

## 1: Caged

### March

**E**VEN BEFORE WE left the parking lot, we could hear the gibbons' piercing cries. About forty of them swung arm-over-arm in their tall cages, bellowing as the director of the Santa Clarita preserve showed us around. Where gibbons come from in Southeast Asia, he informed us, they race through the treetops, 250 feet above the rainforest floor. Flann aimed his camera at the director in front of the nearest cage. The din tapered off and then re-started.

After the official tour, we sauntered around on our own. Flann turned away from me to snap some photos of an intern tossing a bucketful of steaming vegetables into a cage. A mother gibbon leapt toward the food, its infant clinging tightly to her chest. My own body tingled, remembering that intimacy.

That's when a wild-eyed male gibbon sitting in a corner of the cage opposite took hold of his penis. It must have been my red straw hat that excited the hairy little ape. I moved so that my back was to my husband's back. The gibbon pleased himself in double-time haste while staring into my eyes. I felt the oddest *frisson* of guilty arousal, as though I were being unfaithful to Flann in some minor but shameful way. I didn't turn away until the gibbon finished and began licking his own hand.

I caught up with Flann. We passed a cage in which a little gibbon stared an appeal at us through the bars, as though a velvet painting had come to life. "That one grew up in a zoo," a passing volunteer told us, "where she spent way too much time interacting with humans. She's just a little 'off.'"

Flann turned to me. "Speaking of being 'off,' I'm going to have to bring a tape recorder to work. It's insane there." His job was to trouble-shoot computers for a small group of actuaries who assess risks for insurance companies.

I shifted my gaze from the pleading gibbon to Flann. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, and we resumed walking. He ran his fingers through his hair and continued, "I couldn't be in that office full-time. It would send me round the bend. Those prayer meetings! Sometimes, I swear, I feel like howling at the moon. Or dipping my hands in mud—or worse—and scrawling blasphemies on the wall."

I pictured my husband as a feces-throwing primate. His image kept doubling with that of the libidinous gibbon.

"At work yesterday," he went on, "Russell said that we should invade yet another country because it will speed up the end of the world. And, of course, only he and his buddies will float up to heaven and be saved."

"But isn't your boss—? I thought actuaries *needed* to use reason."

"Apparently not."

"I wonder if my screwy twin sister thinks that way too," I said. "Phoebe certainly isn't committed to rationality."

"Hmm. I haven't thought of her and Russell as having anything in common. She always seems so . . . well, *centered*." Centered. Did that make me off-centered? Phoebe always seemed to get what she wanted, though she and I hadn't wished for the same things since we battled as kids over who got the fatter lump of ice cream.

At the last cage, a gibbon walked toward us on two feet, his arms spread wide for balance. He had a feather in his mouth. "Is he us? Are we them?" I asked Flann.

"More or less."

"At least *they* don't have to go job-hunting," I said. This tour was for an article I would write that wasn't going to earn me much. He grimaced in sympathy and asked when I was going to start looking.

"Soon. Before Dorian leaves for college in September." I didn't add that I was in no hurry to commit to filling this last summer my son would be home. I had plans to resurrect one of my old "things to do this summer" lists from when he was small. Few of our old summer pastimes were likely to interest Dorian anymore, but I figured air hockey at an arcade on the pier was an evergreen. A trek to the old zoo with its hauntingly empty cages.

I was shoving my tape recorder and pen into my handbag when we reached the car. A furry shape brushed against my leg. I looked down in alarm, half-expecting an escaped gibbon, the lecherous one. But it was only a mottled cat, and I bent to pet it. It seemed to like my touch and rubbed harder against my left leg, circling repeatedly while I smoothed its fur, until I said to Flann, "Let's get going," at which it bit my left forearm and fled into the dry chaparral abutting the lot.

"Ow, ow, ow," I said as we climbed into the car on our respective sides. Looking closely at my wound, Flann reassured me: "Not deep." Stipples of blood rose to the surface of the skin, and I pressed a flimsy coffee shop napkin on the spot and held my arm over my head throughout the long freeway ride.

## 2: Point of View

**T**HE UMBILICAL CORD is remarkably long and stretchy. You feel—rather than hear—the creaks and susurrations as the connective threads thin into invisibility. You try not to show, not to know, that you're always listening for the final snap.

