

Michael Blumenthal
& Rita Miljo

*“Because They
Needed Me”*

*Rita Miljo and the
Orphaned Baboons
of South Africa*



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Part One

IN MICHAEL'S WORDS:
"THE HEAVEN OF BABOONS"

*And those that are hunted
Know this as their life,
Their reward: to walk
Under such trees in full knowledge
Of what is in glory above them,
And to feel no fear,
But acceptance, compliance.
Fulfilling themselves without pain
At the cycle's center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.*

—James Dickey, “The Heaven of Animals”

I'm not supposed to be here—that is, people from backgrounds like mine aren't supposed to be. No, I'm not supposed to be here, with Dennis huddled up against my chest and Maggie grooming the hairs on my arms, with Sabrina on my left shoulder and Tortilla atop my head, grooming the rest of me. I'm not supposed to be here, along the banks of the Oliphants River in Limpopo Province, South Africa, meters away from wild crocodiles and elephants and hippos and the occasional lion, letting Sunamo do her backward somersaults between my legs as she chases Cory and de Jager around the cage.

No, I'm not supposed to be here—certain friends and colleagues have told me, perhaps enviously—with these orphaned chacma baboons, smacking my lips as I attempt to mimic their grunts and chatterings, trying for myself to understand how I got here and why it feels so good—this grooming and chattering, these small orphaned baboon bodies against my chest.

• • •

It's a long way from what were once the streets of New York's German-Jewish ghetto of Washington Heights to the bush of northern Limpopo Province in South Africa. It's also a long way from being the second-generation son of German-Jewish immigrants who escaped Hitler's ovens by the skin of their teeth to being friends with a woman who was once a member of the Hitler Youth. And it is, I suspect, an even greater distance from being an urban boy terrified of cockroaches and mice to being a middle-aged man with a baboon named Dennis huddled up against his chest, Dennis's sister Maggie grooming his chest hairs, and two more, named Sabrina and Tortilla, on his left shoulder and atop his head, grooming the rest of him.

But all this, in May of 2007, is where I am, and the amazing story of Rita Miljo and her baboons is the reason I got here.



The way I got here, as is the case with so many of the volunteers, is by watching *Animal Planet*. By watching, to be precise, their two-part series entitled *Growing Up Baboon* that featured the work of Rita Miljo and the staff of C.A.R.E. (Center for Animal Rehabilitation and Education). For almost twenty years, Rita had been devoting herself single-mindedly to the adoption, care, and release of orphaned infant chacma baboons at this Center she, along with a nine-year-old female baboon named Bobby founded in 1989.



Though this is a story about baboons, not just about Rita Miljo, it must remain, at least for a while, with her, for it is with her that this all began. I first learned about Rita, as I just said, on television. Now Rita isn't a baboon, rest assured—though I would hardly be surprised to learn that, in a previous life, she was one. Rita is a nearly eighty-year-old woman with the spirit of a sixteen-year-old girl and the force of a tornado. And she is not terribly fond of us humans. But she *does* love baboons.

There was something about Rita Miljo, from the first time I saw her face and heard her voice that immediately reminded me of a composite of the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl—who, among other things, made propaganda films for Hitler—and the American painter Georgia O'Keefe: It was the aging beauty and the deep character of her face, the sense of an iron will coupled with a fierce determination and fearlessness, her deeply *sabra-like* personality—that renowned Israeli desert cactus, after which native-born Israeli women are named, that is so sharp and prickly on the outside, so sweet and juicy within. Somewhere beneath that tough and intimidating exterior, I sensed, lay a certain sweetness.

I knew from the outset that here was a woman I wanted to meet and get to know. And then, once I came to know her, I realized that, for the first time in my life as a writer, it was not myself, but someone *else*, I wanted to write a book about. This unique and courageous woman—her work, her history, her world, her way of looking at life—had a story that deserved and needed to be shared with a wider audience.

When I saw Rita and her baboons that night on *Animal Planet* and realized that maybe I, too, could go to Phalaborwa and work “hands on” with these primates, I simply picked up the phone and dialed Rita's number. Hardly five months later, a small plane carrying me from Johannesburg to South Africa's northernmost Limpopo Province touched down in at Phalaborwa's diminutive, one-runway airport.

Rita had created her Center on a fifty-acre patch of African bush she had bought in South Africa's Limpopo Province. The rest, as the baboons might say if they could, is history ... or, rather, *her* and *their* story. And it was this that brought us together, on many South African winter evenings, in a single room, a meeting of two people that could only have been caused by one of Rita's favorite expressions: “human error.”



So what can be said, in a nutshell, about the life of Rita Miljo? That she was born Rita Neumann to a middle-class family on the outskirts of Königsberg in the far northeastern corner of Germany near the Russian border, in 1931; that, as a young girl, she joined and served in the Hitler Youth; that, even as an adolescent, when she left her family to work in Hamburg's renowned Hagenbeck Zoo, she felt a deep identification with animals; that she

married a young German engineer by the name of Lothar Simon, with whom she emigrated to South Africa, in 1953; that, while in Africa, she learned to fly planes, lay bricks, and build houses; that she consumed everything about baboons and other African animals a mere lay person—or even a so-called expert—could possibly hope to know; that she bought a piece of wilderness along the Oliphants River in 1963; and that her husband and seventeen-year-old daughter died tragically in a small plane crash in 1972.

Eight years after the accident, during her brief second marriage to Piet Miljo, an Afrikaner, Rita made what might be regarded as the transforming acquaintance of her life. While traveling in northern Namibia, she encountered a neglected and abused female chacma baboon named Bobby. (In fact, all anonymous baboons in South Africa were dubbed Bobby, after the Afrikaans name for the species, *bobbejaan*.) Bobby was being kept, poorly, as a mascot at a military encampment. In defiance of the requirement for permits, Rita took Bobby home, and a bond between species was forged.

