



Golden Grove

(A short story)

By

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The beginning (a good place to start)

Let's see where do I begin. My wife had passed away, and in my grief, I threw myself into my work for several years. After one physical examination my doctor basically told me to slow down or die. Well, let me tell you that hit me like a ton of bricks!

My son and his wife had a friend whose father had just passed away and had a small farm up for sale. Through the years I had wondered if perhaps I could try my hand at growing things and thought this would be a good time to see if by some remote chance, I could be a farmer.

We drove out to the country, down several miles along a narrow dirt road. I remember thinking that this was really going to be the "getting away from it all" old doc Simson had recommended.

We arrived at this small farm with a small barn and tool shed, a few trees in the yard and what looked to be an old corral behind the barn.

My son's friend explained his dad, in the later years, had sold all the livestock, let the fields grow over and planted only a small garden along side of the shed. That was all he needed for food and occasionally to give some to friends and family. But there was something else, something I couldn't put my finger on, and something with that old farm that I just had to buy it. For the first time in my life I did the unthinkable, I bought on impulse!

And sitting in front of the fireplace that evening, I wondered at the rapid changes that were unfolding in my life and were doing so at such a pace. I remember laughing aloud. I had never been one to do things slowly, nor go cautiously in when I could just dive in headfirst. There remained this feeling that my life was going to change in some way that was more than just moving, something but what? At the time I couldn't know just how much.

Well the first year wasn't too bad. In the spring I planted a small garden along beside the shed. This was going to be wonderful, I had thought. Ah! I could smell the aroma of cooking vegetables, now all I had to do was plant the seeds, and soon there would be, well, not quite what I had planned. My garden was somewhat of a minor disaster. I learned that rabbits are quite clever in penetrating garden perimeters, some plants don't grow well in shade and sometimes it's a good idea to mark what you plant, so you don't pull them thinking you have weeds. Oh yeah! There were the deer from the Forrest that started to the rear of my farm and extended for miles beyond. I found deer love corn. And at the end of the growing season, there were enough vegetables left for two or three meals, well for me that is. Yes, the animals had eaten well that year and I drove to town, a lot!

The following year was better and the third well I found that like all in life, if you want bad enough, you can do! And my garden grew. And my family and friends feasted and reveled in my new endeavor. And all was good with the world; life was becoming enjoyable again. And for the

first time since my wife's passing, I thought life couldn't get any better. But then again how could I know what was about to happen, nor how my life was about to change.

From what I remember, it was a brisk breezy day the chill had come early that year. My somewhat expanded garden had been harvested and enjoyed by all. My pre winter work was done and for three years I had never explored the acres behind my barn. Oh, I had been to the old corral and into the field behind a ways, but never to the woods that were now encroaching upon my neglected rear property. The grasses had grown high and in the gentle breezes, looked like a silver green sea flowing to the small path that as of yet had not succumbed to advancing growth. An old wooden fence guided my way toward the last vestiges of open space. As I neared the woods I found a small stream that wandered through my property. It was only several feet deep at the most and perhaps five feet wide. The path wandered along side of the stream, until it ended at a little wooden bridge. After looking over the bridge and determining it wasn't going to crumble if I crossed it, I took a deep breath and crossed. Well it creaked and swayed a bit, but I crossed safely. I made a mental note to return one day and fix this quaint little bridge and hoped it wouldn't turn out like my garden on the first try.

Chuckling to myself I wandered into the woods feeling unlike the first explorers, breaking new ground as they traveled into the unknown. Well, after all I had to make this trip adventurous, maybe I'd run into a ferocious bunny or a hostile groundhog. The path narrowed a bit on the other side and even smaller as it entered the woods. At times the path would narrow to only inches, and then widen as to say, "Keep following me". The tall trees shadowed the path ominously, with only occasional burst of sunlight breaking through the dense leaves to light my way. Good thing it was before noon, as I knew I'd never find my way home in the dark and had only packed a small lunch. And how could I have known how much that small lunch would play in what was about to happen in just a short time.

On I went, braving the thorns, sand burrs and an occasional slap of a branch. I was going to find where this path lead. Someone had made this path and it had to go somewhere, and I intended to find out where! Now and then the bushes would tug at my backpack as to say, "Slow down, and enjoy your journey". The path twisted and wound through the woods what seemed to be forever. As I started to wonder if there was ever an end to this green maze, I could see a warm glow up ahead, almost as if the wood were afire. This had to be were the path lead, this had to be the reason for the path. Then with a laugh I told myself it had better be, tomorrow I may not feel like being the great explorer, my feet were killing me!

The Golden Grove and Chitter.

