

PRIMATES by David D. Levine

David D. Levine's first story for Asimov's, "Tk'tk'tk" (March 2005), is currently a finalist for the Hugo award. While that story gave us an insight into alien intelligence on a distant planet, this tale allows for similar insights much closer to home.

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I picked up the phone on the third ring. "Woodland Park Zoo, primate section. Ed Vick speaking."

"Uh, yeah, my name is Dan Stark, I'm calling from Staircase, and I wanted to talk to someone about a ... a gorilla. Or something." The voice was deep, gravelly, and seemed a bit slurred.

"You're calling from ... Staircase?"

"Yeah. The town of Staircase. In the Wonder Mountain Wilderness. On the, y'know, Olympic Peninsula."

"Okay...."

"Anyway, there's a gorilla, or some other kind of monkey, that's been digging in my garbage. I was wondering if the zoo might want it. To ... to buy, or something."

"Well, Mr. Stark, zoo policy is not to purchase animals from private collectors."

"Uh."

"But," I continued, "if you seriously believe you have a gorilla on the loose there, we might be interested in sending someone to investigate. Privately held gorillas do sometimes escape from their owners, or are abandoned, and they can become a danger to themselves and others. So we would want to check it out, and if it really is a gorilla we would work with the local animal control agency to bring it in."

"Is there, a ... like a reward or something?"

"I'm not sure about that, but there might be a small finder's fee."

"Uh, okay. What do I need to do?"

"Why don't you start by describing the situation to me?"

Stark—"call me Dan"—explained that his garbage heap was behind a chain-link fence, to keep out bears and raccoons, but *something* was opening the gate and ransacking the heap. He had spotted the creature on two occasions, and described it as "bigger than a cougar, but smaller than a bear, and it moved funny."

My first impulse was to dismiss the call as a prank or mistake, but Dan seemed sincere, and if there really were a gorilla wandering the Olympic Peninsula it would be criminal to leave it out there.

"Okay, we'll send a team to investigate. Where do you live?"

"Well ... it's kind of hard to find. Tell you what—I'll meet you at, uh, milepost 23 on highway 119, just past Staircase."

I got directions and wrote them on a tan "Friends of the Woodland Park Zoo" sticky note. It would be three or four hours' drive. "Okay, Dan, we'll see you tomorrow at eleven. What's your number, in case we get lost?"

"I, uh, I don't have a phone. I'm calling from the gas station in Staircase."

* * * *

My co-worker Sonia's call woke me the next morning. "Nadiri's got a real bad abscess," she said, "and we have to drain it right away." Nadiri was a two-year-old western lowland gorilla, one of the zoo's most popular and photogenic animals. "There's no way I can take the whole day to drive out to Staircase and back."

"Well, this guy's going to be waiting for us, and I can't call him to postpone." I fumbled on the bedside table, found my glasses. It was a little after six. "Tell you what ... odds are it's nothing, like that time in Bellingham. I'll just go by myself."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll have my cellphone, and if there's anything to it I'll call the county for help."

"Okay. Drive safely."

"Thanks."

* * * *

I pulled off highway 119 next to Dan's pickup, a composition in primer, rust, and moss. Dan himself leaned on its fender, scratching under one arm. Tall, thin, and leathery, he wore a frayed camouflage jacket with STARK on the pocket in black

marker, blue jeans gone tattered and gray at the knees, and mud-encrusted boots. His face was creased and stubbled, shaded by a stained and battered cowboy hat. He smiled, revealing missing teeth, and extended his hand. “Dan Stark.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Ed Vick, from the zoo.” I looked around. “Where’s the garbage heap?”

“It’s at my place.”

“Isn’t your place around here?”

“Uh, no. It’s up the road a ways. Hop in.”

I thought for a moment about what it would be like to share a truck cabin with Dan, then said, “I need the equipment from my van. Why don’t I follow you there?”

“All right.”

Dan drove the truck at demonic speed half a mile down the highway, then swerved onto a logging road marked with a sign too small for me to read. We stayed on that road for a couple of miles, then took a gravel road, which forked and forked again. I was too busy trying to follow to look at my map, but I didn’t think this road would be on it anyway. Finally we bumped and jounced for half an hour up a rutted, unlabeled dirt track to a squalid shack that had to be Dan’s house.

