



THE SCHITZLE CONNECTION

by Cy Young

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story you are about to read is so unique and so enigmatic that it has been published in over 4000 newspapers in 30 countries and has impelled zoologists in the entire hemisphere to reexamine their cherished reverence for Darwin's theory of evolution. But you can make up your own mind about Herman Schitzle. Is he? Could he? Did he? Turn the page ... and prepare to be entranced.

THE SCHITZLE CONNECTION

For Mrs. Nadine Schitzle of Tarzana, California, the appearance of a three-toed sloth in her eucalyptus tree was curious but not unusual.

"I think it's got something to do with Monica Lewinsky's stained dress," she said, gazing into space.

Her next-door neighbor was staring at the beast across the backyard fence.

"What?" Mrs. Elvira Bent said, "I don't get the connection."

Petite and trim in her canary jogging suit and sneakers, Mrs. Schitzle looked up at the taller woman and replied with an open-eyed innocence that charmed. "Well," she said as she flicked a wisp of grey hair from her forehead, "nothing's been the same since that dress was discovered. My butcher got a hernia and I'm very bored with Tom Cruise."

Early in life, Nadine had begun to make bizarre connections; by the time she had reached her present age of sixty-one, the causal relationship between Monica Lewinsky's dress and the finding of a sloth in her backyard seemed perfectly natural. So was her growing conviction that the sloth was her husband.

"Your husband?" Mrs. Bent said looking from the sloth to Nadine. "You're saying that Herman Schitzle, your husband, has turned into a sloth? A *real* sloth? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," Mrs. Schitzle said, nodding vigorously. "He was always a slob and now

he's gone too far."

Elvira Bent had grown up in Brooklyn and still had the New Yorkers' suspicious nature of anything that breathed. From the first day her neighbor moved in, Elvira had been convinced Nadine Schitzle was a little off center. All doubt had just been removed. She was about to ask Mrs. Schitzle how she thought it was possible for a human being to change into an animal when a man wearing a green uniform with an insignia on his sleeve appeared at the gate. The man explained that he was from the Animal Shelter. They'd received a complaint that Mrs. Schitzle was keeping a large animal in her backyard and wanted to know if it is true.

"Mammal," Nadine said, correcting him, "it's a mammal." The man apologized and asked, "Could I see the mammal, ma'am?"

Mrs. Schitzle said of course. She led the way to the neat, fenced-in backyard as Mrs. Bent followed. An old, wooden shed perched on one side of the yard and leaned slightly toward a nearby eucalyptus tree. A hammock stretched between the tree and the shed. Beside the hammock was a television set resting precariously on top of two wooden milk crates. An extension cord led into the shed's window. Near the empty hammock was a large ice chest with a six-pack of Bud floating in the melted ice. Pretzels were scattered on the ground along with several discarded beer cans.

The beast hung upside down from a branch of the tree over the hammock. Eyes closed, it swayed slightly, wafted by the gentle, Santa Ana breeze. It was definitely a sloth. And it had a pot belly.

The three stared into the tree. "That's a sloth all right," the man said, "and a damned big one, I've never seen one that ---"

"--- He's six-two in his bare feet," Mrs. Schitzle volunteered.

The man looked at her in surprise. "You measured him?"

"No," Mrs. Schitzle said, shaking her head, "Herman's always been six-two."

"Herman is ..."

"Her husband," Mrs. Bent offered helpfully.

"Wait a minute, slow down," the man said to Mrs. Bent. His name was Jerry, and he was getting confused. "Herman's her husband, right?"

"Yes," Nadine said.

"And what's he got to do with the sloth?" he said to Nadine.

"They're one and the same thing," Mrs. Bent said. "She thinks her husband is the sloth." She pointed into the tree and continued. "That one up there. The tall, dark one."

Jerry stared hard at Mrs. Bent, then turned to Nadine. "Look, lady, I got a lot of calls to make, I don't have time to play games. Is this a joke?"

"No, it's not," Mrs. Schitzle said eagerly. "Phil, our garage mechanic, became a Rabbi, and Ronald Reagan became President. Anything's possible."

Jerry's eyes glazed over.

