

HER LONG FINGERS caressed his cheek for a moment, as she traced her way down to his jaw, her cool touch just grazing the stubble of Duncan's five-day beard. She studied his face, seeking his gaze. He met her eyes for an instant before looking away, strangely embarrassed by his inability to match the intensity of her insistent stare. Ottoline smacked little air kisses as she reached up to touch his face again, and he was surprised by the gentle precision of her tiny fingernails sorting through his whiskers as she investigated up the contour of his cheek from jaw to upper lip. She pressed two fingers to his lips, and he nearly kissed them, but he didn't, and then she contemplated her fingertips, sticking out her tongue daintily for the tiny flake of something she had found on his lip. She nibbled at it contentedly while continuing to stare up at him, making a sweet, soft, peeping sound. She repositioned her springy little body constantly, and now she shifted again, peering up at his chin, plucking with fascination at the bristles that speckled his face. They had been alone together for five minutes. Ignore her, her trainer Martha had advised, before leaving them alone. Act as if you've seen a million monkeys and you're bored by her. Let her be curious about you. Stay very still. Make no sudden movements. Duncan was very good at sitting still, and he was pretty much the master of being bored, too.

Re-settling herself on his chest, Ottoline began to unfasten the buttons of his cotton shirt, the tufty top of her head brushing under his chin while she dedicated herself to the apparently familiar task of unbuttoning. Top button, done. Next button, done. She breathed out a little sigh of concentration as she undid one more button, but now she was stymied by the padded chest strap of the harness that kept Duncan from flopping forward. She stroked the placket edge of his open shirt and then she touched his exposed chest. She slid her hand into the gap of his unbuttoned shirt and rummaged under the fabric very slowly, moving her hand tentatively, feeling for something, stroking his chest hair, now threading her fingers through it, and Duncan squeezed his closed eyes even more tightly shut as he felt himself moved inexplicably. Her careful, exquisite touch was disturbingly unlike the respectful and routine handling by the various people whose task it was to bathe him and dress him and manage his body. She rotated her fingertip in a tiny circle, gently centering on his left nipple, before moving on to twine her fingers in the surrounding hairs, searching the surface of his body, right there at the equator of his sensory level, delineating the edge of feeling and not feeling. How did she know to trace this line? She continued her tender exploration, mapping his skin with those careful little fingers. He was barely breathing, but he could feel his heart jumping under her hand. He stayed very still, with his eyes half-closed, feeling her cool, questioning hands on his skin. She had a distinctive, salty tang that was quite pleasant, and as he breathed it in, there was something nearly familiar, yet new. Ah, Milly, the beloved cat of his childhood. Her fur always had a sweet, sunshiny smell when she had been outdoors. This was muskier.

His eyes still nearly closed, Duncan could see Ottoline's inquisitive gaze through the fringe of his eyelashes. She was done investigating his chest hairs, and now she sat back and reached up to

touch his cheek again, peeping softly as she cupped his chin with both hands, turning and angling his face with an insistent pressure until he opened his eyes all the way. She was only inches from his nose, staring at him intently with those pellucid brown eyes. What? She smacked her lips expectantly and tilted her head. He imitated her peeping sound and tilted his head as best he could, and then he smacked his own lips back at her in an exaggerated kisskiss, the way he would play with a baby. Ottoline cheeped delightedly, a shrill, joyful sound that nearly hurt his ears, and then suddenly, as if she had just realized who he was— Oh, it's you!—she launched herself against him and hugged him fiercely, burrowing close, her warm body pressed tight against his clavicles, her little fingernails digging into the back of his neck with a pulsing grip. It was oddly thrilling, and flattering, if a little incommodious. He closed his eyes again, feeling strangely peaceful and relaxed. Everything was perfectly still. He hadn't thought about death for at least ten minutes.