As Dan got out of his truck I stared, appalled, at the house: a rectangular box not much bigger than the trailer I’d shared with two other grad students on my first trip to Borneo. The roof was rusty corrugated metal, and the walls were covered with metal printing plates from old newspapers. There was one window and one door, both with dented aluminum frames, and greasy smoke curled from a blackened chimney pipe. It was an affront to the majestic Douglas firs and western hemlocks at whose feet it squatted. “It’s not much to look at,” Dan said over his shoulder, “but I call it home.”

There were several smaller buildings nearby. Nailed to the wall of one of them, head down, was the skin of a black bear. It was half rotted; flies and wasps buzzed around the lolling head.

“So what is it you do here?” I asked, trying to keep the disgust out of my voice.

“Hunt and trap, mostly. For cash I do a little metal work. Hinges, gates, that sort of thing. I have a forge.” He gestured to one of the outbuildings.

“Well. That’s very interesting. Now, where’s this garbage heap?”

* * * *

The chain-link fence surrounding the heap was rusted and battered, looking in several places as though it had been kicked almost through from the inside. Garbage was scattered all around the enclosure, and to a lesser extent outside it as well. Several crows took flight as we approached.

The gate had a simple catch, closed with a scarred padlock. “I had to lock it to keep the critter out,” Dan said.

I examined the catch more closely. It was not something a bear could open; a raccoon might manage it, but it was too high off the ground. “You say the creature opened this gate more than once?”

“Yeah. It’s been going on for weeks.”

“There’s no chance you left it open by accident?”

Dan’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of idiot do you think I am?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Would you please open the gate?” Dan pulled a loose bundle of keys from his pocket, opened the lock. I stooped and examined the soft ground near the gate, both inside and out of the enclosure. The area was pretty severely trampled, but there were some thirty-centimeter prints I couldn’t identify—narrow in the tarsal area and broad in the phalangeal. And a small pile of droppings, fairly fresh.

“You’re a hunter, you say, Dan? What do you make of that?”

“It’s not deer scat, that’s for sure. Too big for cougar, and bear don’t stink like that.”

“Indeed.” I probed the droppings with a stick. Seeds indicated a diet of berries, and there was a lot of other vegetable fiber, but no hair or other indication that meat was being eaten. And it certainly did stink. I sealed a sample into a plastic bag.

“So what is it, a gorilla?”

I sat back on my haunches. “Well, Dan, I’ve shoveled out a lot of gorilla enclosures, but I’ve never seen anything exactly like this. And it’s unusual for herbivore feces to have this strong a smell.” I stood up, tossing the stick onto the garbage heap. “Perhaps the animal is sick.” I braced my hands in the small of my back, stretched. There were no other signs immediately visible. “Let’s take a walk around, see what else there is to see.”

* * * *

An hour and a half later, we sat in the dimness of Dan's shack, with Dan nursing a Pabst Blue Ribbon from his wheezing refrigerator. On the table between us sat a crudely made clay vase, glazed with childish splotches in green and blue, holding an incongruous spray of delicate pale pink starflowers. But I kept glancing at the wall behind him, where a shotgun and two rifles rested on pegs ... clean, well oiled, and ready for immediate action.

"I have to tell you," I said, "I am not quite sure what we have here. It might be a gorilla, or possibly an orangutan, or it might be something else ... something I'm not familiar with." I stared pensively out the window at my van. "I'm pretty sure it's a large primate of some sort. I'd like to call the county, get the local animal control people out here." I opened my briefcase, took out my cellphone and black book. As I looked up the number, I said, "The zoo will coordinate with them, of course, in case it's an endangered species."

"I don't think so," said Dan. I looked up just in time to see the heavy black iron skillet coming down on my head.

* * * *

I groaned as I returned to consciousness, my head a throbbing mass of pain. I raised a hand to see if there was a lump, but it clinked to a stop after moving just a few inches. The other hand was also constrained.

Panic jolted me to full awareness. I was chained to Dan's sagging, metal-framed bed. Around my wrists were manacles, hammered from strap iron, with rusty padlocks thrust through crudely chiseled holes. My neck and feet were also constricted with rough-edged metal. There was no slack whatsoever in the wrist pieces; I would not be able to pull my hand through without dislocating my thumb and losing a serious amount of flesh. I could move my head and my hands around a little, but my feet were firmly chained to the footboard.

