

*Meet the weirdest family in the world*



# Half Brother

KENNETH OPPEL

*'Extraordinarily gripping'*

*The Bookseller*

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

## Part I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

## Part II

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

## Part III

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

About the Author

Also by Kenneth Oppel

Praise for *Half Brother*

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## About the Book

For his thirteenth birthday, Ben Tomlin gets an unusual present. A baby chimpanzee called Zan.

Ben's dad is a hot-shot behavioural scientist, and Zan is part of an experiment to find out if chimps can learn language. But 'Project Zan' turns their family upside-down. For Ben, it's the beginning of an extraordinary relationship with his new half brother.

But soon Zan's animal instincts and rapidly-growing strength begin to cause trouble. And as the media circus descends and the experiment spins out of control, only Ben can save him.

From multi-award-winning author Kenneth Oppel, *Half Brother* is a story which asks big questions about family, humanity and love - and describes one of the most unforgettable friendships in fiction.



# Half Brother

KENNETH OPPEL



*For my whole family*

# PART I

This is how we got Zan.

He was eight days old and his mother was holding him, nursing him. He was cuddled against her and she made comforting sounds, waving the flies away with her free hand. Her back was turned so she didn't see the gun when it fired the dart into her leg. She looked round with a grunt. She saw a man and a woman on the other side of the cage. She stared at them long and hard, still feeding her baby. She knew. It had happened once before, and she knew it was about to happen again. She shuffled deeper into the corner, held her baby tight. Then the tranquillizers kicked in and she slumped clumsily against the wall. Her eyes were still open, but had a glassy look.

The man opened the cage and moved swiftly towards her. He wanted to get to her before she dropped the baby, or rolled over and crushed it. The mother sat, paralysed, watching as the man pulled her whimpering baby away from her body. Outside the cage, the man passed the baby to the woman. She wrapped it gently in a soft blanket and cradled it in her arms, making shushing sounds.

This was my mother.

As she walked away from the cage with the baby, she sang to him, songs she'd used with me when I was little. After a few days she got on a plane with her new baby, and flew home to us.



# CHAPTER 1

## ZAN

I woke up, a teenager.

It was six a.m., June 30th, and I was in a sleeping bag on the floor of my empty bedroom, in our ugly new house on the other side of the country. When you didn't have curtains, the dawn was your alarm clock.

I didn't care. It was my birthday and I was thirteen years old, and there was something exciting about being up so early, seeing the first light slant across your walls, hearing the birds make a racket, and knowing you were the only one awake in the house. The day seemed huge.

Dad had promised to take me for a swim at the lake, and then out to a pizza place for dinner. I hoped he hadn't forgotten. Because, with Mom away, I wasn't too sure he'd remember to get me anything. I'd mentioned a new bike, but he'd never been much good at things like birthdays, especially when he was busy. And right now he was super busy, getting ready for his new project.

I sighed. If I was lucky, the movers would come, and I'd get a bed for my birthday. I looked around my new room, trying to decide where I was going to put all my stuff when it finally arrived.

Scattered beside me on the floor were a bunch of magazines and comics, and I started paging through the latest issue of *Popular Mechanics*. There was a really cool

article about how you could live in your own helicopter, and the pictures showed this big double-decker chopper on pontoons, tied up at a lakeside dock. Inside the helicopter was this super happy family. There was the mom and daughter being happy in the kitchen and the father being happy in the shower, and the two sons being happy playing with toys in their bedroom. The chopper was surprisingly spacious. The family could fly away whenever they wanted and live all over the world, but still be at home.

I wished we could've moved like that.

All we had was an ancient Volvo, and it had taken Dad and me six days to drive from Toronto to Victoria.

We could've flown, but Dad had wanted me to see my own country. He'd told me a bit about the Canadian Shield and the Prairies and the Rockies. A road trip, he'd said, just the two boys, while Mom was away in New Mexico, picking up the baby. We'd see all the cool sites, eat burgers and drink milkshakes, stay in motels with swimming pools, and have a blast.

I was suspicious right away. I knew the whole thing was cooked up to distract me - like giving someone a handful of Smarties on a crashing plane. But Dad was a really good talker. When he was enthusiastic, *you* got enthusiastic. He made you feel like you were the only person in the world, and he was sharing these things with you alone.