The path made one more lazy turn, then abruptly opened. With a burst of almost blinding light and color, opened into the most beautiful wooded grove I had ever seen. Surrounded by dense woods here was this wondrous thing of beauty hidden away from trespassers, concealed for only the denizens of this grove and a few who stumbled across this path. The leaves were of various gold's with splashes of red, green and browns. The amber grasses swayed in the gentle breezes as the bees and butterflies danced from flower to flower. Overhead a hawk made slow graceful circles in the sky and the sound of squirrels chittering and an occasional rabbit darting through the brush made this grove seem almost like a setting in a fairy tale. And there in the center was a huge oak tree with its branches aglow with the most glorious, golden foliage I had ever seen. The whole scene was enough to make one gasp; I was in love with nature once again.

I walk gently along, through the small meadow toward the giant oak, being almost too quiet afraid I would break the tranquility of this dreamland. The path had vanished and I was now walking through this amber sea of grass. Occasionally I could see the head of a rabbit pop up and give me the once over, then disappear again to continue on its way. The oak tree would be my canopy from the sun, I had decided. For as my stomach had decided a while back, it was time for lunch and I wholeheartedly agreed!

Arriving at the oak, I found a shady spot next to a pair of roots that had almost formed a perfect circle on the ground. Sitting down I began to unpack my lunch and carefully put it out within easy reach, still amazed at the beauty of my new surroundings. I knew I would come here often. Here the outside world didn't exist. Here time stood still. Here was peace!

The rumbles from my stomach snapped me out of my thoughts abruptly; it was time to eat. So, still dazed by all I was seeing, I unwrapped my noontime feast, my peanut butter sandwich and poured a cup of nice cool water. What more could one ask for? How could I have even tried to guess how this grove was going to change my life, forever.

I guess it must have been the good old peanut butter that brought my audience. It seemed like within only a few minutes; I was surrounded by several squirrels of various sizes. Scampering around several yards from me. Afraid to come any closer, darting and making a chittering sound they seemed to be torn between their instinct for food and their fear of this new invader to their grove.

My wife and I had gone most weekends to the park to feed the squirrels and birds, so instinctively I had shoved a bag of peanuts into my pocket before I had left. I remember how she had loved feeding the critters in the park and how fresh the memory was after all these years. Lost within my memories, I almost missed the scratching of little feet coming closer to my head. I

slowly turned my head and jerked, almost choking on my mouthful of sandwich. There only inches from my face were two dark eyes set in this fuzzy little face, staring right at me. When I jerked, so did the squirrel. It scampered back a foot or so, then slowly, cautiously, crawled back toward me.

This time I heard the scratching as the squirrel neared and slowly raised a peanut to beside my cheek. This brave little soul climbed right over to the nut and faster than I could ever imagine and vanished. I thought it had fled with my nut until I noticed a cracking sound coming from nearby. Slowly I peered around the oak and there was my little friend hanging from its rear feet eating the peanut. It tossed a quick glance in my direction then went about finishing off the nut. I tossed a few nuts out to the other squirrels and told them it was my turn.

As I brought the sandwich up toward my mouth I felt the presence near my head. Slowly turning I found myself eye to eye with no other than the little squirrel. I had figured it was either real hungry or real brave. At this point I think my curiosity got the better of me. I held the half-eaten sandwich a few inches from my mouth and within a few seconds I felt the light pressure of tiny little feet on my shoulder. Trying hard to suppress the chuckling inside, I could hear the sniffing of my ear and the gentle brush of fur on my neck. Moving my hand a little farther away from me, this hungry little critter stretched out, put its front paws on my hand, sniffed the peanut butter sandwich and started munching away as if I didn't exist.

I talked softly, gently to the squirrel as it ate. Oh, I know it didn't understand the words, but did understand the tone. I lowered the sandwich to the ground and not surprisingly, the squirrel followed, right down my arm.

I decided that as my lunch had been commandeered, perhaps a drink of cool water would be nice. I slowly removed my canteen from my backpack, unscrewed the cap and started to pour. As if this greedy little squirrel was going to miss something, it stopped, listened, looked at what I was doing and in a flash scampered up my leg. It paused for only a moment, then stood on its hind legs, put its front paws on my hand, stuck its head in my cup and now it would seem, I would be drinking from the canteen. Laughing gently I put the cup on the ground and this little squirrel would eat some sandwich and then take a drink of water. Now and then it would Chitter at the other squirrels that would come too close to its feast. This continued until there was little left of the sandwich, which she had carried off, probably to bury or store in her secret winter's hoard.

I packed up my things and picked up any evidence that I had ever been here. This was a place of beauty and peace that man wasn't going to ruin, least not this one.