"Welcome back," Dan said. He was sitting in the kitchen, just a few feet away. He was wearing a sleeveless undershirt that had once been white, and holding a rifle across his knees. A pistol was holstered on his thigh. The light slanted in from the window at a low angle, but I couldn't tell if it was morning or evening. The vase on the table now held showy white serviceberry blossoms.

"Dan," I tried to say, but my throat was dry and it came out as a croak. I swallowed, tried again. "Dan, what do you think you're doing?"

"Here's the way I see it. One," he said, holding up one finger, keeping the other hand on the rifle, "this is the Pacific Northwest, home of Bigfoot. Two, a large critter running around loose. Three, a smart guy from the zoo says it's, uh, a large

primate of an unknown species.”

“Dan, I didn’t...”

“Shut up!” he shouted, baring his teeth. “I’m not finished. Four, this same smart guy has a truck full of equipment for catching gorillas, and he knows how to use it. Five, whoever brings in the first Bigfoot, dead or alive, is gonna be a millionaire. Now what does that all add up to?”

“Nothing!” I wailed. “Bigfoot’s a myth!”

In one motion Dan set the rifle aside, drew the pistol from its holster, and smacked me across the face with its barrel. I was once hit by a cop with a truncheon during the WTO riots. This hurt worse.

“Listen here, smartass. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You play along with me and we can both be millionaires. You fuck with me, and I still get the money, but you wind up dead.” He sat down, holstering the pistol. “Your choice.”

The silence that followed was broken only by the harsh uncaring buzz of flies orbiting over the dirty dishes in the sink.

Think. Think. I had to think my way out of this somehow. But the hammering of my heart and the pain in my head were pulling my brain in two.

“My co-worker Sonia knows where I went,” I said, trying to keep my voice from quavering. “If I don’t show up at the zoo tomorrow they’ll send someone to Staircase to start asking questions.”

Dan put his head to one side and regarded me with cold eyes. “You’re right,” he said at last, then got up and left the shack, leaving the rifle on his chair. I strained against my shackles for a long fruitless minute.

When Dan returned he held my cellphone in one hand and the pistol in the other. Without taking his eyes off me for more than a moment, he poked at the phone with his thumb, then grunted in satisfaction. He leaned over me and pressed the pistol’s barrel to my temple, holding the phone to my other ear. “You tell them you ain’t coming back for a while.” He drew back the hammer, the sound transmitted through my bone sounding like the lock on the gates of Hell. “Make it convincing.” He punched the Send button on the phone. I heard ringing.

“Woodland Park Zoo,” came the voice on the other end. Aurora, the receptionist. I could see her in my mind’s eye, sitting at her desk in the business office, but my real eyes were filled with the sight of Dan’s stubbly, weathered face. His breath was sour and sulfurous, and my head was pinched tight between the phone and his pistol.

I had to swallow a couple of times before I could make any words come out. “Aurora,” I said, “this is Ed. Tell ... tell Sonia...” I couldn’t think of anything to say. Dan bared his teeth and pushed the pistol hard against my head. All in a rush, I blurted out, “Tell her I found something interesting here and I won’t be coming into the office for a while.”

“All right,” Aurora said. There was no trace of suspicion in her voice, damn her.

Dan hit the End button with his thumb and took both phone and pistol away. “Smart boy,” he said. Then he left the shack again.

Jesus fucking Christ. What the Hell could I do now? I wanted to yell “Bigfoot’s a hoax! A guy named Wallace admitted he faked all those footprints!” But I feared arguing with Dan would just get me killed. I had to play along, gain his trust, until I had a chance to escape. Survival of the fittest was the name of the game.

Dan came back, without my phone. The pistol was holstered, but I’d seen how quickly he could draw it.

I swallowed and worked my jaw. Christ, it hurt.

Enunciating slowly and carefully around the pain, I said, “What do you want me to do?”

* * * *

What Dan wanted me to do is just what I would have done originally, except that I had to do it alone, manacled, and under armed guard. We walked the woods for miles around Dan’s place, looking for primate sign: droppings, prints, hair, damaged plants, nests. We set traps, baited with fruit and primate pellets. We sat silently for hours, watching likely spots.

After the first day Dan removed my leg irons—he was tired of helping me up every time I fell, and they made too much noise—but the manacles and collar stayed on. “And don’t try anything clever,” he said. “I’ve got your phone and all the car keys hidden where you’ll never find them. You’re not getting out of here except on my terms.”

