

The Gorilla's Apprentice

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That last Sunday of 2007, just a few days before Jimmy Gikonyo's eighteenth birthday – when he would become ineligible to use his Nairobi Orphanage family pass – he went to see his old friend, Sebastian the gorilla. Jimmy sat silently on the bench next to the primate's pit waiting for Sebastian to recognize him. After a few minutes, Sebastian turned his gaze on Jimmy and walked towards the fence. The gorilla's eyes were rheumy, his movements slow and careful. Their interaction was now defined by that strange sense of inevitable nostalgia that death brings, even when the present has not yet slipped into the past.

Jimmy removed the tattered pass from his pocket and read the fine print on the back: *This lifetime family pass is only for couples and children under eighteen years of age.*

There was a sign on the side of Sebastian's cage: 'Oldest Gorilla in the World. Captured and Saved from the Near Extinction of His Species After the Genocide in Rwanda. Sebastian, 56. Genus: Gorilla.'

The *Sunday Standard* beside him said: Nairobi, Kisumu, Kakamega and Coast Province in Post-Election Violence After Presidential Results Announced.

That Sunday morning was strangely cold for late December. When Jimmy looked around, every one of the animals seemed to agree, each exhibiting a unique brand of irritation. 11 a.m. was the best time to visit the orphanage. The church-going crowd that came in droves in the afternoon was still worshipping, so the place was empty.

He had come here first as a toddler. They acquired their family pass in the days when his father was a trustee of the Friends of Nairobi National Park but his father soon found the trips boring, and for some years, Jimmy had come here alone with his mother.

When Jimmy was twelve his father left them, and Jimmy began to come on his own, except for the year he had been in and out of hospital. That year, he borrowed a book called *Gorilla Adventure* by Willard Price from a school friend. He had read it from cover to cover, in the night, using a torch under the blanket and eventually falling asleep. He woke up to find the book tangled and ruined in urine-stained sheets. He had received a beating from the owner that had only increased his love for the mountain gorilla. For the rest of his primary school years he would take the lonely side in arguments about whether a gorilla could rumble a tiger, or whether a polar bear could kill a mountain gorilla.

Feeding time was Jimmy's favourite moment of the day at the park – sacks of cauliflower plopping into the hippo pool, the dainty-toed river horses huffing. Until Sebastian had fallen sick, Jimmy had helped the handlers in the feeding tasks: crashing meaty hunks against the carnivores' cages and forking in bales of grass and leaves for the others. These times became the fulcrum of his weeks, defining his priorities and spirit more than his mother's war with the doors of the small Kileleshwa flat they now lived in; her daily conflicts with the cheap dishes which she had to wash herself as they could no longer afford a maid; their strange and sometimes psychotic neighbours; her boyfriends.

Week after week, year after year, he listened to the screeching conversations of vervets devouring tangerines, peel and all; the responding calls of parrot, ibis, egret: the magenta, indigo and turquoise noises fluttering in their throats like angry telephones going off at the same time.

It took him away from real life. Real life was Evelyn's College for Air Stewards and Stewardesses which he had attended for a year. Real life was the thin couch he slept on at home. Real life was his mother screaming that he needed to face Real Life. Waking up on Sunday morning and staring at the thin torn curtains of the sitting room, the stained ceiling that sagged and fell a few inches every week and smelt of rat urine, Jimmy often felt he needed to leave the house before his mother asked him to join her and her latest boyfriend for breakfast. Real life was the honey in her voice, the gospel singing in the kitchen as she played Happy Family for her new man.

Jimmy was more sensitive to light than most. When he was sixteen, a blood clot had blacked out his sight for months and he had spent most of that year in hospital. 'Picture an ink stain under his scalp,' the doctors had told his mother. 'That's what's happening in your son's head.' The stain had eventually been sucked out, and the doctors triumphantly gave him large black X-ray sheets for his seventeenth birthday.

After fifteen months of seeing the world in partial eclipse, light came alive again for Jimmy in the Animal Orphanage – glinting off slithering green mambas and iridescent pythons, burning in the she-leopard's eyes high up in her tree.

