



Becoming Human

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Source: *Conjunctions*, No. 61, A Menagerie (2013), pp. 297-313

Published by: Conjunctions

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24517394>

Accessed: 20-09-2016 02:34 UTC

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Becoming Human

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SAVANNA CHIMPANZEES AT DAWN

WE TREKKED INTO THE BLACKENED bush under a blurred crescent moon. The scent of smoke and ash lingered in the air and the simple mud-hut compound Dr. Jill Pruett calls home in Senegal disappeared as if it never had existed, as if I never had gone to sleep fitfully under my mosquito net, but had been walking all night by the light of stars.

Down a barely distinguishable path, we made our way toward the plateau where Jill knew the group of thirty-two chimpanzees she studies have built nests and spent the night. I tried to imagine them at dusk, a blood-orange sun sinking below the red-rock plateau as they climbed up trees to build nests where they would sleep, safe from prowling hyenas. Headlamps on the trail, there was utter silence—partly out of exhaustion, but for me, it felt like a reverence for the forest, for the species of nonhuman primate I would shortly encounter for the first time. I was filled with both awe and fear as charred branches rubbed up against my legs, leaving streaked imprints on my quick-dry field pants, like the forest's fingers, examining me.

At 4:45 a.m., Jill had anxiously waited at the opening of the fenced compound of her base camp, Fongoli, while I groggily laced up my boots. She wore a baggy, ripped T-shirt (beige—chimps don't like bright colors), and well-worn boots stained orange by Senegal's phosphate-rich earth. Her brown hair was tied in a ponytail, and her backpack contained the day's supplies—water, binoculars, a waterproof notebook and pen, cookies, a bag of peanuts, and a couple of hard-boiled eggs from a boutique in Kédougou, the nearest town. The boutiques and hotels had just cropped up in the last couple of years due to the influx of gold and iron mining. When Jill first started working in Senegal over ten years ago, there wasn't even electricity in Kédougou. Now, Le Bedik hotel offers not only a stunning dining-room balcony overlooking the Gambia River, but a swimming pool and Wi-Fi.

The region of Kédougou in southeastern Senegal, a place home to

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both chimpanzees and gold, shimmers like a green gem in an arid country dominated by sand and flat, orange earth. Parc National du Niokolo-Koba is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and some of the only forests and mountains in Senegal are located here. Most of the country is only slightly above sea level, but in the southeast, the foothills of Guinea's Fouta Djallon Mountains reach elevations of 1,640 feet. Kédougou is also one of the poorest regions in the country, and the place where savanna chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes verus*) use tools to hunt.

Jill (or Le Patron, as she is called by many here in Senegal), an intrepid primatologist from Texas, started her field site to study the unique behaviors of these western chimpanzees who eke out an existence in a parched mosaic of savanna and woodlands with limited water sources. A PhD student of Jill's, Kelly Boyer, focuses more on the conservation end of primatology, as the reality of threats to great ape habitat, like mining and human encroachment, become more exigent. "Based on birth and death rates at my site, the group of chimps there will be extinct in sixty years, and that's an optimistic estimate," Jill said.

As corporate gold- and iron-mining companies bombard Senegal's lush forests with bulldozers and gaping pits in the earth, chimpanzee habitat disappears. Truck corridors and mining concessions raze mountaintop forests where chimps once spent the night in nests built of tree branches. The largest company, ArcelorMittal, known for its global steel-production initiatives, now mines for iron ore in the mountains of Bofeto, an area where Kelly has documented the presence of chimps. Kelly attempts to measure the effect of iron-ore mining on chimp habitat through line transects and nest-count surveys. With this information she estimates population densities in areas destined to become large-scale iron-ore mines. Her goal at this early stage of research is to assess chimpanzee populations and their habitat, as well as existing human disturbances, prior to the construction of mines.

Despite the challenges she faces, Kelly appears undaunted by her task of working toward conserving an endangered species. Strong and blonde, her face wrinkled by the West African sun, her energy levels and optimism are extraordinary. She has salsa danced in Houston, worked at a chimp sanctuary in Guinea, and now, in her early thirties, she is pursuing her PhD at Iowa State University. We met in a conservation biology class and quickly became friends and yoga buddies. At a workshop in Iowa City, we listened to a well-respected

yogi, Desirée Rumbaugh, discuss nonattachment and regaining joy after loss. *Vairagya*, or nonattachment, is a key component of yoga. Everything changes and everything will eventually end, Desirée chanted, as we inverted our bodies into headstands, testing ourselves to see how long we could hold the pose.

