

UNIVERSITY
OF DAYS

BY
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LATE SUMMER

KIP HARSDALE LOST THE DIMPLED BALL in pearly clouds edged with crimson.

Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

Doggerel from his youth floated back, in his father's slow drawl, reminding Kip of what was to come later that day: his small trailer crammed with the Buildings and Grounds guys raiding his fridge instead of mowing the south lawn. Not that he minded their company. After all, they were on the same team, right? And he liked being part of a team. Sometimes. He also liked being alone.

Kip pulled another white ball from the bag, bent double, placed it on the tee. Rising, he looked up campus. Nothing moved other than Spanish moss scudding along sidewalks. Dorms either side of the quad were silent, too, hives without bees. In the opposite direction, the baseball diamond and soccer pitch out past the Tab and beyond the Field House, their grass more brown than green this time of year, were as empty as the tennis courts.

No place so lonely as a midsummer campus, Kip thought. He was standing on the flat roof of Billings, a freshman dorm. Behind him, air handlers started with a whine and began chugging like freight trains. Kip turned to look between the massive metal contraptions out to the parking lot abutting Larburg. An acre of asphalt occupied only by a lone pickup, stranded there all week due to a flat tire. Maybe he could

persuade B&G to tow the eyesore away later today even if it was raining. His boss liked the troops to stay busy.

Not lonely. Boring.

Kip pivoted to face a kidney-shaped body of water. On maps, this was Snyder Lake, fed by a small stream that branched off a larger river that ran out to sea. But most everyone at UDays simply called it the Pond.

Next week's band camp would bring some energy.

Head down, eyes boring into the ball perched on its rubber tee, Kip whistled through his teeth. He pulled back, coiled tight. The club sliced a slow parabola then accelerated to a blur, connecting with a solid, satisfying *plink*. Smooth follow through, forearms touching. The driver's head pointed at the water.

It was a couple hundred yards to the levee, and the Titleist sailed over the dirt berm before dropping into the Pond with an inaudible splash. At least he was consistent about clearing the beach. He'd anchored a plastic milk jug at 320, but this shot still fell short of that.

Maybe if I try left-handed.

Kip fished in a side pocket of his golf bag for a water ball, smiling back at the grin cut into its pocked white face. He selected a different driver, and then shuffled into his stance, reset his grip. Soft hands, he reminded himself. Soft hands.

FALL

A MONKEY BIT ME.”

Dieter Giles peeled off a linen sport coat and pushed up the left sleeve of his black t-shirt. He still had the thick forearms and wrists of the wrestler he'd been in college, back when he was conflicted about his passion for literature, and for writing. These days, that concern was a distant memory and more than a faint embarrassment. “Right here,” he said, pointing to his left arm, just above the elbow. “I was ten years old.”

The students facing Dieter Giles were at the end of the first week of their college career. During these five days of freshman orientation, they'd been subjected to a battery of placement tests, sat through lectures on dorm life, been told what they could and could not do as students at University of Days. They'd attended a “Ministry Fair” in the Field House, been plied with pizza.

This final day had started at dawn. Students rolled out of bed and shuffled to the Field House, where they were shuffled into small groups for service projects. From there they were bused off campus to weed yards for senior citizens, sort donations at a food pantry, clear debris from streams, and clean classrooms in elementary schools. They returned hot and sweaty for a presentation by representatives from the University's departments. Cell phones hadn't yet been returned. Ice cream would follow the series of talks.

Science started things off, with Lauren Mifflewhite talking about discoveries that had changed the world. It was Dr. Mifflewhite's contention that many of these rested on equations

that were beautiful—*elegant* was her word—and her enthusiasm caught the pre-meds and engineers. The rest of the group didn't try to keep up. Next, an Econ prof explained how his department led to professions that were bulletproof in a world that depended on finance and management. Then it was Bible's fifteen minutes, with a sprint through the Old and New Testaments complete with hand motions for everyone to mimic. Dieter Giles, speaking on behalf of the English department, was batting cleanup.

"I was in fourth grade. It was early December." Giles' listeners sat in the padded chairs of Snyder Hall's movie theater. Not a good idea, Dieter thought, since most were half past done after so much orienteering. He pulled a stool to the stage's center and barreled on, savoring the challenge of trying to keep them awake.

"We were in Africa. Nigeria. You MK's will know what I'm talking about." A few heads tilted upward. "Except you might not, because I wasn't an MK. My dad was a doctor, specializing in tropical disease, and Africa was just a short-term gig. Some of his buddies from med school had given time to mission hospitals, and they convinced him to do the same. He and my mom figured it would be a grand adventure for our family.

"They put my brother and me in boarding school, with all the other missionary kids. Which was terrible, mostly because the real MK's were lifers. My brother and I dropped in as outsiders, fresh from the suburbs of Miami.

"My parents lived on a mission compound twenty miles away, and we spent weekends there once or twice a month, depending on my father's schedule. The drive took more than an hour, with us crammed into a tiny car, hurtling over dirt roads with potholes big enough to swallow a horse.

"The weekend that monkey bit me, we were home. My dad managed to carve out an afternoon to walk with us to the market in town." A student with a black and white *keffiyeh* around his neck leaned against the theater's back wall. Dieter noticed he was

scribbling in a small notebook. “He gave us each a couple of shillings and set us loose.

“Back home, in the States, we’d go to a mall with linoleum floors and bright lights for chocolate chip cones piled up to here.” Dieter raised a hand above his shoulder. “But in Africa the market was completely different: bright colors, pungent smells, outside vendors. Flies. Mangy dogs. Foods I didn’t recognize, languages I couldn’t understand. There was no ice cream, and the chocolate they imported from England tasted strange. So what were we going to do with our money?”

