

Inhumanity



by

Matt McHugh

He could not feel the tree he knew he was leaning against, as if it were not a thing, but simply a force that kept him from falling. All that he could feel was the throb from the left side of his body spreading through him, less like pain now than the probing of invisible fingers. About him, the sounds of the forest—calls of birds, hiss of wind through leaf and grass—merged into a single, lulling murmur. The canopy of branches overhead seemed more distant than it should have been, and the sky leaking through it almost near enough to touch. He looked down to see his left hand thick with his own blood. His blood darkened the ground beneath him, marking the trail he had left crawling to this spot. Without anticipation, he shut his eyes and leaned back his head to wait for what would come next. An unfamiliar feeling moved through him; it was not hunger or anger or pleasure or pain, but just a calm with nothing in it but itself. Even though it was strange, it seemed like the right thing to feel.

Individuals may distribute this story freely for private, non-commercial use provided all author and copyright information remain intact on each copy.

Copyright © 2003 Matt McHugh. All rights reserved. mattmchugh.com

Suddenly, they were there—with their awkward steps and maddening voices, their bright faces and aggressive eyes. He wanted to rush at them, chase them away, but he could only scratch at the dirt with the hand and foot that still worked. He could make no sound except a rasping breath. Helpless, he watched as one raised its long gun. If they shot again, they would take him. He would not be able to rest in the dense, heavy calm; they could take him away forever. Struggling, he pulled himself away from calmness back into pain and anger—to charge, to run, to hide, to fight, to do anything but let himself be taken. He heard their horrible voices cry out and the crack of the gun.

Mitch woke with the jolt of the white bullet hitting him. He clawed at the spot on his leg where it should have been, but of course was not. He stilled himself while his senses returned. The room around him was the same as ever: white tile walls, red brick floor, frosted glass roof, and the one clear wall that looked out to the hall with the other rooms like his own. Mitch hauled himself to his feet and made his to the glass wall, moving with the *shuffle-throw* step he had learned to compensate for the stiffness in his side. The hall was dark and quiet, with only an occasional hint of motion from the other cells. He hobbled across the floor to a large cement block with a control bolted to it, and tapped on the single black button that worked his TV. It was no surprise when nothing happened. Mitch knew that it was too early for the TV to work. He poked at the dead grass on the floor, and found a piece of orange peel with a few ants on it. He pushed it into his mouth and gnawed it. The peel was dry and bitter, but the ants felt good on his tongue as he crushed them to the roof of his mouth. He sat down and meticulously ground the peel to bits, most of which he spat out so lazily they trickled down his chin and fell on his chest.

He went back to the TV button and tried it again. As expected, the screen in the wall remained dark. Mitch looked at his image in the green-gray bubble of screen. He knew that he saw himself, rather than another who looked like him, but he could not successfully imagine how it was possible to be both in front of and behind the bubble at the same time. He reached out to touch his other self's black, creased face (his other self did the same) but he could only tap a piece of glass in front of the screen itself, not quite reaching his other self's finger. This glass was a smaller version of the room's glass wall. Perhaps he could be kept behind a pane of glass at any time in any place, behind any of the invisible walls that kept everything apart in this world. That seemed to make sense according to the insane logic of this place.

Mitch was idly tugging at the bar tower's dangling rope when a group of people, mostly small, came and stood outside his glass wall. They tittered away with shrill voices as they stared and pointed at him and stared and waved and stared. He watched their antics for a bit, then turned his eyes to the wall's tile pattern when he could no longer tolerate their staring. As he scuffed back to the corner, there came a series of quick, sharp sounds from outside the glass. Mitch looked back to see the biggest person clapping his hands together. This man came to look at Mitch nearly every day and wore Blondie's clothes. He frequently came to the glass wall and challenged him with long stares. He was there whenever Mitch was moved or whenever something in his room was changed. Now, he yelled with a loud, invasive voice while his hands formed HELLO and his fingers made Mitch's name. Mitch turned away, brought himself to the far corner, and lay down. He covered his eyes with the crotch of his elbow and sank into his daily half-sleep of waiting for the TV to come on.

David Allen waited until all forty-two school kids had gathered in front of the enclosure and been shushed into attentive silence by their teachers. He then pointed to Mitch and said, "Now who can tell me what this guy is?" With a flurry of gestures and sound effects, three dozen little voices shouted, "A gorilla!"

He feigned admiration. "Very good! Now, does anybody know what kind of gorilla?" Silence, as he expected. "This is a mountain gorilla. A silverback male, to be precise—"

"What's his name?" one youngster piped.

David shaded his eyes with a hand and conspicuously scanned the group before asking, "Did I see somebody raise his hand?" A boy sheepishly raised his hand while those around him laughed falsely and poked him. "Yes, young man." David said.

"What's his name."