So I got pretty excited, and the day after school was out, we packed up the car and headed off. At first we talked a lot - actually, Dad did most of the talking, but I didn't mind, because he usually didn't talk this much to me. Normally he spent his days at the university, lecturing, or working on his research, and when he came home, he was all talked out, and didn't have much left to say - not to me anyway.

I really liked being with him the first couple of days. He'd already been out to Victoria for the job interview, and he told me how beautiful it was. Mountains and sea

practically everywhere you looked. The house we were going to live in was huge. The climate was the best in Canada. He told me how exciting it was going to be for me, starting at a new school. New teachers, new friends. It was going to be a big change, but Dad said change was wonderful and invigorating and the best thing that could happen to us as human beings. I'd love it, he said. He'd already decided, so there was no point asking *me* how *I* felt.

But not even Dad could talk for the entire eight hours we spent each day in the car – and every day he got a little quieter. Turned out we didn't stop at as many tourist sites as he'd promised, because he had everything scheduled very tightly, and he knew exactly where he wanted to be at the end of each day. So mostly what I saw of Canada was moving at fifty-five miles an hour.

Sometimes, instead of sitting up front, I sprawled across the back seat, reading Spider-Man comics and Ray Bradbury, or just listening to the radio. Dad let me choose the stations at least, tuning in to new ones when the old ones evaporated with the cities, and provinces, and time zones we left behind. The Rolling Stones belted out 'Angie' over and over again, and Dad watched the road, lost in his own thoughts. I sucked on orange Freezies, and the car smelled like French fries and ketchup, and the Fresca I'd spilled outside Thunder Bay.

On the fourth night, we were back in our motel room after dinner. Dad had hardly talked to me all day. Things had gone completely back to normal. I was just cargo.

Dad picked up one of his big books – on linguistics or primates, they all looked equally huge and terrifying – then glanced up like he'd just noticed me. Maybe he was feeling sorry for me, because he gave me a handful of change and said I could buy us something from the vending machines.

I went down to the end of the hall. I put in some nickels and dimes and got Dad a bag of his favourite potato chips.

Then I decided on a Mars bar. I pressed the button, and watched the big corkscrew coil turn. But it stopped too soon and my Mars bar was just hanging there. I thumped the machine, but it wouldn't fall.

And suddenly I was angry. It happened to me like that sometimes, a big solar flare of fury inside my head.

Dad got his chips. That was typical. Dad always got what he wanted. But me, no. I hadn't wanted to move. I liked Toronto. I liked my friends, and I'd wanted to stay, and Dad hadn't even *asked*. He just talked and talked and told me how great it was going to be.

And now I couldn't even get a stupid Mars bar. I grabbed the machine by the sides and tried to shake it. It moved a little. I put my weight into it. I was furious. I was like one of those mothers who sees her kid trapped under a car and suddenly has the strength to lift the whole thing. I figured if I could just tilt the machine forward an inch or so, my chocolate bar would fall loose.

I got the machine rocking, and then it was rocking too much, and I felt the huge refrigerator weight of the thing pushing back, and I knew it was going to fall on me.

Two huge hands slammed against the machine and I looked over and saw this enormous guy putting his shoulder to it and pushing it back into place.

'You coulda been killed, buddy!' he puffed.

'Jeez,' I said, staring stupidly at the machine.

'These things crush you, you know,' said the guy. 'Happened to a cousin of mine in Red Deer.'

'Really?' I said numbly.

'Oh yeah, big time. That your Mars bar?'

I nodded. He reached through the flap, grabbed it, and handed it to me.

'Have a good night now,' he said, and started plugging his own coins into the machine.

'Thanks,' I said.

I went back to our room. It took Dad a few seconds to glance up from his book. He probably had a paragraph to finish. 'That took a long time,' he said.

'The vending machine almost fell on me.'

Dad put down his book. 'Were you pushing it?'

'A bit.' I felt sick. Not just about the close call, but about how furious I'd been.

'Ben, you should never, *never* do that!' he said. 'Those things can kill you!'

'You don't have to get so mad!' I said. Maybe it was delayed shock, but my knees went wobbly and tears came into my eyes. Dad came over and hugged me.

I was glad he was hugging me, but at the same time I didn't want his hug because I still felt angry with him.

Later, after he was asleep, I lay awake for a bit, watching the headlights of the passing cars through the curtains and wondering what life was going to be like in Victoria.

