

JAN STINCHCOMB

TAKE

CARE

OF THEM

I GOT THE GORILLAS FROM MAUREEN. She was nice about it but not too eager to let them go. When she warned me that they were zoo animals I scoffed. I've had all sorts of pets and every kind of roommate. By morning they were exactly where I had imagined them, planted atop the playscape in the backyard, the sun warming their beautiful black coats.

I told my husband they were from New York as if that would make their presence more acceptable. He chided me for my fondness for Brooklyn and then I informed him that they were Manhattanites. It's ridiculous all the same, he told me. And dangerous.

Dangerous?

They rip up people's faces. An animal like that could destroy you. Tear off your arm. You need to let go of your little Jane Goodall fantasy.

You mean Dian Fossey. And she has nothing to do with this.

What do you plan to do with them? He sipped his coffee as he gazed at the gorillas.

Just let them be for now, I said. They're beautiful. They're happy.

My husband was out of work and I was pregnant. Our rent rose each year, like a hardy weed pushing toward the sun. It wasn't a good time to take on more responsibility, but the gorillas were free of charge. And they gave me so much joy. I had never seen such a solid animal before in my life. The size. The smell. There is no denying a gorilla.

Also: apes had always seemed human to me. That's why they scare certain people, the kind who like to maintain boundaries. I, however, could not fear this thing whose face looked so much like a human face, never mind the leathery blackness, or the huge nostrils. I recognized the anger and confusion in the

brow, the sense of injustice in the eyes, and that was enough for me. I felt an immediate connection to the male. Mr. Angry. Mr. Misfit. I even stepped out onto the deck to get closer to him. While I pointed out our banana plant, the playscape collapsed beneath his weight.

My husband turned up the TV.

I was concerned that the female didn't like me. Perhaps she was jealous? She tried to sign to me, but I had long since forgotten the few signs I ever knew. I opted for charades, but then I broke down and laughed as she looked back at me in dismay. Finally she took a stick and began drawing, or writing, in the earth. Her hieroglyphics were beautiful. It would have taken me years to decipher that system. I felt like I was back in grad school, right before I dropped out.

This is embarrassing, I told my husband. He was talking to a headhunter on the phone. I knew he couldn't listen to me but I went on speaking in a soft voice. She's a lot smarter than I am. It's humiliating to play at being her benefactor. I took them in, but she's the one who's always trying to help me. She seems so urgent, so focused. You know, I think she's pregnant too.

I set my hand on my belly but nothing moved. I was bloated.

As the summer dragged on it became difficult to feed two families. When we could not find any more money we got on the metro. I had tried to convince the gorillas to dress up, but they resisted. The male wore a flowered hat to please me, I thought, while the female handled the tokens. My husband came along to get some fresh air, and, as he put it, to take the edge off the fear that never left him. He wouldn't look at me.

The four of us sat in the front row heading east. When we got out at the stop for the zoo, I felt sad and resigned. This must have been our destination all along. Why did I always think I could make a difference? I had opened up a home that didn't really belong to me, shared bananas that weren't mine.

We walked in without paying. Perhaps the gorillas had carte blanche. My husband grabbed my hand. I welcomed the familiar zoo smell of dirt and excrement. Animals live here, I thought. We are all animals.

The primate village was beautiful, all wild grasses and trees. I tried to be polite. I wanted to say something about how happy they would be here, but I didn't want to disturb the tranquility with human speech. I was a little bit nervous stepping onto primate territory but I believed the gorillas would protect us. We spent a whole day getting acclimated. I felt relaxed, almost

cleansed, by the time the sun began to set.

My husband sat down at a little stone slab that looked like a table. It did not seem that he would ever rise again.

The gorillas stood together and turned away from us, exiting on all fours. They left the primate village that day without turning back, and I knew they would never return to the zoo. I had imagined any kinship between us. I looked at their disappearing glossy backs and mourned.

I wanted to say something but I was not sure to whom. It occurred to me that I had been losing my audience for a while. I remembered Maureen's last words to me, which I saw now as a reproach: take care of them.

The baby inside of me kicked for the first time. I promised to do better.