Mrs. Schitzle frowned. "Would you like a glass of water?" she asked. Nadine knew that glaze. It was in Herman's eyes just before he'd passed out from eating too

many hot dogs at a Chargers/Raiders football game. Herman had suddenly stood up, burped explosively, then keeled over on top of her, collapsing her bleacher seat. Nadine's small frame had been engulfed by her husband's 260 pounds of quivering flab. The vendor and two burly Raiders fans had pulled Herman off and laid him in the aisle, saving her from certain suffocation. She took a step back.

The glaze vanished, however, and Jerry regained his composure. He pulled his cap off and scratched his scalp vigorously. "Must have escaped from a zoo. Problem is, there isn't one around here ..."

"Yes, there is," Mrs. Schitzle said, nodding, "there's one on the corner."

Jerry looked down at Mrs. Schitzle in surprise and pointed across the street. "You mean *this* corner?"

"Yes."

"That's not a *zoo*, lady," he said with a hint of sarcasm, "that's a Department of Motor Vehicles Office!"

"Young man," Mrs. Schitzle said without blinking, "have you ever been inside?"

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Unknown to Mrs. Schitzle, Mrs. Bent notified the media about the sloth phenomenon. Later that afternoon, a camera crew arrived along with an attractive, on-the-spot reporter, Sally Sweet. Mrs. Schitzle was busily at work in the backyard hoeing the flower garden when Sally Sweet barged through the gate with her crew.

"Mrs. Schitzle?" she said loudly, "Mrs. Nadine Schitzle?"

Nadine stopped working, shaded her eyes from the sun, and looked ingenuously at the reporter. "Yes?"

Sally introduced herself as her camera crew got ready to tape. The sound man leaned a good-sized mirror against the fence and as Sally talked, she checked her makeup. "Just act natural, Mrs. Schitzle. I'll ask you some simple questions, just be yourself and tell us, in your own words ... all about this event ---"

When the crew was ready, Sally switched on her best smile and spoke into the camera. "I'm here in Mrs. Nadine Schitzle's backyard in Tarzana. A few days ago, Mrs. Schitzle discovered a sloth hanging from a branch of her eucalyptus tree." Sally Sweet turned to Nadine. "Mrs. Schitzle, I understand that you think this animal in your backyard ---"

"--- Mammal, it's a mammal."

Sally Sweet paused. She hated to be interrupted, especially by demented little old ladies. After all, Sally was a well-known TV anchor person, running a close third behind Diane Sawyer and Connie Chung, a fact that the *nitwit* standing in front of her failed to acknowledge. Sally took a deep breath and started over. "I understand that you think this *mammal* in your backyard is your husband. Now Mrs. Schitzle, you don't really believe that do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Mrs. Schitzle," Sally began, a slight condescending sneer curling around her lush lips, "a man cannot become a sloth."

"That's true," Nadine said, measuring her words thoughtfully, "Herman was always a sloth. Of course, when I married him, he had all his toes."

Sally's self-conscious laugh was a little too loud. She'd been slipping lately in the ratings and her confidence was sagging. Just as she was about to continue, the sloth shifted position.

"See that?" Mrs. Schitzle said, pointing a slender finger at the beast. "Did you see the way he moved just then? *That's* the way Herman moved."

The woman was deranged, Sally thought, she had to be. Men didn't change into sloths. It wasn't logical. And logic was supremely important to Sally Sweet whose family had a history of mental lapses, something she hadn't mentioned on her job application at the network. She cleared her throat. "What was that about toes?" she said tentatively, hoping Mrs. Schitzle would give her a logical answer.

Mrs. Schitzle turned to Sally. "Well," Nadine began innocently, "what happened was, a few months ago Herman started wearing those pointed, Italian shoes ---"

"--- Pointed shoes, yes?"

Nadine was all wide-eyed wonder. "Well, I think when the slothiness took him over, his toes started falling off, you know, sloths only have three toes, the *real* lazy ones only have two ---"

Sally didn't like the direction the conversation was heading. "... And you think Herman ..."

"IT'S A FALLOUT FROM MONICA'S BLUE DRESS, RIGHT, NADE?" Mrs. Bent said from across the fence where she'd been observing.

Sally ignored her and continued with a dread fascination. "Mrs. Schitzle ..."

"Nadine," Mrs. Schitzle said.

"Nadine," Sally continued, losing her train of thought, then finding it again. She was beginning to perspire. "Nadine, do you mean to tell me that you think Herman, your husband, has been ... losing his toes---!?"

"Oh, yes," Nadine said cheerfully. She picked up the rake and began raking.