This encounter had been billed as an experiment, and Duncan had reluctantly agreed to the visit, though really he had no choice. Laura had been relentless. At first he refused absolutely. He snickered at the bizarre notion of bringing a monkey helper into the house when she first raised it. Why not? How about a mongoose to do the vacuuming, a cockatoo to answer the phone, and perhaps a helper wombat to assist with paperwork? When he realized she was serious, he dismissed the idea as beyond consideration. That, he had thought, was that. Duncan was angry when Laura admitted she had gone ahead and scheduled a series of interviews behind his back. How long had this been going on? She had been at the Primate Institute three times in two weeks! But even after Laura won, even after he said Okay, fine, I'll do it, I'll meet it, they can bring the damn thing here any time, it's not like I have anything else to do, plan whatever you want, she had continued to sell him on the concept, emphasizing all the tasks the capuchin monkey—the one the Institute thought would be a good match, the monkey absurdly called Ottoline—would be able to perform for him: lights switched on and off, CDs inserted, buttons pushed, pages turned, dropped items retrieved. Wouldn't he like to have this little helper right there to pick up the television remote, or his cell phone, which so often slipped from his grasp? Wouldn't that be fantastic? Yes, fantastic. Whatever. Wouldn't he enjoy having her turn the pages of a book or magazine for him? Sure, why not. Duncan had finally reminded Laura somewhat unpleasantly about the wisdom of his great-uncle Fred, the one with the furniture store in West Hartford, a real holder-forth on a range of topics, who used to say the key to selling is to know when to stop selling.

But now here she was. They had been left together after two hours spent settling in with Martha, the cheerful placement trainer from the Institute who had arrived with Ottoline stuffed inside an incongruous plaid zippered traveling case meant for a cat. Ottoline first explored the room thoroughly. When Martha set up Duncan with a plastic cup, into which she smeared a glob of peanut butter, and a chopstick, Ottoline sprang onto his lap from the coffee table and adroitly seized the chopstick from his loose grasp to dig out her own little helpings. As Martha clipped the coupling link of the long lead attached to Ottoline's harness to a ring loop on the side of his chair, she reiterated the strategy: Ignore Ottoline. Let her be challenged by his inertness. She might choose to ignore him for a while. Don't force it. Duncan should just let her be curious about him at her own pace. Ottoline had not been very interested in Laura, except when Martha

had provided her with some blueberries, which Ottoline snatched immediately from Laura's outstretched palm. "She's already got it worked out that Duncan is the alpha male in this tribe," Martha murmured. Laura took Martha's cue to sit still on the other side of the room, watching and jotting occasional notes about commands and rules and monkey management strategies, though everything was spelled out clearly in the binder provided by the Institute, and Martha was just reiterating what Laura had already read more than once. After a while, with Ottoline and Duncan engrossed in each other, Martha and Laura had withdrawn to the kitchen, leaving Ottoline alone with Duncan, to whom she was now clinging contentedly, her puppyish warm belly against his chest. Laura's allergies had kept them from having a cat, though Duncan longed for one and had for years continued to see Milly out of the corner of his eye when he entered a room, only to discover that it was a shadow or a sweater over the arm of a chair. He had never told Laura how often in the night he still felt the phantom weight of a ghost cat jumping up on the bed and settling at his feet. Even since the accident. Especially since the accident. Now Duncan wondered if Laura's eyes would itch and redden around Ottoline. That would be an easy out right there, putting the whole nutty enterprise beyond further discussion. Keeping Ottoline would already be asking a lot of Laura, not just cleaning the cage and the diaper changes, and the inevitable messes, which were challenging enough, but all the constant maintenance issues, from managing her food to giving her baths, for God's sake. It would be like adopting an ersatz baby, now, after all their hopes...If Ottoline came to stay, Laura would be encumbered with the perpetual care of a grotesque, uncanny, permanently diapered homunculus.

If Ottoline didn't work out, he might actually regret it. Duncan had not expected to care one way or the other. Ending Laura's obsession about the practical possibilities of a monkey helper had been the reason he agreed to the home visit. He wanted to prove her wrong, punish her for having a shred of optimism about the unmitigated disaster of his situation, drag her down into his despair. Duncan had certainly not anticipated Ottoline's complexity. He had not dreamed of her singular presence or how it would feel to be the object of her compelling gaze. Ottoline began to squirm, and then she clambered up across his collarbone to perch on his shoulder, lifting her leash with her tail as she crossed his body, her diaper rustling. What was she doing now? Make yourself at home, Ottoline. Her breath was warm on his face as she rummaged avidly in his hair. Her attention really was so oddly flattering. Duncan could hear Laura's voice in the kitchen. The coffee grinder whirred and stopped. Martha said something in the chirpy voice she had used when praising Ottoline, which made Laura laugh. The screen door to the back porch banged and the house went quiet.