The sun was starting to go down. "Where had the afternoon gone?" I said. Startled, the squirrels scampered and vanished into the tall grass and brush. Well, all but one. She just sat there sitting on her hind legs looking at me as to say "You leaving so soon?" Even as I stood, she didn't run and for just a bit she followed me along the path toward the forest. But as we moved on a ways, she stopped, gave me a passing glance and retreated to the safety of her mighty oak. As I watched her disappear into the brush I knew I would have to return again to this place. To my new found friends. And return I did.

Every time I arrived, the one thing I could count on with certainty, my little friend would be there near the old oak. She would then escort me to what now had become our spot next to the ring of roots and wait patiently as I unpacked our, well... Her lunch! I decided to name her Chitter, as she would always Chitter at other squirrels to get away from her food and at me to hurry up and feed her. The most wonderful thing was that she had decided to adopt me! I would visit the grove several times a week and as she knew when I'd be there, there she was, awaiting. After we'd go

through our routine of food and drink, she would scamper off to do whatever squirrels did. And I would do what I did best, Nap!

To my surprise, one day after our routine. Chitter; instead of running off, sat on my leg and started washing herself. She fluffed up her fur. She fluffed up her tail. She crawled down into my lap, curled up in a little ball, tucked her nose under my arm and went to sleep. And sleep she did, for over an hour! Occasionally when I would move, she'd peak out from under her tail and give me a look as to say "Hey! I'm trying to sleep here!" Yup! She had trained me well. And I wasn't complaining. This too became our ritual. And continued throughout the fall until the first snows fell.

All winter long I missed my little Chitter and her friends. The snow was far too deep to attempt a trip to the grove. Of course I had left several pounds of nuts for all my new friends that should have eased the wintertime eating problems. But still I missed them.

I had Sam; he was just a kitten when my wife had pulled him out of a dumpster where he was foraging for food. Scrawny and wet she had brought him home and with a short time he ruled the roost. That had been eight years before she had passed away and Sam and I were the only family we had on those long winter nights.

Occasionally my son and his wife would call and chat, to catch up on how things were going with my grove and squirrel friends. I had told them all about my adventures when they had come to visit in the late fall. They would drive in from out of state a couple times a year. Each time I took them to the grove all the squirrels would run and hide. Chitter would only come down to me if they stayed at the edge of the wood and watched through binoculars. It was obvious, this was our grove and intruders were not permitted.

I wondered often, especially when Sam would curl up in my lap, if in the spring, would Chitter even remember me. Or would she treat me as a stranger. I'd just sigh! Spring was around the corner and I'd know for sure, once the snows had melted.

Chitter's Return.

The first sunny day after the snow had gone and I felt the ground was safe to trod upon without sinking to my ankles, I loaded up my jacket pockets with nuts, packed a lunch and off I went. Mid spring was at its finest. The birds were singing, butterflies darting across the meadows and the freshness of green covered everything. Across the little bridge and along the little path I hurried wondering all the way if my little friend Chitter would remember me. Or perhaps she never survived the winter. All my worries were soon put to rest. Before I had even reached half the distance from the woods to the huge oak, I saw a small familiar brownish gray shape running through the grass toward me. "Chitter," I yelled. She ran up to me, around me and sometimes, almost tripping me. I stopped and tossed her a nut, which promptly was cracked and eaten. She kept running around me in circles until we were nearing the oak. At this point she ran ahead and sat waiting for me on one of the roots that formed the circle of roots that had become our eating spot.

Well it was like winter had never interrupted our visits. She and her friends ate nuts. She and I ate my, well; our peanut butter sandwich. Of course she drank from her water cup leaving me to drink from the canteen. Ah, yes. She definitely had me trained well. And lastly she curled up in my lap, tucked her head into my arm and with one eye peaking out at me was ready for her nap. "Well old friend, I see you haven't forgotten me". I gently said as not to disturb her. She folded her tail over her whole body and head and with a tiny little sigh went to sleep. I sat for forty-five minutes or so feeling so much with nature, so much at home. But this too was broken by the quick scampering of little feet as she ran up my arm to my shoulder, onto my head where she paused long enough to peak over to my face. It was in her eyes as always, that trust, that kind of look that said thank you. But in reality it was me that was so thankful for what this grove in the middle of the woods had given me. And then there was Chitter. Her lack of fear and her trust in me, this I was most thankful for.

