



The Circle of Happiness

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Chapter One

I Get What I Want

Have you ever had something really unexpected happen to you? I mean *really* unexpected? I'm not talking about something great like winning the science fair, or something gross like discovering that the cookie you just ate was really a dog treat, or even something hard like your best friend moving away. I've had all those things happen to me (including the dog treat), and I bet you've had stuff like that happen to you, too.

No, I'm talking about something else. I'm talking about something so weird and unexpected that if your socks wore socks, it would knock *those* socks off.

I'm talking about monkey-in-the-park unexpected.

Talking monkey in the park unexpected.

That's right. Talking monkey.

In the park.

No? Never happened to you?

Well, that makes one of us.

My name is Mae. There aren't many teenagers like me who have a story like this to tell, so sit down and hold onto *your* socks. You won't believe what I have to say.



I was sitting in the grass after being stuck outside for three whole hours with my little brother Kevin. Our parents had dragged us to a park hours away from home for a cookout with our relatives, all of whom were either babies or old. My best friend was supposed to come with us, but she got sick at the last moment—talk about unexpected—so it was just me and my perpetually grimy eight-year-old brother.

At first, I actually didn't mind. The park where we had the cookout was so different from anything near our house in the city that it was like being on a strange planet—a planet filled with endless green grass, whizzing dragonflies, and barbecue. The only downside, at first, was that this planet was also filled with mosquitoes.

After dowsing myself in bug spray, I was happy to let Kevin get coddled by our aunts while I made daisy chains and tried to startle dragonflies into flying backwards (I know they can do it, but I've never seen it happen). I also spent some time practicing my juggling. It's something I've been trying to do ever since seeing this guy juggle five chainsaws at once. Not that I want to juggle chainsaws—that's nuts—but it would be cool to be able to juggle, say, five flip-flops or five phones. It's not easy, though; so far all I've managed to do at home is juggle three boring tennis balls. So I looked around the park to see what I could practice with, but all I could find were four slimy rocks. They kept slipping out of my hands and landing on my bare toes. The more I tried, the worse I got. I was so frustrated that I actually volunteered to take Kevin to the pond to search for frogs. After lunch, we lay down on a blanket, and I made up stories about the fluffy mashed-potato clouds drifting over our heads—which obviously weren't that interesting because he fell asleep.

But fast-forward three hours, and all I wanted to do was leave.

"Before it's time for s'mores?" said my parents. (Yes. I hate s'mores.)

"Why don't you just enjoy nature!" they said. (That's what I had been doing. For five hours.)

"No, there are no more cookies." (Right. Because Kevin ate them all. Again.)

Why are mosquito bites ten times itchier when there's nothing to do?

Making everything worse, Kevin woke up on the annoying side of the picnic blanket. He kept leaping out of the bushes at me and yelling "Zoweeel!" at the top of his lungs. When I told him to cut it out, he switched to poking me with a stick. When I told him to cut *that* out, he started yelling that I was being mean to him, which made my parents give me the stink eye and tell me to quit being a bad sport and find something else to do. (Like being poked had been *my* idea. And not liking it made *me* the mean one.)

Something else to do? There was *nothing* else to do.

So I walked away from the picnic tables, wandered down a little hill, and sat in the shade of a big old tree. Running my fingers through the grass, I aimlessly searched through the green blades for something interesting—maybe a four-leaf clover. But all I could think about were the things I could be doing if I wasn't *here*.

At home I could be reading, or taking notes on my mold experiment, or petting Herman (our cat), or drawing snagons (snail-dragons) or dogons (dog-dragons) or macawgons (you get the idea), or checking out the new puppies at our neighbor's house, or *not* getting poked by a stick, and *not* itching every nanosecond, and all the while I was thinking how unfair it was that my friend was sick, and that my parents always blame me when Kevin is annoying, and how he always eats the last cookie, and how now my favorite pair of shorts was grass-stained, and how I hate slimy rocks, and how the next day I was going to make pancakes for breakfast and read all day, except I won't be allowed because tomorrow I have a dentist appointment, and if only I *didn't* have a dentist appointment, and how my grandmother had to get dentures, and how I never want to get dentures, but I still don't want to go to my dentist appointment.

And that's when I saw him—the monkey. A little, fuzzy, reddish-brown monkey, hopping from foot to foot in the grass.

“Saat!” squealed the monkey. “Saat!”

“Ack!” I screamed. “Ack!” Were my eyes working right?