"Ought to be one or two around here somewhere ..."

Sally laughed. This was too ridiculous. "Mrs. Schitzle, now seriously. What are you going to do about the sloth? Is he dangerous?"

"No," Nadine said, "he's perfectly harmless, he's never even touched me." She thought a moment, then added, "It's Herman. It's *definitely* Herman."

The cameraman guffawed. Sally quickly motioned for him to cool it. "Don't you need a permit to keep an animal --- sorry, *mammal*, this size in your backyard, Mrs. Schitzle?"

"Oh, I have a permit. I'll get it."

Mrs. Schitzle hurried into her house as Sally gulped in air and welcomed the opportunity for a moment's relief. She faced the camera.

"Well, folks, I'm just as surprised as you are at the developments here in the Schitzle backyard. Either something very strange has occurred, or Mrs. Schitzle has

stayed out in the sun a little too long! She's just gone into the house to get her permit to keep the sloth, who she claims is her husband, in her backyard. Don't go away, in a few moments we'll have another chapter in the Schitzle-Sloth-Saga."

The crew stopped filming. Sally hurried over to the mirror propped against the fence as Mrs. Bent stepped through the gate and approached.

"God!" Sally said, "this is **GREAT STUFF!!** Hey, guys?" she called over her shoulder, "get some footage of the sloth while I check the curls!"

"You got it!" the cameraman said as he and the soundman positioned themselves underneath the sloth.

Sally cupped her hands under her breasts and lifted as she said, "GET AS MANY ANGLES AS YOU CAN! PEOPLE LOVE TO LOOK AT ANIMALS ---!"

"Mammal," Mrs. Bent said, "it's a mammal."

Sally ignored her. "RICK!" she shouted, "TRY TO GET SOME VOCALS ---GRUNTS, SQUEALS, WHATEVER SLOTHS DO ---" She touched up her eyebrows. "WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE, GUYS?"

The cameraman and sound man were staring up at the large furry ball hanging from the tree. "I'LL BE ---!" the cameraman said, "IT'S A REAL SLOTH!"

"YEAH!" the sound man added, "HE'S A BIG MOTHER!" He poked his boom mike into the branches as the cameraman started filming. "DO YOU KNOW SHE'S GOT THE TV SET UPSIDE DOWN SO THE SLOTH CAN WATCH IT?"

"YOU'RE KIDDING!" Sally said, finishing her toilette.

"SWEAR TO GOD!"

Mrs. Bent had been watching and listening patiently. Now she stepped forward. "You know, I'm the one who called you originally ..."

Sally Sweet swung away from her mirror and walked over to Mrs. Bent. "Okay, guys, let's get this lady ---"

"You got it!" the cameraman said as he moved in close on Elvira Bent, then shouted, "ROLLING!"

Sally Sweet peered into the camera and flashed her biggest smile. She was feeling better. "Hi! I'm here with the sloth lady's next-door neighbor, Mrs. Elvira Bent." She turned to Mrs. Bent and said, "How do you feel about having a red-blooded, three-toed sloth in the yard next to yours?"

"I don't sleep well," Mrs. Bent said, shaking her head.

"I can see why," Sally Sweet said.

"Yes. He *is* a hairy beast, a wild, untamed thing. You never know what he might do."

"Could he get into the house?"

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes yes. See that tree in my yard?" Mrs. Bent said pointing to a large palm tree. "The branches ... they sort of ..."

"Intertwine?" Sally said helpfully.

"Good word," Mrs. Bent said, "they intertwine. And it's perfectly conceivable to me that Herman could swing into my boudoir some dark, primitive night whilst out

foraging for food and ... I shudder to think about it."

Sally Sweet glanced up at Mrs. Bent's upstairs window. "It must be frightening. By the way, what do sloths eat?"

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Bent said, flicking a fly from her face, "*That's* why I'm scared. I'm thinking of getting a pit bull."

"Have you known Nadine Schitzle long?"

"About ten years. I was interested in buying this property, but she and the sloth snapped it up before I could close escrow."

Just then Mrs. Schitzle hurried back holding a document. "Here it is, here's my permit." She handed the document to Sally Sweet who studied it momentarily before her face fell.

"Nadine, this is a marriage license."

"That's right," Mrs. Schitzle said, "Herman and I were married in the Santa Monica Courthouse twenty-six and a half years ago." Two dazzling dimples framed her smile.

