

One

“Gabriel! Time to get up, honey!”

He was still asleep.

“Hey, up there; you awake?”

He was dreaming.

“Gabriel, you’re going to be late for the bus! C’mon—shake a leg!”

Which one?

“Hey, up there! Answer me!”

He was far too sick to move.

“Gabriel! I don’t have time for this! You’re going to make me late for work!”

He was at death’s holeway.

Hearing the door open, Gabriel pressed his eyes shut and held his breath.

An itch behind his left ear suddenly flared into easily the worst itch he’d ever had in his entire life. He couldn’t scratch it, though, without bagging himself. One can’t be both breathing his last breath and scratching an itch.

A gentle touch on his shoulder triggered a rush of relief.

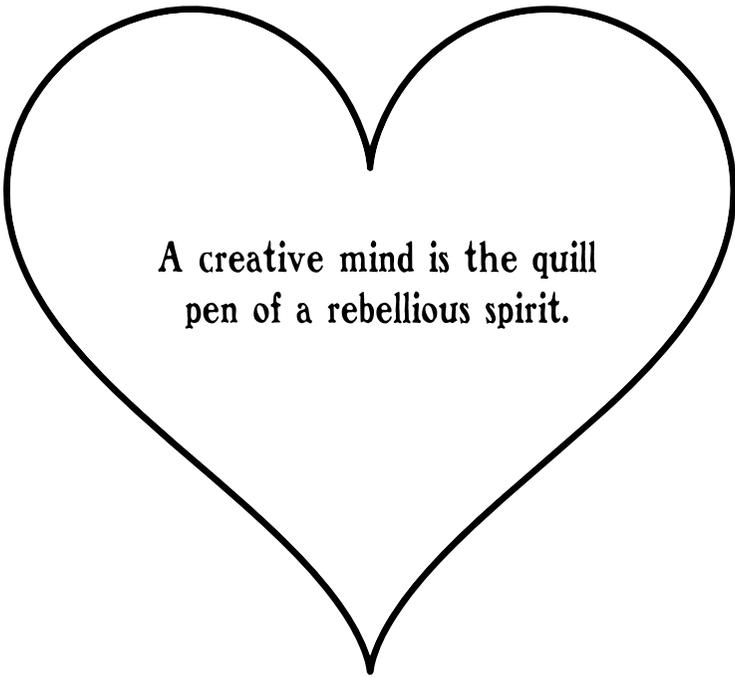
Cracking his eyes open, Gabriel could see his mother looming over him, paws on hips. He rolled over onto his other side.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Why didn’t you answer me?”

“I was asleep.”

“Yeah, and my name is Cassandra Coconut. If I’m late for work one



A creative mind is the quill
pen of a rebellious spirit.

more time because of you missing your bus, buster, I'm going to lose my job. Then where would we be?"

"You don't even like your job. You hate it."

"Oh, so we can all do in this life just what we want to do? Is that it?"

"Why not?"

The door slammed, shaking, it seemed, the entire tree.

Gabriel savored a moment of triumph, but then, as in the case of a cloud passing over the sun, the full glare of reality soon returned. All he had really accomplished, he realized, was to hurt his mother's feelings yet again, after having just promised himself, yet again, that he would never cause either his mother or his stepfather any more grief. He would do whatever it took to make himself worthy of their smiles.

Gabriel felt a lump form in his throat as he recalled the incident, two Sundays ago, that had precipitated his latest vow of good behavior—



The Reverend Willow had called all the pups up to the front of the church for Story Time, and read them the Story of the First Dawn from the Book of Sacred Scratchings, and had then asked if anyone had a question.

