

J A M E S H A R M O N

Harley in Beni

THEY AWOKE THAT SUNDAY MORNING TO THE VOICES OF women drifting across the lava terraces: Harley, Meese, and Corn. The three men had never heard the hymns nor the tongues in which they were sung before and likely never would again. The screaming from the prison house had stopped. There was not a soul in sight, only the banana-leaf hut in the middle of the field—no doubt a church—and the grimy, windowless building where some men in tattered uniforms had brought the teacher the night before.

The sun was burning off the pewter clouds that had drifted down the volcanoes scouring the air with a faint smell of sulfur. The ground where they had slept was like moist, soft clay—a meadow somehow sheltered from the last eruption. Meese and Corn put out the coffee fire and took down their tents, leaving behind only a rock-ring of ashes and the imprints of their bodies in the tall, bent grasses. There was nothing they could do for the teacher, Corn said.

Harley looked bad. They plunked him in the back of the Rover. His large head lolled. His tongue was shriveled and white, his eyes red and puffy. His breath was sour. He had spent much of the night retching and, from the sound of it, Meese and Corn thought he might have lost something essential. Harley had been drinking homemade palm wine in the hut of the teacher the evening before. Soon the uniformed men came for the teacher. They carried machetes and said the teacher had insulted the chief. Perhaps by walking hand in hand with Harley through the

village, which was the way of the men of that tribe, and inviting him to his hut for palm wine. And besides, the teacher talked too much.

In the Parc des Virungas, the earth is alive. Every generation or so one of the many immense volcanoes there blows. Waves and waves of magma that had been roiling beneath the earth's crust burst through clefts and fissures in the rock walls and spew into the valleys, burying anything that does not move. And many things that do. Exposed to the air, the lava cools, hardens, crumbles. Soon living things take root and grow back in the fresh, rich, black topsoil. The things that return are hardy. One day, though, the valley will be buried again in the liquefied rock. And even the hardiest things will die.

Large gorillas dwell on the spines of the mountains near the park. It is their last redoubt. They roam the alpine forests in troops, grazing on the intense vegetation. Park rangers and foreign naturalists keep an eye on them. Poachers track them there too. They kill the largest ones—the males—cut off their hands and sell them in Asia as ashtrays. They take their testicles as well, to be ground into an aphrodisiac powder for small men. One of the park's gorillas had been murdered recently. Rangers had caught the poacher and executed him on the spot.

The three men had come a long way to see the gorillas. That is why they detoured through the park, through this country, on their way to Nairobi. From their base camp on the escarpment, they had hiked three hours on well-traveled trails, then bushwhacked another couple of hours into the forest. At one point they glimpsed a small herd of elephants crashing through the trees ahead of them. They crouched low, breathlessly waiting for the beasts to pass.

Once he found the grassy beds where the gorillas had passed the previous night, their guide tracked them by the highway of stripped and trampled underbrush they left behind. His name was Charlie. He visited the gorillas several times a week and knew them all by name. He hacked his way through the forest with a well-worn machete and carried an old rifle slung over his shoulder. Occasionally he would stop and kneel down in front of a large clump of flaky, green spores on the jungle floor. He sniffed at them, poked them, lifted them to his nose, and crumbled them in his fingers. He said he could monitor the health of the gorillas this way. Charlie came from a different tribe than the teacher; shorter and more muscular, his skin was darker and duskier, his head rounder, his nose and forehead flatter, his features fleshier. He had warned the men not to mingle with the tall, thin tribesmen in the village near their camp on the escarpment.

The men arrived at a clearing, and Charlie motioned for them to sit. If *les gorilles* come near you, he whispered, stay low and don't run. And if they try to

touch you, whatever you do, don't resist—*ne résiste pas*. He then knelt and began making a series of low, throaty grunts. After a long moment several black, shiny faces appeared between trees. Curious adolescents. They studied Charlie. One of the smaller ones sprang up a tree. Another ran to Charlie and tagged him on the shoulder. The two exchanged guttural noises. The gorilla then leaped and squealed delightedly, slapping his head and belly. Charlie smiled and walked to the edge of the clearing. Then others came. Somersaulting. Chattering. Sniffing at the men.