"His name is Mitch. Maureen Donovan, who was head of primate research here before me—she's pretty famous, you may have seen her on TV—she gave him that name. I believe she named him after her father, who died just a little bit before Mitch came to us about two years ago.

"The story of how Mitch came here is a very sad one. You see, Mitch was born and lived most of his life in the wild in Africa. We're not exactly sure, but we think Mitch is between twenty-five and thirty years old—which is pretty old for a gorilla. Well, one day, a group of scientists working in an African wildlife park heard gunshots. They ran to see what happened and found that poachers—men who hunt protected animals—had shot some gorillas! The poachers ran away, because it's against the law to hurt a gorilla, but they had already shot one dead." He paused, then continued with dramatic measure, gesturing to the appropriate body parts, "And they had cut off his hands and his head to sell for trophies."

Many young faces mimed disgust. David had told this story dozens of times, and knew it produced a good effect. The fact that it was not specifically true in this case (the dead gorilla had not been decapitated and no one knew why it had been shot or by whom) did not bother him in the least. There were many such well-documented mutilations, and the image worked well on the popular imagination. The important thing was to convey how the greed and ignorance of humans caused these creatures to suffer constant inhumanity.

David went on. "But then, they noticed a trail of blood on the ground and discovered Mitch. He'd been shot and was bleeding badly, but even though he was hurt, Mitch's instinct to cling to life was as strong as ever. He tried to charge the researchers, so they had to use a tranquilizer rifle which puts animals to sleep without hurting them. They put Mitch to sleep and carried him back to their camp. Mitch had been shot twice, once in his shoulder and once in his hip. A veterinarian took the bullets out and stopped the bleeding, but Mitch was too injured to survive in the wild. Even today, Mitch has trouble walking, and he can't climb at all. They tried to find a zoo that would take him, but not many wanted a badly wounded adult male gorilla. At last, Maureen Donovan, who was in charge here before me, said Mitch could live here."

"How about we all say 'hi' to Mitch?" As they cried their assent, David lifted his hands above his head and clapped sharply. Mitch turned to the sound and David met his unfathomable gaze. David made Maureen's special 'hello' sign then spelled out 'MITCH' in finger alphabet. A light of recognition came into the old silverback's eyes. The entire group hushed, waiting for a reply, but Mitch simply let his vision drift across the rows of children's faces. He then simply limped away and curled up in a corner. David was trying to contain his irritation as he waved the group on to the next exhibit, when one of the teachers spoke up.

"Excuse me, Mr. Allen—"

"Doctor."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Dr. Allen. Did you just use a sign-language?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," he answered. "Years ago, Maureen Donovan created a special sign vocabulary for gorillas, and actually managed to teach Mitch several dozen words. Considering his age when he came to captivity, it's a pretty impressive accomplishment."

"Amazing!" replied the teacher. "And, one other question, if I may. I was wondering, is that a TV screen set into the wall?"

"It is. It's a little experiment of my own to see what he'll do if given a TV and a remote control. We usually turn it on for about two hours a little later in the day, otherwise he'd probably watch it all the time."

"He actually watches it?"

"Yes, indeed." David replied as he ushered the children away. "Interestingly, he comes fairly close to duplicating the Nielsen ratings. He seems to have a particular preference for police shows with lots of violence and blonde women. Heaven knows why."

Mitch's body woke, knowing it was time for the TV to be on. Without bothering to stand, he slid along the floor to within reach of the TV button. He tapped it, and watched for the magic instant when shapeless colored light gave one quick burst within the screen. The real picture soon began to take shape, growing smaller and sharper until it was something. This first scene was the same as the first one usually was: people, half-hidden by a large table, jabbering continuously, as people usually did. He tapped the button again; again there were people jabbering, this time sitting on chairs. This, too, was in its familiar place to Mitch. Sometimes there suddenly appeared a hill made of people's faces piled on top of each other, and sometimes one person moved through the faces like they were tall grass. This was interesting for a short time, but he soon hit the button to go to the next. This one was always different, and today the screen was filled with a mass of amazing colors, colors unlike any he had ever seen in places other than TV. The accompanying sounds were also unique to TV, a strange music that both confused and fascinated him. He pushed the button again when the music stopped and people's voices took over. The next scene was full of many different men—but these ones didn't talk, they moved. Their motions were aggressive and complicated, with people striking and shoving each other, running and climbing on all sorts of structures, and filled here and there with the spikes of color and sound that belonged to guns. This, too, gave way to people jabbering (as everything always did). Mitch pressed the button until the one he liked best came up: a woman with colorful, shiny skin and drifting blonde hair with two smaller women behind her.

