

The Squirrel

Charlotte Burnett

I want to jump up and down do a little dance and a flip all around the office...but I don't, because that would be an affa silly thing to do in front of yer new boss. Mister Archer...Mister Arty Archer.... Main Foreman of this branch of the Harlem Metal Working Company. Imagine me a real Apprentice, to a real plater. Who knows maybe...maybe...maybe I'll even be a welder. I know I can take the courses...I know I can. I'm so excited I cannae hardly breath.

Mister Archer smiles at me as if he understands and speaks in that deep soothing Aberdeen drawl of his.

'Now Quine, you know I cannae offer ye any special treatment...as far as management is concerned yer just one of the Loons. We dinna have many...or any...Quines going for this sort of position in this branch. De ye understand what I'm saying?'

'Oh yes sir, I understand completely – and I dinna need special treatment, I just wanna learn and be the best that I can be.'

He grins at that, a full wide smile that shows offer his front teeth which cracked and yellowed in the middle. I hope I dinna look like I'm staring, he's my foreman – or one of them anyway – and want him to like me. Or at least not spit at me on sight, and that's nae even because I think his spit must smell something affa.

'Excellent, will follow me and I'll introduce you to the boys.'

'Right, Squirrel idiots...we've been three weeks without anyone losing their hand on the guillotine, you break that streak you're cleaning the blood up yourself.'

Squirrels were what they called apprentices here, I dinna ken why, no one will tell me.

'Girl Squirrel...'

'My name's Davey...'

'I dinna care, just get over here and show me you were paying attention. And the rest of you can keep yer eyes on yer work or your hand won't be the only appendage you'll lose.'

Behind me I hear the guilty shuffling of the other apprentices: Fat, Skinny and Baby or at least that's what Foreman Bob calls them. I try nay to notice them or the way they smile at me as I approach the Guillotine machine – a large green cylinder with a long blade attached to it.

'Cut me a sheet of metal.'

His voice is load in my lug and my hands tremble as I lay the sheet of metal under the blade. There's giggling from behind me but I dinna care. Pressing down hard on the peddle under the machine I'm ready to cut through the metal sheet and then...

'Hold on, you've put it in wonky, it won't cut straight' says our teacher, coming over to fix my mistake. Suddenly with a slap a hand hits my arse and I spin round, my foot leaving the peddle.

I'm nay crying when they find me in the bathroom stall – there's no women's so I'm hiding out in the men's. The wood on the stall-door is all flaky and smells of something rancid that I don't really wanna examine. I'm nay crying. I'm rubbing my eyes because I think a bit of Foreman Bob's blood got in my eye. I'm nay crying because I lopped off my foreman's middle-finger on my first day, I'm nay even crying because Fat Squirrel slapped me on the arse. I'm nay crying at all. Skinny and Baby don't seem to get that.

'Dinna cry, we're all been left in tears by Barking Bob. It's not as if yer the first person to chop his finger off,' laughs Skinny, grinning wolfishly at me as if he wasne standing there laughing as it happened.

'Leave me alone.'

'Ach dinna be like that, we were only capering. Have a sense of humour why don't you.' Giggles Baby, the first time I've heard him make so much as a squeak in my presence.

I try and push past them, but Skinny's liltin laugh stops me in my tracks.

'Fat slapped yer arse, stands to reason this situation calls for a bit of revenge. We humbly offer our services, don't we Babe?'

Baby's laugh is barking, making him sound like Foreman Bob in a rage.

'Aye, our services.'

This is the trick:

Fat leaves his tool-box on the counter. So, what we do is drill a hole in the tool-box big enough to fit the nozzle of Grease-gun in, then we watch as the whole box fills with the grease.

We're laughing, me and the other squirrels, laughing so hard before the shadow falls over us.

'And what is so damn funny? Why are ye all standing round my Tool-Box?'

It's not Fat Squirrel's voice.

'I'm sorry...I'm so sorry. We didn't know it was Foreman Bob's Tool Box...we thought it was Fat Squirrel's.'

'Fat Squirrel? Oh, you mean Adrian,' says Arty Archer oozing gentle understanding. 'Yes, he has gained an unhealthy amount of weight recently. No...no I didn't call you in here to discuss that, God knows Bob's an arse...I'm surprised something like this hasn't happened sooner. No, I called you in here to tell you that we have to let you go.'

'But you said the Tool Box prank...'

'Was very funny, but I'm afraid we cannae accommodate you anymore.'

'But why?'

'We can't afford to install a separate bathroom for you.'

‘But...but I’ll just use the Men’s. It’s what I’ve been doing anyway.’

‘No, no we couldn’t possibly allow that...can you imagine what health and safety would say? I’m afraid we’re just gonna have to ask ye to leave. But congrats on the grease prank...that, that was really quite funny.’

He sticks his hand out then like he expect me to...just shut up and shake it. I don’t, I just sit there and stare at him.

‘But...but I was fitting in, they were starting to like me ...I was a squirrel.’

Archer’s smile is tight at that and he looks genuinely sad as he says.

‘Not anymore Quine.’

Author Bio:

Charlotte Burnett is a 24-year-old, Dyslexic, High-functioning Autistic woman who lives in Scotland; and who has previously had short stories published at literary journals such as the *Write Launch* and *Coffin Bell*. She is currently studying for an Open Degree focusing on psychology and creative writing with the Open University.