

# The Story of Gem

An earth-friendly musical fairy tale.

by Jason Roth

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Mother Nature cursed. A noise echoed from the top of the next mountain, where an avalanche just began to trickle down the side of the steep cliffs. It wasn't supposed to happen. But now that it had, there wasn't too much she could do about it.

The rocks fell towards a wooded valley below, which reflected sunlight like an oil slick on the surface of a deep green ocean. From amidst the last of the tumbling rocks, a high-pitched voice bounced its way through the echoes. "Ouch!" came the little squeak, sounding like it might have come from Mickey Mouse, only it was much cuter, and if it *were* Mickey Mouse, it would have been a ball of bloody pulp by now.

Dust rose off the lifeless pile of rubble at the bottom of the mountain. From the top of the pile, a dense cloud of dust blew out from a crevice. A boulder began to rock. It rocked from side to side, until at last it met the edge of the pile and rolled off. Between the crevice, two little wrinkled hands were trying to push up a second boulder. With the exception of the moving fingers, the little hands looked remarkably similar to the rock they were pushing. Rough and porous, the hands were camouflaged against the rock as they twisted and turned it to loosen it from the pile.

The sound of scraping rocks happened to catch the attention of a nearby squirrel, who was busy eating a nice big nut. Rather, the squirrel was *trying* to eat a nice big nut. Unfortunately, its little jaws just couldn't quite fit around the shell to crack it, so logically enough, the squirrel had spent the last two and a half hours trying to *make* them fit.

The squirrel hopped up at the noise and turned its head curiously towards the rubble. By this time, a little pair of granite hands were wiggling out of the hole, searching for a ridge to grasp.

“Uhhh!” squeaked the voice from beneath the boulder, sending it tumbling over the edge of the pile. The squirrel hopped in a zig-zag line over to the pile, and jumped to the top to inspect the hole. He found two arms trapped in the hole waving furiously, but couldn’t figure out what the heck they were connected to. It was easy to see where they ended, with each of the granite fingers squirming, but it was hard to tell where exactly they began. That’s when the rock stood up.

With one little hand, the rock pushed himself up through the crevice and plopped himself on top of the pile. He wiped the remaining dust off his brow, and opened his eyes. The squirrel ducked behind a maple leaf.

The rock was a reddish-brown, and had a diameter of about eight inches. It had a little round mouth and a little red tongue. In the middle of its face was a little nose, which was admittedly cute even for a rock, especially with the few specs of mica which made it glitter in the sunlight. The rock stood with its hands on its hips (or where its hips would have been if it had any) and faced the top of the cliff from where it had fallen. He shook his head (really his whole body) then mumbled something and kicked the nearest boulder with his little foot. He was annoyed.

He wasn’t hurt, after all, he was a rock. But even as a rock, it isn’t much fun to fall down the length of a mountainside in the middle of an avalanche. Once you’re in the middle of things, there isn’t too much you can do except roll with it. This, in fact, was how the rock lived his life: when something bad happens, roll with it. He hopped down from the pile.

Suddenly, the squirrel jumped from behind the leaf, pouncing down on the rock, and bit his teeth into the sides of the rock’s body. The squirrel shook his head, throwing the rock from side to side, and squeezed his jaw,

but couldn't get his teeth to pierce the rock's skin. He dropped the rock in frustration.

"I'm not a nut!" the rock yelled, jumping up. He wrinkled his lips and stared at the squirrel with his arms crossed. But the squirrel wasn't listening. His teeth hurt, and he was busy opening and closing his furry mouth, trying to ease the pain.

"Did you hear me? I'm not a nut! Gee whiz!" the rock squeaked.

"Yes, I heard you," the squirrel replied. "But what *are* you?"

The rock held up his chin and gave a cocky little grin. "My name is Gem, I'm a rock. I think everyone should recycle."

A big white floppy teardrop fell on Gem's head. Like a wet sack of flour, it popped, and white mush dripped down the sides of his body. Gem and the squirrel looked up. There, sitting on a branch above them, was Hooty the Owl, thumbing his beak at Gem from the top of an old Maple tree.

"Recycle *this!*" Hooty yelled, laughing so hard he nearly lost his grip on the branch.

"Why, you..!" Gem said, "Don't you know you shouldn't go to the bathroom on people?"