The next day, instead of leaving at the crack of dawn, Dad let us have a long swim in the pool and then we took a detour off the Trans-Canada to a place called Drumheller where they'd discovered dinosaur bones. After that, it was up into the Rockies. The views were fantastic, and Dad made plenty of stops so I could take pictures.

On day six, we got to Vancouver and took the ferry across to Victoria. Our house, it turned out, wasn't actually in the city itself. It was on the outskirts, in the country, because we didn't want neighbours. Or, as Dad said with a wink, the neighbours didn't want us.

The university had found us a place off West Saanich Road. It was mostly farmland, with some pastures where you'd see cows and horses. You could drive a few minutes without seeing a single house.

'And here we are,' said Dad, pulling into a gravel driveway.

The place looked kind of sullen and dingy to me. On our old street in Toronto, the houses were red brick, skinny and three storeys tall. This one was wide, but just two storeys. The bottom was wood, painted dark green, and the top floor had some kind of pebbly stuff that Dad called stucco.

‘It’s perfect for us,’ he said enthusiastically, as we walked to the front door. ‘Come on, wait till you see your new room.’

My bedroom really was much bigger than my old one, and there were two bathrooms upstairs, so I wouldn’t have to share with Mom and Dad any more. It was strange, and a bit lonely, walking through all the empty rooms. They had nothing to do with me.

The only part that wasn’t empty was the downstairs extension, which the university had just finished before we arrived. It still smelled of wood and fresh paint. It was like a little guest house, connected to the kitchen by a door. You walked in and there was a playroom with cushions and a wooden box of blocks and toys and picture books. There was a little red table with matching chairs. There was a kitchenette with its own sink, fridge, hot-plate and high chair. Beyond that was the bedroom. The chest of drawers was already filled with colourful little T-shirts and shorts, and there were packs of diapers and a pail for the dirty ones. There was a comfy chair, and even a shelf with stuffed animals.

A colourful mobile hung above the empty crib.

I was still in my sleeping bag flipping through *Popular Mechanics* when I heard the sound of a big truck pulling up outside the house, then honking as it backed down our driveway. I ran to my window just to make sure it was really them, then out into the hallway in my pyjamas.

‘Our stuff!’ I hollered.

Dad staggered out in his boxers. ‘The truck’s here?’

'Yeah!' I was thinking: *My camera equipment, my records, my bed.*

Dad lurched back into his bedroom and pulled on some pants and a T-shirt. I did the same, and then we were both running down the stairs, throwing open the front door, and rushing out to greet the movers. They already had the back of the truck open and the ramp down.

We didn't bother with breakfast. We were too busy telling the guys where our stuff should go. I was watching for my boxes. It seemed like for ever since I'd helped pack up my room in Toronto. The guys worked pretty fast, and I was amazed how quickly our entire life was moving from the truck into the new house.

After a few hours they were done with most of the big stuff and were working on the rest of the boxes. I was unpacking in my room. I'd been worried about my photo enlarger and records, but nothing was broken. And I'd have a bed for my birthday after all! Better still, the movers would be gone in an hour or so, and Dad and I would definitely have time for a swim, and dinner at the pizza place.

Outside, a car horn gave a couple of honks. I went to the window and saw a taxi pulled up behind the moving van. The driver was taking a suitcase out of the trunk, and then he came round and opened the back door. Inside was Mom.

'Dad!' I yelled. 'Mom's home!'

'What?' I heard him call out in surprise.

I ran downstairs and outside. Mom was walking towards me, beaming. In her arms was a little bundle of blankets. I'd been missing her, but I hadn't realized just how much until I saw her. With her free hand she pulled me close.

'Ben,' she said, kissing the top of my head. 'Happy birthday, sweetie.'

'Thanks.' Dad hadn't even mentioned it yet.

'You're early!' Dad said, striding out of the house and kissing her.

‘They thought he was ready, so I got an earlier flight,’ Mom said. ‘I left a message at the department, but I guess you didn’t get it.’

‘I didn’t. Our phone’s not hooked up yet either. So how’s our little gentleman?’ Dad asked.

Mom pulled back the blankets, and there in her arms was a sleeping baby chimpanzee.

