

Apes of Wrath

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2003

From the Associated Press (which did such a bang-up job on the Iraq war), dateline Boston, September 29, 2003: A 300-pound gorilla will be kept off display after it escaped from its zoo enclosure and roamed through the Franklin Park Zoo and along nearby streets for nearly two hours before it was sedated with tranquilizer darts, according to Zoo New England CEO and President John Linehan.

Even zoos, it turns out, have CEO's. Undoubtedly so do circuses, and I don't mean the one in Washington, and so does every other institution which once thrilled children with icons and images and visions of another life, a life of magic and marvel. Of course now they view images quite as exciting or more so when they go on-line. But a zoo or a circus (they are not too different), even in our flattened down era, puts on a show which, for all its phoniness, surpasses anything virtual.

18-year-old Courtney Roberson worked at the zoo and was taking 2-year-old Nia Scott, her friend's little sister, for an outing when Little Joe escaped, according to family members. The gorilla grabbed the child, threw her to the ground and jumped on her, according to Dale McNeil, Scott's godmother.

If so, there was remarkably little harm done: "Neither zoo officials nor Boston Police could provide any information on the injuries. But family members said Scott had a gash on her cheek and needed several stitches. Roberson [who was not thrown to the ground and jumped] was bitten on the back and scratched on the leg, said her mother, Shamika Woumm." (I find her name even less likely than her story.) Clearly the family members saw their chance for a score and wasted no time creating evidence. The accusations against Little Joe are grave but, I suspect, self-serving. If a 300 pound gorilla jumped on a two year old girl, I would expect her to incur serious injury, if not death, but probably not just a gash on the cheek. For a rounded picture, we need to look at it from Little Joe's point of view. From the Associated Press we further learn: In August, the 5 foot, adolescent gorilla also escaped from its section of the Tropical Forest exhibit, which had a 12-foot-wide, 12-foot-deep, moat. No one was hurt then, and zoo officials installed electrified wires to keep him from escaping again.

The Associated Press story, aided by the family's litigation-oriented statements, is all too obviously scripted under the influence of the King Kong and Mighty Joe Young films, with adjustments for details. Little Nia Scott is Fay Wray. Mighty — er, Little Joe is framed, perhaps literally, by these evocative antecedents, which it is not necessary for the word-thrifty Associated

Pressman to mention because they are deeply rooted in popular consciousness. Little Joe, at a first pass from the sensitive, anonymous Associated Press reporter, is strikingly depicted as an African American rapist: “The gorilla grabbed the child, threw her to the ground and jumped on her, according to Dale McNeil, Scott’s godmother.” Then, and only after that impression has sunk in, the AP journalist indicates that Little Joe is perhaps as much like Houdini as he is like King Kong. Little Joe has twice thwarted the best efforts of his captors to hold him in bondage. Not a 12 foot moat, not even an electrified fence stopped the 5 foot tall, 300 pound young primate.

The movie the AP guy should have reviewed, at least in his mind, before writing his story was not King Kong or Mighty Joe Young but *The Great Escape*. Young male gorillas like Little Joe, who was born in captivity, pose problems because of their agility and restlessness, according to Linehan. “They go through a stage where, physically and psychologically, they’re growing much stronger, and become much more lean and long, and containment can be an increasing challenge at that age,” he said.

Other young male primates go through the same stage. Some of them formed the anarchist Black Blocs in Seattle, Genoa and elsewhere. Others disperse their “agility and restlessness” in frat parties, liberal politics, music subcultures or even by joining the Army to meet cute dumb hillbillies like “Daisy Mae” Jessica Lynch. As that astute psychologist/CEO Linehan explains, they go through a stage where they’re becoming strong (which, after the indignities of childhood, is a heady realization) and naturally they cast about for something to test their strength against. For Little Joe, there was an only and obvious challenge: his captivity.