"Hey, wait a minute," the squirrel spoke up, "*You're* the rock. You oughta be apologizing to the shit, for god's sakes."

Gem wiped some of the white gooey stuff off himself.

"You'd think I'd get a break," Gem complained. "Running around all day to save my skin, and look what happens to me." He waved a little granite finger at the owl. "And you should know better."

"*Who*, me?" Hooty resonated, "Sorry, just a little owl humor for you. Actually, Smokey the Bear loves that one. Now there's somebody who can really light my fire." The owl winked.

The squirrel twisted his head at an angle and pondered a new question. He watched Gem's arms clean his body, and said, "Gem, what do you mean about running around to save your skin?"

Gem shuddered and spoke softly, "You really want to know who I'm running from?"

"No, I was just wondering what the hell you meant by saving your *skin*. I mean, Jesus Christ, you're a rock."

Gem rolled his little eyes. "You know what I mean. Sometimes even I can't help using one of those vivist phrases invented by the humans. But it sort of applies in my case— you want to know why?"

"Does the answer involve a song?" the squirrel braced himself.

"Of course."

The squirrel winced. "Well, in that case—"

Gem explained, "Oh, come on, Mr. Squirrel. You should know kids respond better to propaganda if you sing it." Gem waited for his music cue.

*(Paper Doesn't Grow on Trees, sung by Gem:)*

*There's a big bad rock collector, who wants to rid the world of rocks,  
He will not stop, until he has, the whole earth in a box.*

*He chases me all through the woods, carrying his ax,  
Wants to slice my head in two, to make up for what he lacks.*

*What am I, a piece of meat, to satisfy his whims?  
One of these days, I'll find a way, to break his goddamn limbs.*

*Well.....*

*Paper doesn't grow on trees,*

*Mountains can't spring from the seas,*

*But humans only see the earth, as a thing to rape and seize.*

*Oh... Evil humans, evil bastards, depleting all our shit,*

*What've we ever done to them, except maybe scratched or bit?*

*Oh...What's nature ever done to them, except maybe scratched or bit?*

*They're cutting down our forests, our homes, our nests, our lairs,*

*Just to make room for parking lots, McDonalds', and state fairs.*

*We respect their rights, yet they deprive us, 'cause some of us have rabies,*

*Of life, liberty, and the pursuit, of eating human babies.*

*Without them we'd have so much fun, we'd do everything we please,*

*But while they're on this planet, let's just pray for a disease.*

*Well.....*

*Paper doesn't grow on trees,*

*Mountains can't spring from the seas,*

*But humans only see the earth, as a thing to rape and seize.*

*Oh... Evil humans, evil bastards, depleting all our shit,*

*What've we ever done to them, except maybe scratched or bit?*

*Oh...What's nature ever done to them, except maybe scratched or bit?*

*One more time...*

*What has nature done to them, except scratched...*

*...a little...*

*...bit.*

Hooty's wise-ass smile had long since disappeared. "You're one pissed off rock," he said simply.

Mr. Squirrel was a little more concerned. He hopped closer to Gem and spoke sincerely, "Is there anything we can do to help? The rock collector sounds like a very bad man."

Gem sniffled. "You mean it?" he asked, touched by the squirrel's generosity.

"Sure," the squirrel responded, then looked up at Hooty. "You'll help protect Gem from the rock collector, too, won't you Hooty?"

"No way, José." Hooty said adamantly. He wobbled to the end of the branch, preparing himself for takeoff. He looked back down, as he extended his wings. "I'm one of those grumpy, solitary characters, only concerned with myself. Don't expect to see me again until the end of the story, when I've seen my selfish ways and have a change of heart. I think I'll show up when you're both in danger, most likely after you're captured by that rock collector fellow. Since I'm a bird, my guess is that I'll come swooping down and rescue you, along with any other lovable friends you've met along your adventures. But until then... *Who* needs you!"

The bird laughed and flew away, up and over the trees, and out of sight. Gem and Mr. Squirrel shook their heads at the stubborn bird, and walked off into the woods.

The fortress stood like a square mountain. It sat in the middle of a dense forest, and its walls were sheer cliffs dropping from a pebbled roof. The walls were raw sheet rock, but the edges of the structure were columns of circular oak. The glass in the windows was the impenetrable black of opal. The plain metal door in the center of the front wall was like a pull-tab on a soda can.