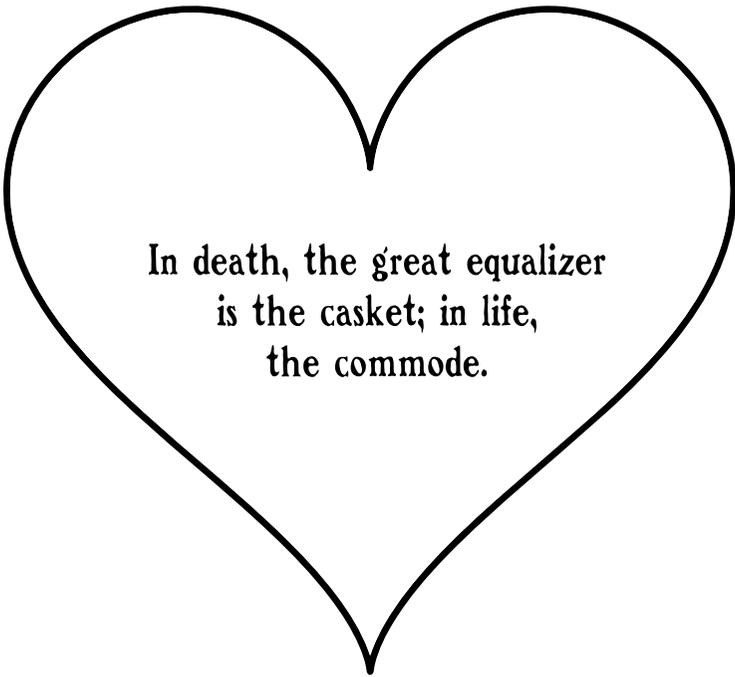
For Gabriel, an unrequited curiosity was like an itch he could not reach with one of his own claws and so required someone's assistance. Only rarely, however, did he ever seek such assistance directly from an adult, except Master Learned. Even when adults invited questions, Gabriel had learned, often what they really wanted was the silence that was the flip side of obedience. This was especially true, he had discovered, in regard to the three R's: Religion, Reproduction, and Remarriage.

Unable on this occasion to keep silent concerning an "itch" that had been driving him nuts for several moons now, Gabriel raised a paw.

"Yes, my son," the Reverend Willow had said, holding a microphone so close to Gabriel's nose he had nearly touched it.

Although Gabriel had spoken in a normal voice, it had seemed to come out much louder: "Could the Great Rodent create a critter even more powerful than He?"

The Reverend's reaction had been swift and harsh. "Sacrilege!" he had barked. "Blasphemy! Be gone from this sacred tree, ye minion of the Dark One! Away with thee!"



In death, the great equalizer
is the casket; in life,
the commode.



The lump in Gabriel's throat began to burn. Tears welled.

He had not meant to be disrespectful. He had meant only to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity to satisfy an "itch" he had not been able to satisfy on his own since scratching in his journal, several moons ago now, a great curiosity: In order for the Great Rodent to be all-powerful, he had scratched, it would seem He would need to be able to create something even more powerful than Himself. If He could not, then how could He be all-powerful? There would be at least one thing He could not do. However, if He could create something even more powerful than Himself, and did, then He would no longer be all-powerful. What He had created would be. Help!

What he should have done, of course, was just keep his mouth shut, instead of thoughtlessly causing his parents likely the most grief they had ever known in all their seasons—

"We'll never be able to live this down," his stepfather had screeched. "Never."

"Nothing will ever be the same," his mother had wept. "Nothing."

Wiping the wet from his furry cheeks, Gabriel tightened the ball he was squeezed into, and closed his eyes—