Every July he had watched the two kudu shrug off the cold with dismissive, bristling acceptance, standing like sentinels blowing smoky breaths in a far corner of the enclosure. When the sun travelled back north from the Tropic of Capricorn over November, the two

hyenas' hind legs unlocked and straightened, and they acquired a sort of grace. In August the thick-jawed zebras and black-bearded wildebeest, heeding the old migratory call, would tear from one side of their pen to the other and, finally exhausted, grind their bodies into the ground, raising dust.

Over the last year, as Sebastian became more subdued, Jimmy spent more of his Sunday keeping him company. He could sit for hours like Sebastian, rendering the world irrelevant. In the Animal Orphanage, everything outside became the watched. And Jimmy knew all about being watched. What his mum called love.

That last Sunday of the year there were still visitors at the orphanage. They carried their apprehension like a badge a day after the election results were announced. All who passed the gorilla pit noticed the slightly built, light-skinned young man with brown hair, a zigzag bolt of lightning on the left side of his scalp, above one ear. He would have been thought good looking, but there was something wrong with the face – a tightness, a lack of mobility.

Soon the crowds would arrive, some from church, others rural primary school children in cheap, ugly browns and purples, wearing leather shoes with no socks, smelling of river-washed bodies, road dust, the corn-cob life, meals on a three-stoned hearth. Jimmy knew all about these children – had lived among them, and become one of them after his father had left and his mother had taken them to her parents' in Kerugoya for six months.

On holidays like today, foreign tourists would crawl out of minibuses and crowd the fence as they flipped through the pages of *Lonely Planet Kenya*, carrying water bottles, cameras, distended stomachs and buttocks, with their wiggling underarms like astronauts on the moon. They watched with strained smiles as their children actualized Mufasa and other television illusions, as they chatted about cutting their trip short, with all that was going on. The children made everyone jump, clanging the metal bars of the cage, trying to get Sebastian's attention, sticking out their tongues at the immovable hairy figure and having their photos taken. When the warders were not looking, they would throw paper cups and other odds and ends at Sebastian, who threw them back.

When the sun crossed its highest point in the sky, faraway screams rent the air. The gazelles and impalas stopped grazing and looked up in their wary way, tensed to accelerate from zero to a hundred as they had always done. The old lions seemed to grin, yawning at a sound they understood only too well, and licked their chops. Smoke billowed in the air from a distance, and loud popping sounds could be heard. In half an hour, as if in response, the crowd had

thinned, and Jimmy was left practically alone beside Sebastian's cage. In the beautiful, quiet afternoon they started their dance, small mimicking movements they shared. Scratches and hand flutters, heads bowed forward and swaying from side to side.

Jimmy listened to the faraway sounds once more and said, 'That must be Kibera. Maybe time I also left, old man.'

Over the last six months Sebastian had started to avoid making eye contact with Jimmy. At first Jimmy had taken offence, then he realized that Sebastian's eyesight was failing. He had cataracts, and his eyes and cheeks were stained with cakes and trails of mucus. Sometimes Sebastian would join their weekly ritual of movements for only a few sluggish moments, then turn away and slowly walk to the shade.

Now they could hear screams coming from Kibera and Jimmy looked up to see a large mushroom cloud as a petrol station was set ablaze in Kenya's largest slum. Sebastian raised his head ever so slightly to catch the breeze, and he began to pace, nostrils flaring and mucus streaming. He lifted his palm and beat it on the ground along with the faraway popping of gunshots. Jimmy had read all the books there were on gorillas, and he knew about their sense of community, their empathy – their embracing of death.

Jimmy had been born not far from State House where the President lived. The house he remembered smelled like the Animal Orphanage. It smelled of the giant pet tortoise that had disappeared when he was eight. After he had cried for a week his mother brought him Coxy, and the house came to smell of rotting cabbage and rabbit urine. Later, when he was older, Mum allowed him to keep pigeons, and they added to the damp animal smell of the house. It smelled of the bottom of the garden where he eventually strangled Coxy and the second rabbit, Baby, and drowned their children, overwhelmed by three squirming litters of rabbits; the piles of shit to clear. His mother found him crying at the foot of the garden and said in consolation, 'What are rabbits anyway? Your father is a rabbit. Always up in some hole.'

