

*Excerpt from "Monkey Business"*

The monkey people had arrived. My sister-in-law ushered them into the living room and they quietly proceeded to set up. Two large cages contained the creatures. All the kids were summoned from downstairs and everyone crowded around in a semi-circle.

The trainer's daughter, a heavysset teen with a long brown ponytail, started the show. She seemed well suited to the monkey business. Her monologue was obviously scripted but she was careful to keep her singsong patter from sounding over-rehearsed. She took the first monkey out of its cage and plunked him on her lap. Underneath his white onesie with colorful fire engines on it was a diaper, which make crinkling sounds when she patted his bottom.

"Everyone say 'hi' to Louie," the girl said, flapping Louie's forearm up and down. "Hi Louie!" everyone chorused.

As it turned out, Louie was not an actual monkey, but a tail-less chimpanzee. He looked startlingly like a baby - a leather-faced, huge-eared, hairy-limbed baby with cocoa brown eyes and a fondness for kissing. He stole the show, repeatedly swiveling his head up under her chin and puckering his lips. The girl indulged him by kissing back with loud smacking noises.

Our son was transfixed. At six, he was delightfully unrestrained by social norms. He laughed the loudest and most frequently of anyone in attendance at his cousin's birthday party, and at times his mouth was wide open with astonishment and joy. I noticed my mom and dad watching him, and I felt a strong surge of love for them all - my parents for being such an attentive Beba and PopPop, and my son for the wonderful being he is.

Louie was dumped back into his portable plastic home, and the second primate was scooped out of the other cage. Shelby was a capuchin, an organ grinder monkey. He was introduced as being "crazy." He was rather manic. The trainer, a loud and friendly, large and

bearded man of about 50, kept Shelby on a leash and would periodically yo-yo him in giant bounces dangerously close to the kids seated in front of him. At first it was impossible to tell whether the trainer was forcing the animal to do this, or if Shelby was taking the lead. Either way, these exaggerated prancing charades occurred so frequently that I was glad my brother, a PETA supporter, could not be here to see it.

Shelby's pinkish face was a third of the size of Louie's and reminded me of Sir Lawrence Olivier as he appeared in the movie *The Jazz Singer* - a wise older rabbi. Like any other three-year old, Shelby did not always obey his guardian. His increasingly hyperactive movements and unpredictability made the kids nervous. They shrank back on the sofa, flinching, when Shelby sprung at them.

Though my son Ty was the kid sitting the farthest away from the show, he was shielding his torso with a well-stuffed sofa pillow, clutching it as though hugging a life preserver on a sinking ship. He giggled at such antics as the monkey eating half-chewed food off the trainer's tongue, but his laughter was tense and strained.

Eventually the act came to a close and the monkey-bonding time began. In one-minute intervals, volunteers approached, then were summoned, to let wild Shelby scramble up their arms and sit on their heads.

My fearless sister-in-law went first. Shelby flashed up her arm like a lightning bolt and wrapped his long furry tail around her neck. The tail seemed to shrink into itself, as a snake would constrict around its prey. With her head stiff from balancing an unstable primate on top, she could only feel what was going on. "What *is* that? His tail? It's very tight," she said. I couldn't tell if she was anxious or just irritated. The animal finally loosened its grip.

I looked down the row at those waiting. Ty was at the end, still covering himself. I leaned toward my mom and whispered, "I don't think Ty wants to have a turn, but I'd really like to get a picture of him with the monkey. I think he'll want to show it to people, later on."

"No," Mom said gently. "If he doesn't want to do it, it's best not to make him." After a while, I went over to him. "Hey buddy, do you want to get your picture taken with Shelby?"

"No." He shook his head back and forth, his long blonde hairs swinging out, pendulum-like, from their birthplace on his scalp.

"You don't have to touch him. You can just stand near him, and we'll take your picture."

"No," he repeated with an uneasy grin.

"Okay, bud," I patted his knee. After all, he was almost half the age of the other boys.

When it was Ty's turn, everyone turned expectantly toward him. "Okay, my man! Come on up!" the trainer boomed.

"Yeah, c'mon!" the daughter echoed.

"No, that's okay." Ty said. He stood up, still holding the cushion, and smiled widely. I knew exactly how he felt. The unease the monkey's behavior created was heightened by the social context - a normally compliant person defying an order in front of everyone. His face turned bright red, clearly visible even in the subdued lighting.

"Alright then!" the trainer flicked his wrist high in the air, reminding me of one of those wild-haired orchestra conductors indicating a forte for the horn section. "How about we try something else? Why don't you feed Shelby? You don't have to touch him."

Guiltily I sat, silent. I did not rise to his defense; instead waiting to see my son's reaction. After much encouragement, Ty slowly walked up to the trainer and was given a spoon with a

glop of peanut butter on it. Tentatively he held it out in front of him. Shelby lunged for it and ate as though he hadn't been fed in a fortnight.

Thus ended Shelby's freedom and he was stuffed back into his cage. After enjoying the spotlight and treats, he was clearly unwilling to go. It was like watching someone trying to get the springy snake back into the fake nuts can.

Ty looked like he wanted to run, but instead walked quickly, self-consciously, back to the sofa. He twisted as he jumped back into his seat, landing on his tushie with a flourish. "Ty is my hero!" the trainer crowed. Some people cheered.

Later, I went over and hugged Ty, rubbing his back. "Good job, bud!" He beamed and clicked his tongue, but said nothing. He didn't need to.