

## The Nature of the Beast

Mark Bourne

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“Film director John Huston said, ‘Hollywood has always been a cage ... a cage to catch our dreams.’ Mr. Huston didn’t direct the movie in this story, but it’s got Hollywood in it, and bigger cages and dreams than even he might have imagined.”

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*THE BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN stands lashed spread-eagle between twin stone pillars. Her torn dress hangs from her body. She screams and writhes. The monster comes. It removes her bonds and takes her away. This has happened to her exactly the same way, again and again uncountable times, for more than seventy years.*

The unrepentantly old woman sat in the audience, watching digitally restored black-and-white images in the darkness. Some scenes up on the screen didn’t match her memories. Others matched too well. The dinosaurs had been there, of course. But more of them. In real life the pterosaur had simply threatened her on that jungle precipice, snapping and screeching but not clutching her in its claws—how ridiculous—to carry her off. The tyrannosaur stank of rotted meat before it was killed, but a movie can’t make you smell that. Nor can it recreate the torment of men dying half-way around the world—the sound a spine makes when snapped between a saurian’s jaws, or the cries men make when tossed into a chasm alive with moving horrors. Or the feel of a giant black hand surrounding you. The cold wind at the top of the world’s tallest man-made summit. Roaring aeroplanes and machine guns. The colors of a final dawn reflected in vast, wet eyes. Eyes reflecting greater rage and pain and sadness than any mere person could know.

She watched, disturbed at the depictions of all those Negroes, and Charlie, the freighter *Venture*’s Chinese cook. They didn’t fit how she recalled them. But these enactments were devised in an even more racist time, by men with the power to diminish what we said disturbed us. Even the white men up there only clumsily mimicked what she knew to be the truth. Any two-dimensional image reduces its subject to an immeasurably thin slice of reality. She was up there too, and as she sat

there in the darkness she felt sliced, reduced to mere light and shadow. Flattened, as if in a cartoon.

In the darkness she smiled at the irony: the only character on that screen manifesting any human depth and dimension, the only one who seemed real in every way that was important, was a promethean being fashioned from an 18-inch metal skeleton padded with foam rubber and cotton and covered with rabbit skins for fur. The reality was too grand, too magnificent, too disturbingly real to resurrect any other way. That matched her memories precisely.

The motion picture ended. The screen ascended into the ceiling above the stage, and the old woman, white-haired and ancient-faced yet straight-backed and poised (“handsome” was the word *The New Yorker* used), squinted into the spotlights aimed at her podium. She stood motionless as the applause from the standing ovation fell away to echoing scattered claps, like twigs snapping in that dense, primordial island jungle seventy years ago. Or seventy million. Out there in that darkness of the Columbia University auditorium sat a thousand people in suits and evening dresses and whatever students wore these days. Each had paid a ridiculous amount of money to sit there and hear her. She could see no farther than the first few rows, though she felt the eyes focused on her from every part of the hall. To her left, a camera flash exploded, its owner disregarding the rules she had specified before agreeing to speak here, her first public appearance in seven decades. A security guard ushered the photographer out a side door. Only when the door had closed behind the photographer did she begin.

“Thank you,” she said. Who would have thought that she would be standing here, back in Manhattan after all these years? Last year, when the invitations and entreaties from the university began arriving at her mansion in Brazil, she threw them out. Neither a “commemorative retrospective” nor an honorary doctorate sparked enough interest within her to end a lifetime of intensely guarded privacy. Why she later retrieved one letter from the trash bin, then answered it: that’s a mystery she still pondered. She had begun writing a speech for this event in an attempt to address that mystery for herself. But after page one it had rambled into meaningless ruminations about change and time and the alleged value of human conscience and guilt and—She tore it up and didn’t begin another.

Perhaps the article in the *Times* had been correct: she simply wished to re-introduce herself to a world she had forsaken long ago, and to do so before it was too late.

She delivered a brief speech, which the audience absorbed with expected deference. She paused to wipe her brow with a tissue and sip from the glass of water provided by the eager graduate student assigned to dog her heels for the duration of her visit. That was her cue to the university’s president, who announced that it was now time for a brief Q&A session. The lights came up on the audience.

She pointed to a young woman, possibly one of the paleontology students, standing in the tenth row. “Ms. Darrow?” said the girl. “Is it true that this is the first time you’ve seen the film *King Kong*? And does it dramatize the reality of the events well, in your opinion?”

*Reality does not come with an orchestral score. Or convenient jump cuts to avoid scenes that tell too much of the story. That final long night in Manhattan had been amputated to twenty minutes of screen time. The movie’s final line of dialogue, perhaps the most contemptible ever spoken in the history of moving pictures, had made the old woman shut her eyes and tighten her hands into fists. “It was beauty killed the beast.” But she had expected it. Everyone knew how this picture ended. Few knew what had not been allowed onto the screen. Not that it made a difference in the end. Few things ever do, really.*

Her voice resonated clearly from the speaker system. “Yes, this is the first time I’ve viewed this motion picture. I saw no point in doing so before now. As to how well it matches my own recollections: in my mind I still see the island jungle as horrifying and alien, and as the most vibrant, colorful place on Earth, full of exotic smells and ten thousand other things now lost to us. New York City I’ll always think of as what you just saw: rapid images in shades of gray.”

