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DAVID HOLLOWAY

Piney Woods Florida, 1964

I hate being a Skunk-Ape. I love being a Skunk-Ape. I hate being surrounded by a weaker species with no clue as to my true identity. I love to let my scent fill a room. It thrills me to sneak a bite of raw chicken from the family fridge. Deep in the pine woods I strip my clothes off to run, and hunt, feeling the hot Florida sun on my fur. When I stop trying to pass for human in any way, then my essence burns like a blast furnace and I am free.

Skunk-Apes are like Cowbirds. Cowbirds leave their eggs in the nests of other birds. Cowbird babies get raised by Robins, or Sparrows, or Meadowlarks- just about any type of bird can raise a Cowbird really. I mean real birds- not like ducks or chickens. Well, Skunk-Apes leave their young with humans. Human families raise Skunk-Apes until they're old enough to escape into the forest and live on their own.

Once they're grown Skunk-Apes head for the woods. Lots of runaway kids are really Skunk-Apes returning to the swamp and forest. After being raised by humans, living with them for years, learning their habits and behaviors, eating their food, sleeping in their beds, Skunk-Apes are eager to return to the simple purity of life in the swamps. There were days when I had to fight the desire to leave so hard I thought I'd break something inside of me.

I didn't always know that I was a Skunk-Ape. I used to think that everybody felt like me. Trapped in a life that wasn't their own. Like they'd never fit in anywhere. But as I grew and changed I began to figure it out. I was shorter than human kids my age, and I had soft dark hair covering my arms. I tended to shuffle my feet and stoop a little when I walked. My foster-mom tried to improve my posture again and again with little progress.

Some of the earliest hints came from my human family who fostered me. My foster-mom used to call me "little monkey." My older brother Roger picked up on that, but didn't use it as a cute nickname. He'd scratch his armpits and hoot. Point at me and sing "You look like a monkey, you smell like one too," to the tune of the Happy Birthday song.

When I was seven, Roger told me that I was adopted. He said that they found me on the front porch one morning. That I didn't really belong in this family. He said that's why I was short and they were tall. That's why I had dark hair and he was blonde. That's why I looked like a monkey. I went crying to my foster-mommy and she told me he was just being mean. That I was her sweet baby daughter and always would be. I still don't know if Roger knew my secret or if he was just being a big brother.

How can a human family be so ignorant? How could they raise a Skunk-Ape as if it were one of their own human children? Didn't they notice my prehensile toes? My hair? The deep funky smell? I learned that many creatures have an emotion called love. This makes them blind and stupid. Skunk-Apes and Cowbirds don't suffer from this odd weakness.

Every time I did something different Roger said "Karen's acting weird again!" Once he saw me lick up a huge black ant as it crawled along the back of my hand. Roger squealed and made a face. Before he could run and tattle, Tommy West came by and asked if he wanted to go play baseball. I was more careful after that.

I found it easy to pass for human, but hard to live like one. My foster-family served terrible food; it was never strong enough or freshly killed. They never put something on the table with its heart still pounding, never even served an unwashed potato. I had to practice something called 'table manners' I couldn't just grab what I wanted and eat it. I had to wear clothes- and since I am female I had to pretend to care about colors and styles and especially my hair.

Skunk-Apes have been in the swamps and pinelands of Florida and Georgia for much longer than humans. Food and shelter are easy to find in the wilds of the south. Any Skunk-Ape worth her name can pick swamp cabbages, catch lizards, snakes, turtles, fish by hand, and peel back palm fronds to get to the delicious hearts of palm trees. We like it raw, wet and slimy. Florida was made for us.

I was lucky that the house my Skunk-Ape mother left me in was near the woods. I don't know how young Skunk-Apes stand city life. We lived in an old wooden house with high ceilings and lots of windows. Foster-dad and my foster-brother Roger had painted it yellow a few years ago and two huge live oaks draped with Spanish moss gave us a shady front yard. A brick garage stood off to the side where we parked our 1955 Oldsmobile. Foster-dad and Roger really loved that car. My foster-mom joked that the car had a better house than she did because it was made of brick and hers was just wood.