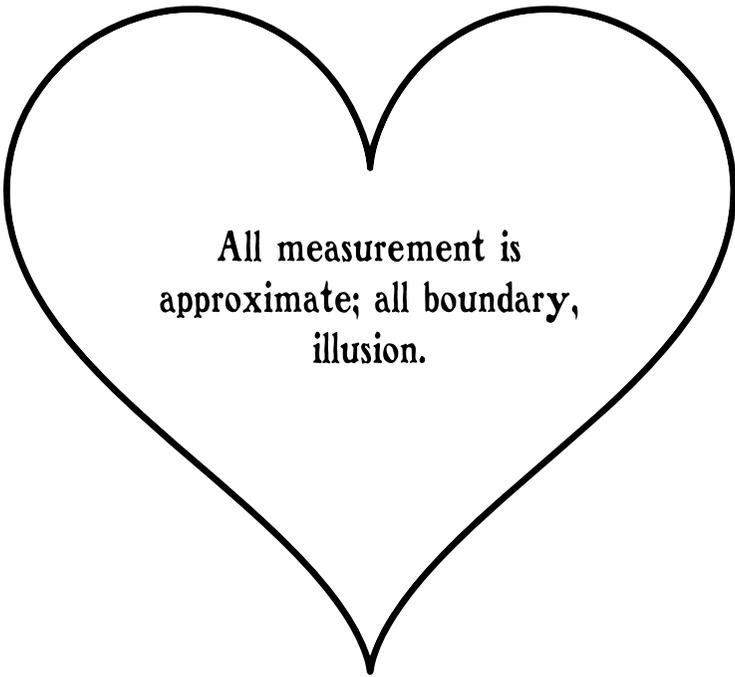


As he hobbled back into the game, the crowd erupted into a thunderous roar, the likes of which Gabriel had never heard in all his seasons.

His injury would have kept any other player in the entire league on the sidelines for the rest of the season. He had been so badly injured, in fact, that he had had to be carried off the field on a stretcher. One of the players on the opposing team had deliberately hit him low, from behind.

His team was six points behind and there were only 30 seconds left on the clock. "You sure you can go in there?" the coach had asked. "I can do it, Coach" Gabriel had replied, wiping blood from his mouth. "Whatever it takes." Tears had flooded into the coach's eyes. Gabriel had never seen tears in the coach's eyes before.

As he stood waiting for his quarterback to bark out the signals, Gabriel could hear a hundred thousand voices chanting his name, over and over: "Gab-ri-el! Gab-ri-el! Gab-ri-el!"



All measurement is
approximate; all boundary,
illusion.

“Nut one, nut two” —

The quarterback faded backward and pitched the pawnut to Gabriel. Tucking the pawnut firmly against his breast, Gabriel exploded into motion. As he scurried to his right, a huge, mean-looking tackle lunged for him, but Gabriel was easily able to elude a desperate grasp, despite the excruciating pain in his injured leg. Then another defender lunged at him, and another, and another.

“Gab-ri-el! Gab-ri-el!” the crowd chanted as Gabriel scurried and scampered, darted and dodged his way through the best defensive line in the entire league.

Suddenly he was in the clear!

No, there was still one defender between him and the goal line—the same player who had deliberately injured him earlier! He was coming directly at him, showing Gabriel a look that said he was going to hurt him again. He was going to make him look foolish in front of all these squirrels. He was going to make everybody laugh at him.

Not this time! Gabriel vowed to himself. This time, it was going to be the other way around!

Narrowing his eyes, Gabriel ran directly toward the onrushing defender.

Only a few tail lengths separated them—

Only a few paws—



“Gabriel!”

Gabriel bolted upright.

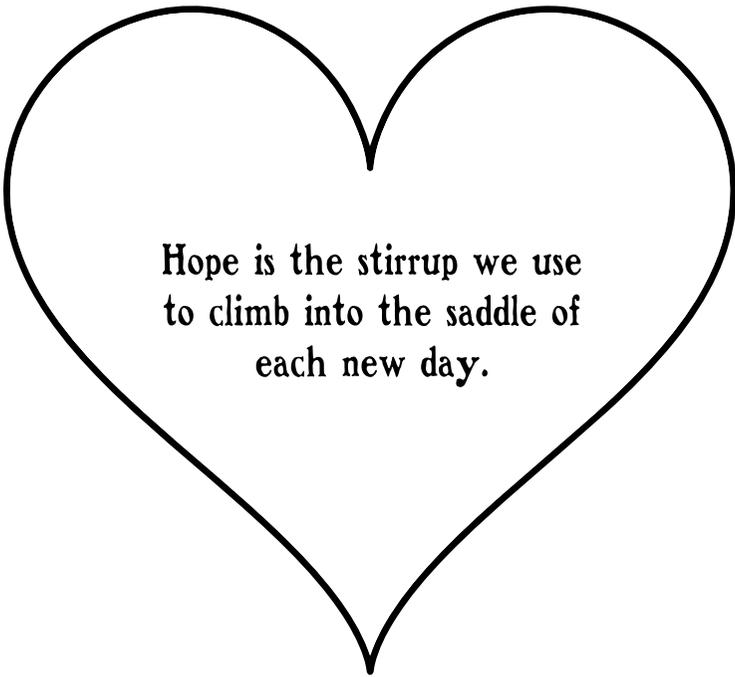
“Get out of that bed!”

