Old Lady

by Irene Chung

Everyday I would see the same old lady standing in the apartment complex's courtyard, seeds and nuts in hand.

Today was no exception. She chittered along with the squirrels as she gently tossed out their snacks onto the withering grass, their tiny hands urgently grabbing at whatever was closest, but still always keeping a safe distance from this curious stranger kindly feeding them.

I had made it a habit to watch her from our fourth-floor window ever since we moved in on my first day of third grade, always enamored with how close the squirrels interacted with her. I never learned her name, but she became a part of my daily routine.

On this particular cold winter day, as I was surrounded by various sized boxes packed and sealed tightly shut, I happened to catch a glimpse of her through the window. I could hear my dad pacing around the stuffy room as he distractedly said to me, "Have your stuff packed Irene, your mother's almost here to come get you for the weekend."

She was facing me, wrapped up tightly in a brown fleece jacket and scarf, the top of her silver hair peeking out from the bundle. Her face was cheerfully scrunched into a smile as squirrels surrounded her feet, blissfully scampering as she stuck to the same routine I saw so many times before. I lingered at the window, not wanting to tear my eyes away from the sight, away from the chaos that was our soon-to-be ex-home.

Like the sunrise every morning, long walks with my dad, or his homemade fried rice, her familiarity enveloped me until the strange ache in my chest was replaced with warmth.

Slowly, she stopped, straightened, gathered her remaining nuts, and made her way back to the apartment.

Maybe I was mistaken, but I could've sworn she smiled up toward my direction, at the window from where I watched.

A week and a half later, my dad and I moved out.