

# Jangles

By Arianna Tull

Troy sat, a beer in one hand and some old photo album in the other, on his mother's old couch. He'd recovered from chicken pox while lying on this lumpy old couch, back when it was in the living room. It lived in the garage now, home to dust and items that haven't been cared for since the 1980s. He took a sip from his bottle and flipped to the first page. It was a photo his dad had taken a few decades ago, when they'd lived in New York. Troy didn't remember the photo being taken, he was only a few years old. Blonde hair covered his eyes and his oldest sister stood behind him, one arm around him. Keeping him close, keeping him from dashing out into the street to follow a stray soccer ball or a dog. They both donned swimsuits and squinted at the camera, Troy's dad hadn't liked telling people to smile. He had preferred to catch people off guard as often as possible. Capture the real moments.

Sarah peeked her head around the doorway to the - now - almost empty garage. Nearly 30 years older than the photo and she still had the wild young look that she did back then. "Hey, you disappeared on us." Troy studied his sister for a moment. His eyes stung, he was sure he didn't have anymore water in his body to cry with. Their mother's funeral was only three days ago and he wasn't sure he was able to continue cleaning out her house.

"Yeah, sorry. Just needed a break." Troy looked back at the old photos. His sister didn't pause for a moment, she took a few steps into the room and gestured for him to stand up.

"Come on, Sandy and Jean found old diaries upstairs."

"I don't think I want to see -"

“Get up.” There was no softness in her voice, she wasn’t requesting his presence but rather demanding it. She turned on her heel and left Troy alone in the garage again. He groaned, sure he was nearly forty years old and still he had to obey his sister.

He followed her back into the house and turned the corner into the living room. In place of the sofa that had been moved to the garage, his sisters had set up a circle of chairs from various places around the house. One from the dining room, one from the kitchen bar, one from the study, and the last one from one of their old bedrooms upstairs. All but one was taken by one of his sisters and he took the last seat.

Jean and Sandy were already looking through a few diaries from their teen years, the contents no doubt talking about recreational drug abuse and high school parties. His collection of writing was easily the largest, he’d lived in this house the longest. There had been five years between his sisters moving to college and him finally following where just he and his mother lived in the house. It had been a very quiet five years.

Sarah flipped open one of the books from the top of the small pile they’d created between them and started laughing to herself. She looked up and blue eyes scanned the rest of the room before looking back down at the book.

“The man exhaled slowly, his eyes focused on the poorly lit road in front of him. His car sat rather low to the ground making the leafless trees rushing past the windows seem ever so much taller.’” She started a story out in a soft, dramatic voice. Jean groaned.

“We are not playing this stupid game.”

“The sky shone with a few stars, many more than he had ever seen in the city. Too much light back there. His sister had called him mere hours ago, begging him to visit. “Just drive out for the weekend.” She had pleaded. Her voice got so annoyingly high pitched when she wanted something from him. He could’ve imagined her, lower lip stuck out and puppy dog look in her

eyes. He'd agreed without thinking first. And now he had to drive to the middle of nowhere. *Damn* it. How she always convinced him to do stupid shit like this was beyond him.' ”

“Did Troy write this version?” Sandy asked. Sarah snapped the book shut and glared at her little sister.

“Would you all shut up and just play the game?”

Troy was the first to end the silence. “The man let out another long sigh. Driving, while not a physical activity, was *exhausting*. He felt drained after twelve straight hours -' ”

“Twelve hours?”

“ ‘ in his car. Perhaps he could have, should have, flown to Michigan. No use thinking like that now, he was nearly there. Only another hour or so until he got to cuddle up in the lumpy ‘guest’ mattress that his sister had bought years ago for him to sleep on while visiting. The state highway felt empty, he passed another car every few minutes or so, but it was far from busy. Formerly pristine snow was pushed to the curbs of the road, dirt and exhaust mixed in with the snow to make it a bit more like a dark colored slush piled up at the sides of the state highway.”

He looked over to Jean to indicate the change in turns. She looked back at him for a few moments before shrugging. “The man saw a small sign on the side of the road indicating a resting spot just up ahead. It'd been nearly two hours since he'd stood up to fill up his gas tank, so why not stop for a moment? It'd be better than continuing the monotony of driving until he found another gas station. He parked quickly and pulled on a heavy coat before getting out of the car. He checked his phone, still he had no service. Why the fuck did his sister live so far away from sane people? He guessed it was because her husband was a hunter, he liked the wilderness a bit too much. He knew his sister was crazy for marrying such a *lunatic*.' ” Jean looked at Sandy who scoffed loudly.

