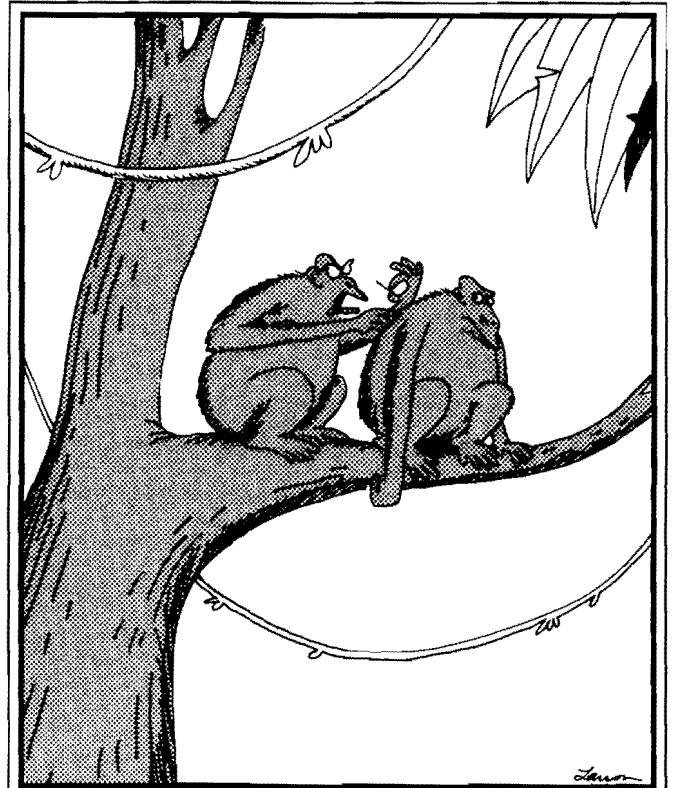


Foreword

In 1988 Gary Larson went on safari to Africa and one of the places he visited was the Gombe National Park in Tanzania, home of the chimpanzees made famous by the *National Geographic* magazines and documentaries. As we sat around the fire the first evening, Gary told me he had been quite apprehensive about our meeting—because of the “Jane Goodall Tramp” cartoon. That story has already been told—from his side—by Gary. But nobody has told my side. I was in Tanzania when the infamous cartoon first appeared. So I knew nothing about the minicommotion that went on at the time until I went to America for a lecture tour. When I got to the Jane Goodall Institute office, my *then* executive director thrust the cartoon at me. “Just look at that, will you!” she announced, in icy tones. I thought the folded paper must contain some bad news so I opened it apprehensively. When I saw it I remember making some kind of explosive mirthful sound—I like to think it was a guffaw, because that is such a wonderful word, a real *Far Side* sort of word. And I said something like: “Wow! Fantastic! Real fame at last! Fancy being in a Gary Larson cartoon!” I could hardly believe it when the *then* executive director told me she had found it so offensive that she had asked a lawyer to write a letter of complaint! It implied, she said, that I had sexual relations with the chimps!! I thought she was joking, until I saw her closed and silent face. And she showed me the letter, which had appeared in the local newspaper.

I was so angry that I intended to write Gary Larson myself, to apologize, but I got whirled into the frenzy of the tour—and I forgot. So the next thing, a year or so later, was an urgent call from the National Geographic Society. They wanted to reproduce the Jane Goodall Tramp cartoon in their centennial volume but Larson’s company had refused permission—they were afraid that my institute would sue them! I remember frantic transatlantic phone calls between the Geographic, Larson’s attorney, my Institute (with quite a different director!), and myself. In the end I had to go to a notary and declare, under oath, that I had no intention of bringing a lawsuit against Gary Larson, or his company, ever! Eventually the JGI benefited enormously because Gary gave us permission to put the cartoon on a T-shirt and it is one of



“Well, well—another blond hair. ... Conducting a little more ‘research’ with that Jane Goodall tramp?”

our hottest numbers! The only real problem it has given me is the sheer number of copies of the thing that people have sent me—and I never like to throw them away. I have enough now to paper a small room. The trouble is, there is only one room small enough—and that doesn’t seem quite polite!

