

## MONKEY IN THE MIDDLE

Don parked his van in the driveway, got out, slid the door to the side and gently lifted a gift-wrapped box. He took it to the front porch and set it on the wide planks; something grunted inside the sparkly paper. He quietly unlocked the front door and peeled inside: Amy, Amanda, and Carter occupied the living-room couch watching some TV show. From time to time, they fished handfuls of popcorn out of two big buckets set on the low coffee-table in front of them. Don opened the door wider, picked up the box and tiptoed into the house.

“Kids, I’ve got something for you!”

Three heads turned towards him, the eyes full of anticipation.

“What is it, Dad?” The girls jumped to their feet and rushed towards the big box. “What IS it?”

“A present for all of you,” said Don, unzipping his raincoat. “A gift I’ve got for your graduations.” Don smiled, hugging each one of his children.

“Let’s unwrap it then,” said Amy, impatiently. “Come on, guys! Let’s see what’s inside.”

Six little hands tore the colorful wrap-paper off. Three pairs of eyes looked incredulously at the cage with something alive inside. Don flipped the switch, and the fixture on the ceiling cast light on—

“A monkey!” screamed Carter. The girls giggled. “A live monkey! Where did you get it, Dad?”

“First of all, it’s a he,” Don reasoned. “Second of all, yes, it’s a monkey. You three have been bugging me for a pet so I decided to give you something that is not a cat, or a dog, or a hamster.”

“Hamsters are stupid!” Amanda injected. “I hate them.”

“I like them!” Amy, the eldest, just had to contradict her sister. “I’ve had a hamster once. Remember?”

“Uh-huh!” Amanda grinned. “It died ‘cause you forgot to feed it.”

“She! Not it!” Amy pushed her sister lightly. “And it wasn’t ‘cause I forgot to feed it.” She screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Whatever!”

“Kids! Kids!” Don intervened. “You’ll have to promise me that you’ll take care of the monkey.”

“Yes, Da-a-ad!”

“Aren’t we supposed to come up with some soft of a name for him?” Carter squatted by the cage looking through the metal grid. “He *has* to have a name.”

All four of them looked at the animal: a pair of black, beady eyes was staring at them from a black leathery face(?) haloed with straight dark whiskers(?).

“Let’s call him... Robert!” Amy sounded excited. “He looks exactly like that monkey in that movie.”

“What movie?” Amanda turned towards her sister. “I don’t remember any movies with a Robert the Monkey!”

“OF COURSE, you don’t! You can’t remember what guy is your boyfriend at the moment!”

“Shut up! I don’t have a boyfriend!”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t. *Of course* you don’t!”

“Kids! Let’s call him Robert then! Carter?”

“I don’t care, Dad. Whatever they say,” Carter shrugged and away from the cage. “I don’t like this thing.”

“It’s not a thing, stupid!” Amanda yelled at her brother. “It’s a MONKEY!”

“I know it’s a monkey! Just because I’m younger, you think you can push me around, eh?” He lowered himself onto the sofa. “I don’t care about this monkey at all! If you want, you can take care of it. I’m out!”

“No, no, no,” Debbie entered the room. “Your Dad and I thought it would be a nice present for you, Carter, on your elementary school graduation. For you, Amanda, on your finishing the fifth grade. And for you, Amy, on your finishing the seventh grade. It will also teach you responsibility and how to take care of animals. And you’re raising all the Hell possible!”

“But, Mom! Cart doesn’t want to take care of Rob!”

You’ve already given him a name! It’s great!” Debbie kissed her husband softly. “They’re such a bunch!” She laughed.

“Yes, they are,” Don said. “Yes, they are.”

“Dad, Rob will need a leash. And where is he gonna sleep? Will he need some sort of diapers, or what?” Amy opened the door, and the monkey stepped out of the cage, dragging its knuckles on the ground. It sniffed the air with its upturned flat nose with huge nostrils.