After about half an hour, the men heard a commotion in the trees around the clearing, and one of the silverbacks, *le deuxième chef*, Charlie said proudly, emerged from the underbrush. He strode around the edge of the clearing on his leathery knuckles, keeping his broad backside to the four men. His belly hung low to the ground. Three or four of the adolescents, who had been playing, shrieked and tumbled out of his way. When he reached a point just above the men, he stood to his full height, stretched out a powerful arm, and pulled down the top of a fragrant sapling. He sat and began stripping off its leaves with his teeth and hands. A young female slunk up beside him and began picking at the lice in his fur. He ignored her. When he finished grazing he let the tree fly up with a snap. Then, as if discovering the men who were crouching below him, he turned to look at them. His large, black eyes blazed. Harley raised up to get a head-on picture, but the great ape reached down and took hold of Harley's camera. He pulled it closer to him—and Harley with it—the leather strap tight around the back of his neck.

Relax, hissed Corn.

ne résiste pas, whispered Charlie. *Ne résiste pas*.

Harley bent forward, and the gorilla seemed to notice something—perhaps a glint of light from Harley's pate, shining through his thinning, blond hair. He let go of the camera and reached out and cupped Harley's head in his massive hand and pulled it to him, sniffing it, studying it. Harley could not resist even if he wanted.

Back at base camp the next evening, Meese and Corn stared at each other across the dying campfire. The moisture in their eyes gleamed in the pale-blue-and-orange light. A vast forest stretched out at their feet. An uninterrupted sea of trees, Charlie had told them, stretching west all the way to Kinshasa. It was very dark—no pinpricks of light save the stars, no fires save their own. And, but for Harley's retching and the cries of the teacher, silent as it was vast.

Meese and Corn now waited for their dinner. They did not know what they were going to do about Harley.

They were in a town called Beni, a military outpost two days' drive north from the gorillas. Through the middle of the town ran two miles of paved road, the only good road for hundreds of miles in any direction. The honchos there paraded their Mercedes back and forth the length of the town many times a day to impress the prostitutes from the surrounding villages.

The inn sat like a fortress atop a hill just north of town. It had been raining an equatorial afternoon rain when they arrived from the market, and their Rover had slithered through the rutted, axle-choking mud leading up the sharp switchbacks to the hotel. After they signed in and surrendered their papers, Meese rushed off to his room and ran a hot bath. His feet ached, and he let the water splutter over them as it filled the tub. In his kit bag he found one last grimy sliver of the soap he had brought from America. He eased into the scalding tub. His hands and forearms bobbed luxuriously on the filmy surface of the bath. The long, curly hairs on his nipples glistened in the cool twilight air when he inhaled. It was his first true laving in a month.

At dinner Corn, who was from England, told Meese the inn had run out of hot water for the evening. He had been unable to draw a warm bath. The way he said it, it nearly rhymed with broth. There was hardly enough for him to shave. Meese said nothing.

The bread when it came was warm, as were the beers. After he had set them out, their waiter disappeared. Corn suspected the man, who was probably also the proprietor, cook, and dishwasher, had run down the long, muddy hill to fetch food for the two men. When he returned he brought more beers and a pottage of cabbages and gourds and leeks. Just as they began eating, the generator in the hotel shut off. The two men sat silently. Corn lit a cigarette. Meese fished in his pockets for a flashlight. Soon the man brought candles. There were no other diners. Meese wondered if Harley had eaten.

Though he did not know him very well, Meese felt a sense of responsibility for Harley. They had hooked up through a classified ad Meese placed in an adventure travel magazine. It read: "Looking for adventure? I'm driving through Africa. Harare to Cairo. Travel companion needed." Harley had responded. They met up in the Charles de Gaulle airport near Paris, where they both had laid over for the flight south. Corn had hitched a ride north from Bujumbura in their Rover. He was headed to Nairobi.

