

Honey Paradise



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Introduction

I live in Paris, France, and that's where most of these events take place. Oh yes, I'm French. Why do I write in English? Actually, I first wrote my story in French, but no publisher wanted it, because they would not believe it really happened. Distrustful people, publishers. Big Sister's evasion was mentioned on TV, I told them. What better proof do you want?

Then I met Mrs Green, who publishes books in London—how I met her is another story, which wouldn't interest you, I think. She believed me right away and no question asked, so I translated the story into English. This was easy, because I studied foreign languages when I was young.

English is much easier than Chinese, I must say. I mean, to a Frenchman. For instance, where you say *table* we also say *table*, and where you say *piano* we also say *piano*. We learn a lot of English words just by watching TV, of course, like *Mickey Mouse* and *McDonald* and *Pampers*.

Do you know what? I'm typing this book on a computer, and it has an English dictionary that beeps when I spell a word wrong. It is even willing to correct my grammar. You see the sentence "Distrustful people, publishers," up there? Well, the grammar checker says: *This sentence lacks a verb*. This is silly, because I'm big enough to notice that a sentence has no verb. Computers are becoming more pretentious every day. Very soon, they'll want to write the stories themselves. Well, I bet no computer is ever going to write a story like this one!

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Chapter 1. Mysterious howls in the Botanical Gardens

My mother used to push us every morning to the Botanical Gardens in our two-seat stroller, my brother Michel and I. Breathing the fresh air did us a lot of good, she said. Twins? No, we are not twins: I was born thirty-five years ago, and Michel came into this world fifteen months later. I remember that the wheels squeaked: Dee-wee... Dee-wee... Dee-wee...

See how strange languages can be. In the original French version, the stroller squeaked Ri-hin... Ri-hin... But the “hin” sound doesn’t exist in English. It’s what we call a *nasal* sound. You might wonder how a stroller produces a nasal sound without a nose. Anyway, I translated it as Dee-wee. On the other hand, Dee-wee wouldn’t do at all for a French stroller, because it has a meaning in French: you’d write it “dis-oui,” and it means Say yes. Of course, there’s no reason why a respectable stroller should order you to say yes. I wonder whether modern strollers still squeak, actually.

For the last few years, I’ve lived in the same neighborhood again, and I resumed this habit of going every morning to the Botanical Gardens for fresh air. Without the stroller, though. Without my brother Michel, too, because I’ve lost touch with him. Or should I say, lost track of him? They have this show on TV, where people come and describe some parent they would like to find. I should go there: If you see a ten-year-old boy who plays violin... But what am I saying! He was ten when my father went to America with him, but now he is... one year younger than I am, obviously.

What does he look like? Me, for example, I’m beginning to lose some hair on top of my head. I hardly recognize myself in a mirror. I imagine a fat American guy, smoking a cigar and driving a Cadillac, hiding his bald pate under a big cowboy hat.

So I go to the Botanical Gardens to breathe fresh air. Actually, I wonder if the air is as healthy as it used to be. I gulp lots of it, because I run. Yes, I run every morning—four laps, clockwise. You should do it too, and you don’t need to thank me for the free advice. Often, I am still quite sleepy, and I hear, as in a dream, this sound that wells up from the deepest abyss of my memory: Dee-wee... Dee-wee... If you ever come to Paris, you should visit these gardens. Their French name is “Jardin des Plantes”; they are located on the left bank of the Seine river, rather to the east of the city. They include big greenhouses for tropical plants, museums with skeletons of dinosaurs, rainbow-hued flower beds. The older parts were created in the eighteenth century by the royal gardeners of king Louis the fourteenth or fifteenth or umpteenth. An enormous tree (right in the middle of the maze, you can’t miss it) bears a label that says: *Lebanon Cedar, brought as a sapling by Monsieur de Jussieu in 1734.*

I didn’t dare enter the maze when I was a child. A French maze is called a *labyrinthe*, and this makes it a very frightening place, where monsters will devour anybody but heroes with a red thread or at least some kind of compass. Two years ago, they did something very strange: they changed the maze so that it resembles more closely the design of the royal gardeners. I was sorry to lose my childhood’s maze, but then I ceased being afraid to enter it.

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Then there is the zoo. How many times did I visit it with my mother and Michell! Tweety birds cheep and chirp in their aviary, lions growl in their cages, moody buffaloes moo. I don't run inside the zoo, because you must pay to get in and besides I don't want to frighten the poor beasts, but I run along its wall every day—near the north end, not far from the Seine. That's where I hear these queer howls. They sound neither like the sad Yoo-hoo of the great eagles nor like the angry Woo-oo that the wolves throw at police car sirens. I can't even find a way of transcribing them. It's something like Goo-rah-wow, only much more complex. I wonder who wails in this manner.

One early morning, just after the opening of the gardens' gates, as I come near the pen of the great centenarian turtles, I discover an amazing sight: one of these four-legged houses has dug a tunnel under the metallic fence and, thinking maybe that nobody would notice her under her grey shingled roof, she is walking slowly away from her jail. I say *she* and *her* because the word "turtle" is feminine in French, so we assume all turtles are ladies.

What should I do? I feel a certain sympathy for the aged escapee, but I'm afraid some mishap could befall her. I guess she knows how to avoid a charging elephant, but what about a charging bus? Yes, I'd better enter the zoo and warn someone.

A bearded man, who drives a little green tractor with a trailer full of hay, tells me not to worry:

"Josephine likes a morning walk, but she always comes back home through her tunnel."

See? As we consider her a lady, we give her a girl's name. I should have asked the bearded man whether Josephine is really a lady. Instead, I ask him who shouts every morning in such a pitiful manner.

"Come," he says, "I'll show you."

I have already noticed this bearded guy. He seems to enjoy riding his tractor. I wonder whether these things are easy to drive. Do you need a license? A pity I'm so shy, otherwise I would ask him to let me try. He's found the perfect job. I kind of envy him, but I'm not sure I could do it. There is probably a very tough zoo admission exam. They ask you to prove you like animals. I'm afraid I would get very low marks.

I follow the green tractor to the house of the great apes.

"Here she is... The female chimpanzee, over there..."

Why is this poor red-hair chimp, curled up in a corner of her cage, so very sad? She groans, she moans, she wails, she whimpers, she cries. I have a feeling that she is calling someone, that she hopes to be heard all the way to her native jungle, or even that she wants me to listen to her.

On the following days, when her sobs trouble my morning jog, I remember her mournful eyes. By and by, I'm beginning to recognize some high-pitched waahs among the others, then a series of hoarse rumbles that are often repeated. I'm certainly helped by the fact that I studied foreign languages when I was younger. Yes, I know I have said it before.

I go to the big Beaubourg public library. They have millions of books, and even movies that you can watch on TV sets. There, in the scientific books' corner, in the Ethology department (Ethology is the study of animal behavior, in case you didn't

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know), under the orangutan shelf and above the gorilla one, I find several dozen books about chimpanzees. Our nearest cousins! You bet scientists have studied them more than any other ape. I learn a lot of things. Listen to this: baboons, who live in the savannah, can see each other from afar and move their arms to say hello, but chimpanzees are hidden by the dense foliage of the jungle trees, so they have to shout to communicate. “Wow! Anybody there? Yo-o-o...” When a great chimp shouts, I’ve read this in a book, he can be heard several miles away. No wonder I hear that zoo chimp in the morning.

I like to learn things. Did you know that elephants can blow special infra sounds through their hony nose? Yes, the elephant books are just behind the ape books. Human beings don’t hear these sounds, but other elephants understand every word at a distance of fifteen miles or more. No bus could shout that loud, I am sure. As for myself, I’m not sure I could be heard more than fifteen feet away; except when I use a phone.

A vexing incident happened the day I looked at the elephant books. Seeing the pictures of the big beasts reminded me of the zoo’s elephant. He died ten years ago, killed by a mysterious illness, with many other animals. I hadn’t seen him for a long time, but I couldn’t help crying when I heard the sad news. I paid him so many visits, as a child, that he knew me quite well. When I handed him a banana through the grill, the way he raised his trunk very obviously said: “Bonjour, Jean-Jacques!” I remember quite precisely the date of his death. See, I don’t cry that often. My mother had died the week before, actually, and my eyes had remained as dry as pebbles in the Sahara desert. Human beings are despicable creatures, or what?

In the big library, there are rows of tables and chairs, so you can sit and study the books. I choose a nice location near a window. I claim possession by dropping a pile of ape books on the table and my jacket on the back of the seat. I go to the shelves to pick up one more book, I stop to take a peek at the elephants, I get lost in my childhood memories... Across a space somewhat blurred by time travel, I see a young man sitting at my chair. He stands up, takes my jacket and walks away unhurriedly. I look at him, I see he is putting his jacket on... No, wait a minute. His? Mine!

My jacket! A real American pilot’s leather jacket, at least that’s what the label says. With a little cash in the left inside pocket, a credit card, my home keys, my ID card and driving license. An also: a photograph of my mother taken before I was born—the only picture of my mother as a young woman that I possessed. She vanished ten years ago, and now I’ve even lost her picture.

I call my bank about the credit card, I change my locks, then I go to the police station to report the loss of my ID card and driving license. The man enters my name into his computer. He looks at me again. He seems puzzled.

“You know what? The computer says you’re a special case. You must go to another address. Let me write it down for you.”

As it is not far, I walk there. Even if you’ve never come to Paris, you may have heard of our great cathedral, Notre-Dame, where a hunchback used to ring the big bell and so on. Well, the place the police guy sends me to is just in front of Notre-Dame. It is the Central Police Station. I climb stairs, I go to the end of a gray corridor, I turn right... Shouldn’t it be left? I’m lost. I have to ask my way.

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Eventually, I find the office I'm supposed to report to. Say, there is a strange inscription on the door: *Bureau of missing persons*.

It may happen that a fellow isn't aware the Law is looking for him. For example, a radar spotted him when he was speeding, but the police can't deliver the ticket to him because he moved.

I'm not sure this is what "missing person" means. Besides, my old car couldn't reach any speed limit that I know of.

A fat man with a ridiculous red handlebar moustache—he resembles a detective in a silent movie—tells me to sit down. He shuffles his papers, looks at me, reads a page in a folder...

"Why, my boy, I don't see the like of you every day," he says in a gruff peasant's brogue. "Been missing for twenty-five years!"

"Missing for twenty-five years? Oh, I get it. It's not me, but my brother Michel!"

He apologizes profusely and even finds a VIP shortcut to replace my stolen papers. Me, as a result of this mistake, I get a bad case of orphan blues. I've gone to America several times. As soon as I came into a new town, I would search for a Michel Greif in the phone book, or maybe a Michael Greif. I stared at people in the street. Of course, there are plenty bald men smoking cigars to stare at on street corners in America.

Okay, back to my story. Back to the library with a new flight jacket—which I'm careful not to take off. I go six times a week (the library is closed on Mondays) to study the big chimp dictionary by Marina von Rumpelsticken and John Wood (published by the university of Purdue, Indiana). I watch jungle documentary films on the TV sets. I try to practice a little: *Whoo, whoo* and *Ra-ra-ro-ro*, but everybody shouts Hush, hush! People are really not friendly, nowadays. They could try to understand that I do something important, I mean.

Oh, it's really not easy at all. Not only is our cousins' language very complex, but it doesn't sound like French or English. More like Chinese (which I studied when I was younger, together with Japanese), with one syllable words, *wah* and *rroo* and *r'ha*, that take a different meaning when you purr or sing, whisper or roar. You combine them to create other words. For instance, the precise word for "honey" is "fruit-of-little-pain-beast," and it shouldn't be confused with "little-fruit-beast," that designates succulent crunchy insects like ants, termites and lice.

To accommodate my publisher, and to help you read this story faster (as they tell me that in America, *Time is money*), I won't write "fruit-of-little-pain-beast," but simply "honey."

Back home, I practice *woo*, *wah* and *ree'rho* several hours every day. I am very careful to play the piano at the same time so that my neighbors, who are used to hearing me brutalize innocent opera pieces, do not notice anything special. Well, yes, I agree that it is a rather original method. I bet nobody ever studied chimpanzee language by playing the piano before me!

I go visit the poor female chimp at least once a week. I don't feel confident enough to say much more than Good Morning and Good Bye (to be honest, I'm afraid to look very foolish), but that makes her laugh a lot. Laughs at my accent, I think. I'm quite glad that I have found this way to lighten her dark moods for a while. She is beginning to trust me somewhat, so she tells me her name: Big Sister

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Red Hair Long Arms. From now on, I'll shorten it to Big Sister, because I am just plain lazy.