“Do you think he’s hungry?” Amy touched the monkey on its head; the animal grinned. “What should we give him? Bananas?”

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Before long, Rob had become a family member. The girls were taking care of him giving him baths, changing his diapers, braiding his hair. Don could never predict, what style they would fashion the unruly shrubbery in - sometimes, it looked like a poisonous mushroom; sometimes, the highly elaborated braids ran up and down its head. Sometimes, and it made Don laugh hysterically, the girls styled the hair in what he called ‘Poofs!’ – the popcorn-like balls all over the monkey’s head.

Then, the food started to disappear. At first, it was something left on the kitchen counter or on the table. Then, this or that box was found torn open, its contents missing and crumbs were all over the place. They blamed Carter, but wasn’t him.

Early in the morning, Don went to the kitchen for a glass of water and stopped dead in the doorway: The door of one of the upper cabinets were wide open, a box of

cookies torn, and Rob the Monkey was presiding over a heap of cookies stuffing them in his mouth and munching on them loudly.

“You f\*\*\*ing animal! You’ve been stealing our food!” he rushed towards the monkey and dragged it off the counter by its leather collar. “I’ll show you how to steal!”

Mumbling something, Don threw the monkey into the cage and locked the mesh door.

Debbie and the kids found Don in the garage. The doors of the kitchen cabinets were strewn all over, the power tools were plugged in each and every socket available in the brightly lit addition. Don was sweating profusely, drilling the holes and installing the looks in the bright light wood.

“Give me that Philips!” He addressed Carter who was looking at the mess with the curious eyes.

“What's the matter, honey? Why's Rob in his cage?”

“Why?” Don screamed at no one in particular. “Because this dumb animal's been stealing food! I've just caught this dumbass on the countertop pigging on the cookies! That's why!”

“You don't have to yell, honey. We all understand how upset you are.”

“Upset? Just upset? You think I'm JUST upset?” Don's face became as red as a beet. “I'm not upset! I'm totally— “

“You don't have to scream and shout in front of the kids.”

“I apologize,” Don calmed down. “Carter, get me some sandpaper. Fine grade will be okay.”

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“I don't have my home-work, Miss Finch,” Amanda lowered her eyes. “Rob ate it.”

The class burst into laughter; the girl blushed and lowered her eyes.

“Who did what to your home-work?” Miss Finch looked at her student from under the half-moons of her glasses. “The monkey ate it,” Amanda whispered.

“Of all excuses, I've never heard THAT one! And I've worked at school for almost twenty years!”

“But it's true, Miss Finch! He tore my report into pieces and ate it,” the girl was at the verge of crying. “I couldn't do anything about it.”

“You'll stay after classes and do your home-work.”

“Yes, Miss Finch,” Amanda blushed.

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“Where are my car keys?” Don was walking fast around the house lifting this or that cushion, looking behind the chairs and on all the surfaces. “Where the hell are my car keys? Where are my f\*\*\*ing KEYS?!!!! I'm LATE for my f\*\*\*ing work!!!”

The keys were nowhere to be found. Don was pacing through the first floor rooms, fuming and getting angrier and angrier. “WHERE ARE THE KEYS?!!!!”

It was a vacation time, and the kids, in their pyjamas, yawning and stretching, crowded the staircase. They were a bit worried, watching their father getting closer and closer to a heart attack. Amanda sat down on a stair and looked into the kitchen: Something was glistening in the rays of the morning sun that flooded the kitchen. Something was glistening—

“Dad, they are in the kitchen aquarium!” Amanda rushed towards the glass tank and plunged her hand into the water. “Look! Here they are!”

“What the \*\*\*\*! Who's put them in here?!!!” Don looked at the cage - Rob was giving him a huge grin. Don could catch a glimpse of an utmost satisfaction in the animal's eyes. Or, so it seemed to him. “Dumb animal! If I weren't in a hurry—“

And, grabbing his briefcase, Don stormed out of the house, and into the van.

