

Cardinal Lessons

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

In spring a pair of cardinals adopts my backyard. Overnight, it seems, the female weaves a nest in the V of a palm frond. Picture the most clichéd of birds' nests and that is what she fashions. Dried grass and leaves, strips of palm fronds, twigs, all knitted into a perfect cup. It looks store-bought.

The female sits inside this nest most of the day. Looking up from the yard below, I see either her auburn tail feathers or the gray-brown tip of her head, sometimes her little black eye and peach beak. The male cardinal hops from branch to branch near the top of a Norfolk Island pine in the neighbors' yard, or makes sudden, short appearances on the patio furniture, the fence, the juvenile Christmas palms. He prefers to be up high, as cardinals do. And like most males he is fiercely red, so handsome with his crest.

The two dialogue constantly. The male talks the most, and between this and his *Baywatch*-reminiscent hue and inability to linger he comes off as a bit extra. His sentences are typically longer than his partner's, which is unusual since female cardinals tend to sing longer, slightly more complicated songs than males, likely to signal when to bring food and when to stay away. Most female songbirds can't sing—how awful to be a nonmusical songbird—but female cardinals can belt it. Mated pairs compose unique shared songs, their own melodic language.

After a few days of eavesdropping, I notice that sometimes the female doesn't answer her partner. Maybe this is because I am in the backyard and she is nervous, or because she's an introvert. Perhaps she has already addressed

whatever question her partner posed and is annoyed. As a married person, I relate to that possibility.

For a while I believe the male cardinal's frequent calls must be warnings for his mate. I'm potty training a puppy, so the two of us are potential threats many times a day. But then I begin hearing the male from inside the house, when the impact doors and windows are closed. I hear him when I am walking the puppy several blocks away. I hear him in the morning, throughout the day, and right before sunset. I never imagined a pair of birds would have so much to say.

The puppy's name is Augie. Augie is a blue Italian greyhound with cobalt eyes, a white chest and stomach, and four white feet. The tip of his nose is white that fades to pink—I must apply baby sunscreen to it if he's outside for long periods—and he has a white triangle-ish mark about the size of a quarter on the back of his neck.

All my husband and I do is talk about Augie. What he eats or does not eat, whether he's hot or cold, how cute he is when he does this, how he's being such a little dick about that. And if we aren't talking about Augie, we're talking to him. Like all the time. There's so much to say.

We've had dogs before, two rescued greyhounds that lived with us over a ten-year period. Smart, loving girls who'd endured a racetrack hell that sometimes haunted them. When the second one died—they both succumbed to osteosarcoma, an agonizing and incurable cancer—my husband wanted another dog right away. I understood why. The house felt lifeless but also crowded with ghost versions of the recently passed Lulu. There she was sunning herself outside on the artificial turf. Lounging in our bed. Prowling around the smoker with a chicken roasting inside. The mornings came off as especially pathetic. A new dog would dispel these ghosts, reorient our directionless time.

Still, I couldn't do it again: love a dog like family and then lose it. Witness the physical decline and its pain, ask ourselves the question of when to end the suffering, disagree bitterly about the when. Cry unexpectedly from the guilt and enduring love years after the vet injects that blessedly lethal mixture. And to bear those feelings is a gift; you got to say goodbye. A dog could die unexpectedly or violently, maybe even because of something you did or did not do. The final months with Lulu left me exhausted from so much hurt, hers

and my husband's and mine. Repeating that hurt, even well into the future, seemed unbearable.

And this: I wanted life without a dog. For a little or maybe a long while. I wanted the freedom to leave and return as I pleased, whether to happy hour or on an international vacation. To not feel bad about leaving in the first place. To stop home cooking dog food and worrying about the consistency of poop. To be the only warm body in my husband's arms. To be just us, just me, again.

Choosing freedom from both pain and responsibility felt selfish. It usually does for women. Lulu passed in early summer and I promised I would be ready for another dog by the new year. I only half believed these repetitions. We had versions of the same conversation that always circled back to me. My husband understood my reluctance; he did not judge or push. But he did feel lonely. And I let him.

I have serious questions about the placement of the pair's nest, starting with its height. If I jumped, I could probably poke it with my fingertips. Mind you, I am five feet three inches tall. Three to ten feet off the ground is typical cardinal nest placement, but still, I don't think any wild animal should trust humans enough to live within our reach. Even worse, the palm frond the nest rests inside is an *Areca palm*, a dense, clustering species that is a serious shedder. Dead fronds as long as six feet fall into my yard daily.