Spring turned to glorious summer, with its warm hot days and warm nights. There were times when I had to start carrying a flashlight because I would lose track of time and before I'd know it, night was falling upon the grove. It was so peaceful and beautiful there I had begun to clear up the dead branches and limbs. By the end of summer and into the early fall, all the cleanup was done. And Chitter and her friends had been stashing the nuts I would bring and were busy growing their winter coats. Big bushy coats. If the farmers were right, this meant a hard winter was on its way. So I made the decision that I would bring plenty of food for all my little friends the next time I returned. You see now I had just about all the squirrels coming up to me to get their nuts. But Chitter was the only one that would sit on my lap and would warn any of her brethren if they dared to try. Jealousy? Greed? I wondered. I laughed, "her possession" I said aloud.

The days were short and the skies were gray most of the time now. Winter would soon cut me off from my beloved grove once again. My son and daughter in-law would kid me about paving a walkway to the grove so I could make winter treks as well. I had just waved good-bye as they left on their long drive home. They had helped me pack my backpack full of nuts and birdseed. Yes! I was now feeding the birds as well. Off I lugged the bag of goodies to give my friends an edge on the winter hungers. I got to the grove and put up a few bird feeders in the trees, around the parameter of the woods. I headed for the oak and realized I hadn't seen Chitter. But to my relief was waiting at the circle of roots for me. She didn't eat a lot and took almost no water. She almost immediately curled up for her nap. The breezes died down and over an occasional song of a bird, I noticed Chitter was making strange breathing sounds. It was a rasping, congested sound that I had heard often as our son caught colds. Even though Chitter seemed a little under the weather, I made up my mind I would try to take her to the vet that lived a few miles down the road. That is if she'd let me.

I slowly moved to a kneeling position, gently cradling Chitter in my arms. Then stood. In the past, Chitter had laid on my shoulder many times as I headed to the woods on my way home, then would jump down and scamper off to her tree about half way. But now she lay in my arms looking up at me, hardly moving. Chitter was sick, really sick, I could sense it. I looked down and spoke gently to her, trying to reassure her and myself that everything would be ok. All the time desperately trying to stem the fear that perhaps it would not. And would soon find that I would be right on both accounts.

Winter guest.

Old doc Wells as he was known was a good vet. He had treated various animals over the years, including squirrels to my relief. Chitter had pneumonia and he said would of died if it wasn't for my intervention. But he understood why I cared so much as we had often talked at the store or at parties. "Yes, people that live out in the sticks, do have parties". It cost plenty, but not as much as it would have been to lose Chitter. We even had to make a small oxygen tent out of one of doc's cabinets and some plastic wrap. Chitter became our mission in life. This little squirrel was NOT going to die. I came in one day and doc Wells in a chair next to Chitter's cabinet bed, fast asleep. It would seem doc was a little more interested in Chitter's well being then he let on. But then again it didn't take long for her to win me over either.

Well Chitter did improve. She recovered and her strength returned after a few weeks. And doc only charged me for medicines, telling me he had enjoyed treating Chitter more than anything since he had retired. But another problem faced me now. The heavy snows had fallen and there was no way back to her home in the old oak tree. I had her in an old kitten carrier that doc had lying around. She chittered all the time we drove back toward my house. I wondered how Sam would take to Chitter. I remember thinking it would be a real good idea to keep her in the carrier rather than Sam to keep her in his tummy. This would be interesting I mused as we entered the house. I just hoped Chitter wouldn't be too frightened of Sam or of his scent in the house.

I closed the door, took off my coat. Sam was dancing around my feet as he always did when he greeted me at the door. I carefully took the carrier off the shelf and slowly lowered it to let my two critters meet each other. I held my breath. And put the carrier on the floor. Sam ran over to the carrier put his nose to the screen. Chitter walked up to the screen covering herself with her tail as she did. Nose to nose, sniff to sniff. Sam looked at me, then back to Chitter and walked over to his favorite spot in front of the fireplace and curled up. Chitter walked to the rear of the carrier and curled up. Whew! At least for the time, indifference.

The days passed and Chitter and Sam seemed to get along. I would find Sam curled up in front of Chitter's cage that I had bought him and Chitter sleeping pressed up next to the door. When they were awake, it would almost seem as they were trying to play with one another. Chitter would watch as I rolled a small red wooden ball across the floor and Sam would chase after it, batting it all over the room. The ball was about the size of a small walnut and I could almost see the puzzlement in Chitter's eyes as she watched Sam play with the ball instead of eating it.

