

The Tale of Sugar
by Georgie Wen

Dark, watery eyes peered upwards from a small opening beneath the Laurel Oak tree. Heavy droplets sank into the ground. The regular chatter above fizzled out during this grey weather. Songbirds moved back to their nests. Squirrels found better cover. It was almost night.

Sugar stepped out and gasped from the cold impact. So difficult to see, to keep her eyes open.

“Linnaeus!” She hardly recognized her own voice, a mixture of anger and worry. Sugar assumed her husband didn’t listen to her again and traveled too far from home. He liked to think that bravery and boldness would set him apart from all the other male chipmunks who went missing. A fool I’ve ended up with, the shivering chipmunk thought. Of course, that didn’t make this night any easier. Sugar wanted so badly to be wrong.

When a figure appeared in the distance she felt it must’ve been a mind trick. It drew closer and closer, filling her with hope.

“Is that you, Mrs. Chippins?” A crow twice her size walked right up. His feathers somehow looked darker when soaked. Sugar couldn’t hide the disappointment on her face.

“Yes, I’m waiting for my husband.” She spoke loudly to compete with the rain.

“Let’s wait inside, shall we?” Archer held a wing over Mrs. Chippins as they went towards thick tree roots that concealed a dirt shelter. It was surprisingly dry and clear of bugs. The crow was able to stand up straight inside the welcoming area.

“Apologies for the tiny entrance. Linnaeus doesn’t like it any bigger,” said Sugar.

“No need, my friend. It’s refreshing to see a married couple be so considerate of each other’s needs.”

Sugar felt a hint of a smile touch her mouth, knowing what her guest was here for.

“So how is your future wife doing?”

“I haven’t seen her much. Perhaps avoiding me,” he said.

“Well as long as she’s making time for you I’m sure things’ll turn out better than you expect.”

Archer shook his head in amusement and asked permission to stay until his feathers were back to normal. In truth, the chipmunk liked the idea of having someone to keep her sane while waiting for Linnaeus.

Three circular openings stretched into darkness. The middle tunnel led to a cozy sleeping chamber and the others led to food and business supplies. She asked her customer to wait while she brought the goods out.

Sugar had eyes sharp enough to find the matching jewelry without any light. They were hanging from the walls along with all other work. If a fire were lit inside her den, you would've thought pirates were after Sugar's home, the way her room glimmered.

A crow was the first to show interest in her talents when Sugar wore a braided twine necklace to a squirrel wedding. Two weeks prior, Linnaeus brought back a flat seashell from his trip with the boys, and Sugar figured out a way to bring it everywhere. That crow leaned in close to examine her neck. Said it looked marvellous. Mrs. Chippins thought his dark beak would snatch the necklace right off, but it turns out he had already stolen something.

It was a small chunk of rose quartz. His request was for Sugar to transform the mineral into a beautiful anklet he could give to his lover. She finished the piece quickly using the same twine. As soon as word got out about the chipmunk who could turn nut shells into treasure, the work literally piled up.

These birds gave her a panoply of random pretty objects from every color stone you can imagine to dead beetles with metallic lustre. Sugar's tiny hands learned how to handle objects that are delicate and objects that are impossible to scratch.

In exchange, the chipmunk community received protection from crows. Sometimes they would even get warning squawks if bears or wolves happened to be nearby. Linnaeus calls her a hero, all the lives she's saved from servicing crows.

"She's gonna love these," said Archer. The sound of rainfall softened as they sat and talked in front of the entrance, watching and hoping for Sugar's husband.

"He's probably just holed up somewhere."

She nodded, not believing. After her guest took off, she tried to sleep in the welcoming room. Her eyes were closed and her body curled up but the mind never drifted off. Long after the showers Sugar was still alone.

Violet wasn't home, wasn't in her tree at all. Sugar searched along the stream and ran into her friend near some trees covered in mushrooms.

"Nice flowers you've got," said Sugar.

"Oh hi Sugar. How's business?" Violet lifted up her rodent-sized bouquet for Sugar to sniff. All white petals.

"Business has always been going strong, but I'm going to need someone to protect it while I'm gone."

"Oh? Where are you headed?"

