

# Part One

*One can't make a new heaven and earth with "facts."*

Henry Miller<sup>13</sup>

**CHAPTER ONE**

**SQUIRREL INC.**

**OR**

**HOW TO CRAFT A STORY TO SPARK ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

*Estimated percentage of nuts that squirrels lose  
because they forget where they put them: 50*

The Harper's Index Book<sup>14</sup>

It is ten-thirty in the morning when she climbs for the first time into my tavern high up in the old oak tree on 44th Street. I observe that her fur is smooth and perfectly groomed. I've never seen her in here before, or indeed anywhere in these green and leafy trees, but from the way she comes in with her tail very straight and twitching, she is visibly with-it, totally today. She asks for a double fermented rose-nectar with a twist, shaken but not stirred, and then insists that I use a different wood-cup, with a thinner lip, and chilled for no less than a minute. Even something as simple as a drink involves a mass of planning – typical Squirrel Inc. Yet I also sense something else hidden beneath her furry façade. It's faint but for a wizened old bartender like myself, unmistakable - something haunting, half-formed, incomplete.

She's carrying off the appearance of being a calm and collected Squirrel Inc. exec with all the interlocking pieces of her existence fitting together in a carefully planned pattern. But a Squirrel Inc. exec doesn't climb into a dark, dapple-lit tavern like mine high up in an old oak tree on a bright sunny spring morning, alone, and order a double fermented nectar unless something is up with the plan of her well-ordered life.

But there's no sense rushing things. It's still early and the tavern is practically deserted. I get her the fermented nectar and fix her fresh hickory nuts. I go on cleaning the wood-cups, getting everything ready for the usual lunchtime rush, casual-like but hovering all the time in her vicinity, so that when she's ready for it, she can get what all squirrels are looking for when they come into my tavern – unintrusive company, a sympathetic ear, contact with some other living thing.

Years ago, you wouldn't have seen a female squirrel alone in here at all, or if you had, you'd have known that she hadn't exactly come here for a drink. But times have changed. The squirrel workforce is now full of females clambering their way up managerial ladders and smashing into glass ceilings with alarming frequency. I see all types in here – male, female, gray, brown, black, all shades, all shapes, you name it. Why should I discriminate? These are difficult times for squirrels. Somewhere, there has to be a place of respite, an oasis where bruised egos can find succor, comfort, a substitute for love.

She finishes her double-ferment a little too quickly.

“Another?” I suggest. I have to stay in business too, you know.

“Why not?” she replies.

Last night's rain has washed and refreshed the atmosphere. A breeze carrying smells of wet grass and fresh earth is blowing gently though the tavern.

“Great day, huh?” I prompt as I hand her the second double wood-cup of extra-fermented nectar.

“I wish,” she whispers as she cradles her drink.

Pause.

“Difficulties?” I venture.

“Big time,” she replies.

“Happens.”

“Not to me, it doesn't,” she says. “Not to *the* rising star of Squirrel Inc.”

Why am I not surprised?

“Here I am,” she continues. “The hope of the firm’s future. The one that’s beaten every nutty goal they’ve ever given her. The one that knows what to do when the firm is in crisis. The one with the idea that will enable it to survive.”

“And?”

“No one’s listening,” she says. “It’s as if I no longer exist. Suddenly I’m an outcast. They see me coming and they run the other way. The thing is, they’re not going to survive as an organization if they don’t listen. I know I’m right.”

“Right.”

“I’ve just come from a meeting,” she says. “I’d done all the numbers and the rates of return were amazing. I’d put together a presentation. All the right slides. I thought it was straightforward. But they just looked dazed.”

“You gave them reasons?”

“I gave them reasons till they came out of my spleen,” she says. “They’re simply not listening. My idea is too strange, too disruptive, too different.”

“Pity,” I say as she sails through her second drink.

“Someone told me that you may be able to help.”

“Me?”

“Skip said you’d know what to do.”

“Skip?”

“A friend,” she says. “He said you’d come up with something new. Something old that’s being put to a new use. What did he mean?”

“I guess he means Dio.”

“Dio?”

