

## Monkey Puzzle

An ordinary day dawned. The sky blossomed deep cherry before clouding over marshmallow white. I had things on my mind: the hike in the price of milk, which I get delivered in bottles to my door; the overpowering smell of last night's smoked haddock when I opened the bin to dispose of my teabag; the still-missing teenager last seen over a week ago as she made her way home at midnight.

I decided to take my stick today as my knee was threatening to do its collapsing routine. I walked a few yards from my front door to the spot where the wider pavement and distance from the swerve in the road make it safer. I looked both ways then crossed when it was clear. The Victorian park with its circumference of iron railings opens its gates from early morning to dusk. I entered.

I made my way, gingerly, up the gentle green knoll towards the walled garden, my favourite haunt, eager to check if any of yesterday's buds had opened. As I came closer to the old flint wall, I stopped in my tracks at the sight of an opening I'd never previously noticed. I bent down to take a closer look. I was not mistaken. There was a gap in the wall which looked like it was made for a child. The top was level with my stomach. The width looked like it would allow a determined human to squeeze through.

I rested my stick against the wall and lowered my body down to take a closer look. I couldn't see through to the other side. It was completely dark, a tunnel rather than an archway. Unable to sustain a squat, I dropped down on all fours and crawled in.

In a blink of the eye, I could see nothing. It was as if the sun had been snuffed out, leaving me to fend for myself with only four senses intact. It smelt slightly tart, like fresh tarmac. It was dry and cool, airy, not at all claustrophobic. As I moved forward, I could hear the rustling of foliage and imagined the taste of a plum in my mouth, the joyous moment of biting through the dense purple skin to release the sweet, warm yellow juices.

That's when I emerged into a clearing. I regained my full height and took a panoramic sweep of my surroundings. A modest circular area was defined by bushes and shrubs. Hills filled the middle distance. But right in front of me was a bench, an inviting sight. I took advantage and sat myself on the sturdy wooden frame, to take stock of my situation.

The clearing itself was grassy, slightly overgrown, but certainly an area that was looked after. Wild flowers spiked their bright colours around the perimeter: blood red poppies, dusky cornflowers, brazen marigolds, wild lupins. In the centre of the circle grew an exotic tree, like a tropical palm but so tall that I couldn't see the top. The sun glinted into the slits of my eyelids as I squinted upwards.

I returned my gaze to earth as I sensed a presence next to me. I turned to find a sizable chimpanzee alongside me on the bench. He wore a quizzical expression and stroked his chin with a hairy hand. His legs splayed out before him as the bench was too

wide for him to sit with knees bent and feet on the ground. His deep brown eyes searched mine.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he asked, raising the half-moons of his eyebrows.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘I don’t think I do, although I am experiencing a particularly strong *déjà vu*.’

I turned away and scuffed the ground with my feet. It was littered with pine cones and broken shells. When I looked again, I expected him to be gone but his cheeky face was still there.

‘Come,’ he said, climbing down from the bench and heading towards the tall tree. ‘Follow me,’ he urged, over his shoulder, so I did.

He scaled the tree like a koala. There were no branches, no leaves. The tree trunk had a crusty surface and once I got the hang of it, I was able to gain some purchase in the thick bark with my fingers and find footholds to lever myself upwards. In my mind, I became a monkey too and lost my fear of climbing.

Before long we had reached a great height. It was like being at the top of the Monument or Nelson’s Column. I’d been so engrossed in each move that it came as a surprise when the monkey disappeared inside a cocoon of garish peacock feathers. I pushed my way in behind him and we both reclined, comfortably cosseted, inside our feather bower with its formidable look-out.

Above us was pure azure. In the distance was the shimmer of water. The hills, far below, looked like the folds of a woollen blanket. The air smelled of coconut. I felt safe, as if the universe had put its arms around me. I dozed off for a moment and came to with a start. The monkey was watching me with a serious expression.

‘Everything looks different from here, doesn’t it,’ he suggested. ‘Collect your thoughts and impressions. Make a memory of this moment.’

I tried, but I couldn’t push away the worry of how to get back down again. My head was starting to swim.

‘Let go,’ he said. And as I heard his words, I found myself looking up at the tree, my feet on the ground once again. It was as if the world had turned on its axis and here I was, in the same place, with a reverse perspective. I wanted to ask the monkey to explain what was happening but I couldn’t seem to frame the questions correctly, so I stayed silent.

