

# **An Autumn Afternoon Encounter**

by Dennis W. Montville

It was a perfect autumn afternoon. The sun was shining through crystal clear skies and the air was moving with only a slight breeze. I brought my favorite cup of caffeinated beverage and sat alone on a well hidden bench. The place I go for such rests is on the campus of a local art school, and the bench is well off the beaten path, likely known to only a few of those who are there every day and to even fewer casual visitors. I sat down, ready only for a period of relaxation while watching the leaves move and the wildlife attend to their daily chores.

The setting is simply beautiful. There are trees and shrubs of many different kinds surrounding the area, with some sections tightly manicured and some left to grow wild. My bench was positioned at one of the transition zones, slightly tucked into the area where the trimming stops and nature begins. As the breeze moves the spindly branches of the shrubs they lightly brush against you, inviting you to join them into a slower paced and simpler life. It is an excellent way to reset your value meter and to restore your understanding that life should be enjoyed a bit more than our modern pace allows. That's why I came today, and that's why what happened was so weird.

One of the species of tree in the area is chestnut. They are not as common as they once were in this area and that's another thing that makes this location so special to me. They are majestic trees in general, and the ones here are spectacular. There are two rows of them flanking a long cascading pond with statuary and water works. The patter of water jets striking the surface is just barely audible from my bench and adds to the serenity of the location. My coffee was the perfect temperature and I was about half done with it when I saw the squirrel emerge from the brush line headed across my field of view in the open area. He had a chestnut in his mouth and it looked like he was making his winter stash. He bounded about 15 feet across and then stopped, looking around as they do to check for threats and competitors. However, what he did next was not usual. He dropped the chestnut on the ground and darted back the way he came. I saw no reason for his hasty retreat but didn't think it significant. Sometimes woodland creatures have an agenda we'll never understand. But then he emerged again with another chestnut in his mouth and returned to where he had dropped the first one and moved about another 15 feet past it before dropping the second chestnut and returning to the first.

This seemed comical. It looked like the classic dilemma of how to get two cars home when you're the only one available to get the job done. One approach is to drive a short distance in one, get out and walk back to the other one, drive that one past the first one, get out and repeat the process until you get home. Now it looked like this squirrel was doing something like that with the chestnuts. Given that there were so many chestnuts on the ground in the area I thought that he must really like these two for some reason. As he dropped the second chestnut and turned to go back to the first he seemed to notice me for the first time. He stopped and stared straight at me for several seconds. Then he let out a small chirp and turned further back towards the first chestnut, flicking his tail in that

characteristic undulating wave-like motion that I love to watch. He darted back to the first chestnut and picked it up out of the grass. Then he ran straight towards me.

This caught me off guard. I've never seen anything like it. Did I look like a good place to put chestnuts up for the winter? I sat perfectly still, hoping that he'd come to his senses and run off. But he didn't, and in fact he jumped up on the bench about 2 feet from me and stood there, chestnut in mouth and looking straight at me. It was too late in the year for rabies, but still I was concerned. This seemed to be a psycho squirrel and although they're not particularly large animals a bite from one wouldn't be fun. He stood there for a full 5 seconds, flicking his head back and forth to look at me with both eyes in turn. Then he dropped the chestnut on the bench, looked up at me for a second or two, let out a small chirp and then bent down and rolled the chestnut towards me with his snout. Absolutely unbelievable! It looked like he was paying respect to me or something. He was bringing me a gift. I thought he might have once been someone's pet that was now out in the wild and still saw people as trustable. I thought that this must be the most unusual thing that's ever happened to me, but it was about to get much weirder.

As I sat there and contemplated what had just happened he quickly leapt off the bench and scampered over to the second chestnut, picking it up in his mouth and then freezing in place, flicking that lovely tail again. This looked more normal as it seemed that he came to his senses and returned to the matter at hand of preparing for the winter. However, normal hadn't returned to my world yet because he turned and ran back to me, jumped up on the bench and while still holding the nut in his mouth bobbed his head up and down as if to bring my attention to it. He then dropped it on the bench and using his nose, pushed it up against the first one. After that he turned sideways, looked at me intently and let out a series of 3-4 chirps, each sounding slightly different than the other. He looked at me for another second and then jumped off of the bench and disappeared into the brush. I quickly lost sight of him in the undergrowth.

What the hell just happened? Was it over? I sat motionless for a long time, trying to get my breathing and heart rate back to normal. I was also wondering if he'd return, but after 5 minutes or so decided that the moment had passed. Slowly the awareness of my surroundings returned. The breeze still moved the drying leaves on the ground. The water still pattered on the pond. And my world had been turned upside down by one strange squirrel. I don't think anyone would believe what had happened just now. I looked down at the two chestnuts. Nope, I hadn't dreamed this. It really looks like it happened. I tentatively reached down to pick one up. It was funny. For a brief moment I thought that maybe the chestnuts might hurt me somehow. That doesn't make sense, but not much else of the past few minutes did either. I touched one and moved it with my finger. Nothing happened. "Okay" I thought, "I'm safe." Then I picked it up and looked at it. Nothing. Just a chestnut. I rolled it around a bit in my hand and saw nothing unusual. Just an average chestnut. Or so I thought.

As I looked at them and considered how I came to be in possession of them I thought about the squirrel. What could have been going through his mind? WAS something going through his mind? They seemed like two average chestnuts, so I couldn't see any answer

in them. They looked pretty much the same too. I rolled them around in my hand and compared them to see if there was anything to distinguish them from any other chestnut, and that's when I really started to see something unusual. Not that they looked unusual individually. That wasn't the issue. I thought I saw something interesting about them so I set my coffee down and held one in my left hand and one in my right. I held them so that the part where they were attached to the tree faced me and looked at the markings on them. I held the one in my left hand and rotated the one in my right hand and as I came to a certain point a chill ran down my spine. Oh, these chestnuts looked about the same all right. In fact, they were *identical*.

I sat for a long time like this, holding two chestnuts together and staring at them. If anyone had walked by and saw me they'd think, well, I don't know WHAT they'd think. Probably that I'm some sort of junkie or something, high on some controlled substance. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I held them like this and slowly rotated my hands so that I could see them along their bodies. No difference between them at all. It looked like I was seeing a mirror image of one nut, except that the image wasn't mirrored. There wasn't even a cut or nick on one that wasn't also on the other one. This was like the two snowflakes thing, except here were two "snowflakes" that were identical. Except they were chestnuts. Now, on top of all of the preceding events with the squirrel was this. My mind raced with questions.

I got up and started walking aimlessly around the grass. I sipped my coffee and looked at the chestnuts. Then I put them in my pocket. As I got nearer the chestnut trees I noticed several on the ground. I picked up a few and looked at them. They all looked like individuals, different in many little ways from each other. I held several of the new chestnuts in one hand and took one of my special ones out and compared them. None of them looked exactly like mine, but they all just looked like average chestnuts. I carefully placed my special one back in my pocket. "This is weird" I thought. "I've got to talk to someone about this." I headed back to my car, dropping my empty coffee cup in the trash on the way. If I had known then what the future held I would have tossed the chestnuts in too.