



BANANA TREES

Adam Finley

I've worked the exact same job since 1987. Each morning I dress in my khaki pants and short-sleeved shirt no matter the weather, retrieve my keys, identification card and wallet from the table beside the front door and leave my apartment.

I always take the stairs. After eight flights I'm glad to be outside in the open air. The kids who lounge against the chain-link fence by the liquor store stare at me as I pass, though they've seen me five times weekly since they were old enough to stand there. I don't look back, and they don't speak. I take the number sixteen bus out to Henley Park with my hands in my pockets, not making eye contact with anyone until I'm safely at work.

Chester smiles at me over his magazine. 'Hey, Levi,' he always says. Chester is the security guard, an old Navy man from Delaware. He's got tattoos and spends the day keeping an eye on things in this part of the zoo. We don't talk much, but I like him. I enter the break room just beyond his guard stand; it's not an official break room or anything, but it's quiet and I usually eat here by myself. Most days I arrive a little early and have a cup of tea before work, but not today. I put my homemade lunch in the refrigerator and head directly outside to check on Arthur. When I get to Arthur's private space—a small section of grass with one stubby tree connected to the chimp enclosure by metal bars and a sunshade—he's sitting on a branch, head down. He looks stressed. Arthur notices me but doesn't move. Every morning since he's arrived I've come to visit him first.

Joan walks around the corner. She's been working here for two years now, monitoring the baboons and helping me with our family of eleven chimpanzees. I like her because she's always happy and never looks at me sideways. She smiles and says that I'm *really* early today and asks

how I am. I look at the ground and say that I'm fine. I ask how Arthur did over the weekend.

'Good,' she says. 'He's still on the banana binge. The Director thinks his family lived close to a plantation in Africa.'

I say maybe he just likes bananas.

'Levi, you're funny,' she says, and her voice drops to a whisper. 'The Director wants to try again with Arthur on Wednesday.' She shrugs and walks away smiling. I watch Arthur for another minute before heading down to the food room.

This is my favourite place in the entire zoo. The food in here is just for the monkeys, in two enormous refrigerators and a walk-in freezer. Inside are tons of fresh fruits, vegetables, roots, nuts, high-protein cakes made from an insect paste, dietary crackers, and bits of frozen meat. One unit is devoted entirely to bananas—a mountain of them. The first time I saw all those bananas—a swirl of deep greens, pale yellows, browns, and tropical reds—I was stunned. It must have taken a thousand banana trees to fill that unit, I thought, but the monkeys will eat them

all in the next two weeks. Their basic diet is set by some scientist's guideline, but I decide what they get, and how much, each day.

This is the most delicate part of my job. I feel almost like a brain surgeon, choosing just the right mix of starches and proteins and fresh, leafy things. There needs to be plenty for all with just a little bit left over. There needs to be a variety. I really shouldn't worry though—their droppings are solid, their weights are healthy, and the family seems to be thriving. They almost never fight. I've tried feeding Arthur the same way, but he just sniffs at the cakes and crackers and leaves them on the ground. I wish he would eat them; all the other monkeys do. But Arthur just wants bananas, ones that aren't quite ripe yet. He eats these in pieces, biting off large sections and leaving others spread on the ground around him. I imagine he does this out of habit, eating and sharing to strengthen family bonds. Some nights he wakes and nibbles on a leaf before going back to sleep. I don't get paid overtime, but usually I stay late just to keep an eye on things.

I get home late and make dinner out of a little wok my mother left me. I eat in front of the television, then move to the kitchen table where my maps lay unrolled. I love looking at maps, pouring over them, reading the lines and imagining the places beneath my fingertips. I have a lot of maps of Vietnam. Since Mom died I've been saving money to go back there, but Minh refuses to go and my duties at the zoo keep me here month after month. After a while I put my maps away, set out my clothes for the next day and climb into bed. Most nights I fall asleep right away, but tonight I stay awake, staring at the row of tiny pictures across my nightstand: our family home in the hills north of Saigon; me as a child, before Minh was born; Mother and Father smiling on a beach; my father sitting at his desk, head in his hands, a lit cigarette throwing white lines of smoke across his cheek.

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I don't really remember my father. He died so that Mom and Minh and I could escape. We might have died too if an American soldier hadn't heard Mother begging in English and pulled her from the crowd into a helicopter. Minh was only a baby, half-starved in the crook of her arm. I was almost left behind but Mom made such a fuss that the soldier picked me up by my shoulders and tossed me in as well. He had short red hair and a camouflage jacket with no sleeves. His name was Dan and it was from him that I received the name I would go by for the rest of my life. Levi Strauss was the ultimate immigrant, he said, and all through that helicopter ride Dan shouted over the noise of the propeller. He told me the history of blue jeans; how one brilliant idea had made Levi famous; how *anyone* could make it in America. I sat quietly as he told me of my bright future in his country while the green tap-

estry of South Vietnam shrunk below us and the masses of people who would never get out simply disappeared.

