

*“It is even harder for the average ape to believe that he has descended from man.”* --- H. L. Mencken

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### Monkey Business (Saturday July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1925)

There was a buzz about town that felt quite out of place. Normally there was no formal celebration of Independence Day in Dayton. But the summer of 1925 was anything but normal. The Progressive Dayton Club had ordered reams of red, white and blue ribbon, and made thousands of bows that hung from every fluted lamppost, tent, table, and chair along the four blocks downtown that had been turned into a pedestrian mall to accommodate the thousands of expected visitors. The mannequins in the department store displays all wore red, white and blue sweaters, pants and scarfs and a ‘Happy Independence Day’ banner was draped between the second-floor windows of the Aqua Hotel. The raised stage on the lawn in front of the courthouse was complete and several workmen were busy running cables and erecting antennas. Hadley identified several out-of-town accents during he and Horace’s Saturday afternoon stroll. But the palpable sense of hope and pride was coming mostly from the cheerful local residents. In fact, Hadley felt it too. In less than a week, easily overlooked Dayton would be hosting the most anticipated court case in decades - what had come to be known as the Monkey Trial.

Hadley had heard Mildred Rhodes abruptly conclude her chitchat with others nearby which meant that she’d seen them walk by on the other side of the street. Then he’d smelled the pipe that Elbert smoked trailing them.

“Do you believe all this?” she eventually asked, obliging him to stop.

“It’s quite a production,” Hadley replied.

“Good morning, Had,” Elbert greeted.

“Elbert. Mildred.”

“Noticed you fixed the time on the clocks in the tower.”

“Horace here did much of the work. I just supervised.”

“It must be so helpful having him around,” Mildred suggested.

“Uncle Hadley exaggerates,” Horace deflected.

“Well, listen to the two of you.” She gratifyingly smiled. “Have you considered maybe staying beyond the summer?”

“I’ve imposed enough already.”

“Well, I promised the lad a soda,” Hadley fibbed hoping for a quick escape. He immediately recognized his mistake.

“You’re going to Robinson’s then?” she seized upon.

“Unless it’s too busy.”

“There will be a wait. Frank hired temporary help soda jerking. But they can’t seem to get the formula just right. Clara always got it just right.”

Hadley sighed.

“Aunt Clara worked as a soda jerk?” Horace picked up upon.

“At Robinson’s. Years ago. That’s actually where she met your uncle.”

A train whistle blasted from the tracks approaching town giving Hadley another idea. Will Morgan had gotten him word that the clock for the courtroom had been delivered yesterday. "I just remembered that there's a package that we need to pick up at the station."

"Maybe you could send Horace to fetch it," Mildred proposed instead. "Elbert has something he would like to address with you."

"I'm afraid the lad would get lost."

"I know the way to the station," Horace assured his uncle.

Hadley thought it likely that he physically grimaced. But Mildred would ignore it if he had. "You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. What's the package?"

"The Dew Drop."

"For the courthouse," Horace recalled.

"It'll be large," Hadley exaggerated. "And heavy."

"I'll manage. Where shall I meet you?"

"Just bring it back to the courthouse."

Once he was gone, Mildred wasted little time prodding her husband. "What was it that you wanted to say to Hadley, dear?"

Elbert cleared his throat. He wasn't nearly as practiced at meddling as she was. But it wasn't proper for her to lead. That meant she'd allow her husband to fumble about getting it started until she got impatient and butted in. He assumed it would be a continuation of the mission he'd failed on previously.

"Mildred, and I," he corrected himself before she had a chance to. "Mildred and I are worried..."

"I told you before there's nothing to be worried about."

"It's just that Margaret saw you at the market."

"Since when does shopping for groceries cause concern?"

"She told Millie that you bought chocolates."

"I like chocolates."

"And flowers," Elbert pressed.

"Jasmine," his wife added.

"I like jasmine too," Hadley defended.

"Horace said he walked in on you dancing the other evening," Mildred finally blurted.

Hadley heard Elbert take a step back which made him feel even more combative. "The lad must have been mistaken about what he saw. Besides, last time I checked dancing wasn't a crime either."

"He said you had out one of her dresses. The sequins one. I doubt a young man could make that kind of detail up."

Hadley swallowed. "I should go and make sure my nephew doesn't get lost."

"Please Hadley. It's not healthy...We just want to help."

"I don't need help," he snapped. "Not yours. Not my snooping nephew's. Not anyone's. Now if you will excuse me."