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“Dad! Rob is spying on me!” Amy lowered herself on the carpet by her father's legs. “He does it all the time. What should I do?”

“Lock your door,” Don resumed watching *The Little House on the Prairie*. “Keep your door locked and stop bugging me with all this nonsense.”

“It's not *this nonsense*! He spies on me!”

“Then put him into his cage and keep him there.”

Amy shrugged and left the room. The phone rang; she picked up the receiver, listened for a second, and yelled, "Amanda, it's your boyfriend!"

"Shut up! I don't have a boyfriend! Who is it?"

"Some guy... What's your name again?" Amy paused. "Sparky? He says his name is Sparky!"

"Mandy has a boyfriend! Mandy has a boyfriend!" Carter chanted, munching on the cookies at the kitchen table. "Mandy has a boyfriend!"

"Shut up, Cart! Go outside and roll in the snow, retard! Or, go and play in traffic!" Amanda descended the stairs and picked up the phone. "Stupid idiots!" she hissed. "Yeah?"

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"Where's my cell phone?!!! Where the f\*\*\* is my cell phone?" Don was combing through the house. The task made him to get down on his knees to look under the chairs and arm-chairs, or to get on all fours to look into the narrow slits of the heavy furniture. "Has anybody seen my cell phone?"

"Why wouldn't you call your cell and find out where it is?" With intelligence so characteristic to her, Debbie remarked in passing her husband who had star-fished himself on the office-room floor. There was nothing under the desk, except some pieces of paper, assorted paper clips, and thumbtacks.

"Call my cell phone?" He contemplated for a while. "I'm not sure it's on."

He picked up the phone anyway and dialed the number. He heard a familiar ring tone somewhere in the house. Twice. And then, his voicemail kicked in. He went to the living room and pressed 'Redial'.

Again, the familiar ring tone.

In a distance. Somewhere in the house.

And his voicemail kicked in.

Again.

He went to the kitchen and dialled the number. The familiar ring tone.

Closer.

His voicemail kicked in.

“I’ll kill that bitch in the store! Why did I have to follow her retarded advice and set my voicemail to answer after two rings?” He fumed.

His voicemail kicked in.

“BITCH!” He yelled at the phone.

He dialled the number and climbed onto the kitchen counter and looked at the cabinet top. His LG had spread itself comfortably on the dusty surface, with its screen smugly telling Don that he had “Missed 6 calls”.

He noticed that Rob was giving him an arrogant, nasty smile; his upper lip curved out showing his big teeth.

“BITCH!” Don yelled at the animal and stormed out of the house.

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“Kids, we’re going pumpkin hunting!”

“Yeeeah!”

Don dialled the number. The ring tone sounded very close.

His voicemail kicked in.

“BITCH!” He yelled at the phone.

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“Kids, we’re going pumpkin hunting!”

“Yeeeah!”

They crowded into the van and departed to one of the apple farms not far from Toledo. As usual, they were picking up apples. As usual, the kids were selecting pumpkins they were capable of carrying.

“Dad, remember I picked up that tiny apple? I mean, you helped me pick it up?” Amanda gave him a smile. “I still remember where the tree is,” the girl pointed at one of the apple-trees at a distance. “That one. Remember? It was still on the branch, and it was too high. And you lowered the brunch so I could hold the apple in my hand.”

“Yea, I remember,” Don said.

“And you took a picture. Remember?” She sighed. “I still remember how windy it was! The wind mussed my hair up. I think Carter wasn't born yet. Right, Dad?”

“Right.”

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He brought the monkey to school, and the blue-shirted security man said that he couldn't have a monkey in the class-room. However, Mr. K, the teacher, said it was okay. Rob the Monkey grumbled something. Something that sounded like, *Give me a pencil! I need a tutor!*

Mr. K said that he would give Rob a tutor, and a two hundred-forty-pound man entered the room. He was almost seven feet tall, his hair resembled a mop head, the pinheads of his eyes glistened from under the extremely bushy eye-brows in his a hit distorted, wide face. A



leather bandoleer crossed his wide chest; however, instead of bullets, he had pin-point sharp pencils in it.

