

## That Day The Monkey Came To Church

Sunday was Cindy's favorite day. She got to dress up in her best clothes and go to church with her parents. She had been going to that building all of her life. She had gone to Christian day care, pre-school and she was now on the verge of 2nd grade. She loved going there and looking up at the building which towered over her. Today there would be Sunday School and the company of the other children. Often the youth minister would drop in and answer questions. Then she would rejoin her parents for the main service.

Traffic was, as always, slow approaching the church parking lot. A police officer was standing in the road making sure that people coming from the other direction could turn into the lot without an accident. Cindy loved policemen, who often came to the school to warn them of the dangers they would face in the world. It was comforting to know that they were always there, looking out for the good people.

This time there was a crowd of people just inside the entrance of the parking lot. People usually parked their cars and went directly into the main building. Any gathering was usually on the porch or inside, out of the sun or rain. Even though it was a bright sunny day, and hot outside the air-conditioned church, there was a large group still outside. Although Cindy pressed against the window, as best her seat belt would allow her, she could not tell what was going on. If

someone was hurt then why wasn't the policeman helping instead of directing traffic?

Then as they turned into the lot Cindy heard her mother exclaim "Oh, my God!" and her mother wasn't given to taking the Lord's name in vain. It made her gasp but not as much as when she saw why everyone was milling around. There was, and she could hardly believe it, a gigantic monkey standing in their church parking lot!

"Mommy, mommy, there's a monkey at church."

To the adult eye it was obvious that the "monkey" was a person in a gorilla suit. Cindy's mother had no idea what this was about but found herself sympathizing with anyone in a fur suit on a hot summer day. Cindy's father had no such sympathy. His main concern was not running over the people who spilled over the curb and finding a parking spot in the church's parking lot. Usually there was enough room, but at least a half dozen spots on either side of the driveway were blocked by people crowding around the "monkey".

By the time Cindy's father had parked the car Cindy was jumping up and down against the seatbelt in an attempt to keep the monkey in sight. She was eager to get closer and desperately afraid that it would be gone before she could get there. She only settled back into her seat when her mother admonished her and reminded her of the rules of the car. Finally, the engine was shut off and Cindy was given permission to release her seat belt, but was not allowed to exit the car until her mother was standing outside and opened the door. As soon as her feet hit the pavement Cindy was pulling her mother by the hand in a determined effort to reach the monkey. Cindy's mother was willing to go along and see what was going on, but she was not willing to run. She'd run in the park as Cindy trailed bubbles from a wand or just to play tag but not in the church parking lot in her good shoes. There was no way, however, to hold Cindy back

without risking losing her so she picked up the pace.

More than thirty people, almost all of them members of the congregation, were milling around the man in the gorilla suit who was handing out sheets of paper. Several of the sheets, now crumpled, lay on the normally pristine sidewalk. Cindy was too excited to look down at the ground, but kept her eyes up as she maneuvered past the other people in an attempt to reach the creature she could only just see through the throng. She did not even register the harsh words and the angry faces of the people she saw every week in church. She finally reached the inner circle and gazed upward at the magnificent monkey who was, somehow, right here outside her church.

“Hi,” she yelled, “hi, monkey.”

When the monkey didn’t respond, she thought, it could only be because she was so small next to it and its attention was taken up with the adults around them. Only then did she see the anger and the shoving. Just then her mother took one of the papers that the monkey was handing out and Cindy felt her mom’s hand tighten around her own.

“Come on, Cindy,” her mother said, “we’re going inside.”

“But mommy, I want to meet the monkey.”

As her mother pulled her away the monkey looked down at her and their eyes met. The monkey’s face was expressionless but Cindy felt that it was smiling down at her. She reached up with her free hand and, just before she was out of reach, Cindy’s fingers slid across the smooth palm of the monkey’s hand sending a thrill through her body. Then her mother pulled her away and the crowd closed in on the monkey and she could no longer see it.

“Bye, monkey,” Cindy said.

Cindy's mother continued to pull her until they rejoined her father on the front stairs of the church, at which point she pressed the handout on to him and then took Cindy to the Sunday School on the second floor. There was usually enough time before the class for the children to mill around and compare the thoughts that raced through their heads, as if they hadn't seen each other in school only two days earlier. Sometimes Cindy saw some of the others on Saturday, but still they acted as if they hadn't seen each other in weeks.

This day the children were crowded at the window that overlooked the parking lot. Even some of the older kids were there. The windows in their Sunday School class looked out the back of the building, so they had come here to see the action. Down in the parking lot adults were still milling around the person in the gorilla suit. The policeman was directing traffic, even though a few of the adults had stepped off the curb to talk to him. The policeman gestured, directing them back to the sidewalk. They continued to speak to him but he had to gesture several more times before they retreated. Cindy did not understand why the adults were angry with the monkey. What could he possibly have done?

After a few more minutes a police car drove up and two men in uniform emerged. Cindy sighed with relief. The nice policemen would help the monkey. They wouldn't let anything happen to him. Imagine her surprise when the two officers walked through the crowd and took the monkey by the arms. The older kids cheered.

