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The Hundred Gibbons

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"The story I am about to tell you is true," said the old man softly.

It was difficult to hear him over the splash of the waterfall. In the stream by his feet there were fat carp, orange and white, nibbling at the surface of the water as if they were kissing their own images in a mirror.

Beyond the old man's wrinkled face were trees and hills and mountains.

It seemed past time to go. The sun had already dropped behind the highest peaks, leaving only half-light for the three travellers. The painting they were investigating grew more dim each few minutes.

As the old man talked, the three guests squatted closer to the scroll and tried to search out its secrets. It was a mounted handscroll, ink on silk. Spread out, it was as long as the table and perhaps half as wide.

The old man smiled. His eyes were shut. "You may look until the appointed hour. I will have lanterns brought out for you. This eagerness you are displaying has never been known to help. The condition for ownership is not one that can be willed." He paused to pull from a pipe. "It is probably not a condition to be desired. Each of you has come terribly far just to see this scroll. I realize that. Still, no one has ever been able to find all the hundred gibbons." His voice faded.

The three travellers bent more studiously over the scroll.

While the day was dying, the old man talked on.

"The Sung painter, I Yüan-chi, was from Ch'ang-sha in Hunan Province.

"At first, his approach to painting was conventional. Like his contemporaries, he wanted to specialize in flower and bird painting.

"While he thought of himself as disciplined and efficient, his tutor, Ch'ing-chi, was most severe with him.

"For the first year of his training, I Yüan-chi was permitted to do nothing more than grind ink from the ink stick between the thumb and first two fingers, holding it upright and grinding it on the ink stone until the texture was just right, not too thick, not too thin.

"For the first year this was all I Yüan-chi was allowed to do.

"There followed three years practicing the basic painting strokes and nothing else. Bone strokes, axe cuts, mi dots, horse's teeth, teardrops, spread-out hemp fibers, dotting like water grass, plum blossom dots, pepper dots.

"Even then, I Yüan-chi was not permitted to paint an entire scene. 'Writing is mind-painting,' Ch'ing-chi would say, 'and so is calligraphy. As the writer must first know words, so you must first know the brush strokes.'

"Gradually the strokes of I Yüan-chi acquired the four vital qualities of Bone, Muscle, Flesh, and Blood. His work grew rich.

"One day, when he had determined that his student was ready to begin the full effort, Ch'ing-chi slapped his fan across I Yüan-chi's nose. He mashed

the heel of his clog into his pupil's color saucers and brush rests and water bowls. 'I disown you now,' Ch'ing-chi said. 'The last thing I can do for you is urge you to go back to your home and forget all you have learned here. For the life of the artist can be a life of unhappiness. No sooner do you think you have done something of merit than you discover it has all been done before—and better!'

"But I Yüan-chi was stubborn. He left his master's school but he did not quit his work. He became well known in Hunan as a painter of birds and flowers.

"He gained mastery of the *Ku fa* style, building up layers of flat color washes.

"But his most exquisite technique was his ability to capture the lively spirit of a bird by the bright shine of the bird's eye. To do this, I Yüan-chi left a tiny spot bare of ink—not in dead center of the eye, as was the custom, but slightly above or to one side of the iris.

"This innovation earned him some fame. But later I Yüan-chi was to have the experience of meeting up with someone better than himself as his tutor had warned. He had travelled north to view the works of Chao Ch'ang, another painter known for his flowers and birds.

"And from that day when he first saw Chao Ch'ang's painting, I Yüan-chi never painted another flower or bird, for he knew he had seen the master of that mode.

"Instead, he made the decision to go and paint only those things that meant the most to him, no matter how bizarre or unpopular they might be.

"He gave up his city life and journeyed deep into the mountains to study the life of monkeys. Yes, monkeys. He had loved the little animals from his youth, and he thought that he could do worse with his life than to catch the secrets of their natural swiftness. No one had tried to do this before.

"He lived alone for twenty years in the hills of Hunan. It is said that he would make a thousand ink scrolls before he would release one. Twice a year, a porter would go up into the mountains and bring back the few scrolls that I Yüan-chi felt good enough to let stand as his own work. And the subject was always the same: monkeys.

"This painting you have before you depicts monkeys playing on a mountainside in the midst of rocks and cliffs. The signature of I Yüan-chi does not appear on the painting, but a colophon by the painter Ch'ien Husan at the edge of the scroll attributes the painting to I Yüan-chi. That other inscription on the top is by the emperor Ch'ien Lung, placed there some seven hundred years after the fact.

"I have examined this scroll for most of my life, and yet I do not grow bored with it. There, see there on the left how that gibbon stands on that ledge as if he were the captain of a ship that was sinking? And see how the young ones huddle there at the center? Just look how all the lines complement each other and flow in similar rhythms!

"Surely I Yüan-chi was a master in this. And what a choice for him to make! Monkeys indeed! A laughable subject. So unfashionable that it is said it took five hundred years before any of his scrolls were allowed in Court!"

The old man smiled to himself as he closed his tale. "The story I have told you is true, but I doubt that any of you heard it, or understood it."