As the weeks passed Sam seemed to treat Chitter as one of his own kind and even went as far as taking Chitter one of his kitty treats and dropped it at the door of the cage. Chitter ran over to the door, sniffed and in one quick motion reached through the cage and began to eat the treat. "Great" I thought. "Now I have a squirrel who thinks it's a cat". And that began an experience that

would live with us forever. Feeling brave and assured by this act, I put Sam on a homemade leash and opened the cage door. Before I could stop Chitter dashed out, ran around behind me and darted up my back and perched herself upon my shoulder. I walked over grabbed a few shelled nuts that I had been feeding Chitter and sat down. She jumped into my lap and began eating out of my hand. Well I could see nothing had changed she was still the same old Chitter. And as she wanted to prove it, curled up in my lap tucked her nose under my forearm, flipped her tail over her head and went to sleep.

Well I remember getting tired so I reclined and before long the warm fire took its toll and I too drifted off into dreamland. I'm not sure how long I slept, but I awoke and reached down and stroked Chitter. My eyes still hadn't gotten around to opening as of this point, but they sure did a second later. Chitter was purring, after a second or two my eyes popped open, Chitter had grown or it wasn't Chitter. Looking down to my lap, I saw my hand was on Sam. How he had freed himself I never would know, but there he was curled up in my lap, with Chitter curled up between Sam and my arm. Only now Chitter had rolled over and tucked her nose into Sam's warm fur and was rewarded with a bath. Sam washed her for several minutes then put his head on his paws and nodded off. And they slept. And I watched in amazement, I had seen it, was seeing it and still couldn't believe it. But from that moment on Sam and Chitter were inseparable. They ate together, they played together, and they even slept near one another. Occasionally Chitter even would sleep on Sam. The cutest thing was I'd roll the little red wooden ball and Chitter would chase it, jump on it and roll over with it as she'd seen Sam do. And Sam? Well he'd just sit there and watch her play. Yes! She had us both trained well.

Sam leaves.

The cold winter days were filled with warmth watching these two clowns romping and chasing each other through the house. There were times when they'd run around at night and make so much noise that I would have to shut Chitter into her cage. And each morning Sam would be curled up next to her door. In the evenings it seemed as if they were having a contest to see which one of them could find a new place to curl up on. If Sam got on the back of the couch, Chitter had to get on the chair. Sam would look at her and move to the table near the fireplace. In return Chitter would jump to the shelf and sit and watch to see what Sam would do. Sam jumped to the mantle, Chitter leaped to the top of the hutch. Sam looked around and decided the mantle was too comfortable to leave and just curled up. It wasn't long before Chitter scampered down ran across the floor and in two hops, was on the mantle next to Sam, curled up and slept. I just shook my head, "would Chitter ever be at home in the grove again?" I mused. She would have to be returned to the wild and I knew that was going to break both Sam's and my hearts.

Towards the end of winter Chitter woke me up with her constant Chittering. At first I had yelled at her to be quiet, then snapped awake. I had heard that sound several times in the grove as a hawk would circle overhead. It was the sound of alarm! I threw off the covers and ran down stairs. I could hear her but didn't see where she was at. "The kitchen" I thought. No she wasn't there, again I could hear her chittering. "The living room" I said aloud. Her alert sounded so frantic. Almost tripping I rounded the corner and stopped. Sam was lying in the middle of the room, Chitter alongside standing on the hind legs screaming..... Sam had passed away in his sleep!

Doc Wells said it was just old age and I truly was glad he didn't suffer with all the problems he could have had. And then there was Chitter whom had brought so much into his life, as she had to mine. I remember choking back the tears as I dug through the frozen ground and placed Sam in his final sleeping place. I shoveled the earth over his tiny body and said a little prayer for my friend of so many years. I turned and looked at the house. Chitter was sitting on her hind legs in the window staring at where I had laid Sam. I always wondered if she had any concept of death, do any animals? I went back inside, took off my coat and sat in my recliner. Before I could recline, Chitter jumped up into my lap and sprawled across my lap like Sam used to do. It was almost as she was trying to ease my sorrow.

The next week or so Chitter would walk through the house chittering for Sam to come and play. Then go over to his kitty bed and lay in it as if she thought Sam would come back to his bed. But as time passed we both began to realize there would no longer be the faint scratch of Sam's claws as he trotted across the floor. And yet we managed to get on with our lives, as we knew we had to. Sam would have wanted it that way.

Chitter would play with Sam's little red wooden ball, chasing it across the room, batting it as Sam had shown her. She'd catch it, leap on it and roll over and kick it away with her hind legs. It appeared Sam had made somewhat of a cat out of her after all. And once again I learned to laugh and enjoy her antics.