A stream passed by the side of the stone fortress. A rusted green barrel, lying on its side, rested on the bank of the stream, its glowing green contents dripping occasionally into the water. Near the stream, a wet trash heap in the backyard was smoldering, the humid stench of smoke drifting up to the tops of tall surrounding pine trees.

Inside, the walls were polished marble. Pink and white clouds swirled across their surface, like a fresh slice through live flesh. There was dusty aroma of gravel accompanying the marble. Somehow the rawness of the smell fit the room, as if a geode had just been cracked in half to reveal a beautiful interior.

Above the fireplace hung a tribute to the inhabitant's hobby. Instead of a rack of horns, a large boulder protruded from a wooden plaque. The plaque's engraved metal sign read "Eighth Annual Greenfield Rock Collecting Championships, Second Place". On the mantle was a photograph of a towering man holding a pick ax over his shoulder, one hand resting on the prize boulder next to him. A trace of saliva was visible in a crease of skin near his mouth. He held his grin strenuously, as if new thoughts of raping and pillaging the earth had already entered his mind.

Lining the shelves of the room were glass jars, each containing a smooth young stone forever swimming in formaldehyde. Their edges and grooves were contorted in the shapes of screaming babies, like embryos

never to be born. Suddenly, from the depths of the cellar, a faint high-pitched scream flew into and out of the room.

A wide, dark staircase led down to the cellar. Dust hung in the air, and the dull light from a workbench left a trail across space. A grating noise came from the same direction, wavering in volume like a toneless ambulance siren, or a rusty merry-go-round. A bulky figure sat at the wooden workbench, hunched over his loud machine. A thick, dirt-black shirt hung from him, untucked so it looked more like a sorcerer's robe than a flannel shirt. Then a thick arm emerged from the figure and moved down to a bucket sitting on the floor at his side.

“Ha, ha, ha...!” the man bellowed.

He reached into the bucket, and pulled out a handful of little stones. “Eeek!” one screamed. “Help!” another called out, waving its little rock arms and legs.

The man held the stones over the machine for a moment, and smiled an ugly smile, “You’ll look right, when I’m done with you,” he snarled.

He let go of the stones. Their little hands struggled to grab on to something as they fell, but all they could do was touch each other's bodies for the last time as unblemished pieces of a living whole— which was the earth itself. They fell into the rock tumbler with a splash, and felt the gritty water rub against their rough exteriors, in a savagely accelerated process of erosion. The stones' little hands squirmed and paddled to escape, but they were caught in the turbulence of the spinning, sandy water.

“Help! Please!” a young stone screamed. The voice faded as the water swept him away and around the cylinder of the electric polishing machine.

The rocks fell over one another, naked and powerless in the small chamber. Sand rubbed against bodies, and bodies rubbed against bodies.

Loved ones perished only inches away. Each saw the inglorious truth of a concept so innocuously characterized by the human race, each passing the last hours of its natural life “like a rolling stone”.

The rock collector got up and paced across the room. He held his thick-fingered hands behind his hunched back and looked at the floor, for he found that a problem was suddenly vexing him.

“These stones mean nothing!” he called out to the apparently empty room. “Anyone can find a miserable pebble and polish it until it shines. But who, I ask, can find the legendary Cerulean Geode?”

“But boss, all the rocks in the world are right there for the taking—” Herpes the rock-hound stuck his meat-eating jowls out from behind the trash can. His chin fur was ruffled from movement, though his eyes were still half closed. His boss guessed the dog had just woken up from another one of his dreams of chomping on the last surviving South American tree gerbil. The dog chomped a couple times on the air, loosening his mouth up from the tense nap.

“I know all about those rocks right there for the taking.” The rock collector thundered. “Do you know *anyone* who knows more about rocks than me?”

Herpes cowered back behind the trash can. “Oh, no one boss. You’re the king. The rock master. The original rock lobster. When it comes to rocks, boss, you know how to rock and roll.”

“That’s right, I do.” The rock collector pushed his lips together, almost as if pouting, and jabbed his finger towards his chest. “They don’t call me Captain Rock for nothing.”

Herpes tried nervously to agree, but his voice was smothered by the first few notes of Captain Rock's song, dancing into the room through the dusty fog.