The house sat at the end of an oyster shell road in the middle of some piney, palmetto woods in central Florida. My foster-dad was tall with tanned skin from being outside in the sun. He worked at a horse ranch down the road. He was a gentle soul- but tough at the core. He took pride in calling himself a Florida Cracker. My foster-mom was short and slight and about as girly as you could get. She had long hair that she changed constantly. She worked as a beautician three days a week in the small nearby town of Dunellen. She was always bringing home fashion magazines and trying to get me to read them or comment on the hairstyles. What use does somebody with fur have for hairstyles?

Many parts of acting human were difficult, but the worst by far was church. Every Sunday we all dressed in stiff uncomfortable suits and dresses. The men and women drenched themselves in perfume or after-shave; smells that tried to hide their true odor, but that just made my nose itch. The praying and the preaching were terrible, but worst of all was the singing. Skunk-Ape vocal chords weren't designed to sing hymns. I learned to just move my mouth and pretend to make noise.

After church my foster-parents would talk with other adults. This was called visiting even though they never went anywhere. While the adults talked about boring adult stuff the kids tried to play without getting their Sunday clothes dirty or torn. Even the human kids suffered these agonies after church.

The one human activity that I loved was television. The family gathered in the living room and watched on our black and white RCA television. Bewitched, Bonanza, and The Beverly Hillbillies, all mesmerized us. I hated Mr. Ed, but everybody else thought it was funny.

We all agreed that the best show was Gilligan's Island and we watched it every week. Foster-mom would make a giant bowl of popcorn and we'd all share it. I always wondered why the characters on Gilligan's Island wanted to leave. They should be thanking Gilligan and The Skipper for finding them a tropical paradise almost as good as Florida. When I said that out loud my foster-family laughed, so I shut up and took another big handful of popcorn

Once foster-dad asking Roger. "Who do you like better, Ginger or Mary-Anne?"

"Ginger- she's a movie star! What about you dad?"

“I like your mom best son- she's as pretty as Ginger and as sweet as Mary Anne.”

The handful of popcorn she threw at him bounced off his tan face, but she wasn't really mad.

Skunk-Apes invented tetherball. How else can you explain a ten year old fourth grade girl like me winning the Osceola Elementary school tetherball tournament? My speed, strength and reflexes were just superior and allowed me to kick the ass of every gi-rl- even fifth and sixth graders. Most of them were afraid of the ball so it was easy. Then I beat all of the fourth grade boys- and moved on to the fifth and sixth graders. Some begged off saying they wouldn't play a girl, but I saw their fear, fear that a girl would beat them like a dirty rug on a clothesline.

The meanest, and biggest sixth grader was Jimmy Cain. He was at least three inches taller than the other boys in the class and he was the last one I beat- although it was contested. Jimmy spent as much time name-calling as he did playing.

Jimmy accepted my challenge and stepped right up. He immediately started heckling and teasing, trying to break my concentration. He had picked up my brother's nickname for me somewhere and kept saying “Monkey Girl, Monkey Girl- you can't beat me little ape girl!” Bouncing up and down the way he did while playing outfield in baseball. Chattering and leering and sticking his tongue out. The other boys started joining in, and even a few of the girls laughed along with them.

Instead of breaking my concentration he made me mad. I called up all of my strength and Skunk-Ape sneakiness. I let him return a few easy smacks and then jumped up into the air and slammed the ball with all of my strength. I'm surprised the rope didn't break, I'm surprised the ball didn't pop, I'm not surprised that the ball smashed Jimmy right in the face because that's what I wanted it to do.

He deserved the smashed face. Maybe I shouldn't have run over to his side of the tetherball circle and laughed at him. Maybe it was wrong to push him down into the dirt afterwards shouting “How's it feel to lose to a little ape-girl? Loser boy!” Laughing and dancing all around him while he moaned and held his hands over his bloody nose. I guess Skunk-Apes don't really understand sportsmanship.