Yes, he was right there in front of me, with a pink face and a funny, flat tuft of hair on his head like a furry beret. He scampered this way and that, jumping here and leaping there like he had a permanent case of ants in his pants.

“Saat!”

Back and forth he jumped, first toward me, then *sproing!* up into the tree, then *poing!* back down into the grass. One moment he was far away; the next moment he was sitting right beside me. Up, down, this way, that way, high in the tree, down to the ground—he was ping-ponging around so fast that it was like watching a kangaroo on a pogo stick.

I glanced over to where everyone was chatting by the picnic tables. Didn't anyone else see the turbo-charged monkey tearing around the park?

“Saaaat!”

With a screech, the monkey landed lightly beside me, sat down, and began searching through the grass, just like I had been doing before he showed up.

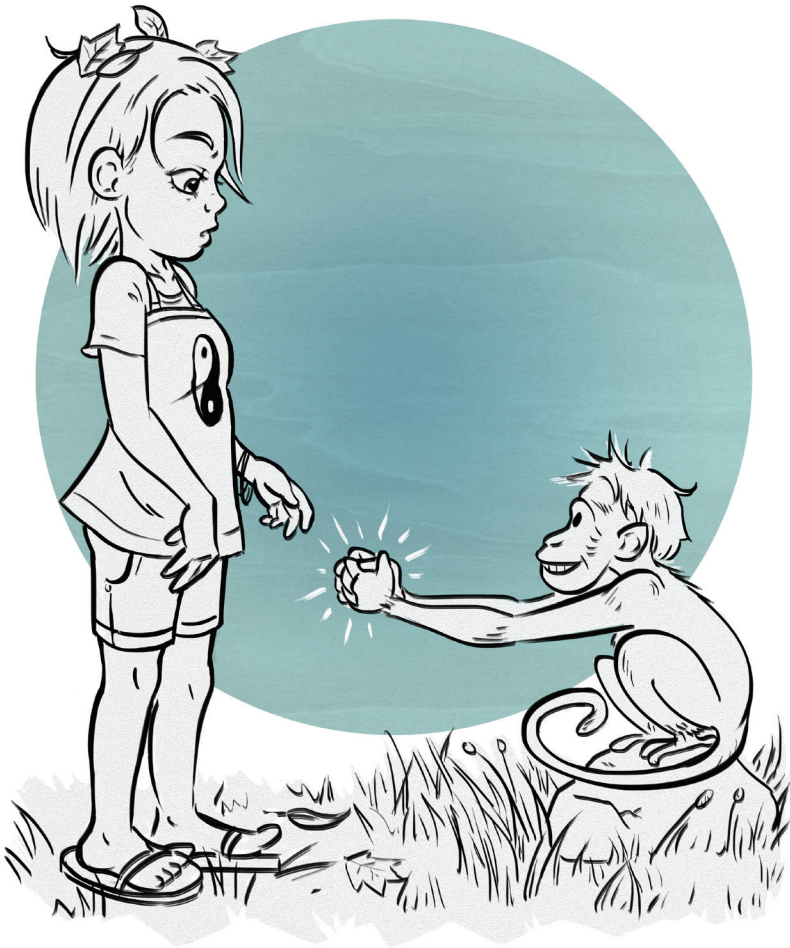
“Are you looking for something too?” I asked, then shook my head. Since when did I talk to monkeys?

But the strange thing was, he seemed to understand me, because as soon as I asked him, he stopped, looked at me, wiggled his eyebrows, and then sprang straight up into the tree. Then he started dropping leaves on my head.

“Hey!” I said. “Stop it! Go back to the zoo!” I stood up. Maybe this would finally get my parents to leave.

But before I could walk over to the picnic tables, the monkey plunked down from the tree and landed at my feet on the grass. He held up one finger as if to say, “Wait!” Then he sat down and started searching through the grass again.

He seemed to find something this time because he stood up with his hand closed, then slowly stretched his arm out toward me.



“Did you find something?” I asked, looking at his clenched fist.

He nodded and wiggled his eyebrows again. Then he uncurled his fingers and spread out his palm.

I looked. There was nothing in it.

“Huh?” I asked, peering more closely. “It’s empty!”

And that’s when things got *really* unexpected. That’s when he talked.