Sugar explained that her plan was to find her husband. When Violet asked how she would do that without getting killed, Sugar revealed how little of a plan there actually was. Nobody in this area knew the truth of what was happening to these chipmunks. All she could hope for was to find answers along the way.

"Would you be willing to stay at my place occasionally to keep an eye on it? I will be gone as soon as I find someone to do me this favour."

Violet got teary all of a sudden. "If you end up finding Robert, I know you'll bring him back also."

"I'll do my best."

Her chipmunk friend gave her one of the flowers for luck and told her to pack well. Sugar nodded and walked back to the Laurel Oak tree to do just that.

The couple's hoard was barely enough to get through winter. There were separate piles organized by type, so it didn't take long for Sugar to grab an armful of her favourites. Sunflower seeds, dried blueberries, and pecans. The amount she filled her cheeks with wasn't noticeable; she would grab more food along the way.

Sugar checked the sky as she was about to leave. Clouds, but not enough for precipitation. She turned her head and truly examined her den for the first time, remembering how they built all of this. Linnaeus was so covered with dirt she said he looked more like a squirrel. He complained in response, telling Sugar to stop throwing dirt his way.

The shell on her neck felt smooth and had a concavity that helped take her anxiety whenever she rubbed it. This necklace would be safer at home, but she needed comfort on this journey. It was like carrying a piece of her husband with her.

Throughout the day Sugar would pick a tall tree to climb. From the tips of a branch she would see the twin mountains and get her bearings. Also she'd check the sun and figure out roughly her distance traveled by how much time had passed. It surprised her how often she'd forget that she was all alone. Words came unbidden, but Sugar would stop talking whenever it occurred to her no one was standing by her side.

The wind was picking up, forcing her into a wineberry shrub. All the berries had been sampled, so Sugar started nibbling on her own food—a yellow butterfly she pounced on earlier. A piece of its wing got stuck in her throat. It took her a minute to cough it out, then another minute to catch her breath.

“Was it poisonous?”

Sugar opened her eyes and froze. The voice came from behind. He sounded close. As the stranger spoke, long tapered legs surrounded the chipmunk. Only her tail moved. He asked what part of the woods she had come from.

“Not in the mood for conversation, I see. It's alright. We'll talk at my place.” Despite his friendly tone and not seeing his face, she was preparing for a dash. Within moments her body exploded from the spider's grip, cutting him off mid-sentence.

He was also fast. Experience must've given the giant bug a serious advantage. He followed her up a small grey tree, never letting those stripes out of his sight. Sugar glanced back only once when he hissed something she couldn't quite hear. Two of his eight eyes were double in size compared to the others. Immediately she felt there was something not right about having more than two eyes, though she couldn't explain why it made her that much more terrified.

As she processed the sharp noise of a wooden snap, her insides lurched. Sugar found herself holding onto a swinging branch without thinking. Then her mind went back to those sickening eyes. Where did they go? He wasn't above her, so she tried to check the tree trunk.

Blackness ensued once she hit the moss covered dirt, a tangle of legs wrapped around her.

She woke up unable to move.

“I'm alive,” she whispered into darkness. Seeing the previous victims lying about made her question whether or not she should be grateful. There were several odd-shaped cocoons about the size of chipmunks. One massive body wrapped in webbing almost seemed like a piece

of furniture. Her unwrapped head was the only thing keeping her from becoming such ugly decoration. Sugar was free to hear, smell, see, and speak as she rested against the wall upright.

“Did you sleep well?” The spider crawled along the side of the wall. Hearing the shuffle of his legs caused Sugar to shiver and think how no spider should be large enough to make a noise.

“I don’t have time for all this,” said Sugar.

He went on top of her to examine his prize. Her eyes were so determined the spider wanted to know exactly what was going through her head.

“Why do you feel that way?”

“I need to find my husband. It’s the reason I’m out here.”

“Poor little chipmunk. Say, how did you get those scars?” His fangs wiggled while talking.

“What scars?”

“On your back.”

“Those are stripes. I was born with it.”

He made a noise that might’ve been a chuckle. Sugar was glad to see him walk off. She was sharing too much. She shouldn’t be talking to strangers, even if she was so helplessly trapped.

When she was all by herself, she heard a rustling—from the edge of her vision, one of the smaller cocoons wiggled and jerked. It made her wonder if any of these white pods contained her husband, or perhaps several husbands. If he were here, the rustling would’ve been him because of how recent his disappearance.

