

The Squirrel Exchange Program

By
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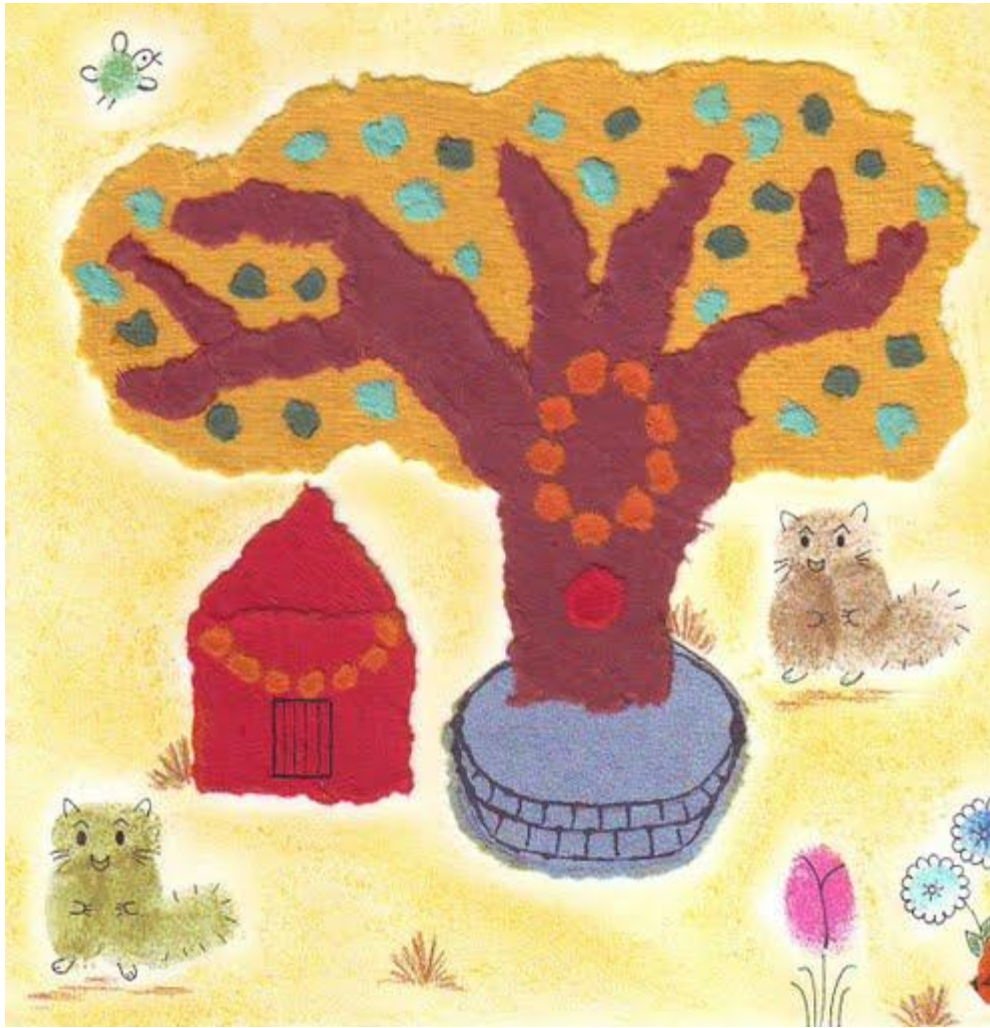
Bonjour. My name is Noisette. I am a European Red squirrel. I live in a large Oak tree in the coniferous forest of Belgium. Our forest is beautiful with tall trees and mysterious dark places. My favourite tree is the Fir tree. I love to nibble at fir cones and extract the small, sweet-smelling, tasty pine seeds. A Bientot. Noisette



Namaskar. My name is Karutai. I am a Three Striped Palm squirrel. My family belongs to the most important group of squirrels seen in India. I live in a Banyan tree in a city garden of Pune. It is a place crowded with people. Among all, I love children. They leave for me ice-cream cups and biscuit crumbs. Phir milenge. Karutai."

Noisette and Karutai have been exchanging letters for many months. The time to meet has come. They are very excited.

"Welcome to India," said Karutai while garlanding her foreign friend with the traditional marigold necklace. "You will love India. It is a sacred land where all nature is revered. Even squirrels are honored. Come! I will show you our Shiva temple below the sacred Peepal tree and tell you the story that explains why squirrels are valued."



With rapt attention, Noisette heard the tale of Ramayana's famous squirrel who contributed in its own little way to help Lord Ram.

