

Journal Entry

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Women and their men. I see them all the time. Airport terminals are a good place to watch. The roles, the emotions, the language is universal.

I see a young couple from the moving sidewalk coming toward me hand in hand. One of them has just arrived. I can't tell which; the small case he carries is non-descript. They talk. She is smiling. Looks up at his eyes, back forward again. Up. Back. So much is said with her eyes. I can only imagine. I watch him. He is talking, but looks forward; she alternately at him and back ahead. What I see in her eyes he hasn't seen as long as I watch.

They pass, and I watch their backs. I see her profile tilted up to his face, but only the back of his head—minding the tiller. I've seen this before. Why is it so much easier for women to know where to look? Where to keep their eyes? Moving through their lives with their eyes fastened to the sides, on the eyes of those who travel with them—their men more intent on destination, the negotiation of the journey. And how do women keep that look in their eyes as they search up into the profiles of their men?

Last Wednesday night we got a video of scientists trying to teach human language to apes and dolphins. You thought it would be great to watch the dolphins you saw in the pictures on the box but were bored, as I knew you'd be when I tried to talk you out of it. Even so, a segment stays in my mind.

One man, a very famous scientist, spent three years raising an infant chimp and trying to teach him sign language. He named the chimp Nim. Nim did very well. Learned several hundred signs. But funding ran out, the project was disbanded, and Nim went to a zoo or something like it. After reviewing hundreds of video tapes of his sessions with Nim, the scientist concluded that Nim was only imitating his teachers and hadn't really learned anything. Put a big dent in the chimp-teaching business for awhile.

Several years later the scientist went to see Nim. Hadn't seen him since funding ran out on the project. In clinical voice over, he wondered if Nim would remember him. The video camera caught Nim walking with a trainer just as he caught sight of the scientist. Immediately chimp screeches filled the TV speaker at the rate of about three per second as Nim threw up his arms and sprinted, as well as chimps can in their loping way, for the scientist who got down on his haunches and braced for impact.

Nim leapt into the scientist's lap and threw his arms around his neck. Chimp arms being what they are, they almost went around twice. All this time and for as long as the camera held on Nim and the scientist, chimp screeches never stopped or even slowed down, chimp teeth big and bright as the scene cut.

And I kept hearing those screeches, and I laughed and smiled and my eyes stung a little all at the same time because the scientist thought that Nim learned nothing, and Nim thought that the scientist was his father, or brother at least. Because the scientist was looking ahead at where he was going. Nim was looking at him.

I'd rather be a chimp than a scientist.

I'd rather be a young woman watching her man's profile than a young man watching the road.

Dave Brisbin