By now the sun had set and servants had brought torches and lanterns into the garden.

There was the rustle of silk and cotton as the three travellers moved on their knees around the table, squinting closely at the long scroll, shifting their weight more rapidly as they sensed time was running out on them.

The wind had picked up and there was the smell of rain in the night air. A storm would signal an early end to the quest of the three travellers, who had until dawn of the next day to try to find the hundred gibbons in the painting.

The old man went back to smoking his pipe. At times, he dozed.

The three travellers grew more desperate. They ignored the cups of tea, the rice and raw fish, the egg-drop soup that was offered. The night wore on.

“Could you not give us until moonset?” one of them finally asked the old man. “What is the difference tomorrow between dawn and moonset anyway?”

“Only an hour,” answered the old man, “and a state of mind. But you understood the conditions before you came up here. Find the hundred gibbons in that painting and the scroll is yours. Find them before dawn.”

The youngest of the travellers sat back on his haunches and looked at the dark clouds passing over the moon. “I have found ninety-eight, old man. Is that not good enough?”

“That is far better than anyone else has done,” nodded the old man, “But no, it is not enough.”

Small drops of rain began to fall.

The youngest traveller stood for the first time in hours. He rolled the scroll carefully. The old man smiled as he reached for it, but the young traveller pulled the scroll away. “I have found the hundredth gibbon,” he said, “so now this is mine.”

“Show me your account,” said the old man.

“No. I choose to say I have found them. I offer nothing particularly worthwhile as evidence. But again, I say I have found them.”

The other two travellers laughed, as did the old man.

“What makes you think the scroll is yours on that basis?” the old man asked.

The young traveller stood alone in the shadows. “Tell me this first. Those of us who say we have found the hundred gibbons, what will happen to us?”

“You will have to go up into the hills. And it is possible that you will die or go mad soon.”

“How soon?”

“As soon as the knowledge of your freedom overwhelms you. For this is the highest agony. To know the freedom of the artist, to know that each step along the way is only one of an infinite number of steps that could have been taken, and that you have more alternatives than there are grains of sand on the beach.

“For each brush stroke made, a million others could have been made. For each word written, a thousand languages exist that could have supplied another. And it is nothing when one gesture or word or stroke has been chosen, for nothing definite follows from that, just as nothing specific had to precede it.

“Freedom! Do you really want it? Our natures cannot tolerate it.”

The young traveller tucked the scroll under his arm. “I have found the hundred gibbons.”

“Very well,” said the old man. “Your pride and your youth are all you have to support you now. But you cannot go back the way you came. Your fellow

travellers here can return to their homes and businesses, but you must go up into the hills where life is lonely. And realize that there is nothing ahead of you except an infinite number of trails that lead to nowhere. Know that you have fallen into the widest of limbos.”

But the old man was already talking to himself and the two remaining travellers. The young one, still carrying the scroll, had disappeared into the mist at the crest of the hill.

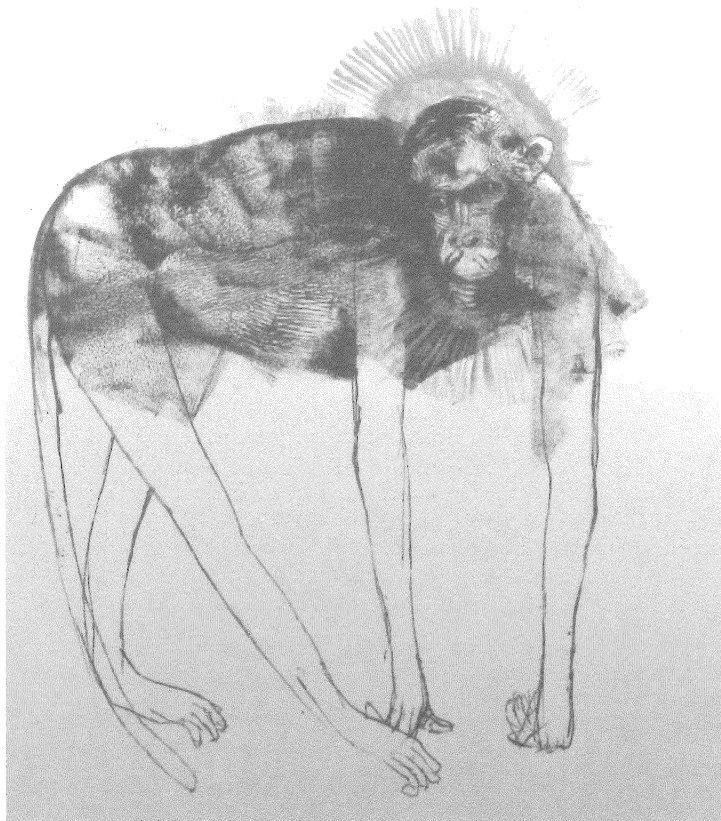
So the three of them sat down in the first false dawn and waited silently and patiently for the scream they knew they would eventually hear.



Jimmy



Hogleg



Train