

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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### **Monkey! Monkey! Monkey! Monkey! Monkey!**

To be fair to Elaine, no one would reasonably expect to find a cymbal monkey upon opening the hood of an automobile. It isn't like any assertion is being made that Elaine is helpless with respect to cars, or that women are in general. This is not a story that deliberately attempts to perpetuate that sort of stereotype. No, this story believes that most men would have been just as baffled to find themselves in Elaine's situation. Though it is always possible that this story will be unintentionally sexist for other reasons, it is not attempting to intentionally be so by denigrating Elaine's mechanical competence.

Frankly, there were few things Elaine despised more than feeling helpless. It didn't come up particularly often for her, but it was something she feared.

One of Elaine's core obsessions in life was preparing for any incident that might come her way. She strived to be able to handle anything, literally anything. In fact, as an attorney specializing in guiding clients through the vagaries of business formation, it was her job. She took courses and attended improvement seminars. She sent away for practice models and home study kits. Anything she could do to familiarize herself with a potential problem situation with respect to which she had been previously unfamiliar, she did.

Still, despite all of her preparation, Elaine's fear persisted. There just seemed to her to be so many ways one could be helpless, no matter what one did. She worked tirelessly, but despaired of ever filling all the knowledge gaps she might need to.

However, an automobile emergency was definitely something Elaine was prepared for. As her rental car continued to rev, though progressively less loudly as it slowly lost momentum on the rural highway near Donovan, Illinois, she was unworried. She expertly guided the 2012 Honda Accord over to the side of the road and put the car in park, leaving the key in the ignition. Then she popped the hood and stepped out to have a look.

That look was when Elaine encountered the cymbal monkey in the engine compartment.

Now, many people feel compelled to peek in the engine compartment of their cars after a breakdown despite having little reason to do so. Perhaps it is instinctual, even when people have no reason to suspect that they will have the slightest clue what they are looking at. Unless there is something obvious, like a cable popped off the battery with a sign labeled *must be connected for the car to run*, people without any automotive familiarity would be ill-equipped to remedy the respective fault no matter how long they looked. Still, they tended to look anyway.

And Elaine looked as well, though she had a reasonable expectation that she would understand what she was looking at. She had taken several automotive courses at a local tech college. She'd studied car manuals and had performed routine minor maintenance on her own car, such as chang-

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ing oil, rotating tires, and replacing alternators. Though her navy skirt suit was not ideal apparel for auto work, and though she would not have currently possessed parts or correct tools for most major repairs, Elaine felt confident in her ability to handle or at least diagnose many automotive problems. For more major issues, she was of course prepared with her cell phone and the number of the rental agency roadside service.

So, when she looked into the engine compartment and saw the cymbal monkey, Elaine felt validly and justifiably confused.

The odd little toy was just sitting in there, dressed in a little yellow shirt and red and white striped pants, banging away at its cymbals furiously. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!* Its mouth was constricted in a pained, tooth-bearing, and jaw-clenching grin. Its eyes were wide and popped as those of an electrocution victim. Above all else, it banged its cymbals with no sign of stopping or winding down.

Being acquainted with the components of an automobile, Elaine noted the absence of an engine (along with the required pistons and such components), an alternator, and a battery. Also missing was a radiator, any place to insert oil, and less critical items such as a windshield wiper fluid reservoir. In fact, the cymbal monkey (being bolted to the frame and coupled to various assorted rainbow wires that ran all over and disappeared into various portions of the car's internals) was the only occupant of the compartment.

At that point, Elaine's brain began operating on two distinct levels. She definitely knew enough about cars to understand completely that the cymbal monkey should not have been present instead of an engine. Elaine was not an idiot. She knew that there was no way that such was normal, or that a cymbal monkey should be able to power a car. All of this she knew. She was neither ignorant nor delusional.

However, at the same time, another level of her brain recognized that the cymbal monkey was, somehow, her current situation. However inexplicably, the car had been operating with only the cymbal monkey. Unless the engine had been present previously and had only been swapped out by magic mid-drive, the car had been functioning in its bizarre state. The toy was just what she had to deal with.

Not grasping how the cymbal monkey apparently worked with the car, she looked to see if anything did in fact look out of place. Burned or disconnected wires, broken shafts or belts, she scanned for anything that would be an evident mechanical problem in any machine, whether she understood this particular one or not. But, the cymbal monkey and all of its wires revealed nothing immediately apparent.

The cymbal monkey, throughout Elaine's inspection, merely continued on its cymbals. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Whatever was the problem, Elaine guessed, the monkey didn't seem to be it. It was still going strong even though the car would no longer move. Elaine briefly pondered whether or not the cymbal monkey functioning was itself a symptom. Perhaps it only banged the cymbals when motion could not correctly be transferred to the wheels. However, recognizing that she didn't possess enough information and would merely speculate

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endlessly in that line of thought, she retrieved her cell phone and dialed the road service number.

