



Marcus and the crunchy bugs

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Theme: *Dealing with family conflict and divorce or separation*

Appropriate age group: *All age groups*



Marcus was a young vervet monkey who lived with his Mom and Dad in a tall tree next to a river. The river flowed gently and the water was very clear. When Marcus woke up in the morning, he could hear dragonflies buzzing and ducks quacking.

Marcus's tree was next to Auntie Molly's tree and Grandpa Martin's tree. Marcus loved his tree – he loved the smell of the leaves and the feel of the bark. At night his parents snuggled next to him, keeping him warm and safe. Sometimes his Mom's tail tickled him, or his Dad's snoring interrupted his dreams. If he woke up in the night, he listened to their deep breathing and soon fell asleep again, feeling very safe.

One day, Marcus's parents started arguing. He heard them shouting at each other. "It was your turn to clean out the empty insect shells – you're so lazy!" and "You spent all the berries I was saving". (Did you know that vervet monkeys use berries as money?) They argued about everything, but the worst was when they argued about Marcus:

"It's your turn to fetch Marcus from monkey school."

"No, it's your turn!"

"You're spoiling him – that's why he's so naughty."

"Nonsense – he's really well-behaved, everyone says so."

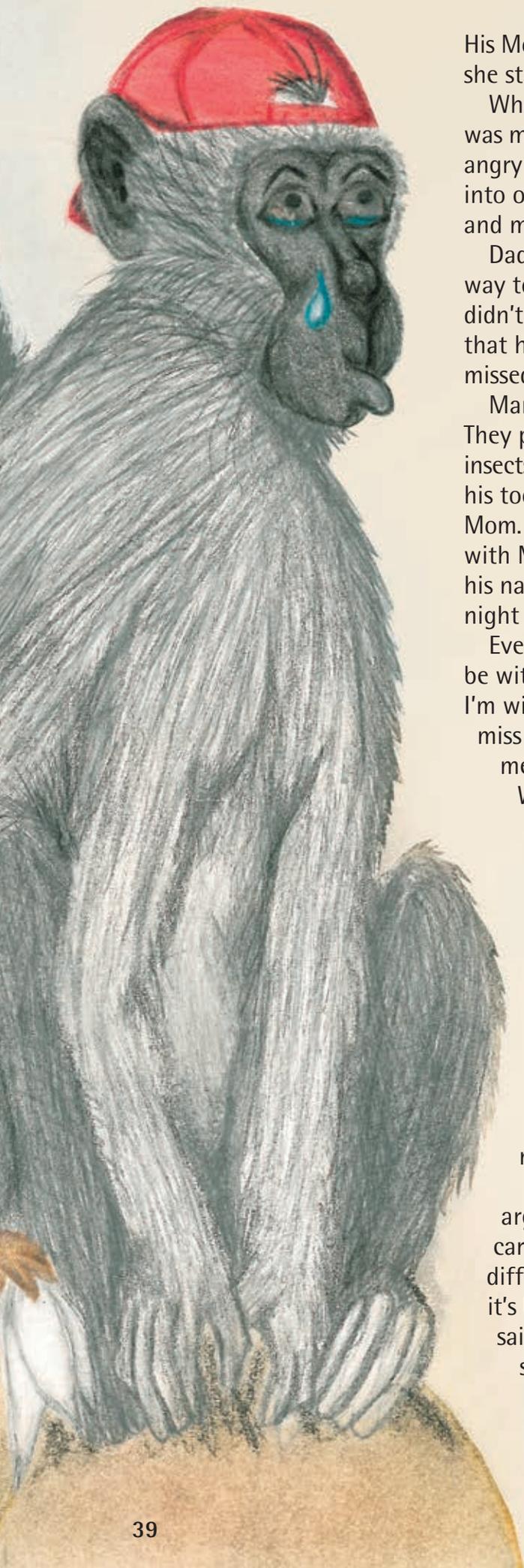
They went on and on, shouting at each other. In the end Marcus's Mom started crying and his Dad stormed out of the tree, very angry. Marcus felt sad and lonely and scared. He hated it when his parents were fighting. He wanted his Mom to stop crying and he wanted his Dad to come back. What could he do to make them stop fighting? He thought: "Maybe it's my fault they are fighting because I ate that butterfly when Mom told me not to and I dropped some berries. Maybe if I behave better everything will be all right."

That night Marcus's Dad did not come home. Marcus felt cold without his Dad sleeping next to him. He had a scary dream that an eagle caught him and took him far away. He heard his Mom crying in the night. The next night and the next night and the next night, his Dad still did not come home. For a whole week his Dad didn't come home. His Mom sat on the branch, crying and crying.

