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BETRAYAL

THE FIRST CLEAR SYMPTOMS WERE AT THANKSGIVING,
last year.

Our son arrived hours late. It has long been our family custom to gather at our house at 4:00 P.M. and to sit down to eat at about 5:30 P.M. and yet it was nearly 6:00 P.M. when Rickie arrived—after having assured us he would arrive at about 1:00 P.M. We were so grateful to see him that no one, even Father, had a harsh word to say to him though we noted how defensive Rickie was saying he'd been driving six hours, stuck in traffic on the damned freeway and wasn't in a mood to be criticized now.

Outside it was deeply-dark, windswept and wintry. And wet. When Rickie entered the house a gust of wind accompanied him and struck at the crackling fire in the fireplace, that Father had been tending with a poker. And there came with him a smell of rain so sharp it seemed metallic, odors of earth and leaves and something rank as an animal's wetted hide that pinched at our nostrils.

We were already sitting at dinner. Rickie's place awaited him. He mumbled an excuse and disappeared upstairs for ten minutes presumably washing up, changing his rumpled clothes, but when he

appeared again downstairs we saw that he'd done little more than run a comb through his matted hair, that hadn't been washed in a while, and he was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans, not freshly laundered, and running shoes. He'd left off his Sigma Nu hoodie at least, upstairs.

Some of us were offended, frankly, that Rickie should sit down at Thanksgiving dinner looking so disheveled. His jaws were unshaven, his eyes were edgy and glittering. His laughter was high-pitched, a nervous sort of laughter, that faded abruptly like a switch shut off. Rickie's younger nephews and nieces and cousins were hurt that he paid virtually no attention to them, as he usually did.

Practically the first thing Rickie said when he took his place among us, as warm platters were being passed in his direction, was that he would "forgo" turkey this year, thanks!

Forgo turkey we protested, how can you *forgo turkey* when turkey is the point of Thanksgiving we pointed out to the unshaven boy in the soiled San Diego Zoo T-shirt but Rickie said with a smirk, Not for the poor turkey it ain't.

Ain't is not a word we use in our family. Not a word that Rickie with a *cum laude* B.A. degree from Stanford and whose SAT scores were in the highest fifth percentile would use. *Ain't* was a jab in the ribs meant to offend and annoy and so *ain't* did offend and annoy us, particularly Father who stared at Rickie speechless. Mother, who'd been preparing for Thanksgiving dinner for two days and who'd purchased an "organic" twenty-two-pound turkey for the occasion, blinked and stared at Rickie as if he'd slapped her.

We asked, are you a *vegetarian* and Rickie said yes that was right.

A *vegetarian*! Since when?

But Rickie just shrugged. He appeared to be starved spooning large portions of Mother's bread crumb stuffing, mashed sweet potatoes, candied carrots and broccoli-with-almonds onto his plate. We

recalled his legendary appetite for any kind of meat including pizza-with-sausage and cheeseburgers, when he'd been a teenager in our household.

Mother said, trying to smile, "Well! At least I hope you are not one of those *vegans* . . ."

In Mother's mouth *vegan* was uncertainly enunciated. Rickie laughed and said, "No Mom: not yet."

Mother's bread crumb stuffing was particularly delicious this year, made with apples, prunes, chestnuts, thyme, tarragon, fine-cut onions and celery. In the lush salad of many gourmet greens were tiny sections of dementines, dried cranberries, chopped escarole, cherry tomatoes from Mexico. The mashed sweet potatoes were (secretly) laced with marshmallow—one of Mother's prized family recipes. All of these foods, plus chunks of thick raisin bread, Rickie ate as if he were famished. (It was curious to see how Rickie avoided even looking at the turkey carcass on the sideboard, that looked as if ravenous hyenas had attacked it. And even the harmless gravy boat, with its rich oily turkey gravy.) When we asked him about his closest friends from college he replied in distracted grunts. Mother dared to ask him about Holly Cryer, a prep school girlfriend whom Rickie often saw when they were both home from college, but Rickie only just frowned and shrugged. Instead he spoke excitedly of Mitzie, Claus, Herc (for Hercules), Kin-dle, Stalker, Big Joe and Juno. We said, "Oh but Rickie, those are *animals*. That is your *work*."

