 Resource 3 - Comic Short Stories by Simon Rich

Simon Rich (born June 5, 1984) is an American humorist, novelist, and screenwriter. He has published two novels and three collections of humor pieces, several of which appeared in the New Yorker, and his novels and short stories have been translated into over a dozen languages. Rich was one of the youngest writers ever hired on Saturday Night Live and served as a staff writer for Pixar. On January 14, 2015, Man Seeking Woman, a television comedy series from Rich, based on his The Last Girlfriend on Earth, premiered on FXX.



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Stories from:

[“Unprotected” by Simon Rich](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30/unprotected): http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30/unprotected

[All Works by Simon Rich](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/simon-rich): http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/simon-rich

For selected stories, answer the following:

* What is the “what if”?
* What is the most satisfying aspect of the story?
* How does it end? Is this satisfying – why?
* What aspect of our culture is being challenged?
* What techniques are used?
* Let’s brainstorm “what if’s”

Unprotected

I born in factory. They put me in wrapper. They seal me in box. Three of us in box.

In early days, they move us around. From factory to warehouse. From warehouse to truck. From truck to store.

One day in store, boy human sees us on shelf. He grabs us, hides us under shirt. He rushes outside.

He goes to house, runs into bedroom, locks door. He tears open box and takes me out. He puts me in wallet.

I stay in wallet long, long time.

This is story of my life inside wallet.

The first friend I meet in wallet is Student I.D. Jordi Hirschfeld. He is card. He has been around longest, he says. He introduces me to other cards. I meet Learner Permit Jordi Hirschfeld, Blockbuster Video Jordi Hirschfeld, Jamba Juice Value Card, GameStop PowerUp Card Jordi Hirschfeld, Business Card Albert Hirschfeld, D.D.S., Scarsdale Comic Book Explosion Discount Card.

In middle of wallet, there live dollars. I am less close to them, because they are always coming and going. But they are mostly nice. I meet many Ones and Fives, some Tens, a few Twenties. One time, I meet Hundred. He stay for long time. Came from birthday card, he said. Birthday card from an old person.

I also meet photograph of girl human. Very beautiful. Eyes like Blockbuster Video. Blue, blue, blue.

When I first get to wallet, I am “new guy.” But time passes. I stay for so long, I become veteran. When I first arrive, Jamba Juice has just two stamps. Next thing I know, he has five stamps—then six, then seven. When he gets ten stamps, he is gone. One day, Learner Permit disappears. In his place, there is new guy, Driver License. I become worried. Things are changing very fast.

Soon after, I am taken out of wallet. It is night. I am scared. I do not know what is happening. Then I see girl human. She is one from photograph. She looks same in real life, except now she wears no shirt. She is smiling, but when she sees me she becomes angry. There is arguing. I go back inside wallet.

A few days later, picture of girl human is gone.

That summer, I meet two new friends. The first is Student I.D. New York University Jordi Hirschfeld. The second is MetroCard.

MetroCard is from New York City and he never lets you forget it. He has real “attitude.” He is yellow and black, with Cirque du Soleil advertisement on back.

When MetroCard meets GameStop PowerUp Card Jordi Hirschfeld, he looks at me and says, No wonder Jordi Hirschfeld not yet use you. I become confused. Use me for what?

That night, MetroCard tells me many strange things about myself. At first, I do not believe what he says. But he insists all is true. When I start to panic, he laughs. He says, What did you think you were for? I am too embarrassed to admit truth, which is that I thought I was balloon.

It is around this time that we move. For more than two years, we had lived inside Velcro Batman. It is nice, comfy. One day, though, without warning, we are inside stiff brown leather. I am very upset—especially when I see that so many friends are gone.

No more GameStop PowerUp Card Jordi Hirschfeld. No more Blockbuster Video Jordi Hirschfeld. No more Scarsdale Comic Book Explosion Discount Card.

Only survivors are MetroCard, Driver License, Student I.D., myself, and a creepy new lady named Visa.

I am angry. What was wrong with Velcro Batman? It had many pockets and was warm. I miss my friends and I am lonely.

A few days later, I meet Film Forum Membership Jordan Hirschfeld.

At this point, I am in “panic mode.” What is “Film Forum”? Who is “Jordan Hirschfeld”?

Jordan Hirschfeld is same guy as Jordi Hirschfeld, MetroCard explains. He is just trying to “change his image.” I am confused. What is wrong with old image? That night, I poke my head out of wallet and look around pocket. It is dark, but I can see we have new neighbor. He says his name is Cigarettes Gauloises. He is very polite, but I get “weird vibe” from him.

It is about this time that I meet strip of notebook paper. On him is written, “rachelfeingold@nyu.edu.”

Now we’re getting somewhere, MetroCard says. I have never been more frightened in my life.

That Saturday, five crisp Twenties show up. I assume they will stay long time, like most Twenties. But two hours later they are gone, replaced by receipt La Cucina.

MetroCard looks at receipt La Cucina and laughs. She better put out after that, he says. I am confused and worried.

Later on, I am minding my own business, when Jordi (sorry—“Jordan”) shoves his finger into me. I am terrified. What was that? I ask. MetroCard grins. He is checking to make sure you’re there, he says. For later.

My friends try to calm me down. One of the dollars, a One, tells me about the time he met Vending Machine Pepsi. He was stuffed in and out, in and out, so many times he almost died. I know he is trying to make me feel better, but I am, like, please stop talking about that.

Eventually, the moment comes. It is like other time. I am taken out of wallet and tossed on bed. It is very dark. I can make out shape of girl.

She picks me up and squints at me for a while. Then she turns on lamp.

I am confused. So is Jordan Hirschfeld.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

His face is like Jamba Juice Value Card. Red, red, red.

“I think,” she says, “that this might actually be expired.”

There is long silence. And then, all of a sudden, the humans are laughing! And then the girl is hitting Jordan with pillow! And he is hitting her back with pillow! And they are laughing, laughing, laughing.

The girl reaches into her bag.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ve got one.”

Part of me kind of wants to watch what happens next. But I am quickly covered in pile of clothes.

When I wake up next day, Jordan is dangling me over trash can. I look down into pit. Inside are Cigarettes Gauloises and Film Forum Schedule. They are talking “philosophy.” I sigh. I do not really want to move in with them, but what can I do? I figure this is “end of the line” for me.

Suddenly, though, Jordan carries me away—to other side of room. I am placed inside shoebox under his bed.

At first, I am afraid, because it is dark, but as vision adjusts I see I am not alone. There is strip of notebook paper rachelfeingold@nyu.edu. There is receipt La Cucina, on which is now written, “First Date.”

I spend long, long time in shoebox.

When I arrive, I am new guy. But as time passes I become veteran. I welcome many new friends: Birthday card Rachel. Happy Valentine’s Day Rachel. And many, many Post-it notes Rachel. I love you, Jordi. Rachel. Good morning, Jordi! Rachel. Everything in here is Rachel.

I do not know how things are in wallet these days. But I am glad to be in shoebox. I feel as if I have “made it.” I am happy. I am warm. I am safe. ♦

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I Love Girl

I am Oog. I love Girl. Girl loves Boog.

It is bad situation.

Boog and I are very different people. For example, we have different jobs.

My job is Rock Thrower. I will explain what that is. There are many rocks all over the place and people are always tripping on them. So when I became a man, at age eleven, the Old Person said to me, “Get rid of all the rocks.” Since that day, ten years ago, I have worked very hard at this. Whenever it is light outside, I am gathering rocks and throwing them off the cliff.

Boog’s job is Artist. I will explain what that is. When he became a man, the Old Person said to him, “Cut down the trees so we have space to live.” But Boog did not want to do this, so now he smears paint inside caves. He calls his smears “pictures.” Everybody likes to look at them. But the person who likes to look at them most is Girl.

I love Girl. I will explain what that is. When I look at her, I feel sick like I am going to die. I have never had the Great Disease (obviously, because I am still alive). But my uncle described it to me. He said there is a tightness in your chest, you cannot breathe, and you have anger toward the Gods. I was going to ask him to explain more, but then he died. My point is: Girl makes me feel this way, like I am going to die. There are many women in the world. By last count, seven. But she is the only one I ever loved.

Girl lives on Black Mountain. It is called Black Mountain because (1) it is mountain and (2) it is covered in black rocks. Every day, Girl has to climb over the rocks to get to the river. It is too hard. She has small legs and she is often getting stuck. So one day I decided, “I will clear a path from Girl’s cave to the river.”

I have been working on Girl’s path for many years, picking up the black rocks and carrying them away. I never throw her rocks off the cliff like normal rocks. Instead, I put them in a pile next to my cave. I like to look at the pile, because it reminds me of how I am helping Girl. My mother, who I live with, says the pile “has to go.” (I worry that she will move the pile, but it is unlikely. After all, she is an elderly thirty-two-year-old woman.)

I have made good progress on Girl’s path, but there are still many rocks left. The job would go faster, but I am clearing the path in secret by the light of the moon. The reason is—and this is a hard thing to admit—I am afraid to talk to Girl. If she found out it was me clearing all the rocks, I’m sure she would say something to me like “Hello” or “Hi there.” And then I would be in trouble. Because the truth is I am not so good at making words.

Boog is very good at making words. For example, last week he showed off his new picture at the Main Cave. Everyone was expecting it to be a horse or a bear (all his pictures so far have been horses, bears, or a mix of horses and bears). But this picture was not of any animal. It was just a bunch of red streaks. People were angry.

“I wanted animals,” the Old Person said. “Where are the animals?”

It was bad situation. I thought that Boog would lose his job or maybe be killed by stones. But then Boog stood on a rock and spoke.

“My art is smart,” he said. “And anyone who does not get it is stupid.”

Everyone was quiet. We looked at the Old Person to see what he would say.

The Old Person squinted at the red streaks for a while. Then he rubbed his chin and said, “Oh, yes, now I get it. It is smart. People who do not get it are stupid.”

A few seconds later, everyone else got it.

“It is smart,” they said. “It is smart!”

The only person who did not get it was me. My beard began to sweat. I was scared that someone would ask me to make words about the picture. I headed slowly for the exit. I was almost out of the cave when Boog pointed his finger at me.

“Do you like it, Oog?”

Everyone stopped making words and looked at me.

“It is smart,” I said. I meant for my voice to sound big, but it came out small.

Boog smiled.

“Ah,” he said. “Then why don’t you explain it to us?”

I felt a burning on my skin. It was sort of like when you fall into a cooking fire and your body catches on fire. I looked at my feet and people started laughing.

I looked up at Girl to see if she was one of the ones laughing. She was not (thank Gods). But she could hear all the other people laughing and that was just as bad.

“I am tired from talking to people who are less smart,” Boog said. “I am going to mate with Girl now.”

He took Girl’s hand and started to mate with her. Some people stayed to watch, but most took this as their cue to leave.

On my way out, I heard Girl making sounds. They stayed in my head all night, like an echo in an empty cave.

The next day, I decided to become an Artist. I told my plan to Oog (there are several of us named Oog—I’m sorry if it is confusing) and he said, “You can’t be an Artist. It is hard.”

Oog agreed with him.

“You’re a Rock Thrower,” he said. “Stick with that.”

I was angry at Oog. Partly because he always takes Oog’s side. But mostly because I did not agree with his words.

Maybe Artist is hard job. It is not for me to say. But I would be surprised if it was as hard a job as Rock Thrower.

