

Joshua King

Poena Cullei

The monkey seemed at once our only hope of escape and our best chance of dying sooner than expected. His intelligence made him my best ally, sure, but his temper was a real drawback.

They only ever used a monkey if they had one on hand. That's what I had always heard. I can only wonder how the ridiculousness of this had never crossed my mind. They *always* seemed to have a monkey on hand. It made no sense. But, as you know, once you start thinking that the whole world begins to come apart at the seams.

Though it was as dark as ox-hide in there, there could be no mistaking who was who. The dog was the most docile, which was unsurprising. I had often seen stray dogs - which I assumed they used for these things - approach people in the streets and enter houses looking for food, unafraid of humans. My presence probably made him think more of scraps than of fear, lucky bugger. The snake was somewhere about, but there was no way of knowing where. A small thing. Probably not venomous. Just for show really. As for the rooster, if there hadn't been a monkey, he would have taken top spot on the list of least desirable sack partners. He didn't peck or scratch or anything like that, he just found it hard to keep still and nigh impossible to keep quiet.

That, in short, was the company I kept in the sack.

At this point we were rumbling down the road on the back of the cart, just getting to grips with each other. The crowd outside were following along, probably thirty or forty strong by now. I couldn't really hear them thanks to the monkey and the rooster, but I was sure they were there because I had been among them enough times. They usually kept quiet anyway, because the real fun was in listening to the prisoner and seeing if he could shout louder than the animals. And though they often could, I wasn't going to give the crowd that satisfaction.

The prisoners in my position often made the mistake of shouting "*fluribus*" or something similar at this time. The river was more desirable than the sea, you see. But, if you're already in the sack, they don't care much about your preferences, and anything you say is likely to get spun right around and turned into the opposite. So if they were going to the river, and they heard you shout for it, they'd likely change their mind out of spite. Besides, the sea was much closer and the river was barely six feet deep, so it was real wishful thinking. I wasn't as stupid as the others. I accepted my fate, even though I had done nothing wrong.

The cart was bumping along a gravel street and over all manner of surfaces, and I could, despite all, feel that we were going downhill, so I thought that the sea was just half a mile or so away.

Even though the road jolted and rocked the cart terribly, I managed to balance myself in a little ball, a sort of egg shape, and so I succeeded in not upsetting anyone too much. The dog even rested his head on my leg. Everyone else was, understandably, upset and showing it, but, in group solidarity, no one had drawn blood yet.

Due to a gross misjudgement of how long the road was, I was surprised by the sack being suddenly yanked up out of the cart and dropped on the floor. The pain was no worse than I had already been feeling. I

landed first, the dog on me, the monkey on him, the rooster on him and the snake somewhere about. Under different circumstances I could imagine savoring the moment for a party anecdote. Those gathered around wouldn't believe what an interesting life I led.

As I expected, this was the point where the crowd all moved forward and got a few kicks in, and, if they had a weapon with them, stabbed and prodded the sack until the guard called time. I can't blame them for this. They wanted the show to go on for as long as possible. Afterwards they had nothing to go back to but the usual routine of work or school, maybe a short bath or workout if there was time and then, if there was no theatre to be enjoyed, an evening reclining in wait for the next day.

After ten minutes or so of kicking, they let up. The monkey was screaming and causing me a notable amount of harm, the bugger.

But then all went still.

We had no solid edge to rest on suddenly, and all of us bunched together in the bottom end of the giant bag, in the same formation as when we had been dropped from the cart. And then we were dropped from what I could only assume was the cliff's edge.

The sound of the cheering crowd quickly died away into a distant whimper. We couldn't feel the air rip past us, because the thick hide took the brunt, but what we did feel was weightlessness. No doubt it was a rather banal experience for the rooster, but the rest of us fell still and silent, enjoying the macabre theatre of the moment before having to accept the inevitable. The bottom of the sack drifted away from me and the top hung somewhere above, rippling like it was in the water already. Just before we hit the sea, there was a moment of pre-impact when my body decided it must react somehow, and it knew that it should expect pain. If there had been any light inside I'm sure we would have exchanged glances, nodded in acknowledgement,

a final *here we go, chaps*. I braced myself. Even the snake stopped its incessant slithering and coiled up. The dog put both front legs around me, ready to treat me as a flotation device, of sorts. When we hit the water it felt as if my skeleton had been stripped and muddled and put back together.

The monkey, quite understandably, was as mad as a monkey could get.

I'm sure you're wondering how I came to be in this situation. Just remember to ignore the stories around town. You know how quickly rumors can get out of control.