Rickie was currently an intern at the San Diego Zoo, at the bonobo exhibit. That day it seemed that, in our company, listening to our conversation, Rickie was frequently elsewhere, and listening intently to another conversation that drew him more powerfully. Almost dreamily now he paused in his rapid chewing to gaze at us one by one, around the table. As if he were counting us, or hoping to discover, in our familiar faces, something he recognized. We could see

a fringe of dark-matted chest hair just visible at the stretched neckline of his zoo-issue T-shirt.

"Oh hey Mom, Dad—all you guys: I've been trying to tell you. My work is my life."

Certainly it was good news that Rickie was employed now, if only as an unpaid intern. (For an unpaid internship might lead to paid employment someday—that was the belief among the families of recent college graduates like ours.) And it was good news that Rickie seemed to be devoted to this work.

But since his employment was only temporary, at the San Diego Zoo, and not the employment for which he'd been preparing himself for four years at Stanford, this was possibly not so very good news.

It had been his parents' dream that Rickie would go to medical school. Or, failing that, Rickie might go into high-level medical research—at a pharmaceutical company, for instance. (Father, a quite successful corporate lawyer at Helix Pharmaceuticals in Vista Flats, California, whose long-ago dream for himself had been scientific research, had contacts in several prominent pharmaceutical companies.)

Yet, Rickie seemed happy. Rickie seemed *defiantly happy*.

Just after graduation, when he'd returned home to Saddle Creek, from his Stanford frat house, Rickie had seemed very unhappy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Rickie had been seriously depressed. That spring he'd been interviewed for a number of promising entry-level positions with California employers but—(so far as we knew)—no offers had followed. Rickie had also, following Father's encouragement, applied to a miscellany of West Coast universities to enter a Ph.D. program in biology, but even where he'd been accepted as a graduate student, he hadn't been offered a fellowship. And so, he'd been inert with disappointment lying on his bed or sprawled on our family-room sofa stretched out like a rubber band that has lost its elasticity.

Son, don't do this, we pleaded with him. Don't give in.

Particularly, Father was repelled at the thought of *giving in*.

Rickie was unshaven then. Bristly whiskers marring his boyish face. And his eyes glazed with boredom, or something worse.

He wasn't *giving in*, he protested. He was *exploring within*.

Anyway he couldn't help it. His generation was the Walking Wounded devastated by graduating from college and being expelled into the world that didn't give a shit for them, B.A. honors from Stanford or whatever.

Sure some of his college friends had definite *plans*. Not his closest frat-brother friends but others who'd gotten into med school, or law school, even if not first-rate schools, still the contrast with Rickie's own life narrow and circumscribed as his bed, or the family-room, sofa—no wonder he was feeling *down*.

Had to take solace from the fact that there were plenty of others in his generation who frankly had *no plans*, not even *prospects for plans*.

At Saddle Creek Academy which was in the highest percentile of California private schools Rickie had taken nearly every science course offered, most of them AP courses. And he'd had other AP courses. Usually high grades and the praise of his teachers. And the SATs—we hired tutors for him, reasoning that, as other parents hired tutors for their children, we would be disadvantaging our son by not hiring tutors; and the expenditure, which had been considerable, had paid off. With Father's encouragement Rickie had looked ahead to medical school at San Francisco, Yale, Harvard, as well as Stanford—the very best.

One of his closest Sigma Nu brothers had died only a few weeks after graduation, in his parents' basement TV room in La Jolla. A lethal combination of (prescription) Xanax and OxyContin the twenty-one-year-old had bought from a fourteen-year-old dealer in the parking lot of Saddle Creek High.