Mitch twisted around to look full face at the screen. The woman began to bend and sway her lean body, slowly at first then faster. The two small ones moved the same way. Sometimes, she stared right at him, but her eyes were not like challenges. All the time, she spoke a quiet, comforting voice, so unlike other people's jerky, grating voices. Her voice was like the murmur of the forests that didn't exist in this place, although Mitch sometimes still felt that sound in his body as he drifted to sleep. Her face, hair, and voice were all so much like Blondie. Blondie didn't exist in this place any more either, but Mitch had a feeling of her sometimes, too. Although he well knew this TV woman was not Blondie, seeing her brought back to Mitch vivid memories. Mitch signed HELLO GOOD MORNING BLONDIE TALK MITCH TALK to the TV, knowing it would not answer. He made the old motions automatically as the old feelings came upon him. A steady pulse of sound began to come through the TV. Mitch squirmed to his feet and started to rock back and forth with the sound, much as the woman and women did.

A tightness began in his stomach, as it often did in this part of the day. He rocked further and further, until his face nearly touched the floor. While bent down, he sucked a mouthful of air into his stomach. Bringing himself upright, he lifted a hand to his mouth and belched out the air along with a

quantity of brown stuff with green and foamy white bits in it. He sniffed the stuff, and finding it in order, swallowed it again.

Suddenly, from the other side of the glass wall, came a mix of cries and shouts. Mitch looked to see a group of people—many small, some not—leaning close to the glass, howling and waving and staring and staring. He resumed his rocking and again vomited into his hand, inspected it, and re-ate it. Again, those outside made a loud fuss, whooping and stamping and banging on the glass wall. A third time, Mitch brought up stuff from his stomach. The people made more noise. Instead of swallowing, he loped up to the glass as fast as he could manage and slapped his full palm against it in front of the faces. The stuff left a splatter on the glass, but it did not chase away or even block out the faces. They made more noise than ever.

Defeated, Mitch limped back to the TV button. He rapped it a number of times, looking passingly at some interesting things, then leaned over to lie face down on the floor, putting his uncomfortable stomach against the smooth cold of the tile. He hooked an arm behind his head, covering his ears with elbow and fingers, and tried to block out the people's shouting.

"Mister, the gorilla in there is puking up in his hand and eating it again."

"Excuse me," David said, turning to see an overweight boy with an ice cream-sullied face point back to the great ape house. Two wide-eyed subordinates backed him.

"The gorilla in there keeps puking in his hand and eating it," the leader repeated.

"And he tried to throw it at us," another added. The others concurred.

David set his elbows on the railing around the great ape island moat. "That's okay, guys. It's nothing to worry about, just a kind of gorilla indigestion." He glanced over his shoulder at them. "But thanks for telling me. You guys enjoy the rest of your day here." David looked down into the moat and remained still until he heard the boys depart. When they were gone, he lifted his head and sighed deliberately, not so much at the annoying kids but at being reminded of Mitch. Here was this magnificent animal with the extremely rare ability to sign—but wouldn't sign to him. It was like a maddening cosmic joke.

Across the moat, the nearest section of the island was currently populated by the zoo's troop of lowland gorillas. When he first came here, he had tried several times to introduce Mitch with them—and failed every time. When put in adjacent cages, Mitch would ignore them completely. If one of the adolescents reached through, the old cripple would charge and slam the bars repeatedly. Adults had been introduced to new troops successfully before. Even two large males eventually got use to each other after a few status-setting melees, which were mainly show anyway. It was logical for him to have tried; it was illogical for Mitch to have rejected it. Maureen had never attempted an introduction and strongly advised him against it. But how could she have known?

David looked up at the glottal yelping of two young males playing hit-and-run tag. The dominant, nobly enthroned on an artificial stump, was given a wide berth. It was true that Maureen had more impressive credentials than he: nearly fifteen years studying gorillas in the wild, ten-odd years at Yerkes and Duke, and nearly a decade here as head of primate research. But, he, too, had a lifetime of experience with these animals. His parents were renowned trainers of performing apes and he had quite literally grown up surrounded by them. When he began to study primatology as a formal science, it was less like learning

than re-categorizing his existing knowledge. At the time, it was obvious how some of his fellow students resented that.

David strolled around the Island. As usual, the chimpanzees had drawn the largest crowd. The three adolescents—Victor, Caesar, and Willie—were busy chasing each other as one held clump of straw. If one of the pursuers managed to snatch away the straw, the others would immediately go after him. The amusing irony (and what made it so recognizably human) was that bales of straws lay scattered throughout the enclosure, but of course they had to have the straw the other had: we covet only what another possesses. One of the chimps stopped chasing and stood tall on an artificial stump. He shook his head, grinning a vast tooth-and-lip grin, and began to clap his hands in mock applause. Enchanted, the audience around the wall—himself included—applauded back and mimicked the chimp's expression. On a simple level this chimp understood the function of symbolic gestures, yet he had no success teaching them any sign vocabulary. He could only get them to respond to simple commands for their few standard behaviors. Yet, Maureen had managed to teach Mitch (a mature adult!) almost fifty sign words and even a rudimentary syntax. How?