Only a few hours ago I was walking home from work. I am not anything important. Well, certainly not now. But then I was only a shopkeeper. The slaves and aristocracy neatly enveloped me on either side of the social hierarchy, and neither had any need for the pottery I peddled. The lucky ones in my trade were getting involved with spices and silk and ivory and whatever other new fad was busy enjoying its time in the sun. No one bought pottery, it was true, but at least that would last for a thousand years. Not like these silly crazes. I had a legacy at least. And goodness knows it wasn't going to come in any other form. Kids, for example. No girl looked twice at me anymore.

But that's another story.

I was walking home from work with a basketful of unsold pottery. With times as they are, you know, and Romans coveting things they have no right to, I have had to start ferrying my wares back and forth each day or there would be nothing there in the morning. Not even pottery is safe in today's world. Jehovah.

It wasn't late in the day. I had packed up early because business was slow, so there were plenty of people milling about. I took the way home that I had taken every day before that, which led me through the marketplace, and, though my hands were full, people still thrust whatever was on their stall in front of me, shouting random numbers and its one-thousand household uses. I would walk past the gladiator ring, and sometimes, depending on the time, I could hear the screams and woops of a crowd that had just seen a head come loose. The next thing I passed was Speakers' Row.

Now I don't know if this was its official name, but that's what it was generally known as. Along the side of the street, up on stones or mounds of dust, or columns if they were particularly good, stood the speakers.

A harmless bunch usually, what they did was not given much notice by passers-by and the religious ramblings they spouted was generally not of much interest. However, it was a respected position. I can't put my finger on the strange mixture of charm and repulsiveness these men exuded, but then no one could, or wanted to. This mixture just made them invisible. Or, rather, visible but ignored. I don't mean to say that the Almighty is not a big part of life here, but most preferred to keep their beliefs undiluted by noisy strangers.

On my way home I would often try and catch a fragment of a speech, for fun, out of curiosity. I had never heard anything that wasn't either banal or benign, and I never thought to expect any different.

On this day there was a new guy up there. They were usually the same people with the same old idea, so this caused me to take a closer look. Beard: check. Dusty old robe: check. Lack of hygiene: check. Empty space in front of him: something was different.

Intently listening to every word was not a huge amount of people, but at least fifteen or so onlookers. They were nodding along, being polite, mouthing the words when it was obvious what he was going to say.

“I will trust and not be -” and they would all mouth “Afraid” or something close enough to not make them look silly. Everyone knew these maxims, because they were echoed everywhere. They had infiltrated like a smell. I must admit I took great joy in seeing them occasionally struggle to fill in the gaps, and the speaker’s hopeful face being greeted with random muttered syllables, designed to sound like any word, forcing him to finish the verse himself. I mean, to be fair, who would ever guess “he will rejoice over you with *singing*.” Not me. And not any of these gormless buggers.

Here is where it all went wrong.

I was perhaps just a bit giddy and playful having given myself a bit of extra time off work. Or maybe it was my father coming out in me. Either way, it didn’t take much to set me off.

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the –” our old speaker started. The crowd readied themselves to mutter their usual chorus, but one poor old woman, with her high-pitched squeak, overexcited and desperate to prove herself, took a stab a second earlier than the rest. It was a shame, because she could only come up with the word *bathhouse*. An answer so categorically wrong that it was laughable, unfortunately.

“Bathhouse,” she said, in more of a sneeze than anything.

Now, I’ll be the first to admit this isn’t funny. Objectively. But we’ve all been in those positions where we know we mustn’t laugh, and yet the whole world suddenly seems only good for comedy. Like needing to pee, it cannot be turned off. The only way out is out.

So I laughed. A big snort of a laugh. Everyone turned around, as they would.

“What you lau – hey, that’s Arrius’ boy,” someone said suddenly. I was, as he said, Arrius’ boy. A murmur went through the crowd. Being a shopkeeper can be quite good for increasing your local fame, but, sadly, I would only ever be recognized as “Arrius’ boy.”

“Now, now,” said the speaker, allowing his eyes to half-close in faux-contemplation. “I’m sure this young man did not mean anything by it. We are all, after all, children of Jehovah, so – ”

“Not him!” someone else chimed in with. The speaker looked confused and mumbled a petulant noise. “This apple fell right under the tree,” the person added.

The crowd approved with nods and guttural noises. “Just like his heathen father!” another said. Every eye that had recently been on the speaker was now on me, and the speaker and I seemed to share a desire to invert this. He stepped forward, elbowing audience members out of his way.