You know, sometimes, you don't really decide to do a thing, but vague yearnings or inklings crystallize into a decision without consulting you. That's how it happened. One morning, I woke up and discovered that I had resolved to get her out. A few heavy locks separate her from freedom. Old locks, which the royal gardeners chose personally I guess. Did you ever see king Louis the sixteenth? On TV, I mean. All he was interested in was keys and locks. That's why he didn't understand a thing about this French Revolution business and lost his head eventually. This stupid old king. He spent years and years dismantling locks and creating locks. Anybody could do that, in those times, because locks were just made with some springs and pieces of steel. Modern locks are much tougher, I think, and now they even have magnetic locks and what not.

I don't know whether you can still buy old-fashioned locks in America. Here in Paris, it's easy. All you have to do is go to the basement of the BHV. This means *Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville*, or City Hall Bazaar. It's a department store that looks like any department store, except that its basement is as marvelous as the robber's cavern in the Ali Baba tale. More marvelous, actually, because instead of useless gems and trinkets, it offers millions of nuts, bolts, screws, nails, hammers, saws, tongue-and-groove pliers, monkey wrenches, drills, gimlets, adzes, ball bearings, carpenter's levels, vises, C-clamps, squares, zigzag rules, brushes, rollers, switches, plugs, wires, fuses, faucets, nozzles and all that.

So I buy three different traditional locks with their keys. I unscrew the grey metallic cases and take a good look at their innards. Just as I thought: the key moves a little peg, that pushes a tiny wedge against a blade spring... All I have to do... Here: if I file two squarish bumps of the first key, it opens not only its own lock, but also the two other ones. I modify the other keys in a similar way, so that now every one of the three keys can open the three locks. Well, I don't pretend that I have created real burglars' skeleton keys capable of opening all the locks in the world, but I am quite eager to find out what I can do with my amateurishly tinkered instruments.

Some parts of the botanical gardens are surrounded by a high metallic fence, other parts by stone walls. While I was in the BHV basement, I bought one of those baggage-racks that you mount on a car's roof, and also a tall aluminum ladder which I fasten on the baggage-rack.

I park my car along the gardens' wall, and I listen to the radio until three o'clock in the morning. The street is empty. I raise the ladder, I climb upon the wall, I pull the ladder, I install it on the other side, I climb down.

I am dressed in black from head to foot. An invisible shadow in the middle of the night, that's what I am. Isn't it fun? I've brought a small torchlight, the light of which I've dimmed with sunglasses. Isn't it clever? You'd think I found that trick in some spy movie, but not at all: it came out of my feverish brain. Oh, I would have made a top rate secret agent, there's no doubt about that.

My idea with the keys was also just right. None of the keys opens all the locks I find on my way, but no lock resists my three keys. Big Sister is sleeping. I must whisper to wake her up, and I discover I can't whisper very well in chimp language. *Arr'h, rro, wouha...* If you think it's easy, why don't you just try! As I feared that

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she might leap about in the gardens to celebrate her returned freedom and lose herself in the depth of the night, I have decided, very reluctantly, to tie a leash around her neck. I try to explain, with my poor words, that it is a temporary measure, that I'll take her to a moving machine, and so on. Happily, she is half asleep and just follows me without asking any question. But when she sees the ladder and understands that we'll climb it, she jumps up so fast that I can't hold her anymore. This is her climbing instinct, what can I do about it.

"Wait for me," I shout.

I hope the night watchmen are fast asleep. I climb the ladder as fast as I can. I'm glad it's not a tree. I move it to the other side, and I show my little white car to Big Sister, begging her to stay close to it.

And now, here I am, behind the steering wheel, Big Sister safely asleep and belted on the passenger's seat, a long aluminum ladder fastened to the roof, as I drive towards the rising sun and a certain isba. Yes, isba.

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Chapter 2. The Isba in the Park of the Grand Duke's Castle.

An isba is a little wooden Russian house. In Russian tales, the witch Baba Yaga inhabits an isba perched upon hen legs. No hen legs for my isba... I received it six years ago. It was bequeathed to me by Madame Ostrowitska, whom I played chess with every Saturday. She was no witch either.

Have I already mentioned my brother Michel? They say that an older brother is always jealous of the younger one, who forces him to share his mother's love. I don't know about that, but I know Michel had a hard life trying to catch up with me. I did everything first: I read first, I swam first, I rode a bike first. He tried to take his revenge wrestling and playing soccer (a sport we call football, actually), but I managed to always keep a slight lead.

The grammar checker says that "to always keep a slight lead" is something very bad called a split infinitive. I won't change it, because I know that as a foreigner I am not strictly bound to the rules.

Our parents considered that this constant competing was a good thing. They thought that each of us was straining to get the best of himself and was slowly building a real winner's character.

As a consequence of this unfortunate rivalry, I hate losing. When we began a new game, I would tell myself: "Madame Ostrowitska is very old, she would obviously love to win, at least once; I must let her win." Alas, I could not control my stupid pride. She was not very careful, and I couldn't help exploiting her mistakes. I was so foolishly conceited that I congratulated myself for the clever ways I found to checkmate my naive opponent. This is a French word, which we spell naïve, with two little dots on the i called a "tréma."

Madame Ostrowitska held what we call a Literary and Artistic *Salon* in her Paris apartment every other Sunday afternoon around tea time. This means that she received some writers and artists and friends who liked books and art and Russian tea. Many Parisian ladies held *Salons* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this pleasant custom is less common today. A friend of mine used to sing Schubert Lieder (this is not a French word, but a German one, meaning Songs) at Madame Ostrowitska's. I'll call my friend Irène in this story, although it is not her real name. Not long ago, she found a good job singing in the Opera chorus, but in those times she was enjoying life, or, as we say in French, living a Bohemian life. When you are a good musician, you have no trouble finding rich people willing to offer you a meal, perhaps even vacations and other gifts, to buy the pleasure of hearing you play. Exchanging a few songs against zakouskis (little Russian hors d'œuvres), blinis (pancakes), a portion of cheesecake and possibly a thin spread of caviar on rye bread, seemed an excellent bargain to her. She brought me along one Sunday afternoon and introduced me to Madame Ostrowitska. She pretended I was a artist, since I knew music and wrote.

Let's say I could play the piano, by really focusing all my brain cells upon the task, to accompany Irène when she sang. Our parents thought we should study two different instruments and play together, Michel and I. My brother immediately saw his advantage in this: he would at last overtake me. If I remember well, he was becoming an authentic short-pants virtuoso when he moved to the other side of the planet. I can still hear him play the Happy Sprites' Waltz on his fiddle while I was

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trying hard to follow him on my keyboard. I really suffered. The Happy Snails' Waltz would have suited me better, no doubt about that.

When I began attending Madame Ostrowitska's salon, I had a job as a copywriter in an advertising agency. I wrote the famous ad that said *If Lassie could speak, she would demand Bonie dog food*. As it was very successful and many dogs' masters did demand Bonie dog food, I acquired quite a reputation as an animal expert. They said that nobody understood dumb beasts as well as I did. Later, I moved to a different field and wrote the booklet that was given away to explain the 1988 tax form. Millions of readers; what you call a Best-seller! This was quite a thick booklet, and let me tell you that I am glad not to be American, since your tax forms are well known to be even more complex than ours. Madame Ostrowitska was ready to consider that I was a real writer.

"Ha, Adam Ivanovich, a writer such as you... I should tell you the story of my life, and you would create a novel out of it," she said.

She had been the governess of Grand Duke Casimir, who fled Russia during the Revolution with some of his Icons and jewels. He bought a castle near Paris and enjoyed life in the cabarets of the Champs-Élysées. Although his doctors told him he drank too much vodka, he just went on blowing his life to the four winds. "My family, they arre all dead," he would say, "and when my cousin Vladimirr passes away I shall be the last Rrrussian prrrince. Thus, let us drrrink, my firriends!" He died suddenly, in a Russian restaurant on boulevard Montparnasse, when he tried to drink three bottles of vodka without breathing.

I knew that the Grand Duke had built a little house for his faithful governess in the park of his castle. Toward the end of June, she would always say:

"I go spend holidays in my little isba, Adam Ivanovich. I shall see you again in September, if God is willing."

I waited until September with some worry, because Madame Ostrowitska was extremely old. Her first name was Anna Vassilevna, and I called her Vava, like everybody else.

One year, at the beginning of June, I felt a kind of foreboding. I knew that I was playing my last game of chess with Vava, and I decided to let her win at last. I acted delicately, but Vava, as she was nearing the mysteries of death, was also able to read the fine print... Hmm. I tried to translate a French expression meaning *to understand half-told truths*, but my translation does not fit. Was she able to see the other side of the coin? No, that won't do either. She had a very steady glance, she didn't batter an eye, she looked at you and saw right through you, and... I give up! Anyway, she smiled at me quite tenderly, and said:

"Ha, my dear Adam Ivanovich, I know how much it cost you to lose for my sake. To thank you I give a little present."

She went out of the room and came back soon with an envelope, which she asked me not to open before her decease.

By the way, I notice that I forgot to tell you why she called me Adam Ivanovich. My parents were born in Poland and moved to France before the second world war. During the war, they belonged to the French underground, we say *La Résistance*. The Nazis suspected them. My father was able to flee, but they arrested my mother, kept her a prisoner in the big Fresnes jail, near Paris, during six months, then let her go because they couldn't prove anything against her. One day, a warden came to

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her cell: they needed someone who spoke Polish. She was brought to the side of a poor Polish underground fighter who had been tortured all night and was dying. He could barely whisper to my mother, with his last breath: “I didn’t tell them anything. My name is Adam... Please remember me...”

My mother was moved to tears and decided that she would name her first-born son Adam, to honor the memory of this brave Pole. In fact, Adam is my middle name: Jean-Jacques Adam Greif. Vava, who like all Russians was very sentimental, loved this story. My father’s name was Janek in Poland and Jean in the underground, where you needed very unobtrusive French names. Anyway, this corresponds to Ivan in Russian, thus I am Adam son of Ivan, or Adam Ivanovich.

As I had guessed, Vava didn’t come back in September that year. One of her friends called me on the phone.

“Vava has followed Grrrand Duke Casimirrr, Grrrand Duke Vladimirrr and all the otherrrs to Heaven,” she said with a queer bleating voice that left no *r* unrolled. “And now you can the envelope open.”

It was a copy of her will: She left me the isba, as a memorial to our chess games and to the brave Pole Adam.

I don’t go very often. To the isba, I mean. I don’t like country houses. In America, you live in suburbs with lawns and lakes, but French people prefer to inhabit gray houses in the middle of Paris and to tend a garden fifty miles away during the week-end. As they all go and come back at the same time, they spend hours in traffic jams. Does this make any sense? The botanical gardens are green enough for me. I can even sit on a bench and read a book. If I have no book, I read the little cards that give the Latin names of shrubs and trees. Euh (as we say in French), where am I? I seem to have lost the thread of my story. Oh yes, the isba. I dislike the isba because the great park of the Grand Duke’s castle, which surrounds it, is even more frightening than the maze. It is a deserted and forgotten forest, full of ghosts.

You see, the heirs of the Grand Duke haven’t been able to reach any kind of agreement after thirty years or so. They throw lawsuits at each other, these foolish heirs, and feed a lot of lawyers. Actually, even though the gigantic black trees—which resemble an army of tired knight in their weary fight against brambles, thorns, lichens and moss—throw a kind of gloomy shadow over the whole neighborhood, it is to be hoped that the lawsuits do not come to an end too soon. Everybody knows that real estate sharks are lying in wait. Sharks do not lie in wait. I should say tigers. They’ll buy out the heirs and build “*Palatial condos in the last authentic park of the greater Paris area,*” etc. This italic quote sounds even better in French, because they have a knack for using old-fashioned words to imply that they are taking up just where Louis the fourteenth left. In case you have never heard of Louis the fourteenth, he built the palace at Versailles.

Seen through Big Sister’s eyes, the isba is already a palace. She is fascinated by the wooden beams and logs. “House–tree!” she exclaims. I show her how she can crawl under the light fence that separates the isba from the park, but I beg her with my utmost persuasive powers not to climb the high wall that hides the park from the neighbors.