Among the cement rocks of the next section, an orangutan couple sat like two huge hairy blobs, while their single offspring swung from the bar trees on her impossibly long arms. Every now and then, the young orangutan would swoop close to her parents and hang in front of them making *yik-yik* sounds, then swoop away to resume her dangling ballet. David clapped sharply and called her name.

"Debbie!" The nearby people stopped and looked to him. Feeling their gaze, David restrained a smile and called again. "Debbie! Debbie, come here. Let me talk to you." As he spoke, he tapped his palm twice, covertly keeping it low and close to his body so that none but the orang saw it. In obedience to the sign, Debbie dropped from the bars and waddled to the edge of the moat. A silent, eager crowd began to form behind David.

"So how are you doing today, Deb?" he went on, making another covert signal. "Are you happy today, or what?"

Debbie shook her head exaggeratedly. "You're not!" David motioned again. "Then what are you?"

Debbie opened her eyes wide, the white semicircles around them showing distinctly in her ruddy face, and stuck out her bottom lip in a heart-rending monkey pout. The spectators cooed in unison. "You're sad?" David voiced; Debbie nodded vigorously to his sign. "What would make you happy then?" David flicked a finger. "Would you like to dance?" Again, Debbie nodded vigorously. "Then dance!" he cried, rolling his thumbs over each other.

Debbie launched into a fur-flailing hula—to the delighted hoots of the crowd—until David's next gesture collapsed her to the ground. "What's the matter? Are you tired now?" A wrist-flick brought the nod and yawn. "Well, okay, you rest now." He dug a few chunks of granola bar from his pocket and tossed them near her prone body—she let them lay where they fell—then gave a final series of signs. As he turned to go, the crowd began to laugh; David whirled about just in time to see Debbie jerk her thumb away from her nose and grin guilty innocence. He leaned over and scowled at her, shaking a chastising finger. Debbie curled to a fetal position, folded her hands beneath her head, and feigned sleep. He could not help but smile now as people applauded and whistled .

Let's see Ms. Donovan do that, he thought to himself as he snapped his fingers, releasing the orang to go collect her treats. He lifted a palm to acknowledge the crowd, then headed toward the outside cages of the primate house—where Mitch would be now.

Mitch heard the quiet skidding sound and looked up to see the door to the outside sliding open. He did not have to look back at his TV to know it was off. It always was when the door opened. He pushed himself to his feet and stared at the open door and the brightness of outside for a moment before *shuffle-throw* stepping to it and twisting himself out.

Outside was definitely better than inside. Although he was still in a cell with white tile walls, a red brick floor, and a glass wall in front, this one was a lot brighter and airier and smelled better. The glass wall here looked out on grass and trees and a path covered with leaf and branch shadows. But best of all was the ceiling above. Instead of the dim light of the frosted glass inside, here there were only a few bars with open space between revealing edges of trees and clouds and endless blue sky. Seeing the trees and the sky brought back in Mitch pieces of old feelings, of the strange calmness that was his last experience of the forest. In this place where everything was wrong, it gave him a vague sense that somehow things might yet become right again.

Mitch went over to the spot where the big food tray would be. It was there. He knew that there were other, tastier things hidden around the cage, but he could get them later. He flicked through piles of fruits and vegetables as he searched for ones that looked interesting today. After picking out some acceptable items, Mitch—celery stalk in his mouth and an assortment of fruits and greens cradled against his chest—took himself over to a corner behind the tire swing and sat down to eat. He was lazily packing his mouth with wadded up lettuce leaves when he noticed, through the hole in the tire, a person outside slowly pacing back and forth, bobbing up and down, and looking at him with a persistent but gentle stare. Mitch regarded this person for a while before deciding it was a woman; her movement and her gaze were very much like Blondie's—though her face and hair were very different. He was about to turn his attention back to eating, when the woman held out her hand and showed him a small pink-orange shape. This colored shape had no sooner caught his eye when her hand lowered then lifted and it vanished. A moment later, a pink-orange shape *plapped* onto the floor of his cage, not far from the glass wall.

Mitch struggled to his feet, scattering the apple slices and bamboo shoots he had set on his belly. He approached the bright shape cautiously. He looked up at the woman; she was holding a big camera in front of her face—as people often did—tilting it back and forth, but always keeping the shiny, round eye facing him. He looked down to the pink-orange thing and batted it with his knuckles. It was soft and wet and smelled distinctly of food. He picked it up, put it to his mouth, and found that it was a melon, but without the hard, bitter part. It was all soft and sweet and dissolved in his mouth almost without any chewing. He turned back to the woman, who now had lowered the camera and was holding out another piece of melon. She lowered and lifted her hand again. This time Mitch concentrated on the orangey chunk itself: he saw it leave her hand, rise up along the glass wall, disappear behind a thick bar near the top, reappear over the top edge, pass between the bars, and drop on the floor just to the side of him.

