

# **My story**

**by Barbú**

I guess my story began fifteen years ago, when my mother had me in the Republic of the Congo or in Cameroon or perhaps in Gabon, I could not say exactly which is my home country.

My parents did not register my date of birth, in fact, we never commemorate holidays, we neither cling to hope because a new year begins nor meet to share nostalgic moments nor pledge obedience to people we cannot see, conferring on them absolute powers. Our lives are as simple as breathing the present. We exclusively adapt ourselves to the place we belong to, becoming devoted admirers of nature; we enjoy its food and we take rest in its comforting trees.

Unluckily, that life was disrupted due to your rashness. Even though I was young, I do remember my first contact with humans. They were two. At first I was scared, I thought they were chameleons as they had an easily replaceable multicoloured skin. Years later I realised that it was not their skin but clothing they wore to wrap up themselves, to protect themselves from mosquitoes and, as they felt embarrassed, to hide their reproductive systems. Embarrassment? I am still trying in vain to understand that symptom. Those humans came to watch me. They never meant to hurt me. As neither of my parents, cousins and uncles was upset at their presence, neither was I. Harmonious sounds came from their mouths. Shortly afterwards, I started to understand them, those sounds were not other thing than a language that, by the way, was more complex than ours. All my doubts turned into knowledge while spending more time with them.

They stayed with us for nineteen days and nineteen nights, at least that is what their records show. Other humans came to visit us on the twentieth day. Unlike the previous humans, these ones were darker and were carrying branches that belched out fire. Although they were noisy, I was not afraid. I wanted to know what was that discontinuous flash which frightened away my whole family. Some tried to escape but they tripped over and could not manage to stand up. Others climbed up trees waiting the sky to protect them, but it was the ground the one that tolerated the consecutive blows of their falls. I was still, seeing how my family went mad and how those two humans that had watched us for days stopped doing it abruptly. They decided to imitate us, lying on the ground.

I walked up to her, she was lying on her back, her eyes were open but they were not looking at me. Her arms, that were stretched out with the palms of her hands widely open, were not looking for a hug as they always did. I could not feel anymore that vibration that made me feel safe when she embraced me. I was too young to understand what had happened but when my father picked me up taking me away from her and from that evil branches, I knew her presence would only last in my memories. Although my father would take care of me, I knew I would never be safe again.

Some of us could escape but not because of our virtues but because the branches were tired of

belching out fire and men seemed to be satisfied with the deed.

After two days, we returned there. That was our place, our home, where we felt comfortable. Mysteriously my mother and some of my relatives disappeared. So did the two humans. I could only find what one of them was carrying on his back. Inside it there were a lot of novel objects to me; they kept me amused for a while: a flat object that reflected my face just like the water does, some clothing (what I first thought was their skin), pictures of myself and my relatives stuck in shapeless leaves with other empty images but full of some tiny drawings messily repeated without being one on top of the other. Throughout my captivity I finally understood lots of things.

During the following years, I would always revive that ill-fated day of my life. The evil branches had destroyed my family. Besides, it was difficult to find a favourable place to live, for trees were also vanishing. I was not able to find relief even when everything was quiet. I was left out by my "brothers" due to a physical handicap I had. My arms were as long as my legs and my position was more upright than theirs. I barely had the need to use my knuckles to support my body to walk. This was the reason why I was slower and weaker than my brothers. These features appeared during my adolescence. They began to ignore me during the daily escapes from dark men because of these problems or because I did not have the strength to climb to the top of trees. Even my father, who had protected me for a long while, adopted the same unfair posture. I had no one to stroke my back, no one to swing with. No matter how much I tried to get close to them, they would not change their minds. The happy memories of my mother were the only thing that helped me to face up the distress I felt inside.

Without the protection of my father, everyone thought my fate was sealed. Dark men would take me with them. However, I always managed to escape, hoping my father would be proud of me, because, despite my physical handicap, I always managed to keep going, finding the suitable way out. My intelligence made up for my other problems. My father came back to me and asked me to break the sugar canes as he could not do it. My father believed that if my family followed me when the branches would start belching out fire, we all would escape. If I was able to escape with my physical handicap, then everyone could do it.

At first he was right, I did not let them down, he had convinced everyone else to follow me. So I foresaw the footprints men were going to leave on the ground. I guessed their hunches. I kept the group alive for years. Only the God men talk about decided who might live and who might die. They began to accept me, my defects, my virtues. However, when I began to accept myself was more important. I converted my defects into virtues which endured as such until I became an adult. Tired of escaping, I thought I was mature enough to face the situation that was bothering us for as long as I can remember.

I had decided I was going to be the boss, keeping myself away from the battle. Not because I was weak compared with my brothers; I was able to bend any man if I wanted to, but because I did not want to kill anybody. However, I was badly mistaken. My eyes were horrified at seeing my brothers getting killed. I can still hear their heartbreaking groans and I will always carry the weight of their deaths on my shoulders, as a punishment for ordering the massacre.