They sent me to the principal's office. They sent me even though I said that it wasn't my fault. Jimmy was teasing me instead of watching the ball.

I sat on the bench in the hall outside the principal's office swinging my legs back and forth slowly looking at my worn tennis shoes and the terrazzo floor, ignoring everything around me. Plenty of kids walked by whispering, and pointing at me sitting alone on the troublemaker's bench. Kenward Jackson gave me a thumbs-up and a smile, but I ignored him. He was the class clown and had sat on this troublemaker's bench many times. The school secretary and the school nurse both walked by without looking at me. Now I was one of the bad kids. I looked down at the soft pelt covering my arms. Was it getting longer and darker?

My foster-mom came to the school to meet with Principal Gaines. He said that Jimmy's nose might be broken. I looked him straight in the eye and said that I didn't mean for the ball to hit Jimmy. I learned why humans like to lie that day. It felt good. Nobody called me a liar because after all- how could it have been deliberate? It was a freak accident- what they didn't know was that I was the freak.

Mr. Gaines started in on a long speech about sportsmanship and my foster-mom stood up and pointed her finger in his face.

“My little girl didn't do anything wrong. A bigger older, boy tried to bully her and she stood up to him. Good for her! You should have Jimmy Cain in here, broken nose or not, instead of my daughter!”

She took my hand and we stomped out together while Principal Gaines fumbled for an answer. Once she got me in the car she said I shouldn't feel bad about hurting Jimmy. That sometimes accidents just happen. I hid my smile by pretending to cry into my hands. Skunk-Apes don't really cry. Being sent to the principal wasn't a big deal.

I got to leave school early and my foster-mom stopped to buy me a coke float at Walker's drugstore. It was delicious, and remembering Jimmy Cain screaming and holding his bloody face just made it sweeter. I wonder if fully grown Skunk-Apes ever get to eat ice-cream.

The next day I heard my foster-brother's voice from around a corner in the hall at school.

“Say that again. See what happens,” –He was probably picking on some little second grader. I walked around the corner and saw Roger pushing his finger into the chest of the much larger Jimmy Cain. Jimmy looked scared, it made me wonder what Roger had already or done.

“Your whole family is strange, Jenkins.”

Roger pushed him up against the wall. “Are you going to leave my sister alone, or do I have to hurt you?” I turned around and backed down the hall the way I came.

Maybe human siblings do feel that love thing but are just very bad at showing it? Or maybe it's a boy thing.

My Skunk-Ape odor got much stronger when I was about 11. The only one to really notice it was our dog Gnarly. That love thing stopped any of the humans from noticing. I started to shower at least once a day and used deodorant too but it didn't help much. Gnarly was a mutt, part beagle, part something else. He had a beagle's markings and loud bay, but was shaped more like a German Shepherd. His long pink ribbon of a tongue hung out of the side of his mouth constantly like it was too big for his muzzle. Once I started stinking we became inseparable. I wonder if there is such a thing as a Skunk-Ape hound? Like a foxhound, or wolfhound, but for Skunk-Apes. If there were such a thing, then Gnarly was one. He could sniff me out no matter how far into the pinelands I had run. We loved hunting together, catching the occasional squirrel, or armadillo, but mostly we caught snakes. Central Florida may be the snakiest place on the planet.

One Saturday afternoon Gnarly and I smelled something on our way back to the house. It had a familiar musty, old sock smell. A long fat rattlesnake was curled up sunning itself at the edge of the yard. Six foot long and as big around as my arm, his gray diamond patterned skin hid him almost perfectly against the pine needles and sand. Gnarly ran towards it growling and started circling the snake. ~~It woke~~It woke and coiled more tightly, it's tail buzzing like mad. I found a nice sturdy branch. The snake's head followed Gnarly looking for a chance to strike. It didn't see me yet. I smashed my rough club down on the snake's back three times snapping its spine and crushing internal organs. It writhed a second then flipped onto it's back and Gnarly went in for the kill. He bit and ripped and shook that snake until it dangled lifeless from his jaws. I reached out to take it. I wanted my share of that bloody twitching corpse, it smelled and looked delicious. I nearly had a hand on it when we heard a shout. Gnarly and I both jumped. Foster-daddy came running around the corner of the house holding a shovel.

