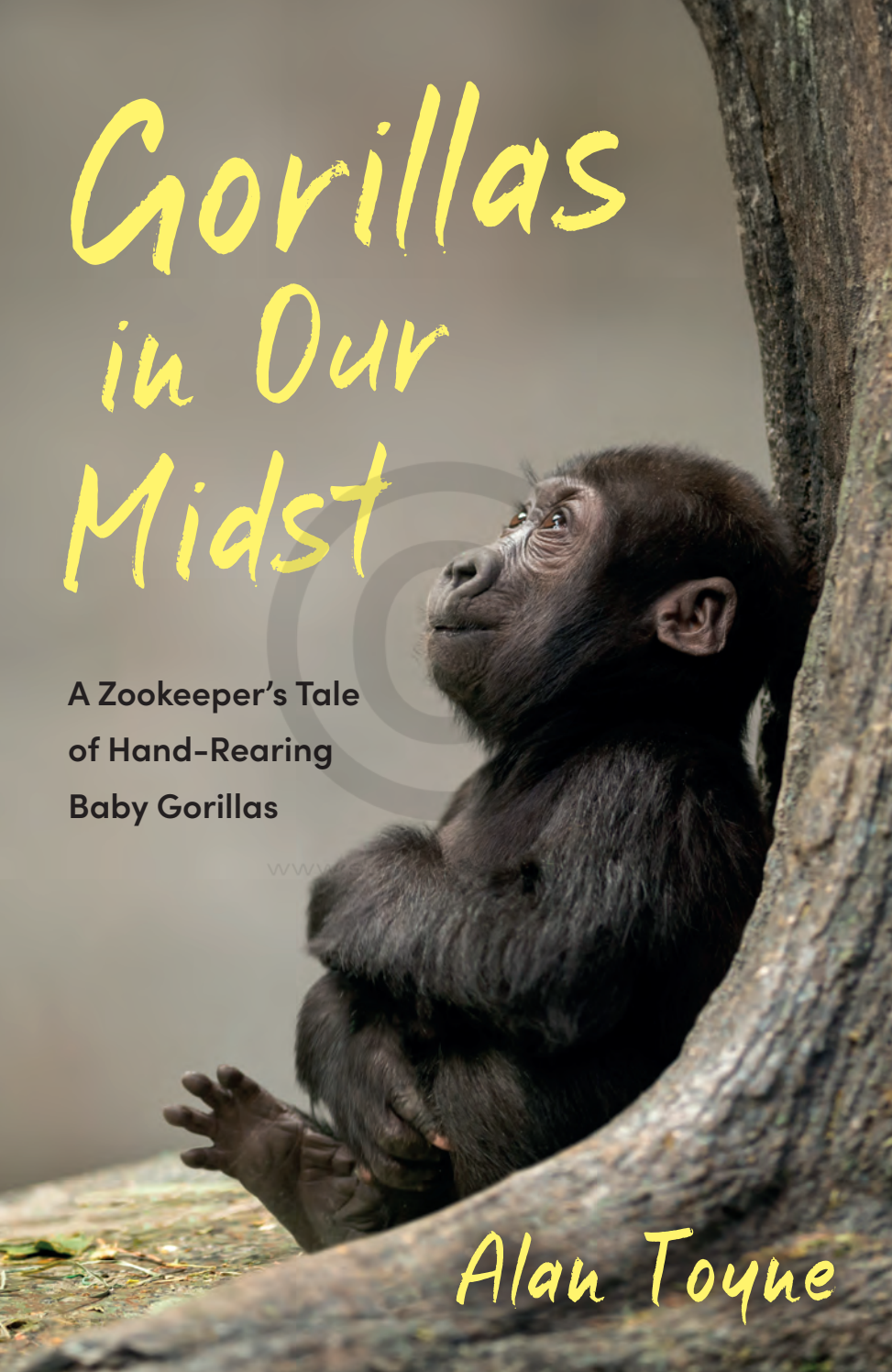
Gorillas in Our Midst

A Zookeeper's Tale of Hand-Rearing Baby Gorillas



Alan Toyne

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Author's Note

This is an account of my time at Bristol Zoo and all events relating to the gorillas are true. Both Hannah and Bob, however, are composite characters as firstly I didn't feel comfortable putting words into the mouths of my actual colleagues, and secondly the cast of characters is already enormous with all the gorillas. I've supplied two family trees, on pages 54 and 221, to help you get a sense of who is who in the troop as we hand-reared the two baby gorillas.

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Prologue

Can You Get a Gorilla into a Car Seat?

The gorilla (a baby about the size of a rugby ball at seven months old) lies on your colleague's knee asleep. She affects a smile, beneath rubbery flared nostrils, smooth ridges of dark skin across her muzzle, long eyelashes and crazy wispy eyebrows. Her eyes flit behind closed lids, hands semi-clenched and ready in loose fists, thumbs relaxed, a brush of black hair across her knuckles. Legs bent, glossy fur trousers that end at her smooth-soled feet, toes half-clenched too, just like her fingers. Opposable big toes curled and relaxed, like her thumbs, with tiny smooth nails.

