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Lullaby of disappearance

by
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Translated by
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(excerpt in English)

“If you get an orangutan to look you in the eyes, you’ll remember it your entire life.”
BIRUTÉ GALDIKAS, primatologist

BEFORE ENTERING THE JUNGLE

Among the green leaves, some raindrop shines before falling and disappearing.
The last orangutans of Borneo are suffering deforestation, the exploitation of the forests by intense harvesting aimed at the extraction of palm oil, mining, fires, illegal hunting...
Falling and disappearing.
The same fragility.
Extinction will occur, it is predicted, between the next 20 and 60 years.
Maybe you're reading this when the inevitable has already happened.
Will culture survive? Will these pages survive?
Falling and disappearing.
The same fragility.

Birutė Galdikas, a primatologist who has focused her work on these great apes—as have Diane Fossey with gorillas and Jane Goodall with chimpanzees—has taken the lead as a defender of the environment and denounced the situation worldwide.
At the very moment this text is being written, Galdikas is 74 years old.
The same fragility.

Before entering this forest you must know that:
The dialogues are beautiful and violent, like the jungle.
The stage directions; lush like the spring.
The monologues; sad like rainy days.
The style swings, from vine to vine, like the fight in defense of Animal Rights.
[] is used to represent a train of thought, or to give voice to those who cannot speak.
~~Strikethrough~~ is used for those thoughts that do not dare be expressed in words.

I imagined that Galdikas submitted this manuscript to the last orangutan of Borneo.
The latter placed it on his head to shelter himself from the rain.
When it was soaked, he tossed it onto the mangrove swamp.
The same fragility.

After reading it, what will you do?

A final warning:
orangutan means “man of the forest” in Malayan.

1

Thunder.

Lightning.

The storm begins, as always.

In Borneo it rains 300 days a year.

More thunder.

The distant clouds break. You can see them if you look up; they are starting to thicken. Like childbirth.

The beginning of the storm doesn't get anything wet.

The smell of wet earth sweeps over everything. Even before it's poured upon.

Wind.

The sound of the leaves is... is... green.

The earthworms seek out holes in which to hide, inside the earth.

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In Borneo it rains 300 days a year.

The smell of wet earth mixes with the smell of wet socks, which drag some slippers through the roots of a fig tree covered with underbrush.

It's GALDIKAS.

The mangrove is at her back.

2

The wind shakes the leaves. It shakes the birds. And the translucent winged cicadas. It also pushes Galdikas's skirts against her knees. In the trees, MUK, one of the last orangutans of Borneo, watches her calmly. GALDIKAS, feeling herself observed, does not share any look with him.

MUK

[Who is that woman who comes every day? I know very well who she is. I know. What is she wanting, needing, seeking? She was a redhead like us. She doesn't smell like us. Although she doesn't smell like the natives either. Nor like the timber merchants. Her hair is like the gray ash of the teak trees. She moves like we do. Slooowly. She must not know how to climb to the branches. She is worried. Her lips and eye lashes have been disappearing. What's the purpose of those magnifying glasses she wears on her eyes? Why has she been in the forest for so many years? She's lonely. Like us. She's sloooooow. Like us. She's fragile. Like us. With long arms, that she folds behind her back when she walks, like us. She got used to the rain, like us. There's jungle for all of us. The mosquitos also know it. What's her purpose in coming every day? In silence. At times she stays around for hours, watching some dry leaf, some footprint or even our feces. I can watch her. I can see her. What makes her so worried? Is it on my account? I know it very well. I think that one time we were veeeery close to each other. I don't have much memory. Maybe she doesn't either, so she writes down in detail everything she sees. Everything she senses. Everything she smells. The smell of her wet socks is one of the most disagreeable smells in the jungle. That and the smell of the loggers. The week's worth of sweat gets mixed with those acidic perfumes for the off days. I've seen them perfume themselves in some bare spot of the jungle before they go to the hut of the woman without stockings. I've heard what they do there. What they do on their off days. When those acidic perfumes rise toward the vine, I urinate, in order to cover one smell with another. I only manage to make it stand out more. Time and again I get it wrong. I think if there were more trees like before, they themselves would take care of putting a stop to the spread of certain smells. I love the smell of ripe figs. I can eat a fig and enjoy it for hours, sniffing my fingers. Touching all my body, my face, my groin... The rain always carries it away. Why did I stop watching her? I know that just now she's enjoyed noticing my moves. She's not taking any notes today. For days she hasn't written down anything. I wonder why she's come into the jungle, alone. Why, every day? Maybe she likes figs? I think she doesn't like the loggers either, and what

they do in the hut of the women without stockings. I never saw her without her socks. I've seen the gleam of the fire in her eyes, on the rainless days. What is she wanting, needing, seeking? She carries a lot of things in her pockets, that I also know. How I'd like to find a fig tree! There aren't so many anymore. We're getting used to seeing a new landscape. In the thicket not just some rabbit devoured by snakes, perhaps an axe, perhaps a shirt left behind, human feces, some old shoe, cigarette butts. I like that white smoke. Will some fig tree be left way over there? She's pretending again. She was watching me. Why is she going around so worried? Why is she raining from her eyes some afternoons? Dusk on the island bronzes our orange backs. It wrinkles her knuckles and forehead, and it smooths her ashen hair. The trucks don't stop. The noise lasts until dawn. Motors in the rain. The wind makes the thin leaves snake. Who is that woman who comes every day? Why is she going around so worried? I know very well. I know.]