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By Autumn 1931, the Great Depression had grayed out the world utterly. Ash-gray streets walled in ghost-gray people who stood without cheer or pride or hope in long bread lines. For an unimaginable \$20 a week, the remaining elite could enjoy the privileges of a room at the Barbizon-Plaza and look down on the ghetto Hooverville shanties cobbled up in Central Park. The newly opened Empire State Building remained half-empty, yet it towered above the geometric jungle of granite buildings and hard, sharp angles. Except for her coat—holes at its elbows and its hem fraying more every day—Ann had acquired no clothing since the night she finally sneaked away from the dark, cold family house, the tyrannical danger of her father, and the docile impotence of her mother. The coat was a gift from a melancholy reverend, the only man who had demanded nothing in return for his charity. Gray like the sheet of newspaper blowing across the sidewalk the first time she got caught stealing days-old fruit from a sidewalk vendor. A defeated, starving, failed thief at 18, Ann had already learned what the world was: flat and colorless and not at all sympathetic. Like pictures in a movie.

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“Of course I recognize the need for—” Something in her throat made her pause. She blinked and it was gone. “—artistic license. I lived those events, after all. Besides, since then I’ve learned that real life is too realistic to sell sufficient numbers of tickets on its own.” She fooled them with a grin, and the audience laughed with her. “Next question.” She pointed into the forest of raised hands. “You, sir, with the

yellow tie.”

The man stood. “What do you think of Fay Wray’s portrayal of you?”

*I hate it.* “Well, I must say that the dear girl screamed more eloquently than I ever could.” A smattering of applause. They were in the palm of her hand.

She pointed to a portly older man raising his hand from the expensive-ticket section. “Yes, Mr. Burns.”

The man stood, smiled. “Why is it, Ann,” he said, “that you became a recluse shortly after your discoverer, Carl Denham, went to jail? And why did you leave your fiancée, Ship’s Mate Jack Driscoll, standing at the altar?”

By the audience’s reaction, the man had just shat on the Vatican floor.

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She was alone near the 21st Street Mission when *the* Carl Denham of Hollywood found her, fed her, and became her savior. His clean and pressed suit made her clothes look all the more shabby and unworthy. He was attractive and spoke well. And much older, maybe even 40, but not slow and soggy like other older men. There was no doubt that he was well-fed; still, he was as smart and crisp as a tall stack of new ten-dollar bills. He smelled of fresh sheets and good aftershave.

“You’re a little thing,” he said. They chatted, just chat, harmless conversation, for a few minutes. He seemed to listen hard to how she talked. After a while that made her uncomfortable so she shut up. He hailed a taxi cab and guided her into it. She didn’t know where he was taking her, but she had a good idea what would be coming next. So she’d fallen this far. But even that was better than starving to death in some alley. “You’re a looker,” he said. “There’s something about you I like.” He didn’t say another word until the taxi took them to a restaurant he said was one of his favorites. There a man in a nice suit greeted him by name and ushered them to a small table. Mr. Denham looked her over like a jeweler appraising a rough stone. “You’re like, like a little animal. That’s it! A scared, meek animal lost in a world too big for her. That’s what I need for my next picture! Have you ever wanted to be an actress?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. It was awfully easy to talk to him somehow. “I once did some work as an extra out on Long Island for a picture.” It wasn’t quite a lie. The producer had run out of money so the picture never finished. The last movie she’d seen was a Marx Brothers that took place on a cruise ship. It was the funniest picture she had ever seen, and the idea of an ocean cruise stayed with her ever since.

Mr. Denham nodded. “That’s good. Can you read a script?”

She turned away from him, chewed the restaurant steak he was paying for, and placed the fork on the table. Which side, left or right, was it supposed to go on? Not knowing that embarrassed her. “A little. I wanted to finish school. My parents didn’t—”

“Your parents? Do you have family who need to give you permission?”

She hadn’t thought of them as “family” since she was twelve. “I have an uncle. Somewhere. I’ve never met him.” Father’s older brother. Supposed to be a lot like the hateful bastard. As a boy he taught Father how to castrate farm animals, something Father talked about with sickening relish. “No. No one.”

“So will you do it?”

Ann looked at her shoes beneath the nice table. They were almost worn through, so she crossed her ankles to hide them. He promised her clothes. New clothes she didn’t have to accept from charity. Probably the sort of clothes Father would not approve of. She mumbled. “I don’t know.”

Denham gestured with effortless authority, and a waiter brought her chocolate mousse in a tall, beautiful glass goblet. She looked away from it. This man had money. And influence. Control over his life. Things she’d only fantasized about. He made pictures about far-away places, with big game hunters and ferocious animals. He owned, they said, the most famous trophy room in Hollywood, full of wonderful, scary animal heads and other things. California was a free and sunny place, that’s what they said. A place to escape, to get what she wanted most: freedom from poverty and the powerlessness that comes with it. Control. And he was very nice, not like men in this city. His promises sure did sound sincere. He really liked her and didn’t even try to touch her.

“Think about it, Ann!” His voice was a first-class train speeding west. “Money, adventure, fame! And a long sea voyage that begins at six in the morning! If there’s one thing I’ve learned in this life, Ann, it’s this: face your fears. It’s the only way to conquer them.” Then he said the words that finished opening her to him. “You can trust me.”

She did. Completely and willingly. It was the first truly impulsive thing she ever did, and that scared her and thrilled her at the same time. Beneath the table, she uncrossed her ankles. *Mrs. Carl Denham of Hollywood. Wouldn’t that show the hateful bastard?*

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“I suggest, Mr. Burns,” said Ms. Ann Darrow, the most famous witness to the October 1931 incidents that had changed—or ended—so many lives, “that you rent

the video of your own retrospective documentary covering the events. *Catching King Kong* ran three nights on PBS, I believe. In 1991. Pay particular attention to part three, which you cheekily titled ‘The Girl in the Hairy Palm.’ You hounded, harassed, and interviewed all the key survivors—excuse me, *participants*.”

