

ORIGINAL WRITINGS

LONG AND DRAWN OUT

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The monkey sauntered through the brush on the forest floor. The hair on its head, light brown and inexplicably patchy, waved in the breeze. And the head itself was grotesque, enormous, and lopsided. Its legs, roughly identical in length, carried the monkey over a series of knobbled tree-roots belonging to a great trunk, smooth and dark. In the branches of this tree sat Benny the Boa Constrictor, hungry and tense, watching. He was slim for a boa constrictor, and his green and mottled body curled over many branches, around the mighty girth of the tree, and onto the back of the page. There it abruptly stopped, as Matt had lost the crayon he had been using.

Having failed in his search, Matt Dryden Jr. cried out: "Mom, can I have some grape juice?" The crayon was still missing when he returned, so he was forced to take up another, and the snake concluded, not a few shades more yellow than it had begun.

When Matt Dryden Sr. arrived home, his wife asked him about his presentation that day. She had been preparing his favorite pot roast for dinner that evening, in hopes of a celebration ("or a consolation," she hadn't allowed herself to think). The presentation had not gone well—so Matt said to Rebecca, though not in so many words. The current project was selling juice boxes to children,

children without any money or transportation, but who had big mouths and liked to watch TV.

Junior finished his own juice box in the living room, just hidden from his parents by the bar in the kitchen. Before him sat his sketch of glorious Caesar on a four-legged couch. Slave-girls were feeding him grapes one by one, sweet and green.

In the meeting room that day, Ted Benson, his boss, was watching, sucking his teeth under sallow cheeks, as Matt presented his plans for the thirty-second Jam Juice TV spot. “What color togas did they wear in Rome?” asked the sallow-cheeked Ted Benson. What kind of question was that? Kids don’t know what color togas they wore in Rome—they just want grape juice! Does Ted even have a kid?

Matt’s son would have known what color togas the Romans wore, and what color tunics too. His earlier drawing had been very accurate, as he had just finished a chapter book about a boy who woke up as a Roman gladiator one day. But nobody thought to ask him.

The son’s father was tired of the boss’s constant questions. Benson had no clue, no mind for advertising. But the boss had taken Matt’s proposal in the end.

Later that evening, Matt and his wife talked about the phone call she had gotten from the school that day. “Mrs. Dryden?” the teacher had started, “Has your son said anything about the way some of the children are treating him?” It would be six minutes before the teacher would use the word “bullying,” but Mrs. Dryden had already gotten the idea.

“He told me some of the kids were mean at school,” she worried to her husband, “but he doesn’t seem to mind much. Will you talk to him?”

The next afternoon, the victim asked his mother, “how did the Spartans fit onto their shields?”

“Onto the shields? Were they standing on them?”

“No, in *Spartans at Sunrise*, when all the boys go out to battle, their moms all say, ‘come back with your shields or on them.’ What do they mean?”

“I don’t know, honey,” she said.

So when his father came home, Matt was lacing the sandals of an ancient warrior with a huge shield. But through the evening, he grew frightened for the soldier going to battle. This young man probably wanted to impress his mom and dad and all his friends. But what if the battle was too scary—how would he get away? Maybe a horse would make the warrior less scared; he could go fast when someone was trying to get him.

“Time for bed, Matt,” his mother called from her room.

He came dutifully, and she brought out his pajamas. “I’m going to draw a horse tomorrow, Mom.”

“Oh, what kind of horse?”

“One faster than all the other horses.”

Matt was fast himself, and today was a running day in PE. Matt didn’t like running day. Mr. Marner always finished class with a big race around the whole gym, and Matt always won. But that meant that Matt always beat Dillon, and Dillon was very large and didn’t like losing. Matt could see the future in the scowl on Dillon’s face.

At lunch, Dillon stole one of Matt’s shoes and filled it with chocolate milk. “Try running now, dope,” he tossed out. But the only response Matt could give was *squish*. And the *squish* left wet spots on the floor everywhere he went for the rest of the day. Little girls slipped on them and cried, if only because their skirts were now stained with a ghastly smear of chocolate milk.

At work, Matt Sr. was in meetings all day with the filming department, the casting office, the graphic designers. He was finally finishing the rounds when sallow-cheeks called and announced that they would be going ahead with Phil Boyle’s proposal instead. “Something more adventurous,” the boss had said.

Imagine it: the scorching sun, reflecting off the waves. The long-bearded pirates, roasting on the deck. They arrive at an island. They dig up the treasure chest. They fit a grizzled key into the lock, and *click!*, it opens. A bounty of cool and sweet Jam Juice juice boxes overflows onto the hot sand. The pirates cry out in victory.

What a joke.

Matt's dad called back each of the desks he had visited that day. "Cancel that design, Paul. We won't be needing those slave-girls after all, Deb," and so on.

Don came to Matt Sr.'s desk at about 4:30 that afternoon. "I don't know if you heard; Phil's proposal went through. We're all going out to congratulate him."

"Can't—the wife's making dinner," Matt said, glad to have an excuse.

Pork chops and baked potatoes were waiting for him at home. "You want to throw the ball after dinner, Matt?" the father asked.

"OK. But I don't know where my glove is."

"It's on its hook in the garage, honey," Mrs. Dryden said.
"You left it in the hall."

Matt was a pretty good catch, even when his father was asking about his day. He talked about the race and how they were getting ready for a test on jungle animals in science class. His dad told him how they were making a commercial for juice boxes, about the different ideas that had been on the table.

"Why did someone bury all the juice boxes?" wondered Matt. His father didn't know. "Why did Mr. Benson pick the pirate story, then?"

"Complicated adult reasons," said Mr. Dryden.

Then he asked Matt about the other kids at school, whether they were all nice. Matt told him about Dillon, about the chocolate milk and the spots on the floor, and even about the weepy little girls.

His father couldn't understand why Matt was so unconcerned about it. "Weren't you upset? He put chocolate milk in your shoes!" But Matt just shrugged his shoulders.

"All my friends thought it was pretty funny."

Thus Mr. Dryden was made confident that his son suffered no debilitating injury to his self-esteem.

Back inside, his son drew that horse that he had planned, but as he brushed the mane, he forgot that the horse had been destined for a warrior. So the horse wouldn't be lonely, he drew a whole herd of horse-friends for him. And Harry the horse ran free through the mists on this island of wild horses. His dappled brown coat glistened in the evening light, and he stood victorious at the top of the hill, peerless, unafraid.

"It's time for bed, Matt," Rebecca called from her room.

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