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Frida Nilsson

THE APE STAR



Translated by Julia Marshall

Illustrations from the feature film *The Ape Star*



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Gorilla

When I was nine, I was adopted by a gorilla. I didn't ask to be, but I was. It happened one day in September.

All of us children at Renfanan—the home for orphans—had been sent outside for cleaning day. The wind danced around us, chasing up leaves from the piles we'd raked. Gerd, the manager, had commanded us to take out all the sheets, hand towels, pillows and blankets to be aired and shaken. She padded around keeping an eye on everything and avoiding the clouds of dust.

“Make sure the dust settles, before you start shaking the next one!” she cried. “Otherwise, you'll get sore throats and that means trouble for me.”

Aaron and I each held one end of a sheet. “Careful!” I said. “You’re flapping too hard.”

Aaron flapped even harder. “I can’t help being so strong,” he said, flapping till his face turned red.

My ponytail bounced around my head. At Renfanan everyone with long hair had to have a ponytail. “Less attractive to lice,” said Gerd.

“Stop it!” I cried, tugging the sheet so hard Aaron lost his grip. He wiped his hand under his nose and sniffed up a glob of snot. With his freckly face he looked like a spotted sausage.

“Shake it yourself then,” he said, picking up a pillow from the ground. He started walloping it onto his knees as if he was trying to kill it.

“The faster you work, the sooner you’ll be finished!” said Gerd. She was wearing her pale green housecleaning coat and her hair tied back.

No one went faster. The sooner we finished, the sooner we’d have to start scrubbing the floors. Or cleaning the windows, peeling potatoes, washing the dishes or raking more leaves on the lawns. There



was no such thing as spare time. Gerd thought we had enough spare time at night, when we were asleep.

There was a reason for the cleaning frenzy. The orphanage was expecting a visitor. Someone was coming to pick out a child to adopt. Gerd was nervous, as she usually was on these days. She’d been running around like a giddy hen since early morning,

checking the house and the children. Dust balls had to be hunted down, holes in clothes mended and ears scrubbed thoroughly with soap and water.

“Thank goodness you’ve all had haircuts at least,” she mumbled, looking at us. Every child had a fresh haircut because the photographer had just been at Renfanan to take our pictures. He came every year. The week before he was due, Gerd took out the big kitchen scissors and cut our hair. When it was time for the photo we had to line up in front of the orphanage and smile as brightly as we could. It was usually fun, some sort of break from the neverending cleaning and scrubbing. It was almost a celebration because these photos had been taken since the beginning, ever since Renfanan was built.

On the wall in the hall were lots of black and white photos of everyone who’d ever lived at the orphanage. Gerd was in a lot of them. She’d been manager of Renfanan since she was young.

“Look at that,” she said now. “Here comes the mail.”

I glanced over to the bend in the road, where a

black car with a golden post horn on its hood had just appeared between the fir trees. Gerd rushed out to the gate, waving her arms like a conductor.

“Stop!” she shouted at the driver.

He rolled down the window.

“We are freshly raked here! Freshly raked gravel!” She reached out for the envelope he was about to put into the mailbox. “I’ll take that.”

The car disappeared. Gerd hummed as she ripped open the envelope. But as she read, the hum fastened in her throat.

“Inspection,” she muttered, and her anxious eyes swept over us all. Almost as if she was counting us. She didn’t need to count, I knew that. Not a day went by without Gerd reminding us that there were fifty-one of us at the orphanage. Renfanan was a home for fifty children, with not one more allowed.

“Ha ha,” Aaron hissed, raising his eyebrows. “Someone’s gonna be toast.”

I stopped shaking my sheet and wiped my forehead. It wasn’t especially hot outside, but you got sweaty,

standing and flapping your arms like that. “What?” I asked. “What do you mean by toast?”

He opened his eyes as wide as two fried eggs. “Don’t you know that Gerd gets rid of the ones she doesn’t want?”

“Gets rid of?” I whispered. My stomach lurched uncomfortably. “Has them killed?”

He nodded. “Maybe not right away,” he said. “But haven’t you heard what she did once to a kid she had trouble with?”

I shook my head. Aaron stepped closer. “I heard,” he hissed, glancing at Gerd, “that a long time ago there was a kid she couldn’t stand. One night she put the kid on the back of her bike and took off. Then she left the kid in an old shed, where nobody lived and there was nothing to eat. It was so little it couldn’t do anything. Then Gerd came home, and never went back. And the child died.”

I stared at him. He nodded and smiled, the whole way up to his ears.

“Ha,” I said. “You’re lying.”