The weeks passed and the snow had just about melted. Signs of spring began to break through what snow had remained. This was the time I was dreading for so long. It was time to reintroduce Chitter to the outdoors. And then, back to the grove. We eased her out in steps. I'd sit on the porch and she would run and sniff the yard. One day to my surprise she darted around the corner of the house. Not sure as to what she was doing I ran after her. As I rounded the corner of the house, there was Chitter sitting on Sam's grave. She did remember! Chitter curled up on the grave for several minutes as if she finally got to say good-bye to her friend, then walked over to me and scampered up my coat to my shoulder and sat as we walked solemnly back to the house. I think at this point she was letting me know she was ready to go home, home to her other friends. To her golden grove and the huge oak she had made her home.

I also knew it would have to be soon or I might have a hard time letting her go. So about a week later, one crisp morning, off we went. As soon as I opened the door she ran over to Sam's grave and stood until I got there. She then climbed up to my shoulder and sat. It was like she had to say good-bye to Sam one last time. She would never be back; the trip from the grove would be too far and unsafe. As we walked away from the house I felt her turn and sit backwards on my shoulder as if to get one final glance at what had been her home for a while. She leaned against my head as we walked down the path toward the bridge, as if to reassure us both that things would be all right.

Home again.

Chitter hardly moved the whole trip back and mostly stayed close to my head. However as we rounded the last bend in the path before the grove Chitter started running from one shoulder to the other. Then there it was in all its glory, the golden grove, Chitter's oak, everything we had missed all winter long. It almost seemed to beckon to us to hurry. It was at this point that Chitter decided that I wasn't moving fast enough and jumped down. Running, leaping, Chitter headed towards her tree and to the other squirrels. They romped and chased one another, scampering across the ground and up the tree. Chitter was home! I walked over to the circle of roots and spread a blanket on the ground. Several squirrels cautiously moved close to me. It would seem a few had remembered me or at least the easy lunch I brought with me. I fed my old friends for a while, then, started to eat my sandwich. I chuckled as I heard the scratch of Chitter's claws, near my head. Down onto my lap she jumped, ate her bit of sandwich, drank from my, err, her cup and curled up in my lap for her nap. Well! Things were back to normal and all was as it should be.

The spring turned to summer and then to fall. I made my trips two or three time a week and most of the time, there was Chitter awaiting my arrival, as she knew in advance what days I was coming. Some days she would make me wait like she was punishing me for not coming the day before. But in no time at all, all was forgiven and lunch was served. There were some days where Chitter didn't eat. She'd just curl up in my lap and cover herself with her tail and nap. As winter approached I made my trip to load the bird feeders and put plenty of nuts in the circle of roots for Chitter and her friends. I knew before long my beloved grove and Chitter would be hidden away from me until spring. I was really going to miss her, for she had eased my missing Sam so much.

Now one unforeseen thing had cropped up earlier that year and I thought that would be what I would miss the most. One day to see if Chitter remembered, I brought the little red wooden ball along with me. After our lunch I had pulled it out and tossed it into the circle of roots. Chitter pounced on the ball and swatted it around the circle with so much zest it would have made Sam proud. She hadn't forgotten. Chitter would play then come over and we'd take our afternoon nap. There were times I'd awaken and Chitter would be gone to do whatever squirrels do, other times there'd she lay sound asleep. These times I'd miss the most through the long winter.

So on the first snow I made the year's final trip and piled up the peanuts. Chitter didn't even stop for lunch. I thought it must have been going to be a long winter. It was just as well though, the ground was hard and cold and Chitter only climbed up to my shoulder, kind of snuggled her head into my neck as to say good-bye and thanks for the food, see you in the spring. She climbed around to my chest, looked at me and off she went to hide more nuts. I yelled bye to her as I left the grove,

but she was gone darting up her tree with a nut in her mouth. Yup! I was going to miss this, but then again there would be next spring.

The winter was a long one and there was only one time I managed to get back to the grove. I didn't see any of the critters that lived there only a few scattered tracks. The animals were smarter than I. But I did leave more nuts and filled the empty bird feeders and left. Winter dragged on it seemed forever that year. The snows were deep and drifted as high as I was tall in places. I hoped Chitter and all my friends in the grove had stashed enough food away. And I worried!

