

**DOREEN**<sup>1</sup>

**D**oreen Green liked her name.

1. It rhymed.
2. “Doreen” was a combo of her parents’ names: “Dor” + “Maureen.”
3. Her initials, *D* and *G*, were both big, sweeping letters you could form with a squirrel tail, if, for example, you happened to have one.

Which Doreen totally did.<sup>2</sup>

“All I’m saying,” said Doreen Green, “is this neighborhood better be chock-full of squirrels.”

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1 Hey, that’s me! I’ll be reading this book along with you if you don’t mind. If you do mind, just pretend those adorable little numbers are word hats and ignore these footnotes.

2 It’s true. I was totally born with a squirrel tail.

“It will be,” said her mom, who looked similar to a lot of other moms you’ve probably seen around: i.e., human, with no squirrel tail.

If you ignored the tail, Doreen also looked similar to a lot of humans you’ve seen around. Specifically, this human was a fourteen-year-old of the female variety, with pale, freckled skin and red hair that never grew longer than her jaw. Also, her two front teeth were a little longer than their neighbors. She had to gnaw on things to keep them from getting even longer. Things like logs.<sup>3</sup>

“Chock. Full. Of. Squirrels,” Doreen repeated.

“I researched the area before we moved, sweetie, and there isn’t a neighborhood in New Jersey that isn’t teeming with squirrels,” said Maureen. “Or any neighborhood in almost any climate anywhere in the world, actually. Squirrels get around.”

“Yeah. Squirrels are awesome.”

They were unpacking boxes in their new house, which smelled a little damp, like an overturned pile of leaves, and not at all familiar. Maureen was stacking their towels and sheets in the hallway linen closet. Doreen was perched on the curtain rod above her window, taping a poster of She-Hulk onto her ceiling. One time when Doreen was little, she and her mom were walking

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<sup>3</sup> Mm-mm, logs: nature’s crackers! Maple logs are my favorite, fresh with syrup. . . . JK, I don’t eat logs. That would be weird. I just chew on them to keep my front teeth trim. Which isn’t weird at all. If you’re me.

down a sidewalk in Los Angeles and saw She-Hulk punch a truck full of bank robbers.<sup>4</sup> In New Jersey, there was little chance Doreen would happen upon She-Hulk. Her new home was closer to the Avengers, of course, since the Super Heroes were based in New York, but they were still a whole state away.

“Can you put this on your mattress?” asked Maureen, tossing her daughter a sheet. Doreen leaped off the curtain rod, caught the sheet in an airborne somersault, and landed feetfirst on her bed.

The Avengers on the sheet were washed out and threadbare in places. The red in Captain America’s suit had turned pink. The Hulk’s angry faces were faded to pale green blobs. Doreen refused to ever get so old and serious that she’d be embarrassed to sleep on Avengers sheets. She held it to her nose and inhaled. It still smelled like home—or their former home. A little salty, like the California air. A little salty, like the tiny tears of the squirrel friends who had gathered on her bed that final night to say their farewells.

Doreen sniffed. A small whimper escaped her throat.

“Oh, sweetie,” said Maureen. “I know it’s hard. Why don’t you go out and prowl around, huh? Meet some new friends? You can finish unpacking later.”

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<sup>4</sup> Also one time I saw She-Hulk walk into a smoothie shop, but the punching-a-truck-to-make-it-stop was more memorable.

Doreen nodded. Her tail swished, as if it were excited to get outside.

“Just . . . don’t stay out late, okay, punkin?” said her mom. “The real estate agent warned us that Shady Oaks isn’t like our old neighborhood, where it’s safe to roam around after dark.”

“No sweat.” Doreen bounded down the hallway, jumped from the top step to the bottom, and opened the front door.

“Here I am, New Jersey!” she said. “Doreen Green, age fourteen. Over five feet tall and not an inch mean.”

Inspired by her name, sometimes she liked to rhyme. It wasn’t her strongest skill.

She stepped outside and felt a pleasant but alarmingly unfamiliar sensation: a breeze tickling her tail hairs.

“Doreen!” her mother called from the top of the stairs. “Your tail!”

Doreen leaped back and slammed the front door shut. She hadn’t made that mistake since she’d been tiny and barely old enough to understand that girls with squirrel tails have to hide them snugly away.