The overnight kit is ready: sterilized teething rings, nappy bags, the lion-headed baby toy that once made a roaring noise, nappies, bottles and more nappy bags. Milk powder and a perfectly ordered clipboard with all the right data recorded: sleep; feeding; poo; wee. Two pens, working, all fitted neatly in the 'hand-rearing bag', ready and waiting by the door, a box of disposable gloves on top.

You slide off your string vest, freshly laundered but worn-in for a couple of hours so it smells reassuringly familiar;

string vests are an essential part of the hand-rearing outfit. It is worn to replicate fur, and the baby gorilla learns to hang off it, knowing that when you move, it has to cling on to come with you, so it never gets left behind.

Your colleague lowers the gorilla into the car seat and you bundle the string vest in with the sleeping infant. Her fingers and toes twitch and hold the vest gently, she stays asleep as you clip her in. Sneak out of the Monkey Jungle office, creep down the metal steps and by some miracle the rowdy gang of spider monkeys don't notice as you exit the zoo through a side door behind their enclosure. The gorilla, snug in the baby chair, is belted into the front passenger seat and the vibration of the engine keeps her asleep until you get home.

That's how it *should* go, but usually…

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Hannah stumbles into the office. Her hair has strands of wood-wool in it, her face is glazed and pale from a full two-night stretch of hand-rearing. Her string vest is clumped with baby gorilla shit and she honks of piss. Afia, the gorilla, is wide-eyed and awake, wired, hanging from Hannah's string vest with a big toe hooked onto her belt.

'Thank god that day's over,' Hannah says.

We've been roping the gorilla house today, splicing miniature Afia-sized ropes and ladders.

'Hey you,' I say to Afia. 'Have you worn Hannah out?'

'Two nights in a row is…' Hannah yawns. 'Well, you know what it's like.'

Our office overlooks the ring-tailed lemur enclosure, with its palm trees and climbing-frame of long branches, a walkway below for the public and a waterfall that trickles over smooth pebbles. A lemur alarm-calls outside, a high-pitched shriek-bark, which sets all the rest off in an echoing cacophony. They run along the paths, leap about and crash in and out of the battered palm trees outside. Our window is smeared with their scent markings.

Afia, transfixed, pulls herself up to look over Hannah's shoulder through the window. She frowns at the greenery and lemur chaos outside, takes it all in, hangs still.

'We need more data sheets,' Hannah says and the chair creaks as she flops into it.

Afia clambers higher up Hannah's back, one wrinkled hand on top of her head, fingers clamped in her hair. She cranes her neck to keep watch on the lemurs outside.

Through the tail-end of another yawn Hannah says, 'I dropped the clipboard in the drain… got all water-logged.'

I sit at the second wonky desk, stacked with a tower of over-stuffed plastic in-trays, and move an empty mug of dark, gleaming coffee residue out of Afia's grabbing range. The bowed shelves above the ancient computer are weighed down with animal diaries and spare UV lamp bulbs.

Afia loves the office.

'Come here, you.' I swivel my chair round, holding out my arms, and Hannah hands her over. Afia forgets the lemurs and stands up on my thighs as I hold her hands. Her sturdy

little legs wobble as her toes grip my trousers. She has her 'play face' on, a big, toothy, open-mouthed smile.

Hannah leans back in her chair. 'She hasn't slept this afternoon.'

'Too busy playing with Bob,' I say to Afia. I let go of her hand to tickle her neck, inside her collar bone, and she dissolves into dry chuckles and tries to play-bite my thumb.

'And she tore the corner off the data sheet and tried to eat it.' Hannah holds up the clipboard and mutters, 'Two-hundred and eighty mils at the last feed,' to herself.

I know the look Hannah has on her face right now. I'm looking at the version of myself tomorrow, functioning on a level of immediate need and nothing more. She's on exhausted automatic, each task done methodically so as not to mess it up. The pain and misery of rectifying a mistake, losing those precious minutes, has ingrained a mode of functionality in us all, so once you sign off, nothing will disrupt that glorious uninterrupted sleep. Proper sleep in an actual bed. Without a gorilla.

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During the day we sleep when Afia does. I stepped over them both at midday, Hannah out cold on the concrete floor of the gorilla introduction den, Afia slumped on top of her, little hairy arms around her neck, soft head wedged under her chin, legs wrapped around her ribs. The warmth of Afia is incredibly soporific, but you know any sleep you get will eventually be interrupted by a steady stream of hot gorilla piss that quickly chills as it soaks through your polo shirt.

'She's got a new tooth coming through too.' Hannah brings her computer to life. 'Upper number seven I think.'