In 1989, along with Bennett Serane a native South African, Rita founded C.A.R.E., and her fifty acres of bush became a refuge where injured wild animals—various birds, reptiles, and small mammals, initially—were treated and released.

As increasing numbers of injured or abused chacma baboons were brought in, mostly orphaned babies, the Center began to specialize. Agricultural lands had encroached on the baboons' natural habitat, and wherever crops were threatened, farmers had the right to shoot the offending "vermin." Poaching, poisoning, illegal trade in pets and experimental animals, as well as environmental hazards (natural or otherwise) left behind orphaned and injured baboons in need of C.A.R.E.

But these are mere facts, mere biographical data, and—while they tell you something about Rita Miljo's spirit of fearlessness, adventure, and commitment—they tell you, in the end, very little about the person I came to know some twenty-five kilometers from the copper mining town of Phalaborwa in South Africa in May of 2007. Because, as always, the person is more interesting, more elusive of true knowing, more complex, than the biography can ever be.

So, after a few days as a C.A.R.E. volunteer, when I began to sense that Rita, a bit grudgingly, had taken a liking to me, I proposed a deal: I would come to Rita's house—consisting, essentially, of a single overstuffed living room that also serves as the Center's office, and an upstairs loft, where Rita sleeps—every night after supper. We'd have a glass of wine, and then we would discuss whatever subject *I* chose for the evening's agenda. "Agreed?"

"Oh, Michael," Rita began in a world-and-Michael-weary way, "all right, if we must... . Agreed."

• • •

Rita Miljo is also not a woman who shies away from controversy, especially when it comes to saving baboons. The task she has undertaken is rendered even more formidable by the fact that baboons, even among animal lovers, are hardly at the top of the list of best-loved primates. For one, they are not readily amenable to being dressed in overalls or *Lederhosen* and paraded onto the late-night TV shows. Secondly, when they become full-grown, they develop not the relatively flat, universally beloved and human-like faces of

chimpanzees and bonobos, but instead a more elongated and snout-like visage that is reminiscent of a dog. And thirdly they are ferociously resourceful and smart—so much so that, yes, they can easily become a pest to anyone whose house, car, refrigerator, or garden they put their minds to getting into.

At times, Rita's stubborn determination to give voice to these often-detested primates has landed her, not only on the dark side of her neighbors' indulgences, but in court. As in September of 2005, when she was charged by the South African authorities with illegally transporting an injured baboon from Mpumalanga Park to Limpopo Province without the requisite permit.

In true Gandhiesque fashion, Rita readily admitted to having violated the law, but claimed she had done so out of necessity, or else the baboon would have been neglected or killed due to deliberate delays in the Mpumalanga Park Board's permit-issuing procedures. She testified that, on a previous occasion, a baboon she had tried to rescue *had* died because of similar delays in issuing the required permit.

Declaring that "the court is sure that what she [Rita] did was what an ordinary citizen in the circumstances would have done," the Mpumalanga magistrate, in a decision hailed by animal rights activists everywhere, including C.A.R.E.'s main funder, the IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare), ruled that the Park's obstructive permit policies were hampering the work of a world-renowned baboon rehabilitation specialist. What's more, the magistrate ruled, conservation officials had displayed "a contemptuous attitude" toward Rita and her work that had caused considerable delays, sometimes lasting years, in issuing her the permits she needed to carry out her work.

"The life of the animal was under threat and needed to be saved," Helen Dagut, IFAW's Southern Africa campaign manager, said at the time. "It was necessary for [Rita] to break the law to do this and the magistrate acknowledged it."

• • •

There is, in the end, one ultimate goal of all this mothering, caging, feeding, transferring, and juggling of infant and young baboons at C.A.R.E.: namely, freedom. In the nearly twenty years of the Center's existence, some dozen baboon "troops" numbering roughly 250 baboons have been released into sites all around South Africa—a process so time-consuming and complex it could easily occupy five times Rita's roughly ten-member staff. Not only must the appropriate release sites be located, permits applied for, the individual troops prepared for their release and transported, and at least two staff members dispensed to the release site for up to five months to make certain the baboons have acclimated and are able to successfully forage for food on their own, but also follow-up by Rita and her staff to check on the troop's welfare can continue, literally, for years—and sometimes with discouraging results.

In the case of the troop that was at the release site during my stay, that same troop had already been released once before—five years back, to be precise, at which time they had survived for four years in the wild. But then, as baboon luck would have it, the farmer on whose land they had been released died, and his son, who had inherited the land, threatened to poison the troop if C.A.R.E. didn't come and get them. Rita and her assistant Lee Dekker then went back to the site during the night and recaptured the remainder of the troop—a process that involved constructing an A-frame, filling it with food, and trapping

the alpha males in cages first, followed by the mature females, until finally only the young, more easy to capture, were left. They then brought them back to C.A.R.E. and had to begin the whole release process over again.

“You know,” Rita says when I posed the usual naïve question, ‘Why baboons?’, “they are the last creatures under the sun that nobody cares about. That’s why. When I first started, everybody said to me, ‘With all that energy you’ve got, why don’t you look after rhinos or cheetahs,’ or whatever else it was they cared about? And I always answered, ‘Because these guys need me.’”

• • •

These guys *do* need her, as I am soon to discover. The morning I arrive in Phalaborwa from Johannesburg, I am picked up at the airport, as are most volunteers, by thirty-eight-year-old Center Manager Lee Dekker, a Pretoria native who has been at the Center full-time for over two years. Lee, I was forewarned, usually arrives at the airport carrying one of the infant baboons she’s foster-mothering in a shawl tied around her waist. But today she has only a baboon-imprinted T-shirt and a trademark scratch on her left cheek (a rite of passage I am soon to carry with me as well). She’s had to leave her baby, Suzie, at C.A.R.E. while doing the weekly food shopping for the volunteers in town. Lee is a highly energetic, affable woman who exudes an air of focused commitment and utter competence. “The situation for wildlife in Africa is essentially hopeless,” she tells me en route, “but we keep trying.”