3

Inside her modest hut, GALDIKAS holds the telephone close to her ear.

GALDIKAS

Mrs. Goodall? Jane? Yes, it's me. How are you? Fine, fine, thanks. Yes, it's raining. It's always raining. It's among the few things that hasn't changed. Yes, she's here now. We've been starting the training these days. Around 25 years old. I wish I were! Right, Jane? The knees, that's the worst, the knees. And the back. They did surgery on your knuckles? What wild people we've been! We really ought to talk more...! Yes, here the time slips by in the rain. What's the day today? Yes. It's true. I have low expectations for her. I already know the times have changed, but... I was hoping she'd be more alert, more observing. All details escape her. I'll have to be patient. In the absence of time, patience. I'm moderate. Like nature. I'm not used to running or hurrying, you know that. Yes. You always were the most fun of us three. Jane? Yes, I think we got cut off. 25, yes, and not very observant. Inexperienced, yes, she's inexperienced. The western world doesn't train the body any longer. She wants to learn it all through her computer. She still doesn't realize where she is. It's always raining here. The streams run off every day... every day, yes, don't laugh... The rain is one of the few things that hasn't changed. Jane, can you hear me? More and more there's less... it isn't easy to see them any longer. And fewer and fewer trees. The insects roam around starving. Yes. I understand. Hopefully we can talk another time, Jane. Take good care. They operated on your knuckles? Jane? Jane, do you hear me?

She hangs up.

4

Inside her hut, the young LIUBA, her nape and back arched over, fixedly watching the ceiling. GALDIKAS in her rocker, her glasses slipping slightly down the incline of her nose, looking in some books. She uses her lenses to read, but not when she raises her glance to observe LIUBA. The image, silent, and the effort of the young woman stretches out a few minutes.

LIUBA

(Firm, without ceasing to watch the ceiling): Can I stop it now?

GALDIKAS

What?

LIUBA

I said I can stop watching the ceiling now?

GALDIKAS

We've only been at it fifteen minutes...

LIUBA

At the very least to rest a few seconds...

GALDIKAS

It's not advisable. We'd have to begin anew.

LIUBA

But/

GALDIKAS

It appears you don't understand why we're doing it...

LIUBA

But/

GALDIKAS

Child/

LIUBA

Liuba/

GALDIKAS

Liuba... Why do you think you've come here? *(Pause)* Fight it... Each time it will be easier...

LIUBA

[How will I stand it?]

GALDIKAS

The first days we should be here around two hours... Then three, then four...

LIUBA

There has to be another way...

GALDIKAS

Child/

LIUBA

Liuba.

GALDIKAS

Liuba... What do you think you know about commitment and sacrifice? About mission?

Silence. A tear streams down the youngster's cheek.

So. That starts to be well. The body responding. The mind opening up. Never close your eyes in the jungle.

Let me read you something:

"I moved slowly down from the tree and pretended to chew on some leaves in order to reassure her that my intentions were of the most peaceful variety. The shining eyes of Peanuts were gazing at me... Since she appeared completely peaceful, I lay down on my back in the vegetation, little by little I reached out my hand, my palm raised upward, and I placed it down over the leaves. After staring at it closely, Peanuts got up and reached out her hand to rub my fingers against hers for an instant... That contact remains one of the most memorable ones of my life among the gorillas."

Diane Fossey.

Everything, it will be worth the effort. It will happen in meaningless instants of our existence. I will tell you that I am 74 years old... A grain of sand in the desert, which will justify all the dunes. Isn't it fantastic? If we are capable of offering them a few of those instants of happiness, it will be worth the effort.

LIUBA

I've seen *Gorillas in the Mist*... What was Diane like?

GALDIKAS

Oh, you haven't come here to learn that. Save your memory and your notebooks for what's important. I promise you that you'll need it.