“All except you, Ms. Darrow. You refused.”

“Yes, I did. And I’ll thank you, Mr. Burns, to never again describe that irresponsible, opportunistic, sexually repressed impresario as my ‘discoverer.’” She directed her attention to the opposite side of the hall. “Next question. You.”

“Um, thank you, Ma’am,” chirped a poorly attired young man who gave her a rabbit-in-the-headlights gaze when she pointed at him. “I’m a big admirer of your work with indigenous religions and peoples. Um. In the movie, the script cuts directly from the island capture to the public unveiling on Broadway and then the escape and, uh, rampage. I was wondering, could you tell us your version of what happened between that night the, um, the ape was secretly brought ashore and the night of the premiere. The night—um, what you feel about that—” The boy’s voice trailed off, his hands fluttering like paper before him. It was as if he’d accidentally asked her to describe her first fuck.

For more than seventy years Ms. Ann Darrow had *never* said *anything* on record about that controversial span between the afternoon the Denham Expedition and its cargo left the creature’s ancient island domain, up to that final night in Manhattan. About the night dozens of innocent people died or were injured. Even her testimony at Denham’s trial had been sparse. The presiding judge was convinced that the shock of recent events had been too devastating for “this pretty young lady.” Her performance in the courtroom had secured her silence as well as Denham’s conviction on a dozen charges ranging from illegal possession of explosives to reckless endangerment to property damage. Charges of enslavement, dismemberment, and murder were, unfortunately, never even raised.

“Young man, if you’re asking me if there’s anything that should be added to the history books at this point in time, the answer is—” She stopped. The next word from her mouth surprised her more than it surprised anyone else. “Yes.”

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It was a thin crescent moon hanging low over the Atlantic, throwing a rippling glow onto the sea beyond the starboard rail. A moon as crisp and fine-lined as a fingernail clipping. She’d never seen the moon look like that. Maybe crescent moons didn’t happen in Great Neck, Long Island, where she had lived until running away one night with only one small bag and bruises hidden beneath her thin cloth coat. She took the train to Manhattan hoping for—what? Dreams of a man to rescue her, answer her prayers, take care of her forever and ever? She couldn’t remember. She couldn’t even remember ever looking up at the sky back then. Now, months later

and hundreds of miles from anything remotely resembling solid earth, the moon for the first time looked like a *place*, a dry, spherical continent in the sky, not an abstract disc easily ignored or lost in the glare of street lights and the pale luminous wash that passes for night in the city they were returning to now.

During the voyage outbound from New York, the night sea's darkness had frightened her on a bone-deep level. She had tried to hide that fear from the sailors. Walking the deck alone at night, she kept one hand always touching the solid security of the ship's cold metal. *Who knew there were so many stars?* One of the sailors had brought a book on board, a long story by some Englishman named Mr. Wells, about people going *inside* the moon. Ann borrowed it to relieve the boredom when Mr. Denham wasn't making her pose and strut in front of his big moving picture cameras. She gave it up after the first chapter. Its talk was peculiar, the story confusing, and she had never read a book before, so she grew frustrated and angry, which was worse than the boredom. Maybe she would meet this Mr. Wells one day. Mr. Denham could arrange it. If it pleased him to do so. He could do anything as long as it pleased him. He was, after all, a man. A man with money. Surely nothing in the world could be more powerful or attractive.

But soon after that outbound voyage, fear had become the moon, a thing real and solid, a tangible object like this ship or the skull-shaped island where no charts said an island should be. Or a black, breathing *thing* clutching her in a dark jungle where no white man had ever before set foot. Compared to that, even the surface of the moon felt close and familiar and touchable.

Now, straight ahead somewhere in all that darkness sat New York City. The freighter *Venture* steamed north with its lights out and at a speed faster than regulations or its heavy-laden engines typically permitted. Far, far behind them, the island hell still pierced her dreams. Although half-a-planet astern, below the equator, farther south than Borneo or Sumatra, deep in the bathhouse-hot Indian Ocean, it could never be *too* far behind. Every night, the nightmares woke her. She kept the lamp burning in her berth, but the reek of fetid meat and the screaming, primal, bestial visions filled her sleep anyway. The tyrannosaur's head, lunging to devour her. The giant cave serpent's fangs darting toward her. A black mountain-face with its bloated mockery of human features. In her sleep, the changing rumble of the ship's engines became a giant monster's colossal body battling and defeating monsters even more horrible than itself. Her hammock: an enclosing fist like hot, hairy leather. Waking up shaking and sweating, she tried to force the nightmares from her mind by walking the deck.

"Ahoy, shipmate," said the deep voice behind her. She didn't turn to look, but smiled all the same. Jack always knew where to find her long after she was supposed to be asleep.

Ann reached out, held tight to First Mate Jack Driscoll's left arm. As they had on other nights lately, they strolled on the *Venture's* forward deck beneath the

Atlantic's clear night sky. The sea crested against the bow while cold wind and spray tugged Ann's hair. Each night the near-winter wind from the east grew colder. Jack wrapped his long seaman's coat around her. He didn't seem to mind the cold. He looked like Charles Lindbergh.

After awkward moments of idle chat and empty pauses, he continued a lesson begun the night before.