*Everyone who saw you would feel so sad that they don’t have a tail, too, her mother always said. Above all, we must be kind. Hide your tail; keep your secrets secret.*

Doreen had always suspected there were other reasons to keep this particular secret secret. Secret reasons, in fact. But Doreen dutifully tucked her tail into the seat of her pants. It was mostly fluffy fur, and fur compacted pretty well.

“Good girl,” said Maureen.

Doreen opened the front door again, but she didn’t feel like rhyming anymore. She felt half as clever, half as strong, half as interesting. Half herself.

She sniffed the air, detected the direction of tree pollen and squirrel nests, and turned left. Off to make friends and climb trees.

The neighborhood was old. The trees were so large their roots had grown under the sidewalk, cracking it from below. The houses were mostly two-stories, standing close together and at attention. A breeze rustled discarded cans and wrappers in the gutters and sent litter rolling down the sidewalk.

The tree smells led Doreen to a large neighborhood park. A soccer field there was crawling with kindergarteners kicking in the general vicinity of a ball—and occasionally at each other. Their parents pointed frantically at the ball and shouted, “Kick that! Kick *that!*”

Over a hillock on an expanse of green, Doreen spied a few people around her age. They were wearing sort-of-belted nightgowns with knee-high boots and hats, long vests, and lots of leather. Was the fashion in New Jersey so different from California? Their apparent leader was a kid with deep brown skin, his hair a short Afro under a feathered cap. He sported a terry cloth cloak and kept calling out, “Forsooth! Forsooth!”

Doreen had never met anyone in a towel-cape yelling “Forsooth” before. She was intrigued.

“And now you walk a narrow stone bridge over a lake of bubbling lava. . . .” he was saying.

The other creatively dressed teens began to step carefully through the grass. Because it *was* just grass. Not lava. Though Doreen caught herself looking to make sure.

“Out of the lava rises . . .” the forsoother said, pausing for effect, “a red dragon!”

Doreen looked around for a dragon, just in case. As far as she knew, dragons were imaginary, but after all, she *was* living in a world where a photo of Thor, the God of Thunder, buying shawarma from a street vendor currently held the Twitter record for most retweets, so YOU JUST NEVER KNEW what was possible.<sup>5</sup>

“Aah!” cried out a pale blond girl in a belted nightgown and knee-high leather boots. “Not a dragon!”

“I choose to fight it!” cried out another girl in a belted nightgown, her black hair full of ribboned braids. She raised a sword. “Yonder scaly fiend’s hide will decorate my mead hall!”

“Hey there!” said Doreen. “You guys look and sound really interesting, and I would like to be your friend.”

They all stared at Doreen, frowning. This was not the reaction Doreen had hoped for.<sup>6</sup>

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5 I think that photo went viral because that shawarma looked *sooooo* delish. Mom thinks it had something to do with Thor not wearing a shirt.

6 Ideal reaction: “Yes, please! We’ve been hoping that someone EXACTLY LIKE YOU would find us here so we could make her our BFF!” Or something. I’m not super particular.

The forsoother stepped forward. “I am the baron of this domain. You, maiden, are trespassing. Go on your way or you may summon the wrath of our guardsman, the he-giant Derek Facepunch.”

The tallest of them hit his palm with his fist in what Doreen guessed was supposed to be a menacing gesture. Doreen smiled apologetically for not feeling menaced.

“So,” said Doreen, “are we friends now or . . . ?”

“Begone!” said the forsoothing baron. “Now . . . back to our adventure. Lady Blightbringer de la Poisonarrow, slay the dragon!”

“YAAAAAH!” screamed Lady Blightbringer. She slashed at the air with her sword.

“Okay,” Doreen whispered.

As she turned to leave, one of the boys jogged over to her.

“Hey, hi, uh, sorry about that,” he whispered under the noise of Lady Blightbringer attacking the imaginary dragon.<sup>7</sup> He held out his hand to shake. “I’m Sir Reginald Foxgood—well, to normal people like you I’m Vin Tang. We’re LARPerS, you know? Live Action Role Players. We like to dress up and pretend to be in a fantasy world, which is a totally reasonable thing that mature people do.”<sup>8</sup>

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7 It didn’t occur to me till now that it could have been an *invisible* dragon and not an imaginary one. I should thank Lady Blightbringer for saving us, just in case.

8 I suspect Vin Tang has had to defend LARPerS to judgey people before.

“Oh.”

“But it’s a closed group. That’s what the baron was trying to say. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Doreen.

