

Sock Monkey

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James steals the monkey from the Central State University laboratory where he works. He slides into his truck and pushes the animal carrier across the seat. Beatrice's small fingers grasp the metal squares of the cage door. She looks nervous but James talks to her until she's turning circles in her cage, indicating happiness. James smiles and tells her she's a good girl.

At home, he lets her out of the cage, and they stare at each other. Beatrice is beautiful. She has a small black face with white tufts of fur on her cheeks and a white band across her forehead. Her hands and feet are dark against her silver-gray hair. Her vervet bark, staccato and high, a call to family members. Beatrice starts turning circles, her tail twitching, her long canines showing.

James questions his spontaneity. He knows only that he wanted to bring her home and take care of her. He doesn't know what to do with her.

He hands her a dried apricot. She stops spinning.

After his wife, Laura, died seven months ago, James's mother came to Walla Walla and lived with him for the first three months. He took a leave of absence from the university and wound up wandering from room to room in his pajamas, depressed and angry.

His mother cooked and cleaned and washed his clothes and did all the things she did when he was a boy, except she tried to talk to him. She tried to talk about her garden and the knitting club she belonged to back in Ohio. She tried to talk about his father, who had recently retired and sat around the house all day doing crossword puzzles. She wanted to talk about her upcoming knee surgery and James's never visiting anymore.

James wasn't interested in his father's retirement laziness or the Somalian immigrant family her church was sponsoring. He was interested only in sitting across

the dinner table from Laura, in teasing her about her upcoming thirty-fifth birthday, and he wanted to dry dishes while she washed and he wanted to smell her skin after she got out of the shower, even though it smelled only like skin and nothing else. Instead his mother sat across the table from him, and while she talked, he got angrier at his mother for a lot of things, like forgetting to pick him up at soccer practice and chaperoning high school dances and wearing a blue dress instead of a black one to Laura's funeral. And then for just being alive. He let the anger fill him up until one night at dinner he threw his plate against the wall and the spaghetti stuck like a Vik Muniz sculpture.

James found himself laughing and apologizing but mostly laughing, and his mother said she understood and a lot of people missed Laura, including her, but he obviously didn't need her anymore and after three months she was going back to Ohio. He needed to get dressed and get on with his life. She kept saying that Laura would want that as she wiped tomato sauce from the wall. And after the adrenaline subsided, James thought it didn't matter what Laura wanted; she was dead.

When James gets home from work the next day, Beatrice is watching *The Maury Povich Show* and eating a peach. Maury is doing paternity tests.

Tomatoes lie half eaten on the coffee table, and bananas are ground into couch cushions. Beatrice smiles and jumps up on the back of the couch. While James cleans up the mess, she follows him from the kitchen to the living room and back again, squirreling around his ankles and pulling on his pant leg.

When they sit down to watch Maury, he asks if they can turn the channel, too much yelling and bleeping. She brings him the remote control, but he feels guilty; she was enjoying the show.

"Keep it," he says. "It's okay."

Beatrice touches her lips with her open fingers and then moves them away from her face. She's learned sign language from the laboratory where James stole her. It looks like she's blowing a kiss when she says, THANK YOU.

He makes them a late dinner. Beatrice climbs up on the table and sits at the place he's set for her. James tells her about his day at the lab. He tells her about some of the other primates, and she cocks her head to the side, listening intently, as Laura would have.

"They think you're dead," he says.

Beatrice finishes her bowl of nuts and fruits. She runs over to him and touches his face. She makes the sign for BABY, her arms together, rocking back and forth.

It was easy walking past the security guards last night. They told him to have a good evening and buzzed him through the gate, even though he knew that they knew there were procedures for dead research animals. Seven months ago he would

never have thought about leaving with a test subject, but seven months ago was not the same as now.

Beatrice smiles at him and keeps signing BABY, but he doesn't know what to do. James makes the sign for NO.

Beatrice runs back to her bowl and turns it upside down. She presses her fingertips together on both hands, the pads like magnets, and repeats the motion, MORE, MORE. James gets her more nuts.

James cleans up after dinner and then reads the paper in the living room. Beatrice settles herself in the armchair across from him. She watches him, her tail twitching like a cat's. He tosses her dried apple pieces, and she squawks, jumping to catch the shriveled slices. She runs over and settles herself next to his leg, reaches out, clasps his fingers. They fall asleep together on the couch.

Beatrice has been at the house for almost a week. James decides she needs clothes. At the craft store he walks down the aisle of decapitated doll heads and pink arms and legs in plastic bags. He picks out two dresses, a hat, and a pair of black patent leather shoes that he isn't sure will fit.