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At least this adventure forced me to tidy up the isba. Before welcoming my young guest there, I moved its most fragile contents to my Paris apartment. The place was filled to the brim with an amazing assortment of knick-knacks. In Vava's Paris apartment, there was already an overflow of musty books, china vases, silver samovars, icons, yellow photographs. To walk across the living-room, you had to slalom between cranky armchairs, wearing lace sleeves like old ladies, and pedestal tables covered with embroidered scarves. In the isba, it was much worse. A sofa was hiding in a corner under a dozen oriental carpets. A glass cabinet exhibited a collection of antique candlesticks, another was full of painted Easter eggs. The walls disappeared behind a mosaic of icons.

Hey, I'm not referring to computer icons, but to Russian orthodox religious pictures showing the Virgin Mary carrying the child Jesus in her arms.

Big Sister visits the isba from floor to ceiling—and when I say ceiling, I do mean ceiling. I remove all the lamps hanging from cords, and replace them with small sturdy halogen lights, which I leave on the floor. She spends hours examining the door knobs, the mirrors, the tables and chairs, the window shades and shutters. Faucets fascinate her: when you rotate the shiny handle, water starts flowing!

The kitchen cupboards contain fantastic treasures. I am sorry to inform a certain museum curator (he'll know what I am talking about when he reads these lines) that several cups of the "Cossack Regiment" tea set, offered by czar Alexander III to archduchess Lisaveta Ludwigozna, mother of Grand Duke Casimir, were broken, hmm, in an unfortunate accident. As a consequence, I accept the price he quoted last year, when I submitted it to him for appraisal. Or I might even accept a lower price, considering the circumstances. I should have taken it to Paris with the rest, of course, but there wasn't much room left in my studio and I hadn't thought that Big Sister would be able to open a locked cupboard.

The most important thing, I guess, is that I convinced her not to play with the electric wires, which she tore off at first out of mere juvenile curiosity. As a fact, I had to create a neologism, "creeper-ouch-pain," to warn her of the danger.

I don't invent new words every day, but I notice that my language skills are improving. Let's say I speak chimpanzee as well as a baboon. All right, I may be boasting a little. I can only imagine the way baboons speak, of course. What's for sure is that I understand Big Sister quite well. Or maybe, I think I understand her. She is quite talkative. She babbles from morning to evening. She often speaks about Africa, about her childhood in the great forest, about her capture. I listen to her story and try to translate it into French (now, English). Some parts of her tale do seem a little obscure to me. I sometimes need to fix them up somewhat, so to speak, with the help of my imagination. I hope that people who are fluent in chimp language will understand how difficult it was for me to transcribe her words after only a few weeks of study, and will forgive any implausibility they might detect in the chapters that follow. I declare hereby that I am ready to correct all the vocabulary or grammar mistakes that they'd notify to me.

Honey Paradise

Chapter 3. Big Sister's story

“*Arr Rh’oo Ro>oo Wa/h Warh...* I am a poor orphan, Sir. The fire angels have taken away my Mom and left me alone with Little Brother Red Hair Long Ears.”

[I write “fire angels” to render a very difficult group of words, which might be translated roughly as “the-animals-that-do-not-exist-and-that-spit-fire.” I’ll write *Little Brother* for Little Brother Red Hair Long Ears, because I’m not only very lazy but also rather out of sorts, having caught a bad cold after running in the rain.]

“I was supposed to protect Little Brother, as he was much too young to defend himself against the leopard devil. When I wandered from tree to tree, he rode on my back. Often, something frightened him and he hid under my belly. He was very timid and never left me.

“He used to ask me where the fire angels had taken Mom

– They brought her to the honey paradise, Little Brother.

– But tell me, Big Sister, why did they choose Mom?

– Because she was so good and never said anything bad. As a reward, they put her inside the shiny bird and took her away to the land of no-bee honey.

– What about us? Will angels come for us if we’re good? Will we go to honey paradise? Shall we ever see Mom again?

– Of course. We’ll travel inside the shiny bird and we won’t worry about food anymore. The angels will offer us ever-ripe fruit and shell-free nuts...

– ... and honey!

– That’s right. No-bee honey, which comes with no sting attached.

– But what happens if we are not good, Big Sister?

– Then the leopard devil (“the-light-and-shadow-skin-devil”) will eat us, like our uncle Wrinkled Buttock.

[Talking about uncles, I’ve learned—much later, when I asked Big Sister about her people’s habits—that chimps are not like us: they never marry. A child doesn’t know his father, but only his mother and perhaps his grandmother, his brothers and sisters, his uncles and aunts. Isn’t it strange? As for myself, my father left with my brother Michel when I was eleven, so I feel a kind of kinship with Big Sis and Little Bro.]

– Big Sister, tell me the story of the leopard captured by the angels.

– This leopard was a very cruel devil. He had eaten old Red Back and her daughter Big Feet, and the little Goldilocks and many other apes. One day, the fire angels came and caught him with a net to take him away to the honey paradise.

– If he was so bad, why did he go to paradise?

– So that chimps can make fun of him! In the honey paradise, devils are locked inside cages and apes can spit on them and throw orange peels at them!

“Ha, Mister, I believed these tales. If only I had known... I should have listened to Gray Tuft. He is a very old and wise chimpanzee, but I found him very boring because he was always repeating the same things.

– Well, well, Big Sister, I hear you’re feeding nonsense again to this poor kid about the honey paradise.

– Not nonsense, Gray Tuft. My aunt Hairy Chest met an old baboon whose grandmother has seen the honey paradise with her own eyes.

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– How can you take into consideration what a baboon says? One of our elders, Black Shoulders—he lived before your time—used to say that you shouldn’t trust anyone who promises paradise on earth and effortless pleasure. Remember our saying: “If you don’t leave your branch, you won’t ever taste honey.” This means that honey does not fall from the sky like rain, even in the fire angels’ land. Ha, my child, I hope, just as you do, that your mother lives in a marvelous country, but in truth we know not what happens when fire angels capture a chimpanzee. These fire angels are brutal with leopards and with elephants and with us. I do not believe that they love us.

– They love us when we’re good, then they take us away inside the big shiny birds.

– Leopards eat us down here, and perhaps fire angels eat us in the sky, inside the shiny birds. Listen to my advice, Big Sister: you must flee the fire angels, you must resist them if they try to catch you. Giving yourself to them instead of running away is really what we call jumping into the devil’s mouth. You are young and you have not lived much, thus you should trust the wisdom of your elders. Just imagine that all the chimpanzees decide to follow the fire angels to your illusory paradise. This would mean the end of our tribe!

“Little Brother, sitting on my back, didn’t understand all these clever words.

– Me, I want to see my Mom.

– Your only mother is Big Sister, Gray Tuft said. Our tribe needs you, Little Brother, and you too, Big Sister, to keep our ancestral territory and maintain our traditions. Do not let the fire angels bewitch you! Remember this antique principle which Black Shoulders transmitted to us: Even more dangerous than a known devil is an unknown one.

“A poor orphan shouldn’t be too fresh, Sir, especially with an old gentleman as wise as Gray Tuft, but I didn’t give a damn about this famous Black Shoulders he was quoting all the time. For one thing, our elders, wise as they may have been, never mentioned the fire angels, the shiny birds and the roaring machines that run across the savannah.

“Gray Tuft could blather as much as he liked, I knew that the fire angels aren’t even afraid of bathing in the great lake. When a crocodile (“a water-snake-thousand-teeth”) attacks them, they aim their bang–stick at it and kill it. Could our elders do that?

“All this ancient wisdom and these ridiculous sayings didn’t prevent me from being bored to death in the forest. Everyday the same thing: branches and more branches, climb and descend, up and down, red fruit and yellow fruit and more red fruit and yellow fruit.

“If only the fruit were ripe! No way: the ripe fruit are reserved for elders and big shots and powerful families. A poor orphan can only get the toughest fruit, if any are left on the branch after everybody helped themselves. In bird nests she finds only empty shells!

“I could eat leaves. Oh yes, you can always eat as many leaves as you want.

“The other chimp children, their mother teaches them all kinds of tricks. How to break a nutshell by wedging it into a root and hitting it with a thick branch; how to catch termites by driving a stick into their nest and pulling it suddenly. Me, I had no mother to teach me, so I would withdraw the stick too slowly and the little bugs

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who had climbed aboard understood what was happening and jumped off the train [*Hmm... I'm translating as well as I can.*] Or I would withdraw it too roughly and it would graze the sides of the hole, so that I also lost my bounty.

“I remembered but vaguely the taste of the nuts and termites my mother used to give me, and I couldn't figure out any way to eat them again, being an orphan. Except in the honey paradise, of course.”

I take the liberty to interrupt this story here. My humble opinion is that this talk about nuts and termites hides the true reason which made Big Sister so eager to change her life. Already, well before she cried in her cage of the Paris Botanical Gardens, she often cried on top of a tree while hugging Little Brother. When he asked her why she was so sad, she answered, between two sobs: “Nobody loves me... Wah... Wah...” Even though Little Brother said: “But I do love you, Big Sister!,” he was unable to console her.

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Chapter 4. The shiny bird that goes broo-broo in the sky

“In spite of Gray Tuft’s warnings, I went on dreaming about the honey paradise. One evening, we saw the dust cloud that the fire angels raise in the plain with their roaring machine. Where did they come from? This honey paradise, if it existed, was it located beyond the horizon, or maybe somewhere in the sky?”

“Our tribe took refuge in the heart of the forest and decided to spend the night on top of the highest trees. But me, I came down in the middle of the night, when everybody was sleeping—including Little Brother on my back. I could see, far away, a vague crimson glare. I knew that the angels sleep close to the fire, hence their name. Nobody, of course, can master the biting flame as they do.

“I approached them silently. How beautiful they were, these sleeping angels!

“I admired their skin, which is not covered by hair like ours but by many-colored fabrics adorned with shining buttons and held together by metallic tendrils [I think she means zippers]. On their wrist gleams a strange bracelet. Some of them hide their eyes behind transparent leaves. Various containers and utensils were lying around the fire—fascinating toys! The roaring machine also slept. Although it didn’t rain, its flanks reflected the fire’s glow as if they were wet.

“Where was the shiny bird? Tiny sparks jumped over the fire. I thought that the angels flew these sparks high above with the shiny bird to light up the dots that blink in the night sky.

“Time ran as lightly as if this adventure had been a dream. Already the morning pushed the darkness away and the angels woke up. One of them saw me—Little Brother, terrified, was hiding under my belly—and handed me a round fruit.

– Little Brother, Little Brother (I stammered, I cried with joy), the angel offers me food! We have been good enough to be accepted by the angels! Never again shall we have to search the trees for the remnants of the elders’ lunch... Never again shall we fear the elephant who pulls off our trees (“the-fat-loud-hand-as-nose”) and the leopard devil... Never again will the bees sting us. Little Brother, the angels will take us to Mom!

“Now all the angels were awake and played with us. They patted us, they let us handle the shining objects. We had never been that happy in our whole life. One strange thing is that the angels didn’t answer when I queried them about Mom, as if they could not understand the chimps’ language.

“We heard Gray Tuft’s powerful voice in the distance:

– Big Sister and Little Brother, come back! You will not find happiness in the land of the fire angels. Come back!

“But we were already settled—not very comfortably—in one of the cages that the roaring machine carries, and we certainly didn’t intend to go back among the apes. All we thought about was the shiny bird; would we really fly in the sky?

“Ha, Sir, the fire angels locked us inside the shiny bird. We could not even see the sky. At first, there was a little light and we could recognize other animals in cages: frightful leopards, a hippopotamus (“riverside-fatty”), a warthog (“run-straight-through”), a giraffe (“tree-trunk-neck”) and horrible crocodiles. Then a fire angel put us to sleep by giving us a shot, and we knew nothing more.

“When I woke up, I felt an awful emptiness under my belly: Little Brother was gone! I was alone inside a cage, in the middle of a dark shed. Food was free all

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right, but the angels who brought it were not at all the pleasant and careful servants I expected. In fact there was neither honey nor shell-free nuts. There was a lukewarm mixture of unknown sprouts or beans, and also some fruits that were even less tasty—and not any riper—than what was left in the trees after our tribe’s lunch.

“I found it rather disgusting, but after a while I was so hungry that I ate everything. I thought about Little Brother, about Mom, about Gray Tuft, and I cried a lot.

“What made me really angry was the thought that Gray Tuft, the elders and their sayings were right after all. Why must oldsters always know better? This is not fair.”