While still in Iowa, we had sat on the floor of Kelly's office with a huge US Geological Survey map of Kédougou spread out like a treasure scroll. It was only a field copy, meaning it could get dirty or marked up, but it was the most beautiful map I'd ever seen. The glossy *région de Kédougou* boasted deep purple gallery forests and sweeping green mountains I could journey through with the trace of my finger. I marveled over the cartographer's skill and precision, the satellite imagery laid out beneath our fingertips. This little jewel at the bottom of Senegal's great sandy expanse represented a last sanctuary for a dwindling population of savanna chimpanzees. The minimal swath of green I could cover with my palm was about to be swallowed by bridges, mines, and paved roads. Silver elephants on Kelly's ring seemed to dance off into veins of *galerie forestière*. She ran her finger across the base of mountains between her two study sites—Kharakhena and Bofeto—places she had found evidence: nests and scat and pant-hoots. Her finger stopped, pressed into the top of the Fouta Djallon.

"If ArcelorMittal has its way, these mountains will be destroyed."

The abrupt sound of a pant-hoot flew into my heart like bats fleeing light—the breathy, low-pitched "hoots" became quicker and quicker until they climaxed in higher-pitched "pants"—hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo . . . ah ah ah ah ah! A sudden stillness pervaded our party. I looked at the back of Jill's head, expectant of her next move.

"It got light fifteen minutes earlier than yesterday," she noted. "They're already down from their nests."

With that we quickened our pace. I turned off my headlamp as the palest of lights crept onto the plateau. The chimpanzees' presence in the forest, in the world, in this tiny nook of a West African country nearly buckled my knees as I struggled to follow Jill's footsteps even more closely now. My entire being became sublimely concentrated on hearing the next call, seeing my first glimpse of wild chimpanzee. It wasn't long before a flash of fur-covered blackness darted through the trees before us. I saw the wrinkled, brown face and steady, mahogany eyes of a savanna chimpanzee—a mother with a pink-eared

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infant clutched to her chest, tiny fingers just visible through the fur on the sides of her stomach.

"That's Natasha; she's a little nervous with her newborn," Jill said, as Natasha walked swiftly away from us, cupping a hand over her baby's fuzzy head.

Natasha was quite gray for a female of twenty. The average life span of chimps in the wild is forty-five, but they can live into their sixties in captivity. Jill described Natasha as one of the shyest females among humans, but with other females in the group, she was tough.

"The first time I saw Natasha she was fighting with another adult female, Lingua. It was a throw down up on the plateau, and they both had babies! She's pretty scrappy," Jill said, "but she's very protective of her daughters."

Jill named Natasha, and Natasha's first daughter, Sonya, after the characters in *War and Peace*.

"Natasha may have a droopy lower lip, and not be the prettiest of chimps, but she's full of life," Jill said.

Natasha held her baby protectively, a gesture I imagine any human mother could empathize with. Chimpanzees form long-term bonds with family members that may persist throughout a lifetime. Having the opportunity to observe these bonds and interactions in their natural habitat was not a privilege I took lightly. Even as I write these words it still astounds me that after only seven hours in a plane from New York City, and a day's long drive across Senegal, I was here, *dans la brousse*, amid wild chimpanzees.

When I told Kelly I wanted to document the work of primatologists in the field as they attempt to study and conserve a dwindling great ape population, she was my most ardent supporter. "That's fabulous!" she said, and found some grant money to get me a ticket to Senegal, to witness the struggles and joys of a primatologist in the bush. Instead of studying wild primates systematically, like I'd done in the past in Kenya, I planned to write about them. I wanted to document not only the existence of both chimpanzees and field researchers in Africa, but to try to better understand what it means to be human. I wanted to write poetry about these stunning creatures who have inspired fear, repulsion, awe, and love in humanity.

