

Planet of the **Monkeys**

By Kevin O'Neill

WHY WE LIKE IT: *It starts out like satire—even funny—but soon, like its screen counterpart Planet of the Apes, this strongly written tale of aberrant species behaviour gets serious—dead serious. We don't know whether this is more like science fiction or the world after Armageddon but either way it raises the same disturbing question that comes with its own unwelcome fallout—Who is exactly Where on the evolutionary scale. The author's cogent prose and narrative control makes what seems an impossibility come alive. (Spacing is author's own.)*

Planet of the Monkeys

Reason number whatever for why Cambodia's always a unique and wondrous place to live: Certainly, in America, I never had to give as interesting an excuse for being late to work as this one morning, "Monkeys were blocking the stairway door. They wouldn't let me pass until I threw them some grapes."

That was part of My-swear-to-God true story and explanation that I gave a student of mine when I showed up at his house a half-hour late for our English tutoring session. I had been waylaid by an invading gang of monkeys who ransacked and took over the rear balcony of Davvy and I's rooftop apartment in Phnom Penh one morning in late September 2016. A dozen or so of these screeching monkeys, who seemed to be very hungry and in a surly mood, had kept us pinned inside our apartment for about an hour while they scavenged for food in our trash and bounced about our rooftop and those of the neighboring tenements clustered about our place. The gang eventually dwindled down to just a determined pair guarding the stairway door – one squatting atop it and the other in front of it. Already running late, I was dressed for work in slacks, button shirt and necktie with my backpack on – but I wasn't going anywhere until I paid satisfactory tokens or tribute to the little apes now running an impromptu "toll booth" at our stairway entrance and exit.

I tried tossing them apples but had no luck, as the two gave them hardly a glance as they bounced by, and then Davvy told me monkeys regard apples as "ot chnang (not delicious)". I was like how the hell do you know anything about the culinary preferences of monkeys? Were they regulars at the 104 Street joint where you bartended? We were out of bananas but we did have a basket of purple grapes and couple of oranges. So, I grabbed them, opened our apartment door, waved these delicacies at them, and then flung the grapes and oranges off the balcony onto a neighbor's rooftop ten feet below. The two toll takers immediately leaped over the balcony railing in pursuit of their breakfast as I made my escape.

My student was amused but hardly amazed by my explanation of tardiness as he knew my 110 Street was fairly close to Wat Phnom Park, a popular city tourist destination and main hang-out for Phnom Penh's primate residents. The monkeys' main sources of food there are the mango trees, trash piles and donations or thefts from picnicking tourists. So, whenever tourist numbers happen to be low, the monkeys get downright barbarian, Vikingish belligerent and invade the surrounding neighborhoods and buildings to loot and pillage. In fact, a few days before they showed up in my neighborhood, a bunch of highly agitated Wat Phnom monkeys had reportedly entered an open window at a Ministry of Economics building overlooking the park moments after they were seen inhaling several discarded bags left behind by the homeless glue and "meth" sniffers who hang out in Wat Phnom. Stoned into a crazy high by those chemicals, the meth monkeys went into a beserk rage when they couldn't find any food in the ministry and spitefully trashed an office.

The monkeys of Wat Phnom and those most often encountered by people in Cambodia belong to the Macaque breed of tailed apes, and are also known as Macacas. They are brown and white, sometimes gray in fur color. They resemble baboons with their long snouts and four-legged strut, and are range from two to three to five feet in length as adults. They are highly acrobatic, gregarious and entertaining, sometimes very sweet and charming, but can be aggressive when hungry and dangerous if provoked.

On Saturdays just before noon, I used to frequently go to a bar called Cavern on Street 104, a couple blocks from Wat Phnom and therefore within the monkey's regular roaming zone. I'd get a patio table seat under the bar's shady awning and have a plate of fries, Bloody Mary, a few beers and just a quiet read if the monkeys weren't around or an amusing spectacle of simian anarchy if they were. It would be a combination of circus acrobatics, trapeze artistry and petty criminality – as the monkeys used their tails and limbs in threesomes and pairs to leap, bounce off of and toss each other from roof to roof, across power lines and onto the roofs of tuk-tuks, cars and trucks both parked and moving. A couple would occasionally swing onto the Cavern's awning and then impishly twist themselves around the awning poles upside down or otherwise like simian striptease dancers and I'd tip them for their burlesque parodies with a handful of fries or a piece of fruit.