There’s not much else to Big Sister’s tale. After spending some days in a veterinary institute, where some tests were performed (but nobody explained to her what this all meant, and she was terrified), she was “quarantined”—to check that she was not bringing over some dangerous illness—in an annex of the Vincennes zoological park, then moved to the Paris Botanical Gardens.

Chimpanzees know only three numbers: one, two and “even-more-than-two” (authors usually translate this as “many,” but I think that “a thousand” reflects the spirit of chimp language more faithfully). Thus, according to Big Sister, she has already spent “a thousand” days in a dark corner of the Botanical Gardens’ zoo. I would think that one year, take or leave a few weeks, has passed since she gave herself up to the fire angels who roared across the savannah in their gleaming machine. She’s had time to find out what “bored to death” really means and to ask herself “a thousand times” the following question: If that’s paradise, what does hell look like?

It seems that her only comfort, during all that time, was when “Hair-in-the-right-place” brought her ripe fruit with a pleasant smile. I didn’t understand right away who “Hair-in-the-right-place” was. When Big Sister mentioned a little green druh-druh, I remembered the bearded man who introduced me to her. The hair in the right place is his beard, obviously. Me, I shave, so I lack hair in the right place... Yeah, translating isn’t an exact science. I can as well call him “Bush-stink-hair.” A perfectly valid translation. I’m sure Marina von Rumpelsticken and John Wood would agree with me.

She tells me that she met, in the Vincennes zoo, a very old and sick chimp gentleman who seemed to know the honey paradise quite well. He explained to her that fire angels often exhibit apes inside big canvas houses, and that they pick up very young chimpanzees so that they can teach them various tricks. Thus it is possible that they brought Little Brother to such a canvas house. I promise Little Sister that I shall look for him.

This strange adventure is just beginning, I tell myself. So far, so good. I expect tougher sailing ahead (as Christopher Columbus said when he left the harbor of Palos, in the south of Spain). I explain to Big Sister, very carefully, that she probably won’t find any fruit in the trees here, that some mushrooms are poisonous, that she must *never* launch her five-mile shouts in the park, that the horrendous roar

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which pierces the air from time to time is made by a train, that I'll fix up everything and even, no doubt, find her brother. Not right away, though...

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Chapter 5. A day at the circus

Happily, there are not that many circuses left in France. I give a few phone calls, asking whether a young male chimp was purchased last year; several answers sound promising, so that all I have to do now is hit the road.

I take my friend Irène into my confidence. She is willing to look after Big Sister while I'm gone. I should change car, she says. Bringing Big Sister to the isba was all right because the trip was short and she was half asleep, but a bigger car, with some kind of foldable rear seats, would make it easier to carry a rowdy chimp boy over a long distance.

I knew this enterprise might eventually cost money, so I started working for advertising agencies again. I had given it up for on moral grounds. *If Lassie could speak, she would demand Bonie dog food* is an outright lie, when you think about it, as no dog ever said what brand of dog food tasted best. Anyway, my reputation as an animal specialist has faded over time, but I get new contracts easily in the field of disposable diapers and washing powder.

Advertising copywriters shun these products, reputed to be the toughest. Not that tough for me, really. I don't tell anybody what made me such an expert: that I know a certain female chimpanzee who took her time adjusting to toilets and beds, that I washed bed sheets every morning for weeks, that I became desperate enough to try Super-Pampers for Girls, then for Boys...

Well, I am earning a more or less regular income, so I sell my old white car and buy a little blue van. I install a mattress in the back, which I cover with a tarpaulin. I also add some straw, because it seems the right thing to do.

Finding Little Brother is not as hard as I expected. I first visit two circuses where they show me little chimps with regular birth certificates: born in the N. zoo, born in the Z. circus. In the third circus, just one glance at a young ape tells me that he is Little Brother. Not only does he resemble Big Sister in a striking way, but the same desperate look clouds his black eyes.

Now let me tell you about a crazy coincidence. If I was writing some imaginary tale, nobody would believe me, but of course in true life anything can happen: there, backstage, in the middle of the animals' cages, I recognize Hair-in-the-right-place, I mean Bush-stink-hair, the man who drove a green tractor and called the turtle Josephine.

"Well, well, well, if this isn't our friend, I mean the apes' friend..." he says, while his beard bristles with what I take to be a slightly mocking smile.

Two things seem obvious to me: that he knows quite well I'm Big Sister's kidnapper; that he doesn't give a damn. I say kidnapper, but you can only kidnap a kid, I mean a human kid, can't you? So maybe I didn't commit any crime, after all. Just a small offence, a misdeed—ignored by law books, I bet. What's more, my purpose was to do good, and you're allowed to commit a small offence when your ultimate goal is to do good. Oh yes, that's a well-known fact, all philosophers and moralists agree about it. Or nearly all of them.

Bush-stink-hair laughs heartily when he learns that the new chimp is the younger brother of the Botanical Gardens' vanishee.

"This is really what I call single-mindedness," he says.

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This guy has a keen sense of observation. He noticed that I talked to Big Sister, back there in the Botanical Gardens.

“Did you learn their language? You’re a smart one. I tried, but I never got it, although I studied with Marina von Rumpelsticken and John Wood in Indiana.”

“The authors of the dictionary? In Purdue?”

“Don’t mention Purdue to me. What a God-forsaken hole! There were more chimps than human beings in this university.”

“Did you study for a long time?”

“Not at all. Before the end of my first semester there, Rump (this was what we called Mrs von R.) and Wood had a big fight and divorced. She complained he loved chimps more than her. It’s true he spent most of his time with his thirty apes, trying to record everything they said on his tape-recorder. He pretended that the dictionary was full of mistakes, that correcting them was more important than their marriage.”

“Mistakes do abound in their dictionary. For me, it’s not so difficult, because I studied languages when I was younger.”

“I don’t know what you told this poor female chimp in the zoo, but I remember she enjoyed your visits. Of course, I didn’t know who snatched her away, but I guessed... I was glad for her. She was becoming crazy in her cage. The veterinarian said that he couldn’t help her. She needed a psychiatrist, he said, but veterinarians do not study psychiatry. He gave us sedative pills to be crushed into her soup. Now that I know she lost her brother, I understand better. She really reached a frenzy of wailing when she saw little boys.”

“Plenty of these in the zoo!”

“I said it on TV, that I was glad for her. Didn’t you see me? They interviewed me the day after she vanished.”

“Euh, just then, I was sort of hiding in a place without a TV.”

“I said locking animals in cages wasn’t the best way to keep them sane. The director of the zoo laid me off. Such declarations spoil the children’s pleasure, it seems. Spoil the zoo’s revenues, too. This explains my working in this circus.”

“So it’s my fault, in a way. I’m sorry.”

“Not me. I’m happy you freed the poor kid. Besides, the circus is more fun than the zoo. Don’t you worry for me. You know what? Just after I left the zoo, I considered taking a cue from you and transporting the wolves to some remote forest. Of all the animals, I think they suffered most.”

“Because of the police sirens?”

“Hey, you’re as sharp as a fox!”

“But why do so many police vans rush along the zoo?”

“They bring prisoners from the Fresnes jail to the court of justice, which is close by. Perhaps the wolves, in their cages, feel some sympathy for the passengers of the police vans.”

Bush–stink–hair thinks that the circus directress is not happy with the new guy: it is quite obvious that he climbs rope and somersaults half-heartedly, so that he’ll never become a good circus performer. She’ll be glad to get rid of him and sell him for a mouthful of bread, he says. A mouthful of bread? This is the exact translation of a French phrase, *une bouchée de pain*, that means dirt cheap.

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Wrong guess. The directress is a tough cookie—not a French phrase. As a fact, she tames the circus lions and tigers, and I bet they don't find it much fun. She pretends that she can't sell me Little Brother for less than she paid, as she'll have to buy a new chimp to replace him. I gasp when I hear the extravagant amount she quotes. I mean, if I want to buy Little Brother, then I must sell my new van...

I make believe I'm writing down all the zeros on my little notebook and I tell her I'm going to think about it.

Another coincidence, or just luck, or maybe not: I open my van's glove compartment, just so, a sudden desire to look into the glove compartment, I have not explored the glove compartment for quite a while, and what do you think, isn't it funny, these three old keys... Yo—can't call it a kidnapping. Just a small offence. In order to do good.

I'm lucky, as a very noisy rain begins to fall toward the end of the night. So I'm confident nobody will hear me when I work the old squeaking locks of the caravan and of the cage with my special keys. Also, the smell of wet straw is so strong that the animals won't notice my own body odor. Little Brother is sleeping soundly. A strange and very moving sight: he is holding a small sleeping circus dog in his arms. I remember seeing this dog yesterday evening when I watched the show. He counted balls by barking and performed other tricks. I even remember that the clown called him Harlequin.

I take them both very carefully, as I don't want to wake them up.

More silly luck: the circus fills up the main central city square, so that I could not find any parking space near-by for my van—and thus the directress certainly didn't see it. That's good. I mean, I'm just a plain guy, *Distinctive marks: None*, but a blue van is a blue van, obviously.

What about that strange fellow, Bush-stink-hair? I bet he'll laugh and say nothing. A pity I have to leave in a hurry, otherwise I would have asked him to dinner. I was beginning to like him. I hope they won't lay him off again because of me.

And now, having slept for hours on the van's comfortable mattress, the two friends wake up. The circus is at least a hundred miles away already. I try to explain to Little Brother that I've met Big Sister. Either because he has never heard a human being talk chimp lingo or because my accent is too wild, he doesn't seem to understand me.

We'll share this van for another three hundred miles, so this leaves me plenty of time to try again. I utter some well-known examples of the elders' wisdom: "Do not trust the lake water, because it hides the crocodile," "The leopard devil never sleeps," "Don't try to argue the elephant's right-of-way" (this sounds better in chimp language, actually...).

Then I sing three traditional ditties: "It rains, it pours, leaves are dripping, please Mommy let me hide under your belly..."; "Leopard devil, Leopard devil, why don't you go eat a baboon!"; "Whaa, whaa, whaa, let's break some nuts...." Little Brother does understand me, after all. How do I find out? Well, he can't help singing along!

During this long voyage, he tells me his story.

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“I fell asleep inside the shiny bird, Mister, and then I woke up at the side of a strange chimp who wore clothes like an angel. Where was Big Sister? I panicked and started crying. The strange chimp tried to console me

– Don’t cry, kiddo. You’ll see, this place is okay. You eat your fill, you travel in the roaring machines. You don’t have to do anything tough except play to entertain the angels.

– Will they give me clothes?

– Sure! And they’ll teach you a thousand tricks, all of them unheard of in the jungle.

– Wee... Wee... Big Sister... I want Big Sister!

– Hush, hush, be quiet. If you shout so, they’ll come and beat you.

– Beat me? Angels? That’s impossible. How could angels hurt me?

– When we behave, they’re nice and give us all kinds of goodies. But we must behave. What’s your name?

– Little Brother. And you?

– Red Coat. In the forest, I had another name, but I forgot it. I have worn this coat for so long...

“I received a bright yellow coat with shiny buttons, Mister, but I wasn’t happy. Where was the paradise that Big Sister had promised me? From early morning until late night I thought about the forest: the high trees, the boughs that swing in the wind, the rustling song of the leaves; my companions, my cousins, with whom I so loved to run through the tall grasses near the river.

“It is true that the lion (“the dragon-emperor”) was locked inside a cage. He didn’t wear a beautiful buttoned coat like I did, and I could laugh at him as much as I wanted. Yeah... After a few days, I didn’t feel like laughing at this poor lion anymore.

“I hated the circus, the stupid tumbles and somersaults I had to perform, the public who laughed and clapped their hands. And the cruel directress! Even the gigantic elephants kneel before her. What was especially hard was that I had no hope of ever regaining my freedom and living a real chimp’s life.

“If only I had found someone to talk to. But this stupid fellow, Red Coat, he doesn’t even understand that you can feel unhappy in the circus.

– Me too, I was sad when I arrived here, he said. But you’ll see... You’ll get used to it. Better laugh than be sorry, hahaha! [This sounds much better in chimp language, and even in French]. When I think about all these morons who stayed behind in their bloody forest, hahaha! Do they only know how to ride a bike, as we do, and to eat with a fork, and to flush the toilet?”

I am glad to hear that Little Brother can flush the toilet.

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Chapter 6. Moving family reunion in a suburban house near Paris

We reach the isba at dusk. Irène welcomes us with a smile.