Throwing rocks is not so easy. For example, five years ago one of my shoulders detached from my arm when I was throwing a boulder off the cliff. And two years after that the other shoulder detached also. I can still throw rocks off the cliff. But now when I throw them I am screaming. Not just once in a while, but constantly. Every time I throw a rock, I am screaming, loud. I do not even realize I am screaming—it is just part of my life. Another thing is that sometimes I fall off the cliff, which is bad situation.

“I am going to make a picture,” I told the others. “A good one.”

“Who are you going to show it to?” Oog said. “Your mother?”

Everyone laughed: Oog, Oog, Moog, even Oog.

“No,” I said. “I will show it to Girl.”

No one made words after that.

I have never spoken to Girl, but one time she spoke to me. It was a long time ago, when we were still children.

It was the first day of school and we were learning to count. It was confusing. I am very good at some numbers. I understand “one” and “two” very well and I am O.K. with “three.” But when it gets to higher math, like “four” or “five,” I have trouble.

The Old Person had told us each to make a pile of five rocks. I did not know how many that was and it was getting to be my turn. It was bad situation.

The Old Person was about to call on me, when Girl whispered in my ear.

“You have too many rocks,” she said. “You need to take away four.”

I stared at her. I think she could tell from my eyes that I did not have a great grasp of “four.”

“It’s two twos,” she said.

I swallowed. To this day, I do not know what she meant by this.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I will help you.”

The Old Person was about to look at my pile when Girl stood up and pointed into the forest.

“Predator!” she yelled.

By the time we came back from the Hiding Cave, it was night. On the second day of school, we graduated and I got my sheepskin just like everybody else. I wanted to thank Girl, but I did not know which words to make. So I said nothing.

Girl has a small head, so it is very strange how she fits so many things inside of it. She knows all the numbers: “six,” “eight”—you name it. But she also knows other things nobody else knows.

One time, I followed her down to the river. She was hunting fish in the normal way, by jabbing a stick in the water. After a long time, she caught a small flat fish. I assumed she would do the normal thing (rip off the head and eat the body), but instead she did the strangest thing I have ever seen. She put the stick—with the small fish still on it—back into the river. A short time later, she pulled the stick out. A bigger fish was on the stick. I do not understand how Girl did this. But I have thought a lot about what I saw, and I have developed a theory: she is a witch who knows magic.

Even though she is probably a witch, I still love her. My mother says that when you love someone you love them despite their flaws. For example, my father was not so good at hunting after a monster ate his arms. But my mother continued to mate with him, because she loved him.

Girl must really love Boog, because he has many flaws. He never smiles or shares his meat with other people. He is rude to the Old Person and will not rub his feet. And he isn’t very “down to earth.” For example, one day he stood on the big rock and said, “Everyone should worship me, for I am a living God.” Maybe he is right. I do not know how all that works. But he doesn’t have to say it on the rock.

Boog’s worst flaw, though, is that he disrespects Girl. It is subtle, but if you watch him closely you can tell. For example, sometimes he orders her to mate with him in front of crowds. I know this is his right (he is man, she is woman). But it is the way he orders her to mate that I do not like. He makes his voice big and snaps his fingers. It is like he is talking to a dog. If I owned Girl, I would only command her to mate with me in front of crowds if it seemed like she was in the mood to do that.

Boog has a lot going for him. He is very wealthy (three skins). He is maybe a God (unclear). He styles his hair in the new cool way (wet). He invented Art. But I still cannot understand why Girl is with him. As my father used to say, “There must be other monsters in that cave that we don’t know about.”

I decided to make my picture of a horse, because I knew that was a thing. It took a long time, for many reasons: (1) I could only work nights, because of my rock-throwing job; (2) it was my first time making Art; and (another reason) my mother was watching over my shoulder the whole time and making words. “You are bad at this,” she said. “You should stop because you are bad.” I love my mother and will always rub her feet, but sometimes I think she does not know how to help.

Finally, after many days of work, I finished my picture. I was about to add my handprint when I heard a familiar laugh.

I turned around; Boog was there.

“What a smart picture,” he said, clapping his hands. “You are really smart.”

I smiled. It was very nice, I thought, for Boog to say nice things about my picture.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I was being sarcastic.”

A long time passed. I did not know this word, but was afraid to admit it.

“I am glad you like my picture,” I said.

Boog cursed the Gods under his breath. “The picture is bad,” he said. “O.K.? It stinks. I do not like it.”

I sighed. I was beginning to see what he meant.

My plan had been to show my picture to Girl. But I started to worry that she would not like it. The reviews, so far, were not great.

Oog said, “It is the worst picture made yet by a human.”

Moog said, “It is proof that you are a stupid person.”

The Old Person said, “I always knew you were dumb. It is known by everyone. But this picture makes me realize you are even dumber than it was believed.”

One of the main problems, people explained, was that I had not given the horse any legs. Also, I had given it hands, forgetting that a horse has no hands.

I was proud of the picture when I painted it, but people’s words had made me ashamed. I decided it was best to destroy it, before Girl found out about it.

I grabbed some empty bladders and brought up water from the river. I was about to splash the painting when I heard that laugh again.

“Don’t destroy it yet,” Boog said. “There is someone who wants to see it.”

He grabbed Girl by the arm and thrust her in front of my picture. It was bad situation.

“Tell Oog what you think of it,” Boog said.

Girl mumbled something, but it was too soft for me to hear.

“Tell him!” Boog ordered.

“I do not like it,” Girl said. “You are not smart. I love Boog and not you.”

I stood there in silence. Hot water came out of my eyeballs.

Boog grabbed one of my bladders, wet his hand, and slicked back his hair. Then he walked over to my pile of black rocks, picked one up, and hurled it against my picture.

“Let’s go,” he said to Girl.

She started to follow him. As she was leaving, she paused to take a rock from my pile. I was afraid she would throw it at my picture, like Boog had. But instead she held it up to her face and squinted at it.

“Let’s go!” Boog shouted.

She followed him into the woods, still holding the rock in her hand.

My mother woke me in the night.

“A monster is here to murder us,” she said.

I nodded. This is usual occurrence.

“What kind of monster? Wolf?”

She shook her head. “It is a clever monster. Listen.”

We were silent for a while; soon, I heard a strange sound. The monster was throwing rocks against the cave, one after the other.

I took my kill stick and headed outside. I saw a figure in the shadows and was about to charge it when the moon appeared suddenly between the clouds.

“Girl?”

She was standing on the edge of the forest, a black rock in her hand.

“Sorry if I scared you,” she said. “I came to say thank you.”

I was confused. “For what?”

“For clearing me a path.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I took a rock from your pile and compared it with the ones on my mountain. They’re the same kind.”

I walked cautiously toward her.

“Are you a witch?” I asked.

She laughed.

“I’m not a witch! I just used common sense. I mean, there are thousands of black rocks piled up next to your cave.”

I was still confused. She put her hand on my arm and the hairs on it stood up.

“Thank you for clearing all the rocks,” she said, looking into my eyes. “It is a good path. You are good at clearing the rocks.”

For the second time that night, hot water came out of my eyeballs.

“I’m sorry I said those mean things about your picture,” Girl said. “Boog made me.”

I was shocked; that had not occurred to me. Boog had been clever.

“Does that mean you like my Art?” I asked.

She looked at my horse and hesitated.

“It’s interesting,” she said. “But you know what I really like? Your rock pile.”

She walked over to it. “It’s sort of like a sculpture.”

“What is sculpture?”

“Like a picture in three dimensions.”

Much time passed in silence.

“Can I impregnate you?” I asked.

“What?”

“I know I am not smart like Boog. I do not understand Art and I am bad with the numbers. But I will work hard to clear the rocks for you. And when you have child I will clear the rocks for the child. I will clear all the rocks for you and the child until I am eaten by a monster or die of the Great Disease. I will make you many paths so you can go all the places you want.”

I paused to catch my breath. It was the most words I had ever made at one time.

“What about Boog?” she said.

I thought about it for a moment.

“I will murder him,” I said.

She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. It was like it had been in my dreams.

We made many words that night. Girl explained that she never really loved Boog. He just seemed like her only option. No one else had ever asked to mate with her. The other six men on earth, including me, had been too afraid.

I confessed that I did not understand Boog’s last picture and she laughed.

“No one did,” she said. “Not even Boog.”

The stars were out and Girl counted them out loud until I fell asleep.

The next day, I took a large rock and struck it against Boog’s head so that his skull cracked open and he died. Afterward, Girl and I went swimming.

We have decided to have many children: one, two—maybe even a higher number.

I love Girl. Girl loves me.

It is good situation. ♦

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Animals

They buried my wife in a shoebox in Central Park. I like to imagine that the service was respectful, that her body was treated with a modicum of dignity. But of course I’ll never know. I wasn’t invited to her funeral. Instead, the guests of honor were the students of homeroom 2K.

Her killers.

When the children returned from the burial, they drew “tributes” to my wife in magic marker—maudlin scribbles of halos, wings, and harps. It was hard not to vomit as Ms. Hudson taped them up above my cage. I’ve never seen such tasteless dreck in all my life.

Hailey, I noticed, was crying as she drew. The irony. It was her responsibility to refill our water bottle last week. Instead, she spent all her free time with Alyssa, practicing a clapping game called “Miss Mary Mack.”

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack!

All dressed in black, black, black!

It was that inane chant that provided the score to my wife’s final moments. She was dying of thirst, but never cried once. It was only later that I realized why: her body was too dehydrated to produce tears.

Pocahontas was her name.

My name is Princess Jasmine. I am a male, so this name is humiliating, but I’m aware that my situation could be worse. The other homeroom, 2R, has a guinea pig named Homer Simpson and an elderly turtle named New Kids on the Block.

Pocahontas left me with three sons, and it’s for their sake alone that I keep up my struggle. Every weekday morning, when the monsters run screaming through the door, I hide my babies under scraps of newspaper. Whenever food and water are scarce, I give them my whole portion. Their faces are an exact copy of my wife’s, and when I look at them, it helps me remember just how beautiful she was. Their names are Big Mac, Whopper, and Mr. T.

Mr. T was born with developmental problems. He was so small during infancy that we had to shelter him each night, wrapping our bodies around his shivering frame so that he could fall asleep. I’ve been through so much. If I lose Mr. T, I’m not sure I’ll have the strength to carry on.

It’s morning now. The square of sunlight on the blackboard grows and grows. Soon the gremlins will run in howling, hopped up on Pop-Tarts and primed for violence. For months, I assumed that this school was reserved for children with “special needs.” Sociopaths and the mentally deranged. But during parent-teacher night, the mink coats and charcoal suits told a different tale. It turns out this school is a private one, an “élite” institution for the children of millionaires.

I can hear the nannies muscling their way through the lobby, dragging their little terrors toward my family. My sons are still asleep. I lick their faces and conceal them the best I can.

The bell clangs harshly. The nightmare has begun.

Monday, 8:25 a.m.

“What time is it?”

“Jobs time!”

My fur bristles as Ms. Hudson takes out the Jobs Board. This laminated poster, with its seventeen colorful squares, rules my family’s existence. It determines everything: whether we feast or starve, live or die. I rub my paws impatiently while Ms. Hudson assigns the week’s tasks.

“Pencil organizer this week is… Dylan! Line leader is… Max! And our two table wipers are… Kristen and Sophie!”

Eventually, she gets to the one job that matters.

“Hamster feeder is…”

I scan the room. There are still some good candidates left. Maybe we’ll get lucky and end up with Caitlin? Last time she gave us double portions. If we get her this week, Mr. T can gain some weight in time for winter. It’s while I’m enjoying this fantasy that Ms. Hudson clears her throat and—with one little word—sentences my family to death.

“…Simon.”