I swivel back to the desk, letting Afia slap enthusiastically at my keyboard rather than have her bother Hannah as she tries to add the new tooth onto the daily report.

Afia grabs the phone with her little fingers and drops the receiver on the floor. Tugs the coiled spring-cord tight with both hands and a foot and jams it in her mouth to chew on.

'Go home,' I say to Hannah as I disentangle the cord from Afia's teeth. 'No way she's getting into the car seat for a while. I'll get someone else to give me a hand.'

'Thank you.' Hannah creaks round in her chair and almost bursts into tears. 'Thanks so much.' She tickles the back of Afia's head, her arm coated, like mine, in yellow and purple bite-sized circular bruises. 'Big day tomorrow.'

I see the realization fall across Hannah's face that if all goes well with Romina tomorrow, she may have spent her last night with Afia. She rubs her eye, pulls a strand of wood-wool out of her eyebrow and turns back to the keyboard. 'I'll print you some more data sheets,' she says, 'then I'll go home.'

Romina is the gorilla we've trained to become Afia's surrogate mum and we've agreed to try the first mix tomorrow.

The printer goes into overdrive and Afia clings to me in sudden terror. Phone cord forgotten, she grips me tight with hands and feet, pulls my string vest as she scurries around me away from the printer, eyes wide. She sucks her finger and ducks as the data sheets growl and jerk their way into a neat pile.

A ring-tailed lemur thumps onto the windowsill outside the office.

Afia jumps again, clambering right around me on the chair to cling onto my back, ready for us to flee. The exact response we've been aiming to instil in her these long months.

The ring-tail, grey fur down its back ruffled by the wind outside, peers in at us with beady orange eyes. The white pointed ears flick and its long, wet nose twitches. The eyes, ringed by black fur, are unable to comprehend the view of us through the window: two zookeepers in string vests, one baby gorilla. It turns its back on us, distracted as others alarm-call in the bushes.

Afia stretches her neck again to watch over my shoulder and I take advantage of her distraction, getting up to check the hand-rearing bag. She has her feet in the armpits of my vest, hands on my shoulders. I know the lemur is going to scent mark and I'll have time to go through the whole bag before Afia loses interest. I check all the bottle lids are screwed on tight.

The ring-tail leans forward on the windowsill, braces its spindly back feet against the glass, the miniature padded back toes splayed, flicks its striped tail aside and rubs its anal scent gland up and down the window.

Afia squirms higher still, arms around my neck, toes clenched. Our ears brush as she keeps the lemur in sight, moving her head as I stand at the window to re-pack the bag. Afia watches and absorbs what's going on, associates the noises with the movement and animals outside. I feel her limbs relax and she clambers back around me again. The chair creaks as we sit back down and she eyes the stapler while opening a drawer with her toes. A few more slaps at

the keyboard and a frown as she sees the car seat waiting by the door, ready to take her out of the zoo and back to a house overnight.

It takes time to get her in, four attempts, interspersed with walks around the office, a trip around the empty zoo, nowhere near the gorilla house, not now that Afia has left for the day and is wearing a nappy. We can't have the rest of the troop seeing her wearing what they would deem to be clothes. They have to think of her as one of them, not a miniature hairy version of one of us. We pass the mara, meerkats and the squirrel monkeys, and she gazes at it all, nostrils twitching, with occasional halts to grab at the shrubs and bamboo.

Eventually she calms down enough to let me buckle her into the dreaded car seat back at the office and I give her my string vest to hold. The drive home is busy with traffic and Afia is beginning to look about the car and peer out of the window. I queue behind a four-by-four with two dogs in the back and stroke Afia's arm as we edge slowly down the hill. She pulls at the shoulder straps, hates being constrained and makes her little grunt-cough noise. A sound of irritation. If you were to snarl '*It*' but dropped the *t*. That's exactly the sound an annoyed baby gorilla makes.

Afia tugs at the straps some more, grunt-coughs and arches her back. Her lips push out, purse together and wobble – she's about to hoot, the *who, who, who* call that announces to the group that she's in trouble and needs rescuing.

I gorilla grumble in return – a deep rumble, like I'm expressing my delight at the most amazing roast dinner at Christmas – and nudge the car down the hill.

She tries a low *'who, who'* and really arches her back. Goes for it, kicks her legs, toes reaching for something to hold. Discards my string vest into the footwell.

I flick on the radio, and she instantly reaches for the lights on the display, remembers she's got her teething chew clamped in one fist and jams it into the side of her mouth, looking up at me.

'Won't be long,' I say and do another gorilla grumble. 'We'll be back at home, have a play on the sofa, eat some food, nice long sleep, long all-night kind of sleep.'

She chews the teething ring and kicks her legs, eyes drifting around the inside of the car again.

I make it through the traffic lights and onto the flyover, a twin line of brake lights up ahead. I see the dogs in the back of the four-by-four ahead pant and shuffle about.

