Four Squirrels

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FOUR SQUIRRELS

Four squirrels tangled together by a plastic grocery bag struggle as they move up a tree Tuesday afternoon in Fredericksburg, Va. They were caught and taken to a veterinarian who freed them.

—Associated Press photo caption

I. Four squirrels

All Larry wants to do is talk about what he’ll do when we’re free—or rather, when he’s free of us. He’s got big plans, big plans, and we have to listen to them, day and night: slippery birches and the topmost branches of longleaf pines, hanging bird feeders with cymbal-shaped baffles, fenced yards with house cats who think themselves smart, human boys with B.B. guns. Nothing! Larry shouts. These things are nothing, no, less than nothing, to him. He could outsmart and conquer, he says, confound them all, if only he didn’t have us, his three siblings, tied to his tail. He doesn’t know about us, he says, but when the big moment comes, man, he’s outta here, history, sayonara, see ya, wouldn’t want to be ya! My way or the highway! He gets so worked up talking like this that he starts biting the air around his head and whipping his tail, the point motion, thus jerking the rest of us out of whatever peace we might have been enjoying. “Sorry, sorry,” he says, but his eyes are still glittering with hysteria. “The big day is coming,” he mutters, and he tries to hold it in, but we all feel it build, wait for it to burst. “It’s coming, man!” Larry screams. “I can FEEL it!”

Felicia is unimpressed. As the only female, she frequently takes that position. We don’t surprise her, although of course she can still surprise us. She is just perceptibly larger than the rest of us, bigger-boned, and her fur is sleeker. And lately she has developed something of a smell about her, a coy, insinuating odor that emanates out over our heads in invisible waves. Not that it does her any good: no normal squirrel would get within twenty feet of us, she says, and she’s right. Occasionally some unsus-
pecting, unfettered, individual regular squirrel happens into our yard and sees us moving miserably along in our broken-pinwheel, lopsided merry-go-round fashion, a malfunctioning machine made of fur bumping its way up the side of a pine tree—and the normal individual bolts, doesn’t just back away, but flees, flees us, as though we were the enemy or could possibly represent any kind of threat. The terror that seizes them is palpable and predictable, the same every time: the first jolt of shock, and then the quick-blooming cloud of understanding—that whatever we are, whatever it is that has happened to us, could happen to them. That revelation—we are what they—flickers into their eyes like a floundering bird. Stare too long and they might find themselves in our place, they suddenly realize. For who’s to say how we got this way? They’re gone, out of the yard before we can say a word.

“I hate it when that happens,” Felicia has taken to saying.

Paul, as usual, says nothing. What I can see of his face when Larry isn’t bobbing up between us—one black eye, a twitch of whisker, sometimes a millimeter of mouth—appears thoughtful. Or perhaps sad. No, thoughtful. I try not to dwell on Paul. Paul’s silence, and I think I speak for all of us here, has become worrisome.

I, Marv, try to take the large view. I remind Felicia that not everyone is horrified by the sight of us, that the yard in which we live is populated by insects of many varieties who have no problem getting along with each other, not to mention the bland assemblies of oblivious pigeons, the sparrows and finches trying to make an honest living, the lizards who sit around all day blowing up their throats and doing push-ups for no apparent reason and who, therefore, would have a lot of nerve calling us odd-looking, the grackles and starlings who take themselves very seriously and are much too busy attending meetings and discussing policy to give us a second thought.

“That’s great, Marv, thanks,” Felicia says. “I’ll fuck a grackle immediately.” When she says “fuck,” a long shudder, kind of an extended wince, runs through all four of our bodies—certainly her intention. I glance nervously at Paul, but his eye is dark and inscrutable, steady as ever. I try to remember the last time I heard him say something, but I can’t. And yet I know he must have
spoken in the past; why else would his silence now seem so dis­
turbing?

Things can change, I tell Felicia. And I believe it—I’ve seen
plants wilt overnight, rain boil up out of an empty sky. But what
I don’t say, though I’m sure Felicia suspects or simply knows, in
her way, that I harbor this weakness, is that when it comes down
to it, I can’t imagine it, can’t actually picture the time when the four
of us will be separate—be free. This is a failing on my part, I
know, yet sometimes when I listen to Larry’s escalating lament,
or look for more than a moment into the inky weirdness of Paul’s
eye, I think perhaps I’m fortunate.