Here is Big Sister, now. She comes out of the main door, swaying gently, as usual, when she walks. Little Brother looks at her, bewildered. She seems to hesitate—Little Brother must have changed a lot in one year. All of a sudden, they both start hollering and jump into each other's arms. Ha, seldom have I seen anything that moving. I can see, through my tears, that Irène is also wiping her moist eyes, although she is not an orphan like me.

She is very clever, Irène (I like her a lot): she bought a big can of honey to celebrate the reunion of brother and sister. Guaranteed no-bee honey, which you catch on a supermarket shelf without running the slightest risk of being stung. The two chimpanzees taste it hesitantly and then frown in disgust.

“What is it?” Big Sister asks.

This reaction is rather unexpected.

“It is honey, I tell her. Fruit-of-little-pain-beast...”

Little Brother, who has acquired some bad manners in the circus, spits his mouthful of honey and seasons it with several very rude words, which I can't decently reproduce here—some of them I didn't even know.

I guess that a honeycomb you tear from the hive of a wild swarm, with its wax cells and its shiny honey and its delicious larvae, is yummier than the so-called “honey” found in supermarkets. As old Gray Tuft used to say, “The sting is the secret ingredient in the honey's taste” (or something—this translating kills me). I usually become very resourceful when I face a desperate situation: I cut two slices of whole wheat bread and insert them into the toaster. Big Sister and Little Brother are amazed when they pop up suddenly. Is that a great game or what? I butter the toasts and add a layer of honey.

“This is how angels eat honey,” I tell them.

Either they change their mind about the taste of honey, or they like the popping up. They do eat at least two dozen toasts between them.

During the next few weeks, I discover, by trial and error, what food my guests enjoy. Fruits that become very soft when overripe, like figs and mangoes. Marmalade. What we French call *fromage blanc*—a kind of cottage cheese—but not at all regular cheese. Dried meat, roast chicken, but not hamburgers. And of course, shelled walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, peanuts, pine kernels, cashew nuts, pecan nuts, Brazil nuts. Just as advertised in the legends about the honey paradise, nuts are served without their obstinate shell.

And that's not all. One day, guided by their instinct (or sense of smell), brother and sister pull out an old plank of the dining room's wooden floor and find a huge termite nest. Fat juicy termites, whom no one had bothered for decades. No need to use a silly slippery stick: just scoop them up with a spoon! Man, what a treat!

What Little Brother missed most in the circus, he says, was the great delousing sessions that the tribe spent so much time at in the forest. Not only was it hard to delouse Red Coat, because of his red coat, but the fire angels threw a stinking powder onto your fur. There was no more lice to trade, and the atrocious taste of the powder made it impossible to lick each other's hair.

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Now that my two friends have settled comfortably into the isba, I leave them alone in the day time and commute to Paris to work. Coming home one evening, I find them quite merry.

“We cooked a good dinner,” they say.

They have understood long ago how the oven works, and they pull out of it a yummy-looking roast. As they say in the jungle, “Empty stomach has no brains” (these chimp proverbs are not strong on logic—I mean, a full stomach doesn’t have much brains either); anyway, I am already into seconds when I begin to wonder where they have found such succulent meat. I question them.

“Wet-nose,” they answer with an impish smile.

Harlequin the circus dog! Well... As a fact, I didn’t like this guy so much. I must reckon that he doesn’t taste bad, though.

I buy another dog. A wooden one, with four wheels and a bright red leash. And also... Ha, if I wanted to list all the things I buy for my young ones, I would cover pages and pages. What happens is that on one hand I want to make them happy, and on the other hand I feel like a scientist, eager to experiment and note their reaction when I offer them Lego bricks or Barbie dolls. They find the Lego bricks pretty, but can’t get the knack to build anything with them. They are puzzled by Barbie: she looks like a fire angel, but she is very small and doesn’t utter a word. Once they get used to miniature objects, they enjoy tiny cars and airplanes enormously.

As a general rule, I notice that they get bored rather fast with all these toys I bring them. Conversely, they don’t get bored fast enough (I think) with some gizmos that you often describe to children as “not a toy—and don’t you ever play with it or else.” For example, they spend hours running like madmen (madchimps?) across the rooms of the isba and switching all the lamps on and off. I put away, in a cupboard secured by heavy padlocks, the knives, the iron and all the other dangerous objects.

Little Brother requests a “roll-fall” every now and then. What is that? I understand chimp talk rather well now, and I even speak quite well for a fire angel, but I do lack a good dictionary to really move ahead. In this case, Big Sister doesn’t know the word either, so I guess it is some kind of circus neologism.

From the isba’s attic, the view takes in the street that borders the park. I sometimes climb up there with Little Brother and Big Sister and we look outside. I don’t open the window, because I don’t want the neighbors to discover my guests—they would have to use strong binoculars, actually. We can see cars and trucks. Further away, the rail track with its occasional “roll-snake-big-thunder-rumble.” And even, beyond the rail track, the gleaming ribbon of the Seine river, on which lazy barges sometimes glide and hoot.

“Roll-fall, roll-fall!” Little Bother exclaims.

A man on a bike, with black tights and a leather helmet, pedals furiously toward the river. Of course! I feel stupid not to have guessed it before: Little Brother rode a bike in the circus!

All right. I buy a kid’s bike—the strongest I can find, with the strongest no-question-asked guarantee. Little Brother is delighted. You wouldn’t say he really knows how to ride a bike: he pedals a little, covers six or seven feet, then falls and somersaults and roars with laughter. Quite a playful kid!

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I install a sand pit, a slide, a swing. They have found a game to their liking: each of them digs one half of a tunnel in the sand until their hands meet in the middle. Of course, they also love to sit behind the van's steering wheel and go broo-broo with their mouth.

They retire with the sun. They don't like beds, after all, but build a kind of nest with cushions, bed sheets and blankets in the middle of their room. This probably reminds them of the nests they used to make with branches and leaves every night in the forest.

In the evening, when the house is quiet at last, after I've done my best to fix up some of their mayhem, I work serenely. Because I like to relax now and then, and also because as a copywriter I must watch the advertising, I brought my Paris TV set. This isba is no Versailles palace, and not even the Grand Duke's palace, so it doesn't have one thousand rooms. I work in the living room, and that's where I put the TV set. Thus it doesn't escape the curiosity of my two young savages, who call this new toy "light-box."

Alas, after retiring with the sun they arise with it too. They turn on the light-box right away. They love to play with the buttons and the remote control, and especially to raise and lower the volume. I am awakened very suddenly by the screams of the weatherman, or by the shouted advice of Pappy the Gardener... (I don't know whether you have Pappy the Gardener, or someone like him, in America—you can fill in with any other TV hero). Now when I want to try a serious speech, along such lines as "I went to bed rather late, I'm very tired, can't you respect my sleep," and so on, I find that my grasp of chimp vocabulary and syntax is not as solid as I thought: they don't seem to understand anything at all.

I am nevertheless quite happy that I can watch them when they watch the screen. They love it when angels sing, or pretend to sing. At first they don't seem to grasp what happens in cartoons. Their puzzled face reminds me of the day they discovered a strange ape in the mirror. After a while, they understood who the strange ape was, and now, by and by, they decipher the language of pictures. It comes to the point where I hear them beating their flanks with pleasure as they laugh and comment the action: "Fall on the ground... kick bad dog... bump head... overturn roaring machine..." I am actually slightly worried to see that they often imitate the falls and capers they watch in the light-box. I wouldn't want them to jump from some high tree because they think they can fly like some Japanese cartoon superhero.

They recognize several characters.

"Look, Little-he-jumps... Angel-yellow-hair (this is Dorothee, the great priestess of kiddie-TV in France)."

They ask me why Uncle Scrooge is so fond of yellow metal, but that is a question I can't find any easy answer to.

Little Brother likes to zap. They don't seem to have created a word for the remote control, but actually they begin to understand quite a few human words, although they can't repeat them. I think that "Zap!" is the very first word they recognize clearly. When I say "Zap on Channel Two, Little Brother," he zaps. A pity he doesn't know anything about channel one or two or whatever, and zaps blindly.

They understand easy words like "dodo" (French baby talk for "sleep"), "à table" (Lunch or dinner is served—their favorite expression), "piano," "je reviens" (I'll be

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back) and of course “pipi” and “caca” (baby talk for, hmm, the body’s liquid and solid waste). I play the piano nearly every day and sing French folk songs like “La caille et la perdrix” or “Biquette veux-tu sortir du chou.” When I translate the words for them, I replace the big cat, the dog and the wolf by the leopard demon, the crocodile and the elephant.

Mentioning the elephant reminds me... When I wanted to teach them picture reading, I bought the story of Babar. Whereas they love books with photographs showing Africa and its fauna, they say that this Babar stuff is really silly. A chimp can wear clothes, no doubt about that, but an elephant!

Actually, dressing apes has its good and bad sides. Clothes are bad for somersaults, because they kind of hobble you. They get in the way when you feel like having a nice delousing party. On the good side, fire angels reveal their unique genius with the glorious invention of POCKETS! You can cram them with all kinds of useful things: stones, a dead (or living) cockroach, earthworms, orange peels, a piece of string.

I often work with photographers in advertising. Their vests are covered with pockets where they keep lenses and film. I buy two such vests. I dress Big Sister and Little Brother in a very simple manner: they wear a photographer’s vest and that’s it.

I pinch my nose when I empty the pockets of their vests before I throw them into the washing machine.

“It smells Rra’h,” they say—and laugh a lot.

I regret that I am unable to translate all the words applying to odors. I smell “wooss,” Irène (who comes visit us now and then) smells “tr’att,” termites smell “hiz-z.” There is no doubt that chimp language contains fewer words, mathematically, than ours, but it does include expressions unknown by humans. For example, there is a special scream for driving away flies and other bugs: “Pit’atch.” Irène and I use it all the time, as it works incredibly well.

With too many words here and not enough there, misunderstandings sprout like grass after a rainstorm. It takes me quite a while to realize why Little Brother and Big Sister complain that books are “caca.” It is because of all these bug droppings under the pictures...

Although they understand the French word “caca,” the word they use themselves simply means “dirty.”

Little Brother, who is younger and wilder than his sister, goes through a rather unpleasant period when he plays with his “dirty” in his bath as if it was a plastic duck. Even worse, he throws some “dirty” at me—his idea of a good joke. I don’t laugh at all.

When we eat, the gigantic bib, more like a bed sheet, which I tie around his neck is still too small. I wouldn’t mind his using his fingers, but he wants to imitate me and eat with spoon and fork (I refuse to give him a knife). He doesn’t succeed too well, gets nervous, overturns and spreads everything that’s sticky and gooey, then cries and demands that I wash and brush him.

As if this was not enough, they waste a lot of time playing games that would make me crazy if I wasn’t already. In fact, it’s all my fault. I started showing, to entertain them, how you can organize sweet-pea races down mashed-potato mountains, how noodle trains can lose themselves in the black tunnel of the mouth,

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how a spoonful for Jean-Jacques and a mouthful for Irène and one for Gray Tuft, and other French baby folklore. They enjoy it so much that now they refuse to eat when I don't perform my full repertory.

What also happens is that one of them decides, all of a sudden, not to eat mashed potatoes anymore: "Sponge-vegetable dirty!" I spent hours peeling potatoes (I mean, it seemed like hours, because I really hate it) and now the customer refuses my delicious *purée*. I don't worry that he or she will die from hunger, but I'd rather avoid being awakened in the middle of the night by someone requesting a honey toast or some other tidbit. I improvise a new show: I sculpt mashed-potato airplanes that take off from the plate airport. I sing "Biquette." I try to explain that you must eat to grow up. I stop short at mentioning starving children in Somalia, who would certainly not consider this sponge-vegetable dirty.

Well, now, once you have mashed-potato airplanes, there is no reason why they shouldn't really fly in the air. I wish I could find some way of convincing my friends that you shouldn't throw stuff, edible or not, onto the walls and ceiling. I just wash and scrub and rub and scour and cleanse, without the benefit of climbing to the top of the ladder in two bounds.

In fact, I am somewhat jealous when I see how easily they climb the trees in the park. I try nearly every day myself. I've found low branches, here and there, that make good steps. I climb as high as possible. It seems they've never seen anything that funny in their whole life!

I enroll in a rock-climbing course. I go once a week to the rocks and cliffs in the Fontainebleau forest, where an instructor tries to teach me (and a dozen other beginners) the basics of this sport. It is terribly difficult. I must stand on a ledge a tenth of an inch wide while holding with tense fingers onto invisible bulges in the rock. I should move to a better position, but I feel that paralysis is gaining on me. My body is drenched with sweat. At least I'm not scared. Not only am I roped safely, but the ground is about two feet away.

