Monkey Business

FARAH GHUZNAVI

For those who thought that the title of this column referred to the simian attributes of certain world leaders (as well as the nature of their policies), I must clarify that my problems with monkeys predates all that!

It all started when I was still at school. We were busy planning our projects for the annual Science Fair, and I was discussing this with a group of friends, when one of the nuns came up and asked us in encouraging fashion, what we were planning to do as our science fair projects.

My friends quickly ran through the subject matter for their projects - constellations, energy sources, the ubiquitous sprouting of the mung bean (highlighted through all its glorious phases of development, after being placed in water). After they had finished, Sister Marie looked at me expectantly, waiting for my contribution. "I'm going to do Evolution", I said proudly.

Being an unusually dense child, I failed to recognise the danger signs that followed. "What do you mean by "evolution"?" Sister Marie said in an ominous tone. "How humanity gradually evolved, and its links to other species," I clarified, "especially the primates." "You mean that you're going to say that humanity has some link to monkeys??" cried the scandalised Sister Marie. "But Sister Marie, that's what the theory of evolution is about..." I faltered, trailing off into silence.

But the damage was already done! Although Darwin's theory of Evolution was part of our syllabus, as far as Sister Marie was concerned, I was already halfway to damnation (at least, according to Catholic dogma!) Those monkeys got me a week of detention, and a harangue that stayed with me for quite some time...

Nor did it get much better when I came into contact with monkeys outside my academic explorations. My grandmother had two pet monkeys named Chichi and Chimi, with whom she shared a relationship of mutual adoration. Alas, neither of the two little beasts was in the habit of extending their affections to the rest of humanity - particularly me!

While the younger one, Chimi, tended to ignore everyone apart from my grandmother, Chichi was a different kettle of fish. She was extremely jealous (and very clever), so would wait for Nanu to look the other way, before making hostile gestures or hideous grimaces at me! No matter how hard I tried, I never managed to prove to anyone else that she had this malevolent side. Instead my grandmother spent a lot of time trying to reassure me that the monkeys were essentially harmless, even as Chichi mocked me behind her back...

Nor was this the first time that my grandmother's love of monkeys had led to trouble. As a young woman living in Calcutta, she frequently incurred the wrath of her aunt by insisting on giving away kitchen scraps to the monkeys that roamed around their neighbourhood. Gradually, one or two of them became regular visitors to their kitchen, much to her aunt's displeasure. Each time one of these monkeys came to collect their rations of vegetable scrapings and the occasional choice morsel that my grandmother had saved for them, her aunt would unleash a torrent of complaints. Neither grandmother, nor the monkeys paid the slightest bit of attention.

Until one fateful day, when it all became too much. One of the monkeys, which was sitting next to my grandmother and taking the food from her hand, suddenly stood up on its hind legs without warning, and walked across to where her aunt was standing. The torrent of abuse suddenly dried up, as the aunt looked at the monkey in sheer terror. Raising its hands, the monkey suddenly slapped her on both cheeks, casually strolling back to my grandmother to pick up its titbits, before disappearing through the window!

Although I didn't hear that story until much later, my early experiences with Chichi had already taught me to have a healthy respect (and maintain a safe distance) from monkeys, in general. So some years ago, when I went on safari, I was dismayed to arrive at the camp and see a number of baboons running around quite freely. I was only partly reassured, when one of the staff told me that the monkeys performed an important function: because the camp was in the middle of the National Park, the absence of boundaries meant that sometimes wild animals (including lions and hyenas) would make their way through the grounds - on such occasions, the chattering of the monkeys served as a useful signal of danger...