The cashier is an older woman who oohs and ahhs over his purchases as if she didn't know what's stocked on the shelves. James ignores her attempts at conversation. He declines giving his email address for future coupons and savings. At the last minute, he throws in a sock monkey from the counter display. It has a band of white on its forehead like Beatrice's. The red mouth and brown heathered body make James smile.

When he gets home, Beatrice is interested only in the sock monkey. James tries to get her to wear one of the dresses, and she bares her canines at him. She cradles the sock monkey and bites at the stitched-on eyebrows. James takes it away and she howls. He lays the dresses on the floor, hoping she'll become interested in the doll clothes. Setting the sock monkey down near her, she watches James for sudden movement. She passes her hand in a circle in front of her face and points at the pink gingham one with the white apron.

"It's my favorite too," James says.

James cuts back his hours at the university and works only mornings so he can be with Beatrice. The lab is chaotic and makes James uncomfortable. He doesn't want to work there. His coworkers are constantly in his space, asking if he's all right, if he needs to talk, if they can do anything for him. He used to be okay with people being close to him, touching his arm, hugging him, kissing his cheek. Now it makes him gag.

On Saturday afternoon he downloads the test the Air Force uses to determine recruits' career paths. He finds out he works best alone in a medical or research

capacity. He thinks about working in the library. The spines of the books facing outwards on the shelves, the alphabetical order, authors like best friends next to each other. He likes books, but when he thinks about the last book he read, which is sure to be an interview question, he can't remember the title.

James explores other career options. He checks out Internet ministry schools. He looks into working for Disneyland. It's supposed to be the happiest place on earth, and James thinks he would have to be happy working there. He downloads questionnaires from magazines, the kind that judge what kind of personality he has, his perfect woman, the ideal date, a city to fit his lifestyle, the perfect pet—which doesn't turn out to be a vervet but an English Bulldog—and he has to find a picture of one on the Internet because he can't remember the difference between an English and an American Bulldog. He looks into vacation packages but then wonders what he'd do with Beatrice.

When James finishes on the computer, he looks for Beatrice. An overturned water dish, garbage pulled from the garbage can, and sunflower seeds peppering the carpet let James know he's left Beatrice alone for too long. He finds her sitting on the stairs and beckons to her to come down. She shakes her head like a stubborn two-year-old. A stuffed rabbit James got Laura one Easter sits on the step next to Beatrice. He wonders where she found it. The bow around the rabbit's neck is unraveling, leaving lilac threads on the carpet. James notices its eye is missing.

"Beatrice." He holds his hand out to her: "Come."

She dances, twirling around on the too-tight step. He's afraid she's going to fall. Frustrated, James makes the sign for COME, but Beatrice laughs at him, scratching at her sides. She's either making the sign for MONKEY or, James thinks, just acting like a monkey. She runs up two more stairs until she stands on the landing, daring him to follow her. James can't. He hasn't been up those stairs in months. Beatrice disappears around the corner, out of sight. Just pressing his foot to the first step makes his heart beat faster. He pulls it away just as Beatrice's black head peeks around the corner to see if he's still watching.

"Beatrice," he says.

She ducks back out of sight. He lets her go.

James is tired of being sad, but he isn't sure what to do. He thought having Beatrice would make him happy, but he never feels happy. He feels all the clichéd things he hears about on made-for-TV movies, except they don't feel clichéd to him. He tells himself he's come a long way in seven months, but when he recounts the things he's done to get over Laura and on with his life, stealing a monkey isn't on that list. He can come up with only getting out of bed in the morning, but he wonders if that's enough. Is it enough just to get out of bed if he spends the whole day missing her?

He stands at the foot of the staircase for a long time before climbing the steps, one foot and then the other next to it on each step, the way old people or young children climb stairs. His breath comes in short bursts. It's only the second time he's gone upstairs since Laura died. The first was after the funeral when he moved his belongings out of their bedroom and into the downstairs guest room. His underwear and socks tossed haphazardly into drawers. The closet dwarfed his clothes, orderless without hers. Laura color-coded and categorized everything. Pants next to pants, then jackets and shirts. Short-sleeved, then long-sleeved, yellow, then green, then blue. He tried to order the new closet, but he couldn't remember where the white clothes fit into the order.

When James gets to the top of the stairs, he notices Beatrice sitting in front of the bedroom door with her sock monkey. At first, James just stands there, staring at the white wooden door until he gets tired of standing and lies down, pressing his face toward the faint streetlight filtering under the door crack. The doors aren't hung right in the old house, sometimes leaving inches between door and floor. James can make out Laura's yellow chiffon scarf on the wicker chair cushion. An earring tangles with dust under the dresser.

