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# The Screaming Baboon.

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**by Matias Travieso-Diaz.**

*Baboons who fail to exhibit moral behavior do not survive; they wind up as meat for leopards.*

— Robert A. Heinlein

Papio Ursinus (commonly referred to as “Pappi”) was an old male Chacma baboon, raised and grown to maturity in the mountains surrounding Cape Town, on the southwestern tip of Africa. He cut an impressive figure as he towered over most members of his troop: he was over four feet tall, had a three-foot tail that swished down his back, and weighed over a hundred pounds, much of it accumulated fat, since he was a voracious eater that fed on practically anything: fruits, seeds, grass, blossoms, bulbs, bark, insects, spiders, worms, grubs, rodents, birds, even small antelopes and other mammals.

Pappi's appetites extended to forcing frequent "friendship" couplings with females in his troop. Such relationships often occurred when he arrived at a new troop and approached a lactating female. Immigrant Chacma alpha males often practice infanticide upon joining a new troop: by killing unrelated infants, the arriving males shorten the period before they can mate with the females of the troop, since a female with dependent offspring generally does not become sexually receptive until she weans her offspring at around twelve months of age. By yielding to Pappi's advances, a female would hope to gain protection for her young from infanticide.

Pappi could not be called handsome, for his coarse hair was dark brown in color, with a rough orange patch on the head that went down the nape of his neck. Perhaps his most distinctive physical features were sharp two-inch canine teeth that protruded from his mouth, and a pair of "red bottoms" or ischial callosities: very large, pink, glowing, hairless pads of skin on his buttocks that provided comfort when he sat on a tree branch.

His most notable attribute was not his physique, however, but his voice. Pappi could emit a very loud, shrill, two-syllable "wahoo" call during aggressive displays at other baboons in which he thought to demonstrate his physical fitness and (implicitly) fighting ability. Through his calls, Pappi would confuse, cower, and generally intimidate his opponents.

Pappi was quite belligerent, even for a pugnacious Chacma baboon. His life had been characterized by a series of power struggles in which he sought to usurp older dominant males and gain power within the troops he joined, which progressively increased in size to include large numbers of adult males, adult females, and their offspring. He always sought to be at the top of the dominance hierarchy in each troop, with the rest of the males ranking in ever changing order as a result of Pappi's replacing previously dominant males.

The troop that Pappi currently led inhabited the woodlands on the slope of a mountain. During the night, the Chacma baboons slept atop large trees, safe from nocturnal predators. The morning dispersal from the sleeping site was synchronized, with all members leaving at the same time. In most cases, dispersal was initiated by a single individual, and the other members of the group decided whether to follow. Pappi, as alpha male, was likely to be followed during the morning dispersal if he chose to initiate it.

Likewise, when approaching potentially dangerous sites such as watering holes, more vulnerable members of a troop would travel near the rear of the group, leaving Pappi and the larger, more formidable male baboons to defend the other members of the troop if attacking predators came into sight. Thus, as alpha male, Pappi was the anticipated protector of the troop from its enemies.

Dominance also played a role in group foraging decisions. Pappi would lead his troop to food resources selected by him. The troop members usually followed him, even though many subordinate members would not benefit from a particular resource. As in morning dispersal, the inclination of group members to follow Pappi's lead was the result of the expectations arising from his being the dominant individual.

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The first real challenge to Pappi's authority came one hot summer afternoon when Pappi led his troop across a savannah in search of a water hole. As they made their progress in the open space, they were spotted and attacked by a large pack of Cape hunting dogs, who roamed in open areas that did not obstruct their vision or impede pursuit. The wild dogs approached the troop of baboons silently and then descended on them like a sudden rainstorm, chasing their selected prey in fast pursuits during which the prey baboons were repeatedly bitten on the legs, belly, and rump until they stopped running, or were simply pulled down and torn apart.

Pappi rallied the larger baboons to challenge the attackers, but the wild dogs moved too fast and eluded the baboons' efforts to engage them. After a few minutes, Pappi turned tail and fled away, leaving behind a large number of victims – mainly females, the young, and the weaker males – waiting to be devoured.

When what was left of the troop had retreated to safety at the far end of the plains, the other baboons turned angrily to Pappi and communicated their displeasure by means of shrieks, gestures of rejection, and contorted facial expressions. Half a dozen of them surrounded Pappi and brusquely shoved him away: he was ordered into exile. He attempted to resist, but was unable to overcome his former subjects and disappeared into the woods.

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Years passed. Life returned to normality in the depleted troop, which was soon replenished by new births and arrivals from other baboon settlements. Baboon memories are short and soon most of the survivors forgot the horror they had experienced on the savannah. Therefore, when Pappi stole back into the settlement one early morning as the troop was getting ready for the day's dispersal, he was greeted with curiosity by most baboons. There were a few exceptions, though. The sight of Pappi brought back unpleasant memories to a few of the older baboons, including the troop's current dominant male, who had been among those that forced Pappi into exile.

A verbal and physical confrontation between the two baboons promptly ensued. Pappi was driven by a thirst for revenge and his insatiable appetite for dominion and, as luck would have it, was able to outlast his older, now weaker opponent, who had to yield power to Pappi and withdraw into obscurity.

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The years in exile had not tempered Pappi's temperament. To the contrary, he set out immediately to make up for the lost time and sought to expand his domain by forcibly annexing other baboon communities that dwelt in adjacent territories. Up to that time, war had been unknown among baboons – individual encounters occurred from time to time, but never had transpired that a troop would attack another. Pappi infected into many of his subjects an unnatural animosity against their neighbors, leading to one conflict after another in which Pappi's troop inflicted pain and in turn sustained grievous losses.

Pappi's reign of terror lasted only for several seasons. At the end, a weakened but united troop banded as one and drove him from power. He was cast away and ended up in the land of the yellow baboons, many moons of travel away from his former homeland. It was never learned if he died of old age or became prey of a leopard or another predator.

His story provided a costly lesson for his former troop: the learnings of history better not be forgotten, else the past's tragedies may be repeated.

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