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Horace had heard the train whistle several more times. He'd exaggerated his memory of the station's location but it was easy enough to follow the column of steam and the sound of the hissing brakes. He was happy to put distance between himself and the conversation that he

imagined was taking place back on the mall. He hadn't intended to tell Mildred anything personal when he'd seen her at the market. But she just kept prying. So he mentioned that he sometimes overheard his uncle singing. Then one evening he'd walked in on him dancing with a dress. Fortunately, he'd stopped himself before telling her that there was a third plate fixed for every meal. And how he'd heard conversations out on the patio. The last thing he wanted to do was to compromise his uncle's trust. But he'd got caught up in the moment. And she was so damn persistent. Besides, there was a part of him that was a little worried too.

There was a 5:30 train that arrived later in the day from Knoxville and this one at 1:30. Both left for Chattanooga thirty minutes later. Because he was in no hurry to return, he found an empty bench along the wall of the station from where he watched the commotion.

Several men wearing dark suits and fedoras, and carrying bulky type-writer cases exited the front car. As familiar as they were with one another, Horace guessed they must be reporters from the northeast. A well-dressed couple was next. Then a family. Once he helped them negotiate the narrow steps, the father slung the two youngest boys upon his shoulders from where they fought with one another over the top of his head. He then collected the hands of the older pair who were tugging against him in opposite directions. The wife followed them cradling a young baby whom she repeatedly stroked and kissed.

Behind them, a short stout man with a thick dark mustache that curled up on the ends paused at the final step down to the platform as a herd of passengers from the second car hurried by to where luggage was being off-loaded. After they passed, he continued taking several stiff steps beyond the foot-traffic then stopped. There he stretched his arms into the air then bent over and came short of touching his toes. He straightened up just in time to watch, of all things, a chimpanzee dressed in a tan three-piece checkered suit, a bow tie and derby hat hop down the steps. Then it teetered upright toward the man and stopped at his side from where it tipped its hat at anyone that made eye contact with it. A few people paused and shook its hand. And when a businessman pulled out a coin, the chimp climbed up his arm, kissed him on the cheek, collected the coin and hopped down. Several people nearby clapped and the chimp bowed. More people reached in their pockets and it patiently went from one to the next until everyone had satisfied their curiosity.

Horace had never been this close to a wild animal before, not that this one was very wild. In fact, it was obviously a performer. He'd been flipping a nickel between his fingers in his pocket trying to decide if he was willing to part with it when the chimp looked right at him and smiled. While the stout man was counting the money it had collected, the chimp strode over and sat next to him on the bench. Horace pulled out the nickel then froze just as a girl with curly blond hair stepped onto the platform. Then she headed directly toward the remaining baggage: a wooden crate and an overstuffed luggage bag held together with several loops of twine. As he stared, he felt something tugging his shirt. He glanced down and the chimp playfully flashed him a mouth full of white teeth. Horace handed it the nickel then resumed watching the girl flip over the crate so that the label faced up. She was wearing thick baggy slacks that were being held up by a belt that nearly went around her narrow waist twice. She also had on a faded white button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves beneath an opened vest. Before he knew it, he had stood and was headed toward her.

"Can I give you a hand with that?" he offered.

"I can manage," she said without looking in his direction.

"I'm sure you can. Still, I wouldn't feel right having a delicate young lady..."

"Delicate?" she said as she turned and glowered. Her eyes were so strikingly blue that he ignored their warning to leave her alone.

“Maybe delicate wasn’t the right word,” he backpedaled.

She continued glaring at him as a bead of sweat ran over her pink cheeks. “What would be the right word then?”

“Definitely not delicate.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she further challenged as she planted her hands firmly on her hips for emphasis.

“Just that you clearly don’t need help.”

She wiped away the sweat then blew aside a curl of her hair that had fallen over her eye. When it fell right back to the same spot, she blew it again more forcefully.

He smiled because it was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. “Look. I’m sorry if I offended you. I didn’t mean to. I just thought maybe you wouldn’t mind if I helped with your things.”

He noticed her attention get distracted toward something beyond his shoulder and recognized an opportunity to shift things away from an unfortunate first impression. “Oh. Did you see that monkey?”

“We were on the same train car,” she reminded him.

“That’s right. Well, have you ever seen anything like that before? I never have. Seen a monkey in person that is. And one in a suit that does tricks. I’ve never seen anything like that before,” he rambled.