We stop at the Phalaborwa Mall to do the shopping before making our way along the Mica Road for some twenty-five kilometers to the signpost marked Grietjie that leads down the badly corrugated and boulder-strewn road leading to C.A.R.E. As we drive along the upper bank of the crocodile- and hippo-filled Oliphants River, we come to a memorial grave marker bearing a wreath. Beneath it rests the remains of a neighbor’s son who, several years earlier, had had a few too many beers with friends before, oblivious to what awaited him within its murky waters, jumping into the river for a swim.

“Don’t ever walk along the river bank by yourself at night,” Lee warns me, “and, for God’s sake, don’t *ever* go swimming in it. We don’t want to put one of these up for you.”

• • •

When we arrive at the C.A.R.E. headquarters, wild baboons emerge from every direction to make a desperate grab for the groceries in the back of Lee’s truck. We remove the temptation at what seems to be great peril, and then Lee shows me to my room. I’ve been assigned the “honeymoon suite” among the volunteers’ quarters, being perched, as it is, directly adjacent to the C.A.R.E. office and Rita’s “private” quarters (shared, of course, with dozens of infant baboons), and featuring that rarest of volunteer amenities—a shower of its own. (My having spoken German with Rita on the phone when I first called, and having introduced myself as a writer, must have paid off.)

“I hope you don’t mind the company of creepy crawly things,” Lee comments with a smile as she places my bag beside the mosquito-net-covered bed. “You’ll have plenty of that.”

“Company,” I quickly discover, is a piece of radical understatement. When I pull open the battered dresser drawer to unpack my things, an armada of cockroaches so vast and so large they seem like something out of Camus’ *The Plague*, pours out of every corner and

streams onto the floor of my cottage, heading for cover. I grew up with plenty of cockroaches in the ghetto of Washington Heights, but these are of a size and seeming ferocity that takes me right back to a horror movie from my childhood starring Boris Karlov, *The Tingler*. Hardly have I recovered from this first outpouring of hospitality from the African insect world than—when I climb onto the bed to straighten a supermarket-quality print of the African bush that hangs directly above it—a flotilla of spiders of every imaginable size and shape invades my space from each corner of the frame, scattering every which way throughout the room and into my bed. I quickly gaze at the return date on my airline ticket: *five weeks from today*. I gulp, take a deep breath, and finish unpacking.

Just after I have had a chance to finish unpacking and, so to speak, “settle in,” Rita takes me for a walk down to the river, where the wild troop is serenely engaged in their late-afternoon grooming. “The perfect peace emblem,” noted baboon researcher Shirley Strum has written in her respected study, *Almost Human*, “should not be a dove, but two baboons grooming.” And, watching the peaceful near-dusk scene unfolding before us, I can begin to appreciate what she means.

Rita points out a huge crocodile sunbathing on the other side of the river, then a group of bush-bucks beneath the trees ahead of us, and then, in rapid succession, a number of animal tracks that are right at our feet—hippo, monitor lizard, water buffalo, water buck. “You can live here very peaceably with the animals,” Rita says as we walk along the river, “if you just learn to respect them and keep out of their way.”

There seems to be nothing this woman doesn’t know about the animal world, and, as we walk, she regales me with various stories of the twenty-odd other individuals and families who are co-owners of plots within the bush reserve.

There was the Brit across the river, for example, who originally brought his place for three million Rand, and then sold off eighty-five shares for a million Rand each. When he died of a heart attack on a boat trip at age thirty-five, “I wanted to throw a party,” Rita says without apology. This is not, I find out very quickly, a woman who pulls her punches. “The one thing I learned from Hitler,” she confesses, “was how to fight, and win.”

It is a lesson she has made good use of here in the South African bush, often against great odds.

• • •

Like so many of the other volunteers who come to C.A.R.E., I saw that the confluence of my motives and what the program depicted was a perfect match. “I had always been interested in primates,” Kim, a volunteer from California who was making her fourth visit in less than two years, told me, “and I wanted to do something ‘ands on,” a sentiment that echoes my own feelings more or less exactly.

The volunteers, like a baboon troop itself, are rather a motley crew. Along with Elena and Zurika, two young women from Italy and South Africa, respectively, who are basically in charge of the volunteers, there’s Jacob and Doris, a transplanted South Dakotan and Canadian couple who had been living and working in California for several years, and who had just retired from their careers, sold their house and all their belongings, and are completing the first year of what is to be a two-and-a-half year

‘round-the-world trip. There’s also Kim, a former real estate investment manager from Laguna Beach, California, who is here for the fourth time in less than two years.

I soon notice a certain parallel between the baboon troops and the “troop” of volunteers: Each time a new member arrives, there’s a sometimes subtle, but nonetheless pronounced, shift in group dynamics—the token males jockeying for position, the females dominating the whole show.

As Lee so aptly puts it one night when I comment on the latter, “They always said it was a man’s world. But the baboons have shown us it isn’t so.”

There’s also Alex, president of the Swedish Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Transgendered Rights, who has just attended an international conference in Johannesburg and is only spending a week; Diana, from the Netherlands, a secretary who wants to change her life and work full-time with primates; and Mackenzie, a veterinarian’s assistant from Phoenix who has contracted a terrible intestinal virus after only a week here, and is in the hospital in nearby Zaneen when I arrive.

Emma is a twenty-year-old primate-biology major from Columbia who already knows just how she will spend her life: more or less just like we are now ... or, at least, in some related capacity. Kryzstof, a Polish veterinary student from Breslau, arrived after I did. Filled with zeal and good intentions (and with a seeming ease with the animals that I envy), Kryzstof came from a nearby private game lodge where he’d been volunteering. But on his second night, after his parents asked him on the phone whether one can get AIDS from the baboons (the answer is “no”), he got so freaked out at the prospect that he decided to leave.