Okay, so I don't become a rock-climbing champion. What I learn is quite useful, though, when I come back to my park. I buy special shoes with smooth soles, pitons, nuts, gates, nylon ropes. I am beginning to improve my skills. Irène seems surprised—and amused—when she comes and finds me loafing lazily in the upper reaches of a tree with Big Sister and Little Brother.

So we bask in happiness, sort of. I mean, perfect happiness doesn't exist, of course. These two youngsters keep inquiring about their Mom—whom the fire angels took to the honey paradise, and after all we *are* in the honey paradise. I try to explain that the paradise is vast. These angels who snatched their mother, maybe they came from Australia or California. Maybe she is a prisoner in a zoo on the other side of the world...

I don't tell them that the fire angels, who are also the devils surmised by Gray Tuft's wisdom, sometimes bring chimps to laboratories where they inflict horrible tortures called "scientific experiments."

Irène is willing to come back here and watch over Little Brother and Big Sister while I hit the road with my blue van again. I don't really expect to find their mother, but I've read in the newspaper that most Russian zoos and circuses are selling their animals because they can't feed them anymore. They give them away

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for a mouthful of bread, for a fistful of dollars. Would trade a rhino against blue-jeans...

No need to steal. Misdeeds, even with good intentions, are over. In the glove compartment? Why, unless I removed them, they should still be there... But no, definitely not.

I hope to find some friendly chimps over there. Give my orphans companions. Assemble a kind of artificial family, the beginning of a new tribe. A little paradise, so to speak.

Also, the van being roomy, I should be able to bring back a thing or two from the Moscow flea market. Obviously, animals are not the only hungry beings in Russia. Some families have hidden czarist times' mementoes in basements for seventy-five years, but they can't afford not to sell them now. Indeed, Vava's friend, the old lady who rolls her Rs, gives me some useful addresses. I won't pretend that inhabiting the isba changed me into an expert, but there's no doubt I can recognize a valuable silver samovar, a priceless Fabergé Easter egg, a nice piece of Nijni-Novgorod china, when I see one...

Well, all right. I started driving eastwards at the end of the last paragraph, I skipped a line and here I am, nearly home already. These Russians showed me bears and tigers—very expensive, actually—but no chimp. I bought two tea sets, half a dozen samovars, enough icons to fill two suitcases, and some modern paintings which I consider the best bargain of the whole lot...

While I was driving over the immensity of the steppe, I thought about my life. What am I going to do next? Maybe I'm spending too much time with Big Sister and Little Brother and not enough with Irène. In the middle of nowhere (actually, Ukraine), someone stole my running shoes in a hotel room. This made me very sad. I'll tell you about my adventures another time, because something very important is going to happen now.

As I'm approaching the isba (I've phoned Irène to tell her I'm coming), exhausted after five thousand miles in the blue van, I hear a melody that shakes me to the bone. A tune I know, which I haven't heard for a very long time. I search the paths and lanes of my memory, and then I remember: the Happy Sprites' Waltz!

Irène is not alone in front of the door. Beside her, playing the violin, stands Bush-stink-hair, or Hair-in-the-right-place. The bearded man on the tractor, in the circus... my brother Michel!

"When the little chimp vanished, he says, the circus directress called the police. With the computers they have now, they found out right away that I worked in the Botanical Gardens at the time of the only other Ape theft reported in France this year."

"What do you mean, this year? Did they have many last year?"

"If you really want to know everything, there were two ape thefts since the scribe of king Clovis started recording history in the seventh century, and I was there both times. They took me away and questioned me at length. When they checked my ID papers, they discovered there was a special file under my name, because Dad had kidnapped me thirty years ago. This was news to me: he had always told me he had agreed with Mom that I should live in America with him. So then they sent me to

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the central police station in Paris, to the bureau of missing persons. By the way, Monsieur Le Garrec says bonjour to you.”

“Who?”

“Red-hair guy with a big moustache.”

“Oh yes. The moustache.”

“He told me Mom’s maiden name, but I was sorry, very sorry, to learn that she died.”

“Yes, ten years ago. I’m sure she would have loved to see you again, but she never said anything about it.”

“Dad also died, five years ago. That’s when I decided to go back to France. I showed my American passport at the airport, so they didn’t recognize me as the missing child. Or maybe their computers were not good enough yet. Anyway, Monsieur Le Garrec gave me your address near the Botanical Gardens. Actually, I lived nearby when I came back from the States. I had studied zoology in California, before my brief stay in Purdue, so I found a job in the zoo. Do you remember Josephine the turtle?”

“Of course.”

“Your concierge told me you were away in your country house. At first she didn’t want to give me the isba’s address. I had to charm her a little [this sounds much better in French—Americans know nothing about using charm with ladies]. She had to believe me when I told her I was your brother, because it seems I resemble you a lot.”

“If you shaved your beard...”

“... and the top of my head!”

I’m not that bald. Michel has always liked a good joke.

“So I came here. When I saw my friends Big Sister and Little Brother, I understood who the chimp thief was. I met Irène... My future sister-in-law, if I understand well.”

“This is not impossible. I’ll choose you as best man!”

Little Brother and Big Sister both know Michel, whom they insist on calling Hair-in-the-right-place. When we tell them we’re brothers, they don’t say “Wow, isn’t that amazing!”, because in this strange world everything seems possible to them. To me, of course, it is quite a shock. I did feel that my life would change when I was on the road.

As an experienced zoologist, Michel considers that our two kids can’t settle into any kind of balanced life in the closed world of the park and isba.

“So far they are discovering things and having fun, but after a few months they’ll become crazy.”

“You’re right. I should take them out. Maybe I could bring them to Disneyland Paris.”

“You’ll pass them as children? Listen, even if you find ways of entertaining them for some months, they’ll eventually miss their native forest.”

“Do you think so? But they enjoy TV so much, and Lego and cans of green peas... They still have millions of things to discover in this world!”

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“When you go to Marseille, you could decide to spend a year or two there to explore the city’s nooks and crannies. You could also find millions of things to discover. You do prefer to come back home.”

“Wait, I think I understand something: you felt like seeing your homeland yourself.”

“Of course. At first, I was delighted. Crossing the ocean in a steamship! Seeing skyscrapers, twenty-foot long cars, cowboys and Indians! Yeah, I saw it all. I lived many years in America, but I never ceased to dream of France. In the end, I don’t really know what country to call my home.”

Michel speaks French with a ghost of an American accent, which I hadn’t noticed when I knew him as Bush–stink–hair.

I guess he’s right. They’ll be happier in their tribe. And me too, I’ll be happy, maybe, because... hmm... Irène... I mean, it will be easier.

Thus we decide to bring them to Africa. Michel remembers Big Sister’s zoo file: she comes from the east bank of lake Tanganyika. I’ve found a very well-made palm size solar generator, so Little Brother and Big Sister will be able to charge the batteries of their walkman on top of the trees.

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Chapter 7. Chimpanzee land

Me, I've earned good money lately. Not only did I work a lot in advertising, but I sold most of the isba's Russian junk. I go with Michel to La Rochelle, a harbor on the Atlantic ocean, where we buy a boat named *The Black Turtle*. Don't you imagine some kind of luxury yacht, or one of these crazy catamarans that nutty solitary sailors cross the ocean with. No, our turtle is a well-weathered sailboat, with an old-fashioned wooden hull (painted black, of course), a main mast and a mizzen mast, a four-bunk berth, a small but well-organized kitchen.

I spent one summer in a sailing school when I was a student. The only thing I remember is that you can know where the wind comes from by looking at little silk ribbons tied to the shrouds. As luck has it, Michel became an accomplished sailor in California. He looks like a pirate, actually. If I wanted to film a new version of *Treasure Island*, I would give him the part of Long John Silver. He would sing *Yo ho ho, and a bottle of rum* in a blood-chilling voice, I bet.

We buy dried meat, Dutch cheese, freeze-dried vegetables, canned peas and beans, biscuits, nuts, bottled water, vitamins, sunscreen. Have we forgotten anything?

During the first few days, in fact, nobody eats any of the stuff except Michel. Big Sister, Little Brother and I are not hungry. Not at all. On the contrary. When I hold the helm, I feel somewhat better, but I can't hold the helm day and night. I'd rather not hold it at night. I'm not that skilful at navigating by the stars or reading the compass under a torchlight. Let Michel do it!

Since we have neither a radar that knows how to ask satellites for our position, nor special computers like these madmen with their sponsored catamarans, we take care to follow the coast of France, then Spain. Michel tells me about his sailing trips between the Pacific islands. Not such a bad life, I say.

Big Sister and Little Brother love to hold the jib sheet, but there's no way we'll trust them with the helm. Don't insist! We said no.

We have no trouble convincing them that they shouldn't move about the deck without a security harness. The sea scares them. It would scare you, too, if you had never seen it before. We do allow them to climb the masts two or three times a day. They need the exercise, otherwise they become too nervous.

When we get to the coast of Morocco, the weather becomes warmer, so we can sleep on the deck. Far from city lights, the sky seems darker and deeper. Billions of new stars emerge from the remote reaches of space. Big Sister is quite disappointed when I tell her once more (she often asked me this question in the isba) that the fire angels did not light these tiny blinking lamps. Well, I don't often watch the night sky in Paris, so I'm amazed when she shows me a star that drifts slowly across the heavens. Michel agrees with me: it is probably a satellite, or maybe a space shuttle. Okay, I must confess that we did light this particular lantern. Big Sister finds this altogether confusing.

In Kinshasa, we find a small shipyard whose owners accept—for a modest fee—to keep our Black Turtle until we return. Then we board a kind of floating jig, little more than a raft, which navigates the river Congo with more passengers than it should. It takes us upriver to Kisangani. There we rent an old Land Rover with a

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driver, clear a few hundred miles of savannah and jungle, reach Lake Tanganyika, cross it with fishermen, and that's it.

During this whole trek, indeed as soon as we step off the Black Turtle in Kinshasa, we attract crowds of wide-eyes onlookers. So what are you gazing at? Never seen any chimps? No, I guess. Chimpanzees don't roam the streets of African cities. They prefer to keep to their forests, as they know how dangerous human beings can be. Distrust goes both ways: the Africans are afraid of great apes, who are likely—until proved otherwise—to wield magical and malefic powers.

What's really surprising: not only do we travel with two chimps wearing ten-pocket vests, but we talk to them! Yeah, Michel spent most of his time on the turtle practicing the language. We even speak chimp to each other, just for the fun of it. No wonder we amaze the crowds.

Three months after leaving La Rochelle, we step at last on the eastern shore of lake Tanganyika—in the southern tip of Burundi, just before the border of Tanzania. We asked the fishermen to drop us in a small cove with our gear. I brought my climbing ropes and hooks, hammocks, machetes to open a path in the jungle, umbrellas, and a medicine cabinet.

As we can't carry more than one ton each, I left the Dutch cheese and the rest in the turtle's hold. We ate what we found in the villages: very spicy meats and vegetables that may have been wild pig and manioc or whatever. Then we bought dried fish from the fishermen. I should have taken the Edam and the Gouda on my back: the native food gave me a bad case of bellyache.

Michel seems to know his way. We walk east under pouring rain. If he wasn't brandishing a large red umbrella, I think I would lose him in no time. Although Big Sister and Little Brother are quite skillful, they just can't hold an umbrella right. After a few minutes, they're as wet as the kids who swam in the Congo river to look at them. They don't like it any more than we do. I should've brought nylon raincoats. It's my first jungle journey with chimpanzees, so I still have a lot to learn.

They do enjoy being back in their homeland, though. They scream in delight:

“Small–red, small–red!”

They climb a tall tree and bring back some fruit that resemble bright red apricots. While they feast on the crimson balls, Michel and I wince: these things are awfully bitter.

“It reminds me of a type of cranberry they eat in America. Actually, they gave them to the chimps in Purdue. They might be okay if you cooked them with a large quantity of sugar.”

“Do you remember Mom's cherry soup?”

“A cherry soup? Are you sure?”

“I guess it was some kind of Polish recipe. She added sour cream. Polish recipes always require sour cream. You do remember her potato pancakes with sour cream, I hope!”

“Why, hmm... You know, I've forgotten most of my childhood in France. It's kind of strange: often, when I wake up in the morning, I know that I dreamt of my childhood once more, but I can't remember my dream.”

“Do you mean that your memories do not reach beyond age ten?”