Sally had begun to perspire again. Her insecurities returned. Her tongue seemed suddenly leaden. "Mrs. ... I ... w-was talking about a permit to keep the an--- slo--- mam---"

"A marriage certificate is perfectly legal, it's all the permit I need, it's ---" Suddenly Mrs. Schitzle spied something. "Oh, look," she said. She stooped down and picked up an object lying in the grass.

"What?" Sally Sweet said, fearing the worst, "What is it?"

Mrs. Schitzle handed her object. "I think it's Herman's big toe."

Sally screamed and threw her hands up knocking the thing onto Mrs. Bent who screamed and flung it toward the sound man who also screamed, flicking it at the cameraman who slapped it away with a grunt. Mrs. Schitzle watched as it arced over the fence where a stray dog snagged it out of the air and ran off as Sally Sweet fainted.

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A day later, Mrs. Schitzle received some bad news. It came from Jerry, the man from the Animal Shelter. "My supervisor said an animal that size -- sorry, mammal, is considered a barnyard mammal and can't be kept inside the city limits."

Nadine was raking up beer cans while Mrs. Bent watched from across the backyard fence. Mrs. Schitzle stopped working and thought a moment, then said quietly, "Well. I don't know how Herman is going to take this."

"TELL JERRY ABOUT THE OATH, NADINE!" Mrs. bent yelled. "SHE TOOK AN OATH, YA' KNOW ...!"

Jerry made a face. "Please, Mrs. Schitzle, don't give me that stuff about the sloth being your husband ..."

Nadine fixed the young man with a gaze of utmost simplicity. "Young man, you may not believe my husband is a sloth but you haven't lived with him. Take my word for it, he is. He just is."

"But ---"

"Your supervisor should know that her decision could split up my home."

"It's not her decision, there's a city ordinance!"

"A sloth ordinance?" Mrs. Bent said helpfully as she came over.

"No, there's no *sloth* ordinance," Jerry said, growing more frustrated.

"It seems to me there's more to this than meets the eye," Mrs. Schitzle added.

"No, there's not!" Jerry said. "The law's the law --- You just can't keep a ... beast that size within the city limits, it's that simple!"

"But what about the family unit? You can't just break up a twenty-five-year marriage because of an ordinance. Besides, Herman's not that much trouble to take care of." Mrs. Schitzle removed her gloves and scratched her tiny nose.

"Look, Mrs. Schitzle," Jerry said, but Nadine wasn't finished.

"--- He does leave fur balls around the yard, but I don't mind cleaning up ... at least I don't have to worry about doing his shirts now ... they were a trial ... the hair got my washing machine clogged up something awful ... and of course he became edentata and that created ---"

"Edentata?" Jerry and Mrs. Bent said simultaneously, looking at each other.

"Toothless," Mrs. Schitzle said. "Oh, he may have incisors, a few upper and lower teeth, but now that he's become arboreal, that's tree-dwelling, life is much easier."

"Speaking of teeth," Mrs. Bent said thoughtfully, "if Herman needs dental work,

will you take him to a dentist or a vet?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, you'd better think about it. He probably needs shots, and you should dust him for ticks."

Jerry sighed. It was late and he had to be going. But Nadine was getting to him, and he had to admit that she reminded him of his mother. "Look. I'll talk to my supervisor, and see if there's anything I can do, Mrs. Schitzle. I can't make any promises, but I'll try."

"Thank you, Jerry," Nadine said. She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. Her charm was overwhelming. He went out the gate vowing to himself to do everything he could to help.

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Later that day the Reverend Opps dropped by at Nadine's request. Opps was a short man in his 60's who wore glasses and a look of benign vacuity. He stopped under the tree and stared at the sloth as Mrs. Schitzle exited the house and came over.

"Thank you for coming, Reverend Opps," she said.

Reverend Opps shook her hand. From the look on his face he was quite concerned. "You said it was urgent so I got here as soon as I could."

After they were seated at the picnic table not far from the eucalyptus tree, he continued. "Mrs. Schitzle, what's going on here? I watched the news last night and frankly, I was shocked at what I heard ..."

"It is a little involved. You see, Herman was a practical joker, always playing tricks on me. This is his latest caper and he's really put me in the fry pan with it."

"In what way?"

"Jerry, the man from the Animal Shelter, was just here. He says Herman can't stay in the city ..."