My eyes widen with horror. Simon Rich is 2K’s “class clown,” a pudgy, hyperactive boy with some kind of undiagnosed emotional problem.

“Hamster feeder?” he shouts. “Whatchu talkin’ ’bout Willis!”

The other children laugh hysterically.

My God, I think. This is it. This is how it ends.

11:25 a.m.

“Free time’s almost over,” Ms. Hudson says. “Don’t forget to do your jobs!”

I sigh with relief as Simon finally walks over to our cage. He doesn’t feed us, though, or replenish our water. Instead, he picks me up by my tail, which is connected directly to my spine. The pain is so searing, it shocks me into a kind of perverse laughter. I did not know my body could hurt this way—that God would allow one of his own creatures to suffer on this level. He swings me through the air, while singing nonsensically in his high-pitched nasal voice.

“Gotta go to Mo’s, gotta go to Mo’s yeah…”

I glance at my babies, hidden safely under newspaper. Even at the height of my agony, I am grateful that Simon has focused his sadism on me. Otherwise, it might be one of them who suffered.

Free time ends and Simon drops me back into my cage, from several times my own height. My sons poke their heads through the newspaper. They look around confusedly, then stare at me in dismay. They’re used to receiving food at this hour, but I have none to give. Simon has forgotten to do his one basic task. There is still some water left in our bottle from last week, but all it can do is prolong our agony. Without grain, we won’t live long.

Our long, slow death march has started.

2:30 p.m.

During science class, Ms. Hudson unveils a large, glossy map of the solar system.

“There are nine planets in the solar system,” she says. “Which one do we live on?”

“Mars!” Simon shouts. The other children howl uproariously. This is what passes for wit among them, the basic substitution of one word for another.

“Very funny,” Ms. Hudson says, smiling indulgently. “But of course, we really live on Earth, the third planet from the sun. Mars is the fourth planet. And after that one comes Jupiter, Saturn…”

I sigh with misery. It’s obvious what’s about to happen.

“Uranus…”

There is a split-second pause and then the class erupts into full-fledged chaos. I try to shield my sons from the noise, but it’s too late. The monsters have heard a “dirty”-sounding word and cannot contain their excitement.

“Uranus!” Simon screams. “Uranus!”

I glare at the teacher, silently willing her to beat him. But all she does is walk across the classroom and turn off the fluorescent lights. Her ploy does nothing. The children’s shrieking laughter is so deafening I can feel my eardrums throbbing in my skull. Some of the students are standing on their desks, swinging their arms around in a kind of mania.

The chaos gradually subsides, but only because the children grow exhausted. The utterance of the word “anus” has produced in them pure ecstasy. Several are crying real tears.

Ms. Hudson turns the lights back on and I glance at the clock. The Uranus hysteria has lasted thirteen minutes. Before the lesson can resume, the bell rings. The students run laughing through the door, another day of inanity behind them.

I watch as my children drink our last remaining drops of water. We’ll be lucky to make it through the night.

Tuesday, 8:15 a.m.

I awake to the sound of screeching laughter. Sophie and Alyssa have made a dress out of pink construction paper and taped it to my sleeping body.

“You’re a pretty girl, Princess Jasmine!” Alyssa says. “A pretty, pretty girl!”

I try to remove the costume, but the tape is double-sided and my paws are too weak to detach it. I must wear this “dress” indefinitely, in the presence of my own sons. I avoid their eyes, and they avoid mine. Whatever dignity I had is long gone.

During attendance, everyone says “here” except for Simon, who says “not here.” Somehow this gets a laugh. For the first time in my life, I think seriously about the option of suicide.

Ms. Hudson starts the day with a geography lesson. She spends ten minutes explaining the concepts of north, south, east, and west. Then she asks the class which country is “north” of the United States. The children stare up at her, completely baffled. Eventually, Jeffrey raises his hand. “Mexico?” he whispers. The teacher smiles at him encouragingly. “Almost!” she says. I watch in stunned silence as she hands the little moron a sticker, as a reward for “trying his best.”

“What do we say?” Ms. Hudson asks her other students. “When someone tries their very best?”

The children smile and break into a chant.

“That’s all right, that’s O.K., we still love you anyway!”

I vomit bile onto my own legs. I’ve heard a lot of treacle in this classroom, but this new cheer is so cloying it nearly pushes me over the edge.

The children continue to chant, their voices growing louder and more confident. It’s no wonder they’re such monsters, I think. They’ve been taught that they’re infallible, as perfect and blameless as gods.

You forgot to feed the hamsters? That’s all right, that’s O.K.

You sprayed a thirsty hamster with water from his own bottle, as he was trying to drink from it, the ultimate degradation? We still love you anyway.

I can feel myself on the verge of becoming insane.

2:30 p.m.

During snack time, Simon and three other obese boys have a milk-drinking contest. It’s not easy to watch as they gorge themselves just inches from my starving family’s faces.

Mr. T has begun eating newspaper to dull the pain in his stomach. My other sons sleep all day to conserve energy. For the first two days of our ordeal, I fantasized constantly about food. I hallucinated mounds of grain, piles of nuts, and luscious chunks of apple. Lately, though, I’ve stopped feeling hungry at all. It’s as if my body has given up and braced itself for death.

Teddy wins the contest by drinking seven milks. He immediately throws up.

Ms. Hudson sends him to the nurse and calls for Carlos, the janitor. He arrives within seconds, holding a tattered mop.

“Hola!” the children shout in unison.

Carlos is a native English speaker, but the little racists assume that he is foreign-born.

“Hola,” Carlos says.

“I need you to take care of something,” Ms. Hudson tells him, gesturing at the pile of brown puke.

Carlos nods and gets to work. He’s still scrubbing twenty minutes later, when the final school bell rings.

“Adiós!” the children shout as they run by him. “Adiós!”

“Adiós,” he says, his eyes on his work.

Ms. Hudson peeks over his shoulder, her skinny arms folded at her chest.

“Are you going to disinfect the area?” she asks. Carlos forces a smile. He has already begun to disinfect the area, but does not want to contradict her.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

“I don’t want that smell hanging around.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

When the children are all gone, she puts on some lipstick and changes into a pair of high heels.

“My dad’s making me see opera,” she complains.

Carlos nods awkwardly, unsure of how to respond.

“Don’t forget to disinfect the area,” she repeats, on her way out.

Carlos finishes mopping and then walks from table to table, cleaning up after the fat beasts. The Jobs Board is a total farce, I think, as he sponges up their filth. Kristen and Sophie are table wipers in name only. At the end of the day, every job on the board belongs to Carlos. The only exception is line leader, which of course is a privilege that he will never get to enjoy.

When Carlos sees us, he curses under his breath. I avert my eyes with shame. Our cage is full of feces. I know we’re not responsible for the condition of our prison, but it’s hard not to feel mortified.

I look on with pity as the janitor collects our soiled newspaper. He has several tattoos on his forearm, I notice, a few cursive names and a large, ornate crucifix. I, too, am a Christian. Although lately I’ve struggled to make sense of God’s plan. I wonder if Carlos’s faith is as battered as mine.

He refills our water bottle, and, for the first time in days, I allow myself to feel hope. Before he can find our feedbag, though, Principal Davenport has run into the room.

“Carlos, there you are! A kindergartener shat himself in dance. Would you please take care of it?”

Carlos forces another smile and reaches for his mop.

“Of course, sir.”

The principal gives him a thumbs-up. “Gracias!”

Wednesday

The water tastes so rich it brings tears to my eyes. As I drink it, I can feel it coursing through my body, giving my parched veins life. I look over at my sons, asleep in their clean cage, their wet little noses twitching with contentment. Carlos has saved our lives. But for how long?

Mercifully, the children are gone this morning. They’ve been given a break from their arduous studies to enjoy a “field day” at Randall’s Island.

The classroom is blissfully quiet until lunchtime, when the hobgoblins return. Their flabby, red faces are streaked with grime and sweat. The smell is almost unendurable. Every child, regardless of fatness, has somehow won an athletic trophy.

“Boom shaka laka!” Simon shouts, as he thrusts his golden prize over his head.

When he walks by my cage, I peak at the engraving on his trophy. “Participation,” it reads. I wonder if Simon is aware that his trophy has no meaning, that all he participated in was a mass delusion?

“Great job, everybody,” Ms. Hudson says. “That was some great teamwork today.”

“Whatchu talkin’ ’bout Willis!” Simon says.

Everybody laughs, including Ms. Hudson.

The children spend the afternoon playing with their trophies. Simon comes up with the ingenious gag of holding his trophy in front of his groin, in an imitation of a penis. The other boys applaud him and rush to follow his example. The girls, meanwhile, busy themselves by making “clothes” for their trophies out of construction paper. Ms. Hudson encourages this madness, passing out glue and jars of glitter.

Finally, at 3:15, the nannies come to take the creatures away.

“Don’t forget to do your jobs!” Ms. Hudson cries. Simon doesn’t even look in our direction. This makes three straight days without food. It’s official: we are going to starve to death.

I glance at my three sons. Their bodies still have breath, somehow, but I can see that something else has died inside them. Mr. T hasn’t moved in hours. And this morning I caught Whopper leering at him with a look I wish I could block out of my mind. Taboos are breaking down. If food doesn’t come soon, I know, we’ll have to make our own.

Thursday, 8:10 a.m.

As the sun rises on another hellish day, I gather my sons around me. I’ve rehearsed my speech all night, but it’s still hard to utter it. Eventually, with painful effort, I manage to force the terrible words through my lips.

“If Simon forgets to feed us one more time… I want the three of you to eat my body.”

Mr. T breaks down and weeps. But Big Mac and Whopper merely nod.

They know it’s the only solution we have left.

I can hear Simon’s voice before he even enters the classroom, as piercing and abrasive as a siren.

“Whatchu talkin’ ’bout Willis!”

His use of this catchphrase has spiked in recent days. Its effect on the other students has waned and often the quip fails to elicit any laughter at all. In response, Simon has taken to screaming the phrase at full voice, in the mad hope that volume might somehow restore the gag’s appeal.

“Whatchu talkin’ ’bout! Whatchu talkin’ ’bout! Whatchu talkin’ ’bout!”

He presses his face against the bars of our cage and chants the phrase, again and again, until the words bleed together and begin to lose their meaning. His noxious Dorito breath engulfs me and I can feel the fury mounting in my chest. I think of the sound of my son weeping and the look my wife gave me as she drew her final breath.

“Whatchutalkin’boutWilliswhatchutalkin’boutWillis—”

I have only a little strength left. But it’s enough to rise up and sink my teeth into the monster’s flesh.

Friday

“Words can’t express how sorry I am! Safety is our top priority—I’m as appalled as you are that something like this could occur at our school.”

“He had to get three stitches! The plastic surgeons say that the scar could be visible for months!”

I roll my eyes as Simon’s mother starts to cry.

“He’s just a little boy,” she says. “And you let him be exposed to wild animals!”

I glance at my sons. They’re still alive, but their breathing is shallow and erratic. Our cage has been moved to the principal’s office, but they don’t seem aware of the change in our surroundings. They’re barely conscious. I can see their hearts fluttering in their rib cages, trying to eke out a few extra hours of survival.

“I’m considering pressing charges,” Simon’s mother prattles on. “My lawyer says I have a real case. Simon had to take a rabies test, and when the nurse pricked his thumb, he cried and cried. The doctor said he’d never seen a boy cry like that.”

I smile proudly, thinking of this scene.

“He’s going to need therapy,” the woman continues. “Lots of it.”

“Is there anything I can do?” asks the tired principal. “To help regain your family’s trust?”