At the beginning the ambush was a success. We overpowered dark men in a very short time. Nature gave us the perfect scenario. We hid so well, that we even could not see each other. However, thanks to our sense of smell, we were able to feel their fear running down their cheeks. Moreover, our sensitive ears were able to hear their unsure and frightful steps. Hunters became hunted. We were enjoying our victory banging our chests with our fists. Some escaped because we had mercy on them when they cried begging for their lives. Fear in their faces taught me that kneeling down and putting one's hands at the level of one's head means begging. That was a terrible mistake. We should have never let them go. More men returned with them, some were white, similar to the ones I met before my mother passed away. They were carrying something else besides evil branches. They had other devices I had never seen before. Some of these devices were so big that were carried either by land or by air. Most fortunate ones, among them were my father and I, were captured with a huge spider web. It took us flying high above the tops of the trees far away from our home.

We all, dead or alive, ended up in a place inhabited by even more men. They put us in a cave sealed with a row of tall teeth so we would not be able to escape. It seemed like a huge mouth chewing us slowly. Before nightfall, five men came near. Three were carrying a branch between their arms and wearing a liana around their waist. However, unlike the other branches I had known that were noisy and dull, these ones were silent and bright. Two men were exchanging words, which unfortunately I could not understand. I guessed they were talking about us. It seemed they could not reach an agreement, until one of them stopped talking, he had accepted his partner was right, and with a gesture ordered everyone to aim the branches straight at us. I knew the branches were going to roar and that death was our fortune. I had to stop them. For that reason, I approached the teeth which separated us from them, begging for my life and my family's in the same way they had done it in the jungle. Men could not believe their eyes. I had caught their attention. As I kept on imitating them, amazement was left behind and now there were only laughters. I was released, but they did not let my family go. I realized they were not going to forgive them. I begged of them once again, unsuccessfully, men stopped for a moment to see if any of my brothers would do what I had done, but no one in my family could do it. Not even my father. Although he knew imitating me would have saved his life, he preferred to behave as a gorilla.

After a few days, I had been confined to a very reduced space, limited by rigid spider webs which prevented me from hurting curious people who would draw near. I was then tamed by Keobe. He

was key in my life. From the very beginning I knew his intentions were good. He noticed I was different from the rest of my family, not only because of my physical appearance but also because of my attitude. He felt motivated by this and decided to teach me how to read and how to write, an unusual idea.

The language was not a problem. I learnt it quite quickly because I had already translated men's language back in the jungle. However, I will never be able to chat, because my vocal chores are different from humans'.

After learning the language I passed to the numbers. Additions, subtractions, multiplications, divisions amazed the visitors. Anyway, maths was not my favourite subject. I was more intrigued by the history of humanity. Knowing the past provided help for rebuilding the present.

Voices were telling I was a special ape, but I did not have a name. Some whistled at me to catch my attention and take me pictures. Others called me by different names until one day the zoo decided to run a contest to give me a name. On the previous day to the final voting, the contest was held unfinished as I wrote in crayon: "My name is Barbú" in big block letters on one of the stones that was decorating my home. The name represents something... but I will keep it for myself.

At the zoo my attitude was not a problem, in fact they took advantage of it holding big celebrations. Once a week there was a big party in which I was the centre of attention. I remember I have once celebrated my birthday in two different occasions during the same year. An unreliable source of information was said to be the reason of the first mistaken birthday, but such mistake was corrected by a physical examination using the most recent technology. Money-making was the main goal of the zoo, and birthdays attracted visitors.

Those were my days at the zoo as the main attraction. If there were no scheduled events, I would spend the day with Koebe and books. However, at night, the only one by my side was the unavoidable feeling of sadness. This feeling showed up without asking permission. It would make me revive the shooting of my father. Every night I would see him dying in front of me. It was heartbreaking hearing the crashing of his bones when he was mutilated by the shinning branches. There was no relief, when everything seemed over, men found another part of his body to cut, sentencing me, for the rest of my life, to tolerate the unbearable.

The final destination of my father's body was men's stomach and unfortunate pieces ended up in their gums. The rest of my family was exchanged for papers and smooth and circular stones.

However, in a way or another, I have always had the memories of my parents. That feels good. Not being alone was definitely something good. And so thought the director of the zoo. I was introduced to "Olivia", my new roommate. A female, with sensual curves, with only 80Kg distributed around her beautiful body and ready to conquer even the hardest of the hearts. The zoo tried to create a big deal about it, organizing a marriage, a honey moon, a birth, etc... At the same time Olivia was also

looking for love. I was craving for an end to this horrible nightmare. Freedom was my goal. During a year and a half I was with Olivia but I could not create a bond between us, our evident intellectual differences set us apart in a way that I could not find her physically attractive. However, I gave in to her petitions. Olivia wanted to become a mother at all costs. I do not know if I was able to give her the child she wanted so badly, but at least I gave her hope.

My last day in that cage was thanks to Keobe. Planning my breakout took us several days. He knew I was not running risks at the zoo, but he understood it was not the most pleasant way of living. His greatest wish was my happiness. At the risk of losing his job, he brought me a big white overall, like the ones the cleaning staff wore, at least to hide my fur in the night of my breakout. He left the door of the cage as if it was closed, but in fact, you could open it with just a gentle push.