He didn't keep pets after his father left. They moved into a small flat with skewed stairs and smirking girls in tight jeans who chewed minty gum all day and received visitors all night. Mum said it would still be all right because they were still in Kileleshwa and not far from State House.

'James', she would call out, from the chemical haze of her dressing table, 'pass me the toe holder, pass me the nail polish remover. Come on James, don't be spastic. Wait till you become a steward, you'll fly all over the world. With your mum's looks you'll be the best,'

she would laugh in the early afternoon, a glass of Johnny Walker Black next to her. ‘Then you can stop spending time with that old gorilla. You know, when your father left I thought that we would just die, but look at us now.’ She would smear on her lipstick and flounce out of the apartment to meet a new man friend. (I’ve no time for boys. I need a man. James, will you be my man? Protect me.)

Sebastian rose, slowly coming to rest on knuckled palms. Jimmy watched the gorilla stand on his hind feet and move in the other direction, slowly, towards the other side of the cage. He was listening to something. Jimmy strained, and for a while he heard nothing - and then he felt against his skin rather than his ears, slow whirring sounds, followed by sharp, rapid clicks. A dark tall man walked into view. He walked with his head tilted. And with his dark glasses and sure firm steps, he could have been mistaken for a blind man. He went right to the edge of the gorilla pit, squatted, and, looking down, spoke to Sebastian in a series of tongue clicks, deep throat warbles and low humming. Sebastian bounded to the bottom of the wall standing fully upright, running in short bursts to the left and the right, beating his chest as if he was welcoming an old friend.

Then Jimmy distinctly heard the man say something in what he recognized as French. He could not understand any of the words, except, *mon frère, mon vieux*. The gorilla-talking man walked away briskly, and Sebastian slumped to the ground in his customary place. Jimmy saw the man walk to the orphanage notice board next to the warthog pen and pin something on it. He felt that he recognized him from somewhere; the way that one feels one knows public figures, beloved cartoon characters or celebrities.

Jimmy scrambled up, shouldered up his bag and waved goodbye to Sebastian. Now that his pass had expired, the Sunday visits would be infrequent. But what he had just seen told him that those future visits, however rare, might be the most important in all these years he had been coming – an opportunity to talk to Sebastian.

The man who now called himself Professor Charles Semambo knew that the Jamhuri Gorilla series of lectures would attract animal science experts from the ministries, and university students – but the rest was decided by the availability of rancid South African wine, wilting sandwiches and toothpick-impaled meatballs. He had learned that the renewal of future contracts was decided in this Nairobi shark pool, and that lectures were where one met and impressed the major players in the game.

The unmistakeable smell of sweat came down from the higher levels of the auditorium where members of the public sat. The bucket-like seats comically forced people's knees up into the air – and Semambo went through the hour allocated for the lecture briskly, enjoying such minor distractions as a glimpse of red or white panties between fat feminine knees. It was his standard lecture: Gorillas 101. Habitat. Behaviour. Group Life. Endangerment.

After the lecture, he allowed the five mandatory questions from the audience. As usual, these were either of a post-doctoral nature from the front row of specialists, or idiotic juvenile comments. One man stood up and pleaded for compensation, because a gorilla from a nearby forest where he lived in Kakamega had eaten his child. He said he had voted for the Opposition because the previous government had failed to do anything about it. The people around him laughed.

Angalia huu mjinga. Hakuna gorilla Kenya. Ilikuwa baboon. There are no gorillas in Kenya, fool. That was a baboon. The man started weeping and had to be led out.

Then the last question: 'It-is-said-that-far-in-the-mountains-of-Rwanda men-have-learnt-to-talk-to-gorillas. Do-you-think-there-is-any-truth-to-such-claims?'

Semambo felt the ground shift slightly beneath him, but as hard as he tried, he could not make out the face that had asked the question. The projector light was right in his face, hiccupping because it had reached the end and caused the words on the screen to blink. *Seeking New Habitat in the Face of Human Encroachment: The Mountain Gorilla in Rwanda.*

'Is that a trick question?' he responded smoothly. The audience laughed.