Gabriel tore the covers off himself and sprang from his bed.

His stepfather pointed a sharp claw between his eyes. “And don’t you ever talk to your mother that way again. You hear me?”

Gabriel nodded, feeling his stomach squeeze itself into as small a presence as possible, like a doomed mole cringing against a rock.

The look on his stepfather’s face held more than anger. It was a look Gabriel had been seeing on his stepfather’s face since the very day he had married his mother. It was a look that seemed to say: “I don’t like you, Gabriel. In fact, I can’t stand having you around. You’re an embarrassment, and you’re not mine; you’re somebody else’s little twit. I wish you’d



Hope is the stirrup we use
to climb into the saddle of
each new day.

go away and never come back.” It was a look Gabriel had never once seen his stepfather direct toward anyone else, not even Cherice, even when she was being her brattiest, which was most of the time.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately, buster,” his stepfather scolded, “but it’s going to have to stop, starting right now. You hear me?”

Gabriel nodded.

His stepfather slammed the door, rattling the entire tree.

Gabriel stood trembling. He couldn’t stop. Finally, he sat down on the edge of his bed and hung his head. Tears rolled down his furry cheeks.

If he had tried just a little harder to win a place on the pawnut team, even if he had only made it onto the third string, at least his stepfather would have had one reason to be proud of him.

Gabriel stared at the floor, unable to do anything else. Finally, fearing a return visit from his stepfather, he put his thick, bottle-bottom glasses on and started to get dressed.

By the time he got to the kitchen, his stepfather had already left the tree for the butternut factory where he was in charge of the shucking department. It was early autumn, the time of the year when all the nut factories were operating at full capacity, which meant his stepfather would not return to the tree until well into the evening.

Good!

Gabriel’s mother was hurrying to leave for work. As Gabriel sat staring at a bowlful of boiled nutmeal, his mother gathered her tote and her pocketbook and stood in front of the main holeway. Looking at Gabriel sternly, she warned him not to miss his bus, or else. The look on her face carried the usual freight of anger and fear. The anger was because of him, Gabriel knew; the fear, because of Mr. Larch, her boss, who did not like her to be late.

Gabriel’s sister Cherice had already finished her breakfast and returned to her room to finish preening for school. Cherice was always preening, it seemed to Gabriel—devoting almost every waking moment to doing whatever it took to catch the attention of the letes at her school. If he were to be so reckless as to point this out to her, however, he well knew, she would call him a “genderist low-life scat-head” and proceed to scratch him bald, head to tail, as she had nearly succeeded in doing on more than one occasion, for much-lesser offenses.



**Humility is the last lesson
learned, the first forgot.**

Cherice was two years older and attended a different school. Hers was within walking distance; Gabriel had to take a bus to his.

Cherice entered the kitchen carrying her backpack and looking well preened. After a quick glance in her direction, Gabriel resumed staring down at his boiled nutmeal, which he had barely touched. It had grown cold and soggy because of his having taken so long to get himself out of bed.

Gabriel hated cold, soggy nutmeal.

“Don’t forget to lock the holeway,” Cherice admonished as she breezed past him.

Gabriel wrinkled his nose to a strong whiff of the flower-scent Cherice was wearing about nine splashes too much of.

“Mind your own business,” he snapped.

“You’re a scathead, Gabriel Maplewood,” Cherice said, just before crawling out the holeway.