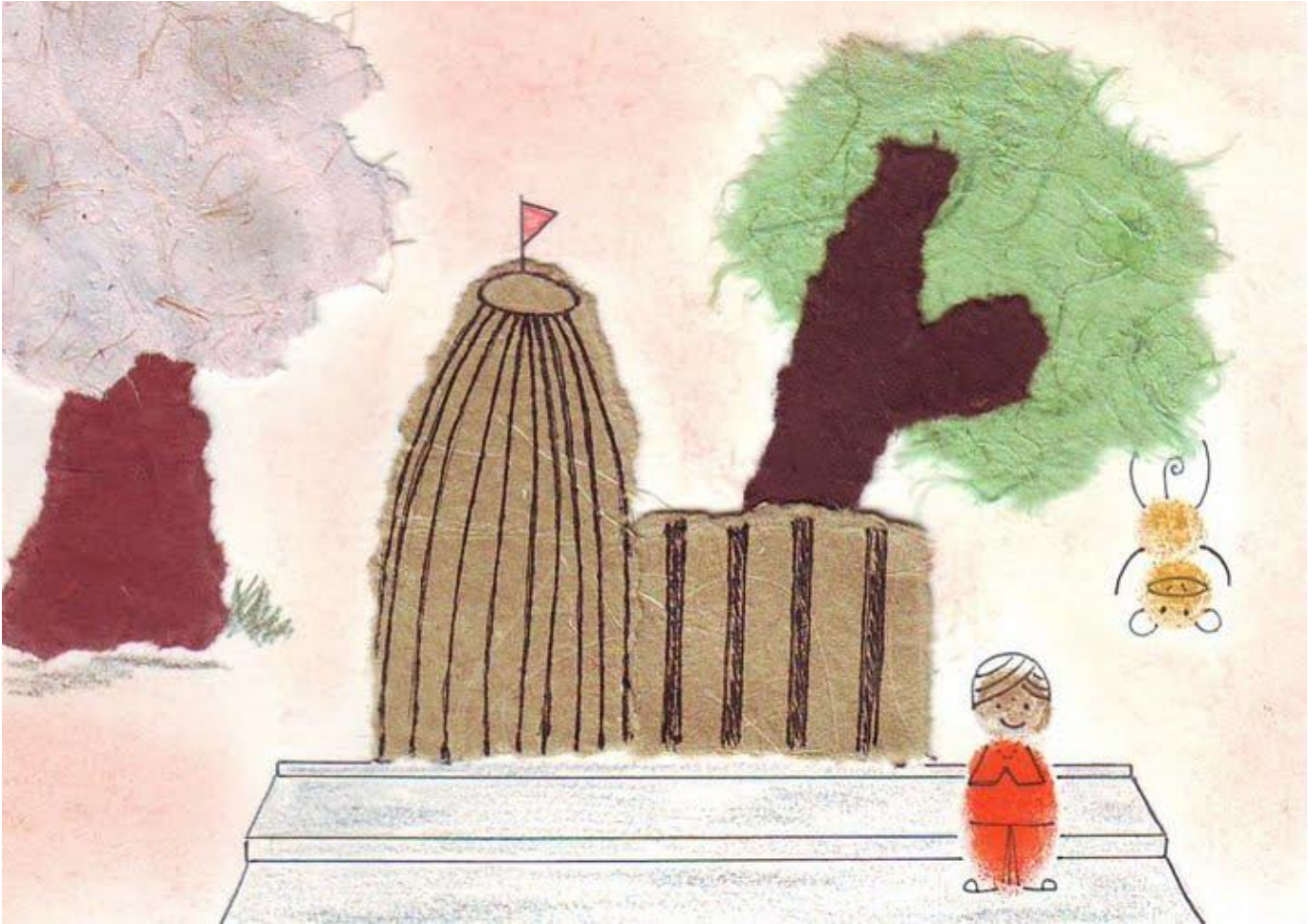
"We have on our back the three stripes which are believed to be the marks of Lord Ram's fingers. Thanks to the Lord, even today, people protect squirrels and never harm them," ended Karutai, the puny Palm squirrel.

"In Europe, Red squirrels are not sacred but endangered," added Noisette with a heart-rending tone.

"Endangered?!" repeated Karutai in dismay.

"People have been killing Red squirrels to make coats and caps out of their beautiful fur. Even it is said that Cinderella's slippers were actually made out of squirrel's vair," disclosed Noisette with anguish.

"Stay in India," offered Karutai innocently. "Here, nobody will ever ill-treat you."

