

The air hung over this corner of the South Carolina Piedmont like an electric blanket, so still and stifling; not a single leaf or flower petal so much as fluttered. It was hot as August and I realized another unforgiving summer would soon arrive. “Y’all both watch your language and manners,” I said as we steered the car—my Dad’s old Honda Accord—down the cul-de-sac to fetch Mama. It seemed to me people who lived on cul-de-sacs led far happier and more normal lives (at least on the surface) than those of us who lived elsewhere—on streets that bled, merged or changed into other streets.

We drove the 12 miles chatting about mindless things like the best Popsicles on the market and the new Groovy Girl bed. By the time we pulled into the gravel parking lot of the Spartanburg Celebrity Zoo, I had a pounding headache. I looked in the mirror and cringed. The heat had enlarged my pores and caked my makeup. My eyes had that tired look even though I’d slept nine hours. The more I slept, actually, the worse I looked.

“We’re here,” Mama chirped. Her voice had never been higher or more operatic. She was beaming with either a caffeine overdose or her ultra-strength prescription of change-of-life hormones. “Did y’all know they have animal movie stars here? They get all the old has-beens that used to be featured in TV commercials or movies. All the elephants and primates—a primate is a monkey, Jay.”

“Duh. And we descended from them.”

“We certainly did not. We were made in the image of God.”

“Well I guess God’s a monkey.”

“Prudy, you’ve got to do something with this child before he,” and she mouthed the last part, “turns into his daddy.”

She took out her church fan. “Lord, have mercy. Anyway, sweeties, they’ve got ’em some rhinos and tigers and all sorts of animals that went from New York to Hollywood and ended up in good old Spartanburg. Aren’t we lucky to have the poor things?”

“Papa Millings drinks beer cans and we learned at school it will make you kill people with your cars,” Miranda said.

My mother momentarily stopped chewing her gum in order to process this shocking statement. She shook her Diet Dr. Pepper and took the last sip before popping the spent gum into the opening.

“Your granddaddy’s one of the finest men on this planet, honey.”

“Beer cans make your brain sick. Is that what happened to Daddy?”

“You stupid freak,” Jay hissed. “It’s not beer cans, you just say beer. The cans have nothing to do with it.”

“Listen, this is enough. Let’s just go see the monkeys and all get along, okay?” Mama said. She made her typical noise of disgust and judgment, a short and deep grunt, then opened the car doors as we stepped into what felt like the inside of a dragon’s hot mouth.

“I really need to be out hunting a job,” I told Mama as she paid the \$12-each ticket price so we could all enjoy a stroll in the heat and smell of hot beasts and their excrement.

“These children need sunlight, Dee, or whoever you are today. You can go hunt you a job later. It’ll be too hot to visit this place in June, plus I heard these monkeys do all sorts of fun tricks and I aim to show my grandchildren a good time. As you can see, I’m the one paying the admission so you can at least act grateful. That’s all you have to do, if you can manage it.”

We wound around the perimeter of the zoo, visiting sleeping and depressed llamas, camels and more varieties of goats and sheep than I could count. The chimpanzee cages lined the south end of the zoo and signs with black stars and painted movie cameras led the way. Below each cage a podium and plaque told the story of this or that animal and what its claim to fame had been. Most were in short-lived TV shows and commercials for pantyhose and rental cars.

We stood for at least ten minutes watching chimps and orangutans, baboons and other monkey types, screech and howl, pound the bars, cut flips for peanuts. Jay laughed for the first time in a week, and I wasn’t about to pull him from this small peephole of light shining on his troubled little soul.

“Look at their butts,” he said, and Mama hissed for him to hush and not say words like that.

“Fanny,” Miranda corrected. “You’re ’posed to say ‘fanny.’”

“Ass,” he said loud as he could, and Mama shook her head and lifted her hands to the heavens as if to say, Lord, I give up.

“I’m calling the therapist,” I whispered. “Don’t worry.”