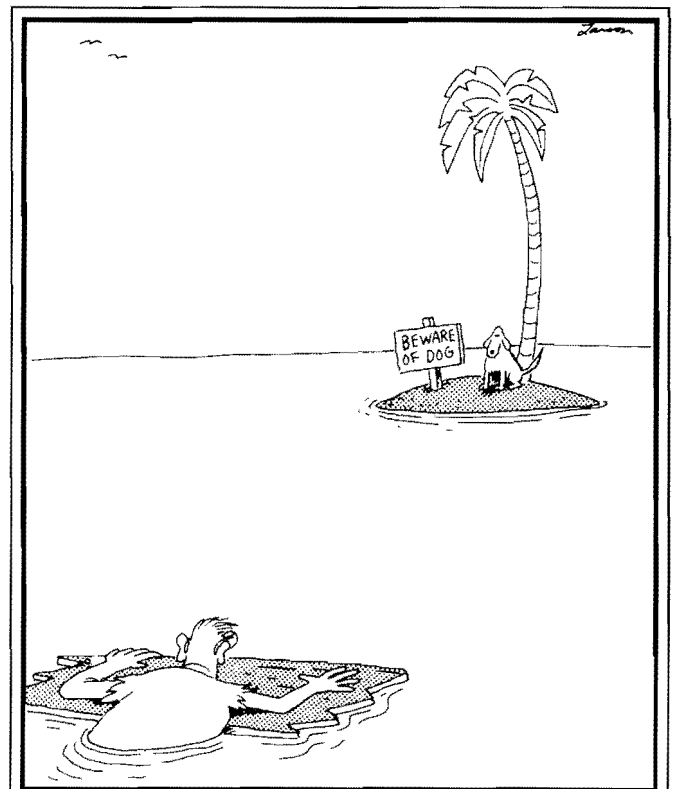
When I tell people that Gary Larson has been to Gombe they are first impressed, then curious. What is he really like, as a person? Does he go around making *Far Side* jokes? Does he have a bizarre sense of humor? I found him utterly delightful, quiet, and very observant. He has a wonderfully kind sense of humor. I never heard him talking Larsonesque *Far Side* language in public! He was interested, as one would expect, in everything around him. I remember that Gary spent hours, with his video, stalking the brilliant butterflies of the Gombe forests.

He and his wife had decided to sleep in a small tent (the rest of their little group, which included Jack Lemmon, had opted for rooms in my house or the guest house). They had all arrived late in the afternoon and as we walked along the

beach of Lake Tanganyika to look for a good place for the tent, the sun was already low over the Zaire hills in the west. Gary and his wife refused all offers of help, so we left them to sort out the tent themselves. The rest of us had a refreshing swim, then gathered on the beach outside my house for a drink. We sat there, listening to the little waves flipping over onto the shore, enjoying the glow of the setting sun on the moving water. It sank behind the western hills. Slowly the sunset faded. Our glasses were empty. And still they had not joined us. We presumed they were just enjoying the solitude—but when they eventually appeared it turned out that they had been struggling with the vagaries of the tent all that time, desperately trying to transform the little bundle of canvas and metal rods into something that looked roughly like a place where they could spend the night! And I don't think they made that good a job of it even then—I seem to remember that the whole thing collapsed the next morning under the small weight of young baboons sliding playfully down the canvas!

One incident stands out vividly in my memory. As Gary and I were walking back through the forest one evening, we encountered Frodo, grandson of the famous chimpanzee matriarch, Flo. Frodo the bully. He has always been a bully, always loved to intimidate any individual, chimpanzee or human, weaker than himself. And even in those days, when he was merely a rambunctious adolescent, he was already stronger than Gary and I put together. I knew we were in trouble when he changed course and made a beeline for us. "Hang onto a tree!" I told Gary. As Frodo pulled and pushed and hit my illustrious visitor, I remained outwardly calm. Actually I was terrified—there I was, responsible for the safety of one of the most talented cartoonists of all time, and there was Frodo trying to throw Gary Larson to the ground! Usually I was the target of Frodo's unpleasant bullying, but on that occasion, even though I tried (for the only time in my life!) to divert Frodo's attentions to myself, he was only interested in Gary. Of course, Frodo wasn't really trying to hurt, just "playfully" trying to intimidate, and luckily he eventually gave up and left us in peace.

