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The Arboreal Revolution

by Janie Reynolds

As he peered across the rainforest canopy, Slim noticed the crowns of the highest mahoganies scoop up the rays of the early evening sun and stop them falling to the ground. He was a sun-lover, this elegant African boy, and happiest sitting in the crook a tree, watching over the valley as if he were a great eagle.

That afternoon his mother had given his group a history lesson, about a time before humans lived in the trees. Slim found this very difficult to believe - how could humans possibly survive there out on the harsh savannahs? But he trusted his mother, who had seen a book from that very time.

The book told of an era many thousands of years before, known as the Anthropocene era, because the humans had controlled everything. Even the other animals. But, in the end they had all destroyed themselves, first by overheating the planet and then with wars and bombs that set half the world on fire.

His mother had told the story of a family from this age who had survived to become his own distant ancestors. It told of fires that swept across whole lands, leaving behind them nothing but burned skeletons and charcoal trees.

In the book there was a wise grandfather father and was preparing his family for the long journey to find a new place to live. Now, this grandfather, even though his eyes were clouded by cataracts, understood much about forests and also about war.

“We’re going back up to the trees,” he announced one day, “there, we will always have the advantage of being ‘uphill’. In the forest we’ll be shielded from the harshness of the sun yet will never go short of rain, which we’ll collect in the leaves and keep in huge vessels we’ll craft from wood. We’ll build tree houses and hang fires from branches to keep us warm. We will feast on fruits and nuts and guard the forest edge day and night.”

But the children had so many questions, just as Slim himself would have had if he’d been one of them.

“Grandfather, how do you mean go *back* to the trees?” one asked, “have we not always lived on the land?”

“Not at all,” said the grandfather, “we come from the trees. We come from the apes who still live in them, and they will become our friends in times to come.”

“But,” asked another child, “how could we have been monkeys when monkeys swing from the branches. How come we could walk onto the plains?”

“Don't mix up apes with monkeys, now!” said the grandfather, “monkeys have tails but apes do not. Do we have tails? No. Because we're apes not monkeys and apes can walk very well on their feet. We can swing from branches, too. It's just something you've never learned.”

“But won't we all be killed, when other humans come to cut down the trees for firewood?” asked a third.

“Then, we shall give them wood. Perhaps in return for something that grows only on land. The forest will never shrink with us there to protect it. And anyway, the plains are too hot. Those people will die before long.”

As he recalled the story, Slim was distracted by a faint smell of cooking that wafted across the treetops into his nose. He was about to hurl himself from one tree to the next, grasping at branches and swinging as he went. But, instead, he didn't jump at all, but carefully slid himself all the way down the trunk to the ground.

‘It is really hard to imagine not swinging when you want to get somewhere’, he thought, as he put one foot in front of the other to make his way back home. ‘But, actually,’ he found, ‘I am quite good at walking upright.’ As his bare feet found their way between the trunks that rose from the forest floor Slim could sense there were many more layers of geology beneath him than he had previously known to be there. In fact, he realised, he was walking upon his ancestors.