

Mama's Bouquet

By John Atkinson

Frank taught me a lot about the woods. He said the main thing was not to get turned around. Once I came across a bed of wild flowers. They looked like Mama's irises except they were much smaller. I wanted to take them home to add to her flowerbed. Frank got upset with me because he didn't want to hang around a sissy messing with flowers. But I explained it would be great if we could dig up the tiny plants because Mother's Day was only a few days away.

"Johnnyboy, you've lost your mind. They are wild."

"So?"

"Listen up. They only grow in the woods. That's the law of nature."

I'd had enough law, people telling me what I couldn't do. Now here was my best friend siding with a law I'd never heard before. I thought it was another one of my pal's tricks.

"Loan me your Barlow knife," I said. "I'm going to dig up a mess of flowers for Mama."

Frank suggested I pick a mess and take them home. I think he had tried this before because he was too willing to offer the advice. But he said I'd better not tell anybody about plucking wild flowers. The guys at school would think we were crazy.

I started picking flowers, but somehow the little things wound up injured. Even after I took my time not to damage the plant, but they wilted before I held a handful.

Frank was right. The plants liked where they were.

Frank, acting smart-alecky, said for me to go up and knock on somebody's door and ask for a few bulbs out of their yard, but never say we were ever friends.

"Hey, Frank! I thought you were cool. How can I find iris plants?"

Frank twisted his mouth. He did that when he was thinking. "Johnnyboy, I forgot. Sunday is Mother's Day. If we can get away with it, it'll work."

I worried about the "we" part because that usually meant me. I worried about what "get away with it" meant. Frank was brazen. The guy would do anything as long as it was fun. I figured he wanted to get his mom something for Mother's Day too. He loved his mother like I loved mine.

"We have a job," said Frank. "It won't take long."

"Doing what?"

"The Monkey Man needs some repairs. You know how to do that stuff."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea."

I worked well with my hands, drove nails, sawed boards pretty straight and could mend most anything to do with carpentry. "Who's the Monkey Man? Where does he live?" They were sensible questions, but Frank changed the subject without answering. That meant something was up.

Frank said the Monkey Man would pay us for our work as soon as we were finished. Gasoline was about 18 cents a gallon and we got a ride from the man with a pickup truck. We loaded a few boards from Frank's house, along with hammer, nails and handsaw. I rode in the back of the truck to hold down the long planks. Frank sweet-talked the driver into stopping at a corner store and buying us soda pops. Frank said we would

promptly pay him back the next day. Drinks had just jumped up in price from 5 to 7 cents in a returnable bottle. We vowed never to buy them again, but it was hot that day.

Driving down a long un-kept dirt lane to the Monkey Man's house, the driver was nervous. Frank told him that we would wash his truck after it had sunk up to the running boards in a mud hole. Each puddle was deeper than the last. The way things were going we would need two more jobs to pay for things as they were and we hadn't started work yet.

Our driver stopped and said he wasn't going any farther. Frank said it wasn't that much more and the driver said, "Good. Tote the lumber from here." The driver turned his truck around. We were about a block from the Monkey Man's house when the truck drove away. Now Frank told me we had another problem—the Monkey Man didn't know we were coming.

"Then how do we know we have a job?"

Frank said for me not to be concerned with that. The main thing was how we would get the lumber on site. We shouldered what we could and marched on. As soon as I saw what we were up against, a shack that was ready to fall over with a single puff of wind, I thought about using my hammer on my pal's hard head.

"That's not what we're working on," Frank said, and took in a deep breath from the load on his shoulder. "Our job is on farther."

"Dammit! I can't go any farther! What have you gotten me into?"

Frank had a way about calming my nerves. He said we were going to fix something on the other side of the shack; that no one used the house that frightened me. It

was as plain as could be the house was haunted. Frank said the cock-eyed house was used as a decoy.

“Why would anyone need a house for a decoy?”

“Because he’s a bootlegger, that’s why.”

“The Monkey Man is a bootlegger?”

“I didn’t stutter, did I? The job is back behind this one.”

