

THE TALE OF SODAPOP - PART TWO - TRANSCRIPT

Sodapop keeps close to the barn cat. In the flood of interesting outdoor scents, it would be easy to lose her. He uses a similar tactic with Lara when she lets him wander without a leash, shooting a glance her way every time he finds himself distracted. The barn cat never seems to look back at him, though she occasionally flips an ear his way.

Because of his size and his fluffiness, people often assume that SodaPop can't take care of himself. But he's been on his own before. He was barely older than a puppy when his first humans took him for a ride, set him on an unfamiliar street, and left him there. He barely remembers those humans, but he's pretty sure they were nice up until then. He doesn't know why they left him behind. It didn't seem like an accident. Those humans only had him for a little while, just long enough for him to grow from a fat baby into the leggy, athletic dog he is today. Maybe they only wanted a fat baby. Maybe they forgot that babies grow up.

He learned a lot of things in that strange neighborhood. Where humans discard food, how water likes to pool. Which animals were good or chasing (almost all of them), and which ought to be avoided (mostly geese). By the time a human finally caught him and brought him to the city shelter, his hair had grown long and matted, and he was even skinnier than he is now. They shaved him and fed him, and he slept in a strange concrete room with lots of stressed-out dogs in nearby enclosures. He didn't mind that place, really. It had nice humans in it. Humans are almost always nice to SodaPop.

It was there that SodaPop finally met his human. He'd never had a person of his own before, not really. But this one walked into the shelter, smiled down at him, and he knew nothing could ever be the same. She took him to a little apartment on a quiet street in Portland. Lara lived there too. She and Lara were happy, and he was glad because he seemed to make them even happier. The humans called him SodaPop, because it made them laugh. He calls himself nothing, because he always knows who he is. He never learned his human's name for much the same reason. She was like the sun. You know it has a name, but you don't really have to use it. The sun is just there.

Those happy days went on forever, at least as far as he could tell. Dogs experience lots of forevers. Time for them is slow and slippery, and they can live in a moment for as long as they want, provided nothing big changes. And nothing changed for SodaPop and his people for a long, long time.

At some point, the humans started fighting. First a little here and there, then almost all the time. They weren't real fights, of course. More the kind of loud display that dogs use when they have a dispute but don't want to hurt each other. But they made the house feel tense, and that made SodaPop worried. He started to feel like he had a stomachache all the time. He clung to his human, but she started leaving the apartment at unexpected times, always without him, so that he only had Lara to be with. Lara was nice, but she didn't speak his language like his person did. His person knew all his looks and signals, every little change in his body language. Lara was much more difficult to communicate with. And she didn't play with the toys right. She didn't seem to care about toys at all, in those days.

And then one day, his human was gone. SodaPop isn't sure exactly when. Dogs aren't good at noticing when things end. He remembers a long hug around that time, uncomfortable and tight. She didn't usually hold him like that, and he whined and struggled until she let him go. Her face was salty, and she sat on the floor for a long time while he tried to clean it off. He's not sure if that was the day she left or much earlier, though. She just wasn't at home for a long time, and then one day Lara put all the things that smelled like her into boxes and sent them away. Then he knew.

Things have been different since then. Not bad different. Just different. Lara is a fine human, and they've come to understand each other better over time. SodaPop loves her. But she's not the sun. They both know that.

Here in the woods, SodaPop's nose begins to fill with that awful, sharp scent he got from the squirrels and from whatever was inside Jake's house. It gets stronger as the trees move closer together. He growls softly as it starts to block out other smells. The barn cat pauses and looks back at him, a long, appraising look. He can't say for sure, but she seems glad that he's uncomfortable here. He hopes that doesn't mean she's tricking him.

Familiarity prickles at the back of SodaPop's brain. He's been here before. Was the smell this strong that time? He can't remember clearly. He's pretty sure

he came here with Lara and Jake, though. He'd found the sweater then, its scent piercing through this sharp mush like a beacon. But nothing smells like that now. It's all just...bad.

SodaPop pushes past the cat, through a little tangle of underbrush, and sees a large clearing full of dry, lifeless dirt. Yes, this is where he came with Lara. It's not a good place.

As he steps up to the edge of the clearing, the sharp smell disappears. In fact, all smells disappear. SodaPop freezes. He sniffs intently. He smells... nothing.

You have to understand, there's always something to smell. Sometimes one scent masks another, or a nose gets overwhelmed, but there's always *something*. Even when all the other senses fail, there's a scent. Except in this place, right now. The non-smell wraps around from all directions, and soon he can't tell where he came from or where he's going. The forest might as well be empty. His own odor goes away. Maybe he's gone, too.

SodaPop begins to tremble. He doesn't know what to do. What do you do with the absence of things? Do you bark at it? Hide from it? It feels like if there's nothing to smell, then there's nothing he can do.

The cat emerges from the brush somewhere near the middle of this little crisis. When she sees SodaPop shaking, she lets out a soft, surprisingly high-pitched meow.