“Linnaeus!” she called out, hoping for an answer. All Sugar received was a voice in her head reminding her to focus on getting out first. There was still precious time before that talkative arachnid would get hungry.

By crow standards, Sugar is a clever little chipmunk. If anybody could escape it’d be her. She used her arms to push away from her chest. The layers of silk clung to her tightly, but Sugar managed to slide a fist out to her neck. It was such a relief to be able to wiggle her fingers. Not being able to move or stretch out was a form of torture she didn’t know existed. With her level of anxiety she would’ve pierced through her skin squeezing that shell.

Sugar glanced to the side every time that covered body made a noise that sounded like the spider was back. She was tempted to tell whoever was in there to stop struggling even though she was doing the same.

Leaning her head downwards allowed her tiny fingers to reach for the pecan hidden inside her left cheek pouch. She was careful to never pull it all the way out while gnawing at the sides, gripping it with teeth or lips to keep it from falling. Splitting a shell had never been so satisfying.

A piece tumbled to the ground along with the hard meat, since Sugar could only hold onto one shell. She did her best angling the sharp edges against the tight blanket of webbing. Her wrist could barely produce the sawing motion she needed as her head was too close. For a moment she thought her idea wouldn't work. Her fingers could only hold onto the pecan shell for so long.

An inappropriate word left Sugar's mouth, her voice overlapping the clatter of her life-saving tool. It took a minute for her to realize she could extend her arm a bit more. Part of the cocoon was torn.

A boost of adrenaline gave her the strength to roll onto the ground and towards that first shell she dropped. She grabbed it and put a toothy edge to the tough silk. Cutting herself out wasn't as challenging at this point. She freed two entire arms and made quick work of the rest.

"Now I can say I know exactly what it's like to be a nut," she said to no one. Perhaps she would tell Linnaeus all about it.

With the shell in hand she approached the now very still cocoon. Their entire body was concealed by web, so breathing appeared to be impossible.

"Don't panic, I'm going to help you." Sugar checked her surroundings to make sure he wasn't back yet. She looked back at where she was cutting and saw brown feathers breaking through the opening. Knowing that horrible creature was capable of catching a bird did not make Sugar feel better about sticking around. She sawed faster. Her heartbeat filled her ears.

Sugar fell back from a violent flurry of wings and silk. The bird flapped but didn't know where to go—certainly not upwards.

"Is this hell? What's happening to me..." the bird whimpered.

“You’re not dead,” said Sugar. “We’re going to escape.” The chipmunk wanted to stick together to increase their odds of survival in case their bloodthirsty friend made an appearance. Two against one.

“What’s your name?” she asked the panicked bird.

“Athena.” And quickly she added, “To whom do I owe my life?”

“Sugar Chippins.”

They moved towards what little light there was in these damp tunnels and encountered more lifeless cocoons. It was tempting for Sugar to make use of her sharp shell again, but so long as she remains inside this maze, nobody has been saved.

A wing fanned out before Sugar just as a spindly shadow moved across the wall. They jumped behind the closest cocoons and held their breaths. If the spider had been paying more attention, they definitely would’ve had an awkward situation.

“I think the exit is close. Let’s rush for it before he notices we’re gone,” said the watchful bird. Sugar got on all fours and followed Athena. She was right. Fear was replaced by the excitement of inhaling untainted air. The sky was dark but ready for sunrise. The chipmunk forgot herself. She forgot the oversized spider.

“I don’t know if I can fly covered in so much filth.”

The chipmunk switched back into survival mode and formed an idea within seconds. She suggested hopping over the rotting log next to them. They would flee in that direction, staying out of the spider’s line of sight when he emerges from his hole.

By the time they were out of breath and unable to keep running, the sun gave its much needed warmth. Sugar felt as though any monster that was chasing her must’ve been shed away with the night.

“Do you hear that?” she asked Athena. Both animals sniffed the morning air.

“It’s a waterfall. I know this area.”

“We need to wash all this stuff off. I can’t stand the way my fur sticks and pulls.”