“Now listen here,” he said. “I don’t know who this man is, but if you have listened to a word I’ve said then you will know that he has our Father’s goodness in his heart, and – ”

“Not this family,” a forthright woman who had spoken up before said. The speaker sighed and let it happen. I tried to throw him a *gee-these-people-eh?* kind of look, but he preferred to suffer alone, it seemed.

“This family doesn’t know Jehovah!” she continued. “You want to know what his father said?” The crowd of people who knew the story well all cried out, “Yeah! Yeah!”

I, of course, knew what my father had said, as anyone who was anyone knew. The poor speaker was torn between crowd control and curiosity, and I’m sure you can guess which one won out. I tried to explain to the woman that it was not important, but she cut me short with a look that told me I was in no position to answer back.

“Well, and you’ll never believe this, he said that *the sun was his god*,” she said, scanning the crowd before settling on the speaker. She paused with a look of astonishment on her face. “The *sun*! He said that it didn’t seem likely that this Jehovah of ours would be both all-powerful and hidden away so effectively, and so the sun seemed as good a thing to worship as any, because...” She paused again, and the crowd all started to prematurely mouth along the words with her. “*Because it was right there, and a god you can see is better than a god you can’t.*”

This, by the way, is why no girl will look twice at me. Not with a father spouting things like that. Now you know.

The crowd erupted into a flurry of exasperated jowls and throat-clearances of disbelief. The speaker, in one final rally of energy, shouted above them all.

“Perhaps it is time to forgive his father. Don’t you think?”

The crowd hushed and looked at each other. A few shuffled uncomfortably. I stood like a lemon, central to the semi-circle they’d created around me.

“We can’t,” a few eventually muttered.

“You can! You can!” the speaker said, joy in his open arms.

“No, we can’t,” they said again with a little more confidence.

“This is the test,” he said, seeing an opportunity to change them all for the better. “This is your chance to forgive and grow. Why? Why can’t you?”

They looked around, trying to decide who should best speak for them. The woman stepped forward.

“Because he’s dead.”

“What?”

“We stoned him to death.”

“Oh.”

A powerful silence took over. In my peripherals I could see the speaker looking at me, but I didn't want to be a part of this anymore. My father's stoning had happened two, perhaps three years ago now. I hadn't witnessed it myself, but they say it was over quickly. I had known better than to turn up at my own father's stoning. You try and argue, they stone you too. You join in, people say you're a monster. There's no winning here. I knew if I were to say anything to this speaker, this crowd, then I wouldn't win.

But, as it turns out, even silence proved rather damning.

“And, uh, and did that solve the problem?” the speaker said, turning back to the crowd.

“Well, no. Now we have his son to deal with. We should've known sooner or later the curse would rise in him.”

“So, if stoning his father didn't help, what will you do to this man?”

He spoke like a schoolteacher, urging the children to reply, in sing-song unison, that forgiveness was worth a thousand stones.

Stop, I was thinking. It's no use.

“We need to do more,” the woman said, finally.

“Yes! Yes!” he replied. “Much more!”

Just stop.

I regret now that I didn't do something then. Not argue, obviously, but deny any connection to my family, or at the very least turn heel, drop my pots and run like water. However, I was frozen to the spot, my arms quivering under the stack of baked clay.

“Then it’s settled. *Poena cullei!*” she screamed.

“What?” the speaker said.

Of course, I thought, and the crowd were on top of me in moments.

The Roman guards were usually quite efficient with this sort of thing, and so I didn’t even have time to wipe the blood from my lip before I had been tried, found guilty of blasphemy and thrown into the street ready to be bagged. Where they found the animals at such short notice, I don’t pretend to know. I suppose by this time they made sure to always have a healthy stock at hand.

My eyes had become used to the darkness now, and I began to see the situation for what it was. You do not need me to describe what these animals look like, and perhaps the image of them all bundled together in this situation is one best left for your imagination.

I tried not to dwell on it too much. Instead I focused on myself.

The first few moments in the water were, ironically, spent in prayer. Well, not prayer. More a loud, desperate plea to anyone, omnipotent or otherwise, to step in and offer a hand. In this wild shouting I almost found myself pleading forgiveness from my father, but managed to check myself at the last moment. I couldn’t ignore the strange twist of fate that had left me being punished in a way that had once been exclusively for parricide. Nowadays, it covered everything from coveting a neighbor’s ox to looking at a guard the wrong way. Whatever is not compulsory is forbidden here. And to do what is forbidden is to be punished by the sack. That stupid man. I shouldn’t be grovelling, I thought, he had had it easy where death

is concerned. During a stoning, you could expect to be pardoned at any moment, it being such a public thing. Anyone could wander in and stop it. It never happened, of course, but it could. Where would my saviour come from? Jehovah? The sky? The depths?