He was ugly. His tiny body fitted in the crook of Mom’s arm, his head resting on three of her fingers. His skin was all wrinkly. His nose was squashed flat and his jaw stuck way out. Frizzy black hair covered his whole body, except for his face and fingers, chest and toes. He had long skinny arms. His short legs were pulled up, and his toes were so long they looked more like fingers. He wore a little white T-shirt and a diaper and smelled like shampoo and Mom’s perfume. As we watched, he stirred and opened his eyes. They were brown and seemed huge in his small face. He stared at me and Dad, and then up at Mom, as if for reassurance. Mom held him closer.

‘He was a little angel on the plane,’ she said. ‘Not a peep, even when he was awake.’

‘He’ll do just fine,’ said Dad, smiling. ‘If he’s this agreeable all the time, we’ll have no problem with this little guy.’

I looked from Dad to Mom. They seemed really happy. And I suddenly wondered: *Was this how they brought me home when I was born? When Dad first set eyes on me, had he smiled, just like he was smiling now?*

I looked at the chimp. He was the reason we’d come.

I’d moved all the way across the country so my parents could be with him.

So they could teach him how to talk.

Dad was a behavioural psychologist. That meant he studied the way people acted. Animals too. Professor Richard Tomlin. In Toronto he taught at the university. A few years



back, he did something clever with rats and published lots of articles, which led to invitations to other universities to show people what his rats could do. Everyone got very excited about it.

Then he got bored with rats and got interested in whether humans were the only animals who could learn language. Dad said there were some scientists in the 1930s who actually tried to teach chimps to speak, but it turned out chimps didn't have the right kind of tongue or larynx or something, so they couldn't form human words.

But Dad knew how smart chimps were, and wanted to see if they could learn American Sign Language, just like deaf people.

So for the past couple of years he'd been asking the university to get him a chimp and fund the experiment. But even though Dad was a bit of a hotshot, and very good with rats, the university wasn't so sure it was interested. I knew Dad had been getting frustrated because he talked a lot about how short-sighted the psychology department was, dragging its feet like this.

But then he got a job offer from the university out here in Victoria. Not only would they give him a big promotion and make him a full professor, but they'd get him a chimp. Dad said yes. I didn't think he even asked Mom. He certainly didn't ask me. He would've moved us to Tibet if they'd given him a chimp.

It turned out finding one wasn't all that easy. You couldn't just buy one at a pet store. *I'll take the cute little one over there.* And it couldn't be some scraggly old chimp from a zoo. Dad wanted a brand-new chimpanzee. A fresh slate; that's what he'd called it.

It took about six months. When he finally got the call, I could tell just from his voice that it was good news. After he hung up, I'd never seen him so excited.

'Borroway has a baby they don't want!'

He'd talked about this place lots before. Borrowway was an Air Force base in New Mexico. They had lots of chimps. In the fifties and sixties they brought a whole bunch into the country to use them for the American space programme. But that was twenty years ago, and now it seemed like they didn't need as many. One of their adult females was about to have another baby and they didn't want to take care of it.

It was perfect for Dad. He needed a baby chimp that could be taken away from its mother, days after birth.

He wanted a baby he could raise like a human.

We ordered in pizza that night, and ate it in the living room, on the orange shag carpet. We had our sofas now, but it seemed more relaxing - and kind of decadent - to sprawl out on the floor with our shoes and socks off, like hippies. Mom especially looked like a hippie, with her long hair, bell-bottoms, fringed vest and the Native medallion hanging from a leather necklace.

Dad was pretty strait-laced. I'd seen some of the other professors in Toronto wear jeans, but Dad always liked a proper suit and tie for work. His hair was short. He didn't go in for all this touchy-feely stuff; he preferred facts. Like Mom, though, he was good-looking, even though he was getting close to forty. They were certainly a lot younger than most of the other parents I knew, because they got married so early, when Dad was a grad student and Mom was still in undergrad. Mom was just twenty-one when she had me.

And now she had another baby.

I looked over at the little bassinet, where the baby chimp was fast asleep, his tiny fingers twitching every now and then. I'd never even had a pet before. No cats or dogs in our house. Dad hated the idea of pets.

'What're you going to call it?' I asked.

'Well,' said Mom, pouring herself some more red wine, 'they'd already named him Chuck at the base, after Chuck Yeager.'

'The guy who broke the sound barrier?' I said.

She nodded. 'But I don't think he looks much like a Chuck.'

'The name's not important,' Dad said. 'He just needs one.'

'Well, *I* think the name's important,' said Mom. 'How about naming him after where he came from?'