“A squirrel,” I say. “Used to hang out here.”

“I’ve got to talk to him.”

“Actually this is a she,” I say. “She’s on the road a lot.”

“I need to speak to her.”

“Not sure that’s possible,” I say. “She hasn’t been here in a while.”

“There must be a way,” she’s says agitatedly.

“Not that I know of.”

She takes a pull on her double ferment.

“I mean, who is she? What is she?” She stares at me.

“Dio? She taught me all I know. Got to the top of one company and was about to be thrown out. And then she figured out how to get back in the game. Used to be here all the time telling us how she did it. Now she’s moved on.”

“Why?”

“Fresh woods. New pastures. How would I know?”

“No need to get your fur ruffled,” she says.

“I’m perfectly calm,” I say.

“But you heard her talk?”

“Yep.”

“More than once?”

“All the time,” I say, arranging some acorns.

“You followed what she was saying?”

“I know it backwards,” I say.

“Skip said it was a miracle,” she says.

“Miracles don’t exist, my friend.”

“I mean, just try. What would Dio say to me if she were here right now?”

She looks at me with those big round squirrel eyes and I feel again that incompleteness.

“Many things,” I say.

“For instance?”

“Suppose I told you it costs nothing and is very easy and natural?”

“Then I wouldn’t believe you,” she says. “How could it possibly work?”

“Suppose I told you that it’s something that’s hard-wired into our brains at birth?”

“I’d ask myself what you’d been smoking.”

“Did you ever try telling a story?” I ask.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because a story can communicate a new idea easily, quickly and naturally.”

“Not in Squirrel Inc.,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Stories aren’t serious,” she says. “Squirrel Inc. is. It’s modern. It’s analytic. It’s sharp. It’s focused on profits. It’s bottom-line. It doesn’t mess around. No emotional mush. No touchy-feely stuff. Squirrel Inc. would never go for anything like that.”

“Did you ever actually *try* a story?” I ask.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” she says. “One meeting, I described what the future would be like.”

“Result?”

“They said it would never happen here. Perhaps in some other company, but not in Squirrel Inc.”

“Maybe,” I say, “there’s another way to tell the story.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“Dio said there are different purposes in telling a story and for each purpose, you tell the story in a different way. Maybe you told the story in the wrong way to achieve your goal.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “I know a story won’t work.”

“Right.”

The mockingbirds are in full song now as my she nurses her double ferment.

“But you’ve heard Dio talk,” she says. “She knew how to communicate a new idea and get everyone into action.”

“If you say so.”

“If I don’t get the big idea across,” she says, “I’m going to be road kill.”

“So what *is* the big idea?” I say. “How *are* you going to save Squirrel Inc?”

“Simple,” she says and smiles. “Squirrel Inc. has always been a company that helps squirrels bury nuts. That’s not going to work in future. The nuts keep getting lost. It’s got to become a nut-storing company.”

**STEP ONE:**  
*Be clear as to  
what change  
you’re trying to  
make.*

“Going from nut-burying to nut-storing is a pretty big transition,” I say.

“It’s too much for them,” she says. “Squirrels have always buried nuts as a matter of instinct. But it’s not going to work any more. Humans keep digging up their gardens. The nut-loss rate is just too great. It worked wonders for us, all those years. But now those years are over.”

“Your idea is pretty clear?” I say.

“Couldn’t be clearer,” she says.

“Then you’re halfway home,” I say. “Most of the time, Dio would say, the problem is right there in the first step.”

“What’s that?”

“Getting clear on the purpose,” I say. “What’s the change you’re aiming for? It sounds like the easiest thing to be clear about. It should be obvious. So many squirrels come in here, all upset, but when you pin them down and get them to say what change they want, they don’t really know. They haven’t thought it through. So you’re way ahead of the game. You’ve already got a clear idea of what change you’re trying to make. You’ve already taken the first step.”

She looks at me intently. “Okay wise guy, what’s the second step?”

“You really want to do this?”

“Yes,” she says, “I do.”

“Then think of an incident.”

“Think of an incident?”

“Exactly. Think of an example where this has already happened successfully, even in part.”