*Dum, dum, dum, ta-da da da dum, dum, dum...* The bulky man paced back and forth, laboriously and heavily to the rhythm of the music.

(*Yes, Ma'am*, sung by Captain Rock:)

*Yes, ma'am, there are lots of things, to occupy one's time,  
From castrating endangered species, to filling oceans up with grime,  
But nothing's crueller than what I do, more evil, or more colder,  
And nothing makes me happier, than seeing one less boulder.*

*The problem with cutting trees, is you can plant more in the ground,  
The problem with burning oil, is that more is always being found,  
The problem with dumping garbage, is that there's too much rooooooom....  
You can always find another hole, to bury a broken broom.*

*Why.... yes ma'am, that's a rock in my pocket,  
Gonna' take 'em all, 'til there's nothing but sea,  
You might wonder why I don't litter or burn trees,  
But for vast annihilation, it's the damage for me.  
Oh, for vast annihilation, it's the damage for me.*

*A factory, you say, that's the real evil in this land?  
The hell with that, I'd rather have, the whole world in my hand.  
Without rocks, you can't do anything, you first need something there,*

*I'd love to see them try to build, a homeless shelter in the air.*

*Some people might be saying that I'm raping mother earth,  
Destroying her and robbing her for everything she's worth.  
But like an undefiled virgin, in a little tight green dress,  
She might be saying no, but I know that no means yes.*

*Why.... yes ma'am, that's a rock in my pocket,  
Gonna' take 'em all, 'til there's nothing but sea,  
You might wonder why I don't litter or burn trees,  
But for vast annihilation, it's the damage for me.  
Foooooor....vast annihilation, it's the damage for me.  
Oh....for vast... an-ni-hil-aaaaa-tion, it's...the  
damaaaage....forrrrrr....meeeeee.*

Herpes was still bobbing his head and singing to himself when Captain Rock looked at him.

“Herpes!” Captain Rock yelled.

The dog ducked. “Sorry, boss.”

“We’re going to get that Cerulean Geode if it’s the last thing we do! I’m not going to let a rock make a fool out of me! I’m a man, dammit! Hear me roar!”

And Captain Rock pounded his chest like an ape. He gathered up his pick ax, rock-net, and other rock-catching paraphernalia, threw on his hat, and headed for the door.

Herpes hesitated. His tongue was hanging, hopefully. “Boss, can’t we... have something to eat first?”

Captain Rock looked sick. He looked back at the dog.

“Please...?” the dog muttered.

“If you insist,” Captain Rock strained. “We’ll pick something up out in the forest. I’m sure some peaceful village will be happy to let us manipulate and overpower them with our white male dominated culture.” He looked in the pockets of his shirt. “I think I have some here, somewhere...” He pulled out a red plastic circular container and waved it at the dog, “See, here it is. Now let’s get out there! It’s time to rock their world!”\*

“What a crock—” Herpes began, then caught himself.\*\* He shut his mouth and followed his boss out into the forest.\*\*\*

Gem and Mr. Squirrel were frolicking in the woods. “Hey, don’t tickle me there!” Gem squealed. Mr. Squirrel backed off and sat down on a log. Before, he was shocked to hear that Gem wasn’t a nut. Now Gem was implying that he had a set of his own.

“A rock with nuts,” Mr. Squirrel said to himself, “Now I’ve seen it all.” He shook his head in wonder, as a millipede walked across the log wearing 100 jockstraps.

Gem rolled in a pile of leaves. “Isn’t it great, Mr. Squirrel, being part of nature? It’s so wonderful to be part of this environmental meta-being, each of us carrying out our own tasks and contributing to the life of the

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\* The author hereby swears that there will be no more puns using the word “rock”.

\*\* The author hereby swears that there will be no more puns using the word “herpes”.

\*\*\* With a stone-faced stoicism, Captain Rock ignored the caustic outburst of Herpes’. The intercourse had been just as unrestrained during his previous encounters with Herpes, so it was inevitable that he and Herpes would be sharing a long and rocky relationship.

whole. You know, we're all interconnected, don't you Mr. Squirrel? Mr. Squirrel?"

Gem sat up and looked at the log, but Mr. Squirrel was gone. "Mr. Squirrel! Mr. Squirrel! Where are you?"