'New Mexico?' I asked.

'No, the place he would've been born in the wild.'

'A bit sentimental, don't you think?' said Dad. He hated sentimentality. He said it got in the way of the truth. It was the enemy of science. He wanted to strip it all away and show things and people as they really were. It was better that way, he said. Healthier and more honest.

'Congo,' said Mom.

I frowned, trying to remember my map of Africa. 'Isn't the country called something else now? Zaire?'

She nodded. 'But the Congo's also the river that runs through central Africa. There's a theory that the river separated two different groups of chimps. And that's why they evolved into different species.'

Dad shook his head. 'Congo sounds a bit too much like Bonzo - the chimp in that awful Ronald Reagan movie. I don't want the association.'

'How about Kong?' I suggested. It was sort of fun, thinking up names.

Mom chuckled. 'King Kong? For this tiny little thing?'

'Tarzan, then!' I said.

This time Dad laughed. 'Keep in mind, I have to use this name in all the scientific papers. It's a bit hard to take Tarzan seriously.'

'For someone who said the name didn't matter, you're being awfully picky!' Mom said, giving Dad a playful jab

with her finger.

I thought some more. 'Just the last bit, then. Zan!'

'I like it,' said Mom right away. 'Does that meet with your approval, Richard?'

'Sounds like something out of *Star Trek*,' said Dad, 'but sure, I can live with Zan.'

*I wonder if I can*, I thought, looking at the sleeping chimp.

Mom poured a little splash of wine into my empty cup.

'You're old enough to have a sip,' she said. She raised her glass. 'To our new teenager.'

We all clinked glasses and drank. It was probably the worst thing I'd ever tasted.

'Sorry we didn't get you to the lake or the pizza place,' Dad said.

'It's OK,' I lied. It had been a crazy day, with the movers and Mom arriving all at once, and getting the house in order, and making sure the chimpanzee had everything he needed. At least Dad had remembered to get me the bike – he'd been keeping it hidden in the garage. And it really was an excellent bike.

'Let me get you some more ginger ale,' Mom said, after I'd choked down another sip of wine.

She went to the kitchen and when she came back she was holding a birthday cake, thirteen candles lit up. She and Dad launched into 'Happy Birthday to you'. Normally it made me kind of embarrassed when they sang, but this time I couldn't help smiling, because I honestly hadn't thought there'd be cake. Mom must have made a special trip earlier to get one.

I blew out the candles and made a wish. I wished that we'd be happy in our new home.

Then I looked over at baby Zan, all swaddled in his bassinet, and thought:

*We are the weirdest family in the world.*

## CHAPTER 2

### FREAKY LITTLE BROTHER

Over the next few days Zan mostly slept, and Mom kept him in his little bassinet while we unpacked boxes and shifted furniture and put our books on the shelves. I could tell that Mom wasn't thrilled with the house. She said things like: 'Well, it's no beauty, but it's very spacious.' She liked the back yard (even if it was enclosed with a high chain-link fence) and the trees, and the farms all around.

I was pretty excited about setting up my new room with my posters and big floor cushions. Even better, the walk-in closet was big enough for a table to hold my enlarger and trays, so I had my own personal darkroom.

When Zan wasn't sleeping he wanted to be held. He needed bottles every two hours. Mom carried him everywhere with her in one of those colourful African slings. She changed Zan's diapers and bathed him and dressed him - I didn't think I'd ever seen her so happy.

'Would you like to hold him?' she sometimes asked me.

I shook my head. I didn't want to touch him.

When Mom held Zan it looked completely natural; when Dad held him it never looked quite right, even when he made cooing sounds and rocked him. Usually Zan would start whimpering, and Dad would look at Mom and go, 'Am I doing something wrong?' and she'd say, 'No, no, he's

probably just hungry or wet. Let me see.' And Dad would hand him over, looking relieved.

I rode my bike a lot.

Dad spent most of the time on the university campus, getting his office ready, and preparing for the courses he had to teach in the fall. And Mom was busy taking care of Zan and, when he was asleep, working on her thesis. Unlike Dad, she still had to get her PhD, and to do that, she had to write a thesis – a really long book. She was going to write it on Zan, while running the research project with Dad.