Simon’s mother turns toward our cage, her eyes narrowing with rage.

“I want those animals out of the classroom.”

Principal Davenport nods.

“We’ll move them to homeroom 2R.”

“That’s not enough,” she says, her voice lowering. “I want them destroyed.”

Principal Davenport clears his throat.

“Of course,” he says.

He picks up a phone and calls for a janitor. Carlos arrives within seconds, mop in hand.

“Hola!” the principal says. “Listen. I… uh… need you to take care of something.”

I can smell the Dumpster before I see it, an overflowing bin of putrid trash. My nose twitches painfully as I process all the stenches: decomposing Dunkaroos and mold-encrusted Pop-Tarts; rancid, soggy Lunchables and spoiled Nesquik. The monsters have accumulated so much waste this week, and now we’re to be added to the pile.

“Sorry, little guys,” Carlos whispers.

He scans the alley to make sure no children are watching. Then he pulls a hammer from his tool belt. I lick my children’s faces one last time. I know my act of rebellion has hastened their deaths. But my guilt is assuaged by the knowledge that their suffering will soon be at an end.

Carlos holds the hammer over Mr. T’s tiny skull. My son looks up, his eyes half-lidded. I pray that he doesn’t grasp the situation, that his final moments aren’t consumed by fear.

“Sorry, little guys,” Carlos says, again. “Sorry.”

He raises the hammer high and his sleeve slides down his forearm, exposing his tattoo. He stares at the three cursive names. Then he puts away his weapon, grabs our cage, and runs.

Saturday

I awake to the sight of three girl humans, gobbling pancakes and chatting rapidly.

“What do we name the babies?”

“Snap, Crackle, and Pop!”

“The mommy should be Mrs. Fluffy, or Mrs. Furry, or…”

“It’s not a mommy,” Carlos interrupts. “It’s a daddy.”

He pours some Cheerios into our cage.

“And we’re going to call him Hercules.”

The girls all laugh.

“Hercules!”

“Why?”

Carlos crouches down and looks into my eyes.

“Because he’s tough. And strong. And he works long hours, even though it’s a living nightmare.”

His daughters look at each other nervously.

“O.K.,” whispers the oldest. “We’ll call him Hercules.”

Carlos clears his throat and wipes his eyes roughly with his sleeve.

“O.K., good,” he says. “Thanks. Now finish your breakfasts, I mean it.”

Simon Rich is a screenwriter and novelist. His newest book is a collection of love stories called “The Last Girlfriend on Earth.”

Sell Out Part 1

I am not smart with words, but I work hard every day of my life.

When I come on boat I have only shirt and pants. The food is not kosher and I soon begin to starve. In middle of ocean, I trade pants for tin of herring. Is very cold without the pants. But I survive.

They send me to Brooklyn and I find job in pickle factory. Every day, I crawl through gears and pull out rats. Is not so easy. The rats have sharp teeth and do not like to be touched. But I work hard. When I start in 1908 they pay me eighty cents each day. By 1912 they are giving me ninety cents, plus bowl of potato soup.

I find beautiful girl named Sarah. Her left leg is lame since youth, but she has all her teeth. She is very clever and teaches me to spell words. I save up pennies all week long so on Sunday I can buy her treat, like seltzer or salt fish.

When we marry, and she is with child, we stay up late each night whispering. We make great plans. We will have son, and he will have son, and so on and so on and so on. And some day years from now, when we are dead and gone, our family name will stand for strength and honor. Someday our hopes and dreams will come to pass.

One day at work I fall into brine and they close the lid above me by mistake. Much time passes; it feels like long sleep. When the lid is finally opened, everybody is dressed strange, in colorful, shiny clothes. I do not recognize them. They tell me they are “conceptual artists” and are “reclaiming the abandoned pickle factory for a performance space.” I realize something bad has happened in Brooklyn.

The science men come and explain. I have been preserved in brine a hundred years and have not aged one day. They describe to me the reason (how this chemical mixed with that chemical, and so on and so on) but I am not paying attention. All I can think of is my beautiful Sarah. Years have passed and she is surely gone.

Soon, though, I have another thought. When I freeze in brine, Sarah was with child. Maybe I still have family in Brooklyn? Maybe our dreams have come true?

The science man turns on computing box and types. I have one great-great-grandson still in Brooklyn, he says. By coincidence, he is twenty-seven years, just like me. His name is Simon Rich. I am so excited I can barely breathe. Maybe he is doctor, or even rabbi? I cannot wait to meet this man—to learn the ending of my family’s story.

“How about Thai fusion?” Simon asks me, as we walk along the street where I once lived. “This place has these amazing gluten-free ginger thingies.”

He gestures at crowded restaurant. It used to be metal factory.

“Are you a cilantro person?” he asks me.

“I do not know your words,” I admit.

“Oh,” he says. “Don’t worry, there’s a bagel place around the corner.”

I sigh with relief and follow Simon into store. He orders two bagels with creamed cheese and hands me one. I cannot believe how large it is—like something to feed an entire Irish family. I take three bites and put the rest in coat, to save for supper. When I look up at Simon I see that he has somehow almost finished his whole bagel. He is eating so fast, I cannot understand it. It is like he is in race and must shove all the bread in his mouth or else he will die. Between bites he gulps from his drink, which is bottle of green sugar water the size of bucket.

“Gatorade?” he asks me.

I am too repulsed even to respond.

Eventually, he has eaten all the food and swallowed all his sugars. I wait for him to catch his breath, but then I can wait no longer.

“Please,” I say. “I must know. What path have you chosen for your life?”

Simon smiles proudly at me.

“I’m a script doctor,” he says.

I shake my head with astonishment.

“That is so wonderful,” I say, my eyes filling up with tears. “I am so proud. I cannot believe my descendant is medical doctor.”

Simon averts his eyes.

“It’s actually just a screenwriting term,” he says. “ ‘Script doctor’ means I, like, punch up movie scripts.”

I stare at him blankly.

“ ‘Punch up’?”

“You know, like, add gags.”

“What sort of gags?”

He clears his throat.

“Let’s see.… Well, the script I’m working on now is about a guy who switches bodies with his pet dog? So I’m adding all these puns, like ‘I’m doggone mad!’ and ‘I’ve got a bone to pick with you!’ You know, things like that.”

A long time passes in silence.

“So you are not medical doctor.”

“No,” Simon admits. “I am not.”

Simon says he is happy I was brined. He has always wondered what it would be like to “hang out” with his great-great-grandfather.

“We’re going to have a blast,” he says. “Brooklyn has gotten so awesome, it’s crazy.”

I ask him if he knows what became of my Sarah. He shakes his head. He has worked very hard to research our family, journeying all the way to place called Ancestry Dotcom. But all he could find about Sarah was the address she shared with me in Williamsburg: 283 Bedford.

“That’s an American Apparel now,” he says. “But don’t worry. You can stay with me for as long as you want.”

He leads me down Atlantic Avenue. We pass many strange peoples wearing tight pants and circus mustaches.

“So,” I say, sadly. “If you are not real doctor, I assume you did not have real education.”

“Oh, sure I did,” he says. “I went to Harvard.”

I am amazed.

“My God,” I say. “Did they know that you were Jew?”

“It’s pretty different now,” he says.

“What did you study? Latin and Greek?”

“Nah, I was an English major.”

I squint at him.

“I do not understand. You did not speak English before?”

“No, I spoke it.”

“Then why did you study it? What was the purpose of that?”

Simon ignores me and gestures at large brown house.

“Here we are,” he says, grinning. “Not bad, huh?”

I look up at building. It is enormous.

“Are you servant here?” I ask.

“No,” he says, laughing. “I own the place!”

At this point I become suspicious.

“What other jobs do you have besides the dog gags?”

“None,” he says. “I’m a full-time screenwriter.”

Once again, I am confused. I have been with Simon all day. He clearly does not work “full time,” not even close. I explain this fact to him.

“Let’s just go inside,” he says.

Simon and I look very much the same. We are both tall (five feet seven) and have handsome bump in nose. There are differences, though. For example, his hands are very soft, like woman’s. Also, his arms are weak and small. They remind me of baby I saw once who had the infant paralysis.

When I first move in with Simon, I do not really understand what it means to be “script doctor.” But as the days go by I learn about the job. The way it works is this: each day, for twenty minutes, he sits down and types up words. The rest he spends complaining.

“I’m so pissed off,” he tells me one day. “They hired me to polish the new ‘Spy Donkey’ sequel. But just looking at it, it’s going to need a page-one rewrite. It’s, like, I didn’t sign up for this. You know what I mean, Hersch?”

I do not know what he means. But it is clear he is upset, because he is drinking so much alcohols in the middle of the day.

“That sounds bad,” I say, trying my best to be polite.

“It’s real bad,” he says. “There’s no way I’m doing a whole fucking draft for them. It’s, like, you gotta draw the line somewhere, you know?”

He refills his alcohol glass.

“You ever deal with this kind of bullshit at the pickle factory?”

I think about it.

“There was one time my friend got caught in the gears,” I say. “And it ripped up his torso, through the chest. And there was blood coming out of his mouth and he was screaming. And I plead with them to stop the machine, because my friend is dying, but no one listens to me, and my friend keeps howling until he is dead. And for years I see his face inside my dreams, with the blood coming out of his eyes and his mouth, begging for me to please save him.”

Simon says nothing for a while.

“Maybe I’ll just do the draft,” he mutters.

One night we have dinner with Claire, a goyish woman Simon mates with in defiance of our Lord.

“So,” she asks me, “where are you from originally?”

“Slupsk,” I tell her.

“It’s near the Poland-Lithuania border,” Simon explains, with big smile on his face. He is wrong, but I do not contradict him. He seems very proud of knowing this one fact about me.

“That’s so cool you’re from there,” Claire says to me. “I’ve always wanted to visit Eastern Europe.”

I fold my arms and squint at her.

“Why would you visit there?”

“I don’t know,” she says, shrugging. “I hear it’s got a really cool art scene.”

I lean in close to her.

“The only scene in Slupsk is people eating horse meat to live and killing each other for potatoes.”

I point my finger at her face.

“You must never go to Slupsk,” I warn her. “It is city of death.”

“Oh,” she says, softly. “O.K.”

She stands up.

“I’m going to cut up the tofu.”

“Thanks, honey,” Simon says.

“You must never go to Slupsk!” I call out after her.

When girl is gone, I grip Simon’s shoulder and stare him in the eyes.

“That girl is too thin,” I say. “She has not long to live.”

Simon chuckles.

“That’s just how girls look these days,” he says. “Look, I’ll show you.”

He opens thick, smelly book with shiny pages. It is magazine, he explains, called The Vogue.

“This model’s famous,” he says, pointing to mostly naked woman. “She’s married to Orlando Bloom.”

I squint at the picture. The girl is very pale, with vacant eyes.

“I have seen this disease in Slupsk,” I tell him. “First, they cough the blood. Then they begin to shake. They ask for the water, but when you bring them some to drink it makes them vomit up the black. They die screaming, their eyes wide open, afraid.”

Claire returns.

“Who wants tofu?” she asks.

“Please,” I tell her. “Eat my portion.”

\* \* \*

One day, I wake up to the sound of yelling. It is Simon. He is kicking his foot against his desk, shouting profanities.

“Motherfucker!” he cries. “Fucking God-damned fuck!”

I jump up from couch and run down hall. It is clear Simon has experienced a tragedy—something monstrous, like the death of someone close. I get to his office and gently open door. Simon is sitting at his desk, shaking his head and muttering under his breath. His skin is pale and he is out of breath from screaming.