"Ever Ready Road Assistance," a chipper young male voice answered her call. "How can I be of service?"

"Yes," Elaine replied, "my rental car has broken down. I think I'm going to need a tow."

"I see," the polite voice responded, heavy with feigned concern. "What seems to be the problem?"

Elaine hesitated, recognizing a dilemma. Surely the cymbal monkey was impossible. She considered merely conveying that the car wouldn't go and letting the dispatched mechanic see the monkey firsthand.

However, the fact remained that this toy was somehow a functioning part of this particular vehicle. She was not familiar with such a machine, but someone obviously was. If she expected the dispatched mechanic to be able to solve her issue quickly and efficiently, as it would be his or her job to do, Elaine would need to provide the information that she could. Otherwise, without understanding enough about the situation, the mechanic might arrive without the correct tools or parts.

"Well," Elaine paused, weighing her options, "the cymbal monkey is clapping away like mad, but the car just slowed to a stop and doesn't seem to be able to go anywhere. I can hear the banging, but no revving anymore."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "The cymbal monkey?"

"Yes."

"As in one of those little mechanical things that claps cymbals together?"

"Yes," Elaine snapped. "I know it sounds crazy, but there's a little monkey in there instead of an engine. He has cymbals and he's banging them together."

"You're telling me your car has a monkey instead of an engine."

"Yes! Just listen!"

Elaine dashed over to the engine compartment and held the phone close. The monkey obliged, or ignored her and continued its activities in any event. The cymbals continued banging. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

"See?" Elaine shouted into the phone before noticing the 'call ended' indicator. The polite young man had hung up.

Elaine paused to breathe and calm herself before attempting to call again. She determined to be less informative the second time. As she was composing herself, though, a beat-up baby blue Chevy pickup truck approached slowly from down the deserted highway. It pulled over gently, but haphazardly, nearby. She could hear what sounded like Waylon Jennings emanating from within.

The truck sputtered off and the driver side door groaned open. A short, heavy-set old man in torn overalls lurched out before slamming the door,

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hard. As he ambled over to her amiably, Elaine noted that he had a blue and white checked flannel shirt on under the overalls and his head was covered by a black baseball cap with *Sun Microsystems* emblazoned on the side. Elaine reflected that it must have been made before they were bought out by Oracle.

"Having some car trouble, little lady?" The hick asked.

Elaine straightened herself up rigidly and dusted off her navy suit jacket. "Indeed I am," she replied curtly. "Have a 'gander' for yourself."

The old man smirked on one side of his mouth and strolled past her to look under the hood. He froze as he caught sight of the monkey. Slowly, the smirk faded. He looked at the monkey, then at Elaine, and then back at the monkey again.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

"What's this," he finally asked her, "one of them hybrid cars?"

Elaine pursed her lips sternly. "No," she snapped. "It is not 'one of them hybrids.' That is a cymbal monkey. Hybrids combine gasoline engines with electric motors. They do not utilize mechanized children's toys from the fifties and sixties."

"Oh," the man remarked, pushing up his cap to scratch at the little amount of dark hair he had underneath, "I didn't know."

"I guessed as much."

"What is it then?"

"I have no idea!" Elaine screamed. "I just opened the hood and there the moronic thing was! It just keeps banging those stupid cymbals and the car won't go anywhere."

"Oh."

"Oh? Oh?" Elaine slammed her fist down on the roof of the car. She collected herself, taking a deep breath. "Look, have you ever seen anything like this before?"

The elderly hick pushed the bill of his hat up and looked again at the monkey. "Well, no. I used to have one of them when I was a kid, but it wasn't attached to no car."

"And," Elaine proceeded, "have you ever even heard of one in connection with an automobile?"

"Well...no. I can't say that I have," the old man admitted.

"Great!" Elaine threw up her hands. "I'm so thrilled that a knowledgeable man stopped to lend a hand to poor, helpless little me. Where would I be without you? Such a great help you've been!"

The old man sagged a little, chastened, as Elaine continued her tirade. He politely waited for her to finish. Afterward, however, he seemed unsure what to say next. Both Elaine and the old man looked at each other, silent.

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Finally, the old man rubbed his chin with one hand and regarded the monkey. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he closed it again. Then he looked at the monkey some more.

Suddenly, a bright flash lit up his dim eyes. He marched right up to the edge of the car and smacked the cymbal monkey across the back of its head. The car roared to life.

Elaine's jaw dropped. "What the—"

The old hick hitched up his pants, despite the fact they were overalls. "There's a lot of things I don't know," he grumped, "a whole lot of things. But, I still get some pretty good results out of giving machines a good 'whack' when they misbehave." He shrugged. "Works wonders sometimes."