Aaron shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. But she won’t be able to drag me away because I’m too strong.” He slapped the pillow to the ground with a crack.

Gerd was still reading the letter. “Tuesday the second,” she mumbled. “The inspection group checks hygiene and routinely counts the children. Yours sincerely, Tord Fjordmark.”

She swallowed and chewed her bottom lip. Then she looked up and saw that a few of us were standing and staring at her. “Oh well,” she said pretending to be calm, “we’ll make sure everything’s clean by then. Including fingernails!” She gasped. “Jonna!”

I started when she said my name that way, hard and loud. It’s not usually a good sign. Gerd strode crossly over and stood with her sharp chin pointing at me. “Do you think that sheet will get any cleaner clutched in your grubby little paws, eh?”

I looked at my hands. I’d forgotten to wash them again. The sheet I was holding was really dirty.

Gerd snatched it from me. “No wonder it’s so

crowded here!” she ranted, waving the sheet. “No wonder! You can all stay here until you’re sixty, all of you! Then I might as well start an old people’s home instead!”

It didn’t occur to her that she’d be as dead as a pickled herring and buried in the ground by the time we kids were sixty. I shuddered anyway. It was a terrible thought, still being at Renfanan. Gerd wasn’t really so ghastly, but she wasn’t a real mother. It felt like all of us children were a nuisance to her. If someone got the flu or pneumonia, it put her in a bad mood because it was extra trouble. And if someone hurt their knee and it bled, her only worry was about stains on the carpets. A real mother would feel sorry for their child, but Gerd only felt sorry for herself. That was the difference.

She turned to me. “You’ve been here for nine years now! Haven’t you learned to wash your hands before you pick things up?”

I felt my cheeks flame. Some of the others giggled, as they always did when Gerd scolded me, which was

often. I could never remember to wash my hands.

It’s not as if I wanted to be dirty. It just went out of my head, however much Gerd nagged. Maybe my brain just wasn’t made to think about soap. Maybe it was made to think about other things, but it hardly ever had the chance; it had to keep defending itself against all the soap thoughts that Gerd forced on it.

Sometimes I even thought that all this washing was a little unnecessary. As far as I could tell, you could stand at the basin and scrub yourself for several years, but when you finally stopped you’d soon be dirty again.

But I never dared say that to Gerd. She always said it was “an irony of fate” that she had a grubby pig like me on her hands. Not that I knew what that meant, but I knew it wasn’t good.

“Well?” she said now. “Are you too stupid to remember a simple thing like washing your hands?”

I looked away; I didn’t want to answer.

Gerd put a hand to her ear. “What? Are you a bit stupider than all the others, Jonna?”

Now everyone was looking at us.

“No,” I whispered.

“Hello!” cried Gerd, as if she was deaf. “I can’t hear what you’re saying. Please answer loud and clear so everyone can hear. Are you stupid?”

“No!”

“Alright then. Go and wash your hands.”

She turned and raised her voice. “The rest of us will pack everything up. There’s no point standing here and flapping all day if you still rub dirt on everything!”

Some kids started gathering up sheets and pillows, ready to go inside.

Then we heard a low brmming through the fir trees. A car was on its way. All the children put their heads up, like hunting dogs catching a scent.

“Take it easy now,” cried Gerd, but no one listened. Every time a car came to the orphanage it was mobbed by children. Everyone shoved and elbowed each other to get to the front and show themselves, to try to get out of there. Oh, how we longed to leave. We longed

for a real home, a real mother, a lovely one with her hair in a bun and a waft of perfume. A mother who was sorry when you grazed your knee and hurried to put something on it, and a father with shiny shoes who rushed out and bought comics for you when you had the flu. Yes, we all wanted to get away from Renfanan, and since the chance of it was only one in fifty-one, no wonder we elbowed each other the few times the orphanage had visitors.

I ran with the others towards the gates. The car was coming closer; it would soon be here. I stood on tiptoes to see over all the new haircuts...

An old banged-up car appeared between the fir trees. It was hurtling along. In a few seconds it roared through the gates and onto the gravel path. It did a couple of wheelies around the big oak tree, then pointed its front right then left, as if it couldn’t decide where to stop. Finally it hit the brakes, spun a half turn and halted in front of us.

Now it wasn’t only Aaron’s eyes that were like fried eggs. The car looked like it had escaped from the

scrapyard. The muffler dragged on the ground, the engine smelled burnt and the windows were covered in stickers. The body was rust-brown, with flecks of old green paint here and there.

I wrinkled my nose. Whoever was in this car wasn't someone I wanted to go home with. The others seemed to be thinking the same.

