

## Helping Hands

Adam and Amy raised their arms, holding hands, and walked through the turnstiles into the zoo. It was a beautiful day in April, the first Sunday to be more like a spring than a winter, and they'd taken the afternoon off from studying, come to Forest Park to enjoy the afternoon.

"And then where did you go?" Amy asked.

"We went back to the party. We were drinking at the suites and there was just a few of us. Then we went back to the party and everyone was there."

"That girl in your chem class?"

"Jen? Yeah, she might've been. I didn't see."

Amy was new to Adam. But that was only in relative terms. At home, in Boston, he had a girlfriend named Sarah who he'd been with for almost two years in high school. This girl, Amy, the one he walked through the zoo with, he'd only been seeing for a couple months, when the long-distance thing got to be too tough. He'd been honest with her about Sarah from the start, though, considered that the least he could do.

At home, where Sarah went to college in Boston, Adam knew that a week ago she had started seeing someone named David. It had only been three weeks since Adam told her they should start seeing other people. This was after things had started with Amy, but to him that detail didn't seem important. When he'd heard about David, he'd called it off with Amy, but Sarah had said it was too late, that she was already dating. So late last night, after a lot of drinking with his friends, *the boys*, he'd gone to find her in her room.

“We were drinking 40’s,” he said. “Mickey’s and tall boys. A lot of stuff.  
Thomas passed out.”

“Bill said you guys did century club the other night.”

“When you called him on the phone?”

“I guess,” she said. “Something like that.”

“Yeah, we had a lot on Wednesday too. It was a good start.”

They were closest to the bears. Each kind of bear had its own enclosure, a piece of land separated off from the others by high walls on the sides and a recessed moat in the front.

He said, “Bill really is handsome, isn’t he? Good body, blond; all around attractive.” Amy started to say something but Adam was still talking. He was counting on his fingers. “His smile is pretty cute isn’t it? That counts as another one, don’t you think?”

“He’s cute.”

“Damn right you think he’s cute. Don’t you think he’s gorgeous?”

“I—”

“Of course you think he’s gorgeous. Shit, I would date him if *I* was a girl. Even as it is now I’d probably date him. What do you think? Would we make a cute couple?”

The brown bears were sleeping on their backs. One of them swatted at the air with a paw. Amy turned to face the fence that separated the walkway from the bear’s area. She put her arms on the bars and bowed her head.

“Last night it was like he’s invisible though. I mean with the girls. The *other* girls don’t even notice him.”

She shook her head and looked at Adam as if to say something but then just squinted and turned back to the bears. “He isn’t trying, none of us are really, but it’s that look he gives people. You’ve never met his father. His father was the one who taught him how to hate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Bill. My suitemate. Haven’t you ever noticed the way he’s so angry?”

“Let’s keep walking.”

They passed the polar bears and he patted her shoulder. “It’s all right Aim, not such a bad thing to be stuck with me.”

She said nothing. He noticed two younger boys in black t-shirts watching them. They looked like the kind who smoked cigarettes in high school bathrooms and listened to Marilyn Manson. They just stood there. They were standing near the entrance, looking around the mostly-empty zoo like they’d expected more people.

Amy stopped at the polar bears. They were big, covered with white, thick fur that clumped up in dirty dreadlocks around their ankles. One of them lay watching and the other moved back and forth across the pen. It paced, then dove into the water and swam to the left side of the pen, then swam back and got out, paced again, dove into the water just as it had before, swam back, got out, and paced.

“How did he get stuck like this?” Adam said. The bear was swimming back from the left again. “His feet are in the same position every time he gets to the back of that island. Right... there! His left foot kicks out like that every time.”

The bear walked back to the front and dove into the water.

“It’s the same.”

“What do you think he’s thinking?” she said.

“Fuck if I know.” She started walking away, toward the interior exhibits, and he followed.

“So we’re both in agreement that Bill is attractive.”

“I’m only saying it because I think it’s funny, Aim. Isn’t it funny?” He poked her from behind, sticking his finger into her side to find the spot where it would tickle.

“Isn’t it funny?”

She pulled away and he whistled. “Yeah, that Bill sure is handsome.”

They passed through the doors into the “World of Animals” and stopped in the vestibule for their eyes to adjust to the light. It was much darker inside, a harsh contrast to the bright day. Through the second set of doors they moved into a room filled with monkeys in glass cases. The first one held Spider Monkeys, little guys with funny beards, swinging from ropes in their cages. One of the small monkeys swung out and landed on a branch. It started rubbing itself between the legs.

“We were broken up, Adam,” she said. “You said it was what you needed.”

