



One Small Step
Ken Scholes

*“I wrote ‘One Small Step’ after reading Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape*, just ahead of last year’s Talebones Live group reading at Norwescon. One of those Fabulous McKenna Girls happened to be attending, heard the story and loved it. Flash forward to Worldcon and I’m attending Aeon’s spectacular party. I tell Marti I’m overdue to send something to them and she says (nodding her head encouragingly) ‘Are you sending the chimp story?’”*

I sent it the next morning. They bought it that afternoon, making it the fastest sale I’ve ever made (Us too! –Eds).

Merriam-Webster defines a fable as ‘a narration intended to enforce a useful truth; especially: one in which animals speak and act like human beings.’ I hope you all enjoy my little fable. Here’s hoping we all sort out that useful truth.”

This story is dedicated to Charles Stores, my college science professor. You were right, Charles.

We realized things had gone too far on the moon when Anderson's chimps killed him, shaved themselves, and democratically elected one of their own to put on his lab-coat and demand a meeting with the rest of us.

Of course, Anderson started this whole goddamn mess, and he deserved what he got. Even Gable and Tennyson agreed on that point, and those two never agreed on anything.

I met Dr. Roger Anderson after a paper he delivered at the World Economic Development Conference in Thailand. Now everyone knows it as *Tomorrow's Labor Force: Inter-species Collaboration for a Better Future*. It's the paper that got him the funding to move his lab to the moon and start training his chimps to do their part in the New Economy.

Of course, the Bible people didn't mind. The way they saw it, chimps were just dumb animals like oxen or horses; disbelieving evolution has advantages. The animal rights people got pretty uptight until the Helen Dialogue.

I got involved just after that. But I remember watching it on TV.

It's a fixed camera in the corner of a room, focused on a small table and two chairs. There is a puzzle on the table. There are other toys strewn about.

Helen ambles in and sits at the table. Her chart says she's been signing since infancy and has been on the treatments for nearly six months. She's come the farthest of them all. Anderson enters and sits across from her, balancing his clipboard on his knees. "Make the puzzle for me, Helen," he says while signing to her. The microphone is also on the wall so his voice is muffled.

"Cookie?" Helen signs.

"Puzzle first; cookie after," Anderson signs back.

Helen sucks her thumb for a moment, grins, and puts the puzzle together quickly. She claps her paws and hoots. "Cookie," she signs.

Anderson spills the puzzle pieces out. "Again."

Helen shakes her head. "Cookie." Then she makes a rude gesture.

Anderson points at the puzzle. His voice is shaking a little. "No."

She howls, bounces from wall to wall, scattering the puzzle pieces. Then, she stops suddenly, stands up as tall as she can and pokes Anderson in the chest with a hairy knuckle before signing with jerky movements: "I'll make the shitting puzzle if you give me a cookie. Puzzle for cookie, you shit."

The rest you know. That incident started a six-hour dialogue. At one point, a psychologist was called in. The animal rights people had a hard time protesting from

then on.

The chimps wanted it.

Later that year, funding came through for a new lab and training area to simulate conditions for their new line of work. That's when I was recruited.

I was a high school English teacher.

But after meeting with Anderson and his research staff—and interviewing with Helen and her pack—I suddenly found myself teaching chimpanzees how to read and type.

Eventually, when the new facility was ready, my classroom moved to the moon.

Helen's brother Chuckles was the fastest to pick up one-handed touch-typing. The U.S. military invested a large chunk of change in a keyboard that strapped to a forearm. They even designed a keyboard that would work over the top of a pressure suit.

We practiced, he in his suit and me behind a monitor. "Hi Chuckles," I said into the microphone.

His fingers flew as the computer synthesized the characters in an electronic voice. "Hi Mike. How are you today?"

"Fine thanks. Are you ready to start?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Fine," I said. "Let's play twenty questions."

He bounced a bit. All of them loved the game. They loved to talk about themselves. And they loved to know about us.

I settled into my chair. "I'll start. What color are my eyes?"

Chuckles leaned forward. "Your eyes are blue."

"Correct. Your turn."

"Einstein has funny hair," he typed, waving at the picture behind me.

"Yes, but that is not a question."

"Why does Einstein have funny hair?"

Chuckles is the one they democratically elected a year later.

“We’ve killed and eaten Dr. Anderson,” Chuckles typed when we were all in the room. It sounded monotone as the computer pronounced the words—like a passionless act. He had scabs all over from cutting himself with the razor and the blood stained lab-coat hung to the floor. “I helped kill him and eat him.”

I knew the answer to my next question but I had to ask it anyway. “Why?”

His fingers started to fly then paused, tapped delete several times and continued. “Because of Helen.”

“Helen was in an accident, Chuckles. You know what. You were there.” We’d all watched the wall collapse. And while Anderson tried to talk them through the rescue, Tennyson and I had raced to the airlock, scrambled into our suits and gone into the mine. By the time we arrived, the chimps were hyperventilating in their suits. We pulled Helen’s broken body out of the debris and buried her outside the lab.

He howled, pounded the floor, and straightened upright. “Anderson—” he paused, looking for the vocabulary “—made it happen.”

I wanted to argue with him. I opened my mouth but closed it because I just wasn’t sure.

I’d seen the last tape Anderson made with Helen the night before her death.

I had to break into his desk to find it.

This is a better camera, sharper image, less warble. It is fixed in the corner of the room and it’s a better room. Cleaner. No toys or puzzles—Anderson’s apes had put away childish things. A porthole in the corner of the room offers a barren exterior view of the moon and the training site.

Helen waits at the table, her hands folded over her lap. She’s wearing the keyboard, but she only uses it half the time. Anderson walks in and sits across from her.