"But this is his home!" the Reverend replied indignantly.

Mrs. Schitzle stared at him, fearing his reaction. "He meant the sloth." She looked at the tree as a beer can plopped to the ground. The Reverend looked over at the sound. Mrs. Schitzle continued. "I'll admit, he is a nuisance now, even more than he was before, but ..."

Opps looked back at Nadine. "Now just a minute, Mrs. Schitzle. You don't seriously believe Mr. Schitzle has become that thing in the tree, do you?"

"Yes."

"But ... but ..." the Reverend said, flustered, "God wouldn't let something like this happen to a man, He ---"

"Oh, God didn't have anything to do with it, Reverend. Herman did it all by himself. He thought sloth thoughts and became what he thought ..."

The Reverend laughed. "Mrs. Schitzle, do you know what I think happened? This is another one of your husband's pranks. He probably went out, bought a sloth, put him up there in the tree, and he's sitting now in some motel nearby having a beer and a good laugh." Pleased with his theory, Opps leaned back and relaxed.

"I don't think so ..."

"Now fess up, Nadine," the Reverend continued. "You and Mr. Schitzle had a little quarrel, didn't you?" He folded his arms smugly. "We all have stresses and strains in this mortal existence. When I first gave myself to Jesus, I vowed abstinence from sensual pleasures, and it wasn't easy. I realized that lurking inside me was a highly oversexed animal that had to be tamed, that ---"

"Mammal, it's a mammal ..."

"Huh?"

Nadine had been studying the Reverend's glasses. She reached over, removed them, and began cleaning the lenses with glass wax just as another beer can clattered to the ground.

"What was that?" Opps said, looking in the direction of the sound.

"What I called you about, Reverend, was to ask your advice."

Reverend Opps got up and stepped over to the tree where he stood squinting up at the sloth. "What's that six-pack doing on top of the ladder?"

Nadine blew warm air on an obstinate spot on Opps's glasses and continued wiping. "Should I stay married to Herman now that he's ... the way he is? I mean, what if he gets turned on by one of those 'I Love Lucy' reruns and feels romantic?"

Opps was glued to the blurred apparition hanging above him. "What's he ... is he reaching for a beer ... is that what he's ... My God! He's actually drinking a beer ---! Isn't he?! He's ---" He was squinting with fierce intensity. "Do you see this?" He looked

over at Nadine. "Am I crazy or ---" He looked back at the sloth.

Mrs. Bent had approached from her house and was leaning on the fence, staring at the Reverend. "Can I put my two cents in? Annulment! It's the perfect solution, Nadine, it's like it never happened, the church cuts its losses, you walk away fancy-free and slothless, no worries, no cares. You could move to Barbados. I'd buy this property from you in a flash!"

Reverend Opps hurried over to Mrs. Schitzle, put his glasses on, and walked briskly back to the tree. After observing the sloth in action, he stepped over to Nadine. The seminary hadn't prepared him for this. He had to go back to the rectory and think. "I have to run, now, Nadine," he said nervously, "but I'll stay in touch. My advice is, I, a, don't think you have to worry about the sloth becoming, a, romantic ... a, I think we should both pray about this, and I'm sure Mr. Schitzle will come waltzing home any day now and this whole thing will be cleared up. So! I'll stay in touch." He patted her arm; she patted his arm back.

"Thank you, Reverend."

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One week later, a kindly-looking gentleman appeared at Mrs. Schitzle's backyard fence accompanied by a uniformed nurse. Nadine was deftly nurturing a nasturtium near her outdoor patio. In the center of the patio sat a circular glass, tiled table and several lawn chairs shaded by a large, yellow umbrella.

"Mrs. Schitzle," the man began, "I'm Dr. Kreuger and this is Miss Gaydosh with

the Department of Human Services."

"It's about Herman, isn't it?" Mrs. Schitzle said with a faint smile. "Please, sit down. I'll make some tea."

A few minutes later they sat on the patio sipping raspberry tea with cinnamon, Mrs. Schitzle's favorite blend. Dr. Kreuger explained that an anonymous individual had filed a report with the Department questioning Mrs. Schitzle's competency. He'd been appointed by the probate court to investigate the situation. "Do you mind if we ask you some questions?" he said, making a mental note to tell his wife to purchase a large box of the amazingly refreshing brew.

"Not at all."