Two girls were standing to the side of the case. They were sketching on long white sketchpads with pencils. One of them drew the monkey, and the other was starting on the tree the monkeys lived in. The girls seemed small, like high school girls, but they were probably freshmen, Adam thought. One of them had short brown hair, and a hard, too-big nose, but the other’s hair was blonde and straight. She wore tight jeans and a thin t-shirt that Adam could just make out the lines of her bra through. She might have worn lipstick, and it had worn off, or she might have just had very pink lips. All of this passed

through Adam's mind in an instant, as he noticed the girl chewing her pencil eraser, and then he turned back to Amy.

"All I did was call him, Ad. I didn't—"

Adam moved away from her, closer to the girls. "We can drop it," he said.

"That's enough I think."

"I just did what I wanted. It was only one call."

"Enough," he said. "You can stop now."

Amy left the "Simian Center" without saying anything more. She crossed the room and pushed through the doors as if she was finished with the zoo entirely. Adam followed her, expecting to say something about not walking away from him, but the next room was even darker than the first, and he had to stop to let his eyes adjust again, before he could see anything. At first he could only make out dim blue boxes, like faded TV sets, but then he realized the room held fish tanks along the walls. The only light was coming from behind the tanks, filtered into a dim blue by the water. The room had an eerie sensation of the fish peering out, as though *they* were the ones doing the watching. Amy had stopped walking and stood in front of a tank.

"I used to go fishing on the lake when I was a kid," Adam said. "I once caught an eel and they cut him along the side from top to bottom. Then they threw him back. They said the blood would attract other fish."

She stopped and turned toward him, looked into his face.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked.

He pushed her back against the fish tanks and put his face down to hers. She held her chin low against her chest so that he couldn't get to her face at first, but then he

pushed his cheek against hers and pushed her face to the side, to where he could match their lips. When he kissed her, her mouth was hard. Her eyes were open and they had a dullness behind them until he caught her bottom lip with his teeth, and then she made a noise and her eyes came to life. She tried to move, but he bit down harder.

She made that noise again but this time drew it out longer, impatiently. She did not move, only waited for him to stop. He brought his mouth from her lip and his face from hers but remained in front of her, holding her body against the tanks. “You shouldn’t have called him,” he said.

“Too bad.” She pushed him away from her, hard, and moved around the edge of the room, sliding along the tanks toward the red exit sign mounted on the ceiling.

“What made you call him?” he yelled after her. She was already through the door when he reached the exit and on the other side he had to stop again as this time his eyes had to adjust to the light. They were outside of the building. He blinked and covered his eyes with his hands, then, when he could see in front of him, he was looking at the metal dome of the aviary. The birds called angrily to one another and a red one flew across the tops of the trees, heading away, toward the farthest side of its cage.

Amy walked toward the exit, and he had to walk fast to catch up.

“It’s not that I’m mad about you calling Bill,” he called after her. “It’s cool, I guess. If I was seeing someone else you wouldn’t mind, so why should it matter to me. Right?”

Without stopping, or turning around, she yelled back to Adam, “You are. You are seeing someone else though.”

At the turnstiles, Adam had just caught Amy, but after passing through them she stopped where she was. Adam heard a scream and looked up. Ahead of them, the two young boys in black t-shirts had knocked down one of the girls who'd been drawing in the monkey house, the blonde, and were pulling her bag away from her. She lay stretched out on the ground, holding the strap of her bag, and Adam saw a sudden flash of her stomach as her shirt pulled up. It was white, and contorted, he saw it stretch and contract as the boy gave a hard yank and pulled the bag away from her, at first taking her arms and pulling her body with him, but then her grip gave and he had the bag. The girl dropped forward onto the pavement, her arms slapping the street. The other girl screamed again, as the boys ran off into the park. "Assholes!" Amy yelled. The girls were not more than twenty feet from where Adam stood, and Amy covered this distance at a run, coming to a crouch by the girl whose bag had been taken and helping her up into a seated position. Adam heard her ask them if they were all right. This was when the blonde girl began to cry. It was the way this began, with her chin first crinkling and then the heaving sobs coming, that made Adam realize how young she really was, that she was only a girl. He saw Amy's hands take the girl's, and the blood on the girl's palms. Amy brought some tissues out of her jacket and wiped away the blood, then pressed the tissues against the girl's hands, holding a small ball of the white tissue against the girl's palm. Her drawing pad lay strewn across the sidewalk, its pages open and bent along the way it had fallen. The brunette picked it up and began to smooth out the bent pages, trying to get the whole pad to be flat once more.

Adam was aware of the fact that he had not moved, that he should have run over with Amy to help these girls, or perhaps chased after the boys, but he had done nothing.

He stood there still, and finally, as he began walking toward the girls and uttered the simple words, “Are you OK?”, he could see the way they looked at Amy: with their eyes wide open, the blonde already controlling her tears. They were thankful that she was helping them, and glad to have her near.