"They'll hurt the monkey," Cindy said to them.

"Yeah," said her friend Lucy's older brother, "they're taking him to the zoo."

"Hey," another older boy said, "maybe they'll send him back to Africa."

"No," Cindy said, "don't hurt it." She spoke in a low voice, even though she wanted to

shout it. But you didn't shout in church and besides, the window was closed because of the air conditioning.

Outside the man in the gorilla suit was resisting. The policeman pulled him towards their car and most of his papers went flying. The adults stooped to pick them up as the man was taken away.

Cindy left the window and ran to the adult's bible study class. Usually her parents would be there, sitting quietly with their Bibles on their laps, perhaps underlining a passage as Pastor Rick spoke. She never understood the little she heard there. The children's teacher, Miss Marion, spoke of simple issues like not lying or taking the Lord's name in vain. Pastor Rick spoke about miracles and weddings and other things that were too complex for her.

This time, instead of that calm scene, there were a dozen adults standing in front of the pastor, all trying to talk at once. Weaving her way through the forest of adults Cindy finally found her parents. She began tugging on her mother's dress. She had wanted to take her mother's hand but, like the others, she was holding a piece of paper and gesturing sternly. Finally, her mother realized that she was there.

"Cindy," her mother said, "why aren't you in Sunday School?"

"They're hurting the monkey!"

"Who? Who's hurting the monkey?"

"Policemen. I thought they'd help it but they took it away. Don't let them hurt it, mommy."

"See," Pastor Rick said, "problem solved."

Cindy didn't feel brave enough to talk directly to Pastor Rick. So she pulled on her

mother's dress again and pleaded with her to do something.

Cindy's mother bent down to talk quietly to her. "Sweetie, go back to Sunday School. No one is going to get hurt."

"But ..."

"No buts," her mother said, "we'll talk about it later. I promise."

Cindy saw there was no point in talking. The adults had calmed down and were taking their seats. Her father appeared as the crowd dispersed and smiled at her. Cindy left the room and returned to her Sunday School classroom. Almost everyone had taken their seats and the older kids were gone but Cindy's first action was to rush to the window. The parking lot was empty. There were no adults, no monkey, no policemen. Even the policeman who had been directing traffic was gone. The cars were parked and the pieces of paper that had been on the ground were gone. It was if nothing unusual had happened. Miss Marion gently told Cindy to take her seat. There was no trace of admonishment in her voice but Cindy felt the eyes of the other children on her as she sat down. The subject of the class was faithfulness to God, but all Cindy could think about was the monkey. She hoped her mother was right and that no one would hurt it. It was the first time she could remember wondering if her mother was right or not.

"Cindy," Miss Marion said, "are you paying attention?"

Cindy looked up. "Sorry, Miss Marion."

"Very well," Miss Marion said, "let's continue."

After class there was a break and then they gathered in the main chapel for the service. Cindy managed to pay attention, to read and sing but the fate of the monkey was always on her mind. Where was he now? Was he being treated well?

When it was all done, including a meeting of the adults with Pastor Rick while Miss Marion watched the children, they returned to their car. It was brutally hot inside so her father ran the air conditioning at full blast while they waited for their chance to back out of their parking spot. Her parents were acting strangely. Usually they chatted with Cindy, asking her about Sunday School and how she intended to use what she had learned in her life. Cindy was always happy to talk about it and how she would be honest and faithful. Today her parents only talked with each other in the kind of code adults used. Not the deliberate code used to hide inappropriate things from small ears, but the kind of talk that flowed between people who knew each other so well that they didn't have to fill in the blanks.

"It's over," her father said.

"For now," her mother said. "What about next time and the time after that?"

"I don't think it will be a problem," her father said, "but if it is, we know what to do."

"I don't like it," her mother said, "I don't like that kind of thing happening. Why can't they leave us alone?"

Cindy did not know who "they" were or what they were doing, but her parents were concerned and that worried her. Her parents rarely spoke to her of things that worried them. Her father often read to her from the newspaper and let her pick out words that she recognized. Very often, though, he would refuse to discuss some of the articles. They were "bad things" but she didn't need to worry about them he would say and she didn't.

When they finally reached their home there was the after church ritual where everyone went to their bedroom and changed out of their church clothes. Cindy's mother had laid out her clothes for after church and, despite how much she liked dressing up, it was still nice to change

into loose fitting shorts, a t-shirt and her comfortable sneakers with the sticky strap. Her father was lying on the couch and her mother was in the kitchen. They were going to have something nice for dinner, Cindy just knew it. Her mother felt that Sunday dinner had to be something special.

Cindy looked at both of them and knew that this was not the time to talk about what had happened to the monkey. Her father was relaxing and wouldn't even look at the Sunday paper for an hour or so. Her mother was not making dinner yet but even she was not ready to talk about anything. She had no choice but to leave them alone and go sit outside for a while, enjoying the nice weather. She sat on her swing and rocked gently back and forth until her father came out and asked her if she'd like to read the Sunday paper with him.

