

The Sympathetic Squirrel

by
Barry Rachin

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The Sympathetic Squirrel

During her lunch break Leslie Carter visited the park where two hundred feet away a middle-aged man was talking to a gray squirrel with a cropped ear. The squirrel sat up alertly on its haunches, arms outstretched, and every so often the man tossed him a peanut from a paper bag. The rodent efficiently stripped away the outer shell and munched on the succulent kernel as the lunatic blathered away incoherently.

Leslie settled back comfortably on her own bench. The woman had nothing to fear. The older, gray-haired man, who looked to be in his late fifties, paid no attention to any of the other visitors and seldom raised his voice except when driving home an impassioned point. His only focus was the solicitous squirrel.

But today was different. A light, persistent breeze was blowing in an easterly direction, carrying the man's pedantic monologue across the two-hundred foot void, allowing the woman to hear pretty much everything being said.

"So, where did we leave off yesterday," the man asked, "before the torrential downpour interrupted our conversation?"

Interrupted our conversation... Leslie noted that the term 'conversation' tacitly implied a reciprocal and reasonably balanced give-and-take between both parties in the dialogue. Did he realize he was talking to a gray squirrel? The black woman removed a sandwich from a small bag and splayed the wrapping across her lap to reveal a corned beef sandwich with sauerkraut and kosher dill pickle.

“I was telling you how I lost my job and ended up on a twenty-year treadmill to nowhere.” The man stared pensively at the animal. “Or perhaps you’d prefer something more sanguine?”

The squirrel shook his head vigorously from side to side and cut loose with a series of high-pitched squeals. “The software company where I worked designed business payroll programs.” The crazy man tossed the squirrel another peanut, which he deftly caught and deposited in his right cheek for safekeeping. “Employers filled in the number of hours worked for each person in their company. The software calculated deductions, gross and net pay.”

The squirrel took a step closer, crooked its silver-gray head to one side and appeared to be listening intently as a small girl accompanied by her mother approached from the main entrance. “Mommy, that man is talking to the furry squirrel!”

The woman steered her child in a wide arc away from the paved path. “That’s none of our business,” she replied tersely.

“Does the squirrel understand what he’s saying?”

“Of course not!” the mother insisted. “Animals can’t talk or reason.”

“But every time the man says something the squirrel responds. It’s like a real conversation.”

Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup. Just as the young child noted, the squirrel erupted in a series of barks, grunts, bird-like chirpings and unintelligible chitter-chatter following each of the man’s comments, creating the outlandish and utterly implausible impression of meaningful dialogue. “Dear god!” The flustered mother yanked the child off at a sharp angle and hurried out of sight beyond a grove of weeping willows.

“Six years ago I discovered a flaw in the software program,” the crazy man picked up the thread of his narrative. “Insufficient memory in one of the design modules caused the processors to seize up and stop working.” “The program was rendered obsolete after only a few years usage and the customer obligated to purchase an upgrade... a new and improved version.”

“I spoke to my supervisor about the problem,” the man continued his soliloquy, “and suggested increasing storage capacity by several gigabytes.” “He said that my request was not unreasonable and would look into the matter.” The squirrel smacked his paws together, a repetitive gesture, as though he was applauding the upper echelon, corporate decision. “But nothing came of my request. One day six months later, in a fit of exasperation, I told the supervisor how I felt. The unnecessary upgrade was nothing more than planned obsolescence, legalized extortion forcing unwitting customers to shell out money for products they didn’t really need.”

“The supervisor fired me on the spot. No notice. No severance package. No nothing!”

“What did I learn from the experience?” The squirrel blinked several times in rapid succession then, crouching to one side, scratched his left ear with a hind leg before settling back down in an earnest, listening mode. “Earning a modest living is for chumps, dopes, deadbeats and ne’er-do-wells. Money. Money. Money. Money. Money Expedient self-interest is its own justification, consumerism the antichrist.”

The squirrel interrupted with a high-pitched squeal, suggesting that he perfectly understood the speaker’s quandary. The shrill howl set Leslie’s nerves on edge. Sipping from a bottle of mango fruit juice, Leslie gawked at the despondent lunatic, whose hands were flailing desolately in the air. The crackpot was carrying on an energetic and dispassionate conversation with a rodent and yet a certain crystalline logic was embedded in his rather one-sided tirade. The

squirrel, who had been holding a peanut in its right paw for the longest time, seemed far too engrossed in the subject matter to crack open the nut.

