

Welcome To Gorilla City

Fiction

Somebody had been putting animals on the water towers. A giraffe at Simmons Park. A hippo out on the highway. A silverback gorilla on the biggest and most visible tower, the one painted with the town's greeting in bold green letters, "Welcome to Charity." The gorilla was hunched over, knuckles dragging, its enormous black body hiding the letters *h*, *a*, and *r*.

"Welcome to Gorilla City," she said. "Get it?"

He didn't laugh.

They were driving to his mom's to pick up the girls. The girls loved the animals like she did. They tried to guess what would be next. Bea wanted a black stallion. Lizzy wanted a bunny, a big white bunny with candy eggs, and inside those eggs more candy eggs, and inside those candy eggs more candy eggs. Sara chose not to tell them that the town had run out of water towers or that the animals were jungle-themed and not farm-themed. Best to let their imaginations run wild. If there had been another blank water tower Sara would've wanted to see an elephant.

At dinner Jake had told her to prepare for the worst. She had told him that the worst wasn't coming. He'd said it was. She'd said it wasn't, and it wasn't because reality can and will make things worse than we can imagine. "So how can we prepare for the worst when the worst is always waiting?"

"What's worse than prison?" he'd asked.

"They'll probably let you play golf there, like one of those Martha Stewart prisons. Maybe you'll meet Martha Stewart."

"Martha Stewart is free."

"Good. I love Martha Stewart."

The girls were curled up on the couch with their MeMu, the three of them watching a movie in the dark. Sara couldn't tell what the movie was, some cartoon, so it was probably OK. Sometimes Jake's mom let them watch age-inappropriate movies, movies she wanted to watch, but she always took the girls with less than a moment's notice, so how could Sara complain? The girls begged to stay until the movie was over. Jake hopped on the couch and burrowed in with all of them. There was no more room, so Sara went into the kitchen and uncorked her mother-in-law's half-drunk bottle of chardonnay and poured it in a juice glass. She stared at two bowls of barely eaten shrimp salad dotted with coarse grounds of pepper. The girls would be hungry on the way home.



“The capital of Alabama is Montgomery,” Bea said. “The capital of Alaska is Juneau. The capital of Arkansas is Little Rock.”

“You skipped Arizona,” Sara said.

“Crap. Phoenix.”

“Where are we going?” Lizzy asked.

Sara had taken a wrong turn on the way to school. She wanted to get a closer look at the gorilla. She didn’t know how much longer he would be there and she wanted them all to appreciate him before he was gone.

“A surprise,” she said.

“I have a quiz,” Bea said.

“You won’t miss it.”

Sara drove as close to the water tower as she could get, the parking lot of a nearby storage garage, and the three of them got out and walked. It was a good morning for looking up, the sky a dull and solid slate gray. The gorilla was huge. He wasn’t the King Kong type, not baring his sharp white gorilla teeth and clutching a blond beauty, but an accurate naturalistic depiction of a gorilla.

“How’d he get up there?” Lizzy asked.

“He climbed, I guess.”

“He’s not real,” Bea said.

Sara wondered who could’ve done it. What kind of person had thought that sticking jungle animals to the sides of water towers was something to do? Did he — or she — have any deeper meaning behind it or was it just a joke as Jake had said? He hardly gave the gorilla any thought, which bothered Sara. Someone had brought into existence something that yesterday wasn’t there and tomorrow would probably be gone. Even if it was an afterthought there was something beautiful about that.

Bea pointed up to the tower and smiled. “Welcome to Gorilla City,” she said.

Lizzy laughed and lifted her arms to the sky. “I get it!”

Jake’s dad owned a trucking and construction empire and had done very, very well for himself and his family. He’d been childhood friends and a major fundraising force for the former governor of Georgia, the one currently serving six and a half years. The governor had been using state funds for personal travel with expensive escorts and had converted a secluded barrier island into a publicly funded yet entirely private hunters’ paradise filled with wild game. Jake’s dad had shot a gnu there. When the investigation started, Jake’s dad turned whistleblower. He claimed he had no choice. He said he couldn’t afford to have the government poking its nose into his family business.



Shortly after, his dad died of a massive heart attack at the age of sixty-one. The guilt of betraying his long-time friend had killed him. The guilt and the weight. Jake wasn't fat like his dad. Thank God. "Don't take this the wrong way," Sara said the first time she met Jake's dad, "but he reminds me of Boss Hogg."

Jake smiled. "He is both those things."