That monkey looked me straight in the eye, opened his mouth, and talked. He said, “What if you were happy *right here?*”

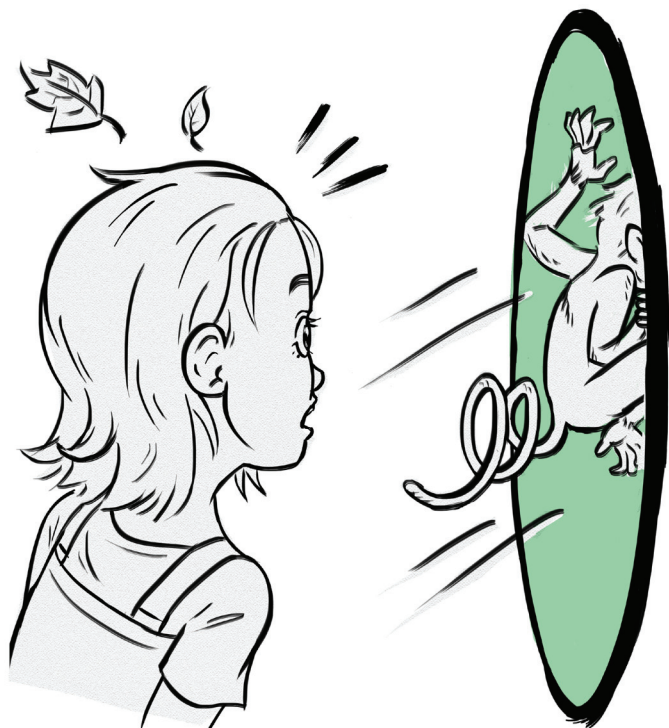
My first thought was, *I’ve gone totally cuckoo!* But then I thought, *What does he mean by that? Obviously, I am not happy right here.* I started to tell him so, but something even stranger happened.

Reaching out one long arm and stretching out one long finger, the monkey began to trace an enormous circle. As his finger trailed through the air, a thick line of black ink appeared out of nowhere, like he was painting with a giant invisible brush.

The moment he rounded the top and closed the circle, the space inside of it went blank, as if he had cut a hole in the air. Then he chuckled.

“You were looking for something interesting?” he asked, but before I could answer, he leaped through the circle, his long tail curling into a spiral before he disappeared entirely into the nothing.

I stood there, my mouth open. What in the world had just happened? I knew I wasn’t imagining it because the circle was still hanging there in the air, like a floating gateway.



I leaned forward and peeked inside it. Nothing. Or—was that something?

There, on the ground—if nothing has a ground—were those tracks? The monkey's?

I had to admit that the monkey was right about one thing: I *was* looking for something interesting, and if this wasn't interesting, I don't know what was.

I glanced back at the picnic table where Kevin was collecting an ominous pile of big, pointy sticks. Then I looked back at the circle.

What would *you* do?

Do you know what *I* did?

I jumped through the circle, too.

Chapter Two

I Get What I Want. Can I Please Return It?

The moment I hopped over the rim of the circle, everything changed. The nothing grew into something. It took its time, though.

At first, all I could see were blurry patches of color, as though I was looking at the world through rippled glass. But as I focused, a sharper image materialized.

All around me, ferns and palms flared skyward, bright green streaks against the blue, their leaves motionless in the muggy air. Beyond them rose a dense and brushy jungle reverberating with buzzes and chirps. Trees of all kinds hung with colorful fruit, and snaky vines wound over and around their branches. Far in the distance, lush green hills lay piled across the horizon like mossy scoops of ice cream melting into one another.

When I peered behind me, the circle had vanished.

When I looked in front of me, a meandering path appeared. It led into the tangle of vines and trees and disappeared around a curve.

At this point, you might wonder if I was feeling scared.

Are you kidding? *Of course I was!* Where was I?

And I had thought the park looked like another planet! This place made the park look as familiar as my bedroom.

How in the world was I going to get back home? What had I been thinking? Had I really just stepped through a random hanging hole of nothingness into a bizarre and ridiculously humid world because some monkey dared me to? *Why would I do that?!*

Come to think of it, what was really so bad about being bored, itchy, and poked with a pointy stick by a grouchy eight-year-old?

Sure, I had been unhappy. I had wanted something interesting to do. But being stuck in a wacky wormhole? Not what I had in mind.

Does this place have a customer service counter? I would like to return one poorly thought-out decision, please.

I had no one to blame by myself. No, that's not true. I blamed the monkey.

Where was that pesky monkey anyway? He could tell me how to get home—if I could find him.

So I started walking down the trail looking for any sign of monkey activity. What does monkey activity look like? I had no idea, but I looked anyway. The faint set of animal tracks that I had seen from the other side of the circle had vanished, but the path was still there, leading into the trees. If I were a monkey, that's where I'd be, so that's where I went.