I also remember their acrobatic circus clown talents being on full display during Davvy and I's visit to a Battambang mountaintop pagoda and Angkor era temple complex where we and other tourists watched in amusement as the place's resident monkeys showed off their prankish ability to wreak total havoc in a place. Near the monastery, a couple of Macaques pranced onto the laundry line and then proceeded to playfully clear their new tightrope of hanging clothes, snatching articles of newly cleaned, drying laundry and tossing it into the trees or onto the roofs as the fed-up washer women frantically swung bamboo poles at them and knocked them about. One younger, smaller monkey kept using the coiled-spring open lid of a vendor's ice box as a trampoline, leaping from a tree branch onto the lid, which would bend down and then forcefully spring up propelling him back into the tree or onto the lid of another ice box – boing! - any time the seller opened one to fetch a beer or soda for a customer. Meanwhile, one monkey was fixated on attempting to disrobe a very patient, good-humored monk by grabbing a loose corner of his robe and unwrapping him by swirling him about like someone unwinding cloth from a spindle. Davvy and I also got a glimpse of a more tender side of the monkey personality, watching an elder Macaque gently caress, soothe and groom a young one who was visibly upset about something or other.

Yeah, ya gotta love those monkeys – but love them in a hands-off, relatively safe distance way and definitely don't mess with them. I recall another occasion when Davvy and I hiked to the

mountaintops of Phnom Bro and Phnom Srey in Kampong Cham where there was a pagoda-temple site renowned combination for its many monkeys and beautiful butterflies. We and other visitors foreign and native witnessed this Khmer kid make the very big mistake of teasing one of these incredibly strong, quick and agile beasts (the monkeys, not the butterflies) while it was contentedly devouring a piece of fruit atop a stone bannister. The youngster, partly hidden behind a stone cobra sculpture, kept pelting the four-foot tall monkey with peanuts and banana skins despite warnings in Khmer, English, Japanese and various other tongues from young and old - basically saying that "you're playing with fire, kid." The surprisingly patient monkey ignored the kid for a while but kept eyeing us onlookers with an exasperated look of WTF's With This Kid and Really?? Am I going to have to handle this myself?!, scanning the crowd for any sign of pending parental intervention, before he finally lost it and, in a split second, leapt over the stone cobra head and wrapped himself around the boy's head and torso. As everyone gasped in horrified anticipation of what they figured was about to happen (Oh god, the kid's going to lose his nose, an eye or some other chunk of his face as the monkey takes bloody vengeance with claws and fangs), the moment of retribution suddenly turned into this Three Stooges-type act of payback. The ticked-off monkey just yanked the kid by the hair with one paw, screeched at him and slapped him across the face with the other paw several times before scurrying off. This thankfully merciful monkey had given the kid just a good, deserved scare and mild thrashing. I certainly think the brat learned his lesson, judging by the way he was howling, not so much in pain, but in terrified relief.

The monkey invasion that resulted in me being late for my tutoring class was actually the second storming of our premises by the area primates. The first monkey takeover, in April of that year, was quite a stunner for both Davvy and I. Waking up to the sight of a horde of monkeys – maybe of score of them in total – surrounding one's home is one flabbergasting shocker, like that scifi movie nightmarishly come true. The bizarre, bedlam-esque scene I peered upon through the chicken coop wire mesh covering our back windows was truly Planet of the Monkeys. Several female Macaques simply sat on our balcony railing with babies in their laps chattering. They and I watched as couple of the crazier males head-butted, rammed and kicked the apartment's back door, which serves as the only route to the stairway entrance and exit. It's the only means of escape from the building as the front door opens onto another balcony four stories above the street. So, we were trapped.

Two other monkeys climbed the chicken coop wire covering the kitchen window and ferociously, maybe triumphantly howled and screeched at me – whether kiddingly or seriously, I had no idea. Another jumped atop Davvy's two-foot-tall, balsa wood ghost doll house which was hanging by a net of yarn threads from the overhanging roof and dangling above our doorway. It instantly snatched the small cakes and dwarf banana offerings to the spirits from its tiny porch, hungrily shoving them into its mouth, as the threads snapped and the doll house plummeted, crash-landing on the doorstep with the monkey still clinging to its roof. It shattered into pieces with its little figurine inhabitants and small wrapped candy treats for the spirits spilling out as this rioting monkey gleefully cackled and danced about the debris like a mad jester. Other Macaques of a more serious, single-minded bent for sustenance, quietly went through our trash, then scurried over back balcony railings and jumped onto the tin roofs of neighboring houses and tenements looking for food elsewhere.

I remember Davvy's first reactions to the invasion were that I was in one way or another responsible for this monkey melee. The invasion had begun around 6 am shortly after Davvy had gone for a pee in our tiny semi-outhouse bathroom which was in a corner of the apartment's rear balcony between the back door and stairwell door. I was lying in bed when I heard these sudden heavy thumps above our ceiling and on the corrugated tin roof overhanging the bathroom and stairwell. Davvy's response, of course, was to irritably yell, "What you doing, bong?" thinking maybe.....that perhaps I was

doing morning calisthenics on the roof or some sort of Irish jig to welcome the new day - or who knows what other craziness that she imagined me up to at that hour?? Anyway, I yelled back, "Not me, it's those f...n cats again." The building was plagued at all hours by insomniac strays who endlessly and very noisily brawled and bonked. But, as soon as I said that, I then thought those were mighty loud thuds for those scrawny alleycats unless they've now got a couple Bengal tigers or lions among their gang.