The middle-aged man suddenly leaned forward, placing his lips alongside the rodent's left ear. "After losing the job, I lost all appetite for working with computers. I took to drink and, when the unemployment checks eventually ran out, my wife left me."

"Couldn't find work for the longest time and finally settled on a series of mindless, entry-level positions... janitor in a paint factory, short-order chef, clerk in a shoe store. I became a recluse, misanthrope, misogynist... well maybe not a misogynist but I wasn't doing all that well with women either."

The squirrel hadn't budged an inch despite the man's proximity. He still clutched the uneaten nut in front of a bristly nose. "Five years I stumble-bumbled from one pathetic mishap to another – a veritable job gypsy – and what did I take away from the soul-numbing ordeal?"

Like a sailboat in a turbulent windstorm, Leslie felt her body list in the direction of the impassioned confession. She folded the remains of the corned beef sandwich in its wrapper and placed the refuse in the bag with the empty juice bottle. "A consumer society cannibalizes its own. It devours everything in its path with carnivorous glee."

As if on cue, the squirrel cut loose with a high-pitched tittering. The black woman shook her head, an involuntary, reflexive gesture, trying to clear her brain. Was the feral creature agreeing with the lunatic or offering a dissenting opinion? The man finally fell silent. A brief moment passed. The squirrel spun about on its heels and hopped away in an erratic zigzag fashion. Reaching a wide oak tree near a shallow pond, the critter scurried up the trunk, disappearing among the leafy branches.

"Excuse me." Leslie approached and stood in front of the man with hands on hips. "You understand that a squirrel hasn't the ability to understand human speech?" Her words emerged more as a question than bona fide statement of fact.

"Of course not!" He sounded offended. "It's got a brain the size of a pea and lives by instinct rather than reason."

"Then why talk to it?"

"If I commiserate with rodents, it's a victimless crime." He cracked a bittersweet, self-effacing smile. "Catholics attend church. They sit in a confessional and recount their sins. I come here and vent to a gray squirrel, who coincidentally is an excellent listener."

Leslie lumbered off in the direction of the entrance to the park but abruptly pulled up and returned to where the man, clutching the half-eaten bag of peanuts, was sitting. "I'm Leslie Carter. I own a kosher delicatessen over by the library."

"You don't look Jewish."

"It's a long story," she observed dismissively, thrusting a hand in front of his chest.

He took the hand and pumped it up and down energetically. "Jason McDougal... I'm clerking over at the Dairy Mart."

"That's two blocks down from my place." He shook his head in the affirmative.

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Was it the disgruntled, software programmer or the quirky squirrel that intrigued her? Leslie couldn't be sure. The woman intended to return to the park the following day, but the October weather was unsettled with the rumblings of thunder eventually giving way to a steady pitter-patter of warm, late-summer rain. The weekend arrived and with it a number of familial

obligations; it wasn't until the middle of the following week when she found herself back on the bench, but the disaffected Jason McDougal was nowhere to be found. Leslie unwrapped her lunch revealing an aromatic slice of brisket wedged between thick slabs of dark rye with a thousand island dressing.

"Well, hello there!" She had just begun nibbling at the crust when the squirrel resurfaced and picked its way to the further bench. "Your friend's not here today and, unfortunately, I haven't any nuts." Five minutes passed. The squirrel continued to bide his time waiting for Jason McDougal. Finally the animal came to where Leslie was sitting. "I don't suppose you'd care for this spicy meat." Ten minutes later, the black woman had finished her lunch, emptied the juice container and stowed the wrappings in a velour tote bag. The squirrel continued to linger, sitting back on its haunches with the paws clasped together in a prayerful gesture.

Chitter. Chitter. Chitter. Chitter. Chitter. When Leslie slung the bag over her shoulder and made a motion to stand, the squirrel stepped closer and expectantly tilted his head to one side. "You want me to bare my soul? Emotional diarrhea was never my forte. I'm more the stoic, grin-and-bear-it type."

Chit. Chit. Chit. Chit. Chit...

Leslie blew out her cheeks and groaned loudly. She brushed a strand of kinky hair out of her eyes and, by way of warning, added, "you really want to hear this?" The squirrel inched closer, wiggled its nose and fixed the woman with a decidedly kindhearted expression.