There were signs we might have noted, that Rickie might not get

into his first-choice med school. For though he'd been an A-student in high school, in his first year at Stanford he'd run into a solid-concrete wall, as he described it, with organic chemistry, physics, and calculus, got messed up at mid-terms and never quite recovered his self-confidence; without informing his parents he had shifted to a less demanding major—some sort of science-culture studies, "environmental biology." Why'd he want to spend his life analyzing chemicals in a lab, examining the molecular underpinnings of animals without any notion of what the original animal looked like, or *was*; sure it was exciting that the genetic code was being broken, through such exacting experiments, but Rickie found abstractions *Boring!*

He'd always liked animals—some animals. Like horses, giraffes. He'd loved our mixed-breed shepherd Strongheart who'd pined for Rickie when Rickie left home for Stanford, though, when he'd lived in our household, Rickie had had a decreasing amount of time to devote to the eager dog whose care and tending naturally fell to Mother. (Not that Mother complained!—Mother was never one to complain.)

Yet, Rickie's luck turned when he received a summer internship at the San Diego Zoo. We hadn't had any idea that Rickie had applied for such a position, at such a place, until, as Rickie proudly announced to us, it was a *fate accomplished*.

Father had said, speaking carefully as if fearing he might be misunderstood, "An internship is—unpaid?"

But Rickie's good spirits could not be dashed, now that they'd been fired up like gasoline sprinkled onto a dying fire. He told Father that working at the San Diego Zoo was known to be so cool for kids his age, everybody says they'd pay the zoo for the chance.

Mother said, "It sounds just wonderful! Rickie can try again applying to medical schools, or to graduate schools, and with this internship in his résumé, he'll be a—shoo-in."

Shoo-in was gaily uttered by Mother, in an outburst of optimism.

Shoo-in was not an expression ever heard on Mother's lips before this moment.

Two weeks after Rickie's first day as an intern at the zoo, we flew south to San Diego to visit with him. In his infrequent calls and e-mails home he'd told us how "great" his colleagues were and how "special" bonobos are—not just "great apes" but unique among these, genetically the closest of all primates to *Homo sapiens*.

Even before we saw Rickie in his zoo uniform assisting an older staff member at the bonobo enclosure, even before we saw Rickie grinning and "signing" to one of the friendly bonobos through the immense glass window protecting the bonobos from zoo visitors—we felt unease, that our son whom we knew so well was being seduced by this new milieu, which was so exotic and so strange to us.

We'd arranged with Rickie that we would meet him in front of the bonobo enclosure at about noon, and would take him to lunch; but when we arrived, breathless and just slightly intimidated—(for the San Diego Zoo is an enormous place!—there was Rickie standing at the side of a tall broad-shouldered woman with ash-colored hair addressing a gathering of about a dozen visitors. Seeing us, Rickie only just smiled, nodded and waved, without speaking to us. You could see—(that is, we could see)—that our twenty-one-year-old son greatly admired this woman, as he'd admired a few of his Stanford professors; so intently did he listen to her words, observing the bonobos in the enclosure as she spoke of them, it was as if Rickie were memorizing the experience and didn't want to be distracted from it.

But how happy Rickie appeared! This was something of a surprise for we hadn't seen Rickie so boyishly enthusiastic since his small triumphs in high school athletics years before. And how very different he seemed, in his smart red San Diego Zoo cap, red sweatshirt and fresh-launched denims, from the melancholy boy laid low by lethargy, depression, and irony in his boyhood room at Saddle Creek.

Mother whispered to Father, "Oh! is that *our son*? He looks so . . ."

"He does," Father said. "Thank God!"