As I trudged along, the vines and tall grasses grew more impenetrable, and the path narrowed so much that it was difficult even to find it. Still, I pressed forward, breaking through endless snarls of green growing stuff and stopping every two steps to search for the way to go next. I had to double back a dozen times when I thought I had made a wrong turn, sometimes doubling back *again* when the wrong turn seemed right in the end. All the while I was itching

like crazy from all the bug bites and beginning to wonder seriously if I was going to find a way home at all. All I could think about was:

What if I never find the monkey?

If I *do* find him, will he tell me how to get home?

What if he doesn't know how to get back?

I think I ate something funny, and this is all a feverish hallucination.

If this path ends, I'm toast.

I wish I had some toast.

Can I live in a tree and be happy?

I'm walking in one big circle. Didn't I see that coconut before?

The monkey should have waited.

How can he talk, anyway?

What use is a talking monkey if all he says is cryptic stuff like, "What if you were happy right here?"

I would gladly be happy *there* instead of here.

Okay, Monkey. Can I go home now?

Why are there mosquitoes everywhere I go?

Is that a mango?

It looks like a mango.

Yuck. It *is* a mango.

I ate mango ice cream at a restaurant when I was six, and it made me throw up.

I hate mangoes.

I hate throwing up.

I will have to eat mangoes and throw up forever if I can't get home.

If I ever get home, I'm never going anywhere without bug spray again.

Why was he showing me *nothing* in his palm?

Why did he drop leaves on my head?

And—ouch! Something knocked me off my feet.

What was this orange gloppy juice oozing down my forehead? Gross.

Did a mango just drop on my head? Hey, wait a minute!

I looked up. Two little eyes. Fuzzy beret hair. Wiggling eyebrows. “Monkeeeeeeeey!”

“Saaaat!”

I scrambled to my feet as he scurried down the branch, jumped to the next tree, and scampered out of sight.

“Wait!” I hollered. “Monkey!”

I ran after him as fast as I could, ducking under arched palms and leaping across muddy puddles as he rocketed from branch to branch across the top of the jungle, his long tail flickering in and out of view.

“Monkey, come back here!” I yelled.

Every so often he stopped to snigger at me as I caught my breath. Then he would scamper off again with a loud “Saaaat!”

“Monkey!” I finally panted, dripping with sweat and clutching the stitch in my side. “Just *stop!*”

And do you know what? He did. He stopped.

“I never thought you’d ask,” he said, landing lightly by my feet. He smiled, sat down in a sunny spot, and proceeded to examine his toes.

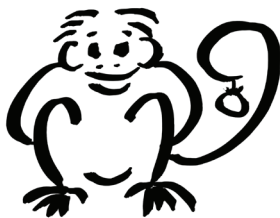
“Monkey!”

He grinned at me and wiggled his eyebrows again, making me wish very much that I had a ripe mango to throw at him.

“Okay, Monkey,” I said to him when we were both sitting down and I had stopped glaring at him. I wiped my forehead on what I think was a banana leaf. “Let’s leave aside for now the issue of why you keep saying and doing annoying things. Really, you’re worse than my little brother. But what I want to know is, how do I get back home?”

“Aho!” he said, springing to his feet with a happy little jump. “I have a story that will help.”

“A story?” I asked. Couldn’t he just give me directions? But at least he was staying still for once and not throwing anything at me. “Okay,” I said, sighing. “Let me hear the story.”



Monkey’s Story

There were once two monkeys having a debate while watching a flag flap and twist in the wind.

Said one: “The flag is moving.”

Said the other: “No, it’s not. The *wind* is moving.”

A deer happened to be walking by and overheard their discussion. He said to them: "It's not the flag; it's not the wind. Your *mind* is moving."



Monkey stopped talking and started examining his toes again.

I stared at him. "That's it? That's your big story that will help get me home?"

"Yep," he said.

"But how does that help? I mean, *your mind is moving?* What does that have to do with anything?" I asked. "Please just tell me how to get home, because if you don't, I'll be here forever, and it will be all your fault because you were bugging me at the park, and if I had just ignored you I wouldn't even be here! You said yourself that I should just be happy where I was, and believe me, I'd be happy to stay in that park forever, and I would even be happy to go to the dentist tomorrow if I could only get back, and—hey! Why are you bouncing around like a rubber ball again?"

Monkey stopped hopping from foot to foot and gave me a vexed look. Then he scampered straight over my head, where he began to jump up and down on a tree branch like he was on the high dive.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, standing up. "Stop!"

"Okay," he said, and he stopped.