Mitch quickly took this piece and ate it. He was so excited that he hardly tasted its sweetness. Here was something amazing: things from outside the glass could come into his cage without using the little doors. The glass wall was not an absolute barrier—things could simply go around it! Mitch looked up at the woman, eager to see this happen again. After bobbing and swaying with the camera for a bit, she became still and watched him with asking eyes and hands spread wide. He made the motion she had used to throw the melon pieces. Her face beamed understanding and she bent to a dish on the ground full of melon, took a piece, and held it to him. Mitch jerked his head toward the top edge of the glass wall and repeated the throwing motion. The woman tossed the fruit up over the wall and down it came in front of him. He put it in his mouth, then signed GIVE FOOD THANKS THROW—with the new sign—GOOD FOOD THANKS—and since it fit in some way and he had no other word—THANKS BLONDIE.

The woman began to move her hands around, but her words made no sense to him. He signed back MITCH NOT TALK BLONDIE TALK AGAIN. The woman took another piece of melon and threw it in; Mitch picked it up and threw it back. She looked at him with a face full of wonder. He signed BLONDIE TALK. She then, very slowly, signed BLONDIE TALK. Mitch bobbed with excitement to talk to this dark Blondie. He began to make any sign that occurred to him: TALK FOOD WATER TALK

EAT BALL RED BLUE PLAY BLONDIE HERE HERE TALK SMELL TOUCH MITCH HAPPY SAD TALK—and on and on, watching for any response his gibberish.

Suddenly, the nearly every day man in Blondie's clothes appeared. He waved his arms at the woman and jabbered loud and harsh. Mitch signed frantically to get dark Blondie's attention again, but she kept looking at the man. His wild signs soon turned to nonsense and he grunted angrily, slapping the floor and stamping his good leg. The woman turned and walked down the path, out of Mitch's sight. In a rage of frustration, Mitch bounded to his food tray and began heaving handfuls of it up and over the glass wall. The man jumped and yelled as fruits and leaves fell around him. The man stopped jumping, but still yelling, signed ME MITCH TALK ME.

Mitch suddenly felt tired and upset. He stood watching the man glaring at him expectantly. At last he signed TALK BLONDIE. The man responded WHAT IS BLONDIE. Mitch limped back to the corner and gathered up the food he had scattered. He pushed some alfalfa sprouts into his mouth and chewed. Without looking at the man, he signed WANT BLONDIE TALK BLONDIE then turned his face to the wall.

While still some distance away, David saw a young woman lob something into Mitch's cage. Cursing to himself, he quickened his pace until he was almost running, his anger mounting with each stride. He stepped over a orangey spot on the ground and came up to the girl; she stood, camera in one hand while smoothing her hair with the other, staring enraptured into Mitch's cage.

"Miss, you can't feed him!" he cried loudly. The young woman started and looked at him with amazement. "There are signs everywhere."

She faltered for a moment. "I...I'm sorry. I just wanted some good pictures." She indicated a plastic dish on the ground. "It's only cantaloupe."

"That doesn't matter," he said, calming—but he kept his voice forceful. "Animals here all have very strict diets and feeding times. You can't just go tossing things into his cage." He looked up at Mitch. "You never know what might give him a bad reaction or—"

David stopped abruptly. There was Mitch, more energetic than David had ever seen him, forming dozens of word-signs in rapid succession. He froze, astounded by the flurry of language from the usually sullen gorilla. "How long has he been doing this?" he demanded of the girl.

"He just started," she answered with a shrug. "Is it like sign-language?"

"It *is* sign-language," he replied sharply. Mitch began to roar and smack his fists on the floor and hop around in his cage. Unnerved, David turned to the girl. "Would you please go somewhere else so I can calm him down!"

"Sorry...I'm sorry..." she stammered, then took up the cantaloupe plate and went quickly away. David watched until she was past the edge of the building, then turned back to Mitch. Out of nowhere, a rain of carrots and pears and romaine lettuce came down on his head.

"Jesus!" he shrieked, leaping out of the salad deluge. He looked in time to see Mitch wing one last clump from his lunch tray. The old silverback then stood as if nothing had happened and fixed him with a penetrating stare. Frenzied, David forgot himself in front of the gathering crowd and screamed.