**STEP TWO:**  
*Think of an  
incident where  
the change has  
already  
happened.*

“You mean, make something up?”

“No. That’s not going to work. We need a true story. It’s the truth of the story that springs the listener to a new level of understanding. I’m talking about a real-life incident where this actually happened.”

“There isn’t any.”

“Think harder!”

“This idea is new for Squirrel Inc.,” she says. “It’s a nut-burying company, not a nut-storing company.”

“Has any other company done it?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You mean no squirrel has ever set about storing acorns rather than burying them? Ever?”

“Nope.”

“Not even outside the company?”

“Well,” she says, “there were a couple of squirrels I once heard about.”

“Tell me more.”

“I know a squirrel called Skip.”

“So I gather.”

“Skip and I were going together, but then he went to live in another city.”

“And?”

“Well, he told me about some squirrels there. They experimented with storing acorns and everyone said they were crazy.”

“Did it work for them?”

“It worked beautifully,” she says. “For part of the winter. They sat back and relaxed and ate their stores of acorns. But they didn’t store enough. They ran out in January.”

“So there *was* a case where this actually happened.”

“That’s what Skip told me,” she says.

“And it worked?”

“In part,” she says. “But not as well as it might if they’d stored enough acorns and had the proper storage conditions. But yes, in part, it worked.”

“What do you know about the squirrels who tried it?”

“Skip said they were a mixed bag,” she says. “A new-age group.”

“What else do you know about them?”

“They’re a wild bunch,” she says. “You know, doing odd stuff, except for one nifty squirrel who focused on hickory nuts because they lasted longer. He made it through to February. His name was Timmy.”

“Timmy?”

“The only normal one in the bunch, according to Skip,” she says.

“And he almost got through the winter?”

“Not right through,” she says. “According to Skip, Timmy didn’t store enough nuts with the proper storage conditions, and he had to go out looking for buried nuts. He does the books for some big company.”

“So Timmy is not too different from the squirrels you’re trying to convince in Squirrel Inc?”

“Maybe,” she says.

“Where did this happen?” I ask.

“The Windy City,” she says.

“When?” I ask.

“Last winter,” she says. “But I don’t get it. What’s your point?”

“What we’re doing,” I say, “is crafting a story that you can use to get Squirrel Inc. to understand the idea of storing nuts and implement it. Giving the date and place signals to the listener’s brain that this really did happen.”

“But Timmy is only one squirrel,” she says, “and even he didn’t get through the winter. My idea is about millions of squirrels, all of them getting through the winter by storing nuts. How can a story about a single squirrel convince anyone?”

“You’d be surprised,” I say.

“Think about it,” she says. “As evidence, a single squirrel is insignificant. Now if I had a survey showing that lots of squirrels in the Windy City were getting through the winter

**STEP THREE:**  
*Tell the story from the point of view of a single protagonist who is prototypical of the potential audience.*

**STEP FOUR:**  
*Specify the time and place where the story happened.*

storing nuts, that might get some attention. But just one squirrel? And that squirrel messed up? Forget it!”

Just then the sun flashes through the leaves for an instant and highlights the troubled expression on her face.

“It’s not the number of squirrels involved,” I say. “That’s thinking with only one side of your brain – the left side. Why don’t you try the right side for a change?”

“What do you mean?”

“The left side of the brain analyses things in a rational way. Three threes are nine. The right side of the brain looks at things more creatively. For the right side of the brain, three threes might be nine. But they could also be three hundred and thirty-three. There’s always more than one way to understand something.”

“But what’s in this for Squirrel Inc.?” she says. “They’re only interested in the analysis. They don’t give a damn about the imagination. Just the bottom line! What do they care about a bunch of mixed-up squirrels in the Windy City? *Nada. Rien. Nichts.* In Squirrel Inc., three threes are nine, *punto!* They’ll never go for a story.”

“That’s where you’re missing something,” I say. “The fact is, we all tell stories. We start doing it when we’re little, with our parents, our brothers and sisters, our friends. We tell stories for all sorts of purposes, unconsciously, instinctively, intuitively. We don’t have to be taught how to do this. We do it naturally.”