Outside there was a black car waiting for me which passed unnoticed because it was dark. The face of the driver was familiar but I did not recognize him. He was scared, I could see it in his eyes, perhaps he had never seen a gorilla before. He introduced himself as a friend of Keobe, he gave a package to me before starting the journey. Inside it there was a book which belonged to the expedition members I had met in my childhood. The book was the one I had found after the murder of my mother. I wondered how Keobe had got it. I clung to it, I could see my family again in it and read what before seemed to be some tiny drawings that were messily repeated. While the car was going away as quick as possible I was staring at a seal placed on the front of the notebook which read where it had been confiscated during the last eighteen months. The place was a military bastion. I deduced that there where those butchers who had eaten my whole family.

The car stopped in a place but it did not look like a military bastion. It was a three- story building and there were humans who had exterminated my family. It was a hospital. He explained to me that every single soldier that had murdered and eaten my family were hospitalized there. Lucky ones had already died while the rest was in the throes of death. According to the driver, most of my relatives were carriers of an immunodeficiency virus which is closely related to an illness which humans suffer from that affects the immune system leaving them susceptible to opportunistic infections. It seemed they had contracted this virus from my family bringing about more infected people, now thirty nine million humans live with the disease worldwide.

The driver also told me that some of my brothers suffered from another illness which first came to light in the seventies in a river in the Congo. This illness is characterized by high fever and gastrointestinal bleeding disorders and all can progress to a constant bleeding from ears, mouth, eyes and sometimes also the rectum. Both viruses are transmitted from gorillas to humans. When he finished his talk, I had already realised who he was. He was the man who kept his mouth shut the day my family died. His help now was an apology. Hate confused me: now I was worried about being sick with those illnesses; filled with remorse for the past and feeling sorry for the present.

We went to the port. When getting out from the car the sky grew orange, but they could not identify me because it was dark. I just wanted to find a ship which may take me away to a place without restrictions, where legislation is totally forgotten by people and leaders, a land which could make me forget this deep anguish. That land was Argentina.

I hid myself in a container. I did not carry any provisions on me as I was in a tight spot. My hopes of living a different future could have been dashed due to hunger but I was in luck. I travelled with two deserters that were carrying a huge amount of food. They were not scared at me. It seemed my popularity at the zoo helped me to meet them, I soon made friends with Romarin y Salomon, who were from Cameroon. Unfortunately the Argentine Customs found them and they were deported. They were not as lucky as the Asians that were travelling in the container that was next to mine. I managed to slip away from officers of the Border Protection Service pretending I was sleeping. I remained like that because it is easier to manipulate an sleeping gorilla rather than an awake one. And what if panic spread and they would commit a wild deed as they thought I was carrying cocaine on me? I was scared.

Many men were required to place me in the wheelbarrow where I got transported to the Customs' Department. An employee was ordered to contact the Animal Protection Agency. I was left alone as he had not got any answers. I took advantage of it to escape, I was looking for a place where trees could dominate buildings.

Before arriving to any populated area, there were three humans wearing costumes on the avenue who were promoting a quick soup. The zebra, the rhino and the giraffe were with a girl who was handing in leaflets and free samples to the passers-by. I joined them as if I was part of the cast.

I kept my mouth shut. If I opened it they would realise I was a gorilla. A man of the group asked me where had I bought the gorilla costume while the others seemed to be quite busy bearing the costume which wrapped them up. The girl gave me some leaflets and I started working.

When we finished working, a pickup truck picked us up and drove us to the deposit where we had to return the costumes. Problems went on and on. I did not want to go back to the cage or to be considered as a phenomena. I just wanted a normal life, living in the jungle again or trying humans' lifestyle.

As I refused to return my "costume", the manager came to see me. He was frowning at my exasperating reaction. However his look told me he did not remember having a gorilla costume which seemed so real. Tired of battling with their innocence, I left performance behind and showed them the size of my fangs. Everybody except one ran away. He was one of the passers-by who had also received the quick soap sample. As he was curious, he decided to follow the pickup truck. "Barbú" he said, I realised stories from other continent had arrived to his ears. I was offered a home by him, but deciding my future was not an easy task.

“I want to be a writer”, I told myself. “Things must change, a different point of view must exist. I think we need fiction to distort the past, to amaze the present and to idealize an unthinkable future. A fiction which captures readers' attention and introduces them to a world full of characters, a world which until now they have only met when dreaming. Writing stories which sculpt different lives' messes, engaging in intrigue and uncertainty. That is my goal.”

After being shut up in a room for a few months, pressing keys to make several stories develop in an alive cybernetic picture, I decided to start living as a normal human: going to the supermarket, paying bills watching a movie at the cinema, crying or laughing at the theatre, enjoying Buenos Aires' nights. But I mainly want to express my feelings and ideas in writing.

I have already shown you my world. I hope you accept me kindly. Fantasy is just taking its first steps... I can hear them... and you?

Translation by Agostina Mayra Gatti.