"I'm sixty-eight and own of a kosher delicatessen in a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon community." Leslie glanced over her shoulder and then swept the grassy knoll with her walnut-colored eyes from right to left. The park was empty. "Forty years ago I was living on Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester, Massachusetts."

"Jew Hill Avenue... that's what we called it, because of all the Russian and Polish Jews that resettled there following the Second World War." "During high school I took a job in a kosher delicatessen. Max's Deli... the owner was this balding Lithuanian Jew. With hairy ears and a pushed-in nose, Max Mendlebaum stood barely an inch over five feet in his birthday suit."

"Six months I split my time between scrubbing dishes, waiting tables and food prep behind the counter." "The clientele, mostly Eastern European Jews, spoke a hodgepodge of guttural German, Yiddish, Russian and – when all else failed – butchered English."

The squirrel made a series of birdlike incantations before allowing Leslie to continue. "From the 1950's Jewish immigrants flooded the area, but by 1960 more than half of the ninety thousand residents deserted Boston – a mass exodus, white flight, call it what you will – heading south to the middle-class suburban communities of Canton, Milton, Randolph and Sharon. Low-income blacks were flooding north from the Deep South in search of jobs and a better life. But along with their best intentions, they brought broken families, drugs and gang violence as part of the new order."

One day in her third year working at the deli, Leslie approached the owner. "Try this." She handed him a platter of silver-dollar size pancakes along with a dollop of sour cream laced with chopped scallions.

"Whatchoo got dere?"

"Potato latkes... a new and improved recipe."

The squat Jew stared at the platter with a dour expression. "No gut!"

"And why not?"

“It’s the wrong texture.” He screwed his features up in a disgruntled grimace. “You have to shred the potatoes and onions not run them through a goddamn food processor.”

“Yes, I realize it’s not traditional,” Leslie countered, “but just taste.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Just try... one little latke.” Leslie would not be denied.

Max seized a diminutive pancake between a thumb and forefinger, mashed it into the sour cream and tossed the morsel into his mouth. “Not bad!” He grabbed a second helping.

“The advantage to feeding the vegetables through a blender is that you doesn’t waste time forming individual patties.” Leslie paused just long enough to insure that she had his full attention. “You drop the batter into the hot oil from a large spoon or measuring cup. It saves both time and manpower.”

“You put in the eggs?” the owner pressed.

“Yes, of course.”

“The flour, salt, pepper, baking powder?”

“Just like the original recipe.”

Max Mendlebaum thoughtfully rubbed a stubbly chin. “Tomorrow we add a new item to the menu... Leslie’s silver-dollar latkes.”

On another occasion, Leslie pulled the owner aside. “The mixer doesn’t work.”

“You check the fuse box?”

“Yeah, nothing’s blown.”

With a pair of pliers, Max loosened several bolts on the metal housing and lifted the lid. An acrid odor permeated the air. “Drive belt snapped.” He extricated the broken belt and handed it to Leslie. “Take this down to the hardware store on Christopher Street and have them match up a replacement.”

“Why not just call a mechanic?”

“*Meshuganah!*” The roly-poly Jewish man balled his hand into a fist and rapped the knuckles gently on the girl’s forehead. “A mechanic might not get here until late afternoon and what would we do for bread and sandwich rolls in the meantime?”

When Leslie returned a half hour later, Max said “Good! Now go fix the broken machine.”

“I’m not a mechanic.”

“Before the belt broke, you were a deli worker.” the man handed her an adjustable wrench and slotted screwdriver. “Now you’re a mechanic.”

Back in the kitchen Leslie lifted the cover on the commercial mixer and nestled the new rubber belt over the larger of two wheels, but the band fell far short of its mate. “Now what?”

“Loosen the bolt on the chrome housing,” Max instructed, indicating a thick nut centered in the spindle. The girl made two turns with the wrench and the wheel began to wobble unsteadily. Pushing forward, she eased the band over the smaller wheel and, while Max held the unit firmly in place, secured the bolt hand-tight.

“Moment of truth!” The owner flipped the switch and the mixing paddle began revolving in typical fashion.

“Next time a belt breaks, what you gonna do?”

“Leslie grinned embarrassedly. “Not call the owner.”

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