“I will be your tutor,” said the two-hundred-pounder lowering himself heavily on a chair across Rob. “Did you say you needed a pencil?”

Rob the Monkey grunted something in agreement.

“I can’t understand you, man! But let’s raise your reading score at least one grade.”

He handcuffed Rob the Monkey to the desk and locked each of his fingers in some sort of cylinder steel restraints attached to the desktop. Then, the tutor slipped a pencil out of the bandoleer and placed the pin point on the monkey's finger. He fished a mallet out of his pocket and—

WHAM!

Don, covered with a cold sweat, woke up and sat up on the bed. A tense, dead silence and the heat of the bed-room enveloped him — the blades of the ceiling fan were motionless and no cool air reached the bed. He backhanded the beads of sweat off his forehead and looked at his wife by his side. Debbie didn’t stir; she was deeply in her peaceful sleep.

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It was an abandoned water-mill not far from their house. Before Carter was born, the girls used to walk over there and play in the mysterious semidarkness of the old wood-and-fieldstone construction. When their younger brother was old enough to join them, the girls showed him all the nooks and passages and beams and ladders of the mill. By accident, they had found out how to make the grinding stones turn, and the squeaking sounds of the stones made the girls scared. They found a sack of wheat in one of the corners of the mill and, thrilled, watched white flour streaming onto the flagstone-covered floor.

In the summer, they used the huge wooden wheel outside as a spring board: The three of them would climb up the ladder and, through a tiny window in the wall, they would step onto the shaky wheel. Yelling wildly like savages, they would jump into the deep water pool by the foot of the wheel, trying not to hit the low stone wall that stream.

In the winter, they would lit the fire place in one of the corners. They would take their coats off and sit on them in front of the fire. Its light, mixed with the dim light of a camp lantern, would throw the huge, shaking shadows onto the dark wooden walls and they would tell horror stories about people drowned in the pool or caught inside a mill in a blizzard.

Or, if the snow was thick enough, they would ski down the steep hill that lay across the frozen creek. And after skiing, they would go inside of the mill to light fire, have hot tea from the green Thermos, and tell the horror stories.

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“Dad, Rob has torn my book again!”

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“Dad, Rob has pooped on my bed!!!!”

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“Mom!!! Rob ate all my cookies!!!!!!”

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They took Rob the Monkey for a walk. Amanda looped the leash around her hand; Amy was holding his paw. Carter dragged his feet in their wake, mumbling something and complaining about the bumps and unexpected tiny potholes. They were crossing a vast field full the scents of the spring soil, partially covered with snow. The bright sun in a light blue sky was doing its best to remove the remaining memories of the winter. A light spring breeze was mussing the girls' long hair, gently caressing their faces. In a little while, they reached the mill.

The door opened with a screech, and the children entered the silent structure. The afternoon light, its rays slanting through the dusty air, entered the mill through the cracks in the walls, through the tiny windows with missing or broken panes. Shivering, Amanda started a fire in the grate.

They tied Rob to one of the rings on the wall and sat in a circle by the fire. They kept silent for some time.

“I never liked him,” Carter said, breaking the silence.

“Same here,” Amy’s whisper was barely audible above the creaking sounds of the old mill. “I hate this creature.”

“What will Dad say when he finds out?” Amanda ran her hand over her long hair and rolled a bang around her fore-finger. “Do you think he’ll be mad?”

“I don't know,” Carter ventured. “I think he may be.”

“Oh, shut up, you two! Always scared of something or someone!” Amy waived her hand and grinned. “And even if he's mad at us, so what? It's been done, and over!”

A gust of a cold wind blew through the huge room; a whining, almost funereal, sound from somewhere in the corner made them shiver.

“Are you cold or are you chickening out, boy?”