I worry the frond on which the nest is built will turn yellow, and then brown, and then drop from the tree like the others before it. I'm not sure the pair can hatch and raise their chicks in time to avoid this outcome. Incubation alone takes 12 to 13 days. I regret harboring these suspicions about nest location because female cardinals are responsible for nest building and I don't want to undermine the notion of women's leadership, even in nature.

I wonder if these are young cardinals, an inexperienced, untested pair. I zoom in on the pictures I snap of them—male perched on the fence, female huddled in the nest—and try to find signs of youth or age. No luck. I am not a bird watcher; any facts offered here are from the Internet. Maybe the cardinals will lose this clutch and learn their lesson for next time. Cardinals attempt two to three broods a year and perhaps fatal errors are why.

Or maybe they'll break up after this. Cardinals are monogamous and sometimes stay together for years. Does a bird relationship survive the loss of offspring? Can any relationship, really?

My husband and I are leaving to spend a week in North Carolina. Puppy Augie prepared for flying by spending time zipped in his regulation-size carrier while I sat at my desk and also walking on his leash with me around the closest approximation to an airport I could think of: the mall. The day we are leaving, a mockingbird fledgling falls or escapes from whatever nest it was in and bops around the yard, hopelessly unable to fly. Augie, sighhound with an insatiable chase instinct, strongly wishes to play with and then consume this innocent chick. The baby dashes across the mulch, wailing, with Augie in pursuit until I can call him off with the command he learned in puppy school: LEAVE IT! The chick hides in the podocarpus hedge, mostly avoiding Augie's attention all afternoon, except for a few panicked episodes when he discovers it again.

Meanwhile, the mother and father mockingbirds cry down to their child from the fence. Mockingbirds are not particularly friendly. I often see them hounding hawks and crows and blue jays in midair. Once a mockingbird dive-bombed my full-size greyhound as we walked underneath an oak tree. Another time my husband and I were in our front yard for a reason I can't remember and a black racer snake came tearing across the grass and into the street, two mockingbirds careening above.

These mockingbird parents are not thrilled with how close my husband and I and Augie get to their baby. They squawk and puff up their feathers and dart from one board to another. The baby sprints back and forth along the fence and I think about trying to catch it, but its spindle legs seem delicate enough to snap between my fingers. And what would I do with it? I don't know where its nest is and probably couldn't reach it if I did.

It is a myth that birds will abandon babies touched by humans. Birds have a poor sense of smell and don't really care if their chicks temporarily waft human scent. I could carry this baby someplace safe, but I don't know where safe is.

The final time Augie noses out the chick, it becomes so scared that it manages to launch from the podocarpus plants over our fence and into the neighbor's yard. These people have no pets but others do. Cats roam the streets of our neighborhood. The fledgling's fate is out of my hands, but I feel

culpable. The sun will go down in three hours. Maybe the chick was safer in our yard. At least the baby got to fly, if only that one time.

We return and the cardinal eggs have hatched and the Areca is all activity. The mother cardinal flits out of the nest and within a minute the father swoops in to take her place. Shuttling insects is busy work. The male seems harried, on brand for him.

I hear tiny chirps when the parents land and see reaching beaks (two, I think?) poking up behind the nest's rim. The babies fall silent as soon as their parents leave; I rarely hear them cry otherwise. I suppose this is a delicate balance for the adults. They need to feed the chicks and that means noise, but they also do not want the chicks to draw dangerous attention to themselves. But all the babies want is attention. They are hungry, constantly hungry.

The pair seem like good parents, although I am not really in a position to judge as I have neither children of my own nor much experience with kids generally. The cardinals are showing up for their offspring, that much is clear. Still, I remain concerned about the nest. The palm frond sags a little now, bringing the family within my reach. Other fronds have shifted so I no longer have as direct a sightline into the birds' domestic life. But the nest remains intact and the frond is green enough. For now.

I wonder what it is like to not be a parent one day and then be a parent the next. The first kid experience. Many people, but not all, feel a new and more intense version of love than they do for spouses or family members or friends, I have been told. "Everything changes" is what parents often say. By that they often mean priorities shift, life reorients, relationships—especially marriages—take new shapes. The before is gone.

Is there a point in drawing lines between before and after a big life event? I suppose people don't stay exactly the same even one moment to the next, which blurs any before/after line we might attempt. But despite knowing that the miraculous is gained in the after of children, my mind dwells on all I risk

losing of my before self when I apply the parenthood thought experiment to my own life.¹

And this: Nowhere in myself can I summon the desire to be a parent. Whatever makes people say they "just know" just isn't there. Unexplainable from my perspective, though some might attempt with these types of worn-out indictments: selfish, no family values, ruined by liberal ideas, too career-driven, defective woman.