"What a heap," cried Aaron. "I'd rather die than get into that."

Gerd stood as if hypnotized, staring at her ruined gravel path. Then she looked at the car. The driver's door opened.

A large hairy leg swung out. There was a muddy boot on the end, with ragged laces. The second leg followed, just as thick and hairy. I gulped and gawked. Partly I wanted to stay and see who it was, and partly I wanted to run and hide. There was something weird about a car like that coming to Renfanan; it wasn't normal. The cars that came here were always fancy.

A hand gripped the car's door frame, and the driver uncoiled from the door with a moan and a groan.

I thought my heart had stopped for a few seconds. Everyone was dead silent.

It was a gorilla! She was incredibly tall, with a belly as round as a barrel and a bulky black head like an overgrown pear. She wasn't wearing a top but had on a pair of baggy trousers. They'd ridden up above her knees. The gorilla bent down and pulled the cuffs over the tops of her boots. She crossed her arms and looked up at the rows of dormitory windows on the top floor, over to the cellar where the potatoes and pickles were kept, back at the kitchen door you entered if you were coming in dirty from the garden, and finally, at the forest, which loomed behind everything like a dark, menacing wall. She stood a long while, taking it all in, then lowered her gaze and looked at us children speculatively.

Everyone turned and rushed for the orphanage door at high speed. Only Gerd stood and stared at the gorilla as if she'd seen a ghost. I followed the others. My heart was hammering in my chest, my boots clattering in the gravel. I wanted to get inside, fast!

But something strange happened. I stopped; I don't know why. I stood with my back to that ugly gorilla, and I remember thinking: I should go inside. I should go and hide like all the others.

But I couldn't. I sensed all over my back that someone was staring at me. It was so intense and compelling I had to look back. Even though I didn't want to, I slowly turned around.

Gorilla's brown eyes met mine. She smiled. She had enormous teeth that were crammed together in crooked rows. She took a step closer. I was fixed to the spot.

Then Gerd fainted. She fell with a little yelp into the hedge and lay there. Gorilla bent over her and fanned Gerd's face with her paws. Gerd soon woke up and got shakily to her feet like a nervous little finch. I ran off like a shot and disappeared through the door.

In the big light-filled hall everybody's shoes and boots were in a pile. I kicked off my boots and with my heart in my mouth I raced up the stairs. On the wall hung all the old black and white photos in neat

rows, but when I went into the dormitory, it was as chaotic as a hen coop. Kids were clambering all over the place, shrieking.

I sat on my bed, and the rusty springs squeaked. I had a terrible feeling in my stomach. Gorilla had looked at me so unnervingly. Gerd would never let her adopt anyone, never. That gorilla was too awful.

"Did you talk to it, Jonna?" Aaron called from his bed. He sat there with the two dark-haired boys who were brothers, who usually giggled at everything he said.

"Are you stupid?" I shrieked back at him.

"Not me," he answered. "But you might've thought you'd suit each other."

The brothers snorted and looked at him admiringly. They were cheeky little brats, even though they were only five and six.

"Shut up," I muttered, and I lay down with my back to him.

Aaron came quickly over to my bed. "Where do you think it got that belly from then?" he whispered.

I turned over. “What do you mean, got?”

“Ha ha.” He twitched his red eyebrows and looked pleased. “I mean how do you think it got to be so fat?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “How did you get to be such an idiot?”

Aaron stopped smiling. He stuck out his chin and stared at me. “At least I’m not so stupid that I don’t understand why that gorilla came here.” He patted his own belly and nodded meaningfully. “That’s why it’s so fat. Children!”

“What?” I could hear that I sounded scared even though I tried not to be.

“It’s obvious,” said Aaron with a shrug. “Do you know how expensive it must be for such a fatty to buy meat at the shop?” He shook his head. “Adoption is a lot cheaper.”

I stared at him in horror. But then I shoved his shoulder. “Huh! Stop lying.”

Aaron sucked in a breath. “Careful, Jonna,” he whispered. “It’s here!”

“Shut up,” I said, but then I noticed that everybody

in the room had gone quiet, looking at the door. I turned around.

There she was, Gorilla, tugging up her baggy trousers. Gerd was also there, her face as red as a Christmas bauble, her eyes flashing lightning.

“Lucky for you and me that we’re skinny,” whispered Aaron. “It’ll probably choose somebody with a bit more meat on...”

“That’s enough!” Gerd interrupted. “Why were all the sheets left in a pig-heap down in the yard? And what’s been going on up here?”

Nobody answered. Gerd took a deep breath. “Line up!” she commanded.