"Remember what I told you about Polaris, the North Star? It's higher tonight. See?" He pointed into the incredible spray of stars. "That's how we can tell our latitude is changing."

*So many.* Jack's stories about the stars made her want to know more. She asked how he could tell which star out of all of those was the North Star.

"Easy. See those two pointer stars at the Big Dipper's front?" He took her hand and pointed it skyward. "Some folks call it the Big Bear, though I ain't never seen a bear with a long tail." He laughed. What a pleasure it was to be with him. She clenched his hand tight and let him guide hers among the stars. "Now draw a line between 'em, and keep going to that star right there. See it? The only bright star in its neighborhood. That's Polaris, the Pole Star. It'll always steer you true, you can always rely on it. It's how we know we're headin' north. Well, that and the compass. And the way Charlie's Stinky Chinky fish stew is tastin' more like the Atlantic and less like Chinese dirty laundry." A sense of humor—that's something Carl Denham couldn't buy with all his money.

"So, whaddaya say? How many times does a guy gotta say & 'Will you marry me'?"

Ann paced alongside the bow railing. She tugged Jack's hand, pulling him along. "I don't know."

"Well, you love me, don't you?"

He *was* plenty good-looking, and she marveled at the sense of well-being she felt when near him. "You know I do. But we hardly know each other, and after what happened on—" She stopped. Sea wind gusted against her face, making it wet and salty and blowing her hair into her eyes.

He released her hand. "You're not still carrying a torch for Mr. Denham, are you?"

Coals of disappointment smoldered within her, though they had faded since she got to know Jack.

"Come on, sweetheart," he said. It was nice when he called her that. "Don't



make me compete against a book-talkin' Hollywood fella with loads of dough."

Since that first day in the restaurant, the wealthy movie-maker had proved time and again that his only interest in her was professional.

"You're not." Ann rested her head on Jack's broad chest. That made it easier to change the subject. "You promised you'd finally show me the hold."

The captured monster was down below. The creature that had carried her off before Jack saved her.

"Shhh, pipe down," he said. "I don't like that idea. That thing is a killer. Are you sure you want to see it again?"

She wasn't. But the nightmares had to stop. She had to put the night-terrors behind her. She wanted to see the evil savages' god chained. Drugged, trapped, defeated. But throughout the return voyage neither Denham nor the captain allowed her near the immense hollow of the cargo hold. *Too dangerous for the poor girl*, Denham said.

Yet since leaving the island, the nightmares had also conjured new sensations. Or perhaps stirred her experiences on the island into a new revelation: sometimes, something forbidden and dangerous is all the more exhilarating for it. Face your fears, the rich man had told her.

Black ocean roared past them. The Pole Star brightened into a comforting, steady lighthouse. "If you take me there," she kittened, pulling him closer, "will you stay with me?"

"Sure. Later. If you're quiet about it."

"Tonight. Right now."

"Forget it, doll. Mr. Denham says—"

"Captain Engelhorn says we'll be in New York by dawn. I want to see before we get there."

Ann looked into Jack's face and pouted the way she'd seen actresses do in the movies. "You promised."

He grumbled. "All right. Let's go. Dames."

Dear, sweet Jack. You could tell he knew a lot about women. Certain types of women, anyway. But around her, he was unsure of himself, almost boyishly vulnerable. That was utterly foreign to her, a surprise exhilarating in its newness. She

wanted to discover what he knew. She wanted the man inside that handsome skin. And he *had* rescued her from the monster's high jungle plateau, from certain death. Or worse. That's the way the press was going to hear it, anyway. She didn't remember it quite that way, but Mr. Denham knew about show business.

He led her down metal stairs and a narrow, dark corridor. They stopped at a plate iron door to the ship's oversized hold. Jack nodded to the crewman on guard. The crewman released latch bolts and pulled open the door. Its huge hinges screeched, metal against metal. Inside, three bare bulbs flickered in a cavernous, rectangular space. Ann stepped in and bumped into a man with an elephant rifle. Though fresh air flowed through vented ducts, the flat gun-colored walls glistened with damp and mildew. The chamber stank of mold, decaying fruit, and shit. Its metal floor sloped gently down to a drainage grate that had been recently hosed.

At the far side of the hold, filling the darkest corner, it sat. Even here, conquered, its head turned out of view, the beast was mythic, Olympian. Its body too grand and super-natural even for Bible stories. *There were giants on the earth in those days*. The remnants of three dozen tranquilizer darts as big as coffee cans littered the floor nearby. Its labored breathing thundered. This thing had taken her from the savages' sacrificial altar, carried her into a jungle world that violated everything she knew and believed in, and for one horrifying day it had kept her. Now its right hand lay lashed to the floor by short, thick chains. That was the hand that had clutched her, before Denham's gas bombs stilled it.

Ann walked the hold's length toward the giant. It appeared to be sleeping. Fitful, rasping breaths pulsed from its mouth and the twin caves of its nostrils. Beneath the massive brow ridge, eyelids spasmed, like a man dreaming. What dreams boiled inside that head? Visions of a lost island paradise? Of an existence punctuated with victorious battles fought against beasts like itself—brutal, unchained, natural? Or confused, uncomprehending awareness of what? Defeat, failure, humiliation, loneliness? That was something Ann understood. All her life it had dictated her existence, defined who she was.

The head lifted, slow and heavy. The beast grunted, scratched its chest with its unchained hand. It cocked its head to one side and turned, searching. Nostrils bellowed wide. Ann heard the *clack-clack* of an elephant rifle being readied. She stepped backward until the steel wall pressed damp and warm against her back.