"What's the matter—what do you want? Tell me! Talk to me!" then signed as he continued, "Why don't you talk to me! God damn it, Mitch! Talk to *me!* "

In the quiet that followed, David heard only the sound of his own panting; the substantial audience he had drawn was perfectly silent. Trying to ignore the dozens of eyes on him, David kept his own eyes locked on Mitch. After a few seconds, the gorilla made the sign for 'talk to' and then—quite distinctly intending a sign—ran his fingers across his forehead. David couldn't recall it from any of Maureen's papers, so he duplicated it and asked what it meant. Mitch turned away. He took some remains of his lunch from the floor, slumped into a corner, and began to eat. David was about to go when he saw Mitch make the signs for 'want' and 'talk to', each followed by the enigmatic forehead stroke.

Back in his office, David pondered Mitch's behavior—particularly that unknown sign he had made. He pulled Maureen's files and thumbed through them. He knew the simplified sign-language she had developed well enough, but it was likely he could have forgotten a word or two. He examined the sketches of the signs. Some vaguely resembled the one Mitch had made, but none was exact. He went to the closet to look for the videotapes Maureen had made of her sessions with Mitch.

. As he rummaged through various bric-a-brac from years past, he thought about Maureen Donovan. Practically an icon in twentieth century primatology. She had lived and worked and lectured all over the world. He was in diapers when she was tracking gorillas in Zaire; he was just finishing his dissertation when she took over as head of primate research here; and he was helping to co-co-co-edit a book on great ape sociobiology when she was teaching Mitch to talk with his hands. When she left to found a research center in Rwanda, he traded on some old favors and won the coveted spot as her successor. Like all professional scientists, primatologists were a close-knit and defensive lot, and David well knew the general perception of his situation. Maureen Donovan was a revered old matron with legacy of vital work; he was the son of show-business monkey handlers trying to legitimize himself. David understood the stigma he bore, but it galled him nonetheless. He knew the seriousness of his purpose and the depth of his own knowledge and abilities. He was not just a ringmaster with a Ph.D. They'd all see that in time.

"Bingo," he said aloud as pulled out a cache of videocassettes. He blew away the dust and set them in order according to their numbered labels, then went and got a player and monitor from the lab down the hall. The first one was fairly straight footage of Mitch's early days at the zoo: transporting him, giving him shots and a check up, him getting used to cages—he forwarded through most of it. The second was mostly of Maureen talking about Mitch: his history, his age, his general health, status of his gunshot wounds. David watched a few random segments with attention. He listened to Maureen tell—in her familiar faltering style—about her initial reluctance to take Mitch at first, feeling that he should be allowed to die (David had not known this and was rather surprised). She went on to tell of how remarkably intelligent and gentle she found Mitch to be. As David jumped through the tape, he scrutinized Maureen. Her tanned face almost resembled a gorilla's with its deep "character lines," to put it kindly. Yet there an odd serenity about her culminating in green-gray eyes and her hint of smile. Even at her age, she still had long, golden blonde hair, which she fidgeted with often. He had heard she dyed it—her one vanity. Still, she was a handsome, aging woman, and as he mentally stripped the years from her face, he could envision her as a pretty young woman, too. He could not help but wonder what she had been like at his age—and what he would be like at hers.

The third and subsequent tapes contained what he was looking for. There were extended pieces of Maureen in Mitch's cage squatting just a few feet from him; David always marveled at the uncertain blend of courage and stupidity it took to do that. She spoke very softly with her head bowed as she made various signs to him again and again. Occasionally, she stopped and took Mitch's hands to show him the sign. As first, Mitch snorted and pulled away, but gradually he came to let her move his hands and fingers almost

any way she wanted. Soon—or rather not so soon, since the tapes were made over months—Mitch got the knack of signing himself, and became aware of what the signs meant. Now Maureen could ask him such questions as 'Where is the ball', 'Is it time to eat', and 'What is your name', and Mitch could answer—though the finger alphabet for his name was essentially unrecognizable. While Mitch responded, Maureen watched him and occasionally brushed back a loose strand of blonde that perpetually fell over her brow—always with the same quick run of fingers across her forehead. David had noticed this habit of hers, essentially a nervous tick, and it was always the same.

The realization hit him like an electric shock.

"THAT'S IT!" he wailed, bolting up and smacking his fist on the desk. Indeed, that was it: the unknown sign Mitch had made. In the course of their sessions, he had picked up that tick and used it to refer to Maureen. To him, it became her name. David rewound the tape and watched her make the movement a dozen times. It all fit into place. Mitch had said 'I want Maureen' and 'I'll talk to Maureen' as clearly as if he had voiced it. Talking was something Maureen had taught him, he associated it with Maureen, and like a dog obedient only to commands from its master, he kept it reserved for Maureen. His task was obvious: to get Mitch to transfer that exclusive relationship of speech from Maureen to him. An idea came to him almost instantly, and he sped through the tapes looking for shots of Maureen signing directly to the camera—as she often did to record new combinations or variations she developed. After noting the positions of several appropriate segments, he left a message for the head keeper to send him two men after hours for a special project, then gathered up the tapes and made his way to the video editing lab.

