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This Teeming Ark
**Expelled from their forested Eden, man and beast drift downriver under the spell of a charming, unreliable deity**

*By Tim Cahill*

It was like trying to drink a beer on the subway at rush hour. Jostled from all sides, I stood hard against the flimsy railing of a makeshift stall and tried to hold my place against various swirling currents of humanity.

Several of the drunks I'd been cultivating peeled out of the crowd to greet me.

"You are my friend," said Maurice, who at nine o'clock in the morning was already in the condition I aspired to achieve. "Buy me a beer." It was his ritual greeting.

"No way in hell," I said, which had become my ritual reply.

It was my tenth excruciating day aboard the *Flueve Congo*—a conglomeration of eight flatbed barges cabled to a great throbbing riverboat motoring down the Congo River. During the endless hours on deck, I had discovered that only drunkards were intelligent enough to comprehend my 100-word French vocabulary.

Maurice, a Congolese Bantu, like most of the other passengers, was a thin, gangly man with a goofy smile. He didn't really want a beer. He drank palm wine, which he carried about with him in a yellow plastic jug that looked like it had once contained motor oil.

The temperature was rising rapidly, the beer was warm, and I was wearing shorts. My skin was a sickly pale white. I felt like a couple of dozen gallons of raw milk. Maurice pointed out all the slowly healing insect bites, the welts, the scabs on my legs.

He wanted to know what had happened to me, and I told him, for the fourth or fifth time, that I had just completed a long walk through an uninhabited forest.

"What were the people like?" Maurice asked.

"There weren't any people. It was uninhabited."

I told Maurice that it was like Eden, this forest in the north of the Republic of the Congo, the former French Congo. The animals there hadn't been hunted, and they approached our party boldly: elephants and chimps and gorillas and antelope. I had been happy there. But here? On the barge? I was not happy.

"I don't like crowds, Maurice," I said.

I told him that my entire life to date had been an exercise in avoiding crowds. I didn't know how many more days I could bear aboard this Congo River barge, along with 3,000 other human beings, all of us compressed into a space about the size of a football field. For me it was...what was the word I was looking for?

"Buy me a beer," said Maurice.

"No way in..." *L'enfer*! That was the word. This was my own personal hell.

I drained the beer and gave the bottle back to the man who'd sold it to me.

"Maurice," I said, "do you know God?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"No."

"Damn." I really needed to talk to God.

I was traveling with Michael Fay, a wildlife biologist, and Cynthia Moses, a filmmaker. The walk through Eden was Michael's project. His job was to inventory the flora and fauna of the forest and report back to the Congolese government with a recommendation about whether the area should be protected as a national forest. (He thought it should.)

Cynthia documented the walk on video, and my job was to write about it. We had traveled with several Bantus and about a dozen pygmies, but it had been simple enough for me to drop back or plunge ahead of the line of march. By myself, it was possible to imagine that I was the only human being who had ever set foot in the forest. Chimps howled and screamed in the trees above, and they often came way too close—well within rifle range—because they felt it was necessary to throw feces and to piss on my head. I was just another primate, and not very special to boot. Even so, I was really quite content alone on the forest floor, ambling through the yellow, dung-studded rain.

Eventually we had stumbled out of the forest and made our way to Impfondo, on the Ubangi River, where several thousand people stood in an open courtyard while lightning ripped the sky apart and rain fell in sheets. Suddenly the rain stopped. Hours passed. People began fainting in the heat.

Michael, Cynthia, and I were the only whites, and we moved in line with the Congolese; with Habib, from the Ivory Coast; with Alphonse, from Gabon; with riverboat con artists and naive villagers on their first trip downriver. The bottleneck turned out to be the soldier who was checking everyone's papers. He wore a camouflage uniform and a brown beret and carried an automatic pistol in a white plastic holster. His name, stitched in red on his left breast, seemed faintly mocking: "Thermometer."

A great wash of humanity carried us onto the corrugated metal deck of the barge, and eventually, engines thrumming, the *Flueve Congo* moved majestically out into the current and began floating down the Ubangi, toward the Congo and our destination, Brazzaville.