I took a few steps forward and froze in my tracks. A cry came from behind the haunted house. The scream sounded like it was from a Tarzan movie, the drive-in window speaker turned up as loud as it would go. “What the hell was that?” I asked my pal, who pretended as if nothing had happened. “Didn’t you hear what I just heard?”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “That’s Bruno.”

“Bruno?”

“Yeah, a chimp.”

“A chimp?” I thought a second. That’s not a good name for a chimp. Bruno was a name depicting a large brute. “How big is Bruno?”

Frank said not to worry, that he and Bruno were friends.

“But I’m not Bruno’s friend.”

Frank said I was much too concerned, but after the ape’s cry, I wasn’t about to take another step unless it was in the opposite direction. Frank said Bruno was a large male chimpanzee, but he didn’t tell me the ape had a bad attitude and the Monkey Man had him for protection against intruders. My pal wanted to move forward too fast.

“Hold it, Frank! Are you crazy? Nobody is around but a gorilla and you want me to help get us killed?”

Frank said I was overreacting, that the chimp was playful after he figured out we were good guys, and that we meant no harm to the property. “Just don’t make any sudden moves until we make friends.”

“But you said you were already friends.”

Frank said he had to reestablish the friendship with Bruno each time he went to the Monkey Man’s house and that was an easy thing to do. That made me more frightened. Frank didn’t tell me the Monkey Man got drunk out of his head and was subject to sic Bruno on imaginary demons. The Monkey Man could go into DTs at any time. That’s why Bruno was on edge, ready to fight to defend his ground.

Frank yelled for the Monkey Man, but Bruno answered with another icy scream. I felt hair rise on the back of my neck and goose bumps popped up on my forearms. I had no sooner said I was fixing to leave when Bruno appeared at the far corner of the haunted house looking straight at me. I didn’t know he was on a chain and Frank didn’t either. “Don’t move!” Frank ordered, fear in his voice.

Hell, I couldn’t move if I’d wanted to. Bruno could catch us before we could turn and take a step. I had a few things figured out. At the moment Frank was without a doubt a danger to himself and any fool who was stupid enough to follow him. That’s what he meant, “*a job if we could get away with it.*” He’s finally lost his fool mind, bringing us here.

Frank didn’t look like he was Bruno’s friend. The big ape squalled and showed teeth as bright as sunshine on a car’s chrome bumper. Angry as Bruno was, I figured something was holding him back. Then we saw a chain around Bruno’s neck. Frank recovered fast from his fear, but I didn’t. He said it was safe for us to go on.

“Frank, it’s safe for us to leave!”

My pal reminded me why we were there, that we needed money to buy flowers for Mother’s Day. Somehow I knew this was going to be an unforgettable Mother’s Day, me in the hospital or in the county morgue.

It took me a while to put things in order. Frank was right. We would have to work around Bruno’s threats or I would be picking wild flowers in the woods. I’d forgotten about repaying our debt to the truck driver for the soft drinks, gasoline and truck wash. We hadn’t driven the first nail, but we were out of Bruno’s reach—that much was to the good.

“What do we have to do?” I asked Frank, but he didn’t answer, which meant things could get worse. Frank left me standing in my tracks while he swung wide on the opposite side from Bruno to the back of the haunted house. I followed after I lost sight of Bruno. The ape followed Frank to know what we were up to.

Behind the haunted house was a newer house. It looked better than the haunted one, stood up straight, but was painted a stupid looking lime green. It had a filthy band of mud around it from Bruno’s paw prints. When the chimp wanted to go inside he banged on the weatherboard to his master who could ignore the impatient ape for hours. Now Bruno’s concern was us. His chain ran to a back porch post of the haunted house. He had calmed down some, but if Bruno got pissed off, I figured he could jerk the post loose. My mission was to keep Frank from doing something that would excite the ill-tempered humanoid. Frank seemed to be blind to the ape’s hatred of us. And Frank had a way of getting a little puppy angry.

The closer Frank got to the green house the more agitated Bruno became. It was plain what his job was, defending the painted house. Frank stayed out of reach of Bruno and looked through steel bars in a side window. He yelled the bootlegger had passed out drunk on the floor—that booze and money were scattered everywhere. He said that’s why Bruno was chained the way he was, to protect his master’s door; the only way you could get inside the green house. Bruno had enough chain to reach that. Frank said we could work as long as we didn’t get near the door.