The thing is, I can’t remember a time preceding our current
condition. It must have happened to us in the nest, that elevated
womb of crinkly paper and warm fluff and flowing milk, but I
don’t remember. We weren’t trying to go anywhere then, we surely
didn’t think of ourselves as separate beings, and we never strived
for anything, except to burrow closer, deeper into the heat of
each other and the detritus that hid us from the world. And when
we did finally come down out of our tree, we moved in a group,
as if propelled by one motor; the plastic had apparently been a
part of us for weeks. Sure, we had our individual longings, our
urges to move toward this bit of foil reflecting the sun, that fallen
apple turning sweetly rotten, but no matter what caught the eye,
drew the heart of one of us, there was always the pull of the
others.

So no matter how frustrating, how wrong, our condition has
come to seem, the alternative seems so... foreign. Right for
some, perhaps, but not for us. Why should we imagine ourselves
to be other than what we know ourselves to be? What possible
gain can come out of such imagining? Only loss, I would say,
heartbreak and disillusionment. But I try to keep my opinions to
myself for the sake of collective peace. That’s the very least, I
think, that I owe my brethren.

In response to Felicia’s grackle remark, Larry reminds her
that octopuses can unscrew jars. “And they are solitary, territo­
rial creatures,” he says. He is quoting the yellowed shred of news­
paper that’s wound in with the bag around our tails; he reads the
few visible bits of print over and over, obsessively, searching for
clues to our destiny. "In the Philippines," he says hopefully, "they have knifeless surgery."

"Here we go," Felicia says, rolling her eyes.

"Lightning hit the governor's airplane," Larry tells her. "There is an orthodontist who requires no down payment. On the next Springer, 'We May Be Identical Twins But I Hate Your Guts!' The perfect lobster is coming! Fisher-Price knows!" There used to be more paper for him to read, but rain has worn most of it away, and Larry, of late, has been reciting the fragments he can remember more frequently and frantically, as if these blurred words from some distant authority, words that have nothing to do with us, are his last hope.

Also, he has begun to talk in his sleep. He garbles one news story with another and adds in elements from nowhere, describes in detail sky-high buildings and cavernous, crater-sized wells he cannot have seen firsthand, burning cities and men carrying crosses, human babies speaking archaic languages. But the refrain is always the same: The day of change is drawing near.

And then, a few nights ago, the final straw—an event we couldn't laugh at, tolerate, or ignore. During a stretch of impossible, rainless heat, in the middle of a night so hot the birds couldn't tell it wasn't day and kept singing idiotically past midnight, Larry tried to chew himself loose. Felicia felt it first, woke the rest of us up shrieking and twisting around to try to reach him. There was the deranged smell of blood coming up from where his mouth was fastened, on the lump of hair and bone and plastic that connected us. "OUCH!" someone screamed, and suddenly we were flipping through the air, out of the crook in the oak where we slept. We bounced twice against the bark and hit the ground on our backs, our legs flailing. Larry made a big show of squinting and yawning, as though he had slept through it all. And to be fair, it turned out to be only his own tail he had gnawed. Still, I don't think any of us believed he had done it unconsciously—and if he had, that was no less troubling: What might he do next?

"Where am I?" he asked. "What happened to my tail?"

Felicia spat at him.

"Look, Larry," I told him, "I think I speak for all of us when I say: this is unacceptable behavior."

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“You’ve crossed the line, Larry,” Felicia said. “You’d kill us if you could get away with it! Wouldn’t you?”

Larry didn’t answer, kept his face averted, licked his bloody fur.

Paul, not surprisingly, said nothing, but something made me turn and look at him. His eye appeared even larger than usual, and a dark light I’d never seen before seemed to tremble out of it, directly at me, a light that said, Emergency—emergency.

“Larry, I beseech you,” I said. “For the collective good, the good of us all. . . .”

“Beseech, fuck,” Felicia said. “He tried to kill us. If he tries it again I’ll chew his face off.”

Later that night when I finally got back to sleep, I dreamed of Paul’s eye. Nothing else—no movement, no sound, just that black, unblinking orb, so large it filled my sea of vision, the fierce silence of it growing bigger, more palpable, more demanding every moment. Paul himself seemed absent; there was only the eye. What, I pleaded, what do you want? But the eye gave no answer, nor did it ever turn its gaze away.

And in the morning, like some terrible omen, a rabid raccoon had appeared over us like a dark cloud, as though out of nowhere, high up in the branches of our tree. It woke us up humming, crooning to itself at some unnaturally low, thunder-like frequency. The smell of its disease was everywhere, heavy against our eyes, and the bugs were going nuts, leaping wildly out of the grass in all directions like gazelles.

