



The View From Heifer Hill—June 2024



The Tale of Richard, the Dumpster Squirrel

I RECENTLY had the opportunity to play the fairy godmother in a “rags to riches” story. I don’t know how the story began, but presumably, it was “Once upon a time, a little squirrel lived in a nest with a devoted mother and several squirmy siblings.” I do know that somehow this cozy chapter came to an end and that this squirrel found his way to the dumpster behind the Dutton farmstand in West Brattleboro.

Unlike the cruel headmistress/evil stepfather/witch of a fairy tale, the staff at the farmstand were all rooting for the little squirrel. They named him Richard, and when I arrived, they led me to where he had been seen most recently. Beside the dumpster, several buckets of fruit and vegetable refuse composted fragrantly. Richard cowered between them nibbling on some slimy tofu.

As a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, I have raised dozens of orphaned squirrels and have learned to assess such situations. The squirrel’s tiny body did not match his fluffy tail, a sign that he had been malnourished for a while. Squirrels in his condition are not scraping by, they are circling the drain.

Here’s what squirrel fairy godmothers do: First, offer a greeting. Squirrels greet each other with a short, nasal hum. Next, moving slowly and speaking softly, establish the outer limits of the squirrel’s flight zone. Then, very gradually make

it smaller. Richard’s flight zone was about three feet. I hovered companionably next to the slop buckets for about 20 minutes. When he moved over to rest in the sunshine, I sat nearby. I was running late for a meeting, however, so decided I’d need to come back and try again later.

Later that afternoon, the dumpster was in the shade and Richard was nowhere to be seen. I took out my laptop, set up shop on the loading dock, and waited for Richard to return. No luck. A couple of robust dumpster squirrels lolloped in the nearby forest. A pair of catbirds stalked and flitted next to the trickle of water at the forest edge. Trucks and motorcycles roared by on Route 9. I waited two hours. No Richard.

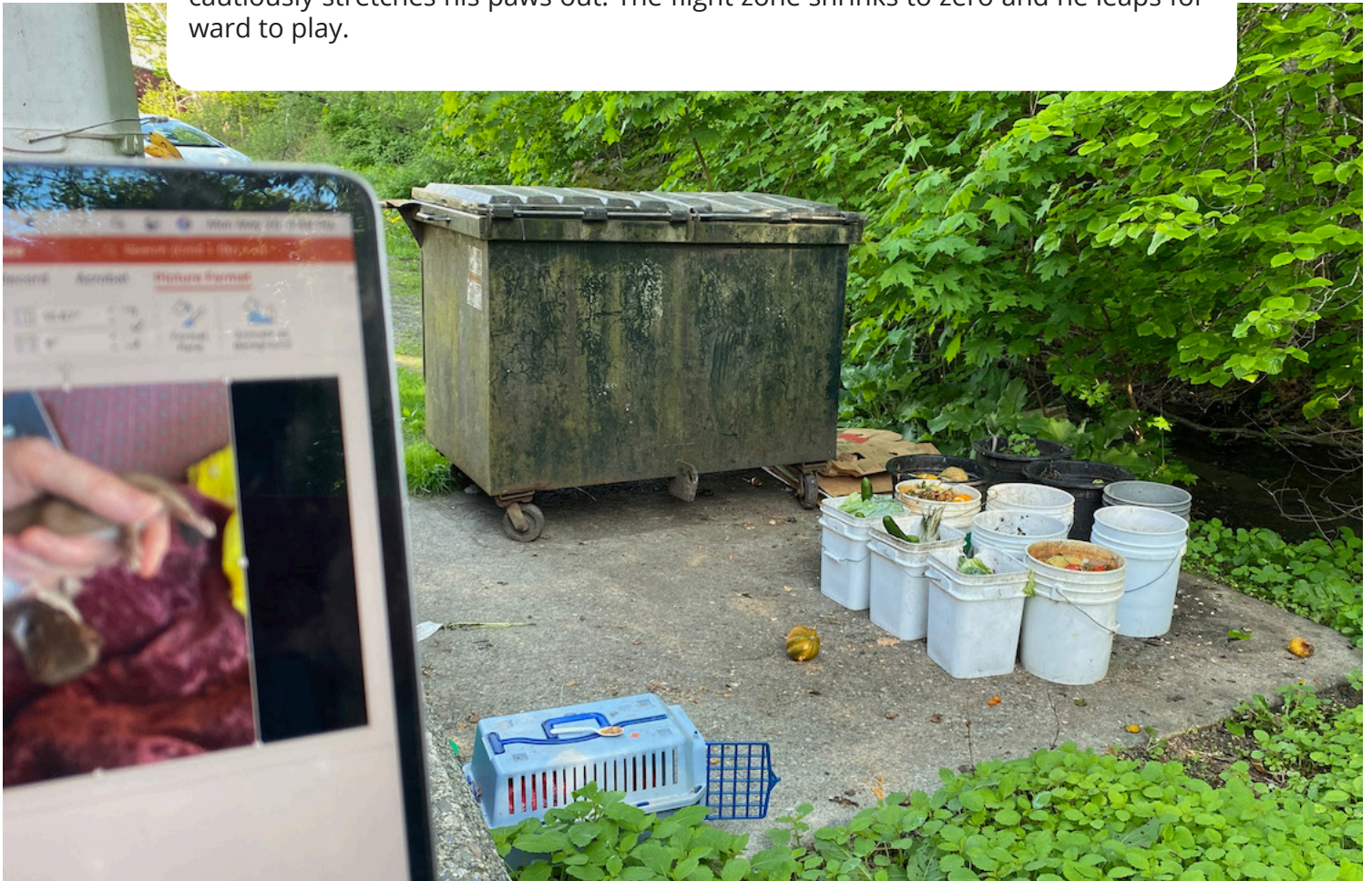
Two days later, I got a call from Dutton’s—Richard had clambered up the loading dock and had entered the store. They were able to apprehend him. When I arrived, The little squirrel cowered in a cardboard box under a milk crate.

When I got him to the orphanage, I wrapped him in some fleece and lifted him from the box. He curled up, closed his eyes, and I like to imagine that in that moment he recognized his change of fortune. I have seldom met such a wretched creature. Vegetable slime caked his fur. He teemed with fleas. He was skeletally thin, with brittle fur and sunken eyes. I wasn’t sure I could save him. First, I offered an elixir of electrolytes, vitamins, and yogurt. Richard drank ea-

gerly from the syringe. Next was a warm soapy bath to get rid of the fleas and the goo. Richard relaxed while I massaged the warm soap through his fur. When I tucked him into a clean blanket on a heating pad, he dropped into deep, blessed sleep.

If you don't share my admiration for squirrels, I recommend a different fairy tale. This one is modeled on the theme of the youngest son/simpleton/prince raised by wolves who sets out to make his way in the world. The protagonist ends up on a quest, wins the ultimate prize, and lives happily ever after. A version of this tale is told by Mark Rober, former rocket scientist and current creator of some great YouTube content. Rober is the king character—the skeptical creator of the quest and holder of the prize. Phat Gus plays the part of the unlikely hero. The video showcases the remarkable talents of squirrels in a way that is both hilarious and awe-inspiring. Google Backyard Squirrel Maze 1.0. Yes, the squirrel wins the prize and the respect of the king.

Tonight, rain is coming down in buckets. Richard, the dumpster urchin, is safe and dry and fed. When I reach my hand out to him, he sits up on his haunches and cautiously stretches his paws out. The flight zone shrinks to zero and he leaps forward to play.



The setting of Richard's darkest chapter.