My favourite time to go for a ride was in the evening right after supper, with the sun slanting through the tops of the trees and the shadows all long on the road. Toronto got so hot and humid in the summer sometimes, you just felt soaked stepping outside, no matter what time of day it was. Here, there always seemed to be a breeze, and in the mornings and evenings, the air cooled down so you didn't get hot or thirsty.

The road smelled like tar and dust and cut grass. It smelled like a promise. Whenever I passed a cluster of houses I'd slow down, hoping to see some other kids hanging out in the front yards. I guess I was hoping they'd wave me over and we'd all go tooling around on our bikes and buy Freezies at the local corner store. So far, no luck.

Not far from our house was a construction site, and a big sign facing the road, showing what the houses in the new subdivison would look like. Right now it was just big machines perched crookedly on piles of rubble and lots of concrete cylinders. One evening I thought I saw a couple of kids moving around near the machinery, but it was dusk by then, and I didn't feel like wandering out there.

So I headed for home. In the distance I saw the lights of the city, and felt a hunger to be down there, to be a part of that light. Back home in Toronto, Mom and Dad had just

started letting me go downtown with my friends on the streetcar. I wondered how long it would be until I had someone to do that with here.

A few days ago, Mom had let me call up Will and Blake on the phone. It was good to hear their voices, but sometimes it got awkward and we didn't know what to say. Sometimes the line was crackly and there were delays in our voices and it made them seem even farther away. I'd probably never see them again, thanks to Dad.

'I think we should start using sign language with Zan now,' Dad said over breakfast one morning in mid-July.

I looked at him over my spoonful of cornflakes. 'He's only, like, three weeks old.'

'I think it's a good idea,' said Mom. 'Just so he gets used to seeing the signs.'

'We'll have the whole team of research students by fall,' said Dad, 'and that's when we'll start teaching him properly. But for now I've drawn up a short list of high-frequency words. These'll be his first words, so if we can give him a head start, so much the better.' He nodded at the big kitchen bulletin board, where he'd tacked up a list.

*Up. Drink. Give. More. Eat. You. Me.*

'Hang on,' I said. 'I'm supposed to learn sign language, too?'

'It's pretty easy, Ben,' said Dad. 'And it would really help Zan. And the project.'

I shrugged. 'It's not *my* project.' I shovelled more cornflakes into my mouth, staring down into my bowl. Mom and Dad didn't say anything, but from the corner of my eye I saw them glance at each other, then back at me. Dad had his calm, psychologist expression on.

'I know all this change has been tough on you, Ben,' he said, 'and it's perfectly normal to feel jealous of—'

'I'm *not* jealous of Zan!' I said, looking at him, sucking happily on a bottle in Mom's arms. Zan was fine: I didn't

feel much about him, one way or another. But I was sick to death of the *project*. I'd been hearing about it for months and months back in Toronto and, for the past two weeks, it was pretty much all Mom and Dad talked about. They'd dragged me across the country for it, I had no friends – and now I was supposed to help them out?

'I don't ask you guys to do my homework,' I muttered.

Mom laughed. 'He's got a point,' she said to Dad.

Dad nodded patiently. 'It is an unusual project, Ben, I know. But Mom and I wouldn't be doing this if we didn't think it was going to be something truly remarkable. Think about it,' he said, and I couldn't help looking up from my cereal to meet his gaze. 'This isn't a typical animal behaviour study. This is the first proper human attempt to talk, actually *talk*, with another species. Chimps are our closest relatives, and they're extremely smart, but we've never had a conversation with them! If we can give them the tools of language, imagine what they might tell us, teach us! It's incredible.'

Some of this I'd heard before, but it did sound exciting. It was like something from a sci-fi movie. One day people would read about it in *Popular Science*, and I could be a part of it. I caught myself nodding as Dad carried on, his eyes bright, his hands grasping at the air for emphasis.

'And that's why the project's whole design is so radical,' he said. 'We're trying to teach another species our language. Human language. So we need to raise Zan like a human baby, so he can learn language just like a human would. No cages. No labs. He's one of us now. He has a crib and clothes and toys. And most important he has a family. He has a mother and a father – and a big brother, too.'

'Ben,' Mom called up the stairs, later that morning. 'There's someone here for you.'

'Who?' I asked as I went down.

'I don't know,' she whispered.



I reached the bottom of the stairs and looked out through the open front door. A kid about my age was riding around on his bike in the driveway.

I went to the door. 'Hi,' I said.