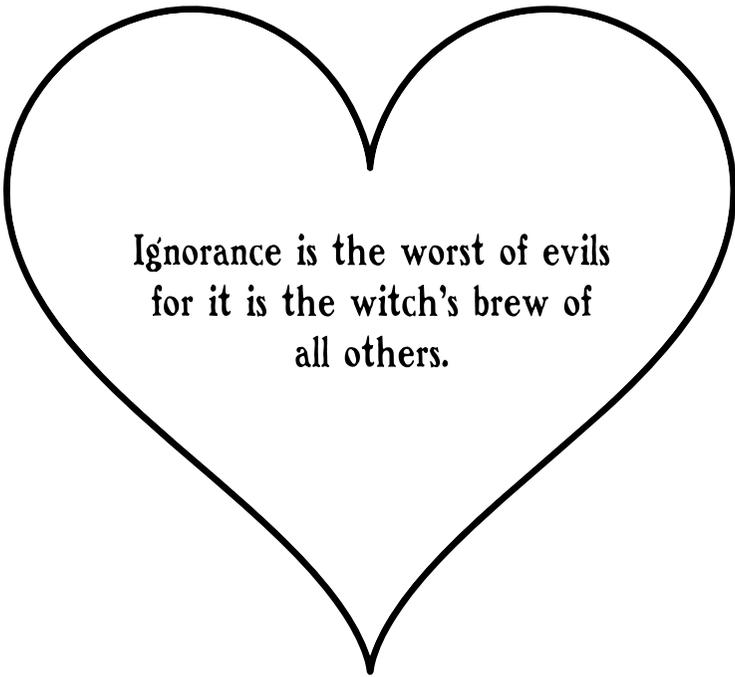
“So are you,” Gabriel screeched.

After Cherice had gone, Gabriel dumped his boiled nutmeal into the garbage and went into the bathroom to brush his incisors. He took his time brushing so he wouldn’t have to spend any more time at the bus stop than was absolutely unavoidable. Finally finished, he collected his school books and his lunch and the astronomy book he had checked out of the grove library on Saturday and putting these into his backpack, except for the astronomy book, which was too large, left the tree.

He deliberately left the holeway door unlocked.

It was Gabriel’s favorite kind of morning. The maples were beginning to turn crimson and orange, and the aspens, already brightly yellow, seemed to combust in the early-morning sunshine. The air was cool in that snuggy sort of way that is peculiar to autumn, and the undergrowth, damp from a gentle, overnight rain, and still green, seemed particularly lush. It was not the kind of day, Gabriel said to himself, as he trudged toward the bus stop, that he should have to waste sitting in a tree full of squirrels who didn’t seem to care about anything other than who was wearing what kind of sneaker or who was pulling whose tail.

Suddenly a deliciously happy thought popped into Gabriel’s head, like a big wide grin on an invisible face. He could just turn around, right then and there, before anybody at the bus stop had a chance to see him, and scurry back to his tree to get his camera. He could spend the



Ignorance is the worst of evils
for it is the witch's brew of
all others.

whole rest of the day in the forest by himself, taking pictures, reading his astronomy book, and scratching thoughts into his journal—and just basking in the friendly autumn sun.

No one would even know. At school, they would think he was out sick for the day. Nobody else would even notice, much less give a care.

Gabriel waited for the big wide grin hovering in his mind to order him to turn around. Instead, it grew dimmer, and dimmer, until poof! it was gone.

You pigeon-twit! Gabriel screeched at himself. Bammer and Chopper were right! You're a complete and utter wimp! A sissified, yellow-bellied pigeon-twit! Only squirrels like Bammer and Chopper had the grease to do such dangerous things as skip school.

As Gabriel turned a corner, he could see Bammer and Chopper waiting at the bus stop with the usual group of pups.

"Hey, here comes Einey Hiney," Chopper screeched, noticing Gabriel approaching.