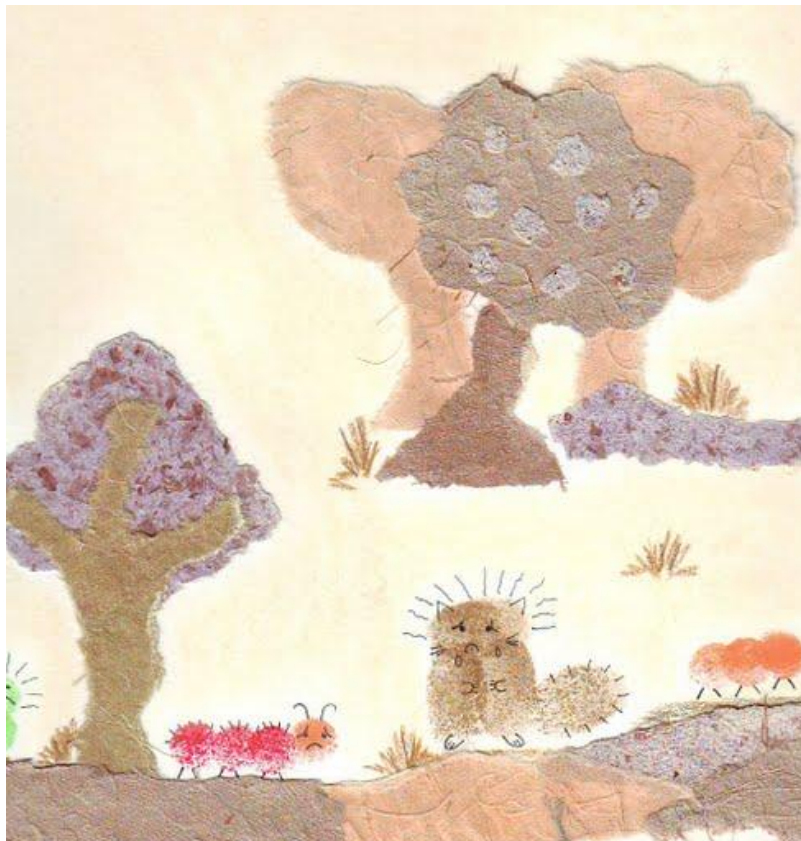


After the first few days of excitement, running up and down the Tamarind tree and the Fish tail palms, crossing streets on television wires, playing at the trapeze artists, scaling rough walls of buildings and entering homes, Noisette began to tire out.

"Why are you looking so depressed? Don't you like my country?" inquired the Indian squirrel who was trying to figure out what had displeased her friend. Karutai seemed to have forgotten that her foreign friend, Noisette, was a forest denizen and not a city dweller!!

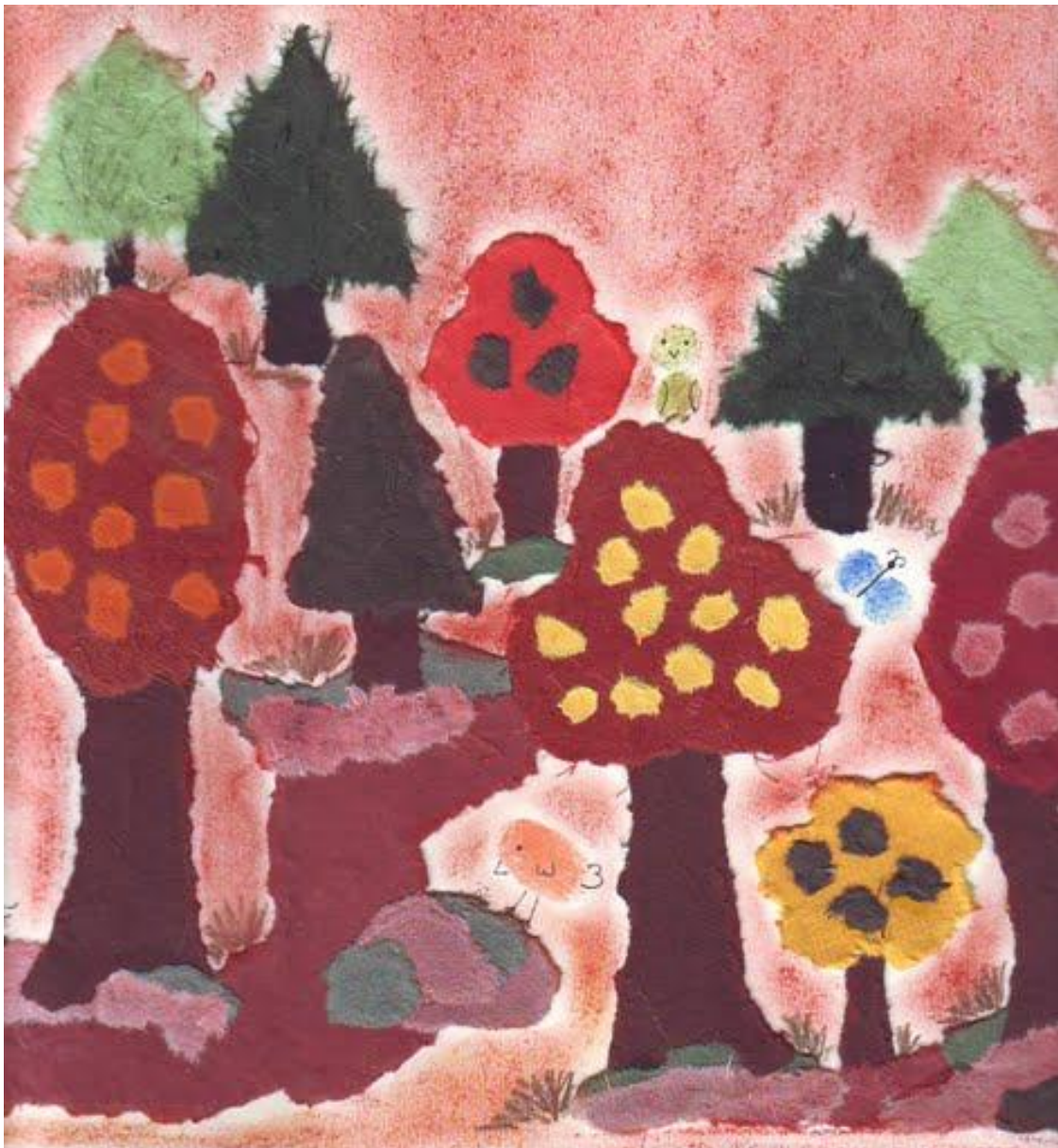
"European Red squirrels are not habituated to the brouhaha of a city and that too of an Indian metropolis," exclaimed Noisette with tears of exhaustion in her eyes. And she squirreled away to the top of a Banyan tree to find a little peace.