I just rubbed my ankles and glowered at him. There *had* to be a way to outsmart this clod. But Dan held the keys, and the gun, and for all his ignorance he was cunning enough to never leave me unlocked and unwatched at the same time. Even my bathroom breaks were taken under the unwavering eye of the pistol: “Just do your business and get back to work.”

* * * *

After three more days—three days of canned corn for breakfast, baloney on white for lunch, venison fried in bear grease for dinner, and the rattle of chains for a “good night”—I was exhausted, burned out by constant fear as well as by the physical labor and lack of proper sleep. Whenever I closed my eyes I dreamed of Dan, holding the gun on me with his cold dead gaze, and jerked awake with a gasp. Every day I dragged myself out of bed could be the one he got too frustrated with the search and pulled the trigger.

And yet ... and yet, despite the circumstances and the company, I felt curiously alive, because I found myself on the trail of a mystery like none I’d ever faced in my career.

There was definite evidence of a large primate in the vicinity. Possibly several such primates. And the signs were inconsistent with any known species. The prints suggested something with the mass and gait of a gorilla, but there were chewed stalks indicating something with the diet of a chimpanzee, and the droppings didn’t look or smell like anything in any of the reference books in the van. All the evidence was fresh, too; it was clear that the creature or creatures had entered the area only recently and were still in the vicinity.

I found myself drawn, almost against my will, to the conclusion that there might really be a Bigfoot, and this might be it. It was not entirely implausible for a primate species to hide in dense forests, shrouded in myth, even in modern times. The orangutan, whose name means “man of the forest,” was dismissed as a legend well into the eighteenth century; the mountain gorilla was not discovered by Western science until 1902, and the giant panda remained hidden until 1936.

In the last day or two I had begun to share my interpretation of the evidence and my theories with Dan. For one thing, he seemed to be saner, more tractable, when he thought the search was proceeding well. For another, I was trying to humanize myself in his eyes. And, finally, there was the attraction of human conversation; I discovered I would rather talk with an unlettered, sadistic hick than not talk at all.

* * * *

Dan drained his beer and put the empty bottle back in his pack. “Well?” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “what is it?”

I handed him the tuft of hair I’d been examining. It had a red-brown color like that of the half-decomposed pine log on which it had snagged. “It has the color of orangutan, but the texture is more like gorilla, and from this tuft I’d say it grows more thickly than either.” I adjusted my collar so that it chafed on the other side. “That would be a good adaptation to a temperate climate.”

“What’s ‘temperate’?”

“Mild weather. Like here, not like Africa or Indonesia where gorillas and orangutans live.”

“I knew it! So how long until we bag the critter?”

I sighed, counted to ten. “I don’t know, Dan. I was in Indonesia for three weeks before I saw a wild orang, and that’s an animal whose habitat and behaviors have been extensively studied. We knew where to look. In this case we’re dealing with a creature of unknown habits. One that has eluded discovery for nearly a century, I might add. *If* it exists.”

“If ?” A crease appeared between his eyebrows. “I thought you said...”

“I said it *would* be a good adaptation to a temperate climate. That’s only one interpretation of this evidence.” Dan’s face soured as he listened, crumpling the tuft between his fingers. “I’m a primatologist, Dan; I did my field work in Africa and Asia. I’m not as familiar with Northwest species. This might even be red fox.”

“Fox?” Dan bared his teeth. “You’re a big-shot zoo scientist and you can’t even tell the difference between fox fur and monkey?”

“Ape, not monkey,” I corrected. “Monkeys have—”

“I don’t want to hear it!” He pounded his chest with his left fist on each word; his right hand tightened on the stock of the rifle. “You keep throwing more and more words at me, like they mean something. I don’t want words! I want *money!*”

I cringed, hunching my head into my shoulders and raising my hands in supplication. The chains on my wrists rattled. “Dan, good science takes time. You have to have patience.”

Dan glared down at me, breath coming fast through his clenched teeth, one fist raised to strike. I hunched down still further, covering my head with my hands, but then he relented. “Aw, hell, I’ve been a hunter long enough to know about patience.” He reached into his pack. “Here, have a beer.”

It might have been just Pabst Blue Ribbon, but it tasted like heaven.

Dan opened a beer of his own and sat down next to me on the damp earth. All around us firs and cedars rose into the moist, hazy air, their lichen-crusting trunks forming a natural cathedral. The lush undergrowth rustled with small living things. “Tell me something,” he said after a while. “How is it you figure that all this life”—he gestured with the bottle—“got started from nothing?”