“Is it raining?” Felicia asked, coming awake. Water from the raccoon’s mouth was falling on us, making marks on our backs.

“Listen!” Larry cried. “Listen to what it’s saying!”

I’d thought the raccoon was only moaning senselessly, but now I heard that Larry was right. The end, the end, the end, the raccoon chanted. Its voice was unraveling, the tone all-engulfing in its desperation; the words seemed to float down from something larger and more diffuse than the bloated, swaying shape on the branch.

“I can’t take much more of this,” Felicia said. “I mean, how much more of this are we supposed to take? I mean, why were we even born—just to be driven crazy by lunatics?”

The end, the end, sang the raccoon.
“We hear you, buddy!” Larry called up to it, but it did not appear to notice.

“Why?” Felicia repeated. “I need to know. Can any of you answer me? Marv? Larry? Paul?” As she said each name we all turned to look at that individual, and when she fell silent we were all left staring at Paul, as if he might really provide the answer. I can’t speak for the others, but that was when I knew we were done for.

That was three days ago, and we haven’t moved. Our limbs are sore from gripping the tree, our necks stiff from looking up. The raccoon hangs over us, chanting out the end of its life, swollen with meaning it must express. All the other creatures have fled the yard, and only we five remain, locked in our fateful exchange. The raccoon chants and drools, Larry babbles, Felicia wails in frustration, and Paul’s eye grows bigger and blacker, its message more inevitable, every moment. And I wait, wait for the change I now believe is coming. Larry was right all along: The day is drawing near. I try to hold out hope that when it is upon us we will rise to meet it, that we will find it in ourselves to do whatever it is that’s required of us.

II. The Veterinarian Who Freed Them

When he was a teenager he had longed to become a real doctor, and he still thought of it that way, despite his successful ten-year practice in the treatment of small animals: real doctors treated human beings. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about animals, but he felt that it was humans he would truly have loved to save—the unsolvable enormity of them, the moist complexity and trickiness of even their simplest parts. One summer when he was still in high school he’d worked a minimum-wage custodial job at a convalescent home, cheerfully scrubbing bathrooms and changing linens and digging people’s false teeth out of the cafeteria garbage; he’d felt at the time that he was proving he could make it as a doctor. He loved helping others, and he was not undone by the grisly.

Then one day he was mopping the hallway outside the room of a retired actuary named Mrs. Rooney who had suffered a se-
ries of strokes that caused her to perceive a string hanging in her field of vision, whichever way she looked. She was constantly calling the nurses and orderlies into her room to get the string out of her face, driving them crazy. On this day, she had soiled herself in her bed, and as he slopped his mop along the linoleum, he overheard her ask the nurse who was giving her a sponge bath to please be more gentle. "I'm not having a picnic down here," the nurse snapped.

He waited for Mrs. Rooney's response, heard nothing, waited a few seconds more, listening to the thick, ruined silence coming from that room, and then he left his mop standing upright in the bucket there in the hall. Looking back, if he had to pinpoint the exact moment he'd abandoned his plan, that would have been it. He could still see that mop standing there like a surprised person he had suddenly walked away from in the middle of a conversation.

He returned to the job, of course, worked the hours he'd signed up for and finished out his summer, but something in him, perhaps his will, had shifted, backed off, turned itself ever-so-slightly away from the experience. He wasn't so sure of himself anymore. He had reported the nurse to the supervisor, but that didn't solve it for him. It wasn't the blood or shit or vomit, he eventually came to understand, that he couldn't handle—not the soft, vulnerable parts of people that undid him, but the hardness, for which there was no answer, no methodology, no cure. So it was that now, instead of saving human lives, he specialized in rodents and birds, taught community education courses called "Understand Your Gerbil" and "What Your Finch Wants You To Know" and "Raising Orphaned Squirrel Babies So They Can Rejoin Their Brethren In The Wild." The only cases he found difficult were those brought about by ignorance: the old man who had shown up, for instance, with a starved, comatose baby squirrel he'd found and kept for a couple of weeks; the thing refused to eat, the man said, sounding a little angry. The animal, just a few inches long, lay at the bottom of an empty cardboard carton, a single, enormous unshelled walnut by its head.