“And *that* boy,” says Rita with a sense of bemused wonderment, “wants to become a veterinarian!”

“Piss and poop,” the other male volunteer, Jacob, says to me during my first night’s supper, “is the story of working with primates.” And piss and poop it is. “*Your clothing will get ‘peed and pooed’ on and you may not want to wear it again later, so don’t bring your best!*” is how the *Volunteer Information Guide* sent to volunteers prior to their departure put it. A textbook example of truth in advertising!

• • •

What a volunteer actually has his or her “hands on” in coming to C.A.R.E., almost from the moment Lee’s truck pulls past the Center’s hardly conspicuous nameplate, are baboons—wild baboons, caged baboons, and baboons eagerly jumping on the back of the truck to help themselves to the victuals before Lee can stop, pick up a couple of stones to frighten them off, and pull in behind the fenced gate.

May mornings at C.A.R.E., at least for me, begin at precisely 5:57 a.m. They begin, to be more precise, with a crescendo-like sound akin to the falling of immense hailstones on my room’s corrugated aluminum roof—the sound of mostly adult baboons descending from their sleeping perches in the sycamore tree just below—coupled with a fervent chorus of *wa-hoos* and copulation cries as the day begins, with its mixed cacophony of dangers, hungers, and lusts.

What you learn in your first few minutes at C.A.R.E. is that there are actually *two*

troops of baboons in residence—the wild troop, numbering somewhere around one hundred twenty and affectionately named the *Longtits* by Rita for reasons that take little time to become apparent; and the caged troop, whose cages, or *hoks* (in Afrikaans), are dispersed all over the property, and who usually number between three and five hundred. The wild baboons moved in shortly after the mid 1980s when Rita, her five ridgebacks, and Bobby first arrived in Rita’s tiny caravan.

• • •

In the wild, a female baboon weans her baby at between six and eight months, a process that takes place in essentially four stages. During the first week or so, the mother holds the baby tightly against her body and forages on three legs. In the second phase, when the baby’s arms are stronger, it hangs underneath the mother, suckling on a nipple. Next comes the jockey position, when the baby sits on its mother’s rump and leans against her tail as she feeds; and, finally, the walking phase, wherein the infant begins to do its own foraging and prepares for independence.

C.A.R.E.’s weaning process, however, being a somewhat ‘unnatural’ variation, is also somewhat more complex. It begins, for the first month or two, with what is called “24/7,” and means just that: The infant spends twenty-four hours a day—including time in the shower (and, yes, in case you’re truly interested, on the toilet)—either tied around its human volunteer surrogate mother’s waist in a shawl, or in her arms. When Rita, the surrogate mother, and the staff think the infant is ready, it is moved to the nursery with the other infants for several hours a day, returning to sleep with the mother at night. This phase slowly morphs into the next—usually at around two months—when the infant grows comfortable with spending the entire day in the nursery, and only nights with its mother.

During the final phase, during which the little babies seem most unhappy, the infant continues to sleep in the surrogate mother’s room at night, but in a small cage. This prepares it for its real “move” into post-infancy, when it will begin to sleep along with the other infants—and, of course, their stuffed animals—in cages set up in Rita’s bathroom in the main house.

• • •

It’s also a hierarchical world, this world of baboons, and though Rita, to be sure, loves all her children, there are certain hierarchies within her affections—or, at least, her discipline—as well. Scruffy, for example, a patient and persistent mid-sized female, is—much to the dismay of the staff!—granted the rare privilege of entrance to Rita’s freezer, an opportunity she makes the most of, not only by helping herself to the food inside, but frequently by toppling the barrel of corn Rita keeps for the wild troop and spreading the kernels on the kitchen floor. Several other members of the wild troop have developed the habit of waiting at what Rita calls her “take-out window,” for the occasional banana, apple or tomato she obligingly tosses their way

The most special treatment of all, however, is reserved for Tripsy, an aged and infirm female and the oldest member of the wild troop, who receives, hand-delivered, a pitcher of milk and several raw eggs every morning. Along with the aged and infirm, there are also special feedings for a pair of suricates (also known as meerkats), a squirrel, a lamed warthog, and—occasionally, when Rita, in near secrecy, makes her way down the hill late

at night with the day's leftovers of meat and bones—the jackals.

“They are all God’s creatures,” says Rita, invoking a deity she doesn’t seem to actually believe in. “Who are we to create a hierarchy among them?”

• • •

Within the genus of *Papio*, or savanna, baboons, of which Limpopo’s chacma baboons are members, there are now considered to be nine subspecies. “Isn’t it funny,” Rita says to me, “how God could have had enough foresight to make South Africa have nine provinces [during Apartheid there were four], when we also have nine sub-species of baboon!”

There is also no small irony in that fact that someone like Rita, who grew up under the racial laws of Hitler’s Germany, would have been confronted not only by South Africa’s Apartheid system, but also by what she calls its *Rassenmischung* (racial mixing) laws regarding the classification of baboons. Until just a few years ago, these laws made it impossible for C.A.R.E. to obtain the required permits to release its baboons to sites occupied by other subspecies, as such mixing of subspecies was not allowed. But, in no small part due to the persistent efforts of C.A.R.E. and the I.L.A.W., these laws are no longer on the books. Nonetheless, with the infant mortality rate among baboons often as high as seventy or eighty percent and human settlements increasingly encroaching on what was once the baboons’ natural habitat, baboon troops have now vanished from roughly eighty percent of the area of South Africa’s Cape Peninsula.

