

Rescuing

I was sitting yesterday in my living room, staring into the small olive-colored eyes of Nellie, my bichon. I had been somewhat glumly thinking about writing a piece called Lunch with My Friend the Trump Supporter when there was a knock at the door.

"I live over on Voorhees," said a guy standing next to his son. "I wanted you to know a baby raccoon fell out of the tree on your front yard."

"Is it alive?"

"I think so. It's not moving much. It seems dazed."

It was about 4 PM.

We went out to look, and there, about a foot from the tree trunk, lay a baby raccoon, about the size of a deflated football. It was pawing the ground, smelling the grass. Its dark eyes were clearly open though it seemed unable to see. Its fur was hay-colored with a touch of green. It seemed completely bewildered and heartrendingly helpless.

We discussed calling the cops, calling Animal Control.

A scrabbling noise, and, in the knothole about 15 feet above me, I saw the descending rear end of another baby raccoon. It lost its handhold and, while we were standing there, it fell to the base of the tree. It was not moving.

At this point I called the Metuchen police who directed me to Animal Control. No one answered at Animal Control. I checked my miniature raccoons again. Mercifully, they were both clearly alive: sniffing the air. They could move a little; they half-stood and stretched in the sun, but they didn't walk.

I phoned the Metuchen police again and explained that Animal Control is closed. The officer called me back in a few minutes. "Animal Control says that the mother may come and rescue them when the sun goes down."

"I don't think they're going to live that long. People walk these huge dogs down Woodbridge Avenue. These raccoons are two feet from the sidewalk."

"See if the mother comes tonight. If they're still there in the morning, call Animal Control."

Now I was in a panic.

I called my girlfriend Lynn who was in Ohio with her elderly mother. She immediately empathized with the deserted babies. “Put up a sign to warn people! Arrange the beach chairs around them like a fence!”

My neighbor Jean wanted to put on gloves, find an enormous ladder, and carry them back up into the knothole herself.

All my options seemed increasingly useless.

An animal-lover friend from Manhasset, who’d heard the story from Lynn, called and asked me the size of the raccoons.

“Maybe about ten inches.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning at eleven. If they’re still there, I’ll drive down and take them off your hands.”

“I don’t know if they’ll make it through the night. My neighbor just told me her dog killed a baby rabbit he found in her garden.”

The sun was now so low it was lighting the undersides of the leaves, and I urged it to set faster.

6:30... 7:30...

I sat on the porch and periodically ran outside to alert the dog-walkers. I tacked a sign to the tree: *Baby Raccoons—Stay Away*.

9:20 PM.

Rachel Maddow was just about to spring the trap on the story she’d been setting up for 19 minutes, when I heard outside a loud—chittering?—trilling? I’d never heard the sound before.

I moved to the porch—and, in the dark, there were two sets of noises: a high-pitched trilling, like a demented flute, and a lower-pitched purring that seemed to be coming from the ground. I was trying to make all this out by the light of the passing headlights. I thought: The poor things are going to be crying all night.

And then I saw the silhouette. A large raccoon was descending the tree, headfirst. She was howling. She jumped to the ground, picked up one of the babies by the neck, and climbed back up into the branches.

The noise had hardly lessened.

Then she was heading down again—this time on the opposite side of the tree. I could make out her silhouette on the ground. The noise was finally diminishing. Then I saw her leap back up the tree with her child in her mouth. There was a loud chittering high up in the tree. (I thought: A mother is screaming at her children.) And then everything fell quiet again: the fireflies flashing, the cars passing.

I called Lynn and Jean in jubilation at the rescue.

I walked into my kitchen and saw that, mid-crisis, I had lit a candle for the baby raccoons—and it was still burning on the stove: my inarticulate call for divine intervention.

“Now you can sleep,” said Lynn.

And I did.