Two summers ago, in the coastal province of Kenya, I had worked as a research assistant watching mangabey monkeys glide through colossal palm fronds. Their small, furry bodies made monumental echoes through the open forest as they clutched hard, red fruit under

their chins like miniature football players and leaped strategically from palm to palm. The Tana River mangabeys (*Cercocebus galeritus*) are not only an endangered species, endemic to the highly fragmented Tana riverine forests of the coastal province, they are an extraordinarily elegant monkey—with dark, stoic faces, heavy eyelids, graceful tufts of gray-white fur—but scientific journals don't want to hear about things like that. Those journals want methodologies and procedures, figures, tables, results, and peer reviews. Hard data is important for quantifying behaviors, but what can it tell us about beauty, empathy, love, and mortality? Does poetry have a place beside science, or will it continue to be relegated to the humanities, to the Unnecessary and Unimportant? I cannot begin to understand or appreciate the complexities of science without love's betrayal of it, and the poetry that allows me to see it this way. Poet and scientist Katherine Larson addresses science directly on this issue: "Science— / beyond pheromones, hormones, aesthetics of bone, / every time I make love for love's sake alone, / I betray you."

One of the many things that makes chimpanzees at Fongoli special is that early hominids are thought to have inhabited a similar type of savanna environment, and the selective pressures associated with such a harsh, arid habitat may be comparable. This means that hominids evolving in the early Plio-Pleistocene, 2.5 to 1.5 million years ago, may have lived similarly to the way these chimps do now—perhaps they had similar home ranges, diets, and maybe, like chimps, our early ancestors cooled off in caves during extremely hot weather.

The vision of what chimpanzees could tell us about human evolution propelled Louis Leakey to send a young Jane Goodall to Tanzania to conduct the first long-term study of chimpanzees in the wild. In 1960, Goodall was the first field primatologist to introduce the public to how incredibly human-like chimpanzees can be. The same year she arrived in Gombe, Goodall observed a chimp named David Greybeard pick up a twig, pull off the leaves, and stick it in a termite mound. He then proceeded to slowly pull out the twig covered in termites, and pluck them off with his lips. Protein. David Greybeard caused our notion of "man the toolmaker" to be forever vanquished.

The chimps had already come down from their nests when we arrived, and were pant-hooting their good mornings to each other.

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Next, they started to eat. Between May and June is the season for a green fruit with fleshy orange seeds called *Saba senegalensis*, or simply saba, as the locals say. These bitter fruits are a main food source for chimps, but also popular with humans. Saba has evolved into a cash crop and is collected by local people and sold to buyers for the market in Dakar and other large cities. Jill's concern is that the harvest of saba by humans, which has increased fivefold over the past several years, will drastically reduce the availability of the fruit for chimps, and have a serious impact on their survival.

Later in the summer, Jill followed the Fongoli chimps toward a creek bed where they seasonally voyage to feast on what is locally known as "minkone" fruit. The site, called Gingi, after an adjacent village, is home to a dozen or so of these fruit trees, a staple part of chimp diet in the late rainy season after saba has stopped growing. When Jill got to the creek one damp July morning, she recalled, all the trees had been cut down for cultivation.

"You couldn't even recognize it," she said, describing an absence in the forest that, for the last ten years at least, had been an integral secondary food source.

Two adult females in the group, Bandit and Lucille, sat next to a termite mound and stared for over an hour at what had once been a major nesting and feeding site they frequented. Jill does not have a way to evaluate this behavior scientifically, but cannot help but wonder: "Were they taking it all in? Were they shocked at the devastation? Or were they waiting to see what activity was going on?"

A male squatted at the top of a tree. A hooked white scar the shape of a slim crescent moon was exposed on his lower back as he reached to pull a branch of fruit to his mouth.

"That's David," Jill said quietly. "He's my study subject."

She pulled a small, curled notebook from her ripped pants pocket and began taking notes. I could immediately tell that she cared deeply for this stunning fellow, perhaps the same way Jane Goodall had felt for her own David.

"I'm going to follow him."

Jill descended a steep, leaf-littered bank into a tangle of saba trees.

We had walked past castellate termite mounds, over metamorphic rock plateaus and through tangled lianas. We struggled through tough potato vines and trees that strangled each other. And here some of the chimps were resting under a cool, viny thicket. An old chimp leaned back on a rock and closed his eyes, his lips slightly parted in a grin. He had a sparse, white beard and pink scars on his chin. The

side of his face was bathed in sunlight, the thick fur on his back covered in dead leaves. He crossed his arms and looked down at a companion sleeping next to him. In that moment I was just a voyeur observing another human being, simply “people watching” as my mother and I used to do in Manhattan, seated on the library steps. There was something in their faces that I had not seen in the mangabeys.