He inhales, as if he can smell Laura's scent on the sheets and in the drapes and on her clothes. Beatrice pets the top of his head, as if he's her family. She sifts through each strand of hair, grooming him, cleaning him, and James lets her. James lies there a long time with his nose under the door. Beatrice climbs onto his back and stretches out, the sock monkey curled into her side. Her body is warm, and James drifts in and out of sleep. James is used to Beatrice sleeping with him now. For the first week Beatrice slept in the animal carrier he brought her home from the laboratory in. He had cut up a blanket and bought her a small dog pillow, the kind for a Chihuahua or Pomeranian, to make the carrier more comfortable. But now in her second week of living in the house, Beatrice sleeps with James in the guest bedroom. She wears the patterned nightgown to bed.

Beatrice wraps her hand around his finger.

They go back downstairs together. They watch *Saturday Night Live*. Beatrice laughs when James laughs, and then she hugs his arm when he starts to cry, after he realizes he hasn't laughed for a while. Then they go to the guest bedroom and crawl into bed.

"Sometimes I can't remember what she looked like," he says.

Beatrice chirps her listening chirp.

"We should have taken more pictures. We stopped taking pictures. And we should have gone to Ireland. She really wanted to go to Ireland. We could have taken pictures in Ireland."

Beatrice begins to snore. James gets out of bed and goes back to the living room. He pulls down all the photo albums and looks through each one. He starts with the

ones before they met. Laura with college friends, old boyfriends, and pets that were dead before James knew her. One photo album has pictures of James playing soccer, and high school dances, and then there are pictures of them together at the spa in California, hiking in Yellowstone, and getting married.

After his mother went home, James went back to work, where coworkers averted their eyes when passing him in the hallway. They acted as if what he had were catching. So he stared them down until they looked up and halfheartedly smiled. He stopped them in the hallway, the men's room, the cafeteria, to ask them stupid questions, to make them talk when he knew they were uncomfortable. He became that poor guy whose wife had died. He could tell they wanted him to go away. What do you say to a man whose wife died from falling down the stairs? He almost wished Laura had had cancer, or had died in a car accident or a freak building collapse—these were things people understood, these were things that elicited hushed apologies and murmurs of sympathy, but falling down the stairs did not. They looked away, embarrassed, as if he were joking and any minute he'd tell them the real way she had died. It left him explaining that she'd always had this thing with stairs, tripping up and stumbling down steps. She took the elevator at the mall and steered clear of the attic at her parents' house. People realized he was being serious. They walked away quickly.

After Laura died James checked the Internet to see how many people died from falling down the stairs. One Web site claimed an American was killed in a fall every thirty-two minutes. The category said it included all falls but didn't list the different fallings, and James could think of only a few ways to fall. Another Web site said 24,900 people died each year from falling. James tried the math, but the numbers never added up.

His friends told him to stay off the Internet and suggested getting a dog. Paul had a golden retriever, Sadie, who was sadder than any dog James had ever met. But Paul insisted a dog, any dog, would be good company. Brian suggested moving into an apartment. Not so many rooms in an apartment. They all had advice during the Thursday night pickup game at the Y.

"Maybe you should think about packing up her stuff," Philip said. "Think about cleaning out the closet."

"Or dating," Mike joked. "The best way to get over the first wife is to find another."

James punched Mike in the mouth and walked off the court. James shouldn't have been there, giving them the impression he was ready to get on with his life. He had already elbowed his own teammate in the face and fouled a guy going in for a lay-up. When Philip called later that evening, he said he understood James's anger. But James didn't think any of them understood.

The funeral home keeps calling. James hasn't picked up Laura's ashes. They want to know whether he's coming to get them, and if he isn't coming to get them, then they want him to call back and let them know he isn't coming, and then they'll know to store them until he wants to come get them, if he ever wants to come get them. James thinks that the funeral home would figure out that he doesn't want to come get them because (a) he never calls them back, (b) it's been seven months since she died, and (c) he hasn't come to get them. He hasn't gone to get the ashes because he doesn't know what to do with them.

Laura's parents call after the funeral home does. James thinks part of the reason is that he won't give them Laura's ashes to bury in the family mausoleum in Connecticut, but they don't come right out and ask. James wonders whether that would make a difference. If they came out and asked him, would he turn over Laura's ashes? Maybe he should just send them the ashes, but he wonders how one goes about doing that. Can you ship cremated ashes through the US Postal Service, or is that more of a FedEx job? He thinks about things like that in the large pockets of silence with Laura's parents. Her mother on the kitchen phone and her father in the den. They ask how he's doing, both of them on the phone at once. When will they stop feeling obligated to call?