Unobtrusively we drew near, to listen to the ashy-haired woman talk about the bonobos and answer visitors' questions. Truly, the woman, whose name tag identified her as HILARY KRYDY, was impressive. She was tall and fit and her face was both plain and powerfully attractive, with an energy and purposefulness that exuded from within. She might have been Mother's age but looked much more robust and youthful. We were directed to look closely at the bonobos, as Hilary spoke. An exhibit in a zoo at which we might have simply glanced—registering some kind of large antic "monkey"—now took on dramatic significance. In the enclosure, which looked like actual wilderness landscape with rocks and boulders, small exotic trees, a pond, the coarse-furred little apes were wonderfully lively and alert as if showing off for their human audience. They rose from all fours with a sort of gawky grace to their hind legs and "walked"—very like human beings. (Mother said, "Oh—are they imitating *us*?" Father chuckled saying, "Certainly not. Their species precedes *us*.") We could understand that Rickie would be drawn to the bonobos as crudely inferior types of himself.

Father observed in the gravely creased face of an older bonobo, who held himself apart from the cavortings of the younger bonobos, an expression of—recognition? *Identity*? For a moment it seemed almost that their eyes locked: each was an *elder*, and had reason to be exasperated with their young offspring. Then, to Father's surprise and disappointment, the seemingly dignified patriarch leapt onto a boulder, glared and grinned at Father with bared yellow teeth and, with rubber-like prehensile fingers, grabbed and shook his large fruit-like genitals in an unmistakable gesture of antagonism. Father winced—such vulgarity! Of course, the creature was just an animal. Father was grateful that Mother didn't seem to have seen this obscene display as other visitors pretended not to have seen it.

Younger bonobos, very lively, charmingly childlike, jumped about

onto rocks, and off rocks; set up a high-pitched chatter of merriment that must have carried for some distance in the zoo; winked, grinned, spat and "signed" at observers who waved and called to them in return. Mother was most taken with the comely female bonobos nursing their hairy young, or hugging the young to their droopy enlarged teats, that did resemble the breasts of a nursing *Homo sapiens* female, to a degree; she saw, too, the uncanny flat-faced beauty of certain of the females, and the adorable gamin-faces of the very young. Rickie glowed with pride as if the bonobos were in some way *his*—a gift of his, for us.

It was thrilling to Rickie, we could see, when the ashy-haired Hilary turned to him, suggesting that he answer a visitor's question—which Rickie managed to do, quite intelligently. (We thought!)

Only when Hilary's mini-lecture ended and the visitors moved on to the next enclosure did Rickie hurry to greet us, with a hug for Mother and a handshake for Father; he was eager to introduce us to Hilary, a senior staff member. Impulsively Rickie invited Hilary to join us for lunch but she declined; she could see, as our heedless son could not, that we were not enthusiastic about the invitation, wanting to spend some time alone with our son.

At lunch in a restaurant inside the zoo Rickie chattered happily about his internship, his fellow interns and older colleagues; he'd become, within a remarkably short period of time, something of an expert on bonobos, it seemed, and spoke to us in an excited disjointed way about the exotic species of "ape" as if we'd made the trip to San Diego not to see him, but to see and hear about his newest-favorite animal.

Some of what Rickie recounted to us was an echo of the guide's talk. In his boyish voice, it did sound fascinating to us, initially.

"Bonobos, often called 'pygmy chimps,' should not be confused with the more common, more widely distributed and far more aggressive chimpanzees. That's an insult to us. I mean—to them." Rickie paused, as if to let this sink in. "Bonobos are much more attractive than

chimpanzees, as you probably noticed—smaller, more slender, with heads that more resemble human heads, as well as other human-like features. (In fact, we had not so much as glanced into any of the other ape-enclosures in our haste to get to the bonobo enclosure.) “Genetically, bonobos are our closest primate relatives. Bonobos ‘laugh’ as we laugh—virtually. Bonobos walk upright as we walk upright—almost. Wouldn’t you know”—Rickie’s voice lowered to a mournful growl—“of the great apes it’s the bonobos who are the most endangered species. Go figure!”

“That is so sad!” Mother said.

“Shit, Mom, it’s tragic.”

Rickie seemed annoyed by Mother’s innocent remark, as Father was annoyed by Rickie’s profanity in Mother’s presence.

