

The Passing of Squirrels

Time goes by, they say. Time passes. But Amy knew better. Amy knew there is no “passage” of time. It isn’t like a quick-running stream. Time sits heavy.

Amy had a lot of pieces of wisdom like this, and very few people to share them with. For one thing, she was a traveling nurse, forever meeting and soon after leaving whole sets of people. There wasn’t enough time to get to a level of friendship that included the sharing of philosophical musings before moving on to her next post.

For another thing, she was getting to an age where, if she were a character in a Jane Austen novel, people would say she was way past “too late” for her to ever find someone to have children with (tick tock, tick tock) to pass on her wisdom to. As a fan of such novels, she worried she had “lost her bloom” even as she hated herself for such a mean, outdated thought.

It was a few months into settling into a new city that she was taking a walk at dusk and saw a man hunched over a wispy bundle of dry grass on the sidewalk. As she got closer, she saw that something was moving, barely, almost imperceptibly, next to the bundle. The way the man was staring at it all so intently made her pause.

“What’s going on?” she asked. He looked up, a man in his mid-thirties, she noted, with patently un-chic glasses perched on a strong nose.

“I think it’s a squirrel’s nest, with some tiny baby squirrels next to it,” he said, a tinge of mourning in his voice.

She hunched over next to him. Sure enough. They were tiny pink things, grotesque in their naked fragility, barely but definitely moving right next to the capsized nest. She wished she'd never seen them. They looked like hopeless cases.

He was Googling intently when she asked, "is there a mother squirrel around?"

"According to the internet," he said, "she might leave and come back to the babies, but this nest looks like it fell out of a tree. The babies should be inside the nest. See?" He held out a picture of baby squirrels in a nest. He looked around hopefully, existentially. "How will she know where to find them?" he said to the absent mother as much as to her. Something about the way he was looking around for the mother squirrel made him look distinctly paternal.

"You have kids?" she asked.

"Me? No..." he said absently, still craning his neck around. A nice looking man she decided. Nice in the eyes. Eyebrows that could really furrow.

"Hang on, I'll get some gloves."

"Yes, yes! It says we should keep them warm in the nest but not to touch them without gloves."

"I figured. I'm a nurse. I have gloves at home, I live across the street."

"Ok," he exhaled gratefully. "I'll wait here."

Walking back, gloves on her hands, she hoped to see the mother squirrel, but there was only that same man with the glasses and the furrowed brows, talking on his phone to the Humane Society. The sidewalk was cold, the babies tiny. She picked them up gently, so gently, her mind already wandering to a year from now when this one, or that one, might limp, or feel pain in its front paw, because of a tiny bit of pressure from her finger now as she tried to lift them back into the nest. She knew she should have a thick skin by now. To be a good nurse, you need thick skin.

But she couldn't help but feel, as she touched the tiny bodies in her gloved hands, that every living creature mattered. Stupid, she knew, in a world that was just a big random shit show.

As she carefully put the nest into a box she'd lifted from an obliging recycling bin, they had one of those overly long conversations that strangers have when joined by a burden or a crisis. What should we do, whom should we call, will these strange little babies live, will the mother come back, are they too cold, and all circling back to the beginning, *what should we do*.

“You try calling the Humane Society and the Animal Hospital again” Amy said, taking charge, “and give them my number. I'll keep them in my garage until tomorrow unless someone will take them tonight.”

He nodded. “I live caddy corner from this spot—I'll look out for the mother. Who knows, she might have just stepped out” he said, trying to lighten the mood.

More queries were Googled, and they ascertained that a baby squirrel was referred to as a kit, and that the kits should be kept in a box over a heating pad on low. They exchanged numbers, she typed “619-862-9972” under the name “Carlos, Squirrels,” thinking that if the kits died, she'd have to delete his number right away so as to never be reminded of them. She wished again she'd never seen them as she put the box on a heating pad in her garage (a space always oddly warmer than the rest of her apartment) and sat and watched them slightly moving. She sat, and watched, and sat, and watched. All damn night. She could see their struggle to breath, not so much in and out, slow like a human, but “inoutinoutinoutin” in a way that made her feel each moment was desperate, and precious, desperatepreciousdesperateprecious with no pauses or spaces between the two. They should be warm to the touch, said the internet, and she should sometimes check they were not too cold, not too hot. She Googled more. Squirrels in cities are lucky if they live about five years, and they usually mate when they are a year old. She sat and

watched them breathe, she felt herself breathe, and she thought about the nice man who had her number, who had probably listed her as “Amy, Squirrels,” who had an air of sweetness and sense about him, and who cared about five dying kits. The garage had that feeling of close stillness garages have, and time hovered, unmoving, as she watched the kits be barely alive, all night.

