

MONKEYS AND BONES

He tried to choke me once, when I was in my twenties, in a hotel with concrete walls. My roommates had gone home to be with their families and my father had come to visit me.

It was after dinner in a restaurant somewhere, we had gone back to his hotel room and something made me nervous. My radar or sonar or whatever that is—those bells that ring in my head were starting to swing, just a little, on the breeze of an ill wind.

He sat down on a chair and beckoned me to kneel beside him. I did, out of an old habit of obedience. He started to tell a story and in the telling of it, put his hand around my neck, his thumb large and strong across the front of my neck. As he told the story his voice got louder and his thumb pressed harder and I could hear in my left ear the beating of my heart.

A normal girl, a healthy girl, would have screamed or yanked his hand away. I did neither. Instead, I thought of science. "If he cuts off my airway I will faint and fall to the ground which will cause him to release my neck. I will be fine because the brain can survive six minutes without oxygen."

Instead of screaming, I coughed, involuntarily. His hand and his thumb fell from my neck and I ran from the room.

Last winter I went to Costa Rica for a week. I wanted to do something healing, having recently given up my thyroid, a set of lymph nodes, and my hair. I signed up for everything, did everything: yoga, tai chi, chi gong, intuitive reiki.

At the end of the reiki session, which was held in silence in a room with a wall of glass that looked out over the tops of the palm trees where the howler monkeys played, the woman said, "Get dressed and I'll tell you where we went."

When she came back into the room the woman who had asked me nothing about myself said, "When I do a session, I always ask the person where they want to go, whether they want to go up or down. You wanted to go down. So we travelled down and I asked, 'Are you sure?' and you said, 'Yes, I want to go down.' So we traveled down to Hades, to Hell, to the place of the dead, and there we met your dead husband. You were encased in a white mud that had hardened like a thick shell and when you broke out of the shell your husband said, 'Pick up your bones, Julie.' There were tall piles of little bones, like chicken bones, and you started to pick through them."

I had been listening to the woman's story with interest, wondering how she knew about my dead husband and thinking "pick up your bones" was something I could imagine him saying to me. But at this point—the chicken bones—what I thought to myself was, "I didn't pick up chicken bones. I picked up big bones."

She continued, "But you didn't pick up the chicken bones. You picked up giant dinosaur bones and I know what kind of dinosaur bones because my son loves dinosaurs. You picked up two triceratops bones."

"Yes," I thought to myself, "femurs."

In Costa Rica I slept in a little cabin set back with other cabins among the palm trees. The night after the reiki and the bones, sleeping on a thin mattress on a wooden platform under a mosquito net, the air still moist and hot even in the darkness of night, I had a dream.

I was in my house, my new house, and my father was visiting. Still tall but now stooped, old but still bearing the potential for harm.

My roof was leaking, water was running down the walls, and my father ordered me to stand on an unsteady box to fix it. But I didn't stand on the box. Instead, I pulled down the attic ladder and climbed up to investigate. Even though the water was running down my walls I could tell it was coming from the basement, so I headed downstairs to fix it.

I had taken only a step or two down when I saw in the basement light the shadow of a man. His hand was raised. It held a knife. I knew the man was my father and he was going to kill me.

I screamed.

On the flat bed under the mosquito net, the scream came out like the wail of a howler monkey—howaawahhh—long and low and loud. It woke me. It took my breath. It caused a rustling in the trees. It caused a howling, in the distance first, then louder, closer. Then howling all around the cabin. I lay flat on my back as the howler monkeys howled over me. They howled and howled and their sound vibrated through my body, shaking me, holding me, healing me. They howled and I breathed out an audible sigh—ahhhhh. The howling stopped. Silence. And in that silence, it seemed that the howler monkeys were listening for me. So I sighed again—ahhhh. Then I listened. There was no sound until the rustling of the leaves as the howler monkeys moved off.

On my back, on the flat bed under the mosquito net, I smiled.

I smiled because I had screamed.