“But not surprising,” Rickie added quickly, seeing the disapproval in Father’s face, “since bonobos are the most peace-loving and the least aggressive of apes. *Not like Homo sapiens.*”

“Do chimps kill ‘em and eat ‘em?”—Father had to ask a facetious question.

Rickie winced. This was a topic he didn’t like to consider.

“Well—maybe . . . Chimps are definitely ‘opportunistic’ carnivores and bonobos, at least bonobo babies, would be vulnerable to them. But I don’t know for sure. I’ll ask Hilary.”

Father suggested to Rickie that they change the subject? We’d come to San Diego to talk about *him*.

“Sure Dad. Cool.”

Slowly then the radiance began to fade from Rickie’s face.

Rickie was clean-shaven and well-groomed. His wavy fawn-colored hair was neatly cut and his zoo uniform T-shirt and jeans were clean; his running shoes didn’t look nearly so bad as Rickie’s running shoes usually looked. Mother had to resist an almost overwhelming impulse to touch Rickie’s smooth forehead with her fingertips as he

and Father talked of more serious matters. The boy didn’t look a day over seventeen!

Father was pointing out that the internship was just for the summer and Rickie had “no future” in the San Diego Zoo or in any other zoo without a Ph.D. in—zoology? environmental zoology? Seeing a sulky look in Rickie’s face, Father said, with the air of a surgeon cutting into flesh just a little more emphatically than required, “It’s a tragic time for *us*. I mean—*Americans*. We are reaching a saturation point of highly and expensively educated young men and women—like you—who have B.A. degrees from outstanding universities, even honors degrees. There are just too many of you—that’s the fundamental, Malthusian problem. But you are not unified, you don’t form a distinct cluster. You’re likely to be scattered, living with your parents. Not at all the way the world was when your mother and I graduated from college, in the late 1960s and early 1970s—everyone couldn’t wait to get away from home . . .”

But this struck a wrong note, a hostile note Father hadn’t meant to strike. And at the moment, Rickie wasn’t living at home but was renting an apartment near the zoo with another recent Stanford graduate whom we had yet to meet.

Father said, “Well—you’re lucky to have part-time employment in this marketplace. Of course, you aren’t exactly *employed*—you are *volunteering* your time. Some of your prep school friends who’d graduated last year or earlier seem to have given up seriously looking for jobs. There’s a rush to graduate schools, too. In most fields, if you are second-best, forget it. Manual labor like lawn work and service jobs at Wendy’s, Taco Bell, KFC is for illegal immigrants or the dumbest high school kids. No one wants an overqualified Stanford graduate. No one wants *adolescent irony*.”

Rickie’s boyish-tanned face darkened with the blood of adolescent humiliation.

Mother tried to soften Father's harsh words by speaking warmly of Hilary, whom she'd scarcely met, and the "pygmy chimps"—"So very lively."

There were exhibits at the zoo, Mother said, where the animals are just so boring, they don't move and don't look at you, because they don't have the brains to see you; and sometimes, like with the great snakes, or some kind of dwarf "tapir," you couldn't be sure that there was anything in an enclosure at all.

"Animal life is boredom," Father said. It was like Father, in times of crisis, to speak in such terse brittle remarks you were led to think that they were aphorisms of Montaigne you should have known, or clever cutting jokes of Oscar Wilde.

Rickie had been eating haphazardly, pushing food around on his plate. We'd scarcely noticed then—we would recall only in retrospect—that Rickie hadn't ordered a cheeseburger, chicken nuggets, or a pizza slice with pepperoni sausage but a large Waldorf salad containing no meat. With the sudden and surprising belligerence of the patriarch-bonobo who'd so offended Father he said, "Noooo Dad. Don't think so. The fact is, *animals* are not different from us: *we are them*."