I considered my answer very carefully; I didn't know anything about Dan's religion, and I didn't want to antagonize him, but he knew me well enough by now that I wouldn't be able to get away with platitudes or generalities. So I decided to give him my favorite theory, straight. "Life is starting all the time," I said at last. "See that puddle there?" It was a muddy depression no different from hundreds of others nearby, and Dan grunted noncommittally. "Right at this moment, molecules could be combining in that puddle to form a compound that's capable of replicating itself. That's the beginning of life. But because there's so much life all around already, something's bound to eat it before it gets much farther." I took a swig of my beer. "The only difference in the beginning was that the first life didn't have any competition."

As I talked, Dan was peeling the label from his beer bottle with one grubby fingernail. He seemed to be considering the concept. "Competition," he said after a while. "That's the thing, isn't it. Everyone has to have more money, more women, more *stuff* than the next guy. Why don't they understand that all a man really needs is clean air, sturdy boots, and fresh flowers on his table? But in this world, without money you're nothing." He balled up the little strip of shiny paper and tossed it into the undergrowth. "You gotta have money to get any respect. Dignity. Y'know? That's why I gotta find him."

"Don't worry, Dan," I said, "we'll find him. We'll find Bigfoot."

I think I was trying to reassure myself as much as him.

* * * *

I awoke in the night, as I often did. Dan snored in his sleeping bag on the kitchen floor, the rifle nearby.

There was a painful itch on my right arm, just below the wrist. It wasn't just the usual discomfort of the manacles. I stared at the itchy spot and saw a small, dark lump. A flea, or possibly a tick.

I stood the itch as long as I could. Finally I had to do something about it. I strained my head and my hand, the collar and the manacle biting painfully into my skin, until I could seize the parasite between my teeth. I bit down with a crunch, tasting my own blood.

After that I fell back, sobbing. As quietly as I could.

* * * *

On day six, I found a deer trail that the creatures seemed to be using with some frequency. We constructed a blind at a clearing along the trail, and stocked it

with supplies to last a couple of days. Now we waited. I suspected the creatures were crepuscular—active at dawn and dusk—but wanted to keep a twenty-four-hour watch to cover all bases. Dan and I slept in alternation; I was chained to a stake by one ankle, the chain short enough that I couldn't reach Dan while he slept.

At dawn on day eight, I shifted on the log I was using as a chair and peered out of the blind. Dan snored quietly behind me; I hoped the sound would not be audible from too far away.

It was going to be a clear day. The rising sun slanted through the trees and raised streamers of mist from the undergrowth. Trillium flowers were just beginning to open for the day, and the tight-curved foliage of fiddlehead ferns glowed green in the early morning light.

I heard a sound. A lip-smacking noise. Then a slight rustling of undergrowth.

I held my breath.

A creature emerged into the clearing, moving slowly, with the sinuous grace of modern dance. It had the reddish color of an orangutan, but it was not an orangutan. The pelt was much thicker than an orangutan's sparse coat, and shorter; the skin beneath was black, not an orangutan's sandy gray.

I had never seen anything like it.

I wished fervently for a video recorder, a camera, even pencil and paper ... but all I had was my eyes, my ears, and my brain. I tried to drink in all the details.

The creature's head was big-jawed and angular; there was some evidence of a sagittal crest. Its ears were small, smaller than human—suggesting that it did not use sound for communication—but it had prominent earlobes like the large-eared chimpanzee. The thin lips were closed, allowing no glimpses of dentition. And the eyes ... the eyes were large, brown, and somehow sad.

Like a gorilla, it appeared to be built for quadrupedal locomotion rather than brachiation. This would be consistent with its mass, which I estimated at fifty kilos—too heavy for swinging from branches. As it walked, it moved only one limb at a time, a cautious gait that made almost no sound. The hands were held in fists, more like the orangutan than the gorilla's knuckle-walk. I peered hard, trying to see if it exhibited dermatoglyphs—fingerprints—on the outer walking surface of the hand.

The feet were not big. They were consistent with the prints I had found, about thirty centimeters long with barely prehensile toes: further evidence that this species did not brachiate. Though the feet did not resemble the supposed Bigfoot print casts I had seen, another aspect of the Bigfoot legend appeared to be true: the creature had a pungent odor, a combination of skunk and garbage, which punished my nose

even from a distance of fifteen meters.