'If I say yes, I might sound unscientific, and you know what donors do with such unscientific conjecture, as the esteemed gentlemen sitting before me will attest.' In the front row, the museum politicians chuckled from deep inside their stomachs.

'You might have heard of Koko, the famous gorilla who was taught sign language,' Semambo went on. 'It is claimed that he is capable of inter-species communication. I think a lot of it is pretty inconclusive. So the answer would be no.'

The piercing voice floated again. Insistent. The face still invisible.

'I am asking whether you've heard of men who can talk to gorillas, not gorillas who can talk to men.'

The audience was bored now; a couple walked out noisily. Then he saw his questioner. He was just a kid, slight and lithe, about sixteen. Now he remembered – he had seen him a couple of times at the Animal Orphanage. (Was it possible?) Then, unbelievably, the young man took a photo of him. The angry click of the camera felt as if it was right next to his ear, and the flash lit up the whole auditorium, including a sign that read, CAMERAS NOT ALLOWED.

‘Excuse me. Excuse me, ladies and gentleman. I want to allow the young gentleman the courtesy of an answer. There might be something in what he says. I also want to remind you, young man, that cameras are not allowed in the auditorium.’ There was an uneasy laughter. The herds needed their wine and pastries. Semambo hesitated.

‘But since you all have to leave I will take the young man’s question after the lecture.’ Light applause.

Baker, the museum co-ordinator in charge of the lecture series, suddenly emerged from the shadows at the back. A naturalized citizen, he had lived in Kenya since the 1960s, and worked as a functionary of one sort or the other through three regimes. He was useful because he provided a sort of international legitimacy to the thugs who ran the government. When things swung his way, he could be a power broker of sorts, a middleman between a defaulting government and donors. He slid to the front of the podium.

‘Let us give Professor Charles Semambo, our visiting expert on the African Gorilla, attached to the Museum for six months, a big hand. And please join us for wine in the lobby.’

After glad-handing the museum officials, Baker came up to Semambo, his face red with embarrassment.

‘Sorry about the camera.’

‘Get it,’ he said tightly. He struggled for a smile then said very deliberately, ‘Get me that fucking camera.’

‘Charles, it’s not that big a deal.’

Semambo wiped the sheen of sweat from his face. It was a bad move to bully Baker: he removed his dark glasses, reaching for a softer, more conciliatory note. ‘Winslow, you have no idea how big a deal it is. I want that camera. Introduce me to the boy. I will do it myself.’

Even if it was fourteen years ago, Semambo clearly remembered the day he had erased his past and come to Kenya. He had met his contact in a seedy restaurant near Nairobi's City Hall. It seemed a confusing place at first. People sat gathered around tables, wielding folders and clipboards and pens, all having various meetings it seemed. Was it some sort of game? Bingo?

He met the man at the bar.

'This restaurant markets itself to wedding and funeral committees.'

'Ah,' said Semambo, laughing, 'Where the balance sheets of living and dying are produced. They are counting the cost of life. Very appropriate. Well, here is the cost of mine, exactly counted, in the denominations you asked for.'

The man looked at him and laughed back. 'I don't know why. I have to sleep at night you know? Our old man is friendly to your side. Me, I just think you are all butchers...'

A title deed, four different Ugandan passports with appropriate visas and work permits, an identification document and his new name. But hiding was not easy. There were always people looking. A couple of million dollars could only buy you so much.

When he turned away from Baker, Semambo was surprised to see the kid standing not five metres away from them. He had been mistaken – the kid was probably closer to eighteen. He had good teeth Semambo saw – a rarity in Kenya.

'Have we met before?'

'No,' the boy said. 'But I've seen you at the Animal Orphanage. When you come and talk to Sebastian.' The boy's voice was a quiet whisper. 'Sebastian. The gorilla. He's dying, you know. I need to talk to him before he goes. Can you teach me?' The boy added breathlessly, 'He has maybe two months. He's old. Could even be sixty.'