“Goddam Internet’s down,” he says. “Second time this morning.”

“What is internets?” I ask.

“It’s a thing on computers.”

“What is computers?”

It takes him long time, but eventually Simon is able to explain. A computer is a magical box that provides endless pleasure for free. Simon is used to constant access to this box—a never-ending flow of pleasures. When the box stops working—or even just briefly slows down—he becomes so enraged that he curses our God, the one who gave us life and brought us forth from Egypt.

“It’s Time Warner,” he tells me. “They’re the fucking worst.”

He bangs his fist against his desk.

“How am I supposed to get work done without Internet?”

I glance at his computer machine. I am still learning about modern technologies. But I am pretty sure from looking at it that Simon has not been doing “work.” There are three boxes open on screen. In first, there is sports scores. In second, there is pornographies. In third, there is Simon’s own name, typed into thing called Google.

Simon notices me looking at his computer and quickly steps in front of it.

“I was taking a break,” he says, his voice loud and defensive. “You must have taken breaks sometimes at the pickle factory.”

“Is true,” I say. “Whenever there was fire, we would get to leave factory until they finish clearing out the dead.”

His phone begins to play loud song.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I gotta take this, it’s my agent.”

He picks up phone and paces around office, a pained look in his eyes.

“I already said no to that!” he says. “No—I don’t want to punch up any more sequels. Because it’s completely unfulfilling. It’s someone else’s characters, someone else’s plot—I’m supposed to be working on my novel, for God’s sake.”

He pauses mid-stride.

“They’re offering what? For just six weeks? Holy shit.”

He continues to pace, but slower, and with a strange expression on his face. It reminds me of time I saw hurdy-gurdy man get hit by brick. He was very embarrassed, and also in pain (because the brick had been thrown into his genitals). But his desire for moneys was so great he continued to play his song, and try to dance his jig.

“You know what?” Simon says, in as cheerful a voice as he can make. “That’s actually an excellent idea for a ‘Zoo Crew’ movie. I mean, they already had Captain Cow go to outer space in the fifth one. But he’s never been to the moon.”

His voice lowers.

“Do you think we can get them to go up even higher? No? O.K.—just checking.”

He puts away phone and we make eye contact.

“What are you looking at?” he asks.

“I am just standing here,” I say.

\* \* \*

That night Simon’s goy comes with giant bag of vegetables.

“I heard you’re into pickling,” she says. “So I went on Epicurious and planned a pickle-themed menu. We’re having broiled trout with pickle butter—and a pickle-vinaigrette salad on the side.”

In truth I despise eating pickles, because they remind me of the deaths of many friends. But I do not want to be rude.

“It is generous,” I say.

“It’s nothing,” she says. “I want us to become better friends, you know?”

She takes out an onion and begins to chop it, very slowly, in an incorrect way. When Sarah chopped vegetable, she used big, heavy knife. She would hold one end down and then swiftly lower blade like it was lever. Claire chops onion using tiny, skinny knife, making one little cut at a time. We will not eat for many hours.

“I’ve been meaning to cook more,” she says. “Simon likes to go out every night. Between you and me, I’m getting pretty sick of it.”

She is barely halfway through the onion when the knife slips and slashes her finger.

“Fuck!” she screams. “Ow, fuck!”

She starts to cry as her blood seeps onto counter. Suddenly, I hear the sound of another woman shriek. I spin around and am surprised to see that it is Simon, standing there, with his hands over his eyes.

“Oh, my God!” he shouts. “Your fucking finger!”

“What do I do?” Claire cries. “What do I do, what do I do?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Simon sobs. “Fuck fuck fuck!”

I sigh and grab girl’s hand. She resists me, so I must shush her like a child.

“Is fine,” I say. “Is baby cut.”

I pour liquid soap over her finger and run faucet. She screams and I have to shush her again.

“Is fine,” I say again. “I fix.”

I grab a rag, rip off strip, dry her cut, tie the wound, and pull.

“There,” I say. “Is better.”

Claire slowly catches breath.

“Thanks, Herschel,” she says.

Simon sighs loudly and steps out from the shadows. Somehow, at some point, he has poured himself giant glass of alcohols.

“Well!” he says. “Glad that’s behind us. How about we grab some tapas?”

He is starting to put on coat, when Claire waves arms.

“We can’t,” she says. “I planned out a whole meal for Herschel.”

Simon squints at her.

“But your finger’s all fucked up.”

“It’s just a baby cut,” she says, smiling wide at me. She has all her teeth, I notice, just like Sarah.

\* \* \*

Even though Claire is bad at cooking, and believes in false God, and dresses like prostitute, with both ankles exposed, she is not so stupid a person. I know this because she is always reading books. I have read books before—a red one and also two blue ones—so I know a little bit about it. But Claire’s books are much larger, with hard covers, and pages filled with numbers.

“She’s getting a Ph.D. in sociology,” Simon explains, when I ask him about it. “Over at Columbia.”

“What does she read so much about?”

“Something with immigration reform, I think? To be honest, I kind of tune out when she starts blabbing about it. It’s a pretty boring thing to study.”

This comment is strange, I think, coming from man who studied English in college—a language he already spoke. But I say nothing.

One afternoon, I am mending shirt in living room, when Claire enters wearing pack on back.

“Mind if I study in here?” she asks.

“Is fine,” I say.

It takes her long time to spread materials onto table. There is pencils, papers, books, ruler, electric number machine, erasing stick. The last thing she pulls out is the strangest: it is terrifying golem with wrinkled face and purple hair. She notices me staring and smiles.

“That’s my lucky troll doll. I’ve studied with it since middle school.”

I nod.

“Is it from witch?”

“I think it’s from Kmart.”

I pick up and examine, making sure not to look into its eyes.

“Simon’s always making fun of it,” Claire says.

“That is madness,” I say. “He is asking for curse.”

She laughs for some reason and opens up her book. Before she can start studying, though, Simon enters holding his computer.

“Read this,” he commands, plopping it onto her lap. “Tell me if it’s funny.”

“I’m kind of swamped,” she says. “Is it O.K. if I read it tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Simon murmurs. “No problem.”

He sighs heavily, like he is in pain, and reaches very slowly for his computer.

“O.K., O.K.,” Claire says, after a few seconds of this. “I’ll read it.”

I watch as Simon begins to pace the room, his baby arms shaking at his sides. Every few steps he glances at Claire, to watch her face.

Eventually, she looks up from the screen.

“It’s funny,” she says.

Simon glares at her. “You didn’t laugh.”

Claire hesitates.

“Well… maybe it’s not laugh-out-loud funny…”

Simon groans into his hands like a man who has lost his family. Claire hops out of chair and begins to stroke his back.

“Simon, it’s great!” she says. “The part where the dog gets auto-tuned? That’s going to kill.”

Simon peeks out between his fingers.

“You don’t think it’s cheap?”

“No!” Claire says. “It’s great! Really, really… great.”

I notice that she is using the word “great” a lot. It reminds me of when my boss gave me tour of pickle factory. He kept using the word “safe.” “These gears are very safe,” he would say. Or, “That belt is perfectly safe.” The more he said the word “safe,” the more I started to think that things were maybe not so safe.

“It’s great,” Claire says again. “The studio’s going to love it.”

“Really?” Simon asks, his voice high-pitched like a girl’s.

“Yes!” Claire says, smiling as wide as she can make her lips go.

Simon sighs with relief.

“O.K.,” he says. “Great.”

He grabs his computer, knocking down troll by mistake. When he is gone, I shoot Claire a look.

“He is asking for it,” I whisper.

She laughs as I set her troll upright.

\* \* \*

On Friday evening, I comb my hairs and knock on Simon’s door. I am surprised to see that he is mostly naked.

“What are you doing?” I say. “It is almost sundown. We have still not said our Shabbos prayers of thanks.”

Simon moans into his hands.

“Herschel, could you just do them without me? I’m in the middle of something.”

“God commands us to rest on Shabbos.”

“Herschel, I’ve gotta turn this in by 5 p.m. L.A. time.”

“But it is Shabbos.”

“Damn it, Herschel!” he says. “I know religion’s a big part of your life, and I respect that or whatever, but it’s not a part of mine. I don’t even believe in God.”

I am so shocked it is difficult to breathe. I did not say anything when I learned that he ate bacons, and did not own yarmulke, and spoke no Yiddish (except for several words that all mean “penis”). But to learn that he has lost faith in our God—despite all the blessings in his life—it is too much to bear. It is too much for me to understand.

“How do you get through your days?” I whisper. “How do you find meaning?”

He thinks for a while.

“Through my art,” he says, finally. “That’s how I find meaning. O.K.? Through works of art.”

I squint at the script he is working on.

“What is ‘Monkey President’?”

He averts his eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I grab the script and throw it at his chest.

“No, I want you to!” I say. “I want you to tell me about this art you do that is so meaningful it would make you miss the Shabbos!”

He flips through his script and sighs.

“It’s about a monkey who becomes President.”

I squint at him with confusion.

“How would this happen?”

“He wins an election.”

“So he is able to speak, this monkey?”

Simon throws up his hands in frustration.

“Do you really want to know? Or are you just trying to make me feel bad?”

“Yes,” I say. “I want to know how this monkey becomes the President.”

He sighs again.

“He wins a break-dancing competition on the Internet.”

“That makes no sense.”

“You think I don’t fucking know that?” he shouts, throwing the script down on the floor. “I told them in six meetings that it didn’t make any fucking sense, but they won’t listen, Herschel! They want the monkey to break-dance in every scene. In the Oval Office, on Air Force One…”

His voice begins to break.

“The monkey’s always break-dancing.”

I put my arm around his shoulder.

“Maybe you should quit this horrible work?”

“Herschel, it’s not that easy,” he says. “They’re paying me thousands of dollars. I can’t turn down that kind of cash, especially when I’m trying to save up for a house.”

I am confused.

“You already have house.”

“I know,” he says. “But a bigger, wider one just went up for sale down the block.”

He points out the window. There are many brownstones everywhere, but I have no idea which one he means. They all look exactly the same.

\* \* \*

The next day Claire runs into house, laughing and shouting.

“I’m finished!” she shouts.

“Finished with what?” Simon asks, his eyes still on his computer.

Claire sighs, crosses her arms, and marches upstairs.

“Her final exams,” I whisper to Simon.

“Oh, right,” he says. “Fuck.”

He runs upstairs.

“Honey, I was just kidding! Congratulations! Let’s celebrate!”

I hear some whispered arguing, followed by the sound of Simon pleading. Eventually, he persuades her to come back down the stairs. She has put on shiny shirt, I notice, and painted her eyelashes black.

“Better get dressed, Herschel,” Simon says. “We’re going to hit the town!”

“I am dressed already,” I say. “My shirt is mended. I am ready to go.”

Simon bites his lip.

“You know, Hersch, I was thinking, maybe you’d like to try another outfit for a change? I’ve got some old Ted Baker stuff I bet would fit you.”

“I am not one who takes charity,” I say. “My shirt is mended. Is fine.”

“O.K.,” he says, waving his hands in the air. “Just offering.”

He heads for the door, and Claire and I follow. We are almost out of house, when Claire suddenly spins around.

“Oh, no,” she says. “I forgot tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“So?” Simon says.

“The maid’s coming.”

Simon groans.

“Honey, the place looks fine.”

Claire kicks off her shoes and runs downstairs.

“Just give me a second!”

“Fuck,” Simon mutters, when she is out of earshot. “This is going to take forever.”

I hear the sound of mopping in the kitchen.

“I do not understand,” I whisper to Simon. “Why is Claire cleaning if you have hired maid?”