The man with the gun yanked a knife-switch on the wall. A spotlight, the kind used in movie-making, shone directly into the face of the beast. Eyes clenched shut, the immense body huddled tighter into a corner. It sniffed the air, then turned its face toward Ann. Fighting to open its eyes, it pulled at the chains. The great being writhed half in darkness, half in light.

It was trying to find her. Its free arm reached vainly out for her. Ann took a step forward.

It could have torn her apart at any time on its island. Instead, it had defeated monsters to protect her. Kept her safe while a dozen strong men died.

She stepped closer.

“Ann, *stop*,” Jack said. “It’ll *kill* you.”

She took another step.

The great beast’s body shifted as much as the chains allowed. It sniffed the air again, and a yearning, animal sound filled the chamber. Its erection, wide and tall and towering from thick, black fur, was free, unchained. It was beautiful.

Jack stepped behind her, took her hair and chin into his hands, and forced her to turn away. “Don’t look there, Ann. Jesus.”

“I want to see.” She twisted away from him. The unashamed animal power manifesting before her drew her in. Something opened inside her: strength, courage, confidence. The certainty of control. It was a new sensation. She liked it.

Jack’s voice, distant and small: “Don’t be disgusting. No wife of mine—” She didn’t hear him finish, his words shattered by a rifle shot. A needled projectile buried itself in an enormous black thigh. The beast shook its head and pounded a fist against the floor. After a moment, Jack grabbed Ann by both elbows and hurled her out of the hold. The door’s metal-on-metal yell didn’t cover the lost-soul howl that pushed air through the corridor.

Well after midnight, New York became a growing smear of light on the horizon. Ann stepped onto the deck to watch the skyline’s boxy silhouettes form against the ash-colored sky. When she recognized the obelisk shaft of the Empire State Building, she fell to the deck and cried with relief. They’d made it home at last, after ten thousand miles and a hundred million years. She couldn’t see any stars up in that sky above the city. She looked for the Big Dipper and the reliable guiding star it pointed to, and couldn’t find them.

Mr. Denham insisted that Capt. Engelhorn bring the ship—at night and under radio silence—to an industrial dock pre-arranged before the voyage. The captain, whom Ann weeks before had dubbed a “dear old lamb” before realizing that he was as corrupt as any pirate, gave no protest. There could be no witnesses when the surviving crew offloaded the cargo that strained his ship’s engines and taxed the specialized equipment installed before the voyage.

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Ann sprawled on an enormous white bed, relishing the clean hotel sheets

against her naked skin. They were the most luxurious, expensive, and sensuous things she had ever touched. Immediately after the *Venture* docked in New York, Mr. Denham took Ann to this hotel suite next-door to the Palace Theater on Broadway. Exhausted in more ways than she thought possible, she slept for most of three days. The sheets must have slipped into her dreams. Several times she awoke flushed and feeling trapped, confined, yet also freed and untethered for the first time ever. Stripped truly naked in every way, she ran, chasing something she couldn't see through a green world, its hot air moist against her body. Wicked dreams, her father would have said. By the third day they mortified her so much that she took unnecessary showers and made sure room service replaced the sheets in the morning. Throughout the three days, Jack visited and brought her flowers and chocolates and kisses and made sure she was all right. She didn't remember Jack in those dreams, though he must have been there.

Sometime during the third day, she asked Jack, "What's happened to it?"

He watched her for a long moment before replying. "Don't worry your pretty head about that overgrown monkey." He kissed her forehead and stroked her blonde hair. "Mr. Denham's still got him drugged and caged good and tight. I told you he'll never hurt you again. Before long the big ape'll be too afraid of us to do anything we don't want him to. Mr. Denham says we're all going to be rich, so the only monsters you'll have to worry about will be our own kids. Whaddaya think, Ann? Let's name our first boy Carl Denham Driscoll. Got a nice ring to it, don't it?"

She didn't remember saying yes to his proposal, but Mr. Denham had talked about their engagement being the kind of publicity you couldn't buy with all the money in Hollywood. She enclosed his hand between hers. "Baby Carl Driscoll. So what are we going to name our first little girl?"

"Aw, don't get too many female notions now," he said. "Last thing I need is another dame in my life." He laughed and, because he was looking at her, she made her smile wider than it would have been otherwise.

Late on the third night, she was sitting up in bed reading and drinking Coca-Cola when Jack came to visit.

"You're looking your old self again," he said. He pulled the book from her hands. "Where'd you get this?"

"Mr. Denham told the hotel to get me anything I asked for. So I had them do some shopping for me, and I asked for something to read while I'm cooped up in here."

"*The Good Earth*?" Jack said. "A woman writer? What is this, some sort of romance story?"

“It’s a best-seller. It’s about China.”

Jack put the book atop the empty dinner tray on the nightstand. He replaced it with a bouquet of flowers. “You don’t have to be cooped up here any more, doll. Soon as you’re ready, we have somewhere to go.”

She pulled the sheet up around her neck. “Where’s that?”

“Mr. Denham wants to shoot some photos of you with the monkey. For the magazines. It’s completely harmless, he says.”

“I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll wait downstairs.” She didn’t move until the door closed behind him.

Twelve minutes later she found him pacing beneath the lobby chandelier.

His welcoming grin disappeared, and his lips pulled tight and horizontal. He waited for her to explain herself. Instead, she seemed to be challenging him to speak first. He gave her a questioning look, like an explorer facing his first unexplainable phenomenon. “You’re wearing a man’s shirt,” he said.