“Hello Helen,” he says while signing out the words.

“Hi Doctor Anderson.” She types the greeting, signing his name.

“Chuckles said you wanted to see me.”

Helen nods. “I want to play twenty questions.”

The back of Anderson’s head moves. “Okay. What color are my eyes?”

She shakes her head. “I want to ask the questions.”

Anderson leans forward. Anyone who knew him knows that this is Roger’s posture of intrigue. “What would you like to ask, Helen?”

“Are you—” she pauses, shakes her head a bit as if clearing it—“Are you the god?” She types the word because she doesn’t know the sign for it.

“Excuse me?”

“Are you...the god?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“The one in the book. Do you make us like you?”

“Which book?”

“The black book.”

“Do you mean the Bible?” His voice sounds surprised now.

She nods.

“Where did you get a Bible?”

She makes a shrill noise, she clicks her tongue at him, she waves her hands.
“We took it.”

Now he seems perplexed. “You took a book?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To be like you.”

Anderson pauses. He runs his hands through his hair and sighs. “How many books, Helen?”

“I’ll ask the shitting questions,” she signs.

He turns off the tape here. Whatever else was said is lost. But we know that after the tape, he made a note on his desk to have us inventory our books and determine what else was missing. Next to the note, he’d scribbled *Morris*, underlined, with a question mark.

I looked at his bookshelf when I saw that note. Of course I knew what book to look for. I looked for the gap where *The Naked Ape* might’ve been but they were too clever to leave gaps.

The next morning, after the corporate trainers left for a four day re-supply at Armstrong City, Anderson ordered Helen and the others into the mine, ordered her down to the deeper parts while the others stood by.

In the hours after our meeting, the chimps were quiet.

Locked in the control room, we tried to radio out. Twenty questions came back to haunt us:

“What is that?” Chuckles had signed three months ago.

“An antenna,” I had told him. “What color are my eyes?” Tennyson and Gable whispered behind me. They were talking about the tranquilizer rifle locked in the veterinary supply cabinet.

We’d let them run freely through most of the facility for most of a year. We’d wanted them to know how to work the hatches, the suits, the equipment. Affordable labor, acceptable risk, and adequate skills with appropriate supervision. That was the executive summary in a nutshell.

I wasn’t much of a biologist, I hadn’t followed much beyond basic science in college. But I remembered evolution’s full house slapped onto the table, all chips shoved recklessly in—the naked, hunting ape. The thinking monkey that went to the moon.

“What do you want?” I had asked Chuckles from the doorway, at the end of our meeting.

His eyes narrowed. He blew spittle at me. “We want clothing. We want all books. We want Helen back.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I told him.

Tennyson tried to get the rifle. There were only ten of them—nine with Helen gone. Plenty to post guards at the facility’s intersections.

They bludgeoned him to death with pipe wrenches and hammers and moon rocks we didn’t even know they’d smuggled in. This time they didn’t dismantle the camera first. Gable reached out to turn off the camera; for some reason, I grabbed his hand and stopped him. I don’t know why.

After that, Chuckles asked to meet with me again. The first time, he’d used his suit radio. This time, he used the intercom, holding the keyboard’s speaker close to the microphone.

“We don’t need to meet,” I told him. “Helen is gone. Help yourself to the books and clothing.”

They ransacked our quarters. I watched them on the cameras, though from time to time a chimp looked up and a camera went to static.

Locked in that crowded, cluttered room, lit by the light of a dozen monitors, we slipped into sleep.

When I woke up, there was a note from Gable.

I had to try, it said.

The movie was a bad joke. “Hey pops, I’m going to the moon to teach chimpanzees how to mine on Mars.” What else could a boy’s father do? He wrapped the movie up and presented it to me at my going away party.

“Get your paws off me,” he said when I tried to hug him goodbye. “You damned dirty English teacher.”

Everyone laughed at his bad Charlton Heston impersonation. I hadn’t even taken off the cellophane.

Chuckles didn’t struggle with it at all.

They were all in the lounge watching *Planet of the Apes* on our flat screen television. Gable was naked, bruised and bloody, stretched out on the floor like a scientist-skin rug. I think he was dead; I hope he was.

I don’t know if he had tried to escape, tried for the gun or tried to reason with them.

No answer would be the right one.

While they hooted and howled at the movie, I made my way to the airlock. I was suiting up when Chuckles and two of his thugs approached quietly.

He tilted his head to the side. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get Helen for you,” I said, not bothering to sign.

“You said Helen is gone.”

“I lied.”

His fingers danced, clackety-clack. “What is lied?”

“I said something that was not true.”

“I’ll go, too.”

I shrugged, putting on the rest of my suit. “Fine by me, Chuckles.” I checked my straps, I checked my boots, I pulled on my helmet and tugged on the gloves.

He went to his locker and suited up.

Together, we went out into the light of the earth. He brought his pipe wrench for good measure.

It wasn’t hard at all. It’s easy to forget the one small step between us and them.

I jump-walked to Helen's shallow grave. I fell onto it, crying out, careful to catch myself on my hands and ease myself slowly to the ground.

When Chuckles shook me, I moaned.

When he poked me with his wrench, I stirred.

When he rolled me over, I brought up a rock the size of a cantaloupe and smashed out his faceplate.

After that, it wasn't hard to use his wrench to pop open the supply shed. We didn't use much in the way of explosives when it came to training.

I didn't need much.

After setting the charges and watching them go one by one by one, I sat on a ridge and watched to make sure no suited figures emerged. I watched the air vent out, white and cold, like the last sigh of a dangerous dream.

Then I watched my watch, watched my oxygen gauge, watched the horizon for the returning supply truck. Africa hung above me in the sky. That cradle of life tipped its face away from me, ashamed.