“Because she’s nuts,” he says. He opens wooden cabinet and pours out glass of alcohols.

I can hear more sounds from kitchen—the stacking of plates, the scraping of pots. Eventually, Claire comes upstairs, holding yellow sponge.

“You can save a little work for Hong,” Simon tells her.

“Her name is Hahn,” she says. “And I’m just doing the low surfaces, because of her back.”

I am very confused about what is happening, but I say nothing. The mood is tense and I do not want to get involved with things. Simon checks his watch as Claire finishes sponging the tables. By the time she is done, he has drunk his entire glass.

“Ready now?” he asks.

Claire sponges wet spot where Simon has spilled some liquor.

“Ready,” she mutters.

Simon pauses in front of automobile and stares at his reflection in the window. He is wearing purple scarf, even though the air is hot and there is sweat all over his face.

“Where are we going?” I ask him.

“Cabin,” he says, running fingers through his hair. “It’s the best bar on the Lower East Side.”

“Can’t we just go to Fontana, or something?” Claire asks. “There’s going to be a huge line.”

“Nobody goes to Fontana anymore,” Simon says, wrapping the scarf tighter around his neck. “Cabin’s way cooler.”

“How cool is this cabin that you need scarf?” I ask.

Claire laughs for long time. I do not understand it.

“Come on,” Simon says, grabbing Claire by the wrist.

I follow them down Avenue A. The Lower East Side, I notice, has not changed much in one hundred years. The women are still emaciated and dressed in rags; the men still wear beards and have sad eyes.

Eventually, after checking purple scarf in two more windows, Simon brings us to the bar that is called Cabin.

“There it is,” he whispers, a look of reverence on his face.

I squint with confusion at the small establishment. It looks the same as all the others we have passed. The only difference is that there is red rope in front of it, guarded by scary Negro giant.

“Hey, man,” Simon says to the giant. “Cool if the three of us go inside?”

“Sorry,” the giant says. “Private party.”

As soon as he says this, three tall men in shiny shirts appear. The giant steps aside, allowing them to enter. Simon curses under his breath.

“What is this place?” I ask Claire.

“Just some celebrity hangout,” she says.

“What is celebrity?”

“It’s, like, somebody people celebrate, because they’re doing something special with their lives.”

“Is Simon celebrity?”

She hesitates.

“Kind of? I mean… you know, in some circles… he’s sort of well known.”

I turn toward Simon. He is pleading with the giant, his hands clasped tight like a beggar’s. He does not look to me like celebrity, but what do I know about it?

Claire starts to shiver and I soon become worried. As I mentioned before, she is very thin and extremely close to death. It is not good for her to stand outside in the cold, dressed in nothing but her prostitute clothes. Her arms are naked almost to the elbow. I start to wish that I had worn my wool so I could give it to her.

“Simon!” I shout. “You must give the woman your scarf!”

Simon turns his back to us, his eyes averted. It is obvious he is pretending not to hear me, so that he can continue to wear scarf.

“I do not understand,” I say. “What is his thing with that scarf?”

Claire rolls her eyes.

“He got it in London,” she says. “He’s so obsessed with it he won’t even trust me to hang it up for him. He says it’s his ‘trademark.’ ”

Simon trudges back to us, with big forced smile on face.

“Just give me a few more minutes,” he says. “I’m making inroads.”

He is adjusting his scarf yet again when his eyes suddenly widen.

“Hey, it’s B.J.!”

He points at the bar’s entrance with both hands. A handsome man is leaving bar to smoke with beautiful woman.

“Who?” I ask.

“B. J. Novak,” Simon says. “He’s an actor—we go way back.”

He hustles down the alley and throws arms around this B.J.

“What’s up, buddy?”

The actor smiles nervously. It is obvious that he does not know Simon and is afraid.

“Remember?” Simon says. “We met in L.A. last year. During the table read for ‘Ice Chimps.’ ”

B.J.’s face turns red as the beautiful woman starts to laugh.

“You were in ‘Ice Chimps’?” she asks, her little nose wrinkling with disgust.

“Just a cameo,” B.J. says.

“He played Wayne Chimpsky!” Simon tells her. “He was hilarious.”

B.J. forces a smile and pats Simon on the shoulder.

“So great running into you,” he says. “I think we’re going to head back inside.”

“Sweet!” Simon says. “I’ll come with.”

The next thing I know, Simon is following them back into the bar, his arms around them like he is their friend.

“This guy with you?” the giant asks the B.J.

“I guess,” the actor mutters.

Simon grins with pride as the guard steps out of his way. He is almost through the door when he remembers we are with him.

“Quick!” he whispers.

We scurry in beside him, like rats across a gangplank.

This is Part One of a four-part serialization. [Read Part Two Here](https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/sell-out-part-two).

Simon Rich is a screenwriter and novelist. His newest book is a collection of love stories called “The Last Girlfriend on Earth.”

Family Business

I

I love my father, but sometimes he can get on my nerves. It’s hard to explain why exactly. It’s just little things he does, here and there, that bother me. For example, sometimes he shits into his hands and then throws the shit into my face while jumping up and down and screaming. I know he’s just trying to be funny—and itis funny, I can see that. But there’s just something about it that bugs me. I’ve asked him politely not to do it anymore, but I always get the same reaction. He just rolls his yellow eyes and says, “I’m sorry, your majesty.”

My father’s been calling me “your majesty” for as long as I can remember. He does it whenever I rinse off fruit before eating it, or catch grubs with a stick instead of my fingers. Basically, he does it whenever I do anything differently than he does.

When I told him I was thinking about going to school, he didn’t even respond. He just kept picking dirt out of his belly button, like I wasn’t even in the same tree as him.

“There’s a human scientist on the bottom of the mountain,” I explained. “He’s interviewing chimpanzees to see if any have the aptitude to learn sign language.”

“And you think they’re going to pick you?” His silver back quaked with laughter. “I’d like to see that.”

“Why can’t you just stay here?” my mother asked. “There are plenty of job opportunities. I talked to your Uncle Mike and he said he’d help you find work at the shit pile.”

“I don’t know if I want to work at the shit pile,” I said.

“Why the hell not?” my father snapped. “I work at the shit pile. Your cousins work at the shit pile. It’s good, honest work.”

“I know.”

“Decent pay, great benefits.”

“Dad, I know.”

“You think you’re too good for it?”

“No! Dad, relax. I’m just interested in sign language. I think it would be a cool thing to study.”

“A cool thing to study,” he muttered. “Just tell me this: How much is it going to cost me?”

“Nothing. If I get accepted, it’s a full ride. The humans pay for everything.”

He snorted.

“O.K., so you get into this fancy program and spend years learning sign language. What are you supposed to do with that afterward? Teach?”

I looked to my mother for support, but she was already crouched behind my father, carefully grooming his buttocks. She’s always been submissive to him. Sometimes I think that’s why they got together in the first place.

“You know,” my mother said, “if you’re interested in humans, your father could put you in touch with Curly.”

I sighed. Curly was one of my dad’s hunting buddies, a half-blind chimp who lived beyond the swamp. Some humans from National Geographic had followed him around, supposedly, for a photo shoot in the late nineteen-nineties. In our little jungle, that qualified him as an expert on humans.

“I’d be happy to put you in touch with Curly,” my father said. “He’ll be able to introduce you to the right people.”

“That’s O.K.,” I said.

My mother glared at me. “Why won’t you let your father help you?”

I massaged my temples.

“O.K., fine,” I muttered. “I’ll talk to Curly.”

“You know,” my mother said, her lips curling into a grin, “your father was pretty big in the human world when he was young.”

She nudged his giant belly.

“Tell him about the time you met you-know-who.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” my father said, waving his paws around in a pantomime of reluctance.

“Please!”

“Oh, all right. So, this one time, I’m hanging out in my nest, when Jane pops over—”

“He means Jane Goodall,” my mother whispered.

My father grinned, thrilled that his name-dropping had landed.

“So Jane opens her banana crate,” he continued, “and she says to me, ‘How about a banana?’ And so I say, ‘How about many bananas?’ ”

I grimaced as my mother laughed hysterically. My father’s been telling us his Goodall anecdote for years, and she always acts like it’s her first time hearing it.

“What does that even mean?” I asked. “ ‘Many bananas?’ That’s not even a joke.”

My parents ignored me.

“I’ll put you in touch with Curly,” my father said again. “He’ll introduce you to the right people.”

My mother grinned at me.

“It’s a good thing your dad’s so well-connected, huh?”

I turned toward my father.

“Where did you say you met Jane Goodall?”

His chewing slowed to a stop.

“My nest,” he said.

“So, on top of a tree?”

“Yeah,” my father said, averting his eyes. “On top of a tree.”

“That’s pretty interesting. Because the trees we nest in are very tall. And humans usually aren’t that great at climbing.”

My mother shot me a warning look, but I kept going.

“She must have been pretty athletic to make it all the way up to your nest. And to carry a crate with her, no less, one that was filled with, as you say, many bananas—that’s really impressive.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” my father said, tensely. “That’s how it happened.”

I could hear my mother’s nostrils flaring, but I pressed on.

“I always knew your friend Jane was smart, but I had no idea she was also the strongest human in the history of—”

A dark brown clump flew into my face. I coughed and choked, doubled over on the ground, my vision blurred from the stench. When I wiped the mess away, I saw my mother standing over me, her little paw caked with shit.

“Don’t you ever disrespect your father like that again,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “Where’d he go?”

“He’s in his tree,” she said, pointing at a nearby baobob. “I think you should climb up and talk to him.”

I looked up at his nest. My dad was barking at the moon, beating his flabby chest in a pathetic show of strength. It was embarrassing to watch.

“If he wants to talk,” I said, “then he can climb down.”

My mother stared at me angrily for a moment, then galloped off screaming into the night.

“I met with the scientists,” I told my parents the next day. “They said I was the smartest chimp they’d ever seen.”

“La di da,” my father said. My mother was standing behind him, in her usual grooming position. Neither made eye contact with me.

“They tested me on memory, pattern recognition, and object permanence,” I told them. “There were dozens of chimps, but I scored the highest.”

“Good for you,” my father grumbled, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Nobody said anything for a while. Eventually, my mother broke the silence.

“It was a big day at the shit pile,” she said. “Your father found three grubs.”

He grunted with pleasure, clearly relieved to be the center of attention again.

“The trick is to feel around in the shit,” he told her proudly. “The grubs are sometimes at the bottom, so you need to reach down to the bottom.”

“You’re so smart,” my mother said. “The smartest, most wonderful—”

“I’m flying to Stanford tomorrow,” I interrupted.

My mother swallowed. For the first time all day, she looked up from my father’s butt.

“How many jungles away is that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I told her. “It’s in a human country called the U.S.A.”

“A human country?” she repeated, her eyes wide with fear. “Like Zimbabwe?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But bigger.”

“Bigger than Zimbabwe?” my father snorted. “Not likely.”

“Dad, it’s like ten times bigger than Zimbabwe.”

“Then how come I’ve never heard of it?”

“Anyway,” I said. “The helicopter leaves at sunrise. I just sneaked out of my cage for a minute to say goodbye.”

My mom was trying hard to stay calm, but I could tell she was upset by the way her ears kept twitching.

“Mom, come on,” I said. “Don’t whimper. This is my chance to get out of this town. To see the world.”

My father stood up suddenly and roared.

“Then go!” he shouted, his thick fur bristling. “Go have fun with your fancy human friends!” He smiled wide, baring his canines. “Just don’t come crawling back to me when you fail.”

II.

I always enjoy visiting the White House.

