

# MY LIFE AS A GORILLA

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## I MY DOCTORS

I was thinking today about my doctors, Petrovsky and DiPoe. They have been patient, encouraging, and, where they could be—where to their minds it didn't negatively affect my medical situation—indulgent. Despite our few spats along the way, I regard them as friends, and not only as great doctors but also as true humanitarians who have dedicated their lives to the benefit of mankind. They have had to endure a lot of criticism and insult on my account, having been called heartless quacks, immoral opportunists, and dangerous madmen;—all of it so wrong, so unfair. For here is the grand fact of the matter: without them I would have been dead six months ago. One might legitimately question whether or not the life they've extended to me so far has been worth living, but no one can question that without them I would not have had it at all, nor the chance at a still better life to come when I get my new, my human body.

Of course sometimes it's hard for me not to be depressed over the delay. It's not easy looking into a mirror and seeing that you're mostly a go-

rilla. —Which by the way is why, the other day, I took down all the mirrors in the house, even the one from the bathroom medicine cabinet whose shelving is now exposed. True, I can never escape the sight of my big bulging furry stomach, or my long furry arms and short legs, or my hands with their thick leathery fingers and black nails, but I try to keep my eyes averted from myself, always kook outward, forward—forward into the future, as it were; reminding myself that sooner or later my situation has to change either for the long-awaited better of getting a new human body or for the not-wholly-unwelcome alternative of having no body at all.

No doubt if I had more company I wouldn't dwell on myself so much, but I spend whole days, and lately whole weeks, by myself, seeing and talking to no one. My parents aren't nearby and, in their sixties, don't have the stamina to drive over and visit me every day the way they did for weeks after I first got out of the hospital. My younger brother, Adam, is often too tired after work every day to come over, and though he tries to make it on weekends sometimes he can't because he has a personal life, either going on dates or doing something he needs for himself. As for my wife, Joanna, she only makes mercy visits now, less for my sake than for her own, to prevent a bad conscience.

And when I think of how busy my life used to be, of how many friends I used to have! At least, I thought they were my friends. But one by one they dropped away and no longer visit me because

(as one of them frankly confessed) it was “too hard for him to see me this way”—not considering that if it was hard for him to *see* me this way, it was a hundred times worse for me to *be* this way. But I don't hold it against him or anyone else, not even against my wife. In their places—in hers—I am sure I would have done the same thing. It's all well and good to talk about the necessity of being kind to others, of being compassionate and helping those less fortunate than oneself: but let's face it, sainthood is the exception, not the rule, and it would be unfair to blame people for avoiding unpleasant situations. And for most people nothing could be more unpleasant than spending time with a guy who's mostly a gorilla.

One day about three months ago I admitted to Dr. DiPoe, that I wanted for company, and he arranged through a state agency for a social worker to stay with me a few hours each weekday. I didn't especially like the idea of spending time with a stranger, but then I figured it might be good for me—that the person sent might be someone I'd like and become friends with. She was a Dominican woman who was very nice but not too bright. She didn't know much English and spoke a coarse ungrammatical Spanish, without music, without grace. She either hadn't understood what she had been told about my situation or interpreted it in a less literal way. When she came to the door and saw me her hair almost stood up on end, she screamed, and ran down the street. My situation had to be explained to her all over again through an interpreter, and even then she only

came back because she was a religious woman, a devout Catholic, who believed in helping the unfortunate, and consequently felt guilty about her initial reaction. But she was so nervous around me that each time I moved she nearly jumped out of her skin. I told her there was nothing to be afraid of, that I was the nicest guy in the world, and that I only have a gorilla body because it was the only way I could stay alive, and that soon enough my head would be transplanted back onto a human body and I'd be like everyone else. She nodded and smiled and said in her thick accent, "Yes, yes—no worries—I unner-stand!"—even as her eyes popped out of her head and you could see she was straining every nerve not to run away again. She quit after only two days, telling the people at the agency she couldn't take it anymore. They offered to send a replacement but I told them and Dr. DiPoe I didn't want anyone else. I didn't need anyone to make me feel worse about myself than I already did.

Maybe it's just as well that people have let me alone. They say that misery loves company, but only *unconscientious* misery: I, for one, would rather not inflict my now soured personality on anyone, preferring to wallow by myself in my dark moods—to have the whole dark rotten deep pool of it to dive into as deeply and as many times as I want without having to worry about dousing anyone around me with its noxious splashes.

I spend my solitary days mostly thinking about whether or not the transplant was worth it, and always come to the decision that, so far, it wasn't.

It *can't* be until I get a human body. Who knew it would take this long to find one? My doctors themselves didn't think so. They had told me it might take a couple of months at most. None of us foresaw the many reasons which would make finding a suitable donor so unlikely: the need for compatibility, the logistics of getting a body to me in a necessarily short time, and (what proved to be the biggest stumbling block) a family's willingness to donate the body of a loved one for my use. It seems now that we'll have to wait till some moribund person specifically donates himself to me, and even then the odds of his meeting the necessary compatibility criteria are unlikely. At any rate, here I am, nearly a year later, and I'm still walking on my knuckles! Only one thing has enabled me to reconcile myself to the delay: the dread of going through another transplant. The first one was *so* hard, and the second is bound to be just as bad—just as painful. Yet I *am* willing to do it all over again because it would be the "real" one—the one for which all the sacrifices were made, and which will give me back my normal life. I also remember what Dr. Petrovsky once told me during one of our pre-operative consultations:

"One day it'll all just seem like a bad dream."

It's hard to argue with that notion—that the bad times, like good ones, pass away and eventually have no more reality than a dream. The only problem is that while you're *in* the dream, it's your reality, and its difficulties and terrors are no less real than those in your waking hours.

I constantly indulge in fantasies of what I'll do when I'm entirely human again. By then Joanna and I might or might not still be together. But the first thing I'll be sure to do is see my kids. Then, if Joanna wants, we can for a while pretend to be a big happy family again for their sake, and take a vacation together; go somewhere warm and beachy for three or four or five months. Only after that will I think about what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.

When I think about everything I had and lost, I have to shake my head at it, at the changeability of life, which is really terrifying when you think about it. You never know, when you get out of bed in the morning, whether you'll be getting into it again the same way at night. No wonder people don't think about it: it's hard to be brave every day. The ignorance of bliss is precisely the ability or determination to ignore the terrible and invisible pitfalls ever around us.

Pondering and saying such things makes it sound as though I'm the exception, the rare brave spirit unafraid to face the terrible facts of the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. If I had really been brave I wouldn't be in this position. I would have fully accepted my death, prepared myself for it, and have gone with quiet dignity unto my fathers. No, I frankly confess I'm a coward, and it was cowardice which forced me to agree to the most extreme attempt to save my life.

## II THE DIAGNOSIS

I come from healthy and long-lived stock. My maternal and paternal grandparents lived into their 90s;—and this at a time when medicine was a lot less sophisticated than it is today. I had the usual childhood illnesses but afterwards rarely got sick except for a cold or the flu, and even then only once every few years. In getting older I was careful of my health, tried to eat well, exercised, rarely used tobacco and consumed alcohol moderately. Whenever I found myself gaining weight, even by only a couple of pounds, I cut back on my food. My annual physical exams and blood tests always came back normal.

I was naturally strong, too. My wife used to smile to see how I, though by no means muscular, could easily lift heavy packages or move about furniture or kitchen appliances. One year she encouraged me to run in a marathon and I, with only moderate training, finished in fourteenth place out of three hundred.

My personal life could not have been happier. After three years of marriage my wife and I had our first child, a boy, Charlie, and two years after