When Goodall first discovered chimps making “fishing poles” to retrieve termites, the idea of “man the toolmaker” was dispelled, but man was still considered the only creature who hunted with tools. This hallmark behavior created a distinct boundary between humans and chimpanzees that exalted humanity and stuck nonhuman primates definitively into the animal-kingdom mix, or so we thought.

The Fongoli chimps proved us wrong once again. Jill observed ten different chimps use “spears” to hunt prosimian prey in twenty-two documented cases. Tool construction involves five steps that include trimming the tool, a tree branch, to a point, in attempts to extract little nocturnal prosimians called bush babies (*Galago senegalensis*) from cavities in hollow branches and tree trunks. Bush babies emerge from their slumber at dusk and communicate through what sounds like language—cries or squeaks. They are agile leapers with large, thin ears like bats; huge, saucer-shaped eyes; and silvery fur coats. Even though in only one of twenty-two recorded cases was the chimpanzee successful, Jill insists that the toolmaking and hunting behaviors were both systematic and consistent. The tools were not used as probes or for rousing, she asserts, but instead these handcrafted tools were forcibly jabbed toward their prey multiple times and smelled and/or licked upon extraction. The discovery of chimps using tools to hunt, a behavior never before recorded in a group of wild chimps, landed Jill in *National Geographic* and put the Fongoli chimps in the media spotlight. Jill now asks us to rethink not only theories about tool use and hunting, but what it means to be human.

Local people such as the Malinke and Bedik tell stories about chimpanzees and monkeys. They believe that humans turn into monkeys if they are somehow outcast from society, and also that chimpanzees are their ancient ancestors and must be protected. Monkeys may be hunted and eaten for bush meat here, but not chimps. Using this traditional knowledge as a conservation tool is key. As folklorist Gregory Schrempf wrote in 2011: “Science can enrich its perspective through a sympathetic attitude toward myth and other forms of

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traditional wisdom." Gathering and documenting stories about people's interactions and beliefs about primates will also be valuable when there are no primates left.

How will we describe the great apes to our grandchildren or great-grandchildren when these creatures are no longer around, except maybe in zoos? How will we explain to them that hairy creatures whose expressions resembled those of humans once lived in the wild, but then went extinct? We won't read them scientific papers. We'll tell them stories, and hopefully, read them poems.

GOLD DIGGERS

Kelly and I entered Le Bedik on a Friday night in Kédougou and were greeted by an international coalition of mining-company employees, many still in their field clothes—geologists from Nigeria, a South African mine manager, a driller from Hungary with a round, sweating face, who was quite drunk. There were representatives from China and Australia, and a lanky fellow from Lebanon with charcoal-rimmed eyes who stumbled outside after he was refused another drink.

Le Bedik, the only locale in Kédougou with Wi-Fi, is usually our first stop when we come into town for supplies. Wealthy business-people, like the mining-company executives, typically reserve rooms. The president's wife, Viviane, stays here when she comes to check on the regional hospital she helped to fund a few years ago. Carved-wood elephant murals adorn the back wall of the bar and rustic village scenes color the concrete walls. From the restaurant balcony we could hear the echo of children's voices, the sound of women smacking clothing against rocks in the Gambia River. The mountains of Guinea were just visible in the distance, shrouded in a white sky, hazy from smoke lingering after a recent bush fire.

Like the miners, we were not quite clean after a week in the bush studying savanna chimpanzees, though we'd washed our hair and put on earrings. I chatted with a shaggy-haired geologist from Cape Town who sat at the end of the bar blowing cigarette smoke out into the fading sky. He was utterly baffled by a writer who had come to this uncomfortably hot country to study chimps.

"What do we need besides statistics and data?" He crinkled up his sunburned face and poured himself another whiskey.

"What will numbers tell us about chimps when they go extinct in the wild?" I said.

"What can you write about monkeys?" he asked. "They eat, they shit, they sleep."

"Apes," I corrected him.

At the other side of the bar, Kelly struck up a conversation with a reserved South African mine manager. He told her about a gold-prospecting expedition in Kharakhena, the field site where we had conducted transects and set up reconnaissance cameras to learn about the area's local chimp populations.

"I've been working here for months and I've never seen a chimp," he said.