It’s precisely this trend that Rita and the staff of C.A.R.E. have set out to reverse. But even the pre-release procedure is fraught with complexity: First, one of the staff members—either release manager Steve Munro (now C.A.R.E.’s director) or former release manager Davie van der Merwe must bond tightly with the troop’s alpha males. Then, a sleeping tree must be located as a central gathering place. The release managers, who sleep at the site in tents, slowly but surely lead the baboons to water, fruiting trees, and other foraging sites until the males are able to find those places themselves. This last phase usually lasts about five months, during which time at least one of them remains constantly with the troop.

In capitalist parlance, this long investment in releasing a troop of between fifteen and twenty-two baboons is bad economics indeed—as was Rita and my driving 120 kilometers to Zaneen, a four-hour-long round trip, just to pick up a shipment of 500 pounds of kernel corn, mostly for the wild troop. “Inefficiencies” such as these—or such as Lee’s twelve-hour round-trip drive to Johannesburg to pick up three new baboons—pervade C.A.R.E.’s work. But the investment here, as Rita is quick to point out, has nothing to do with such calculations: It costs some \$15,000 a month just to keep the Center going, and the only cost-benefit analysis that ever takes place is how it will be humanly possible to save, and release, the baboons.

“People turn everything on this bloody planet into money making,” she told me one night. “It’s the biggest mistake that humankind could have made... . It’s sick. It isn’t right, and it will, in the long run, ruin us.”

• • •

One of the most amazing things, I quickly discover, about baboons is their acuity of vision. I witness two vivid examples of this early in my stay—first during the morning “wake-up” turbulence when, hoping to tape some of the *wa-hooing* and copulation cries to

play for my wife and son back in France, I placed my small pocket tape recorder on top of a beam just inside the wire mesh separating me from the troop. Within less than five seconds, the baboons had spotted it and knocked it to the ground, trying to steal it!

Almost the same thing happened hardly an hour later when, bending down to tie my shoe, I placed a copy of *The History of South Africa* I am reading between the metal door and the doorjamb of the volunteers' lodge. Before I could even begin to tie a knot, a young baboon was seated on the roof eagerly "reading" my book, soon (perhaps out of boredom!) to be torn to shreds. This is a lesson I was to gather evidence of repeatedly during my stay: One of the main reasons many people don't love baboons is that they are constantly showing us how much cleverer they are than we are.

Two other remarkable qualities about baboons are their ability to tolerate pain—a baboon can be dragged, pulled, bitten and clawed so much in the course of the average day, even by its own family, that its very survival, much less its prospering, seems a near miracle—and their almost incredible healing powers. One of the smalls, Zefferelli, for example, had several bones in his right arm fractured when a member of the wild troop attempted to pull him right through the cage. Within an hour, after Lee and Rita had placed a cast on the arm, he was back in the cage, acting as if nothing had ever gone wrong. Virtually the same was true of Diva, Kim's not-even-month-old little baby, who had her arm broken in a similar fashion. Though she had to be taken into Phalaborwa for antibiotics and a cast, Diva, too, was back in her pouch astride Kim by the end of the day.

The frequent hostility between man and baboon—fueled mostly by ignorance as to what baboons truly are and aren't—has produced a series of myths and utter fabrications that have endured for hundreds of years. Baboons play an important role in traditional African beliefs. The Khoisian people, who originally occupied much of sub-equatorial Africa as hunter-gatherers, believed that baboons, along with snakes, were people in an altered state of consciousness. Other African tribes believed baboons, as well as lions, to be capable of mysterious powers, powers that in African society could normally be attained only by shamans and witchdoctors.

In South Africa itself, however, the present-day fate of baboons has been far less mystical. People once received money for a baboon scalp and tail; and, until quite recently, baboons could be shot on sight by farmers and others as mere "vermin." Contemporary folk tales, in Africa and elsewhere, freely portray baboons as stupid and lazy—In most cultures, including our own, "You stupid baboon" is still a common insult.

• • •

Mine is a fairly typical volunteers' schedule: give bottles from 11:00–12:00 (some six hundred and fifty bottles of powdered milk are distributed to the various *hoks* daily) with mediums (between eight months and a year old) from 1:00–2:00, smalls (between four and eight months) from 2:00–3:00, and the nursery from 4:00–5:00. At around 5:30—it is now South African winter and getting dark early—all three groups of babies will be brought into Rita's house and the adjoining bathroom and kitchen to spend the night.

Baboon society is a profoundly gender-oriented world, complete with remarkable gender-detecting genes. This I quickly discover the first morning I enter the nursery, or kindergarten, *hok* where the mostly two-to-four-month-old infants spend the large part of their day. These infants *know* I am both a stranger and a man, and, from the moment I step

into the cage, they beat a hasty and rather noisy retreat into Elena's already baboon-filled arms. "They just need to get used to you," she consoles me, "and they're terribly afraid of men at first."

The fact that these young baboons are terribly afraid of new men had already been graphically illustrated to me that very morning in the mediums' cage, where I have my first exposure to the baboon cry for "help!" and to being "mobbed" by a group of frightened baboons. There are seventeen roughly one-year-old baboons in the mediums' cage—ten females and seven males—and Dennis, with whom I will eventually develop my deepest and most complicated relationship, quickly decides I am a threat.

Just when I think I am beginning to develop a rather friendly, if cautious, relationship with him in particular, something I do—perhaps an inadvertently raised eyebrow or a set of teeth too conspicuously revealed—seems to trigger his anxiety and he immediately issues a high-pitched warning cry. Suddenly, hierarchical competitiveness be damned, *all seventeen* of the mediums, teeth bared, make their way at my calves, my arms, my thighs, my waist.

"Ah Ah Ah!!" cries Zurika, mimicking the baboon cry for *Get away!* or *Cut that out!*, yanking several of the playful young tykes off me by their arms, legs, scruff of the neck, ears, and tails. (Baboons, as I mentioned, have an extraordinary capacity for pain. Acts that would easily land you in jail, if not a psychiatric ward, if inflicted on your own child aren't even a slap on the wrist when dealing with an infant baboon.)