That made sense. But Frank liked danger and for the love of God I couldn’t figure how a soul could add more. The ape was ready to attack. Bruno moved where he could watch us. One thing was for certain; he didn’t like either one of us. If Frank and Bruno were ever friends, Bruno didn’t show it.

“Frank, why do they call the bootlegger Monkey Man when he owns an ape?”

“Are you kidding? Drunks that come here don’t know the difference.”

“Does that mean I’m smart?”

“No, that means you’ve been hanging out with me, Johnnyboy. You just ask dumb questions sometimes.”

Frank displayed his twisted grin, the one that begged for danger, the kind of danger that could get us hurt. Everything was in place to do that. Frank said we had a job to do. “But my legs won’t move.” It was true. I was stiff with fear. I avoided looking into Bruno’s eyes. Instinctively I knew that was a challenge to fight. After I had loosened up a bit, I asked, “What’s up?”

“We’ve got to repair Bruno’s cage.”

I told Frank he had better be joking, but he wasn't. This time I wasn't. "Are you crazy?"

With his usual confidence, Frank said everything would be cool. I knew better. The cage was located between the two houses and off to one side, making the back yard into a triangle of buildings. "Let's get to work," said my pal whose optimistic mind had surely left him. The job went like this; the first lick of my hammer on Bruno's cage sent the big ape into a rage. He flipped over backwards end over end. I had never seen anything like it. It was amazing and frightening all at the same time.

"What the hell did you do, Johnnyboy—step on Bruno's balls?" asked my pal as the chimp flipped and screamed louder than the Orange Blossom Special at the Glen Allen crossroads. I didn't have time to think about Frank's remark. Ape knuckles dug in the ground as Bad Boy Bruno charged at me, only to run out of chain a few feet away. Teeth gnashed so close to my face I could smell Bruno's stinking breath. God held the back porch post attached to the haunted house. Only He could do that.

Even the drunks knew better than to come around when the Monkey Man was passed out. No one but Frank had that kind of nerve to pull a stunt that could get our limbs ripped off by a raging ape. Frank could preach all he wanted about how the situation was cool. I saw the strength of Bruno in his acrobatics, flipping end over end and that was enough for me to make a decision. "I'm out of here. Mama will put flowers on my grave."

Cool or not, this time I didn't go along with Frank. Bruno held an object that looked like a key and was fumbling with a padlock at the end of his chain. I figured the ape was smart and it wouldn't take him long to unlock the chain. I didn't care how Frank

saw Bruno—friend or foe. If Frank ever got back to Glen Allen alive he could tell me how the job went. I dropped my hammer and ran like a scared rabbit. But my pal was on my heels and I was picking my feet up and putting them down as fast as my legs could carry me. I circled the safe side of the haunted house and heard the bootlegger yell, “I will kill you!” Somehow I added more speed, jumping mud holes in the dirt lane with a single bound. The highway at the end came into view, but I shot past all that and headed down the paved road a fourth-mile before I let up on my high-stepping stallion’s gait.

With my pal Frank, if I had my hammer I would’ve tried to finish what Bruno started. But smooth-talking Frank did his thing. Walking home we began to laugh about “the fast feat at the monkey man’s house.” We laughed about who was going to wash the driver’s pickup truck. We would’ve flipped a coin on that one but we didn’t have a penny between us. But Frank and I were still friends, something we couldn’t put a value on. We were alive and happy.

At an abandoned house, I saw some yellow flowers. We stopped and picked a big mess of daffodils. I toted the flowers because Frank was too cool to do something like that, but that left him facing the payback for the gasoline, the soda pop and the truck wash. Back home I gave him his half. I had what I wanted—Mama’s bouquet. I came out the winner that time. From then on I learned to get the details before committing to a business partnership with Frank.

Mama loved the flowers and that was good enough for me. She deserved much more and not just on Mother’s Day. A beautiful lady who held wild birds in her hand. The birds saw Mama the way I did. She held their hearts just like she did mine.