Marcus got more scared, more sad and more lonely. He still played with the other young monkeys but it was no fun. Sometimes he didn't even play, he just sat on a branch and tried not to cry. He went to school in the morning but he couldn't concentrate on his work. He kept thinking that maybe an eagle had caught his Dad. He kept worrying that maybe an eagle would catch his Mom. Then he would be all alone with nobody to look after him.

Marcus heard his Mom talking to Auntie Molly and crying and crying. He heard her talking to Grandpa and crying. They stopped talking when they saw him.

A few weeks later Mom said: "Marcus, this afternoon you must go and visit your Dad. He'll come and fetch you." Marcus was so excited he jumped up and down. Then he asked his Mom, "But where's my Dad been for such a long time and why isn't he living with us?"



His Mom just said, "You better ask your Dad yourself". Then she started crying again.

When his Dad came to fetch him, Marcus saw that he was much thinner and he looked angry-sad. Mom was sad-angry and she told Marcus, "You tell your Dad not to come into our tree". Marcus had to take his leaves and things and meet his Dad on the ground.

Dad and Marcus walked to Dad's new tree. It was a far way to walk. Dad's tree was smaller than Mom's and it didn't smell as nice but Marcus was so glad to be with Dad that he didn't worry. He loved being with his Dad but he missed his Mom at night.

Marcus had lots of fun every time he went to his Dad. They played games in the trees and they had take-away insects for dinner. Sometimes he didn't brush his teeth with his tooth-stick and he went to bed much later than with Mom. Marcus loved being with Dad. But he also loved being with Mom. She made special food for him. She trimmed his nails and brushed his fur and read him a story every night when she tucked him into bed.

Every time Marcus went home to Mom, he was glad to be with her but he missed Dad again. He thought: "When I'm with my Mom I miss my Dad. When I'm with my Dad I miss my Mom. I'm always missing someone and it makes me sad. Who will protect Mom when I'm with Dad? Who will play with Dad when I'm with Mom?"

Marcus could see from his Mom's face that she was not happy when he went to Dad. He could see on his Dad's face that he was sad when Marcus went back to Mom. One day his Dad told him, "Son, your mother and I are living apart so we won't argue any more". But Marcus knew they still had lots of arguments. He often heard them arguing about maintenance. When Marcus asked his Dad what maintenance was, his Dad said, "Maintenance is how many berries I have to give your mother every month so she can buy things she needs to look after you."

One day when Marcus heard his Mom and Dad arguing about him, he hid behind a tree and listened carefully. His Mom said: "Marcus is always sad and difficult when he comes back from visiting you. Maybe it's better if he doesn't visit you any more." Then his Dad said, "He's never sad when he's with me so maybe he should come and live with me." Marcus felt sad and scared when he heard them. He wished he was still a baby living with his Mom and his Dad in their

old tree – with no more fighting, no more crying!

But Marcus couldn't go back to his old life. He went on living with his Mom and then with his Dad, then back to Mom, then back to Dad. This made Marcus feel different from all the other monkey boys and, as you know, monkeys don't like to feel different from other monkeys.

One day Marcus was sitting under a tree with his friend Peter Porcupine. Peter asked him: "Why are you looking so sad these days?" Marcus told him about his Mom and Dad. Then Peter told his story. "My Mom and Dad are living in separate burrows, you know. They used to have terrible arguments. When they got really angry, they hurt each other with their prickly quills and sometimes my sisters and I also got hurt. When they argued, my sisters and I had to hide away from their flying quills. It was really scary!"

Marcus asked Peter, "Did your Mom and Dad stop arguing when you and your sisters got hurt?" Peter said, "Sometimes they stopped but sometimes they forgot about us. They used to get angry as soon as they saw each other. I was really scared then but now I know that they both love me. When they argue and hurt each other I say to myself, 'They are angry with each other, not with me.' Now I can look the other way and still love them both."

Marcus felt better when he heard Peter Porcupine's story. He saw that Peter was a happy little porcupine, even though his parents were living in different burrows. Marcus said to himself: "One day I can be a happy little monkey again even if my parents are living in different trees!"

And that's what happened later. Marcus learned that it wasn't his fault that his Mom and Dad felt sad-angry and angry-sad and it wasn't his job to make them better. He learned that he could love being with his Mom and love being with his Dad, even if his Mom and Dad did not like being with each other.

Marcus's parents still argued when they saw each other. So what did Marcus do? He made a plan. He kept a secret supply of crunchy bugs – and if his parents started to argue he put a bug in his mouth and crunched hard. Then he couldn't hear them arguing and that made him laugh and laugh in the way only vervet monkeys can laugh.



Possible discussion points:

Think of some things that children should take responsibility for.

Think of some things that are for grownups to deal with.