Mrs. Bent peeked out her window and, seeing what was taking place, hurried out to her backyard and began eavesdropping behind the fence.

"Now," Dr. Kreuger began, "it's been brought to our attention that you think this... " --- he glanced quickly at his notes --- "this two-toed sloth is ..."

"Three-toed," Nadine said.

Dr. Kreuger looked up. "Oh. Is that important? The three toes?"

"It could be if he loses more," Nadine said, unblinking. "It will confirm my original theory."

Dr. Kreuger stared at Nadine as he took out his pipe and filled it. "And what is that?"

"Dr. Kreuger, Herman has already gone from five to three toes and my hunch is

that he's going to two and then for the record."

"The record?" Nurse Gaydosh said, her face a mask. "What record?"

Nadine looked at her. "One toe. I think my husband Herman is going to become the first one-toed sloth in existence."

Dr. Kreuger studied her a moment, then chose his next words carefully. "So, you do believe your husband has turned into the sloth?"

"Oh yes. I have no doubt," Nadine said with an engaging smile.

Dr. Kreuger looked away from Nadine to the beer cans on the ground. Mrs. Schitzle noticed.

"I've decided to stop picking up after Herman, Dr. Kreuger. It has to do with reaching one's limit, which I've reached. He has to learn to be responsible and pick up after himself."

"She's not a slave to that baboon anymore, are you, Nade?" Mrs. Bent added helpfully. Dr. Kreuger looked over. "I'm her next-door neighbor, I was the first one she told about *her husband turning into a sloth!*" Elvira said, laying it out so the doctor couldn't miss it.

Dr. Kreuger and the nurse exchanged glances. The nurse looked at Mrs. Bent. "Is there also a baboon involved here?"

"Figure of speech," Mrs. Bent said with a shrug.

"Mrs. Schitzle," Dr. Kreuger said, "I believe you were saying that the sloth drinks beer in that tree and drops the empty cans to the ground ..."

"Yes," Nadine said.

"She also videotapes 'Mr. Rogers' for him," Mrs. Bent volunteered.

"May we see the sloth?" Dr. Kreuger said.

"Of course." Nadine led them over to the eucalyptus tree where the three of them stood staring up at the creature. Finally, Dr. Kreuger spoke.

"Well. Thank you for your cooperation, Mrs. Schitzle," he said, shaking Nadine's hand. "We'll be in touch."

Dr. Kreuger and the nurse left by the gate passing Jerry, who had just arrived. He hurried over to Nadine.

"Who were those people, Mrs. Schitzle?"

"A doctor and his assistant, Jerry," Nadine said. "They asked me some questions."

"What kind of questions?" Jerry said.

"About Herman."

He looked at Mrs. Bent who gazed back with an innocent expression. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Me? Of course not. I think I'll take a little nap." She hurried into her house as Jerry turned to Nadine.

"Mrs. Schitzle, I came to warn you. I've been listening to the radio in my van and this thing's getting out of hand. With all the news coverage, everybody knows about it, even the Board of Health's getting involved." He looked over at the beer cans

strewn across the lawn. "We'd better pick these up, they'll be coming over any moment for an inspection."

Jerry grabbed a black trash bag and began picking up the cans. As Nadine was going to help him, Sally Sweet swept in with her camera crew.

"Rick? Get a shot of those beer cans! Dick? Get the vocals!"

Rick and Dick nodded. Rick, the cameraman, started shooting the lawn, and Dick, the sound man, shoved the boom mike close to Jerry's and Mrs. Schitzle's faces.

"Hey!" Jerry said. "This is private property!"

Nadine was looking up at the sloth. "Please don't scare Herman," she said, having trouble locating him in the branches.

The sound man shoved his boom mike even closer to Nadine's face.

"Hey!" Jerry yelled. "Leave her alone!"

"It's all right, Jerry," Mrs. Schitzle said.

"No, it's not all right! they're trying to crucify you to get a story ---!"

"Hey, bud?" Sally Sweet said. "Don't stand in the way of the media! The public has a right to know what's going on here so *chill out!*" She stepped into the shot and addressed the camera. "We've just learned that Mrs. Nadine Schitzle has been paid a visit by a psychiatrist to determine her competency. As you know, Nadine has been insisting all along that her husband has turned into a three-toed sloth ---"

"--- Just last week" Nadine added.

"Yes," Sally said quickly, "just last week. Could you tell us, Mrs. Schitzle, how

the interview went?"