They lived until the morning, and long before then Carlos had called to say that the Veterinary Animal Hospital one town over would take them at 7am. Amy was there on the button, and found Carlos there, too.

The Animal Hospital called her three days later; two of the kits had died, but three would live. She called Carlos to let him know, and he suggested they go out for two drinks: one to mourn, and one to celebrate.

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Sometimes when things happen, they happen quickly. Amy and Carlos got engaged six months later, and she got a lower-paying but stable job in town. By the time they were married and had bought a little house together, those three squirrels would be having their first litters of kits. She thought of them as she and Carlos made their plans.

By the time they realized Amy wasn't getting pregnant, those three kits would be grandparents, and she thought of their grandchildren, tiny things, breathing in and out.

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Sometimes when things happen, they happen slowly. Amy measured her temperature and ovulation. She cut out coffee and alcohol, did acupuncture, meditated. Turns out kale's not so bad if you add enough garlic. She went in for test after test, was poked and prodded. The shots, the hormone patches, the retrieval of two eggs, the fertilization of both but the news that only one had a good chance, the implantation, the worry that she would never, ever feel a little alive

creature inside her. Then by the time those three surviving squirrel kits were old enough to be great-grandparents, science gave Amy and Carlos their incredible conception. Then came the day after day of worry for the fragile little thing inside her as she spread her hands over her belly, feeling impatiently for a kick or twist or wriggle beneath her skin. By the time she finally felt those first flutters of a creature inside her, the kits that she had watched in that garage would be great-great-grandparents. She grew fuller and fuller of baby day by day, and she spent hours sitting in pain propped up by pillows in endless varied arrangements that were never quite comfortable for her aching back. But it didn't matter, because she had a new inexhaustible passtime: waiting, suspended in the spot where terror and joy meet, to feel the next kick, the next wiggle, in her distended belly.

And then there was a baby, tiny, miraculous. He came out Dashiell, like he'd already been Dashiell when she'd felt the kicks, fully formed in his Dashiell-ness. Strong. Fiercely himself. With his first breath, he'd let out a burst of a bellow. Amy and Carlos lay together and watched him breathe, in-out-in-out-in, this baby who existed because a family of squirrels had fallen out of a tree and the mother hadn't come back. She thought of the children of the children of the children of the three squirrels who had lived, and she wondered about those children.

And everyone called Dashiell "Dash" because he was fast as a flash, crawled everywhere, climbed everything. And he grew bigger and stronger, and he was walking by the time those three kits from the box in the garage were great-great-great-grandparents. And it seemed that in only a moment he was a toddler and then boy and then a man and he went off to college and got a job and moved two hours away to Scottsdale and started to get serious with a nice guy named Alex from his office.

And one day Dash was 26 and Amy was 65, and her hands were the hands of an old woman, and the squirrels she'd saved with Carlos would be long gone, ancient progenitors of twenty-eight generations. And she woke up with a start in the middle of the night and went out to the garage.

It was a different garage, a different house, a different neighborhood, she was a different woman by now, but she still knew that time doesn't pass. Bleary with sleep, she stood there in the garage looking frantically for that box of baby squirrels like only five minutes had gone by. She knew they weren't there, not really, she knew that, but she also knew that in another way, they were. The garage had that same close, warm feeling of suspended time, and she was still her, that younger woman worried about losing her bloom, worried about those same squirrels.

Amy left a note for Carlos: "Gone to visit Dash."

She slipped on jeans and sneakers and got into the car. It was 1am. In just under two hours she was in Scottsdale where she parked in front of Dash's building, locked the car, and used the spare key to let herself into his apartment. It was quiet, so quiet. As she tip-toed to the bedroom she listened to make sure that there was only the faint sound of one pattern of breath. Softly she opened the door, and gently, gently, felt his skin with the tips of her fingers. He should be not too cold, not too hot. Just warm. With pillows arranged artfully at her back and her hands resting on her stomach, she got comfortable sitting against the wall, and watched him breath all night. In. Out. In. Out. In.