In every village they had driven through in that region, people had run up to their jeep waving excitedly and grinning large teeth at the men—except in Beni. And as soon as the men made camp beside the road, word seemed to spread as if by

magic through the forest, and groups of local boys would appear out of nowhere to watch them set up their tents and make their cookfires for the evening. Everyone—except Harley—managed a patois of broken French and Swahili, filling in the blanks of incomprehension with smiles and hand signals. Often the people brought local produce or game to barter. One boy offered them a live chameleon clutching the branch of a hibiscus bush. Another the headless body of a fat Black Mamba. Corn traded the boy two of the cheap, plastic ink pens he had brought for such purposes and spent the evening stripping the skin from the snake's body. It might make a nice wallet, he said.

Corn sometimes played football with the local boys. He taught them the virtues of the English air game—the header, the chest catch. The children, whose footwork and passing he found remarkable, laughed and tried feebly to imitate him, letting the ball smack them in the face or ear.

In some of the remoter mountain areas, the people told the three men they had never seen white men before. One older villager told them white people smelled like death. Corn said it probably had something to do with the lard Westerners used in their soap. It scoured the human smell from their bodies. The old man rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully.

The three men had driven into Beni that morning and stopped at the large open-air market in the center of town. No one greeted them. The market was picturesque—exotic fruits and vegetables, colorfully dyed fabrics, live goats, freshly slaughtered chickens and game, iron and copper implements, small weapons. A few vendors, men mostly, sold clothing from international relief agencies—jerseys with the logos of American basketball and hockey teams, blue jeans, baseball caps—at exorbitant prices. Large, hideous marabou storks slept like sentinels on the tops of the buildings surrounding the square. Harley wanted to snap off some pictures in the marketplace, but a man in a military uniform came up to him, put a hand over the lens of his camera, and told him to stop. Told him to leave. Harley sheathed his camera and went away, leaving Corn to negotiate with a large, impassive woman for some dried fruits, a round of cheese, and several loaves of thick, dark bread.

Meese chose not to go into the square. He slept in the Rover. The midday sun was high, and he had been driving all morning. After purchasing his few necessities and exploring the town, Corn met back up with Meese at the car. The two men ate cheese sandwiches and sour passion fruit on the shade porch of a small building. Neither had seen Harley. A man carrying a case of tall beers on his head stopped to stare at them. Not many white men came through Beni, he told them. Why, earlier that very morning he had seen several uniformed men dragging another white man

away from the market. They had thrown the man into the back of a truck and driven off toward the airport. He looked up and down the street as he spoke, then pointed south.

Meese found pieces of Harley's camera smashed on the pavement near the turnoff to the airport. A beggar in torn clothes and manacles standing nearby held out the broken zoom as a cup. Most likely the man was schizophrenic, Corn explained. They shackled the hands and feet of the mentally ill here and left them to fend in the streets for themselves. A sign declared the road to the airport off limits. A storm gathered seemingly out of nowhere, and the afternoon rains began.

The chicken when it came was fresh but rubbery. Corn wondered if the men would come for the two of them as well. He watched what was happening around them and listened for the sounds of vehicles moving around after lights-out.

Meese felt they should contact the American consulate immediately. The closest American consulate was four days' drive south, Corn told him—the direction they had just come. Well, then they should call the congressman. Hadn't Harley said he worked for a congressman in Washington, D.C.? There were no phones in Beni, Corn said, only radios. But they would not be able to use the radios in any case. They belonged to the military. Besides, what could a U.S. congressman do here?

Okay, then Meese would go to the chief of the military first thing in the morning and demand to see Harley. He would talk sense to him.

Meese did not know the military very well, Corn told him over a dessert of fresh, rich, dark coffee and small, sweet bananas. Here they sit at this frontier outpost some fifteen hundred miles from bloody Kinshasa, and most likely the Great Leader has not paid them in two years, but taken the money the Americans gave him for security and humanitarian aid and bought himself a castle in Spain and a villa in the South of France and an apartment in Rome and left the military men to fend for themselves, which they do by marauding local villages, harassing travelers, and, in general, being extremely paranoid.

But, said Meese.

But nothing, rejoined Corn. He had been around. There were dozens of Benis all over the world. It might do to grovel, even to offer money, if the opportunity arose. But Meese would not be able to "talk sense" into the chief of the military in Beni. Of this, he was most certain.