“So are you, sailor.”

He frowned. “Just that I never saw you in anything other than those movie duds Mr. Denham dresses you in.”

“That’s right. All the more reason for you to stop calling me ‘doll’.”

Jack guided her through nighttime streets to the East River industrial docks. City lights reflecting off the low cloud ceiling gave everything a soft-shadowed, reddish cast. The river lapped against piers, which creaked to the slow breathing movements of the water. The midnight air carried city odors. She tasted automobile exhaust, iron, soot, and wet concrete. Funny, she’d never noticed that about the city before. Now she couldn’t get it out of her nose or off her clothes.

“Here we are,” Jack said. He pointed to a huge building like an abandoned aircraft hangar. The *Venture* was the only ship moored nearby. Its empty cargo hold gaped open to the building’s closed dockside portals—gates as tall and wide as the Great Wall that had kept a primitive village’s god in his savage jungle domain. Men she had never seen before stood guard on the ship and at the building’s tiny, human-sized doorway. The guards had guns. Jack escorted her into the secret dockside stronghold.

Jack placed his arm around her shoulders. “The chimp’s been taken care of like he was the king of England. Mr. Denham says this is one investment worth

protecting no matter how much it costs.” Jack led her through a corridor sectioned by three steel doors, each sealed with massive bolt locks. After the final door, Ann squinted against the brilliance of a hundred electric arc lamps illuminating a space as wide and high as Grand Central Station.

Ann took in the scene a piece at a time. It was the only way her mind could accept what she saw.

In the center of the space: a cage, big as a rich man’s house. Thick chrome beams and latticework gleamed, bright and polished. About half-way up, some were scarred and askew as if something had tried to pull them from their mountings.

In the cage: Denham’s “Eighth Wonder of the World” lay on a great steel T, wrists shackled to the crossbeam. Thick chains secured the metal band around his waist, and more chains anchored the feet to an iron wall ten feet tall, easy. Giving the air a heavy taste of gas and metal, behind the wall men with welding equipment labored at a scaffold framework. It was vast enough, Ann presumed, to support the entire structure, Kong and all, when it was hoisted upright to a standing position. Kong’s mountainous torso of black flesh and hair, supine, was taller than any man in the room. It expanded and contracted in irregular, volcanic breaths. His incredible head faced the ceiling, eyes closed, mouth open. Every few seconds, the hand nearest Ann twitched.

She stood unmoving despite two memories: Father’s detailed descriptions of crucifixion, and the island natives lashing her between twin stone pillars.

Denham’s white shoes clacked against the floor as he approached, striding near the cage. A jeweled ring on his right hand tapped the bars—*ding, ding, ding*—like bells. He smiled at his trophy.

“There he is, kids. Feast your eyes upon the mighty Kong. He was king in his world. A deity. Now we’ve brought him to *our* world a captive, a show to gratify our curiosity. Thirty-eight tons of public fascination bound in chromium and manacled with the same combination lock mechanisms the Navy uses to secure dirigibles. That’s raw nature, my friends. Look upon him and see what we deny about our innermost selves. Conquer him, and prove that we can conquer what we fear most.

“Not even the press knows about him yet, and we’re going to keep it that way until the curtain goes up at the Palace one week from tonight. It’s all arranged. With top tickets at \$20 a head, we’ll be millionaires in a month. Ann, you’re going to be the pretty wife of a rich man, with the biggest wedding the society columns and newsreels ever saw.”

Jack pulled Ann against him, enclosing her with an arm around her shoulders. “Maybe that fella—” He arced a thumb toward Kong. “—ought to be our best man.

You think you can make a tuxedo for him, Mr. Denham?"

"Well, it'd need a chest seventeen feet across and a size nine-foot neck, but I'll put the best tailors on it right away." He laughed. Ann couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

Jack squeezed Ann's shoulder. "Just think, sweetheart: if we teach him to cook and clean, that's a whole staff we won't have to hire. All you got to do is feed him a banana twice a day." Jack and Denham yowled laughter. "He can help you take care of all our kids."

Ann pushed herself out of his grasp. She stepped forward and gazed at Kong's body. Her eyes stopped at the groin. A tarpaulin covered it, like an apron. The floor nearby: wet from a recent hosing.

"Is he sick?" Ann asked.

Jack took her hands. "No. We're just keeping him gassed." He pointed to hose nozzles mounted inside the cage and connected to a row of tanks. "Takes the fire out of him. Lost one man already when a dose wore off sooner than we expected."

Denham said, "Don't worry, Ann. His constitution is like nothing I've seen before. Plus, I have the best animal doctors working on him. He hasn't eaten, but that can't last forever. If we have to, we'll spoon-feed him to get him ready for his Broadway debut."

Denham shouted to a man near an office door. "Frank, fetch my camera!" He hurried to Ann's side. "What a great photo shoot this will be! Ann, I want you and Jack to pose next to the cage. The first photos of the monster and his captors, and the brave girl who captured its heart! 'Beauty and the Beast'! That's what it'll say on the next cover of *Life* magazine!"

Kong stirred. The titan body jerked, suddenly awake. Chains big enough to anchor a ship jangled. The eyes opened with a sticky sound, nostrils flared wide, and his breath came in loud, hot gusts. Ann pressed against the cage. The bars were cool through her clothes. Warm and moist and redolent of another world, the breath washed across her face in waves.

A distant voice shouted. "*Ann. Be careful.*"

"Shut up, Jack." She said it out loud and liked the way that felt.

