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## Anthropomorphize

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# ANTHROPOMORPHIZE

by [Amie Souza Reilly](#) | Apr 15, 2022 | [Fiction](#), [Fiction Spring 22](#) | [0](#)

“It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window, as they left Newhaven; it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning.” —Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Jules is twenty-nine. She is sitting in her cold car, in a parking garage attached to the building where she works, in the concrete and leaded glass city of New Haven, the only anthropologist involved in a study of capuchin monkeys. The monkeys are being taught to exchange coins for fruit. Most of her coworkers are men, some are psychologists, and the others are economists. The economists call the monkeys “insatiable stomachs of want” and the psychologists call them “pre-capitalistic mind models” and although she knows better, Jules calls them each by human names. In the mornings, a zoology graduate student comes in to take their vitals and bathe them.

Jules is in love with the graduate student and also with the sweet small hands of the monkeys.

As the car warms, Jules reaches for her phone to call Hen and remembers just before hitting her name on the screen that Hen is no longer speaking to her. The light on her dash chimes that the gas tank is low. Outside, the red flap of a cardinal catches her eye as it flies from the edge of a pale cement building without windows.

She wants to tell Hen about Wanda, the monkey with the wet eyes who, just after the grad student left but before the others came in, seduced the monkey she calls Paul in order to get his coin, which she then brought to Jules, her monkey hand outstretched, for an extra slice of apple. Jules is the only one who saw it happen.

Hen is no longer speaking to Jules because Jules is reckless. I am tired of picking you up after every catastrophe, Hen said the last time they spoke. Jules and Hen met in college. In the ten

years since, Hen has helped Jules get her car out of impound after it was towed for accumulating parking tickets, drove Jules across campus to turn in her thesis minutes before its midnight deadline, let Jules sleep on her couch after a break-up with a married boyfriend whose angry wife kept showing up on her doorstep. Just last year, Jules stayed with Hen after a different boyfriend ended their relationship, because Jules slept with a colleague at a conference. Hen has been dating the same man since her junior year, has held the same job since graduation, invests part of her paycheck in an IRA. When Hen said, I am tired of picking you up after every catastrophe, Jules had just adopted a cat, not knowing it was pregnant, eight squirming blind kittens swirled in a pile of dirty laundry under her bed, in an apartment that doesn't allow pets.

Jules didn't tell the graduate student about Wanda. She didn't tell the economists or the psychologists, either. She holds the knowledge of what she witnessed inside instead, where it will be protected.

She has played the scene out in her head, what she could say to the others—that Wanda wasn't exercising anything more than basic drives, desire and hunger, how trivial. That tiny monkeys in cages are no different from tiny scientists in buildings. She imagines the way her voice would raise, the way her finger would raise, first to point in the faces of the researchers and then to unlatch the cages, let Wanda and Paul go, let Poppy, Hank, Pinky, Guapo, and Fred Astaire go. But then what?

Her car warm, Jules backs out of her parking spot, drives around and down the long driveway of the garage, a constant left turn until she reaches the street. It has started to rain, gray drizzle, gray sidewalk, gray sky. She fell in love with the graduate student when she saw him bathe the capuchins. His hands so big over their smallness, what could have been rough made gentle. He is from somewhere in Illinois and his mother is sick and as soon as he's through with this study he will return there, take care of her, rekindle a romance with a high school sweetheart, get married,

have a baby he will name in honor of his mother. For a flicker, Jules thinks about telling him about Wanda, knowing it will prolong the study and therefore postpone his plans to leave.

At the red light before the entrance to I-95, her car chimes another reminder about needing gas. If Jules were to tell the grad student about Wanda, she would tell him how Wanda approached Paul slowly, turned herself to him and extended her hand, reaching somewhere between Paul and the coin he had in his corner of their enclosure. How Paul seemed to understand immediately what she wanted, and that the actual sex act was brief, she had the coin in her hand and then leapt toward Jules with a grin on her face. She was hungry. She wanted more apples. They were always out of reach. It was almost impossible for her to get what she wanted in the system the economists and psychologists had set up.

Jules' mother once told her that a car has forty miles from the time it alerts you to the time it runs out of gas. She sat in the parking lot for at least twenty minutes, waiting for warmth and thinking about Hen. How much gas has she wasted by idling? Maybe the warning light was already on when she left for work this morning, she can't remember. When the traffic light turns green, Jules pulls onto the highway and straight into traffic. There is a Shell station at the next exit.

After Hen told Jules she wouldn't clean up her messes anymore, Jules tidied up her apartment. She made an appointment to see the dentist. She wrote Hen an email and apologized, but she did not mention the long lunches she'd been taking with the graduate student, who was not her student or her employee, but seemed to revere her. It's been three weeks and Hen has not responded to Jules' email. Hen has also blocked her on Instagram and Twitter; all contact severed.