I have heard rumors that there are people somewhere that do worship something at the bottom of the ocean, though how true this is, I can't say. It would be nice to find this were true now. Perhaps this god would, territorially, evict me and my fellows from its homestead.

But, no, we were simply left to die.

The sack itself was buoyant, which came as a surprise to me. In my mind an ox didn't have much use for a skin that could float. This world throws up all sorts, I suppose. But luckily it did float, so for the first couple of minutes we hung there, straddling the line between sky and water.

The sack, of course, was slowly being filled, or rather water was filtering in from all directions, and though the ceiling of the thing stayed afloat, it did mean that to keep breathing I had to start kicking my legs like a frog and alternating between ducking under for a few seconds and taking desperate breaths for a slightly longer few.

The monkey was getting quite unravelled by my constant bobbing, and a thought struck me, or, rather, I remember the first thought I had had. The monkey. If anyone was going to do it, it would be him. Break free, that is. It wasn't just strength he had, but determination of character. However, coaxing him into doing anything other than void his bowels and randomly strike out seemed an impossible task.

My point was proven quite well after I had entered my fifth minute of bobbing up and down like a fish-bowl toad. Attempting to grab his arm and gesture to him that he should scratch a hole in the roof, that

we weren't necessarily done for yet, he screeched, dove, and reappeared immediately with the snake in one hand and its head in his mouth.

Well, I supposed, that was a step in the right direction, at least.

Poena cullei had been happening for a while now, and it had become popular in the last few years when the Romans had become bored with the usual punishments, their suddenly being so many rules, and so they had thought they might spice things up. So it was that the sack stopped being solely to deter parricide, and had come to be the go to punishment for almost every notable crime.

As a result, we – the local drunks and I in the bars - had discussed it at some length, and speculated and made assumptions about the way things went. The most popular argument was in which order the sack's contents would die.

Assuming all the subjects survived the cart trip without being eaten or disembowelled, there was no doubt in my mind that the rooster would die first, I would say. *But I've seen a rooster on water*, someone would always counter, *and they use their wings to float, like a leaf*. Nonsense. The snake would kill him, I said. That's nature. Next to go would be the snake. *Why?* Because the dog would kill the snake. Have you never seen the stray dogs around here? Anything that isn't human they eat. I've seen them break open tortoises with nothing but teeth and claws. Besides, it's their curious nature. Something slipping and whipping about that much is sure to be pounced on. *Yes, fair enough*. Next to go, I'm afraid would be the dog. The monkey would never have bothered with anything so small as a rooster or snake. *Surely*. But a dog? It's a territorial creature, and more than capable of bringing it down and certainly that way inclined. These animals have instincts for the biggest threat. *Good point, good point. But, if that's the case, why wouldn't the monkey attack you, the human,*

first? Well, it's, uh, I'm sure it's a matter of comradery. Like-minded creatures must pull together in times of hardship, isn't that right? *Like-minded?* Well, you know, *similar* creatures. *Similar? What are you suggesting?* Oh, no, I don't know. Forget it. More wine?

It was these moments that everyone started to talk about the will of Jehovah, and that it would just go the way he planned it to go, they supposed. Once I offered up the thought that Jehovah seemed to have some strange ideas for punishments for a being that could simply erase the sinner from existence with one breath. As I say, I only offered this once, because no one seemed happy to discuss it. Anyone who would have discussed these things with me in secret had long abandoned me after my father's death.

Blood was spurting from the snake's body, and the dog, who had continued to hold onto me like a new-born baby, started snapping and twisting, trying to catch some in his mouth. I plunged under again, annoyed that I had been wrong about the monkey's helpfulness and the damn drunken argument.

The rooster was the next to go. I was quite pleased that this guess had been right.

After swallowing the snake's body whole and discarding the head, which I tried to forget was tumbling around somewhere below me, the monkey had decided to take things easy for a bit. Unlike me, he was quite buoyant, and seemed unperturbed by the fact he was chin deep in water. With a full belly, he hadn't cared to look twice at the rooster, who, too, had been floating quite happily.