"They're very silent when they want to be. You don't see them, but they're definitely around Kharakhena. We can tell based on nests they build at night to sleep in. . . ."

"They build nests?"

"Yes, they push down branches and leaves."

"Wow."

"Chimps are so resilient, but only to a point. When it comes to mining, we don't know what they'll be able to handle and what they won't. Obviously the loss of habitat will be an issue, but will the noise of bulldozers and other large machinery be a problem?"

"It won't be a problem," he assured her, his face stoic.

Kelly eagerly pulled up a vegetation map on her Toughbook that showed all the areas in Kharakhena where she'd documented the presence of chimps. The map abounded with rich blue circles that predicted home ranges. Blue meant gallery forests—habitat with fruiting and nesting trees used by chimps.

"We just have a small prospecting plant," the mine manager said. "That area, we just use the water source, we only put the plant up for exploration, but we're not going to do anything there."

"What do you mean, the water source?"

"We're building a dam. There's no other way to work in the dry season."

"A dam?!"

"There will be plenty of water for the chimps. It will help them."

"How could a dam possibly help the chimps?"

"It will! Why not? We'll have a camp with fresh fruit for them every day! They eat fruit, right?"

Images of chimps fighting over bananas surely made Kelly cringe, even though she kept a smile on her face. Provisioning wild chimps is forbidden at most research sites, as it has a strong influence on their behavior. When Jane Goodall first started working in Gombe

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National Park, she provisioned the population with bananas to speed up the habituation process, so that she could observe and record behaviors before her funding ran out. When they got accustomed to provisioned food, their natural patterns of behavior changed. Habituated primates that lose their fear of people are more prone to death by hunters and other predators, and can also be dangerous to people. Because primates are genetically closely related to humans, they are susceptible to many of our diseases and, like us, can get a common cold or pneumonia.

We were all drunk and famished, so the mine manager bought some Pringles, a delicacy here, and paid one of the waiters to reopen the kitchen and have some steak and fries made up for us, on his tab. He ordered a bottle of white wine and filled our glasses, while the geologist polished off his own supply of Jameson and told us stories from his days in Angola, how he had left half-smoked cigarettes and water for the local diamond miners who were often beaten to death and thrown in the river, their bodies fished out in the morning. The world will turn a blind eye to unjust deaths for things like precious metals and gems.

"There would be blood coming from their ears, nose, mouth, and the supervisors would just say, 'They've drowned. They've drowned.' They didn't drown. Those buggers had been robbed blind."

He shook his head and rolled the last bits of ice in his glass. I imagined the Angolan workers, killed for pocketing a diamond. I imagined the poor working conditions, the small red glow of a half-smoked cigarette that would be waiting for them at the end of the day.

"We are all stakeholders," Kelly pointed out when our food arrived. "I'm going to be working here for the next several years, and so are you," she said to the mine manager. "We should collaborate."

"There are no chimps where my mine's going in."

"Yes, there are."

Kelly continued trying to convince him that chimps do indeed exist in areas where his company wanted to build mines, at the base of several mountains, where local people believe that chimps are the spirits of their ancient ancestors. Kelly knew she had to pick her battles. The mine manager has only a small-scale concession compared to other companies in the vicinity, namely ArcelorMittal. As she argued, I felt the mist of a heavy rain on my face at the onset of a seasonal downpour.

THE STARRY-EYED YOUTH

The rainy season was just beginning when we arrived in Bofeto village, which was green and glistening against the forest after a midday shower. Mud-slick mountain roads sent our Land Rover fishtailing through fields of Djakore cattle with their long, fine horns and fulvous coats. We slid past bicyclists and into the neon-green savanna, just sprouting new grasses that seemed to glow. After the dry season had left the country barren and thirsty, the rain added fresh color to the once-dusty landscape.

Rustic wooden fences, cattle enclosures, and mud-hut compounds with thatched roofs lined the roadsides. This seemed like an idyllic village, a pristine place that had been untouched by Western influence, until Kelly pointed to the hills. They looked lumpy and shaved in places, like they'd gotten a bad haircut. The hills—which contain caves where chimps rest when temperatures rise in the dry season—had been mangled by mining roads.