'Yes. I know who you are talking about. And you are?'

'Jimmy. Jimmy Gikonyo.'

'Call me Charles. Can we talk in my office? Or even better, let's go somewhere quieter.'

'Sorry, but my mother expects me home early.'

‘I understand. Where do you live? Maybe we can talk on the way as I drop you off. I don’t generally allow people to take photos of me.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s just that I thought I recognized you from somewhere. Not that we’ve met.’

It was two days after the election results had been announced, and it seemed as if half the drivers in Kenya were in a deep stupor and had forgotten how to drive. Semambo counted three accidents during the fifteen-minute drive from the National Museum to Kileleshwa through Waiyaki Way, then Riverside Drive. They turned off at the Kileleshwa Shell petrol station and the boy gave him directions to a large, busy high-rise off Laikipia road.

Two girls loitered outside the grey building. Then a green Mercedes Benz drove up and both jumped in, waving and blowing kisses at Jimmy. The Benz almost collided with a Range Rover that was coming in. The Benz driver, an old African man, threw his hands in the air. The two young men in the other car, one white and the other Kenyan Asian, ignored him, screeched into the parking lot and bounded out of the car. They also waved to Jimmy as they passed. Semambo noticed Jimmy’s hands clench into tight fists.

There was a slight breeze, gathering leaves in the now quiet front of the building. It could not, however, drown out the frantic hooting on the main road right outside the block of flats. Semambo suspected that this went on all day and night. Even from inside, one could see a large queue of walking silhouettes, probably going to Kawangware, through the hedge – a parallel exodus of the walking and mobile classes. Back in 1994 when Semambo had first come to Kenya, Kileleshwa was still keeping up appearances - now it seemed victim to all sorts of ugly aspirations and clutchings: tall ice-cream cake apartment buildings that crumbled like Dubai chrome furniture after a few years.

‘Will this be fine with you? I’ll wait here for the photos, then we can discuss gorilla talking lessons,’ Semambo said.

‘You have to come in and meet my mother. She won’t allow me to spend time with you if she doesn’t know who you are.’

Semambo never used lifts. He bounded up the stairs and was not even out of breath when they got to the flat. Claire, Jimmy’s mother, was beautiful. A beauty of contrast – of failure even. Lines crossed her forehead, the crumpling skin astonishingly frail. Her mouth and jaw, perfectly symmetrical, trembled with drunkenness and skewed lipstick: she seemed on the verge of tears.

‘Please come in.’

Semambo could smell the whisky on her breath. The flat had an extremely low ceiling and he had to stoop once he was inside. She prattled on. He sat down and looked around. There was a bottle nestled on the cushions where she must have been sitting. There were two glasses – one empty.

‘I hope you like whisky.’

The flat was crowded with triumphs of the past. There were photos of three strangers, a young man, woman and boy in different settings. The young man in the photo seemed a studious sort, uncomfortable and self-conscious, with his hand held possessively in every photo by a Claire fifteen hard years younger than the woman in front of him now.

Jimmy carried both his parents’ features. The world in the photo seemed to have little to do with the small flat Semambo found himself in. He could not stretch his legs and his knees were locked at right angles. Everything had been chosen to fit the flat’s small specifications: the Cheng TV, the Fong music stereo, Sungsam microwave and the cracked glass table. Every appliance in the room was on; even the small washing machine in the corner.

The TV was muted. It showed a crowd of young men dancing with *pangas*, a shop in flames behind them. A washing machine gurgled as Dolly Parton sang in the background. There were two doors to the right, probably the bedrooms, Semambo thought. He could, however, see blankets underneath the other wicker two-seater where Claire was now slumped, peering at him beneath suggestively lidded eyes. ‘Thank God for whisky,’ she purred. ‘One of the last pleasures left to an old woman like me. What you do for fun?’ Her voice sounded breathy and Semambo was uncomfortable. He was no prude, but these were uncertain times, and with her perfume and cigarette smell, her drunkenness and incoherence, she promised nothing less than the loss of control.