Jake became the honest and youthful face of the company, the prodigal son, and this had turned out well for the whole family until a recent spate of bad luck. The company had once built a mid-rise retirement development on the coast in Brunswick, and that structure was now slowly sinking into the salt marsh. A local TV hack charged with investigating the frequent and more prevalent cracks in the building's walls had suggested that Jake's dad, who was still alive at the time of design and construction, had known all along about this potential risk. Jake didn't really think this was all that big a deal. They could shore it up. But part two of the investigation, which aired one night later, also discovered that the ground water was contaminated, and someone else's MeMu and PePu had been watering their gardens and taking their meds with water toxic enough to catch fire. The visuals for the news were stunning. A woman in a floral housecoat stood next to her roses and let the news hack flick a lighter below the shower from her watering can. Fireworks. Jake thought the company could weather this storm, too, but he was worried about what they'd find next, what other dirt a deeper investigation might turn up, a real investigation, not one taken on by a crusading local TV journalist with big TV dreams. That's when he confessed to Sara about the trucks and what they'd been carrying back from Florida for years.

"Don't they get hot in there?" she asked. They were in bed. The lights were out, the TV off, the girls asleep, the house quiet.

"These people don't know hot."

"Everybody knows hot."

"They're used to it."

"What's wrong with the people already here?"

"Are you going to pick peaches?"

"I probably could if I had to."

"You might have to."

"I could."

"I know. As an enlightened dude I see that you work very hard every day at keeping the house together, raising our daughters, et cetera, et cetera, but that's not the same thing as picking peaches."

"At least I'd get paid."

"A mom's reward is the future."

"I'd rather have a pocketbook."



They were both silent for a while. She thought he'd fallen asleep. He grabbed her hand under the covers, slid his fingers inside her fingers. "You won't have to pick peaches," he said. "We'll move. We'll take Mom with us. The cost of living in Costa Rica is like nothing."

"I don't want the girls to grow up in Costa Rica," she said.

"They like the beach. You like the beach."

"You're not serious."

"How about Nebraska?" he asked, and kissed her bare shoulder.

The capital of Nebraska is Lincoln, she thought.

He was just some high school kid messing around, but his messing around had gotten him on the news. They didn't want to release his name or give him too much individual attention for fear of copycats and unwarranted and undeserved fame. So the news fonted him as "The Water Tower Zoologist" and blurred over his school picture so all you could see was an open shirt collar and a gold rope chain around a white neck. Sara didn't think this was quite the right name for him. He wasn't really a zoologist, but the news could never be counted on to get anything right.

At first Sara was embarrassed to find out the person responsible for the animals was just a kid, that a kid in a gold rope chain had moved her, that a teenage boy's idea of a joke had made such an impact on her, but she got over it when she found out there was more to what he'd been doing. According to the Internet, the technique was called wheatpasting, and it was a popular form of street art — like graffiti — in bigger cities like New York, maybe even Atlanta. The kids who did this were legitimate and well-respected artists. They had web pages and Twitter accounts telling their fans where to find their work, and they were followed around like stars. But here, in Charity, the boy was viewed as a vandal, a delinquent, a screw-up with a blur over his face. He'd bravely scaled the highest points in town and pasted them with exotic animals and for this he got community service and a criminal record. This didn't seem right.

The giraffe and the hippo were scrubbed off first. Some of the high school students tried to save the gorilla. They linked arms and formed a human fence at the base of the water tower to keep the crews from climbing up to peel and wash away what their friend had done. This made Sara feel embarrassed all over again. Why were kids the only ones who saw the animals the way she saw them? Why did she see the animals the way kids saw the animals? She should've had a more mature response.

The students wouldn't budge. They planted themselves at the foot of the water tower for a day and a half until the cops showed up. Still they wouldn't go. Not until the Tasers.



Jake laughed. "Ouch."

"Three kids were Tased and you think that's funny?"

"They were in the way."

"What if it was one of your girls?"

"You've taught them better."

When she picked up the girls from school she could tell that something was wrong with Bea. She was about to ask her what was the matter when Bea beat her to it.

"I made a hundred on my capital quiz and Berkeley made a 92 and called me a cheater just like my daddy."

"Don't listen to Berkeley."

"She's such a bitch."

Lizzy put her hands over her ears when she heard the word *bitch*.

"Don't talk like that."

"What kind of a name is that, anyway? Berkeley?"

"Better than what you called her."

"She deserves it."

"Nobody deserves it."

"A bitch is a female dog," Lizzy said.

As Sara drove the girls home she could see the water tower, cleaned and back to normal, a gorilla-less bubble above the tops of the pines.