"But," Mother said, flustered, seeing the anger in Father's face, "we are not *really*—are we? We can talk, and we—we wear clothing; we can add up numbers in our heads, and we can—well, make tools—cook food—*grow food*. Not many animals can do such things can they?"

Rickie shrugged as if Mother's question was so foolish he wasn't required to answer. Father said stiffly, "Well. We are *mammals*, I suppose—but not ordinary *animals*. I draw the line at that."

FROM THAT POINT onward, relations with Rickie became increasingly difficult.

We were expecting Rickie to return home in early September, when his summer internship ended, but, in late August, he called home excitedly to inform us that, though his applications for graduate

programs had been rejected at sixteen California universities ranging from Stanford and Berkeley to San Jose State and U-C Eureka, his internship had been extended for another six months!

"Oh no," Father said.

In a stricken-voice voice Rickie said, "What d'you mean, Dad—*no*?" Father said, "I can't continue to support you in a—hobby-kind of job. In a summer-vacation-kind of job."

Rickie protested, "Working with bonobos is *humanitarian work*. It isn't just some trivial pastime. Everyone I know at the zoo would inform you you are *so mistaken*."

"Rickie, it's *unpaid labor*. The zoo pays its staff, you can be sure it pays its administrators generous salaries. Why should you, an intelligent young man, with a B.A. *cum laude* from Stanford, volunteer for *unpaid labor*?"

As Father spoke, Mother was listening to the conversation on a cordless phone. Quickly she said, hoping to deflect the conflict, "Rickie, what good news!"

"Mom, thanks. I'm glad that someone is on my side."

Later, when Rickie reluctantly came home for a weekend, Father tried to reason with him in private.

"You do understand, son, that you should be making a serious effort to support yourself at the age of—is it twenty-one?—twenty-two? You are welcome to stay with us while you're looking for employment or applying to graduate school, and we are willing to support you as an intern for a little while longer, but, you must know—the idea is to be *self-supporting*. If there is any lesson of evolution it is that each generation must become independent of the preceding generation—that is a law of nature! You will want to marry, Rickie, won't you?—you will want to have children?"

Rickie said, with a hoarse, deep-throated laugh, "I will? Who says?"

"But—it's *normal*. It's what is—*expected*."

It was then that Rickie said, frowning severely as he scratched at

his armpit, "Well—I look into the future, I guess, and it's like I'm looking into a mirror in which there's no reflection."

What a strange utterance! We had no idea what it meant at the time, nor would have we ever.

RICKIE HAD TO be cajoled into coming home for Christmas, which had always been his favorite holiday; another time he arrived late for dinner; another time he insisted upon "forgoing" meat—in this case, a delicious Virginia ham Mother had prepared with cloves, fresh pineapple, and brown sugar. Of course Rickie ate—in fact, stuffed himself—with everything else on the table including several desserts. We noted that his table manners had disintegrated—often, he ate with his fingers. His untouched napkin fell to the floor at his feet. Cagily Rickie didn't allow himself to be drawn out on the sensitive subject of the bonobos or what his future employment might be but simulated an intense interest in our conversation about—whatever it was our Christmas-table conversations were about. (It's impossible to remember even our most intense dinner-table conversations even a few hours later. Politics? Football? Illnesses, surgeries, therapies? Christmas presents, to be returned the next day for credit?) Near the end of the lengthy meal, when Rickie was finishing a second piece of chocolate-cream pie, Father leaned toward him and said, as if reluctantly, "Rickie, we should discuss—you know. What you might be doing when the internship runs out."

Rickie's expression froze. But he spoke politely enough saying, "Sure Dad. Cool."

"You have to understand, those—bonobos"—(Father pronounced the word with fastidious disdain)—"are not a serious future for you. You would have to return to school and get a Ph.D., at the very least. You'd have to be trained in—some kind of bonobo-zoology. There is no future at the San Diego Zoo, Rickie. Please understand. We are not being—controlling. We are only concerned for your future happiness."

"Good! The bonobo-work is my happiness."