Gary visited Gombe during his "sabbatical." Soon thereafter he went back to work and produced another five years' worth of fantastic Far Side cartoons. Gary's humor has infiltrated twentieth-century culture. His cows and deer, his



sharks and snakes and insects, along with the strange lantern-jawed small-headed humans, are everywhere. Pinned to college notice boards, stuck on the outside—and the inside—of people's doors, on the walls. All over North America, all over Europe and many other parts of the world. The Far Side cartoons in the newspapers guaranteed readers the opportunity to start their day with a smile, a chuckle—or even a guffaw! Some of Gary's cartoons, quite simply, are absurd. Like the shipwrecked man struggling toward a little desert island only to see a lone dog under a lone palm tree and a large sign reading "Beware of the Dog." Life's little ironies!

Often Gary's cartoons help us to see things with a new perspective, above all to realize that we humans, after all, are just one species among many, just one small part of the wondrous animal kingdom. Larson blithely reverses the roles of human and nonhuman so that, as you browse through a whole collection you find on one page a Gary Larson human carelessly squishing a foolish dog (yapping when the man of the house is trying to watch the World Cup), and on another, a Gary Larson elephant carelessly squishing a foolish human. Then there is the veterinarian, having completed his examination of a gigantic Larsonesque beetle, who turns to the concerned owner: "I'm

sorry, Mr. Caldwell, but the big guy's on his way out. If you want my opinion, take him home, find a quiet spot out in the yard, and squash him." To complete this picture, a normal-sized ant "wearing" a human boot with which he has inadvertently squashed several of his brothers and sisters. "Ernie!" admonishes his mother. "Look what you're doing—take those shoes off!" The whole gamut. Crazy. Absurd. Yet it all helps to put us humans in our place. And we desperately need putting in our place.

Today there is increased awareness about our often thoughtless, sometimes cruel, treatment of nonhuman animals. I believe that The Far Side cartoons have contributed to this growing understanding. The picture of a little old lady sitting on a bench in the park feeding the crocodiles that approach like so many ducks to beg for mice out of a box (with air holes, mind you) or sitting in her living room with a pet octopus on her lap are far out, all right. But such images, collectively, start to make you think. Often a particular image stays with you and pops back into your conscious mind later in the day so that you giggle—or guffaw—out loud. It's sort of like eating something delicious that makes you burp, unexpectedly—and probably embarrassingly—some time afterward. So Gary starts us thinking, and then gets us to go on thinking. Hey! There are other critters out there too! They have names and feelings. They matter too. One of my absolute favorites that can make me laugh out loud, even in public, if it suddenly pops into my mind, is the very small head of a very small fly, in the middle of a huge bowl of soup. From the rim another small fly yells desperately, "Barbara, I'm going for help. Tread soup!" I think I especially love cartoons like this because the animals are all *named*. That drowning fly is not just any old fly—she's a fly who matters. She is called Barbara.

How many people have tried to imagine the world from the perspective of a fly? Gary does. There are two terrified little flies walking through "The Fly House of Horrors" gazing, shocked, at the bloated spider sucking a fly's lifeblood, a huge-looking flyswatter, and a Venus's-flytrap. And, of course, as we all know, he sees many things from the perspective of cows. He introduces us to three cows in a car, jabbering out of the window, "Yakity yak yak yak!" as they stare at a field of humans, who are standing, doing nothing. And dog perspectives—a courting dog, with his gift of flowers, effusively greets his date: "Oh, Ginger—you look absolutely stunning ... and whatever you rolled in sure does stink."