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“Sad, isn’t it? I have forgotten Mom. The only thing I remember is the Happy Sprites’ Waltz.”

“Me, I had a picture of her that could have jolted your memory, but someone stole it. That’s when I met moustache man.”

“Monsieur Le Garrec?”

“Why, my boy, I don’t see the like of you every day. Been missing for twenty-five years!”

Since Michel has forgotten his childhood, we share no common memories. Knowing he is my brother is enough: I don’t feel like a poor lonesome orphan anymore.

Gosh, this march is tough. My brother and I lug huge backpacks. It would be nice if our young friends could help us, but they like backpacks even less than umbrellas. Although their strength is herculean (compared to ours), they can’t carry one. Look at a picture of a chimp: they have no shoulders! This I must tell the people at the *Vieux Campeur* store who sold us the bags: you should invent a backpack for chimpanzees.

After a while, I lighten our load by throwing away my ropes and hooks. We don’t need this stuff, as strong lianas hang everywhere. We must just remember to put on gloves when we want to climb, because the creepers often sting like nettles.

Even with lighter bags, we sink in the mushy rain-soaked ground. Water sometimes rises to the level of our calves, and then... Ow, ouch, leeches! I hate these tiny vampires who gorge on my blood. Showing them a cross is useless. The only trick that works—more or less—is to salt them like French fries. Big Sister and Little Brother don’t understand why we don’t eat them after salting them.

“We’re not very hungry... Help yourselves if you want.”

We don’t have to say it twice. They munch them like candy!

Although they walk barefoot, the leeches leave them alone. I don’t know whether it is due to their fur or to the thickness of their hide. Same thing with the mosquitoes. Actually, if there are any mosquitoes less than one hundred miles from me, the stupid insects will all dart on me right away and spare everybody else, fur or no fur. A kind of wacky wasp also stings me on the left arm. It blows up like a blimp.

“Don’t you worry,” Michel says.” There are no tsetse flies in this part of Africa.”

I hope he is not lying to hearten me or something. I remember he was never sick. Some people are lucky. Me, I was allergic, that’s why my arm swells so much when a bug fills it up with venom.

If I wanted to write a really realistic text, I would need several pages to list the boils, bruises, cuts, gashes and sores that accumulate on my body during this hellish trek. I’d rather skip the detailed description of my torment or I’ll start scratching myself again.

I resume my story on the day when we reach the home jungle of Big Sis and Little Bro’s tribe. At last! We’ve left lake Tanganyika one week ago.

While this corner of virgin forest looks like all the others to me, our young friends recognize their old neighborhood as easily as I would recognize the Botanical Gardens. They utter ear-piercing shrieks to announce their arrival. A powerful voice, which resonates with a kind of quiet dignity, answers them:

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“Big Sister? Little Brother? Is that you? Are you coming back with fire angels?”

“Gray Tuft! Gray Tuft! We’re back! Forgive us, Gray Tuft! You were right and we were wrong. We suffered a lot in Honey Paradise... But these fire angels do not want to harm us. They brought us back here by crossing the big–water on a wood–duck!”

We suggest to the youngsters they run ahead:

“Then you can explain the situation to Gray Tuft and the others.”

We hear shouts and laughs, but I couldn’t say whether they’re remote or close, or even whether they come from the North or the South. After a few hours, a symphony of voices and rustling leaves rushes at us suddenly. Big Sister and Little Brother, surrounded by a swarm of chimpanzee children, ask us to follow them. Some of the kids, overcoming their natural shyness, touch our clothes and jostle us as if they wanted to test our reaction for some kind of scientific experiment. No, no, I’m not scared. Just slightly uneasy... I feel sort of relieved when we see two dozen adults in a small gap or undersized clearing. We recognize Gray Tuft because he seems in charge of the group. Also, he does have gray hair on the top of his head.

You can see right away that this ancient ape isn’t born yesterday, but when I say: “Good morning, Gray Tuft,” he starts like all his pals. Big Sister and Little Brother just forgot to tell them that we speak their language. I bet they wouldn’t be more surprised if the trees started talking. After a while, they get used to it. The tribe adopts us as if we were foreign cousins on a visit.

“Do you remember Babar the elephant?” I ask Michel.

“Of course.”

“I thought you had forgotten your childhood.”

“You’re the depository of my memories! As soon as you talk to me, they come back.”

“When I see Big Sister and Little Brother proudly parading in their photographer’s vests, it reminds me of Babar’s return to the elephants’ country. He wore a bright green suit and shoes with spats. Of course, it was a made-up story, whereas this is reality.”

“He drove a little red convertible, if I remember well. I don’t think any red car could come here, for lack of a road.”

“I’m not asking for a road, but a path would be nice already.”

“We’re not far from the country of the elephants and rhinos, actually.”

“The old elephant king died after eating poisoned mushrooms, so then the elephants chose Babar as their new king, considering he had learnt so many things in the city. I wonder whether our returnees will find any use for what they learned abroad: the roll–fall, the mashed–potato mountains, the cartoons on TV...”

I don’t know about this old king, but I certainly ate some kind of poisoned stuff. My bellyache is getting worse. If I write that I suffer from a bad case of dysentery, people who do not know medicine won’t understand what I’m talking about, so I confess unashamedly that a tropical diarrhea forces me to go and squat in the woods every five minutes. And this is because I treat my illness with the pills in our portable pharmacy, otherwise it would be every two minutes.

Big Sister and Little Brother feel uneasy on my behalf. Gray Tuft tells them not to worry. My symptoms are well known and easily curable:

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“Our elders said that you can stop the dirty that runs like water by eating the earth of the swim-rats’ dam.”

Gray Tuft leads us to a muddy stream, where he shows us a heap of mossy branches, lichen and earth brought there by the swim-rats. We see some of these beasts, who look like beavers to me. A young ape goes down and brings back some earth for me. I eat three spoonful (take or leave a few grams) of this natural medicine. Michel gives it a lick too, out of sheer curiosity.

“The taste is not really what you would expect from a lump of earth,” he says. “I bet these rats strengthen their dam with their spittle, ha ha ha!”

Well, he doesn’t laugh anymore, my little brother, when I get up as fit as a fiddle on the next morning.

“Hey, Michel, the rat spittle isn’t so bad... They should have given some to the king of the elephants.”

“I’ll put some of this miracle medicine in a matchbox and bring it back to the Institut Pasteur in Paris.”

Me, I’d say our mission is over and we can go home, since we’ve brought our two orphans to their tribe. In fact, I would like to see Irène again.

Michel wants to stay another week or two, or even more, to record the secrets of the elders. Curing tropical dysentery isn’t a small matter: it kills millions of babies in the world every year.

“If you could catch a good cold,” he says, “we’d see what this furry sorcerer advises. Can you imagine bringing back a cure for the common cold? We’d sell the formula to a lab and become billionaires.”

“This is really a good idea, but why don’t you catch cold yourself? Besides, if you really want to become rich, go ask Gray Tuft to grow my hair again!”

Things would be easier if we could explain to Gray Tuft what we want: “What did the elders use to stop water-runs-from-nose?” That’s precisely what we can’t do: discuss abstract or hypothetical subjects with chimps. They understand only what’s right there under their nose. As we do not fall sick (thank God!), we do not discover any other miracle cure.

We still learn lots of fascinating things by watching the chimpanzees.

“Say, Michel, do you remember when Mom took us to the Botanical Gardens?”

“Not really. But maybe I took a job there because I had some kind of unconscious memories.”

“She used to sit and talk with her friends while knitting.”

“Mom knitted?”

“Of course. In those times, people didn’t buy sweaters in stores. All the mothers knitted. The reason I mention it is that the lady chimps sitting on the branch over there remind me of Mom and her friends.”

“They don’t knit, though. Even if they knew how to knit, chimp kids don’t need sweaters.”

“I guess I would feel terribly hot with such a fur. Even without any fur, I feel too hot.”

We hear quite well what the perching ladies say. Big Sister, whom everybody scorned before she went abroad, has become the star of the group since her return.

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“Over there,” she says, “fruit don’t grow on trees but in eat-boxes. They have roll-boxes and water-glide-boxes and they live in big boxes. They sleep on top of the live-box, but they don’t climb to their nest like we do: they enter a small box that rises by itself inside the big box. The most incredible box, though, is the light-box.”

“The light-box?”

They’ve heard the story twenty times, but they keep asking for more. The babies grasping their bellies also prick their tiny ears.

“Yes, the light-box is full of very small fire angels who speak and drive roll-boxes. When you try to touch one of these small fire angels, all you touch is the light-box!”

Michel, who studied animals, draws my attention to the behavior of kids. While girls sit quietly with their mothers in the trees, boys jump around and run after each other and can’t stay put. They spend hours every day in confrontations and challenges that I find totally ridiculous.

“Hey, rhwaō (something like *you guy*), move your butt outta there. This is my turf.”

“Are you speaking to me, baboon-face?”

“Yo! You calling me baboon-face? Better watch out!”

“I call you what I like. Are you lodging a complaint, maybe?”

“Just repeat it if you dare! Betcha you won’t repeat it!”

They do repeat it, and repeat it again. They threaten and shove each other. I find their shouts frightening at times, but they don’t seem to do much harm.

“They’re very careful not to hurt each other,” Michel says.

“I hate to disagree with an expert who studied in California and Indiana, but I think you should forget what you read in your university libraries and open your eyes. The non-violent outcome of their duels is not due to carefulness, but to carelessness. If they were not so clumsy, they would properly knock each other down all the time.”

What’s for sure is that the adults don’t waste their time playing these silly games. When a boisterous child disturbs Gray Tuft, the old leader utters a ghost of a growl that stops the kid in his track instantly. Although I shouldn’t feel concerned in any way, this little growl gives me the shakes.

Michel is basking in bliss, I can see that. Not only does he get to watch and study apes as much as he wants, but he also lives like one. Already, when we were kids, he loved it when Dad took the family on a camping trip, whereas Mom and I were not so keen. For example, I find it rather difficult to sleep in a hammock. Me, in Paris, I sleep on my stomach. That’s the way it is, I’ve always slept on my stomach and there is no law that forbids it. Well, just you try to sleep on your stomach in a hammock! Besides, it rains all the time in this country, even at night. I hang a kind of nylon tarpaulin above my hammock, but it still drips quite a lot. Our clothes are wet and stay wet. When I say clothes, I mean what we’ve been able to keep. The young chimps were jealous of Big Sister and Little Brother’s vests. We gave them most of our wardrobe just so they’d stop begging. At least our backpacks will be lighter when we leave.

The chimps do not wash. As they let the rain shower them, I guess they’re clean. They find it very strange that we try to avoid the rain and then go take a dip in the

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river. When one of us washes or swims, the other must stay on the shore to watch over the clothes, or else they'd steal them right away. It's true our clothes never dry and stick to our skin like rubber, but we couldn't walk without shoes and pants through the cutting grass, thorns and brambles—not to mention the poisonous centipedes and all that.

Yeah, the one on the shore also keeps an eye on the river, ready to use our noise-stick in case a drifting log suddenly turned into a crocodile. Michel bought a special big game rifle in Paris. Americans are all gun experts, of course.

Now if a crocodile attacked my brother during his morning bath, I'm not sure I'd plant a shot between his two eyes as I should. What am I talking about, between his two eyes? You don't perforate a crocodile's skin that easily. You must wait until he parts his terrible jaws, then shoot into his yawning mouth. Okay, I can guarantee I would go Pow! with my noise-stick and he would be so scared he would cry crocodile tears and run away.

Michel kills a warthog with a single shot. Quite an ace! We work hard at building a fire. This is a real feat, what with the constant rain and the lack of dry wood. Then we invite the whole tribe for dinner. The fire frightens them a little, but they don't scorn a nicely grilled hog cutlet. They don't eat the meat just by itself, but sandwich it between leaves and chew for hours. Michel quotes an English proverb: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. So we try the leaf and meat sandwich. Not that great, I say.

Apart from some living delicacies, e.g. leeches, Michel seems to enjoy chimp food. As a true American, he knows more about guns than about gastronomy. He keeps munching all kinds of leaves, roots and nuts that the chimpanzees show him. I admit that a purple fruit looking like a fig tastes pretty good. I also eat bird eggs and a sap that oozes when you remove the bark of a certain tree. Honey cake with a larvae filling? No thanks. The best thing around, surprisingly, is a big white flower. Just delicious!

It doesn't bother my brother to spend hours delousing his new friends while chatting, but he doesn't share their habit of nibbling at the lice. He does try termites.

