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Fate

Darkness. But, squirrels don't need much light to get around. Gorbali climbed carefully over his brothers, sisters, father, mother, grandparents and great grandparents to the hole in the tree he called home and sniffed the fresh air. With nothing but nuts on his mind, he flicked his tail and leaped for a branch he was certain was just below. It wasn't.

Squirrels can't look surprised. But, Gorbali was. He fell twenty squealing feet onto the rain gutter of the house below.

BAM - "Squeak!"

"Huh?" Ralph Abrams woke with a start. In his dream his boss, Mr. Hurty, was aiming a shotgun right at him. The skittering sound of squirrel feet on the roof told the real story. "Oooh." He turned to squint at his alarm. Double-take. No! "Ohmigod! Sharon! Wake up!" He struggled to get untangled from the sheets. "The alarm didn't go off!" The sheet, clung to his ankle like a boa constrictor as he hopped out of bed. Now uncovered, Sharon opened one eye.

"What?"

"It's 4:45. You gotta call Hurty before it gets too late!"

Sharon tugged at the sheets. "Too late? It's too damned early, Ralph." She slithered under a small corner of sheet still on the bed and closed her eyes.

"No! Sharon! Calling early sounds real! I told you last night, Remember?"

Just because she DID, didn't mean she wanted to. It was Golf again. Yesterday, Ralph had played in some tournament, or other; and tied, or something, with some other hopelessly addicted hacker. Now, he had to do something else golf-related.

"The Playoff...remember!"

Was Ralph whining like a little girl?

"If I don't play Norm Lanigan, he'll get the trophy." Click! The bedroom light came on like a solar flare. Sharon winced. "Honey, I'm so close to winning the Labor Day Cup! Please!" He handed her the phone. And, yes, he WAS whining like a little girl. Sharon sat up.

"You took Friday off work to play a practice round. You weren't home Saturday, Sunday or Monday, except to sleep. And, now you're playing golf...again?"

"It's not just golf...it's the Labor Day Cup." He handed her the phone.

She dialed. "Whatever."

The Sun was high in the sky before Gorbal felt well-enough to move much. After the fall, he scabbled off the roof to the ground. But, the throbbing in his hindquarters forced him to a safe spot in a hole, low down, in a nearby tree. The pain continued as he watched the paunchy human who lived under his tree, get into a topless metal monster and whistle as he drove away. The whistling tune soothed Gorbal. It sounded very much like his mother when she home-schooled him high in their tree home. And, that's when it all came back to him! "If you ever fall and hurt yourself -- cross the river of metal giants to the healing berries in the patch just beyond." If Gorbal could have, he would have grimaced as he hobbled out of the tree -- toward the river of metal monsters.

For hours, Paz Hurty had been sitting in his car going nowhere fast. He was on the Interstate to the airport when he saw red taillights ahead. After awhile, he turned off the Moody Blues CD and turned on the radio. That's when he heard things like "25 car pile up." "Interstate closed in both directions" and "Hours before motorists can expect to be moving."

Hurty yawned. He had a right to be tired. Sharon Abrams had called him before 5 in the morning to tell him that Ralph couldn't make it in today. She said he had some kind of "stomach thing." She also said she'd taken him to the hospital. Awful. Terrible. Ralph should be with him today in Chicago to meet with his company's biggest client. Another yawn. Of course, Hurty wouldn't make it either. His flight departed hours ago. A cop approached, walking between the cars. "Officer -- what's up?" The cop shrugged. "Some old lady slammed her brakes on all of a sudden -- and BOOM. Twenty-five cars. We're gonna turn everybody around and detour you. Be patient." Hurty turned on the Moody Blues...and yawned.

Gorbal could see the berry bushes across the river of metal giants. They roared like rapids. But, he didn't really hear them. He was focused on the berries that his mother said would heal. Gorbal stuck his tail in the air, tried to ignore the pain in this rear end, and made a dash across the concrete river. What was that awful sound? He stopped, midstream and turned to see the terrified face of an elderly human female with blue hair approaching fast. The metal giant she rode screamed and smoked. Gorbal watched transfixed -- as the behemoth stopped inches away. Close! He dashed across and into the berry patch. Behind him, the clanging, crunching, grinding sound of 25 cars smashing into each other faded in the distance.

Ralph stood on the 18th green, his heart pounding. He looked across the fairway toward his home. Maybe if he thought of Sharon, patiently waiting for him at home, that would calm him.

He turned back quickly. Nope, didn't help. A deep breath. This was it. He had that big-mouth Lanigan right where he wanted him. Sorta'. Lanigan had just tapped in for a 4. Ralph had a 12-foot putt to win. All he had to do was read the putt. He crouched down and stared at the imaginary line from his ball to the hole. "Lord," he hissed under his breath, "help me beat that horse's ass Lanigan." He glanced at his opponent quickly. He hadn't prayed too loudly, had he? No sign of it. He hoped that his prayer for success had gotten to the Big Guy before Lanigan's prayer that he choke. Okay. Ralph stood and addressed the ball.

Up in the ancient oak, which spread its branches over the 18th green, Gorbald contentedly gnawed on green acorns and thought about his day. A busy one. Painful, too. But, in the end, the berries had worked. He felt better. Now he was in this perfect tree watching the sun head toward the horizon on a perfect afternoon. Oops...he dropped his acorn. It tumbled earthward. He watched; then, lost interest and grabbed another nearby nut.

Ralph struck the ball. Click. Oh oh. Not the line he intended. "Damn," he muttered. "Turn!" It's what all golfers say -- when they know it's not likely to happen. Then, out of the blue -- literally - the acorn hit the green, bounced twice and settled in the path of the ball. Almost soundlessly, the ball kissed the side of the acorn -- changing direction almost imperceptibly. Ralph held his breath. Norm Lanigan, who really wasn't a bad guy at all, chuckled and shook his head. Ralph's ball hit the center of the hole -- and dropped in. "I win! I win! Holy crap! I won! I beat you, Lanigan! Yeah!" He pumped his fist. Lanigan smiled and held out his hand. "Good game, Ralph."

Ralph whistled his favorite song as he drove his convertible out Country Club drive, into the setting sun. "What a day! My prayers were answered -- my idiot boss is in Chicago -- and I'm the winner of the Labor Day Cup!" He stopped his car abruptly. Was that a cop at the Club entrance?

The cop held up his hand. "Hold up. Stop." A line of cars passed by on the street in front of the Country Club -- like they were part of an endless freight train. Ralph pulled up as close to the road as he could.

"What's going on?"

The cop leaned on the convertible. "Big accident on the Interstate this morning -- shut it down for hours. We're using this road as a detour to get people outa' there." At that moment, Ralph saw a familiar face in a familiar car approaching. No! Not him! He slid down in his seat and covered his face. A horn. Ralph peeked between his fingers. Oh oh. It was Paz Hurty pointing - yelling - as he passed by at 5 miles an hour. "Golf, Ralph? Don't bother coming in tomorrow, you're fired!"

The cop watched Hurty's car fade into the distance. "Was that for you?" Ralph nodded as the cop saw the Labor Day Cup on the front seat. "You win that?"

"Yeah."

"Nice. Congratulations!"

Ralph sighed. "Yeah. It's my lucky day."

Darkness was settling in. The day was over. Inside the big tree looming over the Abrams home, Gorbal nestled in the midst of his brothers and sisters and father and mother and grandparents and great grandparents...content...brain completely empty...sound asleep. Tomorrow was another day.