Cynthia, Michael, and I stood at the very back of the very last barge, watching Impfondo recede into the distance. On the bank to our left was a small village, and I saw a woman run down the dirt path to the river and begin screaming at us. She was in her late teens, I'd guess. Tall and angular, she flapped her arms like the black herons that rose occasionally along the shoreline. Her cries couldn't be heard above the noise of our diesels.

"Missed the boat," I said.

The woman dropped to her knees, turned her face to the sky, and howled soundlessly. She beat her palms on the rain-sodden red earth, raising splashes of mud that stained her orange dress.

"Seems disappointed," Michael observed.

Cynthia told us that we were like all men: cynical in the face of strong emotion. She felt sorry for the young woman.

We humped our gear through the crowds, looking for the first-class cabin we'd booked. The riverboat's three-story wheelhouse loomed above the eight barges lashed to the bow, the sides, and the stern; our cabin was behind the wheelhouse, in a high edifice that had once been the superstructure of another riverboat. The room was an olive-drab metal cubicle that felt distressingly like a jail cell; the three of us immediately escaped back onto the teeming decks.

Along the starboard railing, men and women dropped a bucket on a rope into the river, pulled it back up, and used the water to wash their clothes, their children, themselves. A harried mother asked us to watch Juliet, her toddler, while she bathed her baby. Juliet was four, and she held my index finger in her small hand.

As we were standing there baby-sitting Juliet, a man in clean khakis and a bushman's hat came by with a young chimpanzee that was clinging to him as if the man was its mother. The chimp had a rope around its waist, and the man put it down on the deck. It scampered about on its feet and hands, oofing and woofing. Juliet's mother swept her up in a single motion. People scattered in all directions. Chimps are strong, and they can bite.

Cynthia, who had once worked on a film with Jane Goodall and knew something about chimps, knelt in front of the animal. She held out her left palm and touched it with the bunched fingers of her right hand. A grooming gesture. The chimp took her left hand for a moment, then turned its back to her. Cynthia parted the hairs on the back of its head, grooming it, and the chimp seemed content.

The man who held the rope told us his name was Sarafin. He had bought the chimp in a village upriver for about $8. It was an orphan. He thought he could sell it to the zoo in Brazzaville.

Michael told Sarafin that, in the Republic of the Congo, any traffic in primates was forbidden. He said that he consulted with the government on poaching issues, and warned Sarafin that he'd be arrested at the zoo. The thing to do, Michael advised, was to take the chimp to the primate orphanage in Brazzaville, where it would be rehabilitated, taught to hunt and forage, and released into the forest.

Later, in the cabin, we talked about the encounter. Michael said he wasn't really sure that Sarafin would have been arrested at the zoo. He thought that the chimp-and-gorilla orphanage was a feel-good solution and that what was important was to stop any kind of commerce in wildlife. Sarafin seemed like a bright young guy who had no intention of breaking the law. He'd help pass the word.

Cynthia said that while the chimp looked healthy enough, she still felt sorry for it.

I identified with it.

There are almost no roads in the northern Congo, and people travel by river. But the *Flueve Congo* wasn't truly about transportation. It was about commerce. Even at the smallest villages, the captain brought the engines to an idle and people paddled out in pirogues. They came to sell smoked fish, or oranges, or live dwarf crocodiles with their snouts wired shut, or chickens or goats. There was no refrigeration on the barges, and meat was kept alive until dinner.

Periodically one or more of the flat-topped barges would be uncabled at a village, and another two or three would be added as additional passengers poured aboard the *Flueve Congo*. Shopkeepers who maintained stalls on the barges sold batteries, lamps, soap, salt, shampoo, T-shirts, hard candy, and music cassettes. Bargaining was a high-volume affair. Folks shouted at one another in the way I might address someone who'd just shot my dog. But there was always a smile hidden somewhere very close behind the seeming abuse.

Eventually the Ubangi emptied into the Congo proper. At the town of Mossaka, we became deck passengers. A local politician had booked our cabin weeks before. The captain allowed us to pile our gear and cameras in the wheelhouse for safekeeping.

In the early-afternoon sun the metal decks of the barges were searingly hot. People sat on boards or bricks or rolls of foam padding. Sheets rigged on sticks provided some protection from the sun. At each stop, another 780,000 people boarded the barge. There was now such a crush of bodies aboard the *Flueve Congo* that no one could take a single step without bumping into someone else.