It was a half second later that primate mayhem broke out as a chorus of primate chattering and howling jolted me awake. It was a tremendous racket rivaling even the cats late night f....king and fighting. As I sat up in bed, the first monkey I saw leapt onto window's chicken wire mesh net, limbs and claws splayed, as it maniacally screamed whatever demands at me. I sprung out of bed, ran to the window, and shouted, "Davy, don't come out!", as she opened the door a crack, and peered up in astonishment at these beserk primates bouncing on the roof, hanging on the kitchen window's chicken coop wire, squatting on the balcony railing, stomping the remains of her beloved spirit house, etc. Immediately, slamming the door shut, she then accusedly screamed from inside, "What you do now, bong!?", as if I had somehow provoked a war with Phnom Penh's monkey residents through some outrageous insult or action. Or, had drunkenly invited them over to our place for a dawn shindig during some late night, heavily intoxicated carousing with the primates at Wat Phnom and then forgotten about the invitation in my subsequent blackout. Shouting back in offended dignity, "I had nothing to do with this!", I ordered her to stay in the can until I came up with a plan and got rid of them.

I first tried threatening them. I grabbed a broom handle, opened the door a crack, fearfully peering out with broom in hand and then summoning some courage, put on my outraged resident voice and demeanor to show these outlandish intruders I meant business. While trying to forcefully brandish the broomstick as a serious weapon of retribution, I just kept sternly yelling things like "hey, you guys," "Really, dudes," "Get out of here" and "Go" to no avail, feeling increasingly silly, as I realized I hadn't any idea what to say to or how to deal with these misbehaving monkeys who were rather terrifying. My shaking the broomstick at them and scolding them only prompted a contemptuous, amused shrug and look of "Really?" from one big female sitting on the railing that reduced my attempt at manly bluster to a whiny, weak-kneed plea of "Please go."

I also tried unsuccessfully to drive them away by pelting them with an array of household goods, quickly gathering up a small arsenal by the door, then opening the door halfway and frenziedly hurtling pots, a shoe, books, a few of Davvy's handbags (A projectile choice I later sorely regretted when Davvy noticed the handbags were missing) and even a couple of old CDs I no longer cared for, flinging them frisbee-style like I was firing ninja stars at them. This barrage of projectiles had zero impact as most of the objects either harmlessly bounced off their tough hides or sailed by or over the monkeys - landing in neighboring yards and on roofs. So, I thought better, and finally decided that only appeasement of these aggressors' appetites could end this humiliating takeover. I began tossing bananas, mangos and our other fruit over the balconies for them to chase after - which broke up part of the mob. The rest were driven away by the emergence of a bunch of half-awake, furious neighbors who went after them with bamboo poles and water hoses. To our chagrined amazement, they angrily cursed not just the monkeys but Davvy and I. They somehow had this demented notion that Davvy and, most particularly, her disreputable, boozy barang (foreign) boyfriend (me) were willing hosts of this very noisy and wild early morning monkey party.

Later, as I left for work that morning, a worried Davvy asked me, What if they come back??? What do I do? I expressed strong doubt the monkeys would be back anytime soon for a return match with that mob of locals who thrashed them. But, if they did....

“Keep the door shut and hope they're still at the pre-tool stage of evolution and haven't seen the latest Planet of the Apes flick,” I told her. “Otherwise, on their return visit, they'll be equipped with wire-cutters and crowbars.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The story above is one of a bunch of I've written that are a compilation of diary entries and Facebook posts that are mostly about my day-to-day life as an expat in Cambodia. Many expat accounts of their lives in Cambodia, Thailand and other Southeast Asia locales are often heavily focused on the more debauched, seedier outlaw sides of existence in those places – the sexpat stoner tales. My stories are mostly about how funny, wonderful and still very strange life in Cambodia can be for an American when you're just trying to make a living there and be a “family guy” in a Khmer clan. Although they include a few tales of disreputable expat behavior and both expat and Khmer drunkenness, as many Khmers certainly love to party and chug-a-lug, my stories focus mainly on the non-degenerate wild side of ordinary life in the Kingdom as experienced by a Westerner. They detail more everyday things like language faux pas, bug horrors, rundown apartment woes, transportation fiascos, run-ins with cats, bats and rats, dietary differences, my teaching experiences, etc. They are a lot more in the style of Thurber, Sedaris and Jean Shepherd than Hunter Thompson or Artie Lange.*

AUTHOR BIO: I am a New Yorker who moved to Cambodia about seven years ago after falling in love with that country during a pair of holiday trips there. I lived in Phnom Penh up until 2018 when I moved to Siem Reap to join my entrepreneurial wife Davvy there, who has a Khmer pork sandwich cart and operates a small store with her daughters. Up until Covid hit, resulting in a nationwide schools shutdown, I had worked as a teacher of English as a second language at Pannassastra University and University of Southeast Asia in Siem Reap. Currently, I tutor English on-line with Engoo, a Singapore-based on-line language education company.