That night, as I stand talking to Rita, there's a sudden hubbub among the staff, signaling what I will come to realize are one of C.A.R.E.'s almost daily series of small and large emergencies. In this instance, one of the babies has escaped from one of the *hoks* outside, and Lee and Senior Animal Keeper Bennett Serane run off to retrieve it.

"Human error," says Rita, mouthing one of her favorite shorthand sentiments. "Human error."

• • •

Once you have picked, cajoled, lifted, and forced enough of the little guys and girls from your head, thighs, shoulders, and waist to take a seat on one of the plastic food crates provided for that purpose, you must wrestle with the first of many challenges about to confront you: How to tell the Dennises, Kimberlys, Tortillas, Yoshis, Judys and Jagers apart. It's a bit like entering a maternity ward and being asked to tell the newborns apart. But everyone *else* seems easily able to do it. Why not me?

The male/female bit, of course, is easy enough. If you can't stop them moving long enough to spot a penis, or the lack of one, there's a simple way: In the males, the *callosities*, or buttocks, are fused below the anus; in the females, they are conveniently separated to make room for the sexual organs. And then, slowly but surely, you become aware of the subtle differences and demarcations: Kimberly has rough, thick gray fur and—with the exception of Sunamu, the alpha female—is the largest of the troop; Icarus has several white scar markings on his left cheek; Maggie, along with the fact that she is hardly ever separated from her brother Dennis, is missing a tail; Sunamu has smooth streaked fur on her back; Jagger is yellowish brown and, by comparison to the others, rather emaciated; Cory is the one practicing masturbation on your left knee. After a few

weeks of this, I can almost swear that my eyes are becoming as focused and discriminating as the baboons'!

One of the first things I need to learn in my relationship with my new charges is baboon language: lip-smacking, grunting, warning calls, laughing sounds, mating cries—the emotional range is rather astonishing. I soon become acquainted with the warning cry through harsh experience: namely, when it issues from the lips of Dennis among the mediums and Peter among the smalls as a call to mob me. In the meantime, I arduously practice my lip smacking—the ultimate accompaniment (along with ears pulled back against the head) to the ‘come-hither’ face of proffered friendship—in front of the mirror. I’m all too aware that mine more accurately resembles a forlorn lover blowing kisses than a baboon trying to be friends, but, after all, I’m only a beginner.

As for the wild troop, there are things to be learned there too: For one, it isn’t wise, especially for a man, to make direct eye contact with one of the large males: It’s seen as a challenge, and can provoke an unwelcome response. Another is that, when males are copulating or busy grooming a prospective mate, it’s best to keep a certain distance—or, at least, not interrupt the proceedings. Picking up a rock—picking it up, not necessarily throwing it!—is sure to intimidate even the large males (who are merely likely to give you a push as a way of letting you know who’s boss), but it isn’t always wise to do so, I quickly discover when one of the other volunteers, Angela, picks one up right in front of a copulating couple, only to be rewarded by a large shove from the male.

• • •

You can pick your friends and you can pick your nose, but you can't pick your friend's nose was a popular saying when I was a kid growing up in Manhattan, but it certainly isn’t the prevailing ethos here. Maggie, whose tail has been bitten off in a fight, is clearly becoming my friend—at least judging from the ardor with which she preens and grooms me. She is also not at all averse to picking at my nose, or my ears, my eyelids, my lips and gums and any other protrusion or orifice she can reach.

In the nursery on the late afternoon of my first full day as a volunteer I meet Shanti, a two-month-old female who greets me with a flattering, and utterly archetypal, gesture: the presentation of her *derrière*. The presenting of the female buttocks, in the hope that the honoree will comply by scratching it, is a gesture of incipient friendship and interest. (It can also have other functions among older baboons, such as expressing a desire for grooming or copulation, or surrender after a fight.) So, obediently, I scratch. Shanti, temporarily satisfied, scoots off playfully into the arms of Elena, then returns for more.

Shanti’s story—heartbreaking but not uncharacteristic of orphans who had the good fortune to fall into C.A.R.E.’s hands—is that the man who previously owned her had nourished her largely on *alcohol*, a substance infant baboons will ingest all too readily. Within days of her arrival at C.A.R.E., it became clear that poor little Shanti was going through detox. Originally Lee’s baby, he seems to take a liking to Jacob, who agrees to take on the rather unique status of being a male “stepmother.”

Nor is this to be the last of Shanti’s medical adventures: When, after discovering a bleeding polyp inside her, Lee administers a sedative that is probably too much for her damaged liver, Shanti goes into shock. Thinking her little infant is dying, Lee bursts into tears. But then, on the way to the vet, the heroic little creature revives, and, by evening, is

back to normal, sitting at the dinner table in Jacob's pouch along with the other volunteers.

• • •

It's with Dennis that I develop the most complicated, and at times perplexing, relationship. Dennis is the youngster whose warning cries first led to my being mobbed by the troop. All I need to do is consult the various scratch and bite marks on my arms and legs to be reminded of the occasion. During my first few sessions with the mediums, he repeatedly comes to me for comfort, but, when I apparently don't give him enough, or the right kind, immediately begins biting me, or crying out for help.

Dennis is also beginning to rely on me for protection from Sunamu and the other larger members of his troop. Along with his devoted sister Maggie, my hairdresser, he now spends most of the time when I am in the mediums' cage grunting and vocalizing in my arms, to whose comfort he frequently retreats, grooming my arms, my chest and, finally, my head to calm himself.