It was a world of constant apology, and my choice, as I saw it, was between passive acceptance or madness—despite the fact that everyone else seemed to be having a swell adventure. Cynthia obtained the captain's permission to stand on top of the wheelhouse and shoot crowd scenes along with sunrises and sunsets. Michael, already fluent in French, worked on his Lingala vocabulary. He underlined useful words in a dictionary and then strolled about looking for opportunities to work *ekila* ("abstinence") or*ezanga tina* ("crazy" or "absurd") into a conversation.

I, on the other hand, could not write my essay about heaven and hell, about the Edenic forest and the sweltering barge. Exquisitely uncomfortable and unable to finish a sentence, I spent many moping hours on one of the flat-topped barges devoted to livestock: goats and pigs and chickens and me all bunched together under a tarp that provided a little bit of shade. One of the goats fell in love with a pig, to the porker's great annoyance. It was entirely *ezanga tina*, a lesson, I thought, about all of us swirling down the drain of the behavioral sink. I longed to be back in the forest, in the monkey-shit rain.

After two days on deck I became disconsolate and sought the company of drunkards. One beer, maybe two, and then back to the goats, back through the general hubbub of too much humanity apologizing to itself. Excuse me. Pardon me. I imagined the future of the human race as an endless ride on the Congo barge, and shuddered in the heat.

Cynthia found me hunched up and brooding among the animals. "Can I do something for you?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, "go away."

I met folks named George and Slava and Josephine and Enrique. Many of them were extremely attractive. God, however, was easily the most handsome man I'd ever met. He stood a couple of inches over six feet, a lean, well-muscled man of about 25 who seemed vastly amused by life in general.

God had just graduated from college and was going to Brazzaville, where he had secured a job teaching school. He apologized about the name. He'd grown up in a remote village where his father heard educated people talking with great respect about a person called God. It seemed a good name for a son, and young God lived half a dozen years before he realized that people other than his father found the name either offensive or amusing. "But I'm stuck with it," he said.

God had traveled often on the *Flueve Congo* and was our single best source of information. There was no set schedule. Some nights we'd anchor in the darkness; sometimes we'd run all night long. It depended a lot on the captain's mood and the heat of commerce conducted at various villages. God had a kind of sixth sense for the captain's humor. He'd predicted our arrival at the confluence of the Ubangi and the Congo to the hour.

Now, after ten days, I needed to know when we'd arrive in Brazzaville. My drinking buddies had varying opinions. Some thought two more days, some three.

"Who knows?" Maurice said.

God knows, I thought, and set off to find him.

I bumped into Cynthia on the way, and together we sought him out across the crowded expanse of the *Flueve Congo* universe. We found him waiting in a long line outside what was now the only functioning public toilet on the barge.

We stood with God, inching our way toward the toilet.

"Tim is going insane," Cynthia told him.

"How much longer?" I asked.

"Twenty-four hours," he said. "We should be in Brazzaville tomorrow morning at this time."

That, I thought, was acceptable. I could certainly bear it for one more day.

But now Cynthia had a problem. At the disembarkation, she wanted to get off first so she could turn around and film our arrival. It was going to be a madhouse. Everyone with something to sell would rush off in order to get the best prices or find the best corner to set up shop.

"Tim and Michael can carry the gear," Cynthia told God, "but could you help me get off and find a high spot to stand?"

God said it would be no problem. Cynthia was happy: She'd get her shot, with the help of God.

I spent the remainder of the last full day drinking beer with Maurice and maundering on, mostly in English, about the difference between Eden and the end of the world as we know it. Maurice agreed with everything I had to say and I finally bought him the beer he didn't really want.

We pulled into the port of Brazzaville at ten the next morning, just as God had foreseen. People began pouring off the barge, but God never showed, and I wasn't going to sit around waiting for him.

"Absenteeism," said Michael, trying to recall the word in Lingala.

Cynthia, who'd put her faith in God, was bitterly disappointed.

"He helps those who help themselves," I muttered as I grabbed my share of the gear. And then—apologizing profusely all the way—I got the hell off that godforsaken barge.