“Exactly,” she says. “This stuff is for babies.”

“That’s what we’re told when we go to school,” I say. “We’re told, okay children, now you’re going to put aside your toys and your stories. Now you’re going to study the significant things – math, algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry. And so you forget about storytelling.”

“But that’s just school.”

“The same thing happens when we join an organization like Squirrel Inc. It’s all about analysis and abstractions. But what do we do after one of these exhausting, boring lessons at school, or the even more boring meetings in an organization? We rush outside and...?”

“We relax,” she says.

“But how?” I say. “We tell stories. We tell stories with our friends, our colleagues, our family. Anyone who’ll listen. Why? We find it energizing. We find it refreshing. We can do it all day. We can do it all night. Even when we’re asleep, we dream in stories. We can’t get enough of it. Storytelling is our very nature. We’ve just pretended to ourselves that we’re something that we’re not. And Squirrel Inc. is no different. They might *say* they’re not interested in a story, but if you tell them a story, they’ll listen.”

“But we don’t have a story.”

“Yes, we do,” I say. “Just think:

*“Last winter in the Windy City a squirrel named Timmy did something different. Instead of burying nuts and searching for them when he was hungry, he spent the fall gathering nuts and storing them in his tree-hollow. Timmy was able to relax with his family nearly all winter, safe in knowing he had a full supply of nuts.”*

“But Timmy didn’t get through the winter,” she says. “He didn’t store enough acorns.”

“No problem,” I say. “Here’s what we do. We tell Timmy’s story up to February and then say, ‘Let’s imagine. Let’s extrapolate.’

*“Imagine if Timmy had been able to store enough acorns. He would have had a supply of food for the whole winter.”*

“But they’ll say it didn’t happen,” she says. “You just told me the story had to be true?”

“The initial incident needs to be true,” I say, “because it’s the truth of the story that snaps the listeners out of their complacency. If you tell them a purely imaginary story, then they’ll say: ‘This will never happen here!’”

“That’s right. That’s what they said.”

“They’re still using the left side of their brain,” I say. “But now you can say, ‘Listen! I’m not making this up. This actually happened!’ When you’ve got the listeners following the story, imagining what actually happened, they’re using the right side of the brain. Then you can push the imagination a step further. You can get them to extrapolate. You say: ‘Just think if the story had continued into the future.’ You anchor the listeners’ imagination initially in reality. And then they’ll follow that story into the future.”

**STEP FIVE:**  
*Make sure that the story embodies the change idea, or if it doesn’t, extrapolate the story so that it does.*

“But will they see the point? Will they see why this story is different?”

“You make them see it,” I say, “by pointing out what would have happened if Timmy hadn’t been implementing the change idea.”

**STEP SIX:**  
*In telling the story, make clear what would have happened without the change idea.*

“How do I do that?” she says.

“Simple,” I say.

*“Just imagine how Timmy the squirrel would have spent his winter if he hadn’t had his store of nuts, scraping and grubbing around, getting frustrated most of the time. Nothing being where he’d left it.”*

“In this way, you remind your listeners how most squirrels now spend their winters. You highlight how different Timmy’s winter was from the typical squirrel winter.”

“How does the story sound now?” she asks.

“Why don’t you try it?” I say.

“You think I can?”

“Of course. Imagine I’m a manager at Squirrel Inc.”

“All right. Here goes.

*“I have a good friend, Skip, who lives out in the Windy City. Skip knew a whole colony of squirrels out there. They all lived in a big willow tree out by a river. Normally they spent their winters burying nuts and searching for them, scraping around, getting disappointed a lot of the time. Nothing was where they’d left it and often they were hungry.*

*“Last winter they decided to do something different. They’d heard it was going to be a really cold winter. You know, they don’t call it the Windy City for nothing. The wind slices through there like a knife. So they spent the fall gathering nuts and stored them in a tree-hollow. They were able to relax with their families with a full store of nuts. That got them up to January and then they ran out. But if they’d been able to store more nuts, they would have been able to have a supply of food for the whole winter.”*

She looks at me. “How did I do?”