“Like you’re one to talk about lunatics. Clarke is *nothing* compared to Chad.” Sandy snapped.

“Not the point.” Jean shrugged. “Your turn.”

“Fine - ‘The man took a few long strides around his car, trying to stretch out his legs. A few joints in his body popped under protest of the new position. His knees ached and his thighs felt rigid. A billboard caught his attention. It had been a long while since he saw a billboard, at least a few hours since he exited the interstate. The sign, a neon yellow with huge blue letters stamped across, wasn’t able to be seen by passersby on the road. He had a passing thought that it was strange to build a sign only the few people who stop in this particular rest stop could see, but it fell from his head just as soon as it appeared.’ ”

Sarah didn’t hesitate for a moment before continuing her section of story. “ ‘The man took a moment to reflect on just how stupid it was to follow the red arrow on the sign. It had been 12 hours since anything interesting had happened after all, might as well check out Jangles, as the sign suggested. The man followed a rough path through the trees. Periodically a red sign pointed him in the right direction. Fallen branches and small bits of litter lined the path indicated by the signs, but there were no previous footsteps. Perhaps he was the first person to see the sign since it last snowed. Just as he was starting to think of heading back, he entered a clearing.’ ”

All four siblings took a breath at the same time, they had all loved this part of the story as kids. Almost everything in the story was different with every retelling, all improv’d as they went along, except for the clearing. There was always *this* clearing.

“ ‘A cage took up most of the clearing, the bars reaching all the way to the tops of the trees. The metal looked as though it had been painted black a long time ago, the darker color chipped and peeled away to reveal the burnt orange color of rusted iron. A dark figure slept

inside, its body moving hypnotically up and down. The ground inside the cage was somehow clear of snow, as if whatever resided inside it was hot enough to melt the precipitation before it had a chance to stick to the ground.’ ” Troy paused for just a moment, he didn’t want his turn to be over but he wasn’t sure what else to say. “ ‘Beer cans and cigarette butts made up the floor of the cage, the litter looked as if it had been thrown from the man’s current vantage point.’ ”

“Litter doesn’t make sense, take it back.” Jean protested.

“Why doesn’t it make sense?”

“He has to be the first one in a while to see it.”

“*Fine* - ‘The man took a few hesitant steps forward, the *litter free* snow below him crunching under the weight of his footsteps. A small metal sign on the cage read Do Not Disturb Jangles. Curiosity took over and the man reached out toward the bars. His hand wavered as his fingers got closer to the metal. The very second that his hand touched the bar, the giant mass inside the cage came alive. It sprung up at an insane speed and glared down at the man. It had glowing eyes, it’s nostrils were scarred and burned, patches of fur on the behemoth ape were singed off. It snorted once, steam rising from it as hot breath touched freezing air, and the man took off running back toward his car.’ ”

Jean picked up the story immediately. “ ‘He stumbled when he heard metal screeching as it was bent and broken behind him. He refused to look back as huge footsteps followed him, the speed picking up. The man nearly tripped over roots buried in the snow, the huge monkey covered more and more ground. Death was most *assuredly* inevitable. The man just barely made it back to the parking lot when he fell, his knees buckled under him and he fell face first into the snow. He scrambled to get up, but he couldn’t quite find the strength to stand again. The monkey slowed and made a terrifying sluggish approach and the man fell back again to look up

at the monster. It's breath was steady and hot on the man's skin. It crouched down to better see the man and studied him for a short moment.' ”

Three of the siblings looked at Sandy as they reached her turn. “ Uh- wait... Okay so ‘ The monkey's injuries were more extensive than the man had thought, little scars and burn marks covered its face and body. The ape growled very softly and reached its giant hand toward the man, its grizzled fingers forming a point toward him. Very slowly the monkey touched his chest and leaned in a little closer. Now, nearly face to face with the creature, the man closed his eyes. He couldn't bear to watch his own demise. A forceful poke to his chest and he let out a soft whimper. He could feel the calloused skin even through several layers of clothing. In a low voice, the monkey spoke. Really, truly said words. The man did have a damn clue as to how or why, but the monkey spoke three words, clear as day.’ ” All four stifled laughs as they looked to Sarah to finish the story.

“ ‘ “Tag,” it had said. “You're it.” ’ ”