Afia throws her teething chew into the footwell. Squirms, strains against the car seat straps. Her legs heave and she screams. No warning, no slow build-up of hoots, just high-pitched fear-screams. Repeatedly, she yanks and thrashes against the shoulder straps.

I'm on the inside lane next to a van, with no hard shoulder to stop on.

Afia shrieks.

There is a guy in the passenger seat of the van next to me, absorbed in his phone, with his headphones in and so he misses Afia force her way out of the car seat, slide out of the straps and use the steering wheel as a handhold to wedge herself onto my lap. She turns on the indicator as she clambers across.

'Pack it in.' I unzip my hoody, try and wrap it around her.

She clutches the gear stick with her foot and squirms around to face the steering wheel, tries to reach through it to turn the indicator back on.

The two dogs in front catch sight of her and go berserk.

Afia peers over the top of the steering wheel to stare at them.

The four-by-four rocks and we hear the bay of their muffled barks.

She yanks the screen-wash stalk, then jumps as blue liquid whines and sprays up the windscreen; spins to clutch me in terror as the wipers slash into life. I feel shit reverberate in her nappy and she wedges her head under my arm, quiet and momentarily wary.

She can't come home again.

That's the reality. Safety issues aside, the distress caused by the car seat is a result of being separated from me, exactly the kind of behaviour we have been trying to instil in her: that she must always cling on to her surrogate. Behaviour that is essential for her safety and development which will allow us to reintroduce her back with the rest of the gorillas. We are now going to have to live on site with Afia at the zoo, for as long as it takes to embed her back into the troop. This is the final time she'll come home, to spend the night with me and my family troop. Afia, born by emergency caesarean section, is now seven months old and ready to become a western lowland gorilla.

The path we're on has been trialled with mixed success a couple of times in Europe but never before in a UK zoo.

The realization throws the reality of what we're about to attempt into clarity. If all goes well tomorrow, Romina will pick Afia up and treat her as her own. I don't want to think about what could happen if it goes badly.

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Part One
Life in the Troop

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Chapter 1

First Day of Volunteering

My partner Sparky drops me off part way along the school run. She pulls into a layby with a slightly harried look and I climb out of the car, with my bag and packed lunch. The kids, Sam and Fizz, both wave out of the back window as she pulls away, gutted they must go to school and I'm off to the zoo for my first day as a volunteer keeper.

It's a 20-minute walk to the zoo across Clifton suspension bridge, which spans the Avon Gorge. The bridge is strung between two mammoth towers of precise curved bricks and taut cables. I don't get to walk this way often and stop halfway to gaze out across the city. I'm nervous. Excited.

Grand Edwardian terraced houses curve up the side of the gorge, with big windows and wrought-iron balconies. Where they can, trees hug the cliffs between shoulders of rock. It's low tide, the river a distant stream below, between banks of glistening mud.

I continue across the bridge, following little brown signs for the zoo and walk the broad, raised pavements through the streets of Clifton. This is the posh bit of town, where you take

your partner's parents for coffee when they visit. Towering houses, most split into flats for rich students. Multitudes of black wheelie bins and BMWs parked all over the place.

It makes me happy that the brown 'Zoo this way' signs display a silhouette of a gorilla. For me it was – always – all about working with primates. I'd travelled when I left school, backpacked in the nineties, crashing through the jungles of Southeast Asia in search of orangutans, exploring the flooded forests of the Amazon trying to spot the bald uakari monkey, with their shaggy brown coats and bald crimson heads. Later I did an anthropology degree and became enthralled with primate social politics.

That's why Bristol Zoo is so perfect – it has specialized in the western lowland gorilla for 60 years and is home to a whole range of other primate species, including the aye-aye, those hairy, bat-eared nocturnal lemurs with the long, extendable fingers. The nocturnal house is also home to grey mouse lemurs, which weigh in at 200 grams. Jock, the zoo's silverback male gorilla, weighs 200 kilos and yet they, and we, as a species of primate, all have plenty in common. I'm fascinated by the similarities between other primate species and us humans, both physically and socially. How much of our behaviour is driven by inherited instinct from our shared, distant common ancestor?

The perimeter wall of the zoo is topped with a fence which overhangs the pavement and holds back spiky bushes. The zoo nestles behind Clifton Downs, between more fancy terraces and a big private school that the keepers would all refer to as Hogwarts.

A low repeated grunt echoes over the wall as I head through the tree-lined car park, from what sort of beast I can't tell, but then I do recognize the sudden whoop of gibbons.

I wait at the pair of tall double gates. I know I'm in the right spot, as I've checked the email obsessively. As promised in the directions, there is a small hobbit-sized door built into one of the giant gates.

It's closed.

I'm early, so I try to relax. I'm walking about with an internal glow. Getting a place as a volunteer has taken months and is a major step along the path to becoming a zookeeper.

The hobbit-door opens and a young guy pokes his head out, black spiky hair and stubble.