A familiar crunching sound: my son's car tires loosening a few aging concrete chips and pebbles on the driveway. The day after Dorian turned 16 and earned his driver's license, I quit picking him up from school. When I turned up at his campus one afternoon to ask a question at the office, I heard a droll voice call out, "It's a mother!" Dozens of students in the parking lot stopped their jabbering and stared at me.

Now I suppressed an urge to spring off the sofa and, with my bare foot, prodded a pile of glossy leaflets on the coffee table, spreading them out sideways until a few spilled onto the floor. I leaned down to pick them up, and while legions of undergrads flaunted their toothy white smiles at me, I scrutinized the parking sticker poking out of one pamphlet. After a couple of minutes, I dropped the brochures and approached Dorian, who was scavenging the back corners of the refrigerator as if the best snacks were hidden there. Hovering, I asked, "Hungry?" He raised his eyebrows at me as though I'd offered to brush his teeth for him. I turned away and recalled how we used to exchange dozens of unself-conscious bedtime kisses. The red spot on my left forearm throbbed. I put my arm behind my back.

I tried again. "How was your history test today?"

"Not bad. The teacher's tough, but I think I did okay."

"In what way is he tough?"

He rolled his eyes. "She." I bit my bottom lip. It was a game we played since I'd sent him to a non-sexist preschool. His "gotcha!" showed how well he'd learned.

"How's Katy?" His girlfriend of a year.

"Good."

"Has she heard from her colleges yet?"

"Nope. She applied a little late."

"Why don't you invite her to dinner tonight? It's been a while." Katy always added an expansive presence to a mealtime. Her unreserved personality was a good balance for my son's wariness and my own timidity.

He shut the refrigerator door and beckoned me to the living room by bending a forefinger and then holding it in that position. He sat on the sofa, patted the space next to him and said, "Come. Sit." I came and sat, cradling my sore arm. "Tonight wouldn't be a good night."

"Oh, is she busy? Is she rehearsing for a play again? Which one?"

Dor shook his head. "She's coming with me to Phoebe's for dinner tonight." An uncharitable image of Phoebe's dining room floated through my mind, her vinyl placemats festooned with trumpet-tooting angels. Angel's trumpet: a poisonous flower. He began again, "Now don't say anything—" His assured pose might have seemed imperious to anyone else, but beneath it there was still a trace of the five year old who only reluctantly let go of my hand at the schoolyard gate. Only now, he would graduate high school in three months. After he was accepted at his first choice, the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, he mentioned that it was known as a party school. Not what I wanted to hear. But he'd be only two hours' drive away from Los Angeles. For me, already missing him ahead of time, a manageable unit of change.

"But what are you—?"

"Okay, that's it." He shifted his body forward as though to rise. "If you want to hear what I have to say, wait."

Uneasy, I made a zipping-the-lip motion. Twinges of regret nipped at me: Should I have been a sterner mother? But then Dor's cell phone rang. He looked at it, stood up and, on his way out of the room, said, "Later, Mom, okay? After dinner. I have to talk to Katy."



"What's for dinner?" Flann, wandering through the kitchen, eyed the empty stove and counters.

"Dor's at Phoebe's with Katy. Not sure I feel like cooking," I said to him. "Not sure what I feel like doing." I could see the gears turning in his brain. We had at least an hour or two of uninterrupted time for ourselves.

"Pick up where we left off?" I knew what he meant. It was a goal we'd agreed on at the end of our first year together, when newness was no longer quite enough to set us both afire spontaneously. Every room in the house, every surface, every humanly possible position. Flann always took the lead, which worked for both of us.

Now he pulled me to the large ancient ottoman in the corner of the living room, then stopped to pull it away from the wall. Gently, firmly, he pushed me down so that my head was hanging down, facing the carpet. He

pulled off my shoes and pants and underwear, grabbed both my dangling hands in one hand and held them behind my back while he straddled me. He found a way to hold his weight lightly while he entered me tentatively a few times. The nubbed cover of the ottoman chafed my thighs, and my unsupported head filled with pounding blood, and then he got serious and I stopped caring about anything else.

When he was done, we both tumbled to the floor where it only took a few seconds for him to get me there too. Sated, we lay side by side, still half-undressed, breathing deeply.

“Can we just stay like this forever? Feeling this good?” I asked.

“Why not?”

And I didn't even mind the “why not” question, one that usually fills my mind with a wide range of unbidden answers.