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Sudden Love: A Very Improbable Valentine

by Robert Krulwich

February 14, 2010

Hear Why Barb Smut's Glasses Got All Steamy

Weekend Edition Sunday

Transcript



text sizeAAA

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She was a gorilla. Barb was a human. And between them, the strangest thing happened.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This story is best told first person, as it unfolded, in conversation. So here's the script of my conversation with animal behaviorist Barbara Smuts. You can listen to it by pushing the button up above, or you can just follow along:

Barbara Smuts: Hi, this is Barb!

Robert Krulwich: Hi Barb. Barbara Smuts is now a psychology professor at the University of Michigan, but years ago, she was a field biologist in Africa where she studied chimps and baboons. And to do that she had to learn to make herself uninteresting to the animals around her so they'd go about their business.

Barb: Right.

Robert: So she practiced being dull ...

Barb: Yeah, shy and pretty boring ...

Robert, giggling: So she never looked an animal in the eye, or ...

Barb: Yeah, you don't give anybody a hard stare. And if you are looking at someone and they look at you, don't continue to look at them. You turn your head away.

Robert: All of which made it very interesting one time when she was up in the mountains of Rwanda, visiting a wild gorilla preserve with her friend Dian Fossey. And she was led to a group of female gorillas — wild gorillas sitting together in a patch of forest. So she carefully approached.

Barb: You walk and move as gently as possible.

Robert: So keeping a safe distance, she sat down to watch.

Barb: Yes.

Robert: Then you noticed someone was giving you the eye. Who's giving you the eye and what happens next?

Barb, laughing: Well I caught the eye of this young adult female who was sitting across from me. It was kinda almost like a circle, and she was on the other side, maybe 12 feet away. So we, umm, locked eyes for a few seconds. She kept looking at me, and I kept looking at her and, uh, I was, inside, inside I was making this enormous effort to beam her way my feelings about her which were entirely positive.

NPR science correspondent Robert Krulwich explores adventures in science with help from designers, performers, cartoonists, animators and filmmakers. Among them, Web favorites OddTodd and Lev Yilmaz.

Robert: Cause you kind of liked her from a distance, yeah?

Barb: I did. I did. I loved her from a distance.

Robert: Why? Because she was such a big animal and you were ...

Barb: Uh, well, they're beautiful animals, mountain gorillas, and she had a sweet expression on her face, and I just thought she was terrific. [laughing] And she'd been looking at me.

Robert: This is so eighth grade. So then what happens?

Barb, laughing: She got up and she walked over to me. I was sitting on the ground. She stood right in front of me, and, uh, she pressed her forehead up against mine. I remember this very clearly because I was wearing glasses and they got all steamed up from her ... her breath. And then she wrapped her arms around me. And she held me for a moment. Just a few seconds. And then she let go, and she sat down. And I felt like, gee I must be OK. I'm not a bad person.

Robert: Well, when you were wrapped up in a gorilla's arms, did you feel scared or did you feel ...

Barb: Nooo!

Robert: No?

Barb: Oh I just felt so lucky. And honored. And thrilled. And I asked Dian Fossey later, I said "Is she in the habit, does she go around hugging, um, women?" And she said, "No, that's not something she does." So

Robert: So to this day, Barb has no idea what happened, why she was chosen, why it felt so right, so strangely welcome. Barb is a scientist, yes, but in this situation there was nothing to measure, there was no data, no pattern, no history, just a sudden rush of feeling and then it was over.

Barb: Things happen when you, when you spend time in wild places and you tune into the animals. Things ... things happen that you can't explain.

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