Now a second creature emerged from the forest, bars of sunlight sliding along its flanks as it moved. This one was larger—maybe seventy kilos—with peculiar flarings of tissue above its eyes and a prominent throat pouch. A male? Then came three more like the first, but smaller; females, presumably. One of them was walking on three limbs, clutching an infant to its breast with the remaining arm. Frustratingly, the older creature's head and shoulder hid most of the infant from my view.

By now the first creature had seated itself, a hairy Buddha. The largest one, the male, flowed up onto a fallen log and probed it with a stick, displaying an almost scientific curiosity. Looking for ants? One of the smaller females settled down and began to tear off the tender heads of fiddlehead ferns, stuffing them one by one into her champing jaws. The other two females sat together; the one with the infant began to groom it, while the second female groomed the first.

“Beautiful,” I breathed.

And then, all at once...

The sound of a rifle, apocalyptically loud in the enclosed space—

A splash of red on the alpha female's chest—

The other creatures slipping away into the forest like a dream being forgotten—

Dan's face clenched in concentration above the rifle stock.

“You *bastard!*” I shouted, suffused with anger, beyond care for my own life. I thought I'd convinced him to use the tranquilizer gun.

“Couldn't let him get away,” he said, swinging his rifle to target the retreating male. He cursed as the big male vanished behind a tree, and moved to one side for a better shot.

But in his eagerness to bag the male, he made a mistake: he stepped inside the circle of my chain. With a wordless shriek I jumped him from behind, pulling my manacles across his throat. We fell together to the damp, loamy earth, but Dan held onto the rifle.

The coarse metal of the manacles bit into my wrists as we struggled, tumbling over and over in the mud. I pulled with desperate strength, grinding the chain against Dan's neck; he gurgled harshly as he tried to reverse the rifle. Then he gave up on that tactic and tried to hit me with the stock instead. But by now I was on top, my knee between his shoulder blades, my ankle chain wrapped around both of his

legs—he couldn't get a good angle with the rifle, but didn't want to let go of it either. Grimly I kept the pressure up, cutting off his air, remembering the structures of the primate trachea. His struggles weakened, becoming sporadic and finally halting. But I didn't let up until I was sure he was unconscious.

Gasping for breath, covered with mud, and bleeding from the wrists and neck where the manacles and collar had lacerated my skin, my first concern was the female Dan had shot. I untangled myself from Dan and crept out to the limit of my ankle chain.

Too late. There was no pulse.

But as I felt her chest I noticed something anomalous tangled in the long hair under her breasts.

It was a kind of pouch, or sack, the size of my two fists. Crudely woven from strips of bark, and attached to the female's belly by cords braided right into her hair. There were some hard lumps inside it.

I teased the sack open. It contained a stick, one end stripped of bark and ground to a point. Several splinters of volcanic rock, each with a shiny, almost serrated edge. Braided cords of vegetable fiber. And a scratched fragment of something that might be flint.

Flint.

A firestarter?

I couldn't be sure.

“Sweet Jesus,” I said aloud.

Trembling from more than just exhaustion and terror, I collapsed to the ground next to the cooling body.

Bigfoot. A tool-using primate. Maybe even a fire-user.

Dan groaned. He'd be conscious soon if he wasn't already. I scrambled back to him and pulled the rifle out of his reach.

But as I felt the rifle's hot metal I paused, and thought about the origins of life.

Dan coughed and started to sit up.

And I shot him in the head.

* * * *

Hampered with the manacles as I was, it took me the rest of the day to drag the female deep into the forest and bury her, then nearly another full day to find my phone and the keys. I yelped with joy as I pulled the phone from its hiding place under the cover of Dan's water pump.

But before I called anyone I thought ... was I doing the right thing? Burying the greatest primatological discovery in a hundred years?

I thought again about the origins of life. How new life, the great self-organizing principle, might constantly be arising spontaneously, but was always being destroyed by other life, life that had the advantage only by virtue of having arrived on the scene first.

What if that new life could somehow be protected, hidden away from the competition, until it could establish itself ?

What if, given the chance, it might turn out *better*?

If word got out, this forest would soon be swarming with scientists and government officials. Well-meaning idiots like me, who'd "protect" the species into near-extinction like we had the mountain gorilla and the Sumatran orangutan.

Bigfoot had managed to stay hidden for thousands of years without any help.

What had we accomplished during that time?

I shook my head while my opposable thumb picked out the digits 9-1-1.

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