“What do you two have there? Sweet Jesus Christ, that's a big rattler!” Gnarly dropped the snake's body and backed away. Foster-daddy stomped on ~~it~~with his work boot. The shovel plunged down once and its head popped off like a magic trick.

“Are you OK sweetheart?” He crouched down and hugged me. “That’s my brave girl,” He said. “Thank goodness you killed it. It could have bit the dog or even one of us. But next time you stay away and come get me.”

It was nice that my foster-dad wanted to protect me. But I couldn’t imagine ever needing protection from something wild. He cut the rattles (nine of them!) off the tail and handed them to me. When he threw the body back into the woods Gnarly dashed out to start chewing on it. That dog has all the fun. I kept the rattles in my top dresser drawer in the fancy carved wooden jewelry box my foster-mom had given me for Christmas.

I started seeing other Skunk-Apes in the woods during my runs and rambles. I’d catch a movement out of the corner of my eye, or scent them on the wind. A few times I found food laid out on the trail in front of me, maybe a freshly killed catfish, or a peeled heart-of palm. It took me a while to figure out that I was being courted by a boy Skunk-Ape. He was shy, and I rarely saw him. But kept finding little gifts left for me. It could be a quail egg or an orchid, maybe a perfect rainbow colored tree snail, or a handful of ripe blackberries. Once he left a heap of delicious mushrooms with dark blue gills, I could smell him and once in a great while he’d show himself standing at the edge of a clearing or down a long stretch of trail, but if Gnarly was with me he stayed further away. Like most of our species he stayed away from big hunting dogs. Gnarly loved me because I was family, but he definitely wouldn’t feel the same about other Skunk-Apes. I started calling this Skunk-Ape SAM short for Skunk-Ape Man. I wondered if he could still talk or if as you became a full Skunk-Ape you lost that part of your humanity.

Foster-mom nagged me about being more girly. “Straighten up, don’t hunch your shoulders. You can’t be a tomboy forever. Don’t wear that blouse with that skirt.” That female human stuff that frustrated me. My body changed. I got getting hips, and breasts, and even hairier. I felt restless and touchy, and snapped at all of the humans in my foster family.

When I started seventh grade Kenward Jackson started teasing me more than usual. Calling me ‘cutie-pie’ and ‘sweet-thing’, sometimes he’d whistle when I walked past. He followed me all over the school. He would wait beside my locker, or he would show up next to me in line at the cafeteria and give me one of his big goofy smiles. It gave me a funny feeling in my chest that I didn’t really understand. I didn’t think it had anything to do with being a Skunk-Ape.

I came home one Friday afternoon in October and my foster-dad had the television on. They were talking about a big storm, a hurricane out in the Gulf of Mexico and could come right through the state of Florida. The wind was picking up and I could feel the storm in my fur and my gut. It was going to be a big one, this hurricane Ellen. The weathermen and newscasters said it would stay out in the gulf hundreds of miles from us, but I could smell salt in the air and knew the hurricane was headed straight for us.

While my mom and dad worried about making the house safe—did they need to board up the windows? Should they fill the bathtub with water? Where were the flashlights and the radio?— I slipped out of the house and headed for the swamp. Something in my chest was pulling me away, dragging me into the wilderness, and I had to leave.

I could go to my true home in the swamp. The chaos of the storm would keep everybody wondering what happened to me. They’d assume I blew away, and that my body might never turn up. But I wasn’t human. I was a Skunk-Ape. Storms didn’t mean anything to me. I’d just find a low spot and hunker down where the blowing trash couldn’t get me.

