



12.

Before we set off, Innocent gave us each a long stick to walk with, explaining that it might come in handy for bashing a path through the jungle. He and Marcel had straight-edged machetes. When Caleb saw them, he leaned his pole up against the gnarled tree we were standing beneath and ducked back into the tent to fetch his own machete from his kitbag.

‘Almost forgot it,’ he told Innocent. ‘Thanks for reminding me.’

I could see doubt behind the guide’s eyes, but he didn’t object, just watched as Caleb strapped his knife, which came in a commando-style black rubberised sheath, to his thigh. When he drew it out, the blade flashed blue silver. He waved it around a bit, trying to look as if he used it often, but the machete was obviously brand new and, combined with the lime-green hiking boots he was wearing, also clearly just out of the box. He looked ridiculous. I wasn’t the only person who thought so. I noticed Patience, dressed only in

a vest top, tatty shorts and ancient trainers, watching his little display with the beginnings of a smile on her calm, round face. It vanished when she caught my eye.

The hike into the jungle started out easily enough, but Innocent was right, as soon as we left the established path the going got tough. It felt as if the impossibly lush vegetation was sprouting around us as we walked. And it was, I know, but what I mean is that I could almost see and hear and smell it pulsing upwards, reaching for the light. The day grew hotter, the air thicker, chewier. It smelled strangely like cooked broccoli. At one point I stepped over a moving line of bright green ants, each as big as a paper clip, some carrying leaves or bits of twig. Where were they going? Where were we, for that matter? There were no clearings as such, just patches of less dense tree-tangle. We had to push aside fronds and stalks and whole bushes to make progress, and despite the thick tread of my walking boots I slipped and slid when the earth beneath us became a reddish clay sludge. I wasn't about to complain though. Patience, carrying a load that looked suspiciously heavier than mine, was just ahead of me much of the time, floating along with ease, even pausing to hold the occasional branch clear of our makeshift path, and she didn't appear to have even broken a sweat.

With so much going on at ground level, as we pushed through the foliage I didn't really have time to look beyond my feet. But we hadn't been on the move long before Innocent paused, motioned for us to be quiet and pointed up at the canopy above us, indicating a group of brown and grey monkeys gathered among the branches.

‘Red colobus,’ he said. ‘Resting now, after early-morning feeding.’

I craned my neck to get a better look. The name made sense; on closer inspection their brownish backs were more a coppery red. They looked thoughtful up there, meditative almost, and their fur was improbably stylish, like a show-dog’s. Through the zoom lens of my camera I could clearly make out three young-looking monkeys dangling their legs over a thick branch – and closer to us still, a bigger, older specimen sitting in the crook of a branch, leaning right back, with his hands clasped behind his head. If the first lot looked as if they were on a park bench, he was definitely kicking back on a sunlounger. I snapped a few good photos while we watched them; by zooming in I could fill the frame with individual faces.

‘That’s a good sign,’ said Amelia in my ear.

‘Why?’

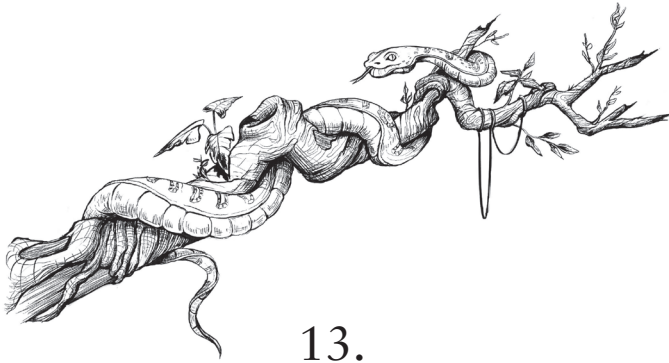
‘Chimpanzees eat colobus monkeys.’

I know Amelia well. She was pointing out a fact, not hoping to see the beautiful creatures above us torn apart.

Xander, however, looked worried. ‘And that’s a good thing?’ he said.

Caleb answered for Amelia. ‘Means they might be close. If we’re lucky we could even get to see them hunting, I suppose.’

Happily – on all counts – Innocent corrected him. ‘That’s unlikely,’ he pointed out gently. ‘If there were chimps nearby, the colobus wouldn’t be so relaxed.’



13.

We pushed on further into the jungle, with Innocent telling us the names of the plants and trees. They mostly went in one ear and out the other, if I'm honest, but the most common plant we had to hack through at ground level was a straggly thing about my height, with longish blue-green leaves. Innocent told us the pigment in those leaves was hypersensitive to light, little of which managed to filter through the canopy above.

Though I don't know what those straggly plants were called I do know the name of the bird responsible for the 'ka-ka-ka' noise that erupted close by while Innocent was telling us about the pigment. The kaka bird. Obviously. Later he pointed out an aardvark hole, twice the size of the entrance to the badgers' set on the north slope of Pitch Hill back home in the south of England, and later still he stopped beside an enormous mound, the surface of which was alive with termites, shimmering in the gloom like petrol on tarmac.

The heat pressed in from all sides.

My shirt stuck to my back, my trousers stuck to my legs, my boots stuck to my feet.

We walked for hours.

We didn't see any chimpanzees.