Gem scanned the clearing of the forest for the squirrel. There was nothing, although he noticed a bunch of sparrows up in a tree looking down to his approximate area and giggling. "Mind your own business, you bony-necked bastards!" Gem squawked.

Then something caught Gem's eye. There was a small pine tree about thirty feet away which had not been there before. Or so Gem thought. And while standing there with a perplexed and wrinkled nose, Gem could have sworn he saw the tree move. Gem stepped back onto a flock of pebbles for a little camouflage.

"Do you mind?" one pebble blurted from under him. "I'd like to see how you like it when a big fat slab of granite plants his thunder-thighs right down on *your* face."

"Oh, I'm sorry, my little friends," Gem said cheerfully.

"Who are you calling little?" another higher-pitched pebbled peeped. "Are you talking to me?" The damn thing looked like a talking clam.

Ignoring the moving tree for a moment, Gem waved his finger at the pebble. "Listen, you. As fellow members of the planet earth, we need to start getting along together. Regardless of shape, size, or mineral deposit..."

"Excuse me," said the pine tree. It was standing right behind him.

Gem spun around. “The rock collector!” he screamed, and ran off in the middle of his intra-planetary sermon on the proper behavior of inanimate matter.\*

Gem ran as fast as his rock legs could take him. He came up on a small brook, winding a ways beyond the log where Mr. Squirrel had been sitting. As he hopped across, he turned and saw the pine tree still chasing him and getting closer to the brook, keeping up with him too easily. The tree seemed to just float across the earth. With his eyes off his path, Gem’s foot missed it’s mark (a whining old water-rock), and he plopped down into the brook.

Seconds later, a barky arm reached in and pulled him out, setting him on the ground. “What’s your problem?” the small pine tree asked.

Gem was shivering. He knew he wasn’t fast enough to get away now. Without thinking, he closed his eyes and tried not to move.

“Hey, buddy,” came the tree’s voice, “What are you tired or something?”

“No,” Gem said, his eyes still closed. “Just playing dead.”

“Rocks can’t die,” the tree said. “Too bad the same’s not true for trees.”

Gem winked open one eye. “Are you *really* a tree?”

“Well, basically. I mean, I still look like one anyway,” the pine tree said sincerely, though with some regret.

Suddenly, from the direction of the log, Gem heard Mr. Squirrel’s voice. “Gem! Hey Gem! Where are you?” The rodent’s voice sounded more relaxed.

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\* He made a mental note to submit a paper covering the topic to the American Philosophical Association.

“Over here!” Gem called, and he and the tree watched as the squirrel arrived at the brook. “Where the heck have you been?!” Gem pouted. “I was looking all over for you. And all this time, I thought I was going to get caught by the rock collector, who I thought was dressed up as a tree, but as it turns out—”

“I thought about what you said about all of us being ‘interconnected’” Mr. Squirrel said, glancing at the pine tree. “It made perfect sense when a certain Miss Squirrel walked by—”

“Ok! I get the point!” Gem yelled. “This story is supposed to be for kids, don’t you remember!?”

Gem, annoyed at the whole mess, paced away from the stream. The other two followed along side, keeping safely quiet. As they approached a maple tree, which happened to be in the way of the walking pine tree, Mr. Squirrel moved closer to Gem to ask about his new coniferous acquaintance. Strangely, the pine tree kept walking straight toward the maple tree. He was heading right towards it, when finally he reached the maple tree, and kept going— straight through it! The pine tree disappeared, and walked out through the other side of the tree. Putting off their terror until the tree appeared again, Gem and Mr. Squirrel screamed. “GHOST!”

Gem was running, this time with Mr. Squirrel at his side. “What the hell is that?” asked Mr. Squirrel, in full gallop.

“I don’t know, but I’ll die polished before I let that freak catch me!”

They heard music up ahead, and ran faster. They started to make out a British pop singer’s voice now, and the words of the song were almost audible. As they arrived in a small clearing, they saw a costumed piano player singing to an audience of animals. The animals were gathered around the piano, with a crowned lion in the center of the group. The piano player

had just gotten out the words “Circle of life...”, when suddenly a big tree fell on his head. He never heard it fall.

The animals in the man’s audience gasped, but in a matter of seconds, they rushed to the singer’s corpse. A few wild dogs tore apart his legs, eating ravenously. A family of maggots climbed into his ears. Two chipmunks burrowed under his stomach. Beavers bit off and carried away his arms. A mother bluejay made a nest in his hair.