"But—those are *animals*. They are not your *family*."

"We've been through this, Dad. They are my *family*."

Mother left the table, upset. Father tried not to raise his voice. The other guests—Father's brother and sister-in-law, Mother's sister and brother-in-law, Rickie's sister Amber and his younger brother Tod, cousins, Grand-daddy and Grand-mom, among others—sat hushed, embarrassed. Father said, "You are saying reckless things, son, which you can't possibly mean. Who is it who supports you, for instance? And who loves you?"

The words *supports you* had an immediate sobering effect. Rickie said OK he was sorry. Just that he felt strongly about his work, as other interns at the zoo did. It wasn't a job but a *vocation*. Mitzie, Stalker, Bei-Bei, Claus, Kindle, Herc, Big Joe, Juno, Juno's new baby Astrid—they were so *real* to him, there was nothing else like them in his life. The other day he'd been allowed to assist a vet who was examining Big Joe—Big Joe was the patriarch of the clan, whom the younger bonobos liked to tease. Big Joe had screwed up his face as if he'd been about to kiss Rickie but had spat at him instead. (Was this funny? No one except Rickie seemed to think so.) Big Joe was the alpha male, with a real sense of humor! Rickie smiled, recalling a private, precious memory.

Dryly Father said, "Good. I'm glad that someone sees humor in this pathos."

THERE FOLLOWED WEEKS of unanswered phone calls. Unanswered e-mails.

A steady stream of attempts from Rickie's family to contact him, ignored.

In late February Father left a phone message for Rickie, straining to keep his voice steady: "Son! I've calculated, we have spent more than two hundred thousand dollars on your education and what do we—or you—have to show for it?"

And: "Is this how you repay us, son? Going over to the *animals*?" At last in March we returned to San Diego. We had little hope of confronting Rickie otherwise.

At the zoo, at the bonobo enclosure, we didn't see Rickie anywhere. A crowd of appreciative visitors watched the bonobos cavort and play—exactly as they'd done on our previous visit. In the animal world, time did not budge.

We inquired at an administration building but were told that Rickie was "no longer an intern" at the zoo. His internship had expired at the end of December.

No longer an intern! How was this possible? We'd been told that Rickie's internship had been extended for another six months . . .

We asked to speak with "Hilary Krydy" but were informed, somewhat rudely we thought, that the senior staffer was traveling in Africa right now and was not accessible by e-mail.

We had a street address for Rickie, in a haven of close-clustered stucco buildings a few miles from the zoo; the neighborhood was what Mother worriedly called "mixed-ethnic"—a predominance of Hispanics, Asians, and very black blacks. When we rang the doorbell at 1104 Buena Vida a bearded and shaggy-haired man with bloodshot eyes answered the door to tell us sourly that "Rickie Asshole" no longer lived there. We were stunned by this crude remark and when we tried to identify ourselves the bearded man said, smirking, "That asshole's your son? You can pay me then, he owes me fucking six hundred forty-six dollars in back rent."

Mother wanted to pay this "debt" at once—Father said he would "mail a check." Mollified, to a degree, the bearded man had no idea where Rickie was and told us we'd be better off checking the zoo. He'd lost his internship but continued to hang out there, so far as anyone knew.

We returned to the zoo. Where is our son? we demanded. Our son seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

Again, the administrators spoke to us cautiously. We thought, evasively.

If only we'd recorded these conversations!

Desperate, we returned to the bonobo enclosure. Strangely, each bonobo in sight appeared to be female at that moment. The slender creatures were exceptionally affectionate, grooming, caressing, hugging and kissing one another amid much excited chatter. (They were sexually adventuresome with one another, and even with the youngsters, but we tried not to notice.)

