



FACE OFF

On May 13, 1998, Mr. Gureckis noticed a squirrel moving feebly through his yard. Concerned, he scooped up the animal and brought it to Second Chance to see if it could be helped. Mr. Gureckis optimistically offered to release the squirrel back into his yard if it recovered. At the time, our staff felt that to be a pretty big "if."



I had never seen anything like it before; his whole head was grotesquely swollen and had a purplish color. The right eye was swollen shut and was oozing pus while the left eye was wide open, dry and unblinking. There was no obvious bleeding from the ears, nose or mouth as could be expected if he had suffered a blow to the head. In fact, the only injury appeared to be a small scrape on his chin which was already scabbed over. Perhaps this juvenile male had been bitten by an adult squirrel and had developed an infection.

The poor youngster clearly felt awful and offered little resistance as we attempted to treat him. We flushed both eyes with warm saline and applied a soothing antibiotic ointment. Having no way of knowing what had caused his problem, we decided to try an oral medication to fight any possible infection. We prepared a cage for him with lots of "warm fuzzies" and snuggled him under the covers.

The next morning, his condition was about the same; he was still alive but that was the best we could say. For the next week, we continued the medications. The swelling slowly subsided but the left eye remained open; fixed and nonfunctional. He became slightly more active and began taking some interest in the fresh fruits, veggies, and nuts that we provided daily.

After several weeks, we were pleased to see that he was behaving much more normally, for a squirrel, that is. He seemed to have some difficulty cracking shells but happily nibbled nuts if we opened them. Since he was becoming more difficult to handle, I often simply watched him, concentrating on the condition of his face. Although his left eye remained wide open, I was more concerned about another thing; his face did not seem to move. He appeared to be wearing a Halloween mask. When Dr. Pat Klein from the Humane Society of the US happened to stop by, I took advantage of the visit and asked her to take a look at the squirrel. She was also perplexed by his condition and examined him carefully. We noticed a slight indentation, like a split, all the way around his head just behind his eyes; a similar line circled his muzzle just behind his nose and around under his chin. His entire face, between those two lines, was dry, hard and DEAD! The dead area also extended down his chest like a bib and pus could be seen filling the split. Dr. Klein began flushing under the skin with warm saline in an effort to clean the area. After a bit, we decided it might be better to leave well enough alone. Dr. Klein applied some antibiotic ointment and suggested we resume the oral medications.

About a week later, Dr. Klein stopped by again and asked how "Face" was doing. His face was still stiff and unmoving but, at least, his right eye appeared fully functional and he was active and eating. We wrestled him from his cage for a better look. His "bib" had begun to peel up so we trimmed it off. The tissue under the flap, although bald, was pink and healthy. He was returned to his cage where he resumed nibbling daintily on his food.

The more I watched Face, the more convinced I was that he had been bitten, not by a squirrel but by something venomous. I had heard that the bite of a copperhead would cause tissue to die. Perhaps he had come across a snake and, out of youthful curiosity, approached a little too close. Squirrels are pretty fast and he would have jumped back when the snake struck, possibly receiving a glancing blow instead of a full bite. This contact may not have delivered enough venom to kill the imprudent youngster but could have left the scab on his chin and caused the tissue damage. We had to catch him, by hand, and remove him from his cage each time it was cleaned and I began to have images of him squirming out of my grasp and leaving his entire face in my hands. Would the underlying tissue be healed? Would he grow new fur? And, what about that left eye? Needless to say, he was handled with great care!

Finally, in mid-August, most of our questions were answered when a volunteer peered into his cage and saw him sitting in his nest box literally holding his face in his hands. The entire face had sloughed off in one piece and he appeared very pleased to be rid of the constricting mask that had made it so difficult for him to open his mouth wide enough to crack his own nuts. The right side of his head was surprisingly well-healed but the left side was still raw and angry-looking. The left eye was simply gone; where the socket had been, only a tiny dimple remained.

He now began healing in earnest and was active and eating everything put in his cage. Periodically, he would scrape the scab off the left side of his face leaving a new raw area but, each time, the wound was smaller. Hair, albeit patchy, was actually beginning to grow back on his chest and the right side of his face. Except for this "Phantom of the Opera" visage, he appeared to be a perfectly healthy squirrel.

By September, I decided to move Face to a large outdoor cage. I had been worried about flies causing a problem on his raw skin but our building is hardly fly-free. If they had not caused a problem inside, I did not think they would do any damage outside. Besides, he was getting "squirrel-ly" and needed more room to exercise. I also needed to see how he would compensate for the loss of his left eye. I did not know how well he would be able to judge distance as he scampered around and leaped from branch to branch and I needed some time to observe these behaviors.

Once outside, Face became very alert and active. It was difficult for us to see how well his wounds were healing as he dashed around the cage when anyone approached. As near as I could tell, there was never a misstep or error in judgment as he scampered around and around and up and down in typically squirrel-ly fashion. Finally, on the last day of the month, I called Mr. Gureckis with the good news; Face was ready to be released!

On October 2, 1998, nearly five months after he was rescued, Face was returned to his home. Mr. Gureckis contacted me later to describe the event. As soon as he was released, Face raced up the nearest tree, paused a few moments, ran down and up the next tree. Up and down, up and down he continued his exploration of his old territory for about 20 minutes before disappearing into the trees. One can only imagine how he felt to be back in familiar and comfortable territory, free again.

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