We crossed a bridge wide enough for construction equipment that leaned heavily to one side over the murky river. A hand-carved wooden canoe tied loosely to a tree on the shore looked as though it would be swept away if the current picked up. Bulldozed roads replaced vague dirt trails, and once-pristine forest was infiltrated by heavy machinery and mining camps. I thought of the lesson on nonattachment and loss we'd received from yogi Desirée Rumbaugh back in Iowa. More and more chimp habitat is destroyed each time Kelly returns to Senegal to conduct her research, and there is seemingly little she can do about it. Everything changes and everything will come to an end. Can I accept this yogic philosophy but still care about conservation?

The impacts of mining in Senegal, and throughout West Africa in general, became a reality to me not only when I saw large-scale mining operations that left gaping holes in the earth, but also when we dined with the people who worked for these companies. When a mining company wants to start a new mine in Senegal, it makes a contract with the government, typically declaring that after the mine has been exploited, it will be responsible for reclamation. Mine reclamation is supposed to mean that the hole will be filled in and the landscape rehabilitated—topsoil put down and trees planted. As the geologist disclosed to us at the bar, this step is often overlooked, and mining companies say they've surpassed their budget, pay a fine to the government, and quietly leave the country. The

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ArcelorMittal mining camp is adjacent to Kelly's field site. Due to the rains, the chain-link-fenced compound seemed deserted aside from a few guards and their dogs. Dump trucks would get stuck in these muddy roads.

Kelly monitors this distinct nook of Senegal in an attempt to determine the effects of mining on chimp habitat. Here, the forests are not only home to chimps and other wildlife, but to some of the world's most desired minerals. ArcelorMittal is the largest steel-producing company in the world, and in the Falémé region of Senegal, they've made a contract to mine for iron ore, a key ingredient of steel. On *Forbes* magazine's "Most Powerful People" list, Lakshmi Mittal, the chief executive officer of the company, is number forty-seven of the seventy people named. His daughter's wedding was the most expensive in recorded history, a \$60 million affair.

Mineral mining is a key aspect of economic growth, as Mr. Mittal and the company website advocate, but it is also extremely dangerous and destructive. ArcelorMittal's website claims that it is concerned with sustainability and safe working conditions, but what it doesn't show is pictures of the open pit mines left to erode and mar the earth. It doesn't show pictures of children washing gold in mercury with their bare hands. It doesn't show mines long since abandoned or resources vanished from the African earth.

In the village, we were greeted by our host, Smiti Damfakha, his four wives, and eighteen children. One wife was displaced from her hut at the center of the compound, and our bags were shuttled inside assembly-line style by the children. Donald Duck sheets were tucked into the two wooden beds, worn linoleum covered the dirt floor, stacks of metal and plastic bowls were kept on a small table, and there was even a motorcycle out front: all indicators of the small amounts of wealth local people make mining. Damfakha was extremely proud of his moto and always asked Kelly for gas.

Most local people work artisanal gold mines, small-scale mining that often relies on rudimentary and toxic methods, like mercury washing, to extract metals. Despite Damfakha's efforts as a cattle herder, hunter, and part-time miner, all of which makes him rather affluent in his community, none of his daughters will ever have a wedding that costs anywhere near \$60 million. Most often, he won't even have enough gas to ride his moto out into the bush to hunt for dinner.

Damfakha welcomed us with bowls of sour milk and sugar, a delicacy in the village, the consistency of thin yogurt with cottage cheese chunks. The children peered shyly into the narrow hut opening.

They examined our backpacks and equipment—Toughbook computers, GPSs, camera traps—and shooed chickens trying to enter. It felt absurd, all that we had brought for only a few weeks. Despite the rains, it was still extraordinarily hot, and animals that were kept in the housing compound attracted a plague of flies. We fanned ourselves with thatched mats and greeted Damfakha's large family. They gathered into the crowded hut, eager to see why the "toubabs" (white people) were here. This is the village Kelly calls home during her stay.

The next morning, I pulled a mosquito net off the rickety wooden bed Kelly and I shared, and, looking for my boots, found two dead rabbits on the doorstep. Their thick, amber eyes had gone expressionless. Damfakha's first wife came inside the hut and smiled at me. She gathered some cooking utensils and lifted the rabbits by their ears. The sky was still dark with a few lingering stars as I watched her light a fire outside the hut and start to boil water.