“Yes, I have.”

“I haven’t. Seen anything like that that is. And the man with him with that crazy mustache. The pair of them looked like they escaped from a circus.”

“Marjorie. The crate,” the stout man with the curly mustache suddenly barked after dropping the coins in a pouch

His accent was strong. *Italian maybe*, Horace figured.

She crinkled her lip in a way he’d never seen someone do before and he wondered whether every little thing she did would be as intriguing. The spell was broken when the chimp slapped him on the butt. Then it continued by to her outstretched hand, climbed up her arm then onto her back. It wrapped its long arms around her neck the leaned by her ear and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“C’mon Joe. It’s back to the circus,” she said as she lifted the crate and carried both toward the lobby. “By the way. He’s a chimpanzee, not a monkey.”

As Horace watched her walk away, the stout man passed him for the final piece of luggage. “She no interested,” he grunted. Then he threaded his arms beneath two of the twine loops and carried it on his back toward the lobby after her.

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“I thought I might find you up here,” Horace said as he continued toward the only occupied bench beneath the rooftop cupola.

Hadley inhaled a deep breath. “Tell me. Is the sky blue?”

“There are a few white clouds. But mostly blue.”

“Do you know why the sky is blue?”

“No,” Horace said as he sat beside his uncle.

“White light from the sun is actually a combination of all the colors of the rainbow.

Those like red, orange and yellow which have longer wavelengths mostly pass right through the tiny oxygen and nitrogen molecules in our lower atmosphere. But those with shorter wavelengths

like violet and blue are absorbed then reflected out in every direction. Our eyes are partial to blue so that's what we see."

"That's fascinating," Horace flatly responded while his mind continued to try to make sense of the monkey business back at the train station.

"I learned that at the university. At first, knowing things like that made me feel **clever**. It also made me feel, commanding, I would say."

The unexpected word momentarily caught Horace's attention. "Commanding?"

"Like I actually controlled more than I previously appreciated."

"What about now?"

"The longer I live, the more I realize how little I know. How little I command."

Hadley heard his nephew abruptly stand and start to pace nearby. "Is something bothering you?"

Horace paused then completely surprised his uncle by asking, "What is it that you do on the back patio until late in the night?"

Hadley recalled being young and having what he was guessing was uncertainty similarly manifest as nervous energy. But as he'd grown older, he'd found maintaining such a state to be exhausting. When he needed to settle himself these days, he'd picture two images; his anchor was one, and the thing he was trying to solve was the other. Then he'd walk toward the haziness until he'd satisfied himself that it wasn't getting any clearer. That's when he'd turn around and head back to Clara. It wasn't that doing so ever solved a particular problem. It just reminded him that whatever had troubled him in the first place really didn't matter as long as she was there to return to.

"That's where Clara set up her studio," he replied.

"Where she made the bird figurines?"

"Yes."

"Are you making them now?"

"I dabble."

"Test. Test," someone said into a microphone below.

"Sounds like they have the sound working," Hadley noted.

Horace walked over to the railing and looked down. The man at the mike gave a thumbs-up to another worker standing beside a large speaker. "I'm sorry I told Mrs. Rhodes about you dancing."

By his nature, Hadley was slow to **rile** and quick to diffuse on the rare occasion when anger came upon him. Thus, by the time he'd made it up to the top of the courthouse, he'd mostly forgotten about his exchange with Mildred and Elbert. "I could learn to be less sensitive to people showing concern," he allowed.

When he heard his nephew begin to pace again, he realized the apology wasn't all there was. Suddenly he was aware of the four ticking clocks. The fact that their second hands weren't perfectly synchronized made it sound like there were four seconds for every actual one. No wonder his nephew felt rushed with the future coming at him like that.

"It's funny the way I can tell if a clock is a little too fast or a little too slow. But when it comes to dancing. I have no rhythm at all," Hadley offered in a way that would enable a conversation on just about any topic.

"You mind me asking a question? It's personal," Horace forewarned.

"I'm not sure why you feel you need my permission now," Hadley teased.

Horace ignored the jab. "How did you know – with Aunt Clara, I mean?"

"You met someone," Hadley gathered.

“What makes you think I met someone?”

“You went all the way down to the train station but forgot to pick up the clock. Your thoughts are entirely scattering and you can’t sit still.”

“I met a girl,” he acknowledged. “And I’m sorry about forgetting the clock. I’ll go back and get it.”