'Hey. You just moved in, right?' the kid asked.

'Yeah, about a month ago.'

'I live up the road,' he said. 'I've seen you cycle by.'

He coasted a bit closer to the door, keeping his bike balanced without putting down his feet. He was pretty good. He had shaggy blond hair and was fairly big without being huge. He smiled a lot.

'So, you coming out?' he asked.

'Yeah, sure, hang on.'

I went and told Mom I was going out. She seemed pleased.

'I'm Ben,' I said as I wheeled my bike out from the garage.

'Tim,' he said. 'What grade are you in?'

'Going into eight. You?'

'Same. Are you going to Brentwood?'

'Yeah.' That was the local school. 'Is it pretty good?'

'Awful,' he said, grinning.

We charged around on our bikes. I let him lead the way, pumping hard to keep up. We went past where they were building the new subdivision, and Tim slowed down so we were alongside each other.

'It's really cool in there,' he said. 'We go there sometimes when they're not working.'

I remembered the figures I'd seen once at dusk. Then Tim sped up again and took me down some roads I didn't know, and we ended up at a little plaza where there was a bakery that had a big cooler with all different kinds of pop.

We sat outside on the edge of the sidewalk and drank from the sweaty bottles.

'You play soccer?' Tim asked.

'Not much.'

'Football?'

I shook my head.

'Any sports?'

'I run. Cross-country,' I said.

He grimaced, like that didn't count.

'I do a lot of photography,' I said, feeling I needed to make myself look better. 'I wouldn't mind making movies one day maybe.'

'That's cool,' he said. 'Where you from?'

'Toronto.'

'What'd you come here for?'

'A stupid monkey,' I said.

He laughed and sprayed out some pop. '*What?*'

'Well, a chimp actually,' I said, and told him about the project.

'That's crazy,' he said. 'You like pinball?'

'Yeah!'

'We've got a pinball machine in our rec room.'

I looked at him in amazement. 'Really?'

'Yeah. Dad got it used from one of his customers. It's pretty good. You've got a second set of flippers up the ramp. C'mon.'

It turned out Tim lived just a couple of minutes up the road from us, in a small blue house. I'd passed it lots of times on my bike but never seen him. We went in the side door, straight down to the basement. The rec room had a low ceiling, and wood panelling. The carpet was dingy. There was a TV and a couple of beat-up sofas and some coffee tables and a floor lamp. On the wall was a truck calendar. The whole room smelled like old shoes.

Blinking quietly in one corner was a *Planet of the Apes* pinball machine. On the back panel were pictures of angry-looking gorillas in helmets and armour and rifles, chasing humans in tattered rags. I'd seen the movie, and it was pretty exciting.

I'd never known anyone who had a pinball machine in their house. In Toronto there was an Italian coffee place near the school where we sometimes played at lunchtime, and it cost a quarter. Tim just pushed the red start button on the side, and the machine burbled into life, popping out the first ball. Tim was excellent, no surprise, since he had the thing in his house. He played the first ball for about ten minutes before losing it. Then it was my turn.

We talked a bit as we played. He loved soccer and was on a local rep team. His dad was a plumber. He had a brother two years older than him. His favourite subject at school was gym. He liked Charlton Heston movies. He liked Led Zeppelin and hated the Osmonds, especially Donny.

'Want to see something?' he asked after we'd been playing for about half an hour.

'Sure,' I said.

He took me through a doorway into the unfinished part of the basement. There were a couple of bashed-up deep freezes, only one of which was humming. Tim went to the quiet one and hefted up the lid. A musty smell of paper wafted out and I looked down at pile after pile of magazines with naked women on the covers. The sheer number of them, and all that skin, stunned me. The sudden heat in my cheeks travelled all the way down between my legs.

'Wow,' I said, swallowing and looking over at Tim. Even he looked kind of awestruck, gazing at them like the contents of a treasure chest.

'Yeah,' he said.

Overhead we heard his mother's footsteps in the kitchen.

'We'd better not look at them now,' he said, letting the lid drop.

Walking back to the rec room, I saw a wall rack with four rifles in it.

'Those are Dad's,' he said. 'He goes hunting. I'd let you hold one, but he keeps them locked up.'

I'd never held a gun, and wasn't sure I wanted to. 'That's OK.'

'I've got a BB gun,' Tim told me, as though this would cheer me up. He grabbed a lightweight rifle tipped against the wall and held it up for me to see. 'Model 105 Buck. Come on.'