'Alright mate?' he says. 'You our new volley?'

'For mammals?'

'Come on in.' He holds the door open and I half crouch to step through it and into the zoo.

'I'm Al.' I hold out my hand.

He crunches it in a hefty handshake. Not an intentional macho bone-crusher, but a handshake of someone who works outside, does physical labour; calloused, firm and strong.

'Bob,' he says and grins. 'Welcome to the mad house.'

The little door clunks shut behind me.

'This here is stores.' Bob waves an arm at a long two-storey brick building. Functional, with big windows in faded aluminium frames. 'Maintenance workshop and then all the vets are upstairs.'

We pass battered corrugated doors that shield a forklift and a weird little green milk float-type vehicle, plugged into

the mains with a twisted orange cable. Two long rusty chest freezers sit along the wall with laminated signs that shout *'20KG BAGS MAX!!!'*

Yellow wheelie bins, the big ones on four wheels with the kick breaks, are lined up outside a kitchen. Zookeepers stand at metal tables inside with rows of cardboard kidney dishes laid out in front of them.

'Diet prep in there later,' Bob says over his shoulder and leads me to a second set of tall mesh gates.

A sign reads: *'This is a lion-proof gate. Keep closed when not in immediate use.'*

'Got some time this morning,' he says, 'so I'll give you the tour round. Get changed first, then I'll show you where everything is.'

'Great,' I say.

He wears tattered faded shorts, the side pockets bleach-stained. His boots are chewed up across the toe caps and he has a radio on his belt, black with an aerial and a button you hold down to talk into. His green polo shirt has a tear across the front; tufts of dark wiry hair poke out and he wears a fleece over the top, at least two sizes too small for him.

We step through a mesh door set into the lion-proof gates. 'Got to grab some screws later,' he says with a nod at the maintenance workshop. 'Remind me.'

I peer through the broad windows and see rows of work benches and machine tools, racks of MDF and ladders.

'Back of the aquarium,' Bob continues with a wave at a row of giant water tanks.

They tower above us, thick industrial plastic held in frames of riveted steel. Pipes and heavy-duty valves that drip. 'Aquarium used to be a bear-pit back in the day,' he adds.

'Have you worked here long?'

'Straight from school mate,' he says. 'Get me ten-year anniversary badge next week.'

I follow him under a bridge, through a curtain of heavy plastic flaps, and we enter the public part of the zoo, pass the Art Deco restaurant, the front webbed with twisted wisteria branches and cascades of blue flowers. Rows of wooden picnic benches squat beneath a taut canvas awning, surrounded by dripping hanging baskets. A seagull lumbers out onto the lawn as I follow Bob.

'Why you with us then, Al?' he says.

'I want to be a zookeeper,' I reply without hesitation.

He smiles. 'You're a bit older than the normal volleys we get, no offence.'

He's right. My decision to become a zookeeper was late in life, by which I mean I'm 36. 'Better late than never,' I say.

He leads me across a wide lawn, the grass damp and springy. 'You'll get lost for the first week or two,' he says, 'but you're never really lost if you can find your way here. The main lawn.'

The gibbons whoop and hoot, letting out their morning territorial duet calls.

'I did some stuff with gibbons when I was at uni,' I venture. 'Their pair-bonding social system.'

'You went to university?' Bob looks at me, baffled.

The gibbons let off another round of whoops, long notes that build into a frenzied crescendo, before tailing off again.

'What are you ASBO lunatics shouting about now?' Bob says.

'ASBO?'

He nods. 'Some Clifton posho complained about the gib-gibs waking them up. We have to shut 'em in three nights a week.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, thing is, whoever it was that complained can't be older than the zoo, can they? Hundred and seventy-two years old. What you bloody expect living near animals?'

He leads me up a grass slope and through a wooden garden gate, between Portakabins and an enclosure full of tumbling ferrets, with ramps and shelves, old boots and cardboard boxes.

Bob ignores them and stops outside a door with a security code pad. 'Changing rooms upstairs.'

'Great.'

'Your uniform ain't here yet, so we've got you some dodgy overalls to wear and you've only got wellies until your boots turn up next week. All in locker number seven.'

'Okay, no worries.'

'You'll be useful today,' he says. 'In disguise.'

The changing room is lined with dented lockers and piled wellington boots, a plastic bin overflows in the corner and wet weather coats hang on pegs, torn with the stuffing poking out.

I pull on the overalls, dark blue, with poppers up the front, stamp my feet into a pair of green wellies and clump back downstairs to join Bob.

'The grand tour,' he says and rubs his big leathery hands together. 'We'll start up at langurs.'

I follow him to the main entrance, the glass doors still closed. The gift shop is crammed full of stuffed animals on shelves, all peering out, waiting for the day to begin.

