

# Gorilla Girl

"When beer is mixed and left to ferment and bread is set out to rise, they sometimes collect wild yeasts; these foreigners drop out of the jet stream or rise up from the bowels of the planet, unwelcome particles which give the finished product a sharp flavor. I

suspect this is what happened to my mother when she was pregnant with me. Sometime during the first trimester she must have let her guard down, perhaps in the public toilet at the flea market in Paw Paw; in a moment of inattention, something airborne and bony slipped inside her to poison the brew, something like a curse.

If I cared to describe the details of my birth and the ecstasy of release from that suffocating maternal clench, you might question whether I actually recall such an early event. In fact, I recall in miserable details this and every sensation that has followed in the tangled and knotted lifeline connecting that howling newborn to me, seventeen years later. I recall that despite the humid heat of the southern Michigan summer, my parents kept me at optimum temperature with air conditioning, and in the bitter winter I was warmed by a clean-burning gas furnace whose filter they changed regularly. Despite these ideal conditions, I was an unhappy baby, screaming during the day and most of the night as well, whether flat on my back or rolled onto my stomach, whether a gentle breeze blew or the night stood still. When I found toys or even blankets in my crib, I tossed them out, unwilling to submit to their paltry comforts. On my parents' shelves are the guidebooks they purchased during this time: *Doctor Spock's Baby and Child Care*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Saving Yourself from Baby*.

It seems foolish to suggest that my having resulted from an accidental conception should have made any difference. And certainly my mother was wrong about my problem ever having been colic, for had it been colic, I'd have been feeling better by the time I was using complete sentences to demand rare-cooked meat and glass after glass of cool water. For years my parents tried to sustain the illusion that I was a normal girl, but my siblings learned by trial and error to keep away from me. My brother broke his wrist the time I pushed him off the roof--before ordering me down, he

first should have considered how precariously near the edge he stood. As a kindergartner, I bit my sister's leg so badly that she needed six stitches. Throughout those early years, I yelled for food at the first pang of hunger, bathed irregularly, and threw things, so my bedroom floor was a pool of broken dishes, torn books, and drywall dust. My father, a dedicated actuary, replaced my broken windows with plexiglass. In photographs from this time, I have a red and swollen look..."

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# O ld Dogs

"...Hamlet, the best watchdog, has only three legs now. The fourth got caught at the knee in a fox trap two summers ago. When the trapper, a third-shift paper mill worker, checked his traps a couple days later, he considered shooting the dog, whose tibia and fibula had been snapped clean by the force of the trap jaws. He would have shot the dog, a lab mix with blue merle colors, if it had looked up at him and whimpered. But, once freed, the dog limped away without looking back, and the man figured he'd let the creature die in peace. Hamlet bled in the woods near the river for days, licking himself and dragging the half-attached leg from place to place. He finally caught the leg on some barbed wire and tore it the rest of the way off. He returned home across the celery field, thin and feverish, in order to heal or die. He licked his stump night and day, licked the busted bone and wound in a constant rhythm, never sleeping, working as though his infection produced an addictive liquor.

Though the stump has healed over, Hamlet has never stopped his vigil. All night, while the rest of the house sleeps, he licks the leg and his whole body in a continuous act of self-healing. He has long been able to stand and walk, but is unable to climb onto the high couches and so must accept the false humility of sleeping on the floor. Cushioned from the cold concrete by only a wafer of carpeting and whatever blankets or clothing falls to the floor, Hamlet remains alert long after people and other dogs are insensible.

Hamlet stops licking himself to watch Margrite light a cigarette and suck in a long draw. Hamlet watches her smoke the cigarette all the way down and then toss the filter in the fire. He watches her feed the fire another log from the stack drying beside the stove. He watches her gray head fall quiet against the couch arm with her mouth hanging open..."

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# The Smallest Man in the World

"...The Smallest Man in the World looks at the patrons one by one then settles his gaze on me and nods. His hair is thinning. With a closed mouth, I smile. He holds up his drink in my direction in appreciation of my beauty, and I lift my drink in appreciation of his smallness.

I have compared beauty to height, but there is more in common between beauty and smallness: conciseness, the correct arrangement of parts in a confined area. Space has not been wasted on the Smallest Man in the World. He is perfectly formed, with limbs, trunk, and ears all in proportion. Only at the most perfunctory glance does he look like a child, for he has a serious forehead and a square jaw. His face is slightly swollen, most likely from drinking, but his size obscures this fact. An art teacher once showed me the trick of making a black ink drawing and then shrinking it on the copying machine--in the reduction, the flaws are less perceptible..."

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