It was not some majestic hundred foot tall waterfall, but Sugar was rather impressed. They approached a pool of turquoise surrounded by rock that had been eaten away by nature’s persistence. Near the edge of the water, Sugar almost slipped in headfirst.

“It’s very slippery,” said Athena. She was scooping and tossing water over herself.

“I know, it’s just that…” She examined her arms. Patches of fur had come off with the sticky parts. By the end of her wash she hardly resembled a chipmunk.

“My feathers!”

Sugar saw them float away from the patchy brown bird.

“It’ll grow back, I’m sure,” said Sugar uneasily. Athena cried over what has been the worst week of her life, her own tears coalescing into waterfalls. The chipmunk dared to take another look at her reflection. She saw a lost and damaged animal who wanted to go into hibernation early. But there was something else—behind? No, above.

Sugar found a creature in the sky. It was too far away to tell what she was in awe of, but the shape was nothing like a bird or a bat. In short, it should not exist.

“We should go home,” said poor Athena, still unable to fly.

“I’ve been searching for my husband.” Sugar held a stare. Her full concentration was on sunny skies towards the north.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hope he’s okay.”

She finally looked at her new friend. They made quite a pair, truly wild in appearance. Anyone who didn’t recognize them would make the worst assumptions and stay clear.

“I understand if you want to part ways. Maybe we’ll run into each other under nicer circumstances next time.”

“That’s not a good idea. With my wings in this condition, I don’t feel safe travelling alone.” Athena made eye contact before mentioning she also wants to return the favor.

This part of the forest felt untouched. It was difficult to find food that wasn’t poisonous. Luckily, Athena had sufficient knowledge of what they could not eat.

The little bird barely kept up physically, so Sugar acted as a scout and shouted, “Come check these,” whenever she spotted mushrooms or berries.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I think I need to take a break.” Athena nearly collapsed. Sugar had been growing more and more worried about her health on top of their lack of resources. She decided to gather some leaves for her friend to rest upon.

“Let’s take a look at you, girl. Are you hurting anywhere? How long were you in that spider den for?”

“Um... two sunrises, although... can't be sure.”

Sugar brushed aside feathers to inspect more of her skin. When she uncovered a strange wound on the back of Athena's neck, she wasn't sure of what to say. This bird was in worse shape than they had thought. Dying, perhaps.

“We'll find someone who can take care of you. Can you find it in yourself to do a call for help?”

“Will anyone hear me?” asked Athena.

“I'm sure someone will come.” Sugar scanned the forest with nervous eyes. She opened her mouth to say nevermind that idea, but Athena's voice rang out far and wide.

The forest got quiet again in contrast with her heartbeat. Sugar assumed a ready position on all fours. She imagined where might that nasty fellow come bursting out. How angry would he be over losing not one but two meals?

Never did she expect to encounter another chipmunk at that moment. He seemed injured because of all the blood, and his walk was abnormal. It reminded Sugar of the time Linnaeus nibbled on the wrong leaves and tried to convince her the sky isn't real.

He stopped.

“Who is that?” asked Athena from her makeshift bed.

“I don't know, but I don't like the way he's looking at us.”

The chipmunk growled in a language she did not understand. Sugar wanted to run, but her friend was defenseless.

“Keep calling for help. I'll distract him.” Sugar didn't sound scared, but she was. She would do exactly what her body was screaming for her not to—it felt like a slow march towards death.

“You've already defeated the spider. Your own kind will be... no problem at all,” she spoke as if to mutter her fears away. “No problem.”

In a most uncivilized manner, he bared his teeth which were stained red.

“Someone please help my friend!” Athena shouted. Sugar tightened her muscles and launched herself forward as soon as the other chipmunk charged. She hopped and used his head as a springboard, flipping through the air. Her mind went back to days of her youth to stop herself from thinking about how a rodent could turn into something like that.

Chipmunk tumbling was one way to stand out amongst your peers as a child. It was also a fun way to pass the time. Sugar had a favorite practice area where she took advantage of a circular arrangement of small boulders. As she landed she would spring towards the next rock to do another jump. The ground was soft enough to reduce her risk of injury while she spun through the air.

It had been too long since she had bothered practicing such antics, and the monstrous chipmunk was a lot more threatening than a slab of rock. Sugar felt disoriented for a few precious seconds, then quickly covered her head from the blow of a screeching chipmunk.