I used to live in the Boston area and I knew exactly where Little Joe escaped from, and where he was recaptured. Needless to say, there was nowhere for him to live in Boston as the magnificent animal that he is. He would not survive the coming winter. And since he was born in captivity, he would not even survive in the rain forest where gorillas belong, were he released there.

This the CEO obviously does not intend for his investment, since Little Joe is one of 6 of the exhibition gorillas he has acquired since 1998. Except that now Little Joe, after his recent adventure, is not on exhibit – he’s locked down – which is perhaps a partial victory for Little Joe. I remember Charlton Heston, in *Spartacus*, howling in his cell, “I am not an animal!” Would it have made any difference if he were?

Truth being, as Nietzsche taught us, multi-perspectival, we might set the measured, classical restraint of the Associated Press story beside the romantic exuberance of the version in the *New York Daily News* (“Teen Was Helpless Against Raging Ape,” Sept. 30, 2003). Much of the story is the same, as we might expect, since the writers are both American Journalists pledged to Objectivity, but the *Daily News* story focuses on the romantic interest. For it seems that Little Joe is not the only 300 pound adolescent primate in the picture. “He was too strong for me, and I’m a big person,” says teenage nanny and zoo employee Courtney Roberson. “I weigh close to 300 pounds.” In this, slightly more plausible version, Little Joe knocked Little Nia out of Roberson’s hands “and stomped on her before going after Roberson again.” There is nothing about what happened to Roberson, or what happened at all, after Little Joe’s “going after” her. Presumably he did nothing ungentlemanly. Since the incidents recounted could not have taken more than a minute, and Little Joe was on the loose for two hours, evidently once he got a good look at Roberson he betook himself elsewhere. Love hath no fury like a woman scorned. And did Little Joe “jump on” Little Nia (AP) or “stomp” on her (*Daily News*)?

According to Nia’s godmother, “When he snatched the baby, the gorilla took the baby and ran with it. And when he went to run, he turned around and he looked at Courtney and he

dropped the baby and ran after Courtney” — contradicting her immediately previous statement that Little Joe stomped Little Nia. Dropping is not stomping. Or did he drop-kick her? By the time the case comes to trial, I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. The *Daily News*, then, departs from the Hollywood paradigm of the Associated Press — this is not a Fay Wray situation at all. Here the helpless, innocent human female, Little Nia, was a sort of bystander who got in the way. This was something between Little Joe and Big Courtney Roberson, who probably looked more like a young female gorilla in heat than any animal the born-in-captivity, hormonally charged up Little Joe had ever seen. She may have played on that. There’s some monkey business here. After Little Joe’s August breakout, “zoo officials installed electrified wires to keep him from escaping again,” in addition to the 12 foot wide, 12 foot deep moat. How did he get past all of that? “There’s a lot we have to find out, and we’ll be reviewing what happened,” as CEO Linehan is quoted in both stories as saying, so it must be true. I have a theory. It was an inside job. Little Joe got out just before closing time, i.e., just when many zoo employees were probably getting off work. I think Big Courtney Roberson was one of them. She claims to have been taking Little Nia “for an outing” — not at the zoo, which was closing — but apparently right outside, although the neighborhood has no other attractions. I think Roberson, recalling the publicity around Little Joe’s first escape, turned off the juice and let him out, and then planted herself, babe in hand, in his path. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were the aggressor. I think what Courtney was courting was a juicy lawsuit, or a tryst, or both.

If I am right, the “raging ape” was the victim here in a most immediate way. He was set up and he was exploited. But if I am wrong he is still a victim, but in that case not the only one. Incarceration in a zoo is a far more serious wrong than a bite on the back from a runaway gorilla.

Now that we know that we share something like 98% of our DNA with Little Joe and his kind, we might rethink our relations with gorillas. About 15 years ago, a visiting Slovenian anarchist, Gregor Tomc, joined me for a visit to the renowned Washington Zoo. An anti-Communist dissident, he was especially curious to see the pandas donated by the Red Chinese. (Nobody calls them the “Red Chinese” any more. Why not? They haven’t changed.) The monkey house depressed him: “They’re too human,” he said.