Well, I didn't even wait for the ground to firm in the spring. I loaded up my backpack with food and nuts, pulled on my boots and off to the grove I went. The trees were just beginning to bud and the woods were mostly still brown and dreary from the harsh winter. I hurried to the huge oak and called to Chitter. She didn't come, so worried but not alarmed, I filled the bird feeders and returned toward the oak. About fifteen yards from the oak I saw a familiar little brownish gray critter running and bounding in my direction. "Chitter", I yelled. I stopped and she ran up my leg to my coat, continued up to my shoulder and nuzzled my head. She then ran around to the other shoulder and sat. She was excited about something, maybe a fox or some other trespasser had entered our grove. I looked around and saw nothing. Maybe she was just glad to see me, I didn't know, but we headed to our spot. I pulled out a plastic tarp and sat on the ground. Chitter ate a few nuts, then disappeared for several minutes. I tossed a few nuts to her squirrel friends. I heard the scratch of tiny feet near my head turned and there was Chitter. She jumped over to my shoulder and chattered away at something. I slowly looked up as so not to knock Chitter off my shoulder. There perched about ten feet over my head were three little squirrels. "Chitter" I said. "Guess I know what you're so excited about now". Chitter had had babies and was showing them off. They wouldn't come down to me and eventually scampered back up the oak to their nest in a hole midway up the tree. Throughout the rest of the year the babies wouldn't come any closer than a few feet from me. Even though their mother was sitting on my shoulder or lap. They did have her appetite though. Through the summer Chitter would sit on my lap or play with the red wooden ball in the root circle while her little ones watched. Eventually they would leave and Chitter and I would be left alone to play or nap.

There were sad times though. A hawk or owl got one of her little ones and a month later I found the body of her second one. It was sad, but as in nature, animals refuse to feel sorry for themselves and life went on. I watched as the last grew throughout the summer and moved to a tree on the edge of the grove. And occasionally her baby would come over for me to toss a few nuts in its direction. All the time Chitter would be napping or playing knowing I wouldn't hurt her offspring.

Summers end.

The last days of summer were upon the grove and I knew the chill would soon be in the air. I had put up some additional feeders for the birds and was making a box to hold the nuts for the squirrels that would nail to the tree high enough where predators couldn't lie in wait for my friends. I had missed a trip to the grove due to several days of storms and looked forward to my return as I packed up for the journey. I got to the grove, walked over to the oak and sat down to wait for Chitter. I unpacked lunch and sat admiring the beauty of this hidden place. I'm not sure how long I sat, no Chitter, none of the squirrel came. I could hear them in the wood, but not around the tree. I scanned the oak, nothing. I was getting worried.

Just as I started to get up, there was a rustle in a small bush several yards from the tree. Out of it slowly came that familiar little shape I knew so well. "Chitter you had me worried". I said. She slowly came up to me, as if she didn't recognize me then climbed up on my ankle and started up my out stretched leg. I gasped! On her sides were large wounds as if something had grabbed her in its mouth or talons. She slowly climbed up to my lap. I tried to give her some water, but she didn't drink. Nor take food. I looked at the wounds and realized they were several days old. Chitter was muddy and her fur matted. It seemed as if she had lain there in the bush days waiting for her friend to come. But I didn't. I carefully stroked her as I had done so many times before to let her know everything was going to be ok. Chitter crawled over to my lap, curled up with her nose tucked under my arm, covered herself with her tail and with a little sigh, died.

I don't know how many hours I sat there stroking her, brushing the tears away from my eyes. I finally got up and carried her tiny lifeless body in my arms and headed back to the house. After making a little coffin out of a metal container I had thought of burying her next to Sam. But Chitter's home was the grove, now golden as the day I first stumbled upon it and that's where she would be laid to rest. I walked back to the grove and found a sunny spot for her grave. I had brought some flower garden fence and placed it around her grave as well. Over the next few weeks I brought flowers to plant around what was now her resting place. It wasn't until then I could bring myself to say good-bye to my little friend, to admit to myself I would never see my Chitter again.

And winter came.

The years after.

Now remembering back through the fading memories, I went back to the grove not as often, but enough to keep Chitter's resting place tidy and to feed my woodland friends. The years passed and the trips became farther in between. One time I had reached into my pocket of a coat I hadn't worn in a few years. In the pocket I found a small red wooden ball. I was at Chitter's grave, so kneeling; I laid it in the middle of the green grassy area, surrounded by the little fence. The following week when I had returned, the ball was gone. Nothing else was disturbed, just the small red wooden ball Chitter had played with, had vanished! I remember thinking that perhaps, just maybe one of her offspring's babies had taken it. But I really knew better, it was gone for good.

I became a writer of animal stories because of my experiences in the golden grove and of course my beloved Chitter and the wonders she had shown me. As the years passed and the money came in, I bought the woods and the grove that many of my stories had used as a setting. This way it would stay pristine as the day I first found it. It was now saved for all those that would come to visit the grove. And I would be assured that my son and his family's love for the grove would carry on. And yes, I was a grandfather and they both loved reading my stories of Chitter and the golden grove, along with the rest. They too had visited the grove and learned the respect and the beauty of nature.