*Normal people like you.* If Doreen showed them her squirrel tail, would they think she was cool and invite her to be their friend? Or would they just dissolve into sticky puddles of sorrow that they didn’t have tails of their own?

Doreen sighed. Maybe squirrel friends would be easier to make than human friends.

Doreen checked to make sure the LARPer’s weren’t watching her, and then she climbed a tree. It was a huge old oak, and she scrambled up the trunk like a spider climbs a wall. Or rather, like a squirrel climbs a tree: with ease.

A little brown squirrel on a branch leaped back when it saw her.

“Hi there! Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you!” she said. “I’m—”

The squirrel ran away.

She climbed higher, discovering a pair of squirrels trembling, staring at Doreen with eyes wide.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Doreen. “I’m like you!” She turned and stuck out her bum. “See that big booty? It’s not that big by itself. I’m hiding a squirrel tail. . . .”

The squirrels ran down the tree and away.

“Okay, then, we’ll just compare tails some other time,” she called after them, a bit defeated.

If they had seen her tail, Doreen wondered, would the squirrels have liked her? But she knew she couldn’t show them. Ever since she was a little girl, her parents had drilled it into her: WHEN IN PUBLIC, HIDE YOUR TAIL.

Suddenly a gray squirrel was right in her face, chittering, mouth open, teeth bared.

“OH! Hey there!” said Doreen.

“*Chukichit-chit!*”<sup>9</sup> said the squirrel, gesturing menacingly with one tiny fist.

“I’m sorry,” said Doreen. “I wasn’t trying to encroach on your territory. I just wanted to introduce myself. You see, back in California I had lots of squirrel friends, like Monkey Joe, Pippy Longtail, Gamma-Phi-Pie, Roscoe and Murph—”

The gray squirrel sneezed. It was not so much a pardon-me-I-got-a-bit-of-pollen-in-my-nose-hole sneeze or even a head-colds-amirite? sneeze. Rather more like a good-day-madam-I-said-GOOD-DAY! dismissive sort of sneeze. And with that, the squirrel turned tail and leaped into the next tree.

“Sorry,” Doreen said softly.

She barely had a moment to feel bad for herself when from the next tree she heard the opposite of a squirrel sneeze.

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9 I’m not translating this because it’s pretty rude. But to be fair, if she’d known that I could understand squirrel language maybe she would’ve been nicer. Maybe.

Yes. One of nature's rarest sounds. A squirrel gasp of fear.

Doreen forgot to check that no one was watching before jumping. That is to say, she *didn't* look before she leaped.<sup>10</sup> She landed in the upper branches and scrambled toward the trunk.

"Are you okay, little friend?" asked Doreen, her keen vision raking the shadows for signs of a squirrel. Instead what she found, well-hidden under the bushiest of branches, was a small metal cage.

"*Chatti-chit,*" said the gray squirrel from inside the cage, her eyes burning with rage.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," said Doreen. "Accidentally stepping into an animal trap concealed in a tree could happen to anyone, especially if—WHOA!"

One end of the cage had begun to move. It was squeezing in, like some kind of weird squirrel death trap.

"What the heck?" said Doreen. "What kind of a jerk would make this?"

The squirrel was chittering in panic. Doreen tried to open the cage. *Locked.* The metal wall had already moved halfway. The squirrel and her tail were curled up in a ball in the far corner and would be squashed like roadkill in seconds. Doreen worked on the lock. No luck. The squirrel looked up at her with wet, frightened eyes.

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<sup>10</sup> "Leap before you look" is kinda my motto.

“Not today!” said Doreen.

Doreen had always been a good deal stronger than her parents. Could she also save squirrels from evil death traps? Grasping the steel sides with each hand, Doreen pulled. The metal screeched. She squeezed her eyes shut and pulled harder.

“I can do this,” she said, her voice tight with exertion. “I am Doreen Green. I am . . .” Then she thought it, the name she only called herself in her head. The secret name she’d never said aloud because it felt like a Super Hero name, and only in her head did she dare dream herself a hero.

*I am Squirrel Girl!*

The metal screeched even louder and popped. The cage fell apart in her hands.

The squirrel was just a streak of gray, leaping free of the cage and running off.

“Yay, Doreen!” said Doreen, because no one else did.

And then, quietly, hopefully, she whispered to herself, “Yay, Squirrel Girl.”