

Post-Squirrel Sighting **WINNER**

By Justin Pineda-Pirro

Foreword by Kyle T.

Justin Pineda-Pirro's "Post-Squirrel Sighting" is a gripping, action-packed narrative that will leave you on the edge of your seat. What starts as a typical night in a local dive bar quickly turns into an all-out brawl that wouldn't be out of place in a Hollywood blockbuster. Pineda-Pirro's vivid descriptions of college nightlife — the thumping music, flashing lights, and overflowing alcohol — add to the sense of anxiety and urgency throughout the story.

As the narrator finds themselves increasingly entangled in physical bouts, their inner-strength shows through in a way reminiscent of a leashed dog catching a glimpse of a squirrel. When the violence finally ends, Pineda-Pirro leaves the reader out of breath.



*A Creek and Observer Landscape
by Christopher DeJarnette*

Country music stung my ears while I held my drink tighter than I hold onto my dog's leash post squirrel-sighting. Anya and Marie made their rounds, greeting and shaking hands with everyone they recognized. This town wasn't home to me; this music didn't sit right with me; and these people, all but two, were not my friends. So I stood, patiently awaiting their return, trying not to get mad every time someone bumped into me. I was a few feet from the top of a flight of stairs at a corner bar near the University of Virginia. The abnormal amount of humidity in the bar amplified the smell of beer, leaving me with a second-hand buzz and an excuse to drink slowly. The girls, all dressed the same, flocked behind the boys at the bar, leaving those who could dance, but didn't have anyone to dance with, in chairs next to high tables against the wall. The background music, laughter, and distant banter left me all but submerged in white noise.

My friends circled back around to meet me. The country genre of music abruptly changed to hip hop, and as my eyes met with Marie's, our heads rhythmically and simultaneously bumped to the beat. The flow slithered through our ears and down our spines. Alcohol kicking in while we were kicking it made it near impossible to be anywhere but there. Blue beads of light lined the

floor around the bar, favoring those with Air Force 1's, me included. The dark and granulated outlines of people swaying side to side left us with the exact nostalgia we came searching for. With exquisite timing, a young security guard, wearing all black, began to yell.

“HEY! HEY! KNOCK IT OFF!!”

Pulling and tugging led us to the bar where our nervous laughs left us excited to see what lay on the opposite side of the gathering crowd. An orifice, formed by sweaty intrigued bodies, revealed a man in a denim jacket throwing around the bartender. With his head down, Denim grabbed the bartender by his shirt, jerking him back and forth, trying to score a few punches but failing each time. In the midst of the chaos, we watched as Denim knocked and shoved until he made his way towards the bar where I was. I was lucky though. A female bartender watched the men fight their way towards her and, being on the inside of the walls of the bar, was left completely and utterly unlucky. Denim, barreling towards her, clocked the poor girl in the head, knocking her into the oh-so-many bottles of vodka adjacent to the brawling men. She yelped, and I thought of my dog getting her tiny feet stepped on by a careless me who couldn't bother to watch my step.

A taller monster of a man finally grabbed Denim off of the bartender and yelled for everyone to leave, marking what we thought as the end of the night. The girls and I regrouped and trotted over used crinkled red solo cups to check on the female bartender, who was now hunched over holding her head. I placed my drink on a nearby table, and we lifted her over the bar and onto a chair. Standing over her I asked about her head and neck. She shrugged me off and immediately as I looked to my left, you wouldn't believe it. Denim barreled through for a second time trying to get over the bar where we were. He pushed me out of the way and violently started bumping into the female bartender while trying to hop the only barrier keeping him from his target.

“Okay, is this guy serious?” I quietly huffed to myself.

I felt something in my gut. It moved around in my chest and I could feel it freeing itself of cuffs and chains. I didn't quite know what was happening, but I felt something, something big, coming undone inside of me. This beast I had successfully captured and condemned deep within my psyche years ago was knocking down blockades and barriers, climbing up my throat, and trying to take control of my arms and legs. I didn't let him take it. Instead, I just gave it to him: Sweet and absolute permission. I looked at the girl and then back at Denim. In a quick burst, I charged him. All of my years at the gym, all the miles ran, every intense workout during soccer practice could not account for the strength I felt pulsing through my veins. I wrapped my arms around Denim's waist and

lifted this two hundred pound man up into the sky and down onto the same table I had placed my drink not even seconds prior. He quickly got up and threw the cup at me. My own drink hit me above my brow, and not even for a second did I blink. My eyes were piercing through time and space, altering reality, beaming directly into his.