But just as I was about to give up hope and suggest we head back to camp and try again the following day (somebody had to crack; I wasn't too proud to do it), Marcel, who was leading the way, stopped dead mid-machete-swing. We all paused. I heard Amelia beside me take in a breath to ask what was going on, and held up my own hand to shush her, just in time. We all stood still.

'Bingo,' said Innocent.

All at once there was a mighty eruption of shriek-chattering and the canopy ahead of us shook as the troop of chimpanzees we'd walked all this way to see dropped and climbed and swung, hand over hand over hand, from branch to vine to branch, some lowering themselves all the way down to the patchy undergrowth, others ricocheting up into the treetops. Innocent motioned for us to squat down next to him and gave us each a blue paper hospital mask. As I fiddled to put mine on he explained that this troop, led by an alpha male called Bingo, were habituated to humans. The cacophonous display was a greeting of sorts. But although they were used to people, and therefore would tolerate us getting close, that made them vulnerable to catching any harmful bugs we might be carrying.

'By bugs, you mean pathogens,' said Amelia. 'That's the collective term for viruses and bacteria.'

‘Smart-arse.’ I smiled.

She gave me a questioning look.

‘Just put the thing on!’ I said, snapping the elastic round the back of my head.

Masked, we looked like a gang of surgeons about to perform an operation. If I’d been a chimpanzee I’d have run a mile. But Bingo’s troop didn’t seem to mind. If anything, by the time we’d put on the masks and stepped forward into the trees they’d been cavorting through, they’d calmed right down. Some were still milling about on the ground, but most were back up among the branches, ignoring us.

I’d seen chimpanzees before, at Whipsnade Zoo, and even though I was only about seven I’d found the fact that they were stuck in an enclosure a bit depressing. This was different. They might have been used to humans, but it felt as if we were visiting them on their terms. They seemed content enough to hang – literally – in the trees around us for the time being, but if they had decided to move off, we had no way to stop them and wouldn’t have been able to keep up with them. That, and the fact that we’d searched for so long to find them, made me really focus on what I was seeing.

The youngster nearest me was picking at the shoulder of the one next to him, parting the long dark fur carefully in search of something or other. He rolled sideways to look more closely at what he was doing, and his short back legs stuck out towards me. I zoomed in on him. How thickly padded his feet were, how pronounced and distinctive the paleness of his face. And those ears. They really did stick out

like saucers, comical brackets either side of a serious brow. His fingers mesmerised me most. They were so unhurried and precise. The ape he was grooming had his eyes half closed. The pair of them, sitting right there, not ten metres from us, looked blissfully content.

Having cottoned on to the idea that Amelia knew a fact or two about the natural world, Caleb now started telling her what he knew about chimpanzees. It wasn't much. 'You know they're five to eight times as strong as a man, pound for pound,' was the best he could come up with. As it happens, Amelia, Xander and I had already speculated about whether that clichéd statistic was true, back at the hotel, and three minutes on Google had dispelled it as a myth. They're strong, but not that strong. And anyway, looking at these chimpanzees, bumbling about among the vines and sitting placidly together, emphasised their gentleness, not their strength, for me.

I waited for Amelia to correct Caleb, but amazingly she just said, 'Hmm.'

I fought the urge to say something myself, and won by concentrating instead on what was in front of me again. A female chimpanzee on the ground off to my left had picked up a piece of wood. After inspecting it, she brought it down smartly on what I at first thought was a stone balanced on the tree root in front of her. In fact it was a nut. Once, twice, a third time she hit the nut, her face set in concentration, until the shell broke apart, at which point I swear her expression changed to one of satisfaction. I took a photograph of it. Delicately she swept the crushed shell off her anvil-root,

retrieved the nut itself and ate it. And then she picked up another nut and repeated the process.

I gaped at Innocent, who smiled proudly. 'She's the best at it,' he said. 'Also fishing fire ants from a nest with a fine twig . . . she's champion of that too.'

'They hunt meat as well though, right?' said Caleb.

'Nuts, fruit, leaves, colobus. They're as omnivorous as you,' Innocent replied.

'We share ninety-seven per cent of our genes with higher primates,' Amelia said, then corrected herself: 'Actually it's between ninety-six and ninety-eight per cent, depending on how you calculate it.'

'Thanks for clarifying,' said Xander.

Amelia, missing the gentle sarcasm, took Xander's words as an invitation to expand and started telling him about humans and chimpanzees sharing a common ancestor dating back just six-to-eight million years. That seemed a long time ago to me. I tuned them both out. Undoubtedly there was something human about the apes. But it was more complicated than that. Being in the jungle with them filled me with two contradictory emotions. On the one hand, I felt as if I was connected, part of something larger than myself. On the other, looking through my zoom lens into the nearest chimp's black-brown eyes, I felt very, very alone.

I became aware that Innocent had got to his feet. Patience stood up too, beside him. A general restlessness spread among the chimpanzees. Their chatter was more urgent. In seconds they had all moved away. Whether Innocent and his daughter had triggered the change or were responding to it, I didn't know.



‘Quickly, we must leave,’ he said.

I turned just in time to see Marcel raise his gun to his shoulder. Something – or someone – was moving through the jungle towards us. One figure became two, five, six . . . nine men at least, half of them armed.