when the two lovers run toward one another in gauzy slow motion? That's what I think of when Polly rockets toward me from our property line.

Finally I drop a nut. Polly goes through the typical squirrel ritual. She picks it up with both paws, claws extended. Her individual claws remind me of those black metal hangers from my dry cleaner. She daintily rotates the peanut lengthwise in her mouth.

During the cold snap that followed the blizzard in January 2005, Polly stopped visiting. Squirrels don't like snow, and they don't like freezing temperatures. They huddle in their nests high up in trees. Many of them will snuggle together for warmth, draping their fuzzy tails like blankets.

The first day after the storm, only one or two squirrels ventured to the squirrel palace, which Allan restocked immediately after the storm ended. I scattered nuts on the patio. One or more of the animals snuck them away. I didn't see who.

The next day I went outside at 9 a.m. and called, "Polly, Polly, Polly" and, "Anyone want a nut?"

A squirrel darted out and grabbed the nut at my feet. "Want another nut?" I asked. But before I'd completed my sentence, the pretender slinked away. He was a Paolo, a Pablo or a Paul— not a real Polly. I repeated this process six or seven times to my great disappointment. Is Polly okay, I wondered, when no one lingered for a second nut.

Several days later, it finally warmed up into the mid-30s. The sun shone brightly as I stepped outside with nuts in my pocket. A blur of fur rocketed toward me from the back of the yard. Such decisiveness could only mean it was Polly. Or so I hoped. I smiled and called her name as I ran down the back stairs. The squirrel didn't slow down until she got within six inches of me. I threw a nut on the snow-covered ground. She grabbed it and rotated it in her mouth.

Next came the true test. I threw down a second nut. The squirrel grabbed it in her mouth and adjusted it with her paws, so one plump peanut stuck out on the left and one to the right, like an overstuffed handlebar mustache. Polly was back. ▲

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