“Great!” I say. The extra-ferments have given her energy. “But there’s still work to be done.”

“Oh?”

“It had a lot of good points, but we can make it better.”

“How’s that?” she says, her whiskers now bristling.

“Remember what I said about the single protagonist? A single hero or heroine that the listener can connect with?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” I say, “who’s your single protagonist?”

“Skip.”

“Did Skip store any nuts?”

“No,” she says. “He’s the squirrel who told me about it.”

“Exactly. The person who told you the story doesn’t interest the listeners. When you start out talking about Skip, they might think that the story is about Skip. But it’s not about Skip. It’s about squirrels storing nuts. Skip just confuses the listeners and distracts them. We’ve got to get Skip off stage. Let’s think for a minute. Who *is* your single protagonist?”

“I went one better than a single protagonist,” she says. “I gave you a whole colony of squirrels. Surely the more squirrels we have, the more convincing the story, right?”

“Not necessarily! You’re thinking with the left side of your brain again. In matters of evidence, the more witnesses you have, the stronger the testimony. But in storytelling, you’re not using the weight of the evidence. You’re operating on the right side of the brain, sparking the imagination, and so getting the listener to think what it might be like, spending the whole winter relaxing and drawing on a store of nuts. The thing is, it’s easier to identify with a single squirrel than with a whole group of squirrels. Just give us Timmy. Get your listeners to identify with Timmy.”

“I see,” she says. “What else?”

She’s taking it pretty well, as I give her more hickory nuts.

“Too much detail,” I say.

“Isn’t that how you tell a story? Sights and sounds. How cold the wind was. Living in a willow tree by the river. That sort of thing. Make the listener feel what it was like?”

**STEP SEVEN:**  
*Strip the story of unnecessary detail*

“You’re right when it comes to a story for entertainment. But not when you’re telling a story for a purpose. The mechanism is different. Stories for entertainment immerse the listener in the storyteller’s story. The idea is to absorb the listeners so completely in the story that they think about nothing else. When you’re using storytelling as a tool, it works just the opposite. You’re not trying to absorb the listener in your story.”

“Why not?”

“You’re trying to spark a new story in the listener’s mind. You’re talking about a bunch of squirrels in the Windy City but you don’t want the listeners thinking about them too much. Instead, you want the listeners to be thinking about their own situation. You want them saying, ‘Hey, that’s pretty interesting! We could do that! Suppose we started storing nuts instead of burying them? We could relax all winter instead of scurrying around searching.’”

“So the listeners create their own story?”

“Right. The listeners start crafting a new story in their own minds. They start to invent the change idea afresh. It becomes their own idea adapted to their own differing situations. And of course we all love our own ideas.”

“How do you make this happen?”

“You strip the story of details that are unrelated to the change idea. You tell the story in a simplified way so that there’s nothing to distract the listeners.”

“Will they still be able to follow the story if I take out all the detail?”

“You leave in enough detail for them to follow the story and you delete all the rest.”

“But will it still be interesting if I omit all this?”

“You make it interesting in the way you tell it. You tell it with belief and feeling. It’s your performance that gives the story its force. You don’t need the other details.”

“What else?”

“We’ve got to work on the ending.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Hollywood is right. It’s got to have a happy ending.”

“You mean they lived happily ever after?”

“Sounds corny, but guess what? It works. With a negative story, you’re sadder but wiser. You learn something. But as you think about the negative implications of what happened, you end up in a mood of concern and worry. You don’t feel like moving forward rapidly into action. By contrast, a story with a happy ending generates a feeling of gentle euphoria – the perfect state of mind to be thinking about a new future for you or your organization.”

**STEP EIGHT:**  
*Make sure the story has an authentically happy ending.<sup>15</sup>*

“What does that mean for my story?” she says.

“It means that you emphasize the success in storing nuts, not the problems that had to be solved.”

“Is that all?”