I, like the seasons grew old and the trips to my beloved grove became too hard, too long, too far apart. There came a time I couldn't get along without help. My body grew tired and frail. My son and his wife took me to their home in another state and I had a nice couple move in rent free to my house with the understanding that they keep the grove and Chitter's grave clear. Of course they too fell in love with the grove and I knew I could rest easy that it was in good hands.

A few years later came the news, I had a bad heart and it was getting worse. It wouldn't be long before I would not be able to leave the house. So begrudgingly, my son and daughter in law, agreed to take me back to visit my old farm and the grove. After all one always has ones memories and I just wanted to walk once more the places where my life had changed so dramatically.

The trip seemed short as I anticipated the return to where my heart still remained. The couple we finally decided to give the farm to had fixed it up so wonderfully and assured me the grove was just as I had left it. We had dinner and for the first time in years I felt great! Chuckling and retelling of my tales of the grove and Chitter. And then there was Sam's grave. There was a small fence and flowers around it and they had kept it up beautifully. We walk back along the path and paused to wonder at the sea of waving green grass. Back to the little brook and the small bridge, now painted and repaired. Through the wood with the birds chirping as they had so many

years ago. And then the grove, oh the wondrous grove. It was as the first time I saw it. Green waving grass, trees aglow in red and golden splendor. Leaves danced and twirled in the gentle breezes. How I had missed this place, I had been away too long.

I asked my family and friends to stay here at the woods edge so I could be alone once again in and among the grove. I walked over to Chitter's grave and said hi to my old friend. I walked over to the old oak and spread my blanket and the memories came rushing back, flooding my mind. How wonderful my life had been, how lucky I was to have found this spot, to have found Chitter.

I could see her curled up in my lap napping, eating my sandwich, drinking from my cup. I reached around to the circle of roots and started brushing away the leaves. I remembered how Chitter loved to play with, I stopped! My hand hit something! Carefully moving away the last few leaves I gasped! There under the leaves was a small wooden ball. It was cracked and the paint was faded, but here and there I could see the remains of red paint. "Oh". I gasped aloud. It was Chitter's ball. I had been to this root circle many times over the years, even my last visit here and the ball was not there. "Where?" I never finished the sentence. There was a gentle warm gentle breeze that rustled the bush near the oak. It brushed against my shirt and up to my neck. It gently tossed my hair and brushed against my ear. "Chitter", I whispered. I knew finding the ball wasn't because of some quirk of fate knocking it out of the tree. I knew why this ball was here, why it was now. It was Chitter's way of telling me "everything is going to be ok". That she was waiting for me, her old friend. I smiled, opened my hand and looked at the weathered old wooden ball. I leaned back against our oak tree, closed my eyes and smiled as memories of Chitter came rushing back, the love, the wonder, and the happiness I found.

I had come home. I slept.

Epilog.

We came to see what was keeping dad and found that he had passed away lying under his oak. He had a blissful smile on his lips that helped ease my sorrow. And in his hand was this old faded wooden ball like the one in his stories. We knew it couldn't be, but if it had eased dad's passing then the ball would remain with him.

There was little discussion as to where he would be interred, his beloved grove. It was a small funeral. Family and close friends attended. Flowers from his many readers were left at the house. There were words of praise and of course the tears. And when the service was done, one by one, the people left until just my wife and I remained.

The day was as dad had described in his stories, warm with a deep blue sky, clouds drifting in the breeze, casting shadows across the grove as they drifted by.

We strolled over to the old oak, my wife gasped; there in the small circle of roots laid a small red wooden ball. "But we buried the ball with your dad" She said. I knelt down and cleared the leaves away from the circle, my head spinning, searching for a logical explanation, I managed to reply "Then perhaps this is where it should stay."

Just then the ball moved ever so slightly, then again. "The breeze" I replied, my wife managed a weak smile as we turned from the old oak.

As we walked to the edge of the grove a cool breeze suddenly blew over us. We turned to look at the direction it had blown from, and toward the old oak. A cloud passed in front of the sun

casting a shadow over the tree and just for the briefest of moments, sitting against the old oak, we saw the silhouette of a man, and on his knee sat a squirrel. Upon the breeze we could hear a faint chittering and the warm gentle chuckle of dad.

I looked at my wife and the warm gentle smile on her face I knew that she too had seen the two of them.

Perhaps it was their way of letting us know all was well, or just them saying goodbye, I'll never know. We turned and started our walk back to the old farm and our hearts soared.

We had been given the gift many never receive, a chance to know, to see what lies in our hearts, the chance to say one last goodbye.

For we knew that dad and Chitter had found one another and were once again together, in their beloved Golden Grove.

THE END!