Days later, however, Dennis twice initiates yet another mobbing of me. This is interesting, because one tends to project the 'human' expectation of gratitude—after all, who's been protecting and cuddling him continuously the past several days?—onto the baboon world, where it hardly applies. Fact is, Dennis is very low, perhaps lowest, within the troop hierarchy, and, as Rita says, those of low rank will often “switch sides” against a common enemy (me!) as a way of trying to ally themselves with their more powerful troop mates.

I decide to adopt a new strategy with Dennis, which actually seems to work: I studiously avoid any eye contact with him, no matter how hard he seems to be trying to meet my gaze. I sense he is just waiting for my eyes to meet his to give out the *help!* cry and have the others come mob me, but I'm not buying. I also let Sunamu and the others beat up on him at will and pull him off my lap. This seems to be working: No trouble the first day, at least.

On my second day entirely alone with mediums (volunteers, especially males, are never left alone in the baboon cages until the baboons have come to know, and feel comfortable, with them), Dennis approaches me relentlessly for comfort, yelping his little *help!* cry until I squeeze him to my chest and stroke his head. It's astonishing—and in many ways quite moving—to realize that these baboons are actually beginning to *know*, and to trust, me. We seem light years away from the mawlings and mobbings of my first several days.

As the days march on, Dennis, in fact, is so sure of my protectiveness that he feels confident enough to attack Sunamu, the alpha female and troop leader, who does reverse somersaults between my legs chasing him. Dennis and his sister Maggie, with whom, arm in arm, he occasionally does a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers soft shoe around the cage, grooms my chest hairs, while Sabrina and Kariba groom those on my legs. Even Sunamu takes a turn at grooming me, which suggests that, finally, I had *really* made it!

Dennis's behavior, on the other hand, remains strange and unpredictable. A real momma's boy, he come to me perpetually for comfort, occasionally even risking a small act of aggression at one of the other baboons, and then immediately running back into my arms screeching and squealing. Yet eye contact with me seems to frighten him, and,

whenever I look at him or try to lip smack him, he takes off screaming! He does the same at bedtime, when I try to take him inside.

The smalls, slowly but surely, are beginning to take a liking to me as well—though how that ‘liking’ manifests itself isn’t always what one might hope for. Komoti, for example, begins manically grooming my chest—a ‘grooming’ that includes pulling on my chest hairs as well. Zefferelli, on the other hand, chooses the approach/avoidance method: Bandaged arm and all, he performs an interesting dance, usually on my left knee, mounting my knee, sitting down, opening his arms wide, lip smacking me, and then taking off on a frantic run in the other direction, sometimes pausing just to pee on my leg before departing. Flirtation? Game? Whatever it is he may want from me, his behavior reminds me of something I’d read in Shirley Strum’s *Almost Human* before coming to C.A.R.E.:

I have observed baboons when meeting for the first time, advancing and retreating ... a slow respectful means of getting to know each other. Sometimes their language is so indirect that it is difficult to detect at all and in human terms it appears as if they were ignoring each other when in fact they are merely acknowledging the other’s personal boundaries.

So there you have it: Zeferelli is merely trying to get to know me, just offering his respect.

• • •

It’s hard to say whether a troop of seventeen eight-to-twelve-month-old baboons having been nicer to one on any one day than the day before substantially raises one’s spirits is a sign of having risen, or fallen, within one’s own not-so-humble species, but—risen or fallen—that’s how I am starting to feel. The mediums seem actively *happy* to see me, with Kimberly jumping down on me at least a dozen times from the wooden post above and lying playfully in my lap, and Tortilla and Sabrina madly vying for Maggie’s hairdresser role.

My Dennis strategy, too, seems to be working: He’s constantly trying to make eye contact, first from my lap and then from various vantage points around the cage, but I steadfastly hold to my resolve: stroking and lap dancing are fine; eye contact, no.

In the nursery (which is all girls) later that afternoon, Shakira continues presenting her pinkish little bottom, which I obediently scratch, while Petri and Maya—what a compliment!—carouse on my lap. Even Emilia and Thandi flirt with me from the safety of Elena’s lap, while Shanti does a frantic little dance between us and Willow, Zurika’s baby, peeks curiously out from beneath her blanket. This, in the world of a new “alpha male” being introduced to a troop of infant females, is real progress.

• • •

The next day, which begins as usual with a crescendo of *wa-hooing* from above, coupled with the occasional copulation cry and the hailstone-like descent of baboon feet from the trees and cages above, proves to be an eventful one: That morning, as I am sitting among the mediums with Elena, and just after Elle, one of the caged troop, has tried to steal baby Suzi from Elena’s arms and Sabrina, another member of the troop, steals the baby blanket, I see Bennett, Rita, and Lee running up to Area 1, where one of the adult baboons has been found dead. Elena runs out to help and for the first time I find myself alone with the mediums, hoping Dennis wouldn’t instigate another mobbing. When a baby cobra drops

from the blanket containing the dead baboon, Rita thinks, at first, that a cobra bite has done the damage. (“The babies,” she says as she walks past, “have enough poison in them to kill too.”) But once the dead baboon is brought inside, his purplish-black tongue reveals he has died of asphyxiation, the product of a black mamba bite, the deadliest bite of all.

There have now, in the brief time since my arrival, been three baboon deaths (two from snakebite, one from tetanus), along with the three mawlings—of Diva, Zefferelli, and Thandi. Each day, I am soon to realize, brings its little panoply of small and large emergencies: illnesses, accidents, deaths, injuries, escapes, fights.

The time alone with the mediums passes, gratefully, without incident, and, later that day in the nursery, it’s only Petri who takes an interest in engaging me, with an occasional tentative foray on Thandi’s part. It occurs to me as I sit there that human-baboon interactions can, at least at the outset, be a one-way street: It’s up to us humans, somehow, to enter the world of baboon-ness in order successfully to interact with them ... waiting for *them* to act like *us* is utterly futile.