“We have time later.”

Horace returned, sat for a brief second then stood again. “I’m just there on a bench. Minding my own business. Watching as people get off the train,” he began. “There were reporters, businessmen, families, a short Italian guy with a crazy mustache and a chimpanzee dressed in a suit.”

“It’s not every day you run across a chimpanzee dressed in a suit.”

“Then there was this girl,” Horace continued. “I’m afraid I didn’t make a good impression though. Did you make a good impression the first time you met Aunt Clara?”

Hadley laughed. “I dropped a napkin then knocked her over when I tried to pick it up.”

“How’d you recover from that?”

“I have no idea. I just kept going back and eventually she had pity on me.”

“I can’t go back to the train station because she won’t be there.”

“Was she with someone?”

“The man with the mustache. Oh, and the chimpanzee.”

“That shouldn’t be hard to track down in Dayton,” Hadley noted. But surely his nephew had already recognized that. “You’re probably less concerned with finding her as you are worried about what you should do when you do,” he surmised.

Horace bashfully nodded. “I’m sorry. Yes,” he added. “I said something that set her off.”

“Any idea what?”

“I guess I might have called her chimp a monkey. And I might have suggested that it and the man with the mustache looked like they were from the circus. But that was before I knew she was with them. Besides, I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just trying to talk to her. She had these amazing blue eyes. And I was having trouble thinking of something to say.”

“Women can be a mystery.”

“What do I do?”

“Just keep trying.”

“Until I get it right?”

“Until she sees how hard you’re trying. I’m not sure we ever get it right.”

Horace sat again then started swinging his legs beneath the bench.

“I remember staying up many nights trying to think of romantic things to say to your Aunt Clara,” Hadley offered. “But then when I was around her my mind would just go blank.”

“What did you do about that?”

“I wrote down all the things I couldn’t bring myself to say.”

“And she liked that?”

“Nobody knows exactly why exactly one person falls in love with another person. Maybe it’s a smile. Maybe a kind word. Maybe a simple note. I do know that it’s worth discovering though. It’s worth swallowing your pride. It’s worth embarrassing yourself on the dance floor. It’s worth spending every penny you ever had and every one you’re ever going to make. Because there’s nothing else that compares to that feeling.”

Horace thought about that for a moment. “Do you think you could maybe ask around where they might be staying?”

“Why don’t we go get that clock you forgot first. Then we’ll work on figuring out where the monkey is staying.”

“Chimpanzee.”

“Right.”

“Joe.”

“What?”

“I heard her call him Joe.”

“The chimpanzee wearing a suit is named Joe.” Hadley chuckled. “Well, was he kind enough to tell you hers?”

“Very funny. The man with a mustache called out her name. Marjorie.”

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The porter at the train station handed them the hardened box addressed to Hadley Sapien. He also knew exactly where Joe Mendi, the “Gentleman Chimpanzee” was staying. Ballard House was the second of the three authentic boardinghouses in Dayton. And it was on Tortoise Street only a few blocks over from Finch.

Once they got it to the courthouse, the clockmaker and his apprentice had spent thirty minutes carefully unpacking the Dew Drop. They eventually left it with a janitor to secure until they could return another day with their tools. Neither said much during the walk back home.

“What’s this?” Horace asked after checking out the hesitant knock on his door and finding his uncle standing in the hallway.

Hadley had heard his nephew crumpling up paper after paper for the last hour and a half. “Flip back to the beginning. There should be a napkin,” he explained as he extended the scrapbook that was in his hands.

Horace slowly thumbed from back to front. Between keepsakes he noticed notes written on stationary, ruled school paper, another on a cutout from a cardboard box, and one even on a torn piece of a paper bag from the market which said “Love was just a dreamy notion. Until you made it real.” Eventually, he got to the first page upon which he found a small square napkin which he read aloud. “I’m sorry to have to start with an apology again. But I’m afraid I lost my nerve to ask. And I really would at least like to know your name.”

“That’s it?” Horace questioned.

“That’s it.”

“I think I’ve been trying too hard,” he realized.

“There will be a time when trying your hardest won’t be enough. And other times when the words come as natural to you as breathing. When they do, say them to her. If she’s not nearby then jot them down on whatever you can find. Then one day you’ll have a book that’s full and a heart that’s fuller.”

Horace flipped back through the pages then closed the book and handed it back. “Thanks Uncle Hadley.”

“Good luck.