Mitch sat in a corner of his inside cage—the outside was closed by this time, as usual—and waited for the lights to go off, as they usually did about now. Unexpectedly, he heard the *click-creak* sound of the little door by his TV being opened. This confused him, since this door only opened to give him food and it wasn't time for food. He leaned over on his knuckles to look at the door. To his complete surprise, a person was crouching low, walking into his room. Fear and mistrust filled Mitch. People never actually entered his cell, unless it was to do something to him, like stick him with a needle or make him swallow a pill (Blondie, of course, the exception). But such things were usually done when he was strangely sleepy—too sleepy to even move sometimes. But now he was fully awake, and the person, whom he recognized as the nearly every day man with Blondie's clothes who chased the melon woman away and tried to talk to him, now entered. He remained squatted in the corner between the TV and the glass wall. He signed HELLO to Mitch and asked him to come close. Mitch barked irritation at him and looked away. The man called out loudly, then tapped Mitch's remote control. The TV crackled and blinked to life even though it wasn't time for TV. The man tapped the button until the screen was filled with a hissing white field. The man then signed HELLO MITCH TALK BLONDIE NOW and called out again. The TV screen jerked and sputtered, then showed something that made Mitch jolt up. Blondie was on the TV! He went closer to the screen to make sure that it was Blondie and not another who looked like her.

It was definitely Blondie. She looked at him and said her name and talked to him with her hands while he listened to her quiet voice. Mitch found this very confusing. Blondie was on the TV, trapped behind a little glass wall just like he was, yet talking to him. Sometimes she would suddenly flicker and jump, and her head or body would be at different angle, or else she would hold completely still for a while. Sometimes, she looked right at him and made sounds, but did not talk—except making her name occasionally. But she was still Blondie, and Mitch answered her questions happily. WHO ARE YOU she asked. MITCH, he answered. ARE YOU HUNGRY? she asked. WANT THROW FOOD, he answered. WHERE IS THE BALL? she asked. BALL NOT HERE, he answered. In the excitement, he had forgotten about the man, who suddenly called out again.

Blondie's image was gone and the screen was once again filled with the dirty white field. Mitch grunted his confusion and looked around his cell. All he saw were the usual tile and glass walls—and the

man crouching by the TV. The man called out to him and signed WHO ARE YOU...MITCH...WHO ARE YOU...TALK TO ME...WHO ARE YOU?

WANT TALK BLONDIE Mitch said.

The man called out again and Blondie reappeared on the TV.

WHO ARE YOU she asked. MITCH, he answered. ARE YOU HUNGRY? she asked. EAT GOOD FOOD, he answered. WHERE IS THE BALL? she asked. Mitch, confused, did not answer this repeated question. The ball was not here. Blondie should know this. The man called out, and the screen went dirty white. The man signed WHO ARE YOU...TALK TO ME...WHO ARE YOU...ARE YOU HUNGRY...TALK TO ME...TALK TO ME. Mitch ignored him and watched for Blondie to come back. The man yelled again, and Blondie reappeared.

WHO ARE YOU...ARE YOU HUNGRY...WHERE IS THE BALL? she asked again. This did not make sense. Blondie never used to ask the same questions. She could not have forgotten his answers so soon. The man yelled and Blondie became completely still on the TV. The man signed WHO ARE YOU...TALK TO ME. Irritated, Mitch signed TALK BLONDIE. The man replied, BLONDIE NOT HERE...I AM BLONDIE...TALK TO ME. The man suddenly reached out and tapped the TV button. The screen popped and became its normal gray-green.

I AM BLONDIE...TALK TO ME...I AM BLONDIE signed the man.

This was not true: this man was not Blondie. Mitch barked with frustration and hit the TV button several times. Nothing happened. The TV remained dark behind its small glass window.

TALK TO ME...I AM BLONDIE...I AM BLONDIE... the man continued to sign.

At last, Mitch understood. Blondie had been taken away, just as he had been. She was kept behind a glass wall, just as he was. This man had taken Blondie away, taken her clothes, and he could make her do what he wanted, just as he could stare at Mitch day after day and make his cage different anytime he wanted. Enraged, Mitch stood and roared his anger. The man stood, too, and challenged him—all the while signing I AM BLONDIE...TALK TO ME...I AM BLONDIE....

Mitch could bear no more. He lunged forward and shoved the man with his good right arm. The man tumbled back into the glass wall, and bounced off it with a satisfying *whung*. He collapsed to the floor and lay still in a submissive position. Mitch gave a few irritated *whoops* to make sure this man knew his challenge had failed. Suddenly, there came a deafening shriek from behind and Mitch scrambled away, terrified. Two more men squeezed into his cage and stood tall in challenge. One held a pole that cracked with hot, blue-white sparks, and a white tube blasting the awful sound. The other held a long gun. Before Mitch could react, there was a gunshot and a jolt that struck him in the neck. He swiped at the spot, and a white bullet fell to the floor.