For several months we lived in a charity house in Tucson, Arizona—as far from banana trees and daily rain showers as you can get. From sunup to sundown, the entire city was sticky and yellow. Even at night I imagined it glowed faintly. The charity house was run by a Lutheran ministry and each morning I was taken to a room with several other boys and taught how to thank God for saving my soul. I was more thankful that they saved my mother and brother, but I didn't say so. That winter we were relocated to New York City where we didn't have to pray any more. Mom worked during the day at a dry cleaner's down the street, and at night she took phone orders for a Vietnamese restaurant seven blocks over. Afterwards she walked home in the black night. Twice she was attacked that way.

I wake up sweating and hurry to work.

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The Director of the zoo studied primate behaviour under Dr Goodall. He knows that in the wild, male chimpanzees stay with their natal family for life; changing families is just not an option. But he hypothesises that because Arthur is so young he might be able to assimilate. At any rate, it's his only real hope—*his* family was killed and eaten by guerrilla fighters in the Congo. The Director says it's 'fairly unlikely' that the other males will seriously harm him. I've seen the data so far: neatly calculated tables and graphs spelling out how many minutes Arthur stayed in the enclosure, how he acted, how each member of the family reacted, etc. It's all coded and numbered and meaningless, but I remember.

First day: I watch in horror as half the family chases Arthur around the enclosure, up the trees, finally cornering him. Three older males bare their teeth and strike at him with swinging arms. He has to be removed for his own protection.

Second day: Arthur is too afraid to even approach the others. He cowers by the entrance for several minutes until the males take notice. They work themselves into a frenzy and Arthur is removed to avoid another attack.

Third day: The Director has the sunshade removed for two hours each day so the family can see Arthur—he thinks limited exposure will ease their anxiety, but the males just howl and shake the bars violently. When they can't get in at Arthur they settle for shitting into their hands and throwing it at him.

The list goes on and on. Eight days of constant experimenting. Little progress. The males seem to realise he's not a physical threat, but his presence is still disruptive. Tuesday crawls by. I start planning Wednesday's meal in my head on the bus-ride home.

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You can always tell immigrant families by what children carry to school for lunch. All the Americans have sandwiches on white bread, juice boxes and a sugary treat. Hispanic kids bring floutas and bean burritos. The Asians have rice and meat. It's a badge they wear as outsiders; a neon sign that says they do not belong.

The black kids in the neighbourhood liked to beat us up and steal our money. The only other way to school was around the park where all the white kids lived. The white kids never stole from us, but they called us names, stuck out their tongues, made fun of our accents. They asked us how many Americans our fathers had murdered. They spat on us. One time, a man coming home from work saw his three sons throwing glass bottles at my friend Li as he crouched against a wall. The man got out of his new powder-blue Thunderbird and walked straight into his house. After that we took our chances with the black kids.

I graduated high school and attended a community college, but in my second semester Mom got sick. I dropped out and applied for this job. They asked where I was enrolled and I said I was taking night classes at NYU. Later that year, Mom went back to work part-time, but she was never the same. When she died a few years later of viral meningitis, Minh changed his name to Harold and moved across the country. He only learned our language to speak with Mother—at her funeral he told me he'd never speak it again.

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It's Wednesday now and the Director wants to put Arthur back into general population. The males have taken less interest in him recently, but I ask the Director to wait a few more days. He narrows his eyes at me and I look away, embarrassed. 'Mind your own business, Levi,' he says.

I feed the family more than usual. Lastly, I feed Arthur. I give him insect cakes and meat but he's just not interested. Silently I tell him to keep his head down. I tell him not to even look at the females. Then I take my break and stare at the clock. At a quarter past eleven the Director arrives. The barrier is removed and within three minutes Arthur is being pummelled. He's removed again, and I leave early, telling Joan that I don't feel well. I go home and pace the apartment for a long time. I try to read, to look at maps, to watch television but my mind is spinning and I can't make sense of anything.

I want to go somewhere but have no destination, so I wander the streets until dark. I find myself halfway across town, in front of a brand new Vietnamese restaurant that advertises as 'family run'. I go in and a very young girl behind the counter greets me in clumsy English. As I approach, she squints behind crooked glasses and begins speaking in Vietnamese. I greet her in return, the words stumbling through my brain and off my tongue; it's been

a long time. I order a simple meal as her father comes out to say hello. He tells me they just arrived from a village outside Da Nang and put every penny they have into this restaurant. 'I love America,' he says. 'Anybody can make it here.' I try to smile as his daughter swats flies behind the counter.

My food is ready and he hands it to me in a styrofoam container. He asks for my story but I say I have to go. I get home as quickly as possible, looking back every few blocks, though no one is following me. I start to run. I get to my building, and without realising it, I'm in the elevator with four strangers. I don't even care, I just want to go home. When I finally lock myself in I'm no longer hungry and go straight to bed, where I lay awake, staring at the picture of my father. His head is turned away from the camera, but I know he's looking right at me. I fall asleep with his voice inside my head.

The next morning I call work and tell them I'll be out for the rest of the week. I go talk to a travel agent. I return to that restaurant for dinner and tell the father if he ever needs anything at all, to call me. I go home and look at my maps of Vietnam and start to dream out loud.

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Adam Finley is a new writer pursuing a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide. He is an avid traveller who enjoys good music and good whiskey. Adam aspires to publish both fiction and non-fiction.

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