Kelly and I quickly dressed by the light of our headlamps and prepared our packs for a day out in the bush. We filled our extra water bottles, put sunscreen on our faces, and made coffee. Kelly checked the batteries on her GPS and decided on a few nesting sites she wanted to visit from the year before. One site she listed was *la place du baobab géant*, the place of the giant baobab. There she had found over forty chimp nests, old and new, and determined that this was a nesting site they had been coming back to for years.

Damfakha arrived in a sweat-worn button-up shirt and knit cap and took us into patches of woodland forests below the shaved mountains. We shared handfuls of peanuts and little bags of biscuits for breakfast as the sun rode up over the mountains and washed through the savanna, making the grass appear translucent. Dew from the rainy season's quick-growing grasses soaked through our boots and socks within minutes.

We navigated stretches of savanna pocked with mushroom-shaped termite mounds and clusters of white flowers, petals long like lilies. Every so often we stopped for water or a bathroom break, but Kelly was eager to get to *la place du baobab géant* before lunch and the heat of midday. We spoke little, but occasionally Damfakha would ask for new boots (he only had sandals), or new linoleum floors for his wives' huts. Kelly agreed to bring him work boots the next time she visited, but demurred about the new floors.

"You know that stream near Dakar?" Damfakha asked in his minimal French.

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At first we were stumped.

"The big one," he said.

"You mean the ocean?" Kelly asked.

"Do you have to pass over that to get here?"

"Yes. In an airplane."

"I didn't know there were villages on the other side."

Kelly spotted the giant baobab—the thick trunk was wide and buttressed, the sparse limbs like an intricate root system secured into the sky. Male chimps will pound their fists on tree buttresses like these to get the attention of the group. However, beside the giant, no other trees remained. The earth surrounding the baobab was scorched and ashy. Chimp nests, and all the trees that contained them, were gone. What was once a forest that chimps utilized for food and sleeping trees had been cut down and burned for cultivation. Kelly's mouth dropped open as she stopped in her tracks and scanned the desiccated earth. She threw her backpack to the ground and ran through the field.

A bare-breasted woman in a long, blue warp skirt adorned with fish bones planted peanuts amid blackened tree stumps. The woman glanced over at us briefly before resuming her work. Kelly started to cry.

"There were forty nests here last summer," she whispered, hiding her face so Damfakha wouldn't see her tears.

Chimps returned to this place often, a sanctuary guarded by the baobab, now the lone survivor in what will become a field of peanuts local people use to make a traditional sauce.

"I know people need land to cultivate, but why did they have to choose this spot? Why here?" Kelly asked.

There were still a few trees left on the periphery, and a number of old nests, but Kelly figured that the chimps had been forced to find a new place to go.

She wiped her eyes with her shirtsleeve and pulled out her field notebook. She lifted her chin and diligently wrote down the GPS coordinates and time, then simply: "forest gone." We were seeing firsthand the effects of human encroachment on what was previously considered wildlife habitat. Can chimps viably share space with humans? How long can their displacement go on before there is simply no room left on the planet for them?

"They've found somewhere else," Kelly decided, examining the blue swaths of forest on her GPS. "I want to check out the gallery forests to the north. I haven't been there yet, but I'm sure there're chimps."

Despite setbacks, Kelly remains dedicated and inspired, and most importantly, she truly believes that chimpanzees have a place in the future of our planet. On the back of Kelly's business card is the famous quote from Baba Dioum, an environmentalist from Senegal: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, we will understand only what we are taught." Kelly is working toward conservation education programs in local schools to teach children the value of protecting forests and the animals that reside there.

"There are losses we just have to let go of," Kelly said, turning away from the giant baobab. "This year there will be peanuts instead of chimp nests, but many years from now, the forest will start to come back."

And with the forest will come fruit, and with fruit, chimpanzees.

Another day in Bofeto, I got on the back of Kelly's moto and we rode through the bush, over the ArcelorMittal bridge, and into gallery forests to the north. The USGS map promised stretches of dense forest. We hiked through savanna-woodland mosaics not looking for chimpanzees, only evidence of their presence. As Kelly taught me, habituating primates could put them in danger. Besides, we can learn all we need to know about the unique behaviors of West African savanna chimps from the group Jill habituated at Fongoli. Also, Kelly had recently begun putting camera traps in places where she'd documented feeding activity, and has some wonderful footage of chimps bringing fruit into caves. These wildlife-surveillance systems take pictures at even the slightest of movements, and allow Kelly to observe behaviors she otherwise would have missed. She's even gotten footage of a curious lion sniffing the camera lens.