Both of them rolled across the ground until he pinned Sugar into the mud. They were locked into an intense stare during this battle of strength. Nothing but rage behind his smoky grey eyes. They bulged grotesquely. A string of saliva fell from his bloody mouth as he snarled, but she could still hear that frightened voice calling for help.

The smell of wet dirt brought back even more memories. Play fighting and silly games that resulted in everyone needing a bath. An unforgiving girl chipmunk stopped being friends with her for dirtying the back of her head.

With this guy, Sugar didn't need such precise aim. All it took to blind him was a handful of mud and two seconds. Finally she could wrestle out of his grip, and just in time. The ground pulled away from her before she realized two claws had wrapped around her arms. Although she couldn't see who had saved her, she knew it must've been a crow.

"My friend is down there. She can't fly."

The bird dropped her off in a tree and swooped back down to grab Athena. Sugar clung onto the branch as if she were afraid to fall, perhaps thinking the predatory rodent might be waiting at the base of this White Oak.

"Sugar!"

The chipmunk lifted her head and squealed, "You made it." They thanked the kind stranger and asked if he'd be willing to take Athena home.

"I don't know if I'll see either of you two again, but I feel so lucky to have support during these awful circumstances," said Sugar.

Athena urged her to head home right away because they probably almost died to someone else's missing husband. Of course, Sugar didn't want to believe it was too late for hers. Deep down she knew it would never be too late.

“I promise I’ll be extra careful.” She turned to the crow. “Again, thank you for taking care of my sick friend.”

Her prayers went out as she watched them sink into the sky.

Sugar found a small nest of larvae inside of a tree that would help her get through the day. Bugs were never her favourite treat, but these tasted amazing given her hunger. If there were three nests, she would’ve finished them all off.

The next thing she encountered was not so appetizing. Her stomach turned when the smell hit her. She remembered how the murderous chipmunk was still out and about. Well, he couldn’t have taken this animal down all by himself, so Sugar assumed a bear would also be nearby. Facing away from the enormous partially eaten corpse, Sugar watched the shadows. She jumped at the chirp of a frog. Was it a frog? Those creatures make croaking noises, last she thought.

Another sound, low and distant. She needed to investigate. Her stripey body lay low all the way to the next bloody animal, and unlike the last goat, this one was alive. He was kicking the air while on his side, speeding up the blood loss.

Sugar stood speechless. Now that the sun has gone into hiding, she should also seek temporary shelter. She looked at the poor goat right in the eyes. Nothing but a vessel for panic and suffering at this moment. Hearing someone meet their end was not how she wanted to spend the night, but she felt guilty walking away.

A disturbing thought came rushing forth when she squeezed her eyes shut. Athena could’ve ended up in the same position, a mess of feathers lying somewhere in the forest which grew colder by the minute. Sugar hugged herself and stayed near a thick tree with gnarly roots.

The screams got worse. Stranger sounding. She couldn’t believe that goat was still alive. Eventually her curiosity got the best of her and the chipmunk leaned around to see what had happened.

None of this felt real. If she went back home to report what she was witnessing right now, everyone would say the spider must’ve injected venom inside her brain. All of them were acting like starving wolves. In fact, she had never seen animals be so ruthless.

“Linnaeus,” she said meekly. He could be a part of that mindless chipmunk mob. And what if he was? Sugar wasn’t exactly comfortable with approaching such a violent version of her husband. Such a meat-loving version. Maybe if she could look into his eyes once more...

An attack knocked her into the dirt so suddenly she was surprised to find herself breathing and awake. A much larger chipmunk was on top of her, snarling and scratching her face. Sugar knew that a cry for help would attract more of these maniacal chipmunks, so she put all her energy into fighting back.

A moment later he stopped. She had a chance to really look at his face.

“Linny,” she gasped. Her husband was breathing rapidly, not saying a word. “It’s me,” she whispered again and again. But he didn’t understand. Linnaeus dug his claws into her neck and hissed nonsense.

Sugar was no longer able to talk. For all that terror she went through, the chipmunk found it in herself to be grateful to see her husband for the last time. When she reached for her shell necklace, she closed her eyes and saw a kind, handsome face. Pain subsided. Linnaeus said her name.

The End