“I’m not chickening out! Let’s do it!”

They rose to their feet and started the mill. The wheel outside was turning and turning, making the familiar squeaking and screeching noises; Amanda pulled a handle and put the grinding stones into action.

The girls dragged Rob the Monkey towards one of the supporting pillars and tied him to it with the leash; a shadow of fear appeared in the ugly, beady eyes of the animal. Amy took a switchblade out of her pocket and whispered, “I had to borrow it from Dad, see?” She recklessly shaved the monkey's face, leaving bleeding cuts all over the leathery skin. She shaved the rest of the scalp with the same recklessness, and the beads of blood started to trickle onto Rob's shoulders and chest. “Now I know what ‘a bloody monkey’ means.” She pronounced triumphantly.

Amanda found a steel rod and approached the animal. She uttered in a menacing whisper, barely audible above the noise made by the rotating wheels, ”You fucker... Stealing from us... Destroying our stuff... We should have scalped your ugly watermelon...” She looked into his eyes, swaying the rod in her hand. “Keeping silent, eh? I’m so sick of you!”

She hit Rob the Monkey across his face; something cracked noisily, and the lower part of the face turned into a protruding sack. Rob the Monkey whined. “You fucker!” Amanda screamed. Getting more and more enraged, she started to slam the rod on Rob's arms, shoulders, hind legs. Some of the hits ended up on the ribcage, crashing and cracking most of the bones.

Amy found an old horseshoe and, holding it firmly at the base, placed the ends under Rob's chin and tilted his head up. Then, she quickly let the head go and horseshoed the already broken jaw in a perfect uppercut. Rob the Monkey grunted; the blood rushed out of the half-opened month.

Carter cut the ropes with the switchblade, grabbed Rob by the back of the neck and smashed his face against the floor. He undid the leather collar and throw it out of the window. A loud splash came over the screeching sounds of the mill. Carter smashed Rob's face against the floor once more. They lifted the lid covering the grinding stones, threw the monkey inside, and, with a bang, closed the lid.

A piercing shriek rang in the air, deafening them; the mill shook at its very foundation. The grinding stones stopped for a second and then resumed their turning round and round. A thin stream of blood started to pour out of the opening on the side of the wooden case, while the grinding continued within. Patches of fur and fragments of bones followed the blood, and then—

“Is it mincing him, or what?” Amanda asked, unmoved with the spectacle in front of her. Calm, she was rolling a bang around her fore-finger. “We could make some hamburgers I guess,” she chuckled. “Or, should I say, CHIMPburgers?” The girls burst into laughter.

“You're sick, Mandy!” Carter yelled and turned away from his older sister. And threw up on the floor. “You're sick!”

Grinning, Amy pointed at something that had just rolled out of the opening. “Look! It's the monkey's eye! Amanda kicked the eye with her foot, sending it towards the wall. With a nasty plop, the eye smashed against the wooden planks.

The stones were turning and turning, and the entire mill was shaking violently. Suddenly, all the remaining window panes cracked with the sound of a rifle shot and the shards

of glass flew all over the place; some dirt and pieces of wood started falling down from the ceiling. A narrow crack zigzagged across the floor.

“Let's get out of here!” Carter screamed. “Now! Let's go!”

The floor started pitching and rolling under their feet like the deck of a ship caught in a violent storm. Avoiding the larger pieces of wood and whole planks raining onto the floor around them, Amy, Amanda, and Carter darted towards the door and rushed out of the mill.

With interest and horror in their eyes, they the huge wheel detaching itself from the outer wall and collapsing into the creek, splashing water all over the place. Then, with a deafening noise, the walls gave in and crumbled into a heap of rubbish. A thick cloud of dust ascended into the air, partially blocking the spring sun. The mill was there no more.

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“Where's Rob?” Biting into the apple, Amy roamed about the house. “Has anybody seen Rob? Dad? Mom? Amanda? Carter? Where's our silly monkey gone I wonder?”