“One final thing,” I say. “You need to nudge the listeners so that they get the point. Not heavy handed. Don’t overpower them. Just provide tiny guide-rails so that the listeners spring to where you want them to go. You say:

*“What if all our squirrels used modern storage techniques. Just think of the possibilities for Squirrel Inc. if it was helping all squirrels use this technology. Imagine what a business that could be!”*

**STEP NINE:**  
*Link the story to the change idea with phrases such as “Think...” and “What if ... ” and “Just imagine...”*

“The magic words are, ‘Imagine...’ or ‘Just think ...’ or ‘What if ...’ You invite the listeners to travel on the wings of imagination and envision a different future.”

“How would that all sound?”

“How about this:

*“I know we’re all quite worried here at Squirrel Inc. about the decline in revenues from our nut-burying business. Unfortunately, that’s only going to get worse because the humans are digging up their gardens at an ever-increasing pace so that this business can only get smaller. How can Squirrel Inc. survive in these increasingly difficult conditions? What’s the future going to look like?”*

*“Well, it’s going to look like today. Let me tell you about something that happened just a few months ago.*

*“Last winter in the Windy City, a squirrel called Timmy was facing a particularly difficult situation because gardens were being dug up all over the place. Normally, he would have spent his winter scraping and searching, being disappointed most of the time. Nothing would be where he’d left it. He’d have been hungry half the winter.*

*“But that’s not what happened to Timmy. He did something different. Instead of burying acorns and searching for them when he was hungry, he spent the fall gathering nuts and storing them securely in his tree-hollow. Timmy was able to relax with his family and his full store of acorns right up to February.*

*“But just imagine if Timmy had been able to store more nuts with the proper technology: he would have had a supply of food for the whole winter.*

*“Imagine if all squirrels used modern storage techniques. What if Squirrel Inc. was helping millions of squirrels store their acorns? Just think what a business that could be for Squirrel Inc.”*

She looks at me with a strangely twitching face. A mockingbird is imitating the robins with its song.

“I’m not the first squirrel to come in here with this kind of a problem, am I?” She looks at me quizzically. “How did you get into this?”

“My grandmother told me stories when I was young. Wonderful yarns that lasted forever. It gave me a love of story that’s continued through life. After all, that’s what a bartender does all day – tell and listen to stories.”

“Think a story would work on Skip?”

“I thought he was in another city?”

“He could always come back.”

“Skip wouldn’t commit?”

“How did you know?”

“Someone once said: we must be willing to let go of the life we have planned so that we can have the life that is waiting for us.”<sup>16</sup>

“What does that mean?” she asks.

The bar is starting to fill up now, and I’m going to be running off my claws before long. I tell her to come back later in the day, and I’ll be happy to talk more about stories.

“Thanks,” she says. “Name’s Diana. I’ll be back.”<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

### STORYTELLING TO SPARK ACTION

At a time when most organizations are faced with the necessity of disruptive change, leaders typically find it difficult to get listeners not only to understand new ideas but also to start implementing them rapidly and enthusiastically. The conventional wisdom that transformational change can be catalyzed by giving people a reason to change reflects a confidence in pure reason that is as touching as it is deluded.<sup>18</sup>

A **springboard story** enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community may change. Its impact comes not so much through transferring large amounts of information, but through catalyzing understanding. It enables listeners to visualize from a story in one context what would be involved in implementing such a change in an analogous context. In this way, the change becomes the listeners' idea.

#### **Steps in crafting a springboard story:**

- *The leader defines the specific change idea to be implemented in the organization.*
- *The leader identifies an incident (either inside or outside your organization, community or group) where the change idea was in whole or in part successfully implemented.*
- *The incident is narrated from the perspective of a single protagonist who is prototypical for the target audience.*
- *The story specifies when and where the incident happened.*
- *In telling the story, the leader ensures that the story fully embodies the change idea, extrapolating the story, if necessary.*
- *The story makes clear what would have happened without the change idea.*
- *The story is stripped of any unnecessary detail.*
- *The story has an authentically happy ending.*
- *At the conclusion of the story, the leader links the story to the change idea with phrases such as "What if..." or "Just imagine..."*

**Caveat:** a story is not a panacea. A leader marries narrative with analysis, using narrative to draw listeners inside the idea so that they understand it, while also using analysis to communicate the costs, benefits, risks and implementation issues.