She poured herself another shot. Jimmy appeared from behind one of the two doors. Semambo was developing a grudging regard for the boy – most teenagers would have taken on a long suffering sullenness with a mother like that. Jimmy treated her like a slightly loopy older sister. ‘Mum. The professor and I need to talk.’

Her face went blank for a while, and the mouth trembled. ‘I’m going to bed. You men are no fun at all.’

She went through the door that the boy had come from and slammed it. The TV now showed a soldier in fatigues creeping against a wall and then shooting down two young men.

‘I need some air,’ Semambo said. Jimmy beckoned and opened the other door. A small room gave on to a narrow balcony that overlooked the parking lot. Semambo crossed over into the open and looked down at his hulking Land Cruiser.

Some distance away, towards Kangemi, fires burned into the night, black smoke billowing towards the City Centre. The screams in the air were faint, the gunshots muted, as if coming from another country. Semambo looked out, listening, and shook his head.

‘While some fuss about whether to eat chicken or beef tonight, many won’t see tomorrow morning. We are in the abyss and the abyss is in us.’

He turned and removed his dark glasses. The face was thick and flabby, layered with dark pudge, and there were two large scars running down his neck. Jimmy felt that he needed to back away from the balcony.

‘Do you think that it will get much worse?’ he asked.

‘Only when you see the fires in your parking lot.’

‘I never thought that the end of our world could happen so slowly. This all started when Sebastian fell sick. Can you teach me to talk to him?’

‘That might not be possible. His time might be nearer than we think. Just like ours. Maybe I can tell him how you feel. Let us go see him.’

Now the screams and wails began on the Langata side of the city. By the time they were near the Nairobi Animal Orphanage, their faces were lit up in the cabin of the Land Cruiser by the fire on Kibera plain. They sped down Mbagathi Way, turned up Langata Road and past Carnivore restaurant as if driving around in hell. Figures danced in the road, yelling and waving *pangas*, grotesque in the firelight.

‘Hide in the back and whatever you do, don’t come out. You will only excite them.’

Once they were clear, Jimmy jumped into the back seat.

‘What do you talk about with Sebastian?’

‘Can you imagine what Sebastian has seen of man since he was born?’ They had reached the gate of the orphanage. ‘Get back into the boot and hide.’

A guard came up to the Land Cruiser smiling brightly and peered into the car. ‘*Habari*, Professor. What brings you here at this time of the night.’

‘My old friend is dying, and I need to see him.’

‘Yes, he hasn’t eaten today.’

Jimmy sat back up as they drove in.

In the orphanage, the animals’ nocturnal sounds drowned out the sounds of fighting from the neighbouring slum. Then, for a while, everything was quiet. ‘I don’t think Sebastian has long. Living by Kibera has aged him impossibly. Nothing alive can take the past he has come from and then have to repeat it in old age.’

When they finally got to the gorilla pit, Sebastian lay on his side, heaving. Semambo rushed to where the wall was at its lowest and jumped into the enclosure, landing as silently as a cat. Jimmy passed him his bag through the front metal bars. Semambo went back to the gorilla, crooning all the while. Sebastian tried getting up. A huge light climbed up in the sky, followed by a large explosion. Sebastian twitched and lay back with a giant sigh. Semambo removed a long syringe from his bag and filled it with fluid.

‘Goodbye, old friend.’

Jimmy ran to the back wall and scrambled to where Semambo had jumped down. When he hit the ground inside the cage he felt something give in his left ankle. He hobbled to the middle – Sebastian had stopped moving. Semambo removed a small razor from his bag and shaved the left side of Sebastian’s thick chest.

Semambo plunged the long needle into the small, naked spot and pressed the syringe home, and in that single motion the gorilla sat up immediately. He started clawing at his chest where the injection had gone in, roaring madly and beating his chest until the rest of the animals joined in, drowning out the din of man, and fire and death.

Sebastian whirled his arms like windmills. Semambo stood without moving, then Sebastian wrapped his arms around him, roaring enough to drown out the rest of the world. Jimmy had scrambled away to the edge of the cage and Semambo’s face turned apoplectic, red,

crisscrossed with blood vessels. His glasses fell off, and his light eyes turned darker as the two figures became one. ■