• • •

As I begin spending more and more time alone with the mediums, it’s not only Dennis and Maggie with whom I seem to be making progress. Sabrina and Karima also begin relentlessly grooming me; Kimberly, apparently eager to show off her gymnastic skills, delivers a flying drop kick to my left eye on one occasion, turning it bright pink, as she catapults off a beam; even Sunamu begins presenting her lovely pink behind.

“You’re in here all by yourself?” Rita says with a smile as she walks past.

“I sure am. See ... I’m not as frightened as you thought.”

“You are *very very* brave,” the boss reassures me.

Baboons are relentlessly curious, and one of the great pleasures of spending time with the mediums is watching them—whenever, for example, a group of young baby warthogs walks by or there is any commotion in front of Rita’s door—line up against the front of the cage, noses pressed against the fence like a bunch of children lining up to watch a Thanksgiving Day parade.

Among the smalls, Johnny, Brutus and Komoti are also getting used to me, and, in the nursery, Lee’s baby, Suzie, keeps making tentative approaches, then retreating. Shakira, Petri and, to a lesser extent, Thandi, now all seem more relaxed in my company. I am also starting to deliver afternoon milk to the older adolescents in Star *Hok*, who seem to like the game of having me chase them around the cage to retrieve the baby bottles and nipples.

That evening, on my pre-sundown walk along the beach, I see one of the wild troop females carrying what looks like a black dishrag, hanging limply from her hand. Training my binoculars on her, I realize that it is a dead baby she’s been carrying around, a fact Rita confirms later that evening. “The mother,” she explains to me, “was too young to know how to care for it,” a situation I realize also sometimes has its human counterpart.

• • •

The truth is that, by the end of my second week at C.A.R.E., I’ve begun to feel a bit baboony myself. I’m actually beginning to enjoy this sitting around being groomed,

presented to, and lip-smacked. What's more, it isn't a bad life being the alpha male. I get a lot of attention! Somebody up there on my head—Tortilla? Sabrina?—seems to have fallen absolutely in love with me. She madly grooms my hair and my eyes, then moves on to my chest, along with periodic yanks on my chest hairs, and methodically chews off all three buttons on my shirt. But all in all it's a good life here in the cage—calming, tranquil, even meditative.

“I was in baby *hok*,” volunteer Kim Sobakk recalls to me one day over lunch, “and there were seven or eight babies in there with me, and I leaned back and they were all lying on my chest and the sun was coming through the trees, and it was the most magical moment I can ever remember.” I am beginning to understand what she meant.

Even Sunamu actually *twice* engages me in long, intimate grooming sessions. She now seems much less after Dennis. While Stella and Judy, two of the more yellowish females, have taken up residence on my left knee, opposite Dennis and Maggie. Then, also, there are lots of soft kisses along my eyes, nose and ears on this day, not only from Maggie, who has also taken to kissing me on the lips, but from Kariba and Tortilla.

Yoshi, with the characteristic white scar on his left cheek, seems to have discovered me as well, grooming me voraciously all over the eyes and head, sticking his own head down through the opening of my shirt (buttons removed, courtesy of Tortilla or Sabrina), and coming to me for comfort when he is attacked by one of the more dominant males or females. Jagger—the scrawniest of the bunch—is also beginning to find me a source of comfort, particularly at the end of the day when time comes to take the babies in for the night; and Sabrina, not one of the mediums who previously seemed most drawn to me, quietly devours a carrot on my lap.

I'm fitting in, I slowly find ... just becoming one of the family.

• • •

Before I know it, my stay at C.A.R.E. is drawing to a close. My last day of official work begins with three crises: Elena has been bitten by one of the suricates that morning when she went to feed them, and late last night, Kim got a call from her husband in California, who's been ill, suggesting she might have to go home. Rita's reaction to this revealed everything about how she views the human/baboon hierarchy. “Imagine,” she commented when she related the news of Kim's husband, “having to choose between your husband and a sick baby!” The “sick baby” she was referring to, of course, was Diva!

Meanwhile, up in Star *Hok*, Paprika had been nearly choked to death when one of the other baboons stole the new volunteer Kora's T-shirt and got it wrapped around her neck, forcing Lee, Kim, and Zurika to jump in and rescue her.

Suddenly, I begin to feel a deep welling of emotion come over me. I am actually going to have to say *good-bye* to Dennis and Maggie, and to all the others.

• • •

On the day of my scheduled departure from South Africa, I rent a car and drive from Phalaborwa back to C.A.R.E. to say good-bye to Rita, Lee, Bennett, and my “children.” No sooner have I arrived, but that I commit one of those “human errors” people so often make with baboons—namely, underestimating their resourcefulness and intelligence—and leave my car outside the volunteer lodge rather than locking it up behind one of the

Center's fences. Though I've removed my backpack and all obvious signs of food, I should, after all this time of living day and night among the baboons, know better. By the time I've walked down the hill to Rita's house, members of the wild troop have had at the car in search of food, ripping the passenger side mirror right from it. And I, of course, have only myself to blame.

When I walk into Rita's living room, Suzi, who is there with Lee, is so glad to see me she leaps onto the sofa to play. What a change from those first days, when she ran and hid from me! But there's also been bad news during the night: Nelson from the "Nut Village" has died of pneumonia after eleven years at C.A.R.E. When they shaved his chest to do the x-ray, Rita tells me, they found that a number had been tattooed on him by the experimental lab that used him as a subject before his rescue by C.A.R.E. One can't help ponder the irony of it all: The dark resonance of Rita's German past rearing its head once more.

"Where will you bury him?" I ask Rita.

"Up the hill with all the others, behind the Nut Village," she replies.

"And do you put a marker up for each?"

"No," she smiles. "I remember where they all are... . And that's where I'm going to be buried too." Which was to take place, I never would have imagined at the time, much sooner than either of us ever suspected.

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