"Fine, it was just ..."

"What did they ask you?"

"You don't have to answer her, Mrs. Schitzle!" Jerry said. He turned to Sally Sweet. "I think you should leave Mrs. Schitzle alone. She's answered enough questions."

When the sound man moved the boom mike close to Jerry's face, he batted it away, making a resounding THWACK---!

"HEY, WATCH IT!" the sound man said, "THIS IS SENSITIVE EQUIPMENT!"

"NO, *YOU* WATCH IT!" Jerry shot back.

The disagreement quickly escalated to a full-scale fistfight between Jerry, Rick, Dick, and Sally Sweet. It was interrupted by a loud sneeze from overhead.

"Wait a minute," Sally Sweet said as she was about to kick the man from the Animal Shelter in the testicles. "Did that sloth just sneeze? Was that a SLOTH SNEEZE!?"

Nadine had been searching the branches, trying to locate the sloth. She glanced quickly at Sally. "It's his allergy, the Santa Ana winds ---"

The combatants forgot their disagreement and hurried over to the tree. They looked up. The sloth was nowhere in sight.

"Where is he?" Sally said, "WHERE THE HELL *IS* HE?!"

Sally Sweet's question was answered by a blood-curdling scream from Mrs.

Bent. The sloth, frightened by all the commotion below, had slowly moved onto the stem of the palm tree near the upper floors of her house. The cameraman quickly focused his camera on the confrontation as Mrs. Schitzle shouted and waved to Mrs. Bent who had just appeared at her bedroom window.

"STAY CALM, ELIVRA, HE WON'T HURT YOU!"

"ARE YOU GETTING IT?" Sally Sweet demanded of the cameraman as Mrs. Bent's escalating screams intensified Sally's mental chaos, "ARE YOU GETTING IT, DICK!?"

"YEAH, I'M ---"

Sally had never been good in crises and her mind was slipping fast into incoherence. In desperation, she glanced at the sound man. "ARE YOU GETTING THE GRUNTS, RICK? ARE YOU G-G-G-G-GETTING THE SLOTH ATTACK?"

The sound man was tapping his boom mike. "I'M NOT GETTING ANYTHING, SAL, I THINK IT'S BROKEN---!"

Sally went berserk. She whirled on Jerry as the whites of her eyes began to show. "LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE, YOU WIMP!" she screamed incoherently. "I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL FLY THROUGH YOU LIKE A FAT BIRD! I'LL ... I'LL ..."

As Mrs. Bent continued screeching and the cameraman got the footage of the "sloth attack," Sally Sweet went limp and started foaming at the mouth.

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The competency hearing was held the following month in probate court, Judge

Wilhelm Gottfried presiding. After listening to the testimony of Dr. Kreuger and the nurse, the judge addressed Mrs. Schitzle.

"Would you please explain, in your own words Mrs. Schitzle, how you ..."

"Nadine, judge, call me Nadine," Mrs. Schitzle said with a smile. Her dimples had not lost their dazzle.

The judge smiled back. "Nadine is my mother's name," he said warmly. "Now. Would you explain, in your own words, Nadine, all about the sloth and just why you think he's your husband."

"Certainly." Mrs. Schitzle gazed out the window at a neat row of palm trees in the courtyard. "Something's in the air, Judge. First, there was Monica Lewinsky's dress, then my neighbor's hernia, then Tom Cruise got boring. Everything's changing. Tax laws change every year, I just got used to the taste of Coke and they changed that. Your Honor, I used to pay thirty cents for a quart of milk, now it's over a dollar, and forget about coffee. So, when Herman got slothier and slothier, it just seemed logical. Everything else was changing, why not him?"

The judge was listening intently. He nodded in agreement.

"I told him over and over, judge, 'Herman,' I said, 'Herman, you'd better watch it. If you're not careful, something's going to happen.'" Nadine leaned forward and shook her finger in the air. "Also, I warned him about Halley's Comet, but he said he didn't care, and it was *right after that* that Herman started having trouble selling those Fiats."

Nadine paused and leaned back in her chair. "Well. I got a little inheritance a few years ago, judge, and I suggested he retire and it probably was a mistake because his slothing got worse, and then Herman's team, the Oakland Raiders, got creamed in a playoff game by the New England Patriots and that pushed him near the brink ... his slothic inclinations took over ... he started eating more and more pretzels and drinking more and more beer and staying glued to the TV set. His mind became mush, Your Honor, and he started losing his identity ..."