LIUBA

I only meant/

GALDIKAS

I know already. Sorry. Diane was very brave. Really. From the start. Both Diane, with the gorillas, and Jane, with the chimpanzees,--she was the first—and me, too, of course, we were pushed, by Mr. Leakey, the very well-known paleoanthropologist whom they mocked for showing the African origins of the human race. We had the good fortune of knowing him, and thanks to him and the patronage and protection of a few associations that came about, our common project could develop. To live among gorillas is really dangerous. Understand me. Diane showed her extreme inclination for the project from the start. One night Leakey assured her that she ought to have her appendix removed before traveling to Africa, following the model for example of those who were preparing to travel in space, since if an infection ensued, it would be inoperable. Days later, Diane visited him after having had the operation. By then it was too late, and Leakey could only

apologize for his joke and thank her for the gesture of obedience and commitment.

LIUBA

I thought that anecdote wasn't true.

GALDIKAS

It was. Preparing for a trip and the training back then, it was something much more... savage. You're fortunate to keep your appendix. This has changed a lot.

LIUBA

So much?

GALDIKAS

Yes.

LIUBA

I would love to hear about it. Can we continue with the training tomorrow?

GALDIKAS

It's still early.

LIUBA

I'm feeling a slight cervical cramp, I'm not sure I can stand it much more.

GALDIKAS

That's a good sign. I recognize that sensation. It's not near me. But I recognize it.

LIUBA

It's starting to hurt a lot. Although my conscience has begun to separate itself from my body, from the pain.

GALDIKAS

There's no need to get mystical, the difficulty is more human than divine. More animalistic. More natural than what It seems. But you're not going to reach it in front of a computer.

May I read you something more? More of Fossey, I mean.

"On my first full day in the camp, I had hardly walked more than ten minutes from the time I left the campground when I saw a solitary male gorilla, sunbathing on a horizontal trunk that stood out over a small lake, located in a corner of the Kabara grassland. Even before I could grab the binoculars from their case, the animal jumped frightened from the tree and disappeared into the dense vegetation of the nearby mountain skirt."

You'll have to learn to have patience. A lot of patience.

LIUBA

Can you see them easily?

GALDIKAS

More or less. Although nothing now resembles the reality I found fifty years ago. Not even half the jungle is left. Rest assured you will see them, and you will work with them. Here we don't only research the behavior of the free orangutan, we also foster and reinsert those who come abandoned, wounded, lost, confined in some circus... They're tranquil, slow and calm, but very elusive. Or so I think.

LIUBA

Excuse me?

GALDIKAS

I know very little about them, after almost five decades... Hardly anything, I've just begun to understand them, now that they're on the brink of disappearing.

LIUBA

There's still hope.

GALDIKAS

I suppose so. One can't believe what one cannot see. Another scientific commandment.

LIUBA

How long have we been here? [I don't know if I can stand it much longer...]

GALDIKAS

It's funny. Maybe you don't notice it, but you're making it hard on yourself putting up such a resistance. You raise yourself up, you get on your tippy toes... Very complicated... For sure....

LIUBA again plants her heels on the ground.

LIUBA

Yes?

GALDIKAS

No stockings. Socks! And thick ones.... I advise you not to insist upon drying your clothing. Always damp. Your clothes will always be damp. And use resistant fabrics, or they will fall apart on you within months. Soon after I arrived all my belongings rotted away. 95% humidity. Rain 300 days a year. Three shirts, one dress and some book. No photos or disks, no pretty furnishings. Pure ashes.

LIUBA

But/

GALDIKAS

I already know, your legs are snow-white, and tender, tomorrow we will train with leeches. You'll also have to get used to finding them when you cross the mangrove swamp...

LIUBA

[I think I must have misunderstood, or I haven't wanted to pay attention....] My back is really hurting me... [Is it necessary?]

GALDIKAS

The orangutans live in the treetops, on their branches, always hanging and unhangings their long arms on them, going from vine to vine ... If you wish to see them, I'm afraid you'll have to get used to looking up at the sky. You're lucky they live in high places, what would you think if you had to imitate their gait, walking on their knuckles? Poor Jane wrecked hers... Even forty years later they still occasionally bleed on her.

LIUBA

I'm feeling sick to my stomach... Can you read a little bit? When you read, it seems like the pain goes away...

GALDIKAS

Yes, of course. Child?

LIUBA

What?

GALDIKAS

You're doing very well. Don't worry. It will be worth the effort.

GALDIKAS searches among her papers.

LIUBA

You know something? It's odd...

GALDIKAS

What?

LIUBA

Not being able to see you when you tell me these things...

GALDIKAS

Don't ever look me in the eye. It's unnecessary. For listening to each other. For searching each other. For finding each other. For appreciating each other. It's unnecessary. They know it. Remember: They don't need us. We don't interest them and they understand those looks as intimidating and threatening.

LIUBA

How am I ever going to be able to enter into/

GALDIKAS

Don't dwell on it. Or you'll suffer. It's all about a different type of intelligence. But if you get an orangutan to look you in the eyes, you'll remember it your entire life.

LIUBA
Can I stop?

GALDIKAS
No, not yet.