Bob looks at his watch. 'Got twenty minutes yet, before we open,' he says and turns to stare into an enclosure, glass fronted with chicken wire-type mesh high above and a bleak-looking concrete pole in the middle. Two tiers of pallet shelving surround the pole and shelter a huddle of big, bright orange monkeys. They glare at us and hug each other's knees.

'Don't see many of these about.' Bob nods at the orange monkeys. 'They'll chuck shit at you if you give 'em half a chance. We had to put that cover up.' He points at strips of green cracked Perspex above the windows. 'They was pissing out through the mesh.' He laughs. 'Golden showers for the public.'

One of the langurs has black fur, huddled in the middle of everyone else. 'Is that the male?' I say. 'The black one.'

'Just a different colour morph.' Bob grins. 'Thought you studied at university?' He turns from the monkeys and points. 'This—' he pauses— 'this is the top terrace. There're pictures of this full of people, black and white photos back when zookeepers had to prance about in caps and polished boots, like a bus conductor.'

The terrace runs almost the entire length of the zoo, lined with trees and neat flowerbeds. Glossed green benches, with curved wrought-iron legs.

'We're the fifth eldest zoo in the whole world,' Bob says with pride. 'Opened in 1836, and this is the first zoo to not be in a capital city.'

'Really?' I'd read this, done my research, but I don't want to interrupt Bob's flow.

'Monkey puzzle tree down by bats,' he says, 'show you that in a bit. Trees here that are older than the zoo itself, two hundred years some of 'em, but never mind that. Lions first, just over here.' He leads me toward a line of windows, smeared with dinner-plate-sized paw prints.

'Every fucker moans about how they should be out on the plains in Africa and they ain't got enough room.'

'Oh right.' The enclosure feels small, but I've already put the captivity debate to one side in my mind. I'm here to learn and really get stuck in, understand how modern zookeeping works.

'They're Asiatic lions for a start,' Bob continues. 'So why they should be in Africa I don't know, and it might look small, but it's bigger in there than you think.'

The enclosure is roofed over with chain-link mesh and has bushes in front of a waterfall, some battered trees, a series of moss-covered rocks and tall wooden platforms at the back, with straw beds underneath. I see a lion face watching us.

'Plenty of cover for them, see.' Bob leans on the barrier. 'That's what they like, getting out of sight. Probably the best Asiatic lion enclosure in the country.' He turns to look at me. 'And Twilight World; that's got to be the best nocturnal house in the whole of Europe.' I hear the pride in his tone again.

'You've got aye-aye, haven't you?' I rein in babbling on about primate social systems and my anthropology degree. I need to fit in here and join the new troop.

'Those long-fingered idiots,' he says. 'Yeah, you don't see many of them about neither.'

The male lion's head appears next to the female's, mane tousled with straw.

'These dopey sods wouldn't know what to do in the wild anyway.' Bob frowns. 'You'll get a bit of that being a keeper. Bunny-huggers telling you the enclosures are too small.'

'Animal rights people?' A couple of my friends disagree with zoos, think they are cruel and that animals shouldn't be kept in captivity. They were bewildered by my decision to become a keeper.

Bob nods. 'There ain't no wild left for half the species we got here.'

His radio crackles. *'Fourteen to twenty-five Bob.'*

He unclips it from his belt. 'Receiving.'

'We need to get eyes on J.P.'

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Bob looks at me. 'Tour's postponed.' He lifts his radio and says, 'Copy that, I've got our secret weapon.'

We cut back across the main lawn and the restaurant lights wink on as we pass, illuminating the tables and counters inside. The zoo shrugs awake, in preparation for the public coming in. I can smell coffee as I follow Bob into Monkey Jungle.

A woman waits for us, hair in a ponytail. She hugs herself, shivers and stamps her feet in her wellies. She has a green zoo polo shirt on and shorts like Bob's, but newer. 'You've got my fleece on,' she says.

'Just warming it up for you.' Bob looks at me. 'Ungrateful, ain't she?'

'Hi,' she says to me. 'Hannah.'

'Al,' I say, and we sort of almost shake hands, but she's too cold to stop hugging herself, so we don't. Both Bob and Hannah must be ten years younger than me at least. Mid-twenties.

'Has he been giving you the tour?' she asks.

Bob creeps down to the far enclosure window. 'Where's this clown now?'

Hannah frowns. 'He doesn't mean it.'

'Mean what?' Bob says over his shoulder.

'You're always calling your animals idiots and clowns,' Hannah says. 'Some people—' she gives me an apologetic smile '—they might find that offensive.'

'He wants to be a keeper,' Bob responds. 'You know I'm only joking, don't you Al?'

'Fleece.' She holds out her hand.

Bob steps back from the glass and peels it off. 'Chilly, ain't it?'

'I'm going to get quarantine done,' she says. 'Get back to Gorillas so we can take Kera out before break.'

'Righto.' Bob ushers me back toward the restaurant. 'We don't want that bearded idiot J.P. seeing us together.'