“OH SO YOU WANNA DO THIS? HUH?” Denim shrieked.

With Hennessy dripping down my profile, I said nothing. I just continued to stare. He looked scared and, quite frankly, I was beginning to feel frightened myself. Reality swept through the building and nestled into that crumpled-up cup Denim threw at me. Adrenaline fled my body and cowered away next to the female bartender. I wanted to look back and say, “HEY! Where do you think you’re going? We’re not done yet!” But I knew if I broke the stare, Denim would know that whatever bravery I might’ve had when I initiated the fight was now definitely gone. Speaking of things that were gone, I was genuinely curious as to where Hulk the security guard went. Oddly enough, his big head peaked over the steps I spent the majority of the night next to. He scanned the room and carried his eyes through the bar until he met the back of Denim’s head. His eyes widened, his brows arched inward, and his upper lip scrunched showing his long, horse-like teeth.

Thank Jesus, I thought.

Hulk grabbed Denim by his jacket and relentlessly dragged him down the steps. My shoulder felt warm, so I looked to see a familiar hand followed by a crazed voice, “Yo, that was wild bro! You were great, dude! What the hell was wrong with that guy?”

“I don’t know, Marie, but let’s get the fuck out of here.” I followed with a soft laugh as I let out all the air I was holding hostage in my lungs. “Where’s Anya?” I looked around to find her talking to the female bartender. I walked over to the injured girl in the chair. “Hey, are you okay? I hear an ambulance. Is that for you?” I said sympathetically, looking down at her.

“I’m fine,” she muttered.

Not that I was expecting a “thank you,” but I was definitely not expecting THAT. “Yo, Anya.” She looked over to me. “Let’s skedaddle.” She hopped up from her kneeling position, fixed her jacket, and nodded at the both of us to leave.

“So much violence, I feel tainted.” Anya smirked at me with squinted eyes. I bumped her lightly but hard enough to make her step off to the side.

“Shut up! That shit was crazy, you really threw that n****, huh?” Marie smiled ear to ear, jealous she didn’t get into any fights.

“Yeah man, I just didn’t wanna see that girl get more hurt than she already was. I don’t know what came over me if I’m being honest.” But I did. I looked down, almost embarrassed I showed that side of me. We walked down the steps and outside to find a well-lit street flooded with cops and an ambulance. As we walked, I saw black men being questioned. I saw black men speaking to the cops, black men that weren’t even in the bar. I saw cops grabbing black men by the arm to ask them if they knew the perpetrator. As if every black man knows every black man in Charlottesville, Virginia. I squeezed my eyes shut but could still see the blue and red lights. I opened them to see Marie turned my way trying to show me the video she took of the fight.

“Yo look, I was gonna post this, but if the ops get their hands on it, it’s wraps. So I’mma just keep it for myself.” She chuckled looking down at her phone, holding, in her mind, what seemed like a million dollars.

Cops stormed up and down the street carrying notepads and pens. I kept my head down, trying not to bring attention to myself. I thought about Denim. I wondered if he got away safely. I questioned how he got himself into that situation. I thought about his beast and if he had successfully locked him away until today. I thought about how that could have been any of us, and I got angry at myself for feeling empathy for a guy who had just gone on a tirade in a local bar. I felt more empathy for him than I did for the rude girl who got bonked in the head. I felt more empathy for Denim because while staring in his eyes I saw my own. I saw fear and I saw pride, and if we weren’t just looking in a mirror, then I’m not quite sure what we were doing.

Country music blared in the background and brought me back to existence. The overwhelming sound of sirens fell over us like white noise. I held both their hands tighter than I hold onto my dog’s leash post-squirrel sighting, and we walked. We walked through the chaos. We walked through the fire until we got to the other side.