She knew enough not bring up the monkey at that point. After a while they had gone through the back sections of the paper, which her father preferred to read to her. There was no chance that anything unpleasant would be in the Sunday sections he chose to read to her. The daily paper was more news and fewer stories about foreign vacations and rich people's houses. After a while Cindy decided to mention the monkey.

"Daddy," she said, "is there anything in there about the monkey?"

Her father sighed and put the paper aside. "Cindy, that just happened a few hours ago. This paper was delivered before that."

"Will it be in tomorrow's paper?"

Her father looked over his shoulder at Cindy's mother, who had come out of the kitchen to listen to them. They sat down on either side of her.

"Well," her father said, "this paper is about big important things that happen all over the



country. They don't bother with little things."

"But there was a monkey at church!"

"Sweetie," her mother said, "you know that it wasn't a real monkey."

"But I saw it."

"I know, but you just don't see monkeys on the street. They're in Africa and in the zoo."

"But ..."

"Honey," her father said, causing her to turn around, "it was a man in a monkey suit."

Cindy looked at him but her mind could not accept it. "I saw it." She had never felt so certain about anything.

"Only for a second," her mother said. "I was there with you and you couldn't have seen him for more than a second or two."

Her father tried to think. What to say, how to make her understand. "Cindy," he finally said, "it's like Halloween."

Cindy gasped. "Pastor Larry says that Halloween is wrong."

"Okay," her father said, "bad choice." The subject of Halloween had often been a sore point at their church. Pastor Larry, the youth pastor, was against Halloween, while Miss Marion thought that it was harmless fun. Pastor Rick refused to make a decision one way or the other as long as it was all about candy and the kids didn't dress up as devils.

"Sweetie," her mother said, "do you remember last week when we driving to the mall?"

"Uh huh," Cindy said, not sure where the conversation was going.

"Do you remember those people standing on the corner holding signs?"

"You said they were selling something."

“That’s right!” her mother said. “They were trying to get people to go down another road and look at new houses. Do you remember what they looked like?”

Cindy thought. “The lady was green and the guy wore a big hat.”

“That’s right. The woman was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. You’ve seen pictures of the Statue of Liberty, haven’t you? Well, you know that the woman standing on the corner wasn’t that statue, right?”

“Mommy, the real statue is so big and made of metal or something. She was just a person.”

“Exactly,” her father said, “so you see that ...”

“But there are monkeys, right?”

“Yes, but ...”

“I mean there must be millions and millions of monkeys and some are in Africa and some are at the zoo and this one was on the street.”

“Cindy,” her father said, groping for a concept she would accept. “Cindy, you’re just going to have to believe us. What you saw was not a real monkey. It was a man in a suit.”

“But why did they have to hurt it?”

Her parents noticed that she was using the word “it” and not “him”. She was still thinking of that man as an ape.

A look passed between the parents and there was an unspoken agreement that her father would have to answer that question.

“That man, and he was a man, was breaking the law. He was on church property and when people asked him to leave he wouldn’t. That’s why the police had to come and take him

away. They didn't hurt him, they just made him leave."

"What was he doing? Was it bad?"

Again her parents looked at each other.

"It really doesn't matter," her mother said.

"But he wasn't hurting anyone," Cindy said. "I touched his hand and he didn't hurt me."

"You saw the papers he was handing out? Well those papers were, I don't know how to say this, very insulting to us."

"How?"

"Well, you learned about faithfulness in Sunday School, right? And in church you learned about the truths of our faith?"

Cindy nodded. She knew this. "Jesus is Lord and if we believe in him we'll all go to Heaven."

Her parents smiled.

"Well," her father continued, "he was handing out papers saying that it was all a lie."

"Why would he do that?"

Her father had to shake his head at that one. How to explain to a child about the kind of person who would try to disrupt church and shake people's faith in God? How could she understand that kind of hate?

"You'll just have to take our word for it. He didn't belong at church and he had to leave. That's all you need to know."

"But Miss Marion said that animals are good and go to a special heaven."

"For the last time," her father said, "this was a man, and he was doing something wrong."

The police made him leave, but no one hurt him.”

“But ...”

“Cindy,” her mother said, “your father has told you what happened and you’ll just have to believe us.”

Cindy could think of nothing to say and they never spoke of the monkey again. Sunday passed and they had a wonderful church day meal and then watched some television. When it was her bedtime she changed into her pajamas and knelt by the bed to say her prayers while her mother stood by. She remembered to bless her mother and father and her grandparents. Then, after her mother kissed her goodnight, turned out the light and closed the door, Cindy lay quietly until she heard her mother walking away.

Cindy had never disobeyed her parents and she did not think she was doing anything wrong. Still, she felt she had to keep this to herself. She knew they would not understand. Just as she felt herself falling asleep she looked up at the ceiling, way up to where God and his son Jesus lived.

“Jesus,” she said as quietly as she could, knowing that God saw and heard all, “please watch over the monkey and don’t let anyone hurt him. Thank you.”

Her duty done, she smiled, closed her eyes and drifted peacefully off to sleep.

The End