Panicked, Mitch clambered to the opposite corner of his cage. The two men, picked up the crumpled not-Blondie man and pushed him through the door. Their stares never left Mitch for an instant, and the pole sparked menacingly. When they backed out the door, Mitch grabbed a handful of straw and dung and fired it toward them. But it was a useless gesture. Mitch knew he had been defeated again. The white bullet would take away the world and send him to an even worse place: this he knew to be true. From the other cells outside his glass wall, he heard muffled cries of agitation. As he sank into an unnatural sleep, he listened for Blondie's voice among them.

David Allen shifted in his office chair and adjusted the strap of the sling on his right arm. Separated shoulder: he was lucky. He knew that, even without being told repeatedly by every nurse, doctor, and orderly in the emergency room—let alone the zoo's entire board of directors. The chairman had been fairly level-headed about the whole thing, and only referred to his actions as "irresponsible" a half-dozen times. The head keeper had been less charitable, calling him a "fucking moron" so frequently he lost count. David took his medicine with a penitent head bowed. He deserved it after all. Entering a dangerous animal's enclosure unprotected was not just frowned upon, it was simply not done. He had endangered two keepers, not to mention himself, for a reason that, objectively, even he now had to acknowledge as frivolous.

He had learned something about Mitch's signing ability, though: it was not true communication, just a trained behavior that belonged to Maureen, a rote action learned to please a favorite keeper exclusively. After all, gorillas are social animals; it is in their nature to bond with some, and exclude others. The important thing was that he had determined that Maureen had not succeeded in teaching Mitch language. It was a simple game to the gorilla. Mitch no more connected a concept to a symbol than "Clever Hans" grasped the sums he tapped out with his hoof, all the while reacting solely to his trainer's unconscious facial relief when the horse hit on the correct number. Mitch's reputation as a genius was shot. And Maureen Donovan's had taken a little dent as well.

Given all that had happened, David thought that the television—which would never show Maureen again—might prove too upsetting to Mitch now, so he had it pulled from his cage. Now that Mitch's value as a scientific subject was essentially nil, David toyed with the idea of having him put down. He quickly dismissed that line of thought, though. With proper care, Mitch could still live quite a few years—and the bottom line was that a large gorilla was still a major draw for any zoo, particularly when the gorilla is in isolation and can be viewed up close in a traditional enclosure. Besides, David sensed that a hint of spite might be mixed in with his considering destroying the animal; he could not have that on his conscience. No, Mitch would live out the rest of his days and die naturally in good time. He owed at least that much to legacy of Maureen Donovan. However, David decided he needed to authorize one more modification to the cage to stop people throwing crap into Mitch's enclosure.

Mitch woke in the early morning darkness. The room around him was the same as ever: white tile walls, red brick floor, frosted glass roof, and the one clear wall that looked out on the dark hall and the other rooms like his own. The only notable exception was that the TV was gone. It had been gone ever since the second white bullet hit him, and this was no surprise. Behind the small window of glass was only a dull piece of wood. Mitch crawled to the block where the control had been. He scratched at the four bolt holes in the cement block for a minute before retreating back to the corner where he would face the wall while people stared and yelled and thumped on the glass.

Several hours later, at the appropriate time, the door to the outside slid open. Mitch rose and made a few quick *shuffle-throw* steps toward the opening, but as he approached, he noticed that it looked different somehow. When he passed through the doorway, he saw that the outside was much darker than usual. He looked up. Instead of blue sky and bits of tree, there were only the bars and, behind them, a ceiling of some dull green material. Mitch examined this for some time, then went to the food tray and took a chunk of moist fruit. He tossed it up to the green ceiling. It hit with a *pak* then came back to the floor. Mitch threw it again, with the same result. He bent to the fruit and sniffed it. Before it had smelled sweet and fresh, now there was something strange and stale about its odor. He left it where it lay, and slumped down next to his food tray. He stuffed a few bits of greenery into his mouth before deciding he was not hungry. He rolled onto his back, then closed his eyes so that he could not see the new roof.

Mitch found himself in a familiar forest, leaning against a familiar tree. He felt no pain from his bleeding side, and the wind blew the scent of leaves and wood into his nostrils. Blondie came to him, crouched before him in the grass, and touched his bloodied hand. She spoke softly to him and signed, MITCH TALK TO BLONDIE. As he considered what to say in reply, the earth suddenly vibrated beneath him.

Mitch woke and turned to see a man staring and thumping repeatedly on the glass wall. He yelled and several smaller people began thumping with him.

Mitch turned his back to them and stared at the pattern of the tile wall. He closed his eyes, tried to bring back the image of Blondie, and signed his name to the darkness.

END