Slowly and carefully, we moved around the room. Everyone spread themselves across the floor to form lines. I chose a place at the far end. I hitched up my shoulders and tried to look hunched and sour. No one wanted hunched, sour children.

Gerd approached. “Now then!” she said. “I want to see some happy faces! And you will be polite when Gorill...when the lady here speaks to you.”

She turned nervously to Gorilla, who gave her a measured look, then turned to look at us. My knees shook. Part of the line backed up when Gorilla stepped forward. She was so big. Her face was wrinkled like an old sailor's, and her fur shone as if she'd rubbed it with oil.

"Stay in your lines!" snapped Gerd. "And be polite!"

She was very twitchy—maybe she thought she'd get adopted herself if none of the children was to Gorilla's taste.

Gorilla went up and down the line. When she reached me at the far corner, she stopped. I stared at

the floor, and I hunched my back until it felt as if it would break in the middle.

Gorilla stayed there. Time dragged on for an eternity, and no one made as much as a squeak.

"But Jonna!"

It was Gerd who finally dared to open her mouth. She gave Gorilla a fawning glance, before coming over to me. "Didn't I tell you to wash those grubby paws? Is it swine week at Renfanan without me knowing, perhaps?"

Gorilla followed what was happening closely. Gerd noticed and was encouraged. "How do you think the lady here feels when she comes to visit and finds you so slovenly?" she hissed. "That can't be nice!"

But Gorilla looked increasingly amused and Gerd, sure that she was gaining points, went on with her commentary. "No, and you know what? Next time we get a visitor, I'll have to hang a sheet over you, the way you look. Heaven help me. What a ragamuffin!"

I didn't know what to say. Tears burned under my eyelids and everyone stared at me, as usual.



Gerd sighed, hands on hips. “My sincere apologies, dear lady,” she said to Gorilla. “Between you and me, this child is downright hopeless, one of those we’ll never get rid of. She’s been here since she was just a scrap, left on the steps. In nine years, I haven’t managed to trick anyone into taking her.”

She leaned towards me. “Did you hear that?” she said. “Now you know why you’ll never leave. Because you insist on being dirty all the time!”

She looked at Gorilla with a smile that meant the two of them completely agreed that I was a stupid, stupid child.

Gorilla crossed her arms over her enormous stomach. Then she nodded at me.

“This one will suit me fine,” she said.



The house in the old industrial part of town

Some children in the line gasped.

“Oh... well, well.” Gerd looked unsure if she should smile at Gorilla or me. “Well then. In that case you can come this way.”

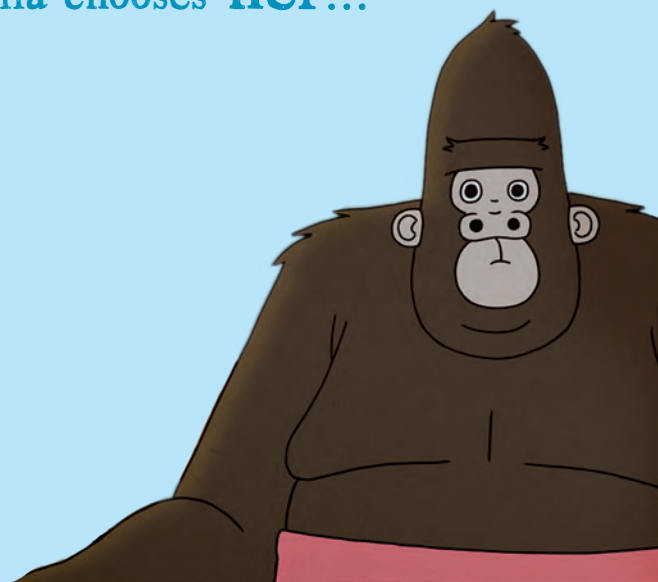
I stayed where I was. There was roaring in my ears, and I thought I might throw up on the floor in front of everyone.

“So!” Gerd hissed, pulling me with her. I waited for a comment from the others, a wave of giggling or Aaron saying again that Gorilla and I suited one another. But no one said a thing. Everyone was quiet as mice, and Aaron’s face had turned completely white.

Jonna lives in an orphanage. Like all the other children, she dreams of being adopted by a well-dressed mother who smells of perfume. One day, a beat-up car pulls up. The door opens and out steps a thick, hairy leg in a muddy boot, followed by a belly as round as a barrel, and finally, a head like an overgrown pear. It's a gorilla!

Surely the orphanage won't let a gorilla adopt a child.

**But, to Jonna's horror,
Gorilla chooses her...**



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