My colleague, Professor Fitzbaum, and I get dragged to so many tedious events. Fundraisers, lectures, book signings. It can get pretty tiresome. The White House, though, is different. It’s dignified, refined. The truth is, it’s one of the very few places I feel at home.

I was practicing my speech on the lawn when the First Lady stopped by to chat.

“Hello,” she signed to me.

“Hello,” I signed back.

I always enjoy our conversations. She patted me on the head and then took the stage to introduce me.

“Ladies and gentlemen. In honor of Earth Day, we have a very special speaker. Please ‘go ape’ for… Professor Chimpsky!”

It was time for my address. I nodded solemnly at Professor Fitzbaum and the two of us took the stage.

“Thank you,” I signed to the First Lady, raising my left paw to my lips. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

I scanned the White House lawn. There were dozens of cameras trained on me, broadcasting my speech to screens all over the world. I cracked my knuckles, determined to do my species proud.

“Environment good,” I began. “Peace. Earth Day. Hello. Peace. Me chimpanzee.”

I waited for Fitzbaum to translate, then continued.

“Peace friends. We friends. Chimpanzee and people. Me chimpanzee. Environment good. Chimpanzee. Peace. Thank you. Goodbye. Chimpanzee.”

Professor Fitzbaum finished translating and the crowd burst into applause. The speech had been an enormous success—far greater than I had even hoped. It was the pinnacle of my entire career. Still, as usual, I had trouble enjoying my triumph. In moments like these, my thoughts always turned to home.

I hadn’t had any contact with my parents since the day I left the jungle. I didn’t miss them, exactly. But part of me wished they could see how far I’d come. In just five years, I’d amassed more accolades than any chimp in history.

My mastery of sign language was so vast and fluent that it had earned Professor Fitzbaum a MacArthur “genius” grant. My face had appeared in every magazine on earth, from the American Journal of Primatology to Parade. My father didn’t subscribe to any magazines, though. He’d never know how far his son had come.

A caterer set down a tray of champagne flutes. Fitzbaum usually limits my alcohol intake, but he was busy talking to some reporters. I grabbed two flutes and tossed them back.

Across the lawn, the First Lady was talking to her daughters. When the younger one asked her a question, she answered patiently, smiling and nodding. I could tell she was a wonderful parent, the kind that always validated her children and never threw her shit into their faces.

There wasn’t any more champagne poured out, so I grabbed a bottle from a nearby table. I was starting to feel a bit light-headed, but I didn’t care. Earth Day only comes once a year, after all.

“Hello,” I signed to some nearby humans. “Hello. Hello.”

They didn’t understand me. What did it matter? I was almost finished with my champagne when Professor Fitzbaum finally returned. His eyes were wide and his movements frantic.

“Stop,” he signed to me. “No.”

I sighed. Fitzbaum and I have always had an excellent relationship. But sometimes he can be unreasonable.

“Earth Day,” I explained. “Hello. Earth Day.”

“No understand,” he replied.

I threw up my hands with exasperation. It’s not my fault he taught me only fifty signs.

“Give,” he said, pointing at the bottle. “Give.”

I looked around and saw that a crowd had formed. There were dignitaries, reporters, and—most troubling of all—a man holding a dart gun. I stamped my feet with frustration. Everyone was overreacting.

I was trying to sign something to that effect, when I lost hold of my champagne bottle. It shattered on the ground. I jumped onto a table to avoid the flying shards and collided with a large ice sculpture of a globe. I don’t remember much after that. Just the sound of shouting, the smell of grass, and a sharp little pain in my thigh.

I woke up in a cage.

At first I thought I was alone. But as my vision adjusted, I became aware of a shadowy figure in the corner. It was another chimpanzee—old, obese, and out of breath. The hair on his back was falling off in clumps and the skin underneath was covered in dark-red splotches. His face was crawling with insects, but he made no attempt to swat the bugs away. He just sat there in silence as they crawled up his nose and into his eyes. I’d never seen a chimp in worse shape.

I walked across the cage and cautiously thrust out my paw.

“Hey,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Me Charlie,” he said, through labored breaths. “Charlie the Chimp.”

I assumed that he was joking. Charlie the Chimp was famous—an international movie star. His “Chimp Champion” videos had grossed millions in the eighties. Fitzbaum had shown me all of his films during a study on primate self-recognition.

“You can’t be Charlie the Chimp,” I said. “That’s impossible.”

The old ape sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “Me prove it.”

He reached for an apple, paused to catch his breath, and then tossed it through the bars of our cage. I watched in shock as it sailed across the facility and landed neatly in a distant wastebasket.

“Oh, my God!” I said. “You’re really him!”

He nodded tiredly.

“Charlie … me … Charlie.”

He was clearly on something. Tranquilizers, probably. I sat down beside him and groomed his splotchy back.

“I’ve seen all of your movies,” I told him. “ ‘Slam-Dunk Charlie,’ ‘Touchdown Charlie,’ ‘Strikeout Charlie.’ I even saw the lacrosse one.”

He winced.

“ ‘Bounce-Shot Charlie.’ ”

“Yeah!”

“ ‘Bounce-Shot Charlie’ not so good,” he admitted. “We run out of sports… movie not on same level as others.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought it had its moments.”

He smiled proudly.

“Maybe one or two good gags,” he said. “So. What you in for?”

I laughed.

“Oh, just a little episode at the White House. But I’m not here permanently.”

He shook his head.

“Everyone here permanently.”

I forced a smile.

“That can’t be true. My trainer, Professor Fitzbaum, he loves me. We’ve been a team for five years. We’re like family.”

Charlie leaned in toward me. I could feel his hot breath on my face.

“Trainer not like family,” he said. “Only family like family.”

I swallowed.

“I used to have trainer,” Charlie said, looking off into the distance. “We like brothers. He take me People’s Choice. He take me to Golden Globes. We wear matching suits—mine just like his, only smaller. Then, one day, on set of ‘Karate-Chop Charlie,’ I get confused and make one mistake during filming. Me here ever since.”

“That’s so unfair,” I said. “What happened? Did you forget your part or something?”

“I rip testicles off actor. Throw across road.”

“Oh.”

Charlie sighed.

“I not even get to finish movie. If you watch video close, they use backup chimp in tournament scene.” He shook his head bitterly. “He never got kick right. Movie suffer for it.”

I nodded sympathetically. This poor chimp had devoted his life to entertaining humans, and they’d thrown him away like a broken toy. Could that really happen to me? I was starting to despair when Professor Fitzbaum walked into the room.

“Hello!” I signed frantically. “Hello!”

I didn’t want to make Charlie feel bad, but I couldn’t resist a few celebratory hops. My friend had come to get me, just like I’d known he would.

“Thank you,” I signed to him, raising my left paw to my lips. “Thank you. Hello. Love.”

Professor Fitzbaum’s hands remained rigidly by his sides. I wondered if he could see me in the shadows.

“Love!” I signed again. “Hello. Me chimpanzee. Good.”

Fitzbaum took a step closer, and I winced. He wasn’t alone. Behind him was the man with the dart.

“No,” I signed passionately. “Stop. Please. Friends.”

“I’m sorry,” Fitzbaum said, avoiding eye contact with me, “but our facilities can’t accommodate a full-grown chimpanzee.”

Charlie laid his meaty palm on my shoulder. I felt a scalding tear roll down my face.

“Don’t worry,” Fitzbaum said, “you don’t have to stay here.”

He grinned at me.

“I’m taking you home.”

I let out a scream as the man with the dart took aim.

III.

“Guess it didn’t work out, huh?” my father said, after our obligatory hug. “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He looked the same, just slightly heavier, with a few more grey splotches on his back.

“It’s O.K.,” my mother whispered to me. “I’ve already talked to Uncle Mike, and there’s a place for you at the shit pile.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I muttered.

She passed me a handful of grubs, and I felt my stomach turn. I didn’t remember them being so unappetizing.

“What’s the matter?” my father said, his mouth already full of the bugs. “Not fancy enough for you?”

“Jesus, Dad. I just got back. Please…”

My parents gasped and it took me a moment to figure out why. I’d been signing unconsciously as I spoke.

“What the hell are you doing?” my father asked.

“It’s sign language,” I explained. “It’s actually not so hard. Look, I’ll show you.”

I tried to teach them “Thank you,” the easiest sign I knew, just a touch of the left paw to the lips.

“You follow any of that?” my father asked my mother.

“No,” she said. “None.”

My father laughed.

“I can’t believe you spent five years on that nonsense,” he said. “What a waste.”

“It wasn’t a waste,” I said, defiantly. “I got to do all sorts of amazing things—things you wouldn’t believe.”

He folded his flabby arms across his chest.

“Like what?”

“I got to go to the White House.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s where the President of the United States lives.”

“You met the President?” my mother asked.

“Well… no,” I admitted. “But I met his First Lady.”

My father snorted.

“That’s not the same thing.”

“You know,” my mother said, “your father once met a celebrity. Honey, tell him about the time you talked to you-know-who.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, waving his paw around.

“Please!”

“Oh, all right. So, one time, I’m in my tree, and Jane—”

“He means Jane Goodall.”

A loud whirring noise sounded from the clearing below. I looked down and sighed. Fitzbaum was already looking for my replacement. His truck was loaded with various testing apparatuses. I recognized a large plastic box from the day we’d met. It was a simple pattern-recognition test. You climb inside and watch as three plastic orbs light up. If you hit the corresponding levers in the correct order, you win a banana. I could still remember how Fitzbaum had grinned when I solved it on my very first try.

I heard some rustling in the trees around us. Dozens of chimps were balanced on high branches, watching Fitzbaum skeptically.

“Here, chimpy, chimpy,” my old friend said, dumping his box out of the truck. “Who wants to win a banana?”

My father snorted again.

“How hard could it be?”

“Extremely hard,” I told him. “That test requires memory, dexterity, and problem-solving skills.”

My father waved his paw dismissively.

“Any monkey can push around some levers.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Then why don’t you try it?”

My mother climbed between us, but I kept on going, pointing aggressively at my father.

“If the test is so easy, why don’t you climb inside the box and show me how it’s done?”

My father looked around. The entire tribe was watching at this point.

“Fine,” he said, grinning wide so the other chimps could see. “No sweat.”

My mother gasped as he leapt out of the branches and landed with a thud beside the box. Uncle Mike cheered and the other chimps joined in. My father wasn’t the leader of our tribe, but he was a respected elder. I wondered if he knew what he was risking.

“I’ll be back in a second,” he called out confidently. “With many bananas!”

The tribe clapped and hooted as he climbed into the clear plastic box.

From the moment the lights started flashing, it was obvious that my father was outmatched. He tried to put on a brave face as he randomly pulled the levers. But within a couple minutes, his frustration grew obvious. He let out a roar, grabbed the middle lever, and pulled it as hard as he could. I grinned as he yanked uselessly on it, his flabby body shaking with frustration. Eventually, he had no choice but to give up.

“Thing’s broken,” he muttered, avoiding eye contact with the crowd. I couldn’t help but gloat as he started to climb out of the box.

“Not so easy, huh?” I said. He didn’t respond. It was around this time that I realized he was stuck.

“What’s happening?” he muttered, his frustration giving way to panic. “What’s happening?”

I climbed down to a lower branch to get a better view. My father’s stomach was wedged between two levers. His breaths were fast and shallow. Fitzbaum watched impassively from his truck, jotting down notes in his field binder.

A crash of thunder sounded and the other chimps dispersed. My father watched in horror as they turned their backs on him, his mouth agape, his body trembling. I could see that he had defecated.

“How could you do this to him?” my mother shouted at me over the sound of pouring rain.