But, said Meese.

Such persistence will only threaten the military men, Corn said. And it is not a good thing to threaten military men in a town like Beni. Also, counseled Corn,

keep your camera and valuables hidden at all times. Now, let me see how much money you have.

The assistant to the deputy to the chief of the military in Beni told them no one knew of a white man who had been in the market. No military men had taken any white man from the market in a truck. This was preposterous and an insult. And he should know—he was, after all, the assistant to the deputy to the chief of the military in Beni. White men, he told them, looked very pale, as if death were in them. As if the life force had gone out of their bodies. Especially those with white hair and white eyes. His black eyes blazed with malice.

But, said Meese, Harley has blond hair and blue eyes.

That's what he means, whispered Corn.

No white men had ever been to the airport, they were told. It was not permitted.

But, said Meese.

But thank you very much, said Corn, taking hold of Meese's arm. Here, said Corn. He handed the uniformed man a crumpled wad of American money and an unopened package of Marlboros. *Merci beaucoup pour sou*—how do you say trouble?—*pour sou aider*.

The man studied Corn's outstretched hand. He glared at Meese. Perhaps there is someone who could help you find your friend, he said. But he will not be available until this afternoon. You may come back at that time.

But, said Meese.

But we shall be back at that time, said Corn. Now we must go. He took Meese by the arm and led him out of the presence of the assistant to the deputy to the chief of the military in Beni.

The two men took a wrong turn walking back to their hotel. They found themselves in a dense slum of filthy huts. Open sewage poured down the middle of the street. There were many flies and mosquitoes. And no military.

Quickly they were overrun by children clamoring to have their pictures taken. The children posed and begged for money. A number were crippled by polio. Many had distended bellies. No one in the mountain villages had distended bellies. Much food grew in the rich volcanic soil. Meese began taking pictures and giving out some small American coins. Corn handed around his remaining pens.

Someone, an elder, told Corn and Meese they should leave. It was demeaning for the children to beg. And it was humiliating for the white men to take pictures of the children. The white men would go back to their country and look at the pictures and laugh at the people. At their poverty. Nor did they want the men's charity. The man was very well-spoken.

But, said Meese.

Mais merci, said Corn. They left the slum. They ate cheese and bread for lunch. The sun burned high in the sky.

In the afternoon they went back to the office of the assistant to the deputy to the chief of the military in Beni. It looked as though rain would fall any moment. Another man met them at the door. He screamed at them and waved his arms. He told them to go away. To take their money and cigarettes and go back where they came from. He demanded to know who they were spying for and told them they should leave the city quickly. By tomorrow morning.

But, said Meese.

Corn walked away. The man glowered at Meese, rested his hand on the butt of a large, black pistol tucked into his belt. Meese backed away and trotted after Corn. The man watched them until they were out of sight.

In town Corn tried to find another ride to Nairobi. He could not. They returned to their hotel.

There really is no choice, Corn told Meese that evening. A new moon cut a path through a thick, dark field of stars like a scythe. We must leave. And soon. The military men know where we are staying. They have been in our rooms. If we stay another day, most likely they will come for us.

But how do you know this? asked Meese.

It does not matter, said Corn. The call is yours. The Rover is yours. If we go back south, we can get to your consulate in a few days. They might still be able to do something. North is out of the question. If we go north we will never get across the border into Uganda.

A long silence passed between them.

Meese made up his mind with a shrug. He said he thought they should go for help. It was their best bet. They should never have come to this godforsaken country in the first place, however beautiful. However many gorillas. First thing in the morning they would head back to Kigali. The waiter handed Meese another warm beer.

Corn was relieved. There really was no choice.

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The next morning a military truck loaded with men in uniform met the Rover at the foot of the hill leading to the inn and followed them south to the edge of town. South toward the gorillas, toward the volcanoes. As their Rover rounded a muddy curve, Corn spotted something slumped beside the road. He jumped from the car. It was Harley. His face was pulpy and swollen. His boots were missing.

Behind them the large truck stopped at the edge of the pavement, turned around, and headed back to Beni.

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