Just when he thinks about moving on with his life, it's Sunday, and his own mother makes her obligatory phone call. It always starts with her fussing that he needs someone to take care of him.

"You should think about moving back home," she says. "We've left your room exactly the same."

The drained waterbed, a baseball wallpaper trim, the Louisville Slugger propped in the corner, Andrea Curtis's underwear in the cigar box in the third desk drawer. Pale pink bikinis, the white lace torn a little from the elastic waistband.

"Take as long as you need," she says.

James smiles, thinking about the panties.

It doesn't matter that James hasn't said a word; his mother keeps talking about his potential visit. James assures her that he's feeling better since Laura died and doesn't need a visit Ohio. That would depress him more than staying where he is.

"What about Thanksgiving?"

"I'll think about it," he says, but he really wants to tell her to fuck off, her and her suggestions, that even if he were suicidal he wouldn't move back in with his parents. But he's never felt comfortable saying the word "fuck," unlike Laura, whose sentences were populated with the word. And he thinks he shouldn't say "fuck" to his mother.

James finds himself in Laura's closet late in the afternoon the next Saturday, more than three weeks after he has brought Beatrice home. He's not sure why he sits on the floor holding Laura's red suede shoe with the red bow. He doesn't know

where the other shoe is, and he wants to cry, but he can't. He thinks maybe he can't because it's ridiculous sitting in Laura's closet holding her shoe more than seven months after her death.

Beatrice doesn't seem to mind sitting in the closet. She picks up a black Mary Jane and makes the sign for SHOE. She picks up the white strappy sandal and then the brown clog and then the stiletto tan boot and each time makes the sign for SHOE, and he says yes, and she signs SHOE again and again to him, maybe for each of Laura's shoes. When Beatrice bores with the game, she sits with him, hugging the sock monkey. She signs BABY and hands it to him, but he won't take it.

Taking care of Beatrice makes him feel useful, but he feels pathetic sitting in the closet next to her. It isn't right to keep her, to make her a replacement for something that can't be replaced. He loves Beatrice but not in the way he loves Laura. He smiles, knowing how silly that sounds, how insane. Beatrice stares up at him, waiting for the next game. He knows he can't keep her forever, dressed up like a doll. He decides it's time.

For the next few days he distances himself from Beatrice, which makes her angry. He comes home to find clothes on the floor ripped and soiled. She screams when he doesn't pay attention to her, flinging food at the television and at him. She needs to be with other monkeys, to have a family. He thinks about taking her back to the lab or letting her go in the woods or dropping her off at the entrance to the nearest zoo in Seattle, four hours and twenty-five minutes away. He checks Mapquest for driving directions.

On Wednesday afternoon he tells Beatrice to get dressed, but she won't, and when he puts her in her favorite dress, she rips it off and shrieks. James goes out to the truck and puts the carrier on the floor. He puts Beatrice in the seat and pulls the lap belt snug around her, feeling guilty because she should go in a car seat. Her fur is sleek and silver. She looks beautiful and strange without clothes. He looks away. Even at night she wore a nightgown, and he feels awkward touching her warm furry animal coat. She nips him, but it doesn't break the skin. He hands her her little purse packed with seeds and nuts and fruit for snacking, and he opens her window halfway.

James merges onto I-82 towards Yakima. The sun feels nice warming up the truck, and Beatrice chatters on the passenger side. She digs into her purse and eats the dried apricots first. The breeze ruffles her fur.

James arrives at the Seattle Zoo as it starts to get dark. The lights flicker and hover, not quite on, in the parking lot. Cars drive out and away from the zoo, and James knows he can turn around and go home and keep Beatrice. No one will know.

James pulls up to the entrance, away from the parking spaces, and takes a deep breath. He doesn't know whether he can leave her there and he's worried about

someone finding her and he's worried about getting caught. It doesn't matter that James wants her to live in a bigger habitat, more like the jungles in Africa; the zoo will have to suffice. He scoops her up out of the seat, and she hugs his neck and tries to give him the sock monkey. She won't stop squawking until he takes it. He puts her in the carrier and walks up to the large wrought-iron gates. He places the carrier inside the gate and then rings the bell. Beatrice stares at him through the cage, her black fingers gripping the door. She signs BABY. James holds it out to her, but she looks away. He calls her name, but she won't turn around.

James walks back to the truck, the sock monkey tight in his hand.