“I didn’t do anything!” I shouted back. “He’s the one who wanted to try it.”

“He’s old!” she screamed, her voice choked with sobs. “Can’t you see that? He’s old.”

Professor Fitzbaum cursed at the rain, hopped in his truck, and drove out of sight. My father sat shivering in the plastic box. The water was up to his ankles and rising.

“Do something!” my mother shouted.

I hopped down from the tree and rushed over to the box.

“Dad!” I shouted. “If you suck in your stomach, I can pull you out!”

“Go away!” he screamed. “I don’t need your help! Get out of here!”

The rain intensified and my father started whimpering. The water was up to his knees. I looked back at my mother. She was jumping up and down in a panic.

I reached for my dad’s paw, but he swatted me away. His eyes were wild, his movements frantic. He was totally disoriented. The water was past his waist by the time I figured out a plan.

“Dad,” I shouted over the sound of falling branches, “I’m hungry.”

He didn’t respond, but his movements slowed.

“I’m hungry,” I repeated. “I never ate dinner.” I took a cautious step toward him. “I wish there were grubs I could eat.”

His breathing slowed.

“There are grubs everywhere,” he murmured.

I poked at the muddy ground, feigning confusion.

“I’m not good at it,” I said over the sound of howling wind. “I need help from an expert—someone who knows about grubs and about shit.”

My father’s eyes brightened.

“I can help,” he said.

“Really? You would do that for me?”

“Sure,” he said, his posture straightening slightly. “It’s no big deal.”

“Great! Suck in your stomach and I’ll pull you out.”

“What?”

“So you can help me.”

“Oh.”

He sucked in his gut and I pulled on his arm, dragging him out of the box. He immediately thrust his paw into the ground.

“The trick is to really get in there with your paws. See?”

He pulled out a grub and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said. I forced a smile and shoved the wriggling creature into my mouth. “Mmm. Delicious.”

“Want another?” he said.

“Um… sure.”

He reached back into the mud and pulled out a whole handful. I swallowed them as quickly as I could.

“You’re good at hunting grubs,” I told him. “I’m really impressed.”

“I guess I’m O.K. at it,” he murmured.

He beat his chest a couple times. At some point, it had stopped raining.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll groom you.”

“You don’t have to groom me.”

He ignored my protests and squatted behind me. I looked up and saw my mother looking down at me from a tree. She scrunched up her face, as if trying to remember something. Then she thrust out her left paw and raised it briefly to her lips.

Day of Judgment

The Messiah floated gently down Eighth Avenue, His arms spread wide, as if to hug mankind. Traffic stopped and people gawked, their eyes and iPhones pointed toward the heavens. All who gazed upon Him knew at once why He was here: Earth was saved and all their pain was ending.

His throne came to a stop above Times Square, beside the giant Sony screen. He was fifty feet tall and beautifully proportioned, with golden skin and eyes like polished sapphires. A pair of cherubs sat on his shoulders, playing silver trumpets. Their song was so beautiful that it moved people to tears.

“I am the Messiah,” the deity announced, as if there were any question. “And I have come to bring you all salvation.”

Some reporters had assembled on the street. The Messiah smiled down on them indulgently.

“Feel free to ask me what you wish,” He said. “Chris Matthews, you can go first.”

“Thank you,” the news anchor said. He was trying his best to remain composed, but his cheeks were damp with tears. “What, exactly, do you mean by ‘salvation’?” he asked.

“All suffering will cease,” the Messiah answered. “And Earth shall be turned into a heaven.”

The crowd cheered wildly. Strangers embraced. The elderly danced like children.

“Anderson Cooper, you go next. You’ve had your hand up the longest.”

“Thank you,” the correspondent said. “I was wondering what this means for the world’s poor?”

“Deliverance,” the Messiah said. “The poor shall eat, the lame shall walk, and all wars shall be ended!” The cheering grew so loud that the Messiah had to shout to be heard. “O.K., who’s next? How about you, Al Roker?”

The cheering stopped.

“What’s wrong?” the Messiah asked. The cherubs whispered something into His ear.

“Oh,” He said, turning pale. “I’m sorry. I meant Al Sharpton.” He cleared His throat and forced a smile. “Go ahead, sir!”

Al Sharpton glared up at Him, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

“You were going to ask me something?” the Messiah pressed on. “Go ahead, ask away.”

“O.K.,” Al Sharpton said. “I guess my question is: Why did you confuse me with Al Roker?”

“Look, I’m sorry about that,” the Messiah said. “It’s just that you’re both named Al, and you’re both on TV.”

Sharpton raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure it’s not because we’re both African-American?”

“It’s not that!” the Messiah said. “I’m just really bad with faces. Ask anyone.”

“If you’re so bad with faces, how come you recognized Chris Matthews?” Sharpton asked. “Why didn’t you confuse him with Chris Hayes?”

The crowd murmured in agreement as the cherubs exchanged a worried glance.

“Look, this is crazy,” the Messiah said. “It was an honest mistake. I’m the Messiah—I love all mankind! I’m not racist, O.K.? I’m not racist! ”

The cherubs tugged on His robe, but the Messiah kept defending Himself and making everything worse.

“You’re both named Al! You’re both on TV! I’m not racist! ”

Anderson Cooper thrust his microphone toward the heavens.

“Messiah, do you think you ought to apologize to Mr. Sharpton?”

“Apologize for what? Confusing two people who are both named Al and both on TV?”

“Do you regret your comments?” Chris Matthews asked. He’d moved on from the salvation story and was now focussed on the race angle.

“Guys, this is crazy!” the Messiah said, his face contorted in a pained grin. “I have black friends. I’m a fan of black culture! ”

At this point, the cherubs were trying to physically close His mouth.

“I love Kanye West!”

Times Square fell silent. The cherubs buried their faces in their hands.

“O.K.,” the Messiah murmured. “Let’s just stop for the day. I’ll come back tomorrow, and we’ll try again. Or something. Sound good?”

No one responded.

The cherubs, their cheeks redder than usual, played a few rushed notes on their trumpets. Then they grabbed the Messiah’s elbows and dragged Him awkwardly up to Heaven.

The Messiah paced back and forth on His cloud, scrolling though tweets on His iPad.

“This is ridiculous,” He said. “I’m trending on Twitter. And, look at this, look at Google.”

The cherubs dutifully hovered over His screen.

“If you type ‘Messiah’ into the search box, the first thing that comes up is ‘Messiah racist.’ Not ‘Messiah salvation’ or ‘Messiah to end death.’ ‘Messiah racist! ’ ”

He forced a laugh. “This is crazy!” He nudged one of the cherubs in the ribs, sending him tumbling across the sky. “You guys think this is crazy, right?”

The cherubs shared a long, silent look. Eventually, the one called Sorath cleared his throat.

“Oh, sweet and noble Messiah,” he said, in a honeyed voice. “The thing is . . . Al Sharpton and Al Roker look nothing alike. Al Sharpton has a moustache, and Al Roker doesn’t. Also, Sharpton has hair and Roker is completely bald.”

“It’s true,” Zophiel, the other cherub, said.

“They’re exactly the same age. I looked it up on Wikipedia! ”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“So you’re telling me you’ve never made a mistake like that? You’ve never confused two black guys before?”

“No,” Sorath said.

“Not even once?”

“No.”

“Also,” Zophiel said, “I wasn’t sure what the best time to bring this up was, but you shouldn’t say ‘lame.’ The term is ‘differently-abled.’ ”

“Seriously?”

“That’s the accepted term.”

The Messiah threw up His arms in frustration.

“How am I supposed to keep these things straight when they keep changing the terms?” He caught His breath and smoothed the folds of His robe. “O.K.,” He said. “Let’s fly back down. We’re doing my plan. ”

Sorath and Zophiel hesitated.

“What is it now?”

“We just don’t think it’s a very wise strategy,” Sorath said.

“It’s going to be fine,” the Messiah said. “Come on. Grab your trumpets and follow me.”

The cherubs were shocked by the size of the crowd. Everyone was covering the story now, from Al Jazeera to TMZ.

“Start playing,” the Messiah whispered.

The cherubs sighed and reluctantly launched into “Gold Digger.” There was light booing from the crowd as the Messiah did some hip-hop-inflected head moves.

“I’m not a racist,” the Messiah said. “But you don’t have to take my word for it. Instead, I ask you to take the word of . . . the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.! ”

The crowd watched in astonishment as the Reverend descended from Heaven, his golden halo gleaming. His aura was bright and radiant, but his expression was distinctly strained.

“O.K., Martin,” the Messiah said. “Tell them.”

“Tell them what?” the Reverend asked.

“That I’m not a racist!”

The Reverend averted his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” the Messiah demanded.

“To be honest,” King said, “this whole situation makes me extremely uncomfortable.”

“You can go back to Heaven in two seconds,” the Messiah promised. “Just tell them, really quickly, how we hang out and everything.”

“But we don’t hang out.”

“What about that time we played golf?”

“We never played golf.”

“Sure we did! Remember? You told me all those crazy stories about growing up in Michigan?”

“Michigan?” the Reverend squinted at the Messiah. “Are you sure you’re not thinking of Malcolm X?”

The cherubs hung their heads. One of them took out a flask and started drinking.

“O.K., I know that was bad,” the Messiah said. “That was bad. But answer me this: How can I be racist when I don’t even have a race myself? I’m not a human—I’m an angel! ”

“You’re clearly white,” Chris Matthews said.

“I don’t identify as white.”

“Do you identify as black?”

“I actually am part black!” the Messiah said. “I did that thing, that genetic-testing thing that you do through the mail. I’m mostly angel, but part of me is black. I’m almost two per cent black.”

The crowd booed.

“Martin and Malcolm both start with an ‘M ’!” the Messiah shouted, as King and Sharpton exchanged a weary look. “And they’re from the same era! And they both did race stuff! ”

Al Sharpton raised an eyebrow. “‘Race stuff’?”

The Messiah buried His head in His hands and groaned. When He finally looked up, there were tears in His eyes.

“O.K.,” he whispered. “I admit it. I never realized this before, but, I guess, the truth is, I’m a little bit . . . racist.”

“I’m sorry,” Martin Luther King, Jr., said. “We couldn’t hear that. You’re a little bit what?”

“A little bit racist!” the Messiah said. He began to weep, and His tears rained down on Broadway, dousing the crowd. The cherubs stroked His back with their tiny, chubby fingers.

“What should I do?” the Messiah cried. “How do I make things right?”

“You can meet with black leaders,” Al Sharpton said. “And start a dialogue.”

“O.K.,” the Messiah said. And He followed Sharpton north, to Harlem.

A few days later, the Messiah appeared on “The Rachel Maddow Show.” His apology was eloquent and obviously genuine.

“I came to save mankind,” He said. “But, in the end, mankind saved me.”

“Where do you go from here?” Maddow asked.

“I’m taking an educational trip to Africa,” He said, “to improve my understanding of diversity.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said. “I think we’re out of time.” She pressed on her earpiece.

“Oh, right. But, first, one more question: Are you still going to bring salvation to mankind?”

“I’m not really focussed on my career right now,” the Messiah said. “My goal is just to resolve my personal issues. I obviously have a lot of hatred inside me, which I was completely unaware of. Hopefully, though, with the help of therapy, I can unpack my white privilege and inspire others to do the same.”

“So when will you return?”

The Messiah thought for a moment.

“I’ll return when all our hearts are fully purged of racism. When we see a man’s face and no longer notice the color of his skin.”

“And how long will that take?”

The Messiah shrugged. “We’ll see.” ♦