Soon the adventures of Noisette in India were coming to an end. The cruel summer was on the way. Day by day, temperatures were soaring. The soil turned to dust. The grass and trees changed to brown. Water became scarce. Every one was thirsty and weak. Noisette, the European Red squirrel, was feeling rather uncomfortable in her thick fur designed to resist the coldest of the weather.



"Au revoir! À bientôt!" said Noisette. And she planted an affectionate kiss on Karutai's cheek. "Hope to meet you soon in Belgium. You will like the temperate forest. It has a refreshing climate," said Noisette while boarding the aircraft.

"The woods in autumn wear dazzling colours. What a beautiful season to visit Belgium!" thought Karutai, rubbing her eyes to be sure it was all real and not phantasmagoric.



Karutai was welcomed warmly by Noisette who took her to her home, a cozy drey in the cavity of an old Oak tree. The drey was a recycled bird nest. The twig framework had been strengthened, leaves had been piled up and a soft layer of grass and moss had been added for extra warmth and comfort.

In the evening, the Red squirrel organized a huge feast of nuts; there were crunchy acorns, oily walnuts, succulent hazelnuts, creamy chestnuts and fresh pinecones.

After such a regal meal, Karutai began to feel heavy and sick.

"In the cold weather, you need a rich diet of nuts," said Noisette, talking like a nutritionist. "Nuts are a source of proteins of which every squirrel has to take advantage. And remember, you might have to go through the winter without a single meal!"



Soon, Karutai joined the European Red squirrels in their collective task of gathering provisions to fill up the larder for the coming winter months. To rummage through the hidden corners of the woods and dig up seeds and nuts was a new game for the Indian squirrel. By watching others, she soon learnt.

"Where to store this supply of acorns?" asked Karutai.

"In the hollow of the Maple tree," replied Noisette.

"Where to bury this harvest of chestnuts?"

"In the roots of the Fir tree."

"Where to hide these delicious hazelnuts?"

"In the abandoned burrow at the root of the Oak tree."

"How are you going to remember so many storage places?" asked Karutai who had already forgotten where she had hoarded the acorns.

"A keen sense of smell and gnawing hunger will guide us," replied Noisette with the confidence experience gives. "And if few nuts are not recovered, it is not a tragedy. Some of the missed nuts will sprout and eventually become trees whose fruits will feed our next generations of squirrels."

One morning Karutai awoke to find the woods covered in a thick white blanket.

"It is snow," explained Noisette. "It means winter has come."

Winter was fun at first. Watching glittering snowflakes twirling gracefully, hopping in the crunchy snow and leaving behind star-shaped footprints, skating down tree trunks covered with white frosting and relocating seed caches buried below a thick layer of snow, provided hours of fun for Noisette and Karutai.



But soon, days started seeming like an eternity. Silence was everywhere in the forest. Nature was hibernating. The woods looked desolate. All day long, squirrels huddled in their nest trying to keep warm by wrapping their bushy tails like a shawl and cuddling up close to each other.

Poor Karutai! With her tail only half as fluffy as the tail of a European Red squirrel, she was having a hard time protecting herself from the icy winds. "I think it is time for you to go back to India," suggested Noisette with compassion.

"Yes," exclaimed Karutai. And her eyes twinkled like the sun sparkling on the white snow.