[SFX: Cat sound.]

The sound acts as an anchor, pulling SodaPop back into the world. It's getting very dark now, but when he turns his head to the side he can just see the cat's outline against the trees beside them. She might be the only real thing in the world.

SodaPop isn't quite sure what happens next. Maybe the cat, with her expanded pupils, can see more. He just notices that the dead dirt takes on a shifting, churning quality. Long, dark streaks appear, like the fingers of a mole seeking the best path. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, something bulges toward the surface. He can't make out what it is, but it seems familiar somehow.

He feels like he's trying to access an old, old memory, something he never actually experienced but has carried in his blood from his mother's mother's mother. A bit of knowledge that only lives in his oldest bones.

Then suddenly, squirrels leap down from trees all around the dead clearing. He can't be sure, but they look like the Bad Squirrel from earlier — fur a little too dark, eyes a little too bright. They chitter and weave, and to SodaPop it feels like he's hearing them from underwater. As their paws hit the dirt, their scent disappears. Together with the darkness, this makes them nearly invisible to a dog like SodaPop. He shivers again, and whines softly under his breath.

Beside him, the barn cat's tail twitches. The squirrels chatter and run in the dirt. SodaPop can only see shadows, but the ones he sees undulate strangely, as if the terrain is changing shape in front of him. All at once, he gets the feeling that the squirrels are doing something important here. The cat hisses softly, but he doesn't look away. There is something precious here, something that shouldn't be left to squirrels. If he can just get a little bit closer...

As he lifts a paw to step into the dirt, the barn cat bites him on the tail, hard. SodaPop yelps and staggers backward into the brush. He whirls around to face the cat. Her hair is all on end, her tail puffed up to at least twice its size. She's not looking at him, though. She's staring back at the clearing, her eyes wide. SodaPop follows her gaze just in time to spot a line of dark squirrels, heads all turned in his direction, bodies tensed for a fight.

The cat sprints off into the bushes, away from this horrible place, and SodaPop follows close behind her. Behind them a chattering wail floats out of the squirrel mob, an eerie sound that only barely remembers it's supposed to be a rodent's cry.

Forest smells rush back in, much to SodaPop's relief. He knows the squirrels are close behind, dozens of them, the sharp scent arcing off them like lightning. He forces himself to focus on the cat, who's surprisingly agile given her bulk. She darts under bushes, springboards sideways off of tree trunks. There's no real strategy here, just a wild, frenzied race. SodaPop struggles to keep her in sight as he also bounces over logs, slips down through hollows, whooshes past the ferns.

At the foot of an old Douglas fir tree, he spies a place where the dirt has fallen away from the roots, creating a small pocket. It may not be an escape, but it would leave him guarded on three sides if he has to make a stand. The barn cat clocks it too, and they zip into it at nearly the same time. Their soft bodies wedge together into the back corner of the hollow. They're both breathing hard.

Just then, they hear an owl. The sound stops the squirrels, who come to a halt and turn their glittering eyes toward the sky. SodaPop hears the owl shift its flight and prepare to dive. Maybe it doesn't know about bad squirrels. Maybe it thinks this mass of rodents will make an easy meal. Whatever its reason, it swoops.

Instead of scattering, the squirrels turn their heads as one to watch the owl's descent. They're not afraid. If anything, they seem excited. Hungry.

As the owl's claws come within range of its intended victim, the pack of squirrels screams. The weird rodents leap into the sky, climbing over each other in a squirming tower of tails and claws. In an instant, they swarm the owl, first pulling down its talons, then covering its entire body. There's a confusion of screams and growls, and then it's over. The owl is dead.

SodaPop knows this is wrong. Squirrels don't hunt, and they certainly don't do it in packs. What's more, they definitely don't *eat* other animals. But these abominations don't hesitate. They fall upon their former predator and devour it. They eat every sinew, bone, and feather. Within seconds, the owl is just...gone.

SodaPop wants to stay in his hiding spot forever, whining and shaking. But the barn cat taps him on the nose and then pads soundlessly out of their place and into the brush. SodaPop hesitates. Nothing about this makes sense. The owl should have taken a squirrel or missed it, and the other squirrels should run for cover. SodaPop should pick out a straggler and try to catch it himself. Or he should chase the squirrels off and see if there's any owl meat left. The sensible parts of him say that he can still fulfill this last part of this chain. But then, maybe if squirrels don't act like squirrels, he shouldn't act like a dog. And so he turns away from prey and prey of prey, and follows a cat into the tall grass.

OUTRO

Thank you for listening to the Tale of SodaPop, part one.

This episode was written, edited, and narrated by Julie Saunders. The role of SodaPop was played by Archie. The Barn Cat was played by Lulu. Music for this episode was provided by Epidemic Sound -- please see the show notes for titles and composers.

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Until then, please take care of yourself. Your best is still ahead of you.