"Come on! Stop pretending this is too gross for you. In France, you eat snails, don't you?"

"Cooked with garlic and parsley. Besides, we let them disgorge the contents of their digestive tract for three days before we cook them. You Americans don't understand anything about food. I've read that your president eats cottage cheese with ketchup for breakfast. Ugh! Mind, if you find some ketchup, I'm willing to taste your termites!"

Speaking of termites, we learn how to fish them by sticking a twig into their nest. We're more skillful than Big Sister and Little Brother, who still don't get it. If we organized a championship, though, some chimps would beat us with one hand tied in the back. Me, I've acquired a philosopher's wisdom with old age, so I can accept not being the best at everything. Michel is younger. He trains every day to improve his score.

"I bet you'd love to become king of the tribe, like Babar. When Gray Tuft ascends to chimp heaven, I mean."

"Don't you find this is a great life? Real freedom! No bosses, tax auditors, teachers, policemen, jails, psychiatrists!"

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“Strange: professions beginning with the letter P have no place in your paradise¹. As for me, I long for Paris, bread, pasta, potatoes and apples.”

Actually, I’m quite fed up with the tepid, heavy, sticky and moldy air that weighs on my shoulders and seeps into my lungs. I dream of the cool light air of the French Alps. In Paris, I love the color green. That’s why I run every day in the Botanical Gardens. Here, I feel like a person with a sweet tooth working in a pastry shop: too much of a good thing. I like the chimps (especially Big Sister and Little Brother, who’re the happiest apes in the world now they’re back with their friends), but I find them somewhat sticky, like the air. I can’t shave or brush my teeth without attracting the whole tribe as if I was on a stage. What’s more, Big Sister and Little Brother call toothpaste tube–candy. They sucked several tubes dry in the isba before I decided they didn’t need to brush their teeth after all. So now I must keep my toothpaste with other precious items in a pouch that I keep tied to my belt day and night.

The worst thing is that I can’t go to the toilet by myself. I walk deep into the forest, I hope I’m alone, but I always hear a rustling of leaves that tells me someone is watching me from above.

The forest scares me. Danger lurks everywhere. Actually, the mere sound of the rustling leaves is enough to freeze my blood. When it is not followed by the hearty laugh of a chimp, it may announce the charge of a warthog or a bigger denizen—or worse yet, the fall of a huge rotten branch. Sometimes, a full-size tree collapses. As if the explosive noise wasn’t loud enough, the chimpanzees add a deafening counterpoint of shrieks and howls. They seem to protest, like the Botanical Gardens wolves when the police vans went by.

Michel remembers the wolves, the police vans and Josephine the turtle. Homesickness catches up with him eventually. We decide to give a great farewell feast. Our friends show us a bend of the river which some large animals consider a trendy late-night bar. We find our way with the help of our torchlights and hide nearby. A torchlight is another piece of equipment we’d better keep in our belt pouch if we don’t want it to vanish without a trace. Whenever the sun shines through the clouds for a few minutes, we get the small solar generator and charge the batteries.

Michel shoots a kind of antelope.

“Go get it. I’m covering you,” he says to the chimps who’ve come with us.

“Man, you’ve seen too many war movies!”

“There might be some lions in the vicinity. They know this watering hole, too.”

“I’ll go with them. My life is in your hands, but I’m sure you’d get your lion at fifty feet in the middle of the night...”

I lead the troop like a brave officer. I guess I’m not risking much: all the animals within hearing distance of the gunshot have already fled to the other end of Africa.

So, on the next evening, camp fire and roasted antelope. If you’ve already spent an evening around a campfire, you know that it’s no fun without some music. Because our bags were heavy enough, Michel left his violin on the boat. Yeah, he

¹ In French: Patrons, percepteurs, policiers, prisons, psychiatres. Then in the answer: Paris, pain, pâtes, pommes de terre, pommes.

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played lullabies under the moonlight between the Canary islands and the Sahara desert. It was very romantic. We decide to replace the fiddle with our voices and sing the *Frère Jacques* canon. This example of avant-garde music amazes the chimpanzees—except Big Sister and Little Brother, of course, who pretend to know the honey paradise and its tricks in and out.

We suggest the chimps sing “Whaa, whaa, whaa, let’s break some nuts....” with us. All we get is a miserable failure. They can’t join their voices in a chorus, for lack of discipline. Michel admits they are not very artistic, as a general rule.

“If I settled here, I would miss books, music and paintings after a while.”

“It would be nice to eat some bread, too.”

Although we do not drink anything stronger than coconut milk, we feel quite merry and invite them to a dance. We return to the human repertory and sing a French round:

*Dansons la capucine,
Y’a plus de pain chez nous...
Y’en a chez la voisine,
Mais ce n’est pas pour nous... You!*

This is similar to the English:

Ring a ring o’roses
A pocket full of posies
Hush! Hush! Hush!
And we all tumble down!

Everybody holds hands and dances around the fire. On *You!*, we all tumble down. I bet this is the first time such a show is given in the forest. Our laughter is so boisterous that the warthogs and other jungle creatures toss in their sleep and dream of earplugs.

As a French proverb says : the best things must come to an end. A little before dawn, we cover the fire with sand and go to bed. After a few hours sleep, we pack our bags. This is quickly done, as we’ve given away our clothes. We still have our hammocks, our medicine chest, and my notebook. Well, yes, I wrote a page or two every day. Otherwise, how do you think I could have written this book?

We say goodbye to Gray Tuft.

“Thank you for bringing back Big Sister and Little Brother,” he says. “Thank you also for letting our tribe get better acquainted with fire angels. They’re neither as angelic as Big Sister thought before throwing herself into their arms, nor as dangerous and cruel as the elders pretended.”

“Well, hmm, you shouldn’t trust them too much, mister Gray Tuft...”

Some young chimps, including Big Sister and Little Brother, accompany us on the way back. Without them, actually, we wouldn’t find the way back. Dropping white pebbles wouldn’t have helped: the path we opened with our machetes is already hidden by grasses and brambles.

“How do you think they find their way, Michel?”

“Maybe they can still smell our stink after all this time.”

“I don’t know about time, but after all this rain, I doubt it. It’s more likely they recognize individual trees. Here Fat-trunk-sour-fruit, there Low-branches-squirrel-house.”

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“I guess you’re right. It’s as easy for them as for us in Paris: turn left at the big café, then right at the Renault garage.”

After seeing millions of fat trunks and avoiding billions of low branches, we reach the shore of Lake Tanganyika. Now we must part for good. I see the same glow in my brother’s eyes as on the dark mirror of the lake. I’m close to tears, too. Big Sister rejoices on our behalf, though:

“You’ll see the house–tree again, the roll–boxes and the roll–falls, and Mommy–jump–bread (she means Irène), and the light–box. You’ll be able to say hello to Angel–yellow–hair and Uncle–yellow–coins!”

“Sure, I’ll say hello to them.”

This is one thing I’ve told her a thousand times: it’s useless to speak to the people who dwell inside the light–box. But now that I promised, I’ll say hello to them as soon as I see them again!

I note in my diary that Little Brother doesn’t seem to react when his sister mentions the roll–boxes and the light–box. Believe it or not, he has almost forgotten honey paradise.

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Chapter 8. Two fire angels go back home

We hold a small conference, Michel and I, on the beach.

“So how do we cross the lake?” I ask him.

“If we wait a little, we’re bound to see some fishermen.”

“Do you really want to spend six weeks going back to Kinshasa?”

“What do you suggest?”

“I still have some money. Maybe we could find an airport near here and fly back.”

“What about the Black Turtle?”

“We needed it when we had two very special passengers. If we leave that ancient vessel where it is, some people will get it eventually and be happy, so we can put a good deed to our credit. The only thing of value we left aboard was your violin. You’ll have to buy another one.”

“That’s okay. It was a cheap spare. I left my good violin in Paris. I didn’t want it ruined by sea water and heat. Come on, let’s just follow the shore northward.”

“Where to?”

“There’s a small town named Nyanza-Lac not too far. Once there, we’ll see what we can do.”

In Nyanza-Lac, we find a Toyota pickup going to Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. The driver doesn’t see us as hitchhikers, but as millionaires, so we have to give him a few dollars.

The guards who watch over the meadow they call Bujumbura International Airport tell us they’re expecting a plane any day now.

We mark our return to civilization by drinking our first Coke. Burundi used to be a Belgian colony, so many people speak French. The men have quirky French first names like Isidore, Donatien, Tharcisse, Albin. We meet a Lebanese store owner, Monsieur Chemaly. He tells us why few planes land in Bujumbura:

“The country is in shambles right now, because of so-called troubles. In 1966, captain Micombero dethroned king Ntare V. He took refuge in Uganda, but the Ugandese authorities sent him back to Burundi, where he was executed. King Mwambutsa should have returned from Switzerland, but he didn’t. The real reason behind all this is that they made Charles Ndizeye mwami while his father was still alive, and thus the legitimate mwami.”

I won’t pretend the preceding paragraph makes sense. I try to note everything Monsieur Chemaly says, but at the same time I’m dreaming about the jungle, so maybe I skip a word or two here and there. You can check a Burundi history book if you want to know more about king Ntare V and mwami Charles Ndizeye. What’s for sure is that these events started a series of civil wars, revolutions and terrible massacres.

“Twenty years after the first civil war,” Monsieur Chemaly says, “victims of the troubles in Burundi were still fleeing to Rwanda, our neighbor to the north. Then Rwanda had its own troubles, half the population killing the other half, and refugees from Rwanda swept into Burundi and Zaïre. To avoid the troubles, Zaïre renamed itself Congo, but this bit of magic didn’t help...”

Michel interrupts Monsieur Chemaly. He’s heard enough.

“If this is civilization, I’d rather go back to Gray Tuft’s tribe.”

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“Don’t be foolish. You know the chimps aren’t much better than human beings. They fight, they honor the strong and despise the weak, they kill small baboons to eat them, and I’m sure they would have stolen our torchlights if we hadn’t owned a gun.”

“You’re making my point. They don’t have guns, machine guns and grenades. And let’s not forget nuclear rockets and nerve gas. Look, we’re in Burundi. If you go straight in this direction, you come to Sudan, where people from the North kill their southern countrymen. If you go in this direction, you reach Somalia, where heavily armed bands terrorize everybody. War reigns supreme all over the place. Honestly, I wish I could retire from the human tribe.”

“Listen, Michel. Chimp violence isn’t enhanced by our marvelous technology, that’s true. I do think it is worse than ours, though, because nobody opposes it. If you don’t like war, you can say so, write books, fight against it, make yourself useful. Remember what you told me: you crisscrossed America, you navigated around the Pacific ocean, but all along you dreamt of returning to your native land. Now that you’ve settled in Paris, found a brother there (and a sister-in-law, too), you won’t abscond to the jungle.”

We have plenty of time to argue for civilization and against it, as they’ve haven’t finished repairing the airport’s runway.

“Tomorrow ready,” they say every evening.

In the end, we find a tiny airplane that takes off from a soccer field and we fly back to Paris by way of Nairobi and London.

As I’m writing this book, Michel is reading so to speak above my shoulder. He’s the one who asked me to include these discussions we’ve had in Bujumbura.

“When you come to the end of a book,” he says, “the reader should be able to draw conclusions. I don’t know... That we can learn a lot from chimps; that we should take them as our models; or at least respect their wisdom and stop destroying their forests...”

“I know that book authors often want to demonstrate something. As for me, I didn’t start with some idea to be proved, but with an adventure I went through. The adventure is over. It doesn’t mean I want to save the poor animals locked in zoos or threatened in Africa. If you want to launch such a crusade, my dear brother, all I can say is: good luck!”

There’s another thing I can say: my life has changed. I married Irène. We want to have babies and play with mashed-potatoes mountains again. I was reunited with my brother and I find it fun that he is so different from me though at the same time so similar. And also, I managed to write this little book. I don’t know what you think, but I find it more interesting than my preceding work, the 1988 tax form booklet. I hope it has as many readers.

I was ready to write the word “end,” but Mrs Green, my London publisher, wants to know whether we gave the rat spittle to Institut Pasteur. Alas, no. When we passed through Nairobi airport, Michel’s bag smelled so bad that the customs people ordered him to empty it.

“What’s in this matchbox?” they asked.

“A special mud with medicinal properties.”

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“This stinks too much. Dangerous. Might bother passengers. Or suppose the pilot faints. Can’t take it with you.”

So we had to throw it away.