“The circle of life. Isn’t it beautiful?” Gem reflected.

“Yeah, the circle of life, my ass.” The voice came from behind them, “I’m right smack in the middle of it.” They turned around and saw the pine tree, also contemplating the scene.

“Who are you, anyway?” Gem asked the tree, conveniently forgetting he had been running from it.

The tree seemed displeased. “I’m Pine-fresh,” he answered.

*(What’s the Matter?, sung by all; the Chorus consists of Gem and Mr. Squirrel:)*

*(Spoken:)*

*Pine-fresh:* Notice you never hear a song about an Indian tree spirit.

*Gem:* An Indian *what?*

*Pine-fresh:* An Indian tree spirit— that’s what I am. Indians believed that every tree has a spirit, which goes on living after the tree dies.

*Mr. Squirrel:* So what’s the matter with that?

*Pine-fresh:* You’re the matter.

*Mr. Squirrel:* Huh?? *(turns to Gem)* What’s wrong with him?

*Gem:* (shrugs)

*Pine-fresh:* Matter!! You know, substance... material... stuff!! You're made up of it!

*Chorus:* And you?

*Pine-fresh:* I ain't made up of doo.

(Sung:)

*I float around all through the woods,  
just wishing I could feign,  
that the savages who created me,  
weren't so darn insane.*

*They told me I could come back alive,  
in the form of something new,  
but no matter how hard I try,  
The laws of nature say "fuck you".*

*Chorus:* What's the matter, what's the matter, what's the matter,  
you?

*Pine-fresh:* With only make-believe vocal cords, a ghost can't even say  
"boo".

*Chorus:* What's the matter, what's the matter, what's the matter,  
you?

*Pine-fresh:* Being a tree spirit really sucks....

*God, those Indians were schmucks.*

*(Spoken:)*

*Gem:* *(to Mr. Squirrel)* Listen to this, I got a good one. What do you call the place where a tree spirit lives?

*Mr. Squirrel:* I don't know. What?

*Gem:* A haunted tree house!

*Chorus:* Ha, ha ha ha!!!

*Pine-fresh:* *(sarcastically)* Ha, ha. Very funny.

*Mr. Squirrel:* Ok, how about this one. What did the tree spirit wear to Christmas dinner?

*Gem:* I don't know, what?

*Mr. Squirrel:* Magic light bulbs, telepathic ornaments, and possessed tinsel!

*Chorus:* Ha, ha!

*Pine-fresh:* See what I mean?

*(Sung:)*

*I used to be such a sacred tree,  
worshipped, and never owned,  
the Indians had nothing better to do,  
besides cutting scalps and getting real' stoned.*

*But now all I have is a spiritual trunk,  
and needles that can't even prick,  
it's frustrating to meet a girl with a nice set of cones,  
when all you're stuck with is an impotent stick.*

*Chorus: What's the matter, what's the matter, what's the matter, you?*

*Pine-fresh: With only make-believe vocal cords, a ghost can't even say "boo".*

*Chorus: What's the matter, what's the matter, what's the matter, you?*

*Pine-fresh: Being a tree spirit really suuuuuuuuuucks....*

*God, those Indians were schmucks.*

Gem put his hand on Pine-fresh's back (which was the same as his front, except for the lack of eyes, nose, and mouth.) "I don't blame you for being bitter," Gem said. "Like I always say—"

Pine-fresh and Mr. Squirrel walked away, mid-sentence. Mr. Squirrel said to the tree, "We're trying to protect Gem from a bad rock collector, who's trying to rid the world of rocks. You can come along with us, if you want."

"Really?" Pine-fresh said with a tear in his eye. "You... really want to be my friend?"

Gem jogged to catch up to the other two, like a salesman losing a customer. "The way I see it, Mr. Pine-fresh, we're all just a part of nature. We should *all* be friends."

The music started, and they all put their arms over each others' shoulders, and rocked their heads back and forth in unison.

*(Isn't It Great to Be Friends, sung by all:)*

*Isn't it great to be friends?*

*Oh, isn't it great to be friends?*

*Everyone should love, love, love, each other,*

*It's just great to be friends.*

*Isn't it great to be—*

The rock collector's net smashed down over them. Before they knew what was happening, he had dumped the three of them into a metal cage and latched the top shut.