Obviously cardinals do not think about any of this; they simply feel an urge to procreate. They build a home. They ensure resources are nearby. They chose a lifelong mate they believe in, notable given that most animals leave females to raise offspring. They risk their own lives to bring other life into the world several times a year, every year, for as long as they can.

Spring's first real thunderstorm. The wind blows and the palm fronds whip. The nest looks like it will be bucked out of the Arcas and land in the nearby pool. Some of its twigs and dried fronds flutter to the ground and I worry this house may disintegrate.

After Lulu died my husband and I fell into noticeable, sometimes comfortable, other times awkward, silences. For ten of our 11 married years we'd talked about our dogs—what they ate or did not eat, whether they were hot or cold, how cute they were when they did this, how they were being such little bitches about that. Turns out a major percentage of our conversations circled around or, weirdly, through them. Like I'd comment on my husband's road rage by saying something like, "Hang on Lulu, Dad is driving like a wild man!" The dogs became our shared language.

When this language went dormant, I couldn't tell whether we had talked about the girls so much because of love, or because over time we had stopped speaking often enough about other things we shared or didn't, or some blend

1. My fear of becoming pregnant and performing motherhood in America, a country that hates women openly, is another essay entirely. So is discussion of the climate change-related suffering any child born today will endure.

of both. I do know that through their lives and then their deaths the girls planted resilience in our marriage, and in us as individuals. But I also sense something small, something that I think we're both trying to keep small even as we pretend it's not there, that we used them to silence.

I need to trim seed bracts off the Areca palms. Otherwise the bracts, which look like upside-down staghorn coral, drop white-yellow flowers and then huge numbers of golden marble-size seeds that roll into the pool and gather in stinking rotten piles on the turf. Plus those seeds are candy for roof rats and I've been down that road.

Yet I can't bring myself to trim anything above the nest. The dangling bracts are heavy; they will knock the nest down or smash the babies. But not trimming also could be deadly. Rats eat baby birds. Rats attract cats, which also eat birds. Everything is hungry.

I have to decide.

Unlike most Italian greyhounds one encounters on Instagram, Augie does not scurry around with a hunched back and tucked tail wearing immaculate outfits. His eyes do not bulge. Even for the breed his legs and neck stretch long. His seal-blue coat shines and his body is muscular, evidence of his place in a line of winning show Italian greyhounds. Physically his one flaw is the kinked tail he was born with, a defect that prevents him from being or siring a show dog. I joke that because of this tail mishap he was on sale.

Our Augie eats a raw beef grind that comes frozen in five-pound tubes from a kennel supply company. Also raw chicken necks, his favorite. He sleeps under the covers. He prefers my husband for playing and me for cuddling. He squirrels away treats in dog beds, between couch cushions, under blankets, and behind pillows to eat later; I'm told his mother also does this. When he needs to pee in the night, he licks my feet to wake me.

Play is Augie's love language, always. Chase the ball, tug the stuffed koala bear, squeak the toy squirrel, it's all a way to say I love you, we love each other. Augie is the nickname for Augustana University in South Dakota, where my husband and I met and fell in love. A word woven into our unique shared dialogue.

When I look at Augie I see a miniature version of the hounds we once had but with way more attitude and a statistically longer existence. I see a life we are trying to shape that doesn't include a hell that sometimes haunts him. There are parallels to parenthood but even I, the un-parent, know raising a puppy is absolutely nothing like raising a child. I can walk away when I need to. I am still me. I risk very little.

After Lulu passed, early summer became late summer, which turned to fall, and meanwhile my husband and I took last-minute day trips to Miami and did not think about the consistency of poop and enjoyed each other in our bed and sometimes fought and often conversed in circles and we spoke about that something we needed to keep small, and then at Christmastime my fear of pain and need for freedom drained away enough and in January we brought home our first puppy, and now we talk about and through him and what a relief that this house isn't going to disintegrate.

One morning: silence. No chicks, no parents. The reality is obvious but I do not look. A handful of days pass. Finally, on the sixth day since we returned and I first heard the chicks, I haul a stepladder from the garage, climb up, and peer inside. Empty.

Cardinal chicks leave the nest nine to 11 days after hatching. Depending on when these babies hatched during my week-long absence, it's entirely possible, maybe even probable, that they willingly flung themselves out of their home under the cover of night, their parents scanning for danger from the Norfolk pine above. The chicks might have bopped about like broken things until something in their brain connected to their wings and they fluttered upward, away from their parents and each other, toward a future mate and melodic shared language and babies that live and die.

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