'That's exactly what I'm talking about,' Hannah calls over her shoulder as she heads off toward the maintenance block.

'Bearded idiot?' I ask.

'De Brazza monkeys.' Bob grins. 'We've got two of them in the last enclosure there.' He jabs his thumb over his shoulder.

'Breeding pair. J.P.'s the male, can't miss him, he's got bright blue bollocks.'

'Bright blue?'

'He's been getting out and over the moat onto Gorilla Island. Keeps doing it and we can't figure out how.'

'Okay.' I glance about. The thought of animal escapes hadn't occurred to me yet.

'He won't do it if one of us is watching,' Bob says. 'But we got you with us today. And you ain't in uniform. In disguise. He don't know you.'

'You want me to spy on him?'

'You'll have to keep a low profile, he's a crafty bastard. We think he's slipping through the electric fence or maybe jumping from a tree outside.'

'Okay, sure.'

'I'll be back to shut him in before break, so they can take Kera out.'

'Okay,' I say again, unclear of what he's saying or who Kera is. 'What if he does escape?'

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'Just make sure you see how he's getting out. I'll be back in a bit with a radio, so you can contact us.'

Bob heads off and I sidle into Monkey Jungle. Four big enclosures, two on either side of a wide public walkway.

I lurk behind a handy screen of interpretation signs and peer into the De Brazza monkey enclosure. It has tall glass walls and a climbing frame of branches, screwed together and hung with ropes. There are piles of logs on the woodchip floor and a heavy concrete water bowl. A hatch leads outside to a row of trees and another wonky

climbing frame, half screened from Gorilla Island by tall bamboo.

J.P. spots me hiding behind the sign straight away, my cover immediately blown. He stands on a sawn tree-ring platform inside, halfway up the climbing frame. He has a bright orange eyebrow ridge, above serious, dark eyes. He threatens me through the glass with a forward bob of his head. The white fur around his nose and chin forms a pointed beard and his shoulders are stocky, legs covered in black glossy hair. The grey speckled fur down his back looks almost crimped and his tail is long and dark. He sits down on the platform and shows me his blue baggy scrotum.

I can see straight through the glass back wall of J.P.'s enclosure, across the moat to Gorilla Island, a rolling hill with a long, sturdy climbing structure of massive beams and poles, leading to a brick building on the far side. The gorilla house.

One of the interpretation signs I'm hiding behind tells me all about the gorilla enclosure and provides a map of the island.

The hill, I read, allows the gorillas a space to be out of sight of the visitors if they want to. The island is covered with a selection of edible plants, which allow the animals to graze throughout the day, forage as they would naturally do in the wild. A laminated extra sign flaps as the breeze tugs through Monkey Jungle, stuck onto the interpretation board with drawing pins. An A4 sheet that says not to panic if you see gorillas up at the top of the large precarious tree toward the far end of the island.

I peer over the sign, through J.P.'s enclosure and scan the island for this precarious tree but can't see it, or any gorillas.

J.P. glares at me.

I read that the house has four entrances outside onto the island, but from here I can only pick out two gorilla-sized square metal hatches, closed and high up in the wall of the brick building on the far side of the island, one accessed by the climbing frame, the second by a giant ladder. The climbing frame is hung with ropes and a hammock. There's a shelter somewhere, according to the sign, and I pick out the stream that bubbles down the middle of the island between rushes and boulders, which goes on to aerate the moat acting as a natural barrier, since gorillas can't swim.

I sneak a look at J.P. and he sits as before, but his head is lowered.

It's a quiet weekday at the zoo. The bright early morning has turned grey, dark clouds rolled across the sky by the wind. The first visitors are trickling in – a troop of mums. They gather with babies in prams and pushchairs, trudge in tired groups and sink gratefully onto the picnic benches clutching cappuccinos and lattes. I catch talk of sleeping regimes and potty-training; much like other species of primate, they bond in social groups, sharing parenting tips and company.

The picnic tables overlook the macaque enclosure, next door to J.P. The same shape and size, but with a way sturdier climbing frame.

The mums that are less tired, or wired on their once-daily coffee, notice me lurking and I watch the suspicion fall across

their faces as their kids, those that are old enough to talk that is, all ask 'Mum, why's that man hiding?'

I ignore them. Not sure what to say. No one wants to hear the word *'escape'* when they're sleep deprived, while keeping an eye on little toddlers.

The macaques have amazing colouration too – nothing in comparison to J.P.'s blue bollocks, but they have distinct manes of white-grey fur, flared out around solemn faces. The rest of their coat is a shiny black, tails short and jaunty, with bell-pull ends. They stroll around their enclosure, turning over logs and stones, happy to forage on the floor. The dominant breeding male is big and bulky; he struts around with an air of puffed-up self-importance. All four females are in oestrous, the point in their reproductive cycle when they are most fertile. As a result, their rumps swell up. The alpha male is driven to mate them as much as possible so as not to miss the moment, and so today, on this gloomy morning, he is shagging constantly as the tired mums stop in front of his enclosure. He grabs a female, smacks her tail aside and shrieks as he thrusts away, punching and biting her back, constantly shadowed by his young son, long and rangy, masturbating in support.