Judge Gottfried had been doodling absentmindedly. Without looking up, he said, "What I'm getting here, the gist of it, is that you think Herman chose to become a sloth. Is that right, Nadine?"

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes widened. "Just as people choose to be angry or moody, he made decisions every day, *not* to clean the windows, *not* to mow the grass, *not* to help with the dishes. He even started to look like a sloth." Nadine studied the Judge intently. "You've seen people who look like their pets, haven't you, Judge?"

The Judge looked out the window and thought for a moment. "Yes, on reflection ... my cousin looks just like his beagle, long ears, a nose that ---"

"--- See?" Nadine said, triumphantly. "Herman just went one step further and became what he looked like!"

"But Nadine," Gottfried said, staring at the curl on her forehead, "nowhere in history is it recorded that a man evolved into a sloth."

Mrs. Schitzle nodded eagerly. "That's right, Judge, Herman's the first one."

Somehow all of his human impulses got thwarted and canceled each other out, and finally, his genes looked around, saw what was happening, and they reprogrammed him to survive, you know, survival of the fittest? And the best way Herman could survive was as an easy-going, arboreal edentate. He's shown the way and we could be in big trouble."

Judge Gottfried cocked his head to one side trying to follow her drift. "In what way?"

Nadine sat up straight and folded her arms. "If this catches on, Your Honor, it could become a stampede. Pretty soon we could be up to our ---"

"--- Watch it ---!"

"--- eyeballs in sloths! It's the theory of evolution in reverse, Judge. It took millions of years for our first ancestors to get up enough courage, but somebody did, somebody finally got tired of being prehensile, tossed his tail over his shoulder, and shimmied down the tree trunk ... the others saw him cavorting in the shrubbery, *they* came down, discovered fire, made a wheel, and built freeways ..."

Nadine was gazing at Gottfried with an intensity that reminded him of a theoretical physicist at Harvard with an IQ over 170 who ended up illustrating children's books. Nadine continued.

"Judge, our first forbearer hit the ground running and we've been running ever since, barely taking time to learn to stand upright and do the foxtrot. But I think we've come full cycle. We've had our little fling on two legs and messed it up and now we're

going back to the trees ..."

.....

Dr. Dillingham was perspiring and red-faced from his hurried trip up from the San Diego Zoo. He was standing under the eucalyptus tree studying the sloth which hadn't moved in three days. "You're sure you want to do this, Mrs. Schitzle?" he said. "This is such a unique pet. There aren't that many two-toed sloths in existence."

"He's three-toed," Nadine said.

"No, he's not," Dr. Dillingham said, "I count only two."

Nadine hurried over and peered up at the mammal. She shook her head and smiled. "Herman," she said, "you little devil, you!"

"You must be reluctant to part with him."

"It's hard, Dr. Dillingham, we do go back a ways, but the expense is too much. It's gotten so he only drinks imported beer now ..."

Dr. Dillingham looked startled. "You give him beer?"

"And pretzels," Nadine admitted. "For thirty-five years. That's one of the reasons he got to look like that."

"Thirty-five years?" Dr. Dillingham said, looking even more startled. "My! You *do* go back, don't you?"

"Yes. But it's too much of a responsibility. I want to travel. With Herman here, I can't leave ..."

"I see. Well, then, shall we discuss price?"

Mrs. Schitzle's gaze shifted back to Dr. Dillingham. "Yes," she said evenly.

"Move him out by tomorrow and I'll give you fifty dollars."

Dr. Dillingham laughed. "You don't understand, Mrs. Schitzle, *we're* the ones who ---"

"--- Seventy-five?"

"No, no, that's not what I ---"

"--- Okay, look. I'll give you a hundred dollars and I'll throw in his leash." Mrs. Schitzle knew how to close a deal, she'd learned from Herman.

"But ..." Dr. Dillingham's eyes were beginning to have that dangerous glaze.

Mrs. Schitzle stepped back.

"Okay, you can have the hammock and his wristwatch. Swiss, works great."

She knew she had him now, he was putty in her hands. "I'll send his clothes UPS but *I'm* keeping his Honda. By the way, he's very gentle and won't hurt a fly, just don't ask him to *do* anything. Will you take a check?"

THE END