Sara decided that an appropriately mature response was a letter to the editor of the paper. *The Charity Register* only came out twice a week so it was impossible to have written the letter in time to save the gorilla, but she went ahead with it anyway, practicing what she preached to the girls about follow-through. In it she wrote that the animals had been unique and original and funny, and while they may not have been the ideal images the town wanted projected to thousands of travelers cruising up and down I-75, the people had to admit that the animals made them smile. In the letter she had trouble coming up with the right word to use for *kids*. She didn't want to call them *kids*, or *boys* and *girls*, or *youth*. All of those words sounded vaguely condescending. So she settled on young adults. "Obviously the young adults of Charity want to feel like they are being seen and heard, like they have a place to express themselves. We should offer them a broad canvas instead of erasing their best efforts," she wrote. She was proud of this last line.

Jake said he liked the letter overall but that you couldn't really erase a canvas, so the metaphor wasn't exactly right.

"What do you mean?"

"You can erase pencil, but not paint, so it's more like you want to say rip up their fabric or mineral spirit their spirits. That's good. Something like that."

"I don't think so."



“Or you could say we should offer them a sheet of paper and a pencil instead of erasing their efforts.”

“That’s lame.”

“You wrote it.”

“What I wrote wasn’t lame.”

“I’m just saying.”

In the letter she proposed turning the façade of the old movie theater into a public graffiti wall. The building was about four stories high, all brick, and used to house the one-screen movie theater back when people like Jake’s parents were growing up. It had been closed for years. The south facing side of the building was painted with the chipping remains of an ancient ad for ice-cold bottles of Coca-Cola: 5 cents. The town could paint over it, give all their citizens a free white wall to do as they saw fit. The Water Tower Zoologist could paste his animals. Kids could spray paint their names in neon colored letters. They could draw cartoons. The park district could project movies on the wall on summer nights. The wall would be a living and breathing piece of art representative of Charity and its people.

They didn’t run her letter to the editor. She got an email response back thanking her and apologizing that *The Register* didn’t have room for all the excellent letters they received. This was obviously part of a form letter, but at the end were a few lines that addressed her concern directly. *Graffiti is used to communicate gang territory. Do you really want that as a representation of Charity?*

“This is crap,” she told Jake. “There are no gangs here.”

“They’re called something different,” he said.

Sara offered Lo two hundred and fifty dollars to go to the hardware store, buy her some white exterior paint, some rough nap rollers and some extenders, then to drive one of the company’s cherry pickers to the old movie theater in the middle of the night and lift her up and down in the bucket while she painted the south wall white. As far as she knew Lo was legal.

“It’ll take too long,” he said. “A brick is a sponge. You’ll never finish. Tell you what. Double it and we’ll do it for you.”

This was a lot more money than she wanted to spend to prove a point, but she agreed, and paid him in cash after he went with her to the ATM.

He didn’t tell her when they’d do it, but he promised that it would be done by the end of the week.

She drove by the old movie theater every day to take the girls to school, even though it was out of the way.



On Monday nothing had changed.
On Tuesday nothing had changed.
On Wednesday nothing had changed.
On Thursday nothing had changed.

She figured Lo had taken her five hundred dollars and spent it all on Corona Light and tamales. Now she hoped Lo was illegal. She'd turn him in.

But on Friday the job was done.

The entire south-facing wall of the old Charity Theater was a stark and beautiful white, total white, except for thin shadows cut by power lines across the glossed and gleaming brick. Sara pulled over.

"What are we doing?" Bea asked.

"Do you have markers? Crayons? What's in your backpacks? Just grab your backpacks."

They all got out of the car and went to the wall, Lizzy and Bea with their backpacks and Sara with her morning travel mug full of sweetened coffee. She almost didn't want to touch it. It reminded her of the animals, the surprise way they'd appeared overnight, as if the giraffe and hippo had climbed the towers on their own to see what they could see, as if the gorilla had wanted to announce something to the whole town and found the highest point to deliver his message, as if they had all been alive once but were only able to move safely under cover of night, in darkness, like something out of a storybook, and when day broke they were forced to slip back into one dimension, adhering themselves to the closest solid structure they could find.

Before long Lizzy had her markers out. She was scribbling in purple against the rough surface of the brick, lines, nothing more, just lines, wavy and without direction. Then she started at one end of the wall, the marker gripped in her fist like a handlebar, and pushed it all the way to the other end, one long thin purple line. Bea laughed at her sister then grabbed the black marker from Lizzy's bag and started writing her name in cursive, small and delicate and careful. Sara picked up the red marker, then put it back for the blue, then the green. She uncapped it and stood there staring up at the wall.

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