"I'm sorry, Mr. Caldwell, but the big guy's on his way out. If you want my opinion, take him home, find a quiet spot out in the yard, and squash him."

Recently I was talking with one of the best teachers I know, Tim O'Halloran. He has been able to inspire generations of middle and high school students to care for the natural world. Tim told me that Gary Larson has had a major impact on his teaching. Tim uses Far Side cartoons to introduce topics, to illustrate points, and to "reinforce the notion that the more we investigate the universe, the richer is our experience." When designing exam papers Tim finds the cartoons "ease the tension and spark the memory." It all began when, in the fall of 1985, he was given the task of teaching science to 162 Tulsa ninth-graders who were convinced that it was absolutely irrelevant to their futures. Tim put one hundred Far Side cartoons on a large bulletin board, and told the students to study them. The consensus was that they didn't understand the humor—The Far Side was "too weird." However, Tim wrote me, "Each time we completed a unit and the students approached the bulletin board armed with newly acquired wisdom, I smiled quietly and thanked the cosmos for Gary's perspectives as the kids roared with the confident laughter of the enlightened."

So, how did their knowledge help them? Well, take the cartoon that shows the confrontation of two female mantids

on the doorstep, with its caption, "I don't know what you're insinuating, Jane, but I haven't seen your Harold all day—besides, surely you know I would only devour my own husband!" This doesn't make sense until you have learned that it is normal practice for a female praying mantis to devour her husband once mating is over (sometimes she starts, on his head, even *before* he has finished). Then there is one captioned, "The last thing that a fly sees," which shows about twelve images of the same large woman with a raised fly-swatter. This cannot be appreciated until you know about the compound eyes of flies.

Speakers at scientific conventions often introduce a slide of a Far Side cartoon to illustrate a point, to get a laugh—Far Side humor is often highly appropriate for those involved in science of some sort. Although you don't need to be a scientist to chuckle at the idea of a dog filling himself with water from a garden hose causing his wife to exclaim, "So! Planning on roaming the neighborhood with some of your buddies today?" But it's even funnier when you know how dogs and wolves can mark a huge territory without replenishing their liquid intake. (When Farley Mowat tried to emulate the marking behavior of the wolves he was studying, he simply ran out of juice when he was just one quarter of the way round *their* "neighborhood"!)

But Gary does not only cater to those who know about natural history. He has something for everyone. There are dentist cartoons for the dentists, and doctor cartoons for doctors, and cooking ones for cooks. (I especially love the one where the father is intently reading *The Cold Cereal Cookbook*, yelling at his son, "Oh, wait! Wait, Cory! ... Add the cereal *first* and *then* the milk!" Yes, and then *sugar to taste!*) I spend half my life in airplanes these days—and now, every

time the pilot announces turbulence just as the meal service—or, worse, the beverage service—is about to begin, I think of Larson's pilots grinning at each other then swinging the controls from side to side, laughing fit to bust. And Larson often pinpoints the social problems of our time. The dog, pointing a revolver at his bloated master and mistress as they gorge themselves on yet another meal, says, "Hey, bucko ... I'm through begging," surely represents the social unrest that lies at the roots of violence in our inner cities.

Gary Larson's genius lies in his ability to combine his astute understanding of human nature, his equally extensive knowledge of natural history, and his extraordinarily well-developed sense of the absurd. There is, for example, the spider, minute on a huge couch, explaining to a bearded psychoanalyst her repetitive nightmare in which her feet get stuck, one by one, to her web. It is a great contribution you have made, Gary. You teach us to poke fun at ourselves, using the most primitive animals to point out the absurdities of our own behavior. Bang on target. I mean—Metamorphosis Nightclubs! Single-cell bars. Amoeba porn films. *Touché*, Mr. Larson, *touché*.

And now Gary Larson is retiring, and we shall miss him. Some of us will miss him very much. But we wish him a wonderful second career. And we can be sure that, as a result of his books, his cartoons will be around for a long time. Thousands more people as yet unborn will be helped to relate to the ironies and the tragedies, the joyfulness and the richness, of life on earth.

Jane Goodall
July 1995