About five miles from my house at the border of the swamp I found what a perfect spot. I found a gopher turtle hole dug deep into the bank of a creek full of ~~water~~ water of water the color of weak coffee. I could tell this deep hole had been there for a long time. I took a deep sniff at the

mouth of the tunnel and smelled the turtle, a few mice, some lizards and a Garter snake. There were no Rattlesnakes or Water Moccasins, so it should be safe. I started digging as fast as I could to widen the hole so that I could fit inside. The tunnel was a good fifteen feet deep, but I stopped widening it once it was deep enough for me to crawl in with a few feet to spare. I could hide under the bank, and if the water came up too deep I'd move. I backed into my little cave just far enough so that I could still see out. I finally felt free. My heart hammered in my chest in excitement. I felt like that time I tried one of foster-dad's cigars, and I hoped I wouldn't get sick this time the way I did then.

The wind picked up and leaves and branches flew by. The rain came down so hard and thick that it sounded like somebody was playing a drum. I felt safe and dry; if it were quieter I might even have fallen asleep. Then something big moved across the front of my little tunnel. I crawled out to look around. The thick gray clouds scraped the treetops. I should have stayed in my safe little burrow. Then I looked across the little ravine that the creek ran through. Sam stood next to a big cypress tree and waved at me. He finally decided to stop hiding and show himself. He was taller than I was, and his chest was huge. I hadn't noticed the reddish tint to the fur that covered him when I caught glimpses of him in the past. He reached his hands out and gestured in a come-here type movement.

I jumped across the creek and took his hands when we both heard a loud baying. Gnarly charged out of the storm toward Sam growling and baring his teeth. The male Skunk-Ape howled and dove towards the dog. Each was determined to protect me from the other, and each of them was willing, and even eager to kill the other. I grabbed Sam by his shoulders and held him back. Gnarly took his chance. He latched onto the Skunk-Ape's leg just below the knee growling and shaking his head, eager to rip out as much flesh as he could. I let go of Sam and grabbed Gnarly by the collar. I dragged Gnarly back and away. When I looked up again Sam had melted into the woods.

I fought the crazy winds and headed back the way I came dragging the dog with me hanging onto scrubby palmetto's with one hand and Gnarly with the other. As soon as he knew where I was headed he came along willingly. I still held him tight. I didn't want him to double back and finish what he started with Skunk-Ape Man.

When the yellow house came into sight Gnarly and I both howled. The storm had lifted the roof completely off, and two of the walls had collapsed. Clothing, furniture, dishes, books, tumbled across the yard in the wind. My favorite yellow blouse sailed past, and Gnarly's doghouse collapsed into a pile of lumber. The old live oak trees in front of the house were stripped of their ugly gray Spanish moss. A huge branch stuck out of the garage roof like a poorly made chimney.

The wind slowed and stopped. I could stand up without holding onto anything again. I turned and looked back into the pinewoods behind the house.

Three full grown Skunk-Apes peered out from behind slash pines and palmettos. I had never seen so many at once. I knew they were waiting for me to turn away from the ruined house and follow them deep into the safety of the swamp. Follow them into that world of pure existence, with no hurtful words, no worries about what to wear or which girlfriend likes you today. The world of raw existence and freedom.

Gnarly took off loping across the yard towards the wreckage of the garage with his tongue swinging in front of him as he dashed away. The rain had plastered my dark fur against my arms. My toes were curled inside my shoes. I couldn't smell my Skunk-Ape stink anymore. Did the water wash it away?

Dad, Mom, and Roger staggered out of the garage with huge smiles. They spread their arms wide and picked their way across the trash strewn yard eager to hug me. I could give up a life of ultimate freedom as a Skunk-Ape in return for ice-cream, television, and a stupid mutt with a tongue two sizes too big for his mouth. Or I could howl, and run, eat raw meat, and roll in the muck free from all of the nonsense and pain that goes along with being human. One end of the path had my sweet loving human parents—the other end of the path had my skunk-ape Romeo and all his kin. I stood halfway between them. Gnarly stood panting at my knee, waiting to see which way I'd run.