The monkey show was all a great hoot until one chimp decided to treat himself to exhibitionism and pumped his hand furiously at the little thing between his hairy legs. I sat frozen in fascination, having never seen any creature do such, and here was this monkey, mouth open, grinning as if saying to all us humans, *“See this, dumb people. Stick around. Don’t leave till I finish my show. Y’all don’t know what you’re missing not doing this in public. It’s twice the fun.”*

I led my children away, though Jay jerked from my grip and rushed straight back for the cages. I tried to interest Miranda in giving the baby goat a bottle and saw that Mama had also stayed behind with Jay, her eyes transfixed while the monkey finished what he’d started.

“What’s he doing?” Jay asked, but before Mama Millings could answer, the monkey reared back his arm and flung his results at her, coating her coiffed hair with primate sperm and setting off in her a wave of screams that had the whole zoo at her side.

She had swooned and collapsed on a wooden bench and everyone was fanning her, paper-toweling her hair and bringing her water as she kept rolling up her eyes to the sky and saying, “Oh, lawsy. Oh, have mercy on my soul. What, pray tell, did I do to deserve this? What kind of perverted place is this?”

Jay had his hand over his mouth and his bony shoulders shook. I knew he was laughing and I tried hard not to join him, but the pain of the past two years seemed to drop like dead skin from my body and I fell to the sidewalk in waves of unstoppable mirth. Tears streamed down my face, I laughed so hard.

“Prudy!” Mama screamed, calling me the old birth name. “Have some decency and take your children away from here. Where’s your sense of motherhood?” She turned to the zoo staff. “You people are going to read about this in a Letter to the Editor. If you can’t get your monkeys to control their urges, you oughtn’t have such filth for my grandbabies to see. Why, I never even knew monkeys had . . . had . . . well that sort of thing between their legs or that they could do such a thing.”

“Oh, yeah,” a man in a jungle-print official zoo shirt said. “They are smart as we are.”

“You think that’s smart? Is that what you teach your—”

“Ma’am we’re so sorry about all—”

“Prudy, take the children away now. Go get an ice cream! Will you please get me some fresh paper towels so I don’t have to go home with sin caked in my hair? You will be hearing more from me about this, I can assure you.”

By the time Mama got in the car, she wasn’t talking, but her face was puffed up and pink. She folded her arms over her chest and kept emitting that grunt. A grocery bag covered her entire head, held together like a turban with a Scrunchie.

I drove along in silence, letting the children carry on about the zoo, all the while trying to placate my mother with occasional pats on her knee and offerings of Juicy Fruit gum. She had chewed and spit out three pieces by the time we turned into her subdivision, the glare of late-day sun blinding.

“Mama, watch out,” Miranda screamed. It was too late. I felt the small body of a something hit my tire. I slammed on the brakes. “Mama! You kilt it.”

I pulled over and saw a squirrel lying in the road, pawing the air, its tail swirling like a helicopter. “It’s not dead,” sweetie. “Hold on, okay? Mama, watch the kids, hear?”

I got out of the car and scooted the squirrel to the other side of the road with my foot. It was still moving, but didn’t seem to be breathing. One leg was at an odd angle and blood ran from its foot. I crouched over its little body and made a tiny O with my thumb and index finger. I placed the O over the squirrel’s little mouth and blew two small puffs of air into its lungs, alternating this with two-fingered chest compressions. No sooner had I begun my rodent CPR did Mama fly from the car and start yelling.

“Get away from that thing right now! Are you crazy? They carry rabies. Prudy, I’m not going to sit here and let your children see this spectacle. What in God’s name is wrong with you?”

I removed my mouth from the O and stared at Mama. “Get back in the car, please. I know what I’m doing.”

“You could get rabies. I didn’t raise you to French kiss road kill. This is the most embarrassing and—”

Both kids had by then freed themselves from the car and crossed the street to watch. “That is so cool,” Jay said.

“Gross, Mama,” Miranda said. I continued my CPR and chest compressions until finally, the little animal began to breathe on its own.

“Look, y’all, he’s breathing,” I said, spitting onto the road and wiping my mouth with a Kleenex. “Run to the car, Mama, and get that empty box out of the trunk. I’ll put him in there.”

“I won’t do any such a thing. I’m taking you home and you’re going to wash your mouth out with Listerine and scrub those lips with Ajax and Lysol. Now let go of that filthy old thing and get in this here car. I’ve had an awful day and we could both use scalding showers.”