Denham took the camera, mounted its tripod into position, and peered through the eyepiece. "Beautiful," he murmured.

Kong strained to sit up, his eyes focusing, his face like a child's waking in an unfamiliar room. That head moved in deliberate spasms, searching. The nostrils flared, grasping at a scent. He saw Ann.

Denham moved the camera to a new position. "It's you, Ann! He smells you! Don't worry, he can't break those chains and we have more gas ready to pump in there. Stand near the bars. Jack, look up at Kong and hold Ann as if you're protecting her! Beauty and the Beast! Beauty and the Beast!"

Flashbulbs exploded.

"No, Ann!" Denham shouted. "Look at *Jack*. You're happy he saved you from that monstrous terror. You're delighted that he's going to be your husband! No, *no!* "

He stomped toward her, white shoes slapping the floor. He yanked her hands from the cage and forced her head against Jack's chest. Kong pulled his wrist chains taut. Muscles moved behind his vast brow as his concentration focused on her, his eyes Pole Star bright, his face a Rushmore of anger and sorrow and protectiveness—with the remnants of a defiant nobility Ann had never seen before, not in any man.

"He's shaking it off," Jack said.

"Just a few more shots," Denham said. Flashbulbs popped. Ann pulled away from Jack and wrapped her hands around the bars again.

"*No,*" Denham yelled. "*Goddamn you, girl.*"

This time Jack grabbed Ann by the shoulders and yanked her back. "Pay attention or Mr. Denham won't get his pictures."

*Flash!*

Kong arched his back. The tarp fell away. Ann saw. Across the groin, a smaller tarp strapped to Kong's legs acted as a bloody bandage. It failed to hide a ravaged mound of limp flesh in the cavity between Kong's legs. Red-matted fur surrounded it.

"You cut him!"

"We took the fire out of him," Jack said.

"You mutilated him!" She locked eyes with Jack.

"Ann, be reasonable—"



Denham's ring went *ding!* against a cage bar. "Let me tell you, they'll make one hell of a display in my trophy room back home."

A scream of rage and pain and humiliation exploded out of her. Jack slapped her, hard, and she collapsed to the floor. Kong roared to bring down the cave enclosing him, to collapse the entire universe with the sound of his voice. Fists that had pounded down the centuries-old Wall became red as the manacles cut into fur and flesh. The chains and locks held.

"He'll damage himself!" Denham snapped. He ran to the row of tanks and turned a wheel valve. "*Everybody get back.*" Acrid clouds firehosed into Kong's face. Something metallic and bitter stung Ann's eyes and throat. Someone, she didn't notice who, grabbed her by an arm and dragged her away from the cage. Within seconds Kong lay still again. Until the next day her arm bore the off-color impressions of someone's fingers.

\* \* \* \*

"So, obviously—" said Ms. Ann Darrow, the famous author of a dozen books and organization charters that forced half a world to hold a mirror up to its own nature. "—there was more to the story." She looked out over the stunned audience. Even the Nobel Prize had not been so satisfying. Camera flashes popped, but Security paid no attention. That's all right. She didn't blame them.

"The rest is worth a footnote too, in case Mr. Burns there wishes to add another episode to his little documentary.

"The night before the opening at the Palace, I bedded Jack Driscoll. I don't remember if he was any good or not. But I got what I wanted from him: the combination to Kong's manacle lock devices. Then on opening night, before Denham brought up the Palace's curtain, before Kong was hoisted to a standing position for all the audience to see, I planned my first ever act of sabotage."

\* \* \* \*

Denham had walled off the Palace's church-sized backstage area. Ann approached the two armed men guarding its entrance. She told them that Mr. Denham wanted her to wait for him inside the protected space, inside with the star attraction. For one last roll of newsreel footage, she said. The truth was, Denham and Jack were in the theater office counting the incoming receipts and toasting their success. They believed she was alone in her dressing room. Twenty minutes until curtain.

From inside, Ann heard the stage manager's voice, muffled by the walls, as he shouted at his assistants, worrying over the enormous electric winches ready to slide

away the audience-facing wall and lift Kong's steel cruciform and its base to a vertical position. At any moment the stage manager might burst in to check the manacles securing the drugged Kong's wrists to the crossbeam, or the dockyard chains attached near Kong's wrist locks and ascending taut into the galleries high above the stage. If he caught Ann here, alone!

The crossbeam was a polished wall before her. On it, just above her head, rested Kong's right hand, palm up. It had not moved since she arrived. She found a stepstool and climbed to the metal surface. A short length of chrome chain attached the wrist manacle to the bar. Where the chain met the manacle, she found the lock and its four-inch-thick, foot-long, grooved bolt that locked the manacle closed. Though large and mechanically advanced, within two minutes Jack's combination sequence sprang free the bolt with a hammering clang. Thick springs secured the manacle's hinged halves in place, but those springs couldn't be nearly as strong as the bolt. She removed one of two blue silk scarves from her shoulders and tied it in a neat bow around the mechanism, hiding the retracted bolt. Earlier that afternoon, she'd made sure that everyone concerned, including the guards, knew she wanted to add a "woman's touch" to the formidable devices. Denham had said it was a swell idea. The press guys would love it.

She stepped off the stool and crossed the span to the opposite wrist, slowing a little when Kong's head formed a roof above her own. She repeated the unlocking procedure, tied the other scarf. Now, maybe, Kong had something approaching a fair chance. With luck, they both did.