As we crossed the savanna into gallery forest, baboons barked in alarm, those in the foreground statuesque as they watched us stumble through vines and twisted lianas.

"There have to be nests here," Kelly said as we turned on our GPSs, wrote down our coordinates, and began looking.

In waterproof field notebooks we recorded the time, latitude, longitude, number of nests in one place, how old they were, and what habitat they'd been found in. Kelly considers nests fresh if they were built the previous night, old if they appeared to be from a few weeks ago, and ancient if they were made months or even years ago. Instead of trying to see chimps, we sought out remnants of their existence—nests, feces, places they'd left discarded fruit, caves they'd rested in.

We descended dense, wet, green hills, and sound seemed to drown

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away. All I heard was our footsteps, water falling from leaves, birds chirping. A flash of orange antelope crossed our path, and immediately we found nests. Many of them were fresh. Kelly spotted footprints on the edge of a termite mound, and we searched the ground for feces, which were filled with saba seeds.

"They were here eating just this morning," Kelly said, poking a pile of dung with a stick.

We left the bush late that afternoon with notebooks full of fresh nest counts. On the back of Kelly's moto, wind dried the sweat on my face. We traversed rock-studded mining roads that cut through stretches of savanna and forest, making accessible land that had been known only to local hunters a few years ago.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Kelly yelled suddenly. Damfakha's moto in front of us had swerved into the grass, and a few yards away, a series of hulking black masses knuckle-walked through a patch of termite mounds.

"There they are! It's a whole group of them!" Damfakha pointed excitedly.

Kelly and I both jumped off our moto and let it fall into the road.

"Come on! Let's go!" Damfakha motioned for us to follow him, but Kelly begged him to come back.

She frantically grasped for her binoculars in attempts to get a group count. How many males and females, how many adults and juveniles? How many mothers with infants? Eight black chimpanzees, muscled shoulders poised above the neon grass, walked single file away from us. A juvenile sprinted to the front of the group.

"It would be so easy to follow them," Kelly said, "but we just can't."

Her hands shook as she held the binoculars to her face. I grabbed for mine and got a brief glimpse of the backside of an adult male at the end of the line before they disappeared into the forest. We stood at the edge of the road, silent and breathless, our boots toeing the grass as if some invisible wall were keeping us out of the bush. It's best they remain afraid of humans, I told myself, particularly now that their forests are being replaced by mines. As much as Kelly would have loved to find out where they were going, she was satisfied just to know that they were still here.

Back in the village, I was too tired to write. My boots were muddy and soaked through with condensation, my stomach rumbled, and my legs felt like Jell-O. My desires were primal—all I wanted was food. I ate a prized apple I'd been stowing away at the bottom of

my backpack, an import from South Africa sold at a boutique in Kédougou. I swept away pieces of bone from the rabbit we'd had for breakfast, and sprayed insect repellent everywhere. It was no match for the fly population, and the day was still too hot to get underneath my mosquito net to read or nap.

While Kelly entered data into her Toughbook before dinner, I hiked a cow path to a rock plateau above the village. No one is ever alone in a village—I still heard roosters, women pounding millet. I listened to children running home from the fields, trailed by their mothers, who were carrying buckets of peanuts and cabbage. The hunting dogs came to bark at me as the sky lowered its purple gaze onto rocks still warm with sun. Rocks that harbor gold. A child threw stones at the dogs, and I noticed that his jersey, torn at the shoulder, featured Barack Obama's smiling face.

The dogs yelped and ran down the cow path. I listened to a generator's whir. I found a sense of solitude and stillness here, and felt myself a part of the landscape, a white bipedal creature sitting on metamorphic rock, a rock perhaps filled with precious metals. This landscape has been vastly modified by time, animals, weather, people, agriculture, and mining companies, but it felt ancient and knowing. The wind moved easily and intimately through the grass, welcoming another wet season. The sky was a bare lavender, and I could see every indent, every contour and carved space of the moon. Damfakha approached in a loose, button-up shirt covered in yellow and red butterflies to tell me that dinner was ready. There would be antelope, rolled into balls by his wives, fried in palm oil, and served over rice. Once, there were volcanoes here. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?