Herpes the hound was pressing his face to the side of the cage and panting happily. The three captives sat there, shivering, staring back at their captors silently.

"Don't stop singing," Captain Rock ordered. "I was enjoying it. Just because us humans like to rape and pillage, doesn't mean we don't like to sing and dance."

"Sing for you?!" Gem yelled. "Not if my life depended on it!"

Mr. Squirrel elbowed Gem in the stomach. "What are you, a moron?" he whispered. "Your life *does* depend on it. And more importantly, *my* life depends on it!"

"Don't worry, my rodent friend," the rock collector said, picking up the cage. "I don't care if you sing or don't sing. I'm going to torture you anyway."

"Great, now you pissed him off!" Mr. Squirrel yelled under his breath.

"I'm not surprised," Pine-fresh said to the squirrel. "What made you choose a rock for a friend, anyway?"

“I don’t know,” Mr. Squirrel said regretfully. “I should have taken off the minute I found out I couldn’t eat him.”

Gem put his hands on his hips. “Geez! And I thought you guys were my friends!”

Pine-fresh shook his branches. “No way, those were your lyrics, not mine. Besides, I didn’t know you were going to get me caught by some rock-crazed maniac. Thanks a lot!”

“Enough!” the rock collector yelled, banging on the side of the cage with his fist. He swung the net over his shoulder, and kicked his dog in the side. “Let’s go, Herpes. We have work to do.”

Hooty the owl was resting on top of a large oak, spinning his head around in circles, amusing himself. There was a cardinal’s nest several branches below him, filled with new babies who were just starting to peek their heads over the edge. The mother was away looking for worms.

“Pssst,” Hooty whispered. “Hey, up here.”

The baby cardinals raised their heads.

“What are you mice doing up here?” Hooty asked, with a vague smile.

A few of the scared birds hid down beneath the twigs and leaves. One boy bird kept his head up, and answered, “We’re not mice...” he started, “we’re cardinals...”

Hooty laughed. “Sure you are. I bet that’s what your mom told you.” He shook his head knowingly.

“What do you mean, sir?” the bird responded, a little less confident than before.

“Oh, it’s just that I’ve heard your mom tell that to so many other mice she’s brought up into her nest. I even heard her tell them she was going to teach them how to fly!” Hooty whacked his right leg with his wing. “Ha, ha, ha!!! That was a real knee-slapper! Proverbially speaking, of course.”

There were panic-stricken whispers coming from the bottom of the nest. The little red birds were examining their wings now, and flapping them slowly. One little girl bird pointed her beak over the edge of the nest and looked down. She was still very young, and couldn’t see the ground clearly yet.

“But...” began the boy bird who had spoken before.

“I know,” Hooty nodded above them, adjusting his position slightly on the branch. “And she told you those are your wings, and you should flap them when she pushes you out of the nest. And you don’t have to worry about falling, because just when you’re about to hit the ground, your wings will save you and *Halleluiah*, you’ll be flying. I know, I know. I’ve heard her say it a thousand times. And where are all her other children now, huh? Do *you* see ’em anywhere? I don’t.” Hooty looked off into the distance, as if he had something else to concentrate on.

All the little red heads were poking up now, looking nervously at the branches around them. The whispers had become anxious peeps. Hooty was quite amused.

“Answer me, this,” Hooty went on, to dish out the final blow. “If you really *were* birds, then why wouldn’t she just tell you to fly out of the nest? I’ll tell you why. Because you can’t fly! Because *you’re mice!* And *mice can’t fly!!!* She’s going to push you off one at a time and laugh as each of you falls and splatters all over the ground, unless of course you bang your brains out on a branch on the way down and die before you even get there.”

Hooty shrugged. “But you don’t have to believe me. Just watch what happens to the first one of you that gets pushed off. If I were you, I’d be damn sure I wasn’t the first one. Or the second. Or the third. If *I* were you, I’d get the hell out of here.”

The baby cardinals were holding each other in a big clump of wet feathers and crying. Hooty sat above on his branch, laughing. “God, I love being an owl,” Hooty said.

Suddenly, a triangular green shape floated up from beneath the tree. The translucent figure hovered next to Hooty for a second, than said, “Excuse me, are you Hooty?”