The glow of the Shell station is as cold and antiseptic as moonlight. There are eight pumps in two lines in front of a convenience store well-stocked with stale coffee and wilted hotdogs warmed by red lights. Jules feels the hollow ache of her hunger as she pumps gas into her car in the cold rain. She wishes she'd remembered to wear gloves.

Once the tank is full, Jules walks inside the store to get something to eat. Both Hen and the grad student are vegetarians, and Jules tried to be, too, but woke in the middle of most nights with a gnawing craving for meat. There was half an egg salad sandwich leftover in her lunchbox, but she wanted something else. Inside the store, the lights are bright. Along the wall, clear-doored refrigerators hum like a choir and Jules remembers she needs milk. As she opens the door, she sees her reflection, wet hair stuck to her head, bags under her eyes, the hint of a cold sore at the left corner of her mouth, and she grabs the first half gallon in the case not noticing it is skim, which she hates.

She recognizes the shape of Hen's shoulders beneath her coat, the knit hat on her head that Jules's mother sent to her the year Jules and Hen moved into their first off-campus apartment. The heels of her rainboots are worn at the back because she walks heavily on the backs of her feet. There is no way Jules can leave the store without Hen seeing her, she is too close to the door, and she needs the milk, needs a hot dog. The store feels smaller than it did a moment ago.

Jules gets in line behind Hen, the jug hanging from her curled fingers. She leans forward a little and in barely louder than a whisper she says, Hey. Hey, Hen.

Hen turns around, she's holding a long bottle of water, her eyeliner is smudged on one eye, probably from the rain, and Jules wants to clear it from her face.

Jules, Hen says, and for a second Jules thinks Hen might reach out to shake her hand in an oddly formal greeting and Jules puts her hand out, too. But Hen is only putting her hand into her pocket. The man behind the counter cranes his neck to be sure she isn't stealing. Jules, she says again, hi. It's been a while. It's good to see you. You look nice. It all comes out of Hen so fast and untrue. It hasn't been that long, it isn't good to see each other, Jules is wet.

Jules doesn't think before she erupts into conversation. I almost called you today, it's so funny that you're here, Wanda mated with Paul for a coin to get an extra slice of apple from me and

thank god no one was around to see it, you know? The only reason she stops talking is because the door opens and the wind rushes in, almost as loud as the bell over the door that dings each time it opens. A skinny man, a boy really, barely old enough to drive, runs toward the counter, cutting in front of Hen and Jules, not wearing a coat. You got a bathroom key? he asks the man behind the counter. The man behind the counter reaches for it up on a shelf holding cigarettes and baby formula and tells the coatless young man to leave his driver's license as collateral for the key. As he pulls it from the front pocket of his jeans, the boy spills a fountain of change on the floor.

Both Hen and Jules bend over to help gather what's spilled. Jules puts her milk on the ground, Hen puts her bottled water on a display of Easter candy, which is out a month too early. As she does, she takes her other hand out of her pocket to grab a quarter and Jules sees the diamond on her finger, clear as a window and magical in the florescent lighting of the convenience store.

Jules feels for a moment like she's looking at a diorama. The scene feels tiny, smaller than real, the store no bigger than a shoebox containing this frozen moment: a man holding a key in front of a teenager wearing big jeans while hot dogs rotate in a hot glass box near a yellow mop bucket, its handle leaning against the wall. Energy drinks glitter like sequins next to soda bottles shaped like toy missiles. And in the center of it all, Hen in her old gray knit hat and camel coat, the smudge of eyeliner like a gash, Jules' milk jug on the floor.

When the teen boy walks out with the bathroom key in his fist, time rights itself. Hen, Jules says to Hen's hand. I am so happy for you. For you both.

Hen follows Jules's eyes to her hand, says to her own engagement ring, What were you saying about the monkeys? What happened at work? Jules thinks about Wanda's fingers, so small reaching through her cage, her big wet eyes, the coin, the Tupperware bowl of sliced apples. And then she hears a sound that is not the convenience store door this time, but her phone, and on the face of her phone is a photo she took of the grad student, his hand on the top of his head, trying

to tame the cowlick that never lies flat. Jules knows Wanda will do it again, will trade sex for a coin and then trade the coin for an apple. She knows that the next time it happens the psychologists and economists will be there to observe it themselves, will draw conclusions about sex and manipulation, will make connections between consummation and consumption. She knows they'll never understand that if there were no cages, no coins, if there were instead endless reachable apples, there would be no need for trade at all, and maybe Wanda and Paul would have sex anyway, after eating their fill of apples and petting each other behind the ears, joy on top of joy on top of joy. Jules looks Hen in the eye and says, I have to take this call, I'm sorry, and she walks outside in the rain, leaving the milk on the floor.

Note: This story is born from an actual Yale study of capuchin monkeys. The true(r) story can be found [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### [Amie Souza Reilly](#)

[Amie Souza Reilly](#) lives in Connecticut. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Chestnut Review*, *HAD*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Catapult*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the Department of Languages and Literature at Sacred Heart University.