When I next looked at him, his face, close to mine, had turned into a skull and I too had shed my flesh to become a skeleton, a collection of ivory bones. But the vision passed and now the monkey was playing on a swing near the tree. I laughed. At the edge of the circle was a doll-like figure in a hat. Then I saw another and another, a line of dolls all dressed like kings and queens, a series of fleeting images like in a child’s flick book.

I could hear drumming, remote at first then drawing closer. Its rhythmic pulse caught me up and made me want to dance. The monkey jumped off the swing and started to frolic in front of me. I shook off the burden of pain that I carry in my spine and moved in time with him. Soon, we were jumping together and punching the air. I was Muhammad Ali, floating like a butterfly, stinging like a bee. Light on my feet, I was shadow fighting with the primate. I was in the dojo slicing the space with high karate kicks.

The drumming came nearer and nearer until it was me making the sounds, my feet and fists stamping against the skin of the drum. On and on it went, the relentless beat, working up to a crescendo. I closed my eyes and could no longer tell the difference between inside and outside.

I woke where I'd fallen, in a heap on the ground. I stirred and found I couldn't move. There was a heaviness on my heart. I opened my eyes and looked. There, reposing on my chest was a vast tortoiseshell she-cat, its emerald eyes like lasers, pinning me down. Her heft was soft and warm. Her purr rumbled deep within me like a train in a tunnel.

I wondered where the monkey was. I could see very little from where I was lying. I guessed I was at the outer edges of the clearing. My body had sunk down into the prickly undergrowth which fizzed with fecund juices, a rank but not unpleasant scent. The cat pushed her paws forward on to my face. Wisps of fur tickled my nose. Her cool spongy pads rested on my mouth. She kept her claws sheathed and seemed simply to be reaching out to me. But still I couldn't move.

After what seemed like an eternity came a prodigious rush of air and I was weightless, soaring up, up into the sky. Level with the clouds, I found myself held securely under the wings of a great white bird. Its horny claws were wrapped around my torso and I was hang-gliding above the scene below which telescoped smaller but ranged wider as we looped the landscape. The bird's flight path was strong and steady. Above me, its head flaunted a vast round face, protruding eyes, hooked beak, and tiny ears that constantly adjusted their position. It was some kind of owl, maybe a massive snowy owl, a dense nap of colourless feathers coating its frame.

Below me, I spied a number of dwellings, neat patches of field and meadow lined with hedgerows, mounds cushioned with mauve heather, acres of dancing gold crops. The blue ocean formed the vanishing point of my vista. From time to time, the owl let out a long spectral hoot that reverberated through the atmosphere and sent smaller birds fluttering, flustered, away from the proximity of his pounding wings.

And now, the owl coiled us round and down, back into the centre of the clearing, circumnavigating the tall tree, lowering me gently to the ground. I could see the wooden bench once more and there was the monkey, looking up from where he sat, waiting and waving to me.

I was glad to see him. He felt like a friend in this cosmos where everything was unexpected, yet my conviction that I'd been here before was with me still. He had a childlike wonder in his eyes as he stretched out his arms to me grasping both my hands in both of his. We stood close together as we watched the owl ascend once more and disappear over the scrubland.

'Which path will you choose?' he asked me, as he indicated the options before us. I saw that there were beaten tracks stretching from the bench in each direction: north, west, south and east. I placed my hand on my heart and took a deep breath.

'I will choose the path that goes east,' I said.

We set off hand in hand, walking in step, out of the clearing, through the wilderness and around the hill where we glimpsed the sea. As we walked, the light became yellow. It was thicker than sunlight, as thick as a yellow duster. There were

sunflowers growing on each side of the path, towering yellow sunflowers each with a velvet-button core and a corolla of silken petals. The air was rich with nectar. The grass was suffused with herbs: camomile, saffron-crocus, cotton lavender, fennel, evening primrose, yarrow, dill. I stopped to pick sprigs of each and bunched them into my pocket.

‘Have you collected what you need?’ the monkey asked, his head aslant to catch my eye as I stood alongside him. I nodded. We continued on a winding route that led us back to the clearing and here the monkey smiled and said farewell.

I looked around and saw the tunnel-like opening that had led me into this place. I crouched down and crawled back through. I was ready this time for the experience of utter darkness before the light poured on me once more.

As I rose to my feet in the park, familiar pains scorched my joints. I swiftly grasped my stick before my balance buckled. The sky was nondescript with clouds that humped like camels and bloated like whales. I admired the purple polo-neck woolly on a passing poodle and marvelled at the number of people with well-dressed dogs who meandered on the grass chatting in a desultory fashion. It was an ordinary day.

I put my hand in my pocket and savoured the prospect of a smoky-hot mug of healing herb tea when I got back indoors after my stroll.

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