I know what he meant. I spent a minute alone before a gorilla in a cage. I looked him in the eye and he looked me in the eye. Anyone could see the intelligence and the pain — and it was in his eyes too. Tomc was quite right but I would rephrase what he said. ‘We’re too animal’ is more like it. The enslavement of Little Joe and so many other animals eerily reminiscent of ourselves really indicates our failure to come to terms with our own nature, which is an animal nature. In domesticating animals we have made ourselves the ultimate domesticated animal. For us to escape, on an individual basis, from civilization — from the state, the market, the class system, from religions and moralities — that is scarcely more realistic than for Little Joe to pass a quiet winter in Boston where he was recaptured, “near a football stadium.”

But we do differ in an important way from our fellow animals. We have language. Recent research establishes that this is not the qualitative break it was long thought to be. Gorillas appear to have a rudimentary vernacular language, and they can even be taught English sign language in controlled circumstances. Noam Chomsky does not believe this, not because it isn’t true, but because it refutes his Cartesian linguistic theory. He is like those 16th century prelates who looked through Galileo’s telescope and denied what they saw because it could not be true.

In tribute to Chomsky’s Scholastic obtuseness, the researchers who study Koko and her fellow gorillas have named their dumbest gorilla student “Nim Chimsky.” Language — especially

written language — has served as an instrument of domination. Like most truths about the life we live, this one sounds extravagant or overstated or metaphorical, but that is only because it is so difficult to stand apart from that life, if only in thought, to see it as it is. It is a finding of sober archaeological fact that for the first one thousand years of writing (in ancient Sumer — now known as Iraq), it was devoted exclusively to government record-keeping and occasional chest-thumping by the Ozymandias-style autocrats who still rule in the Cradle of Civilization, only now they are American. Literacy was so restricted to bureaucrats that Hammurabi, for instance, probably could not read the Code of Hammurabi. Now history is not necessarily destiny, but it certainly should inform those who would be makers of destiny, if they know what's good for them.

The question is whether there is any other way than through language to get out of what language has gotten us into. Even those who say “no” contradict what they say just by saying it. Language posits the only possibility, if there is one, of the Great Escape. And it has to be a Great Escape, a collective adventure, because anything less than that is just like Little Joe busting out to — to where? to what? That's just it. Little Joe got out, but while he had a place to escape from, he had no place to escape to. I wonder what he thought of the streets of Boston which he wandered for two hours. He could hardly have found there what he was looking for, if he'd even thought that far ahead. I know I never did.

I have given my reasons for doubting whether Little Joe went ape, but even if he did, going ape is something apes never do in the wild and in the society (for they have one) of other apes. Going human is really a better, if also an inadequate description of what he is accused of doing. Our prisons — our human zoos — are filled with humans who have gone ape, which really just means, stir-crazy. They experience domestication literally with a vengeance. Elsewhere, in school or in the workplace, it's not usually so obvious. But your boss has made a monkey out of you all the same. Alexander Pope wrote a couplet — about a dog, not an ape, but he was saying the same thing I am (Kew was a royal palace):

*I am his Highness' dog at Kew
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?*

Free Little Joe and all other political prisoners! A zoo and a circus — these words are not only effective metaphors for our civilized society, they really surpass metaphor by verging on straight reportage, much like the Objective reportage of the Associated Press and the *Daily News*. It is no accident that we so often reach for one of these words to disparage some feature of the political or social scene. They fit the hand so well. It never required DNA evidence, not for anyone “with ears to see,” as Ivan Stang once phrased it, to notice that the animals deservedly called the great apes are amazingly like ourselves. I have never understood how any creationist moron could visit a zoo and look at the primates and come away with his Bible bigotry intact. He is, I suppose, our own Nim Chimsky. Unfortunately, our Nim Chimsky has the right to vote.

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