Then, as if they'd just been released from another part of the enclosure, a swarm of males came in—the younger, playful bonobos and at the rear the patriarch who had to be Big Joe, who'd insulted Father previously. Big Joe moved with a stiff sort of arthritic dignity, the hair of his large head seemingly parted in the middle, like a gentleman banker of the 1950s. Rudely the younger bonobos rushed past him, jostling him and taking no notice of the furious glares he cast at their sleek backs. The younger bonobos were fueled by an infectious sort of energy—leaping, swinging, wrestling with the females and one another. (We tried not to stare.)

"Oh look!" Mother cried. "Behind that rock—do you see?"

There crouched a lanky male bonobo with narrow shoulders and a small head; his face was a childish gamin's face but his eyes were hooded and covert.

"Do you see? It's him—Rickie! Oh God."

Mother began frantically crying "Rickie! Rickie!" while Father tried to restrain her. Zoo visitors were astonished to see a well-dressed middle-aged woman making a gesture to climb over the railing, to press herself against the glass wall, arms outspread. "Rickie! Come back, Rickie! You know us—don't you? Rickie!"—so Mother pleaded. The female bonobos gazed at her with sympathy welling in their dark brown eyes. Big Joe was glaring, grinning, stomping his feet, scratching his belly and genitals in an effort to direct attention to himself. The

lanky bonobo at whom Mother was calling had quickly retreated to the rear of the enclosure, hiding his eyes behind his hands.

Mother clutched at Father's arm to keep from fainting.

"You saw him, didn't you? Oh—you saw—didn't you?"

"Y-Yes. I think—yes. I saw our—son . . ."

We must have caused a commotion since security officers arrived, to escort us from the San Diego Zoo. Mother was so agitated she had to be driven in a motorized cart with Father seated despondently beside her.

"Oh what have they done to him, those terrible apes," Mother lamented. "How have we failed him, our son . . ."

Grimly Father said, "It's our son who has betrayed us. He has *gone over to the animals*."

THE SAN DIEGO ZOO has refused to cooperate. No one in authority will take our allegations seriously nor even speak with us any longer.

Through an attorney the zoo has issued a statement that our claims (of "abduction," "seduction," "coercion" of our son) are *totally unsubstantiated*.

The head of the great apes department has insisted to us, on the phone and through his attorney, that it is impossible that our son has in some way "disappeared" into the bonobo clan. There are just thirty-seven bonobos at the zoo, including newborns, and each is, of course, documented; approximately one-half of the bonobos were born in Africa and the rest had been born in the zoo. Certainly there was no possible "human male" who had hidden among the bonobos and dwelled with them—this was the height of absurdity.

Father agreed that what Rickie had done was absurd. That would be between Rickie and his family, someday soon. For the time being, we are convinced that Rickie is living in the San Diego Zoo bonobo enclosure in his new, bonobo form; he has, as Father charges, *gone over to the animals*.

This document is a preliminary draft of our prospective lawyer's

brief. It is not intended as a legal paper and it is not (yet) in a state to be submitted to the San Diego County Courthouse.

Each Sunday we return to see Rickie. Clean-shaven now, our son has become lighter on his feet; his arms have grown longer, in proportion to his torso and legs. His toes are large and distinct and appear to be prehensile. His face is boyish yet wizened and quizzical, as with an ancient sort of wisdom; like his lively bonobo brothers he is shameless in his sexual proclivities with both young males as well as females of all ages. At our most recent visit last Sunday for the first time Mother said, with a sharp sigh of despair, "Oh maybe—it isn't our son. Maybe what we are looking at is—just an animal."

We gripped each other's hands staring into the enclosure. Mother was quietly weeping and Father stood tall, brave, and dry-eyed. We were gazing into what might have been a wilderness setting—somewhere in the depths of Africa—where amid a pack of bonobos, across a hilly distance of about thirty feet, the lanky-limbed bonobo with a curious ring of hair at the nape of his neck like the remnants of a collar observed us with an inscrutable expression—regret, exasperation, embarrassment, defiance? We saw as he turned away a just-perceptible wave of his furry hand as he trotted off with his brothers and sisters into a shadowy cave at the rear of the enclosure.