

Apologue

James Morrow

SciFiction

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James Morrow (www.sff.net/people/Jim.Morrow) lives in State College, Pennsylvania, according to his website "with his wife, Kathryn, his twelve-year-old son, Christopher, and two enigmatic dogs: Pooka, a Border collie, and Amtrak, a stray Doberman that Jim and Kathy rescued from a train station in Orlando, Florida. He devotes his leisure hours to his family, his Lionel toy electric trains, and his video collection of vulgar Biblical spectacles." Morrow's novels include *This Is the Way the World Ends* (1986), *Only Begotten Daughter* (1990, winner of the World Fantasy Award), and *Towing Jehovah* (1994, the first of a trilogy about the death of God). Much of his short fiction is collected in *Bible Stories for Adults* (1996), including the Nebula Award-winning fable, "The Deluge." His next book is an historical novel, *The Witchfinder General*, due out in 2002.

This story somehow reminds one of the best fantasy fiction of Ray Bradbury. The year 2001 was one of great excitement, great tragedy in the real world, and great change. The world is in an economic recession, now officially dating from March 2001, which we hope will be in recovery by the time you read this in mid-2002, and there is a war going on. James Morrow reminds us that our contemporary fantasies, even our monsters, while they cannot solve our problems, can uplift us spiritually and give us solace in such times.

The instant they heard the news, the three of them knew they had to do something, and so, joints complaining, ligaments protesting, they limped out of the retirement home, went down to the river, swam across, and climbed onto the wounded island.

They'd always looked out for each other in times gone by, and this day was no different. The ape placed a gentle paw on the rhedosaur's neck, keeping the half-blind prehistoric beast from stepping on cars and bumping into skyscrapers. The mutant lizard helped the incontinent ape remove his disposable undergarments and replace them with a dry pair. The rhedosaur reminded the mutant lizard to take her Prozac.

Before them lay the maimed and smoking city. It was a nightmare, a war zone, a surrealistic obscenity. It was Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"Maybe they won't understand," said the rhedosaur. They'll look at me, and all they'll see is the berserk reptile munching on the Coney Island roller coaster." He fixed his clouded gaze on the ape. "And you'll always be the one who shimmied up the Empire State Building and swatted at the biplanes."

"And then, of course, there was the time I rampaged through the Fulton Fish Market and laid my eggs in Madison Square Garden," said the mutant lizard.

"People are smarter than that," said the ape. "They know the difference between fantasy and reality."

"Some people do, yes," said the rhedosaur. "Some do."

The Italian mayor approached them at full stride, exhausted but resolute, his body swathed in an epidermis of ash. At his side walked a dazed Latino firefighter and a bewildered police officer of African descent.

"We've been expecting you," said the mayor, giving the mutant lizard an affectionate pat on the shin.

"You have every right to feel ambivalent toward us," said the rhedosaur.

"The past is not important," said the mayor.

"You came in good faith," said the police officer, attempting without success to smile.

"Actions speak louder than special effects," said the firefighter, staring upward at the gargantuan visitors.

Tears of remorse rolled from the ape's immense brown eyes. The stench filling his nostrils was irreducible, but he knew that it included many varieties of plastic and also human flesh. "Still, we can't help feeling ashamed."

"Today there is neither furred nor smooth in New York," said the mayor. "There is neither scaled nor pored, black nor white, Asian nor Occidental, Jew nor Muslim. Today there are only victims and helpers."

"Amen," said the police officer.

"I think it's clear what needs doing," said the firefighter.

"Perfectly clear." The mutant lizard sucked a mass of rubble into her lantern-jawed mouth.

"Clear as glass." Despite his failing vision, the rhedosaur could see that the East River Savings Bank was in trouble. He set his back against the structure, shoring it up with his mighty spine.

The ape said nothing but instead rested his paw in the middle of Cortlandt Street, allowing a crowd of the bereaved to climb onto his palm. Their shoes and boots tickled his skin. He curled his fingers into a protective matrix then shuffled south, soon entering Battery Park. He sat on the grass, stared toward Liberty Island, raised his arm, and, drawing the humans to his chest, held them against the warmth of his massive heart.

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