Dieter Giles shifted on his seat. A young woman in the front row dozed, her chin in her hand. The sleeves of her striped t-shirt were rolled up on shoulders red with sunburn.

“We wandered around, and eventually stumbled upon a man with a monkey. A spider monkey, with a long rope attached to a collar around his neck. We moved in closer. The man pointed at the monkey. ‘Tricks?’ he asked. ‘Sure,’ we said. ‘One shilling,’ he told us.

“I punched my brother’s arm. He looked at me, but then came up with the money and gave it to the man. We waited. Nothing happened. ‘What about the tricks?’ I asked. When the man smiled, I saw a lot of black teeth, or gaps. ‘Two shillings,’ he said.

“‘Two?’ I was indignant. ‘But you said one.’

“The man turned the leash like a jump rope, but the monkey didn’t move. ‘Two shillings.’

“He had me, and he knew it. I took a shilling out of my pocket, handed it to the man. And then I walked over to the monkey. ‘I want to see something really good,’ I said.

“The monkey blinked a couple times. Then, before I could move, he jumped on my head, pulled my hair, scampered down my back. He was hanging on my shirt and I reached around trying to get him off me. But he scooted around my other shoulder, grabbed

my arm, and bit it. Right here.” Giles pointed again through the sleeve of his jacket.

“Quick as a flash, the monkey hit the ground, shrieking like the wild animal it was. The man let go of the leash. The monkey dashed into a crowd. The man ran after him.

“My brother and I stood there, completely befuddled. Our money was gone, we were in Africa, and I had just been bitten by this wild animal. A cute spider monkey that’s only supposed to live in a zoo. I was mad. My arm hurt.

“Do you have rabies?” my brother asked. Rabies? How was I supposed to know? Luckily, our dad was a doctor. He could tell. We decided to find him, which by some miracle we did.” Dieter rubbed his eyes with a hand that was missing most of its smallest finger.

The writing prof rose from his stool to pace the stage. “My dad asked about the monkey, how big it was, did it seem healthy, where was it now. I could see he was worried. I think I started to cry. My brother, though, he remembered. ‘The man with the monkey was by someone selling peanuts,’ my brother told him. ‘The peanut place was green’.

“My dad took us back to the clinic on the missionary compound where we lived. A nurse hustled me into another room, gave me a coarse brush and a bar of brown soap, and led me to a faucet. After turning the hot tap on full, she said, ‘Rub where the monkey bit you. Make lather with this soap and rub with the brush until it bleeds.’”

“My dad was gone. The nurse told me he was searching for the monkey. Searching for the monkey?” Dieter’s eyes opened wide; a few in the room laughed.

“My father took my brother with him, and together they found the man. My dad tried to buy the monkey, but no deal. Then he asked about having the monkey stay in a cage.

“Maybe you know this,” Dieter said, continuing to pace. “But back then, I was clueless. You can discover rabies by watching an

animal's behavior closely. The evidence is obvious, but only if you have the animal under observation." He ran a thumb over each side of a dense handlebar mustache.

"The monkey prefers to be free', the man said. 'Would the monkey stay in a cage if I give you two pounds?' my dad asked. The man hesitated. 'The monkey would agree to live in a cage for one week for four pounds'.

"So my father rented the cage for this monkey. He and others watched around the clock and the monkey stayed well. Irritable about being cooped up, but not dangerous.

"Meanwhile, people kept asking how I was. I'd see my mom and dad whispering and I knew it was about me. For my part, I was hoping this would be an excuse not to go back to school. Plus, I was still upset about having had to rub my arm bloody with that brush."

Dieter returned to the stool, sat, sighed. "Before my mother died a few years ago, we were talking, and the monkey story came up. By then, I understood about rabies, but it still seemed like there had been an enormous fuss. I asked her why everybody had been so worked up about that monkey.

"I thought we told you,' she said. I assured her they had not, or else the explanation hadn't stayed with me.

"You remember your friend Ian,' she began. I did: Ian was in my grade at boarding school, the only friend I made that year. 'And his father?' my mom asked. Ian's father was dead, I remembered, another example of that strange place's curiosities. 'Do you know what happened?' my mom asked. I did not.

"Rabies. A couple of years before we arrived, he was out in the bush with Ian and his brother when they were attacked by wild dogs. He managed to get the boys to a clinic but they only had enough medicine for two people. They radioed for a plane to bring more, but between weather and mechanical problems, too much time elapsed. Ian's dad made sure his boys got what was available. When a plane finally arrived, he was very sick. He died.

“Your father knew that story. We all did. It hung like a cloud over the missionaries we were with. But the treatment for rabies was pretty awful, so your father decided if he could track down the monkey and watch it, they would know better what to do with you. We weren’t about to ignore what had happened, but at the same time didn’t want to put you through—”

Dieter left the stool again. “My father was a doctor. Me, though. The sight of blood? Physical pain? I had a very low threshold. Apparently my parents thought the treatment might kill me even if the disease didn’t.”

Standing still, Dieter’s voice lowered to almost a whisper. “The monkey turned out to be just fine. For all I know, his owner gave him shots and just used him for extortion. But it could have gone the other way, too.”

A chair in the back squeaked. “Is there a lesson here?” he asked with more volume. “A moral? Perhaps.” He brushed sandy hair back from his forehead. “But there is certainly a story. And stories are the heart and soul of a liberal arts education. Our aim is to help you learn others’ stories, and find your own. We want you to grapple with stories, embrace them, tell them. The future of the world depends on that.”

Dieter jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, spun on his heel, and walked off stage.