I scowled at him. "I don't get it. Why do you stop when I tell you but then start springing all around again?"

"Aho!" he said. "You told me to do that, too."

"What? No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

“I did not! When did I ever say, ‘Monkey, please bonk around like my brother after one too many cookies’? All I’ve been doing is asking you to help me get home, because if you don’t, I’ll be forced to eat mangoes for the rest of my life, and I don’t know how to build a tree house, and—hey! Where are you going *now*? You see?” I shouted over to where he was swinging in the trees. “I didn’t tell you to do that!”

He caught the tree branch above me with his tail and hung upside down, his face level with mine. “Aho! Yes, you did,” he said. “Tell me, Mae, where is your mind?”



“Uh, in my *brain*, of course!” I said.

“Nope!” he said. “Mind is moving!” Then he howled with laughter and threw a handful of leaves on my head.

“Stop!” I yelled again.

He swung to the ground and looked at me plainly, his eyes serious and kind. Not an eyebrow was wiggling this time.

“Saat, Mae,” he said. “What if you were happy being *right where you are*?” And with that he bounded away, his tail disappearing into the jungle.

Well, thanks a lot, Monkey.

What if I was happy being right where I was?

My mind is *not* in my brain?

My mind is moving?

I sagged against the trunk of the tree and picked up one of the leaves Monkey had chucked at my head, twirling it in my fingers.

Monkey was asking a lot. Asking the impossible, even. Be happy *here*? The only way I was going to be happy right where I was was if *right where I was* was the park. That was all I could think about.

My mind was definitely back at the park. I wished I was with it. Then we’d be in the same place.

Then again, when I was at the park, I wasn’t very happy. My mind was at home. It wanted something interesting to do.

I *got* something interesting to do. I got what I wanted. That’s what happiness is, right? So how come I wasn’t happy?

Was happiness really getting what I wanted? If it was, then it seemed tricky. What I wanted kept changing.

First I wanted to be at the park. It was fun. Then I didn't want to be at the park. It was boring. First I wanted something interesting to do. Now I want to give it back. First I didn't want to go to the dentist tomorrow. Now I'd volunteer to go to the dentist every day if I could just get home. Why? What changed?

The more I thought about it, the more the answer seemed to be *nothing*. The park and Kevin and the dentist hadn't changed. They were still the same old park, brother, and dentist.

Nothing changed about *them*, so something must have changed about *me*. So what changed?

My mind.

My *mind*!

Mind is moving!

I sat straight up like I had been hit on the head with another mango. My skin was tingling all over. I understood what Monkey meant. I couldn't believe it!

My moving mind was bouncing my emotions all around like a yo-yo. That explained a lot—like why, the other night, I had been so upset when we had rice casserole for dinner instead of spaghetti. All day long I had been looking forward to spaghetti, but my dad forgot to thaw the sauce and made rice casserole instead. I was so disappointed, even though I like rice casserole.

Why had I been so upset? Because my mind wanted spaghetti. It was *attached* to the idea of spaghetti. It was stuck in the past. It was living in a spaghetti-for-dinner

alternate reality. It definitely wasn't with me, eating rice casserole. My mind was moving!

My mind can move all over the place, but I can't.

My mind can move all over time—to the past, to the future. But I can't.

I can only be where I am.

So what if I had told my mind to join me in the present for a nice bowl of rice casserole? I probably would have felt pretty happy.

Could that be it? If I could stop my mind moving right now, could I be happy right here? Could it be that happiness is all in my head?

Monkey said that his story would help me get home. Maybe if I could stop my mind from moving, I'd be back at the park.

I closed my eyes and took a good look at my mind. Sure enough, it was jumping all around, thinking about mangoes and dentists and parks and my fear that I would never get home.

Stop! I told it, just like I had shouted at Monkey. *Just stop and be right here. Not back in the park. Not at home. Just here.*

Here.

Why wasn't Monkey here?

Something smells weird.

I wonder if these mosquitoes carry malaria because I do *not* want to get malaria.

Oops.

Back to here.



Monkey said this would help me get home, so keep trying.

Oops.

Don't think about getting home.

Back to here.

Deep breath.

Deep breath.

Cicadas chirping.

Toe tickles.

Breath.

Breath.

!

Mosquito buzzing.

Wisp of wind.

Goosebumps.

Hey, did I just keep my mind still for a moment back there?

I did!

I wish I could I tell Monkey.

Maybe later.

Oops.

But I did it!

I opened my eyes.

Hanging right in front of me was another circle.