“Ahhhhhhh!” the owl screamed, and lost his balance. He fell past the cardinals’ nest and whacked his stomach on a tuft of leaves, then continued falling straight to the ground.

Hooty’s head was feeling heavy when he first tried to lift it. He opened his eyes to a fuzzy swirl of green and brown. Pine-fresh was standing next to him, looking a little more at home on the ground.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Pine-fresh said. “I usually don’t do that, but it’s kind of important.”

Hooty’s vision was starting to clear. “What the hell are you?” Hooty said, rubbing his head feathers.

“I’m an Indian tree spirit.” Pine-fresh answered, “But there’s something important I have to tell you. Gem and Mr. Squirrel have been captured by the rock collector. And we have to save them, right now!”

Hooty looked at his watch. “Just about right on time,” he said. “Ok, where the hell are they?”

“I’ll show you,” said Pine-fresh, “Let me ride on your back.”

So Pine-fresh climbed onto Hooty's back, and as they flew towards the rock collector's house, Pine-fresh told Hooty about how he had been able to walk through the metal cage and escape. He told Hooty that Gem and Mr. Squirrel were both in danger, and they had to hurry or Gem might be another trophy on the rock collector's shelf.

When they arrived at the rock collector's fortress, black smoke was rising from amidst the trees. They followed it down to the roof, and landed. The smoke was pouring out of a stone chimney. The only sound in the area was the "whish" of the smoke as it left the small opening.

"It's still our best chance of saving them," Hooty said, leaning with a wing on the side of the chimney.

"Do you think you can make it down?" Pine-fresh asked.

Hooty grasped the sides of the chimney and held his face in the smoke. He closed his eyes, and left his head there for a moment, while the thick, dirty clouds squeezed out at him. "Pffffff!!!" he exhaled and coughed. "Yeah... I think I can do it." So he jumped up onto the chimney, grabbed both sides, and slowly eased his way down.

Pine-fresh floated down through the roof. He had picked the spot above where Gem and Mr. Squirrel's cage had been lying in the rock collector's living room. He appeared through the ceiling, and stuck his needle-covered face into the room to check for the rock collector.

"Ahhhhhhhh!!!!" Pine-fresh screamed. The rock collector was sitting on the couch eating a squirrel sandwich and admiring the two separate halves of his new, sparkling purple geode. The rock collector was laughing an evil laugh. (Sort of a "hardy har har".)

On the outside of one of the geode halves was a face: a pair of unfocused, crossed eyes, an unbreathing nose, and a little open mouth with

a little red tongue, dangling out limply. Pine-fresh screamed, and flew off into the woods, hearing three final sounds which would haunt him forever: the evil laugh of the rock collector, the raging flames of the rock collector's fireplace, and the crackling of the burning coals. Or was it feathers?

*(Stop Fucking Up the Earth, Asshole, a lighthearted, instrumental song will be played during the closing credits.)\**

Cast of Voices:

Gem - Angela Lansbury

Captain Rock - Arnold Schwarzenegger

Mr. Squirrel - Ted Danson

Hooty the Owl - Robin Williams

Pine-Fresh - David Bowie

Herpes the Hound - Steve Buscemi

Mother Nature - Tom Bosley

First stone - Cher

Second stone - Madonna

Third stone - Tim Conway

Elton John as himself

First pebble - Joe Pesci

Second pebble - Robert De Niro

Cardinal baby boy - Michael J. Fox

Baby cardinal voice #1 - Don Johnson

Baby cardinal voice #2 - O.J. Simpson

Baby cardinal voice #3 - Max von Sydow

Baby cardinal voice #4 - Traci Lords

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\* Upon showing the story to test audiences, a new ending has been added: When Hooty and Pine-fresh arrived at the rock collector's house, they found Mr. Squirrel and Gem still alive in the cage. Pine-fresh picked the lock on the cage while Hooty pecked Herpes the dog to death with his beak. Hooty then gathered everyone onto his back and flew out the window. The rock collector saw them leave and ran to the window, yelling, "I'll get you all for this!" The group responded "Oh, no you won't!" and built a nuclear bomb out of twigs, bear shit, and plutonium, and blew up the rock collector and his entire fortress. Thus, the world was made safe again, and all the animals, trees, and rocks lived happily ever after. The End.