In the back yard he set up some paper cups along the fence that bordered the fields and we took turns shooting at them. The ammunition was these tiny steel balls. To load, you pumped a lever, then held the gun to your eye to aim through the cross-hairs. Tim was a good shot. He could knock the paper cups off the fence almost every time. By the end, I'd gotten a couple. It was fun, actually.

Towards the end, I went to put the cups back on the fence and felt a sharp pain in the back of my jeans. It was like getting stung by a wasp.

I swore and gripped my bum and looked round. Tim was laughing. He was holding the gun.

'Jeez,' I said. 'That hurt!'

'Yeah, it does,' he said. 'Sorry. Couldn't resist.'

I looked at my hand to see if there was any blood, but there wasn't. It hadn't even torn my jeans. It just stung like heck. I was kind of angry with him, but he was smiling and laughing so good-naturedly it was hard to stay mad.

I figured I'd made a friend.

When I got back home, I walked into the living room and Mom was sitting in an armchair, holding Zan. Her blouse was unbuttoned and folded back on one side, and Zan was sucking at her breast. She and Zan both turned to look at me at the same time, Zan's face brown against my mother's pale skin. I instantly looked away, feeling like I'd done something wrong, like I'd seen something I was never meant to see.

'Sorry,' I said, and headed out of the room.

‘Ben, wait,’ I heard my mother say. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you come in.’

‘It’s OK,’ I said, stopping in the doorway, staring down at the carpet. From the corner of my eye I saw Mom put Zan down on her knee. He started whimpering and pawing her as she buttoned up her blouse.

‘Even with the bottle, Zan still seems to want to nurse,’ she said. ‘Your father thought it might be a good idea. To try and make sure he gets everything he’d get from his own mother.’

‘Right,’ I said, nodding. I didn’t want to think about it – not at all, really. ‘It’s sort of weird to see.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I have mixed feelings about it, too. And it’s not like I have any milk to give him anyway.’

‘You don’t?’ I asked.

She smiled and gave a little laugh. ‘You need to have your own baby to produce milk.’

‘Oh,’ I said, blushing. ‘Right.’

‘Anyway, I can’t keep it up for too long; it’s getting painful.’

I nodded and made a *hmm* sound, like I was all calm and interested in what she was saying. Mom was always very big on everyone talking openly, and sharing everything, and not being embarrassed about our bodies especially. She said it was unhealthy to be embarrassed about the human body, and that it was beautiful and honest and natural.

But I’d had about as much nature and honesty as I could handle right now.

It was another week or so before I held Zan for the first time.

I was sort of nervous. I sat down on the couch and Mom put him in my arms. He was awake and he just settled against me, gazing up into my eyes and occasionally making a soft panting sound. It was a really intense look, like he expected something.

I remembered Mom saying that chimps spent a lot of time grooming one other. So I combed through Zan's hair with my fingers, kind of patting him and stroking him, and he got very quiet and looked at me even more intently. Then I pretended to find something interesting in his hair, pick it out, and pop it into my mouth. I made a satisfied smacking sound. Zan looked very interested at that and hooted softly.

Without even realizing it, I was stroking him, and before long his eyes started to look sleepy, and he dozed off. Mom asked if I wanted to give him back, but I said it was OK, and stayed there like that for a little longer, Zan sleeping in my arms.

Mom took a picture of us with my camera.

It was hard to know what Zan thought of all the signs we made as we talked with him. But his eyes were alert and curious and he seemed to watch everything.

He always wanted to be held, so before I picked him up, I'd sign *Up* - just pointing my index finger skyward - and then lift him. And he loved being hugged, so I thought it would be a good idea to teach him that sign as well. Before I gave him a hug, I'd do the *Hug* sign, which was simple, just crossing your arms across your chest, like you were giving yourself a hug.

The first time Dad saw me doing it he asked me to stop. 'We need to start slowly with him,' he said. 'We don't want to confuse him.'

'I think Ben's got the right idea, though,' Mom said. 'Shouldn't we be stressing the things that are most part of his life?'

'I suppose it's fine for now,' said Dad. 'But when we start teaching him properly, we'll need to stick to the signs we choose. It's got to be very methodical.'

In the first week of August, when Zan was about five weeks old, Dad decided it was time to introduce names. We