The dog, unfortunately, was the culprit. I realized late enough that the dog had been doing no work himself in regards to staying alive, and this is what set off the chain. I didn't mind him hanging on, because it

didn't make much difference to my ability to stay afloat. He was small enough, and friendly looking, so there was no harm. What I did worry about, however, was the message this gave off. The monkey's fur was becoming heavy. He wasn't struggling, but it was obvious that he would soon be. If he saw the dog hanging on to me, not a care in the world, what would that make him think? Right. That clever little bugger would be on me like a lion on a slave.

So, and it broke my heart to, believe me, I folded my arms to my chest and thrust forward, pushing the dog from me. The bag's balance was knocked temporarily off kilter and the whole thing was sent entirely underwater for a worrying thirty seconds. Eventually it rose to the top again and we all took a welcome breath. Luckily, no one seemed particularly desperate to blame me, so we let ourselves settle again. Without the dog I felt more at ease, and, surprisingly, he was floating. Without so much as a kick of his legs he was resting happily on the surface. I patted his head and he bobbed down slightly, but rose again just as quickly. It was the most curious few seconds. At that moment a wing rose from underneath him, broke the surface for a moment, and then stopped and sunk. Investigating underneath him with my hands I realized what was keeping him afloat. The poor bird didn't stand a chance.

So it was just me, the dog and the monkey now. It was all quite calm.

It was nearing evening, and had only been about 3 hours, at most, since my arrest. The sun was still hot. We were close enough to the coast for there to be a slight wind, which I could hear beating the outside of the ox, but couldn't feel. There was no ventilation, and the number of sweaty, wet animals had turned the sack into a sort of steam room. There was nowhere for the heat to go, and so it just hung in the atmosphere, seeping first from our bodies, then into our mouths and lungs, and then back out to fill the empty space.

Pushing my curls up and over my head I noticed that the dog was desperately lapping the water in front of him. Instinctively, I grabbed his chin and stopped him, but as soon as I let go he continued. No matter, I thought, he'll be dead soon anyway. May as well make it a quick one.

My father had had it easy. Stoning is an alright way to go, relatively. You have to think relatively when you talk about death. You have to take into account all deaths. Old age, disease, falling off a cliff. And once you have done this, you'll find that stoning is not as bad as all that. All it took was a few stones. The good thing about a stone to the head is that it dominates your thoughts. There will be no wondering about the afterlife or the sun or any damned monkeys when you have stones flying at you. Your mind will think of stones. I, though, have an unbearable amount of time to think. The animals are slowly dying. And when you are in the minority by simply being alive, what is there to think of but death?

The truth is, I didn't agree with my father. The sun is no thing to worship. Sure you can see it and sure it can be useful at times, but it is too inconsistent a thing to be a god. As for Jehovah, I think much the same about him. Although you can't see him, of course.

The dog slipped quietly from atop the rooster and both of them sank to the bottom.

The monkey has been staring at me since the dog went under, and every time I sink and then surface again I find he is still looking. It seems with everything else dead he has taken an interest in me. I stare back at him, unafraid of him, the mangy thing. The wet hair flattened vertically against himself makes him look stupid. But, then again, I don't suppose I look much better.

“Go on! Go on! You stupid monkey!” I scream at him, gesturing wildly, but either he can’t understand that the outside world is just a neat tear away, or he is unwilling to help. I can’t say I blame him too much. It is not that I am becoming accustomed to life in the sack. That would be absurd. Besides, it’s been little more than thirty minutes, an hour, something not very long. It is just that I have some comfort to take from it. There are no girls to ignore me, no speakers to listen to, no lost friends to lament, no drunks to argue with. But most of all, I know that my pottery is still out there somewhere, and it will last for a thousand years. And more. More than me, more than this monkey, more than my stupid father ever did, and more than their gods who make all this nonsense happen.

It is hot, yes, and it smells like a sodden farm, and it is a rather trying situation for the old knees, but, I swear on the sun, it is a comfort to think one day they will look back on this moment and regret it.

The monkey has that look in his eyes again, but he looks at me as if I have that look too. He knows me by now. He knows every hair on my wet head. Reaching forward a bit he scratches my arm, nothing serious but I would have preferred nothing at all. I ignore him. I like him. His temper is a foul thing, but he is an intelligent sack-fellow. If only he would listen to me and help me.

I have decided now that I might worship the monkey. It is something to do. Forget the sun. It has gone. And forget Jehovah. His greatest intervention in my life was to put me in this sack. I worship the monkey. There’s a kinship, a likeness, and he respects it. And it is a comfort to plead to someone for salvation knowing full well what the answer will be. He’s there, he ignores me as much as hurts me, and, best of all, he’s about to be erased from this foul world, just like me.