Something watched her. She felt it. Panicked, she felt her knees go weak and she almost tumbled from the stool. She clasped a handful of thick, black fur near his thumb for support. Then again panic spiked—what if Kong suddenly awoke? She didn't know what he would do—bellow and roar, alerting Denham and the men with guns? Crush her in blind fury? She remained still, feeling her heart drum in her chest and the sweat sticking to her expensive formal gown. What was she doing here at all? Was she a stupid, sinful girl, just like Father always said?

A low huffing breath heated the air from above. She turned her head and looked up. Kong was looking at her. Twisting his neck as far as possible, he gazed down with eyes big enough and dark enough to mirror her entire body in their surfaces. She saw herself there, small and distorted and translucent, one hand on the lock, the other clutching his fur. In the jungle, a lifetime ago, Ann had looked into those eyes with terror as they stared back with desire and controlled supremacy. Once bright and intensely alive like some force as fundamental as weather or fire or sex, Kong's eyes now were dry and dull, their intensity faded. The drugs—and more—had taken their toll.

Kong turned his eyes just enough to focus on the manacle lock at Ann's tiny, tiny fingers. A heaving rumble, perhaps intentionally low and inaudible to anyone but Ann, wafted from that great, huge throat. Ann did not release her hold on his fur.

The two of them looked at and penetrated each other. Without sound or touch or physicality, something passed between them, a shared comprehension that bridged the chasm that had separated them. Two wounded animals: one that had known only freedom and mastery; another who, until now, had barely dared hope for either of those.

Perhaps it was the electric lights, perhaps only the moisture in her own eyes—whatever it was, for a moment Kong’s eyes seemed to re-ignite with a volition and understanding stronger than (or maybe merely different from) any human expression she’d ever known. But before she could see for sure, Kong turned his head back toward the ceiling, released a rumbling breath, and closed his eyes. Electric winches roared into action. The keening strain of overhead pulleys vibrated down from the ceiling through the chains. In the distance Denham barked orders. Someone pounded on the door.

\* \* \* \*

“With the rush to hoist Kong and raise the curtain on time,” Ann Darrow told her silent audience, “no one bothered to check the locks. So that, my dears, is how King Kong escaped so quickly.”

Somewhere deep in the auditorium, a pen dropped.

“Later, after the much-analyzed climb to the top of the Empire State Building, after the planes, after what had become of Kong on Fifth Avenue twelve hundred feet below— After all that and the lawsuits and criminal charges, I saw to it that Denham was ruined. The judicial system being so goddamn patronizing back then, the court awarded me a great deal of Denham’s money. They didn’t convict Jack, who was only following orders, evidently, though he never understood why I never spoke to him again. According to what I saw in Mr. Burns’ little film, my almost-husband tried to get into the movie business. Then later tried to drink himself to death, but failed at that too, the pathetic dear.”

She focused her attention on the poorly attired young man who had given her the rabbitty gaze when she pointed at him earlier.

“As to my feelings regarding the fact that dozens of innocent people were killed or injured—”

What did she think about all those lost or damaged lives? After all, human beings had suffered and died because of her; their pain and loss should have been placed in her hands, the same hands that had released those bolts. She had known that since the day Carl Denham went to jail.

“Do I have a guilty conscience? Do I regret giving Kong the only freedom he could have? On his terms?” She closed her eyes and reviewed a life that, she was

certain, to every person in the audience represented a crushing weight of years, of authority, of fiercely protected solitude bound by chrome chains of control and responsibility. More than anyone else in this room, she knew that wounds heal but scars remain. She long ago accepted hers and chose to not let them mark her in any way that did not serve her own ends. All those years rewound now and there she was again, reflected in Kong's eyes that final time—far, far above the world, up there in a cold, pigeon-colored sky veined with first morning light, in the warm black cavern of a palm—when she knew with the certainty of a shared soul that he understood what was happening to him.

Ann drew in a sharp breath, opened her eyes. For the first time in—she couldn't remember how long—her chest ached and her voice threatened to break. She expertly blinked back tears. The boy who had asked the question was sweating and biting his lip, unaware of how foolish he looked. The answer that came surprised her not at all. "Not today."

She stood straight and looked into that audience with a face clear, sharp, and unapologetic. "All those years ago, Carl Denham said to me, 'There's one thing I've learned in this life.' Well, I can outdo him by two. One: 'monster' is a relative term. Two: you either take control of your life—your power, your dignity, doing everything within that power to keep it—or the monsters take it from you. And three: If keeping the monsters away means letting go of the innocence that can be so familiar and comforting, well, then, that goes for girls as well as gods.

"It wasn't Beauty that killed the Beast. If you ask me, it was quite the other way around. Thank you. That's all."



EXT: Close-up. Dawn.

*The impossibly young woman is in a hairy palm high above the city. She is not screaming now. The beast's majestic chest is bloody from machine gun bullets. Before the biplanes circle around again, he looks at her, cradles her within his fingers. His expression is child-like, puzzled. He appears frustrated by his inability to say something to her. Finally, clutching the skyscraper's dirigible mooring mast, with infinite care he releases her onto a safe ledge. He touches her gently once, twice, three times before the planes swoop in again. More bullets pierce his flesh. He touches his neck, looks at the blood on his fingers. He visibly weakens. Weary. The planes return and scream once more. Then, perhaps exhausted, perhaps resigned, Kong loosens his grip and falls.*

*The camera pulls far back and we see the beast's silhouette descend, strike a ledge, tumble brokenly, and continue falling. We can't see the woman's face as he falls, exactly the same way, again and again uncountable times*