'What are those monkeys doing, Mummy?'

'They're just…'

Hysterical kids' laughter. 'That one's pulling its winky.'

'Why is that man hiding?' one of the mums asks.

J.P. sits there on the platform, eyes locked back on mine, and I hear the clump of Bob's boots. 'Hey mate,' he says. 'Got you a coffee.' He holds up a takeaway cup. 'You do drink coffee, don't you?'

'Yeah, thanks,' I say.

He hands me the warm cup and takes a radio off his belt. 'Going to give you this as well.' He offers up the promised two-way radio. 'They're taking Kera out on the island.' He points at the gorilla enclosure. 'We're ninety-nine per cent sure J.P. is getting through the electric fence outside, but if he's slipping out through a loose roof panel we've missed or pushing his way behind the slide somehow, we need to know, so if he does anything odd, radio number 14 and tell them.'

I nod.

'You know how the radio works? Just hold down this button and talk.'

'Okay.' The radio gives me some recognized role at least, gives my lurking a certain legitimacy when the mums come past. 'The macaques are mating,' I say to Bob.

He snorts. 'Rubs his dick raw every month,' he says. 'That's why he keeps biting the females as he's doing it, had to explain it all to this teacher last time they was all in oestrous. Didn't tell her how much he likes it when you put the ointment on for him, though. Easiest animal you'll ever medicate.'

'What?'

'Radio if J.P. does anything dodgy – can't have him on the island when they go out there with Kera.' He closes the hatch to the outside area of J.P.'s enclosure and padlocks it shut.

J.P. stares at the island and eventually we both see the metal doors in the brick gorilla house swing open. Two keepers step outside onto the island and one of them is Hannah from earlier. She has a gorilla on her back.

Kera is four years old, about the size of one of the toddlers tottering past. The size human kids are when they can just about walk, pushing their own pushchairs, the stage where they're not quite steady on their own two feet yet. Kera is that sort of size and weighs 39 kilos. Arms around Hannah's neck, Kera peers over her shoulder. They take her toward the climbing frame.

Later, I will learn that Kera arrived at Bristol Zoo not long before I did, from a hand-rearing facility in Germany. She was born one of twins and their mother rejected them both. Any baby gorilla that needed hand-rearing at that time would be sent to this nursery-type facility and they'd all grow up together and have gorilla company to play with. Kera and her twin brother both grew up there and became too strong and disruptive to stay at the facility, but at four years old they were still very young to introduce into existing gorilla groups elsewhere.

Kera came to the zoo and the process of introducing (or 'mixing') her had begun. Getting her familiar with her surroundings was an essential part of the process, before being mixed with the other animals, so she would know escape routes if she needed them and didn't get herself stuck in a dead end if she was attacked. Or touch the electric fence.

Not that I know any of this right now. All I see are two keepers seemingly playing with a gorilla on the island. What I do know is that I want this life.

Hannah and the other keeper take Kera back inside and pull the door shut behind them.

J.P. is asleep on his platform.

The macaques still shag away next door.

The two-way radio I was given by Bob crackles in my hand. A panicked call. *'Mammal keepers to ISO.'*

I hear the echo of footsteps as Bob sprints into view.

'Copy,' he pants and his keys splash out of his pocket as he passes me at full pelt. I sweep them up and run after him as he charges toward the gorilla house.

The mammal keeper team are gathered at a window. I glimpse Hannah inside, on her hands and knees. Kera, the little gorilla, has her in a headlock.

I hold out Bob's keys for him and he disappears inside the gorilla house.

Hannah throws Kera off and she leaps straight back at her, mouth open in a manic toothy gape. I can see how ludicrously strong she is for something so small; her arms wave, hands clutch and she thrashes with Hannah across the floor. I hear doors clang inside, bananas fly everywhere and Bob bursts in.

The keepers gathered at the window are tense.

Hannah is on her back and shoves the exuberant gorilla away with her foot.

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Kera strips off Hannah's wellington boot and tosses it over her shoulder.

Bob scatters a double handful of grapes and walnuts, and Kera makes a grab at them as they bounce across the floor around her.

Hannah abandons her boot and Bob helps her exit the enclosure.

The keeper team all exhale and I feel my heart pound.

The keeper-door shuts with a distant clang and Kera kicks the window we're all staring through, clapping and laughing, picks up the discarded wellington boot and bites it.

Hannah and Bob both step out of the gorilla house and stand in front of the team.

Hannah is slightly lopsided. 'That's the last time any of us go in with Kera,' she says.

I walk home, disappointed. I will have to wait a whole week before my next day in as a volley. My head is full of primates and names.

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