But most of the cases the veterinarian saw struck him as a little silly, though of course he never let on that he felt that way in front of his anxious clients. Out of some perverse habit or
compulsion, even after ten years, he often thought about the human equivalent of an operation he was performing or a treatment he was administering, forced himself to consider the differences between human and animal in terms of money, beauty, glory. When he heard about the squirrels that were being delivered for him to untangle, he recalled a story he had seen in the news about the surgical team who had, in a ten-hour operation, separated a set of human infants, conjoined twins—they weren’t called “Siamese” anymore—who shared one six-chambered heart. The doctors had known in advance that only one of the babies could survive the surgery, they had selected which one based on all available information, and that baby’s fingernails were painted pink to avoid a tragic mistake. Because of the sacrifice of the one life, the doctors were careful not to sound too celebratory in interviews. The head surgeon had said that the feeling he’d had during the procedure was “one of respect for the event, for the sanctity of the individual soul.”

The veterinarian understood and accepted that he himself would never give such an interview, never know such a feeling—it was not a feeling likely to be engendered by inoculating a hamster, or, for that matter, untangling a bunch of squirrels from a grocery bag. Nevertheless, in some odd way his obsession with medical miscellany kept him from growing bitter. He didn’t mind doing his best by small animals; he figured someone had to do it. Cases came to him, unglamorously, and he took them.

The tangled squirrels had turned up in a humane cage trap someone had set for a rabid raccoon, a guy from the newspaper had gone out to take a photo, and then Mike Wentworth from Animal Control had picked them up and brought them in for the surgery. “I’d say these little ‘brethren’ are unblessed,” Wentworth said, holding the wire cage up over the receptionist’s desk and peering in at the jumbled gray lump of bodies. The Animal Control guys were a hard-core crew, and Wentworth in particular liked to rib the veterinarian about the hokeyness of his community ed courses. The squirrels didn’t flinch at Wentworth’s loud laughter; they looked wary and exhausted.

But the operation turned out to be a simple one, no complications—it wasn’t even a surgery, really, so much as a clean-up job, the cutting away of a lot of hair and debris, the sterilization
of a superficial bite wound on one of the tails, rabies vaccines for all. The squirrels would be fine when the general anesthetic wore off, though their tails were somewhat diminished, bent at odd angles and half-bald. But here, the veterinarian felt, was one of the nice aspects of treating animals: unlike humans, they would not feel shame about their deformities.

This thought made him recall something he’d come across when he was putting together his “Orphaned Squirrel Babies” course, an old wives’ tale that said the squirrel was the only animal in the Garden of Eden to witness Adam eating the apple. So horror-struck was this squirrel, the story went, that it pulled its naked, rat-like tail across its eyes to block out the sight, and as a reward, all squirrels were henceforth given bushy tails by God. The veterinarian idly wondered how the four he had just separated would manage to block out horrifying sights, but he couldn’t imagine what those sights might be, and he wasn’t really worried. Such myths were clearly meant to be about people; the animals were only symbolic.

When the squirrels woke up, he carried them, now in four separate rodent cages, out into the small, dogwood-shaded courtyard behind his office. He set the cages on the grass facing the line of trees along the back fence, opened and braced the cage doors, and then stood back to watch. After a long pause, all four squirrels scampered out at once, then moved immediately in four different directions. Oddly, though, they seemed to move in perfect unison, They took miniature roller-coaster-shaped hops, then stopped to stand on their hind legs, then bounded forward again, all at the same moments, as if mechanized. They didn’t seem to be aware of each other, didn’t even glance at each other, which for some reason made the veterinarian smile.

The biggest of the four was the first to break formation, disappearing in a sudden burst over the fence and into the forest preserve. The others followed more cautiously, going off at divergent angles into the brush. The last, who the veterinarian noticed had unusually large eyes, lingered a few seconds longer, standing up motionless with his paws against his breast and gazing off into the distance as though he were listening to something the others had not heard. Then he, too, made his
careful way into the sheltering foliage, looking back once at the veterinarian, or perhaps at the building or the row of empty cages.

Respect for the event, the veterinarian thought. Sanctity of the individual soul. What a joke.

Still, he felt decent. To have done his part, however small anyone might judge it. On his drive home he hummed moronically to radio songs he didn’t know, then detoured on impulse to the apartment of a woman he had dated briefly, months ago. She was a sharp-eyed girl who had worked as his assistant for a summer and then taken a much better job at the children’s zoo across town. They’d quarreled a lot while they were dating, yet there had been something genuine between them from the start, some sort of recognition, though of what the veterinarian could not have said. But the relationship had trailed off—he had never understood why. He still suffered occasional bouts of missing her, fits of melancholic happiness or happy melancholy that seemed to come out of nowhere, like this one, and as he stood on her front step in the late-day sun, waiting to see if she was home, he wondered again, as he often had in the past, whether in some nameless but essential way they were meant to be together.