

Friends for Life

By Mia Saranovic (Year 5)

When you were in the forest, you saw me. I knew you did. I felt a chill run down my spine, my heart raced at the mere sight of you, and I ran. I left you there without food, without water. You knew I took it, the bag with food, water and the silver locket with the picture of you, your wife, Claudia, and your children, Sofia and Teddy inside of it. You knew I was faster than you and that's why you didn't fight. Why you didn't chase me. Why you didn't give up though, is still a mystery to me. But how you found him, that gorilla that you protect with your life, is crystal clear.

I found out that you were starving, and looking for food, for some kind of civilisation after spending two weeks in a forest that used to love you, and that now is tainted with your sister's blood. You still didn't know that she was saved, just, and if you'd stayed longer, you would have been too. She still comes to me, asks me where you are, and I can't bring myself to tell her that you weren't saved by other humans, that you weren't brought out of that forest by *anyone*, and that you'd presumed her dead, and that you kept going, and even from the last day I heard from you, you think she lies dead in a forest, on a rotting log covered with now-dead orchids and leaves from an *Astonia* tree. But, if you stayed for her, you wouldn't have met that gorilla.

Once you'd left your sister, once my friend and her crew of doctors came to save her in a helicopter that took five hours to land beneath the dense foliage of the forest, not knowing that you were with her when she'd left from her house on that ill-fated day, you saw him. That gorilla. I was there too. That's when I took your bag of supplies. I saw you turn your back to him and took that opportunity, and ran. All because you won a scholarship to travel to Central Africa to study rain forest biology. And I didn't.

The only reason I was there is because I have rich friends. You were there because you deserved it, because you loved animals.

Once I left with your supplies, you snapped around at my clumsy footsteps, but I was gone. The gorilla had disappeared into the forest as well, to your dismay. You kept walking, stopping once to take a sip from a nearby stream that trickled slower than any others you'd found earlier, taking mercy on you and letting you rest, then you followed that same stream to what you hoped was civilisation, or at least food. As you walked, you admired the irregularity of the leaves and plants on the forest floor and in the tree canopies, and how the morning dew still hung on the leaves, and how the wind whistled melodic tunes.

It was late in the evening by now, and you had been walking all day, except for that small rest at a stream, and now it seemed like days ago that you had stopped there. You stopped once again, and it was there. That gorilla. It looked at you curiously, as if recognising you, and you stood up, slowly creeping towards it. You suddenly stepped on a twig, the crack louder, to you, than any other noise on earth could ever come close to. I heard it, as I was perched in a tree on the edges of the clearing, bird watching, and I cautiously turned around to peer at you through the vegetation that bloomed on its branches. I was surprised to see that you had travelled so far on foot, as I assumed you had no rests, and I remembered, just like you, that gorilla from the last time we met. I wasn't sure if you saw me, but I believe not.

Before this time, you had told me many times that the forest was beautiful, and I had believed you. But then, as I looked into the clearing, I realised that just one word couldn't describe it, nor anything else in the forest. The pond, at the end of the stream you had been following, was utterly wondrous. Its waters stretched across the clearing, caressing the roots of each tree trunk, and lapping at its banks. The waters glistened a turquoise I had not thought imaginable in nature before that day, as waves so subtly danced on its surface, dazzling me. The light from the evening sun reflected off its surface and cast a blue shine on the trees and flowers surrounding it, bathing you, me, and the ape in its calming

azure glow. An old, rotting log lay on the banks of the river, where you sat staring in surprise at the gorilla who returned that same curious expression. The river was surrounded, not by sand, but by pebbles of all colours, sizes and shapes. When I looked around again, I saw that this clearing was, in fact, smaller than I first thought, but no less glorious.

This was the first time I got a good look at this gorilla. Its fur was a startlingly dark, more black than the most pure coal on earth. Its face showed expressions that I, being ignorant of all of the animals that were not, to my expectations, beautiful enough, had never seen projected so clearly on anything but a human. Its face was flat, with just its nose and mouth jutting out, and its eyes beacons in the darkness. It was, now as I remember it, absolutely gorgeous.

You crept a couple of steps closer, wading through the stream, afraid of stepping on more branches that could possibly attract any attention from other animals. The gorilla kept its unblinking stare fixated on you for what seemed like, to me, hours. Once you'd come to the joint of the stream and the lake, you swam the water too deep to wade in. After a few metres, you came out towards the gorilla, and you looked at. You saw a bundle in its arms and came to a conclusion. "So you're a mum huh?" Your whisper carried out to her, and as if she understood, she nodded. I had not known if it was the mother or father who cared for gorilla cubs, and this was one of the many things you had taught me since childhood.

Suddenly, the sound of bullets burst across the clearing, and I screamed. You glanced up at me for one second, before turning back to the gorilla. Another shot rang out, I jumped out of the tree and ran.

Now, 40 years later, as an old man, I receive a telegram from you. You tell me you have a friend for life, not human, but an ape. I had not heard from you since the shooting of that beautiful gorilla. Her cub survived, you tell me, and you cared for him until he grew old and lay to rest with his mother, in that ill-fated clearing, 40 years after that ill-fated day. I can only hope you forgive me, and that is

why I've sent you this, after all these years, I can only say one word. Sorry.