Gabriel prayed for the bus to arrive on time—Please!—even though he knew his plea would fall on deaf ears because of his recent violation of the fifth Indelible Don't: "Bring not shame unto your mother or your father."

"Desperation makes beggars of us all," Gabriel had once written in his journal.

Please!

Bammer approached Gabriel showing a look that made Gabriel's stomach begin to queeze and quiver. It was similar to the look Gabriel was always seeing on his stepfather's face.

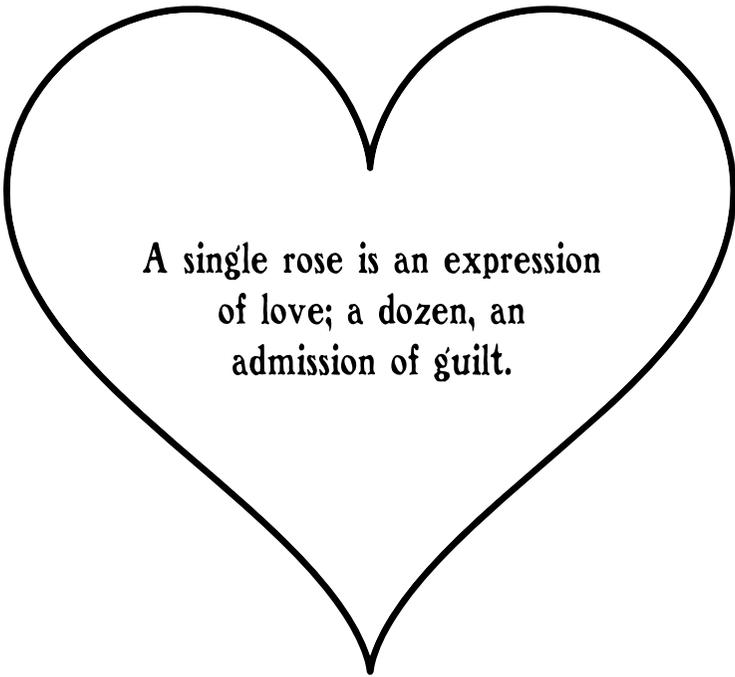
"Whataya got there, Einey?" Bammer snatched the astronomy book out of Gabriel's paws. "Get a load of this," he barked, loud enough for everyone at the bus stop to hear: "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Being a Pigeon-Twit but Were Too Bleepin' Scared to Ask."

Everyone at the bus stop howled.

Gabriel pictured himself grabbing Bammer by the neck and pushing his face into a mud puddle. But, of course, he would never do anything of the kind.

Bammer began to paw through Gabriel's book with deliberate carelessness, injuring several pages.

Gabriel flinched with each excruciating sound of tearing paper, until



A single rose is an expression
of love; a dozen, an
admission of guilt.

finally he could bear the agony no longer. “Please,” he pleaded, “give it back. You’re hurting it.”

Bammer ripped out part of a page. “Oh gee gosh, you’re right. I think I just heard the poor thing scream. Did ya hear it?”

Gabriel struggled to hold back tears.

Bammer slowly ripped out most of another page. “Did ya hear that one?”

Tears flooded into Gabriel’s eyes. “Yes, yes,” he screeched, nodding.

Bammer jammed the ripped-out pages back into the book and handed the book to Gabriel. “Kiss it better,” Bammer demanded. As Gabriel reached for the book, Bammer let go of it and jumped backward. The book landed in a mud puddle and splashed muddy water over Gabriel’s hind legs.

Bammer and Chopper, bursting into screeches of laughter, were joined by the other squirrels at the bus stop.

Gabriel pawed his book out of the muddy water and wiping it off as best he could with his bushy tail, held the book against his breast.

Standing off by himself then, his face uplifted toward the sun, Gabriel closed his eyes and pictured himself stretched out on a high limb deep in the forest. He could feel his eyes become heavier in the healing warmth—his muscles become supple and relaxed—his soul become like a morning mist hanging over a tranquil pond—

Gabriel popped his eyes open to a jarring screech.

The bus had arrived.