



Learning the Ropes

taken from King Bruno

by

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When Bruno's mother is killed by poachers, he is taken from his home in the forests of Sierra Leone and held prisoner in a village. Starving and close to death, he is then rescued and taken to the city by Bala and Sharmila - a husband and wife who adopt Bruno and care for him like their own child. But adjusting to human life is not as easy as it seems...

Back in the forest, all the young chimps had wanted to be like Gombe. They staggered around with twigs and leaves, trying to impress one another. Their mothers showed them how to use stones and sticks to crack nuts or scoop honey out of a bee's nest. Fishing for termites was the hardest. First you chose a twig and stripped it of its leaves. Then the twig went into a hole in the side of a termite mound. Once the twig was covered in termites, you drew it out and ate them. The twigs had to be perfect – not too short and not too wide. And the termites didn't like being caught. When Bruno took his first delicious mouthful, they bit his tongue and he yelped.

But all this was easy compared to living with Bala. Swinging was banned in the house, and so was breaking. Every morning, while Sharmila combed her hair, Bala proudly buttoned his clean white shirt to the neck. Bruno studied them. He ran his fingers through his own fur and played with the buttons. He wanted to be a human, clean and dainty. And so, when he turned around one day and saw the neat, perfect poo he had left on the carpet, Bruno grunted anxiously.

In the forest, no-one would have minded. In the forest you went to the toilet anywhere, as long as it wasn't in your own nest. You could even pick your poo up and

throw it around.

Bruno had lived in Bala and Sharmila's house for nearly a year now, and he had never once seen Bala throw his own poo around. He never fought or slapped or bit Sharmila, and when he ate, he held back his farts and grunts. In all this time, the only other chimps Bruno had seen were in the TV, where they couldn't get out and hurt him. These strange chimps had houses of their own, with ropes and tyres to play on, and although Bala studied them with interest, Bruno was relieved when the TV was off and they went away. That was all finished now. Bala and Sharmila loved him. He wanted to stay with them, in their house full of toys, far away from the forest. That was why he was concerned about the poo.

Bruno fidgeted. He had to do something about it before Bala returned home. Then he remembered. Upstairs, in a small room, stood a bowl with a puddle of water and a roll of paper beside it. This was where Bala and Sharmila made their toilet. It had taken Bruno months to find it.

He panted in excitement, dashed up the stairs and grabbed the paper. Then he stopped. There were toys everywhere – a fuzzy white stick for cleaning your teeth, a comb for grooming. Bruno couldn't resist. He dropped the toothbrush in the toilet bowl and pressed the handle. He laughed as the brush spun round and round and disappeared. Then he stopped. Bala would never do this. Bala would finish the job he had begun. Bruno ran downstairs and set to work.

It was harder than it looked. The roll of toilet paper was big and Bruno's hands were small. When he wiped at his poo, it just seemed to spread everywhere. But in the end it was gone. The carpet was brown and sticky and piles of brown paper lay everywhere. Bruno clapped and jumped up and down. Bala would be happy.

Bala wasn't happy. When he walked through the door and saw the mess on the floor, he stared at Bruno as though something invisible had hit him on the head. Then he picked Bruno up and took him outside. Bruno squirmed. When they reached the garden, he screamed and rolled around. He pooped again and threw his poo at the neighbour's car. Then he climbed the mango tree.

It stood at the end of the garden, and it was the one place where Bruno was free to do what he wanted. Bala never followed him. Bruno's feet and hands were clever – they found the branches without looking. But Bala was slow, and the more Bruno barked at him, the slower he got.

Outside Bala and Sharmila's garden lay the city. Humans crowded the streets, chattering, carrying piles of wood or fruit or toys. Bruno sat on a branch and watched. They were like chimps in so many ways. He had seen them hug and kiss each other and sit close to teach things to their young ones. They were clumsy and had no sense of humour, but they were also patient. They weren't afraid of the dark or the forest; they didn't need the sun or rain or plants or animals. They built their own world - a world without shadows or strange noises, a world that was safe and comfortable - and Bruno

longed to be like them.

He was in the tree again when Bala called him. Bruno heard the warm ring in his voice and swung down, panting happily. As he reached the ground, a small hairy figure stepped out from behind Bala's leg. She had been playing with the laces of Bala's shoe, but when she looked up and saw Bruno, she opened her arms.

"Bruno," Bala said, "this is Julie."

Bruno stopped. Julie was a chimp. A young chimp, not much older than him. Bala smiled at Julie and handed her a piece of banana. Bruno's throat choked up. She was in his house. Eating his food. Playing with Bala's shoe. Bruno trembled. Then he screamed and charged.

She was too quick, and as Bala yelled at Bruno, Julie slipped away, across the garden and into the branches of the mango tree. Bruno scooped up a stone and threw it. Julie laughed. He swung into the tree after her. *No*. Bala was his.

Julie leapt from the tree to the roof. She was still laughing, like this was all a game. Bruno barked, but when he had her cornered, Julie jumped from the roof to the wall at the edge of Bala's garden.

She was running along the top of this wall when suddenly she stumbled and screamed. Now he would show her. She had slipped and cut her hand. She wasn't laughing anymore. Her eyes were frightened and she whimpered as Bruno grabbed her and Bala yelled.

It was then that he smelled her. It was a forgotten smell, musty and warm, and suddenly Bruno stopped. He swayed. Then he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his nose into her fur, breathing deeply. Julie kissed him and, from the ground below, Bala gave an approving shout.

After that, it was useless. Julie was here to stay. If Bruno beat her or bit her, or stole her dinner, Bala would scold him and lock him in the cage he had built in the garden. Bruno howled and rolled around, tearing out clumps of his own fur. But the weeks passed, and Bala did not budge.

Julie was better than Bruno at everything. She knew how to comb her fur and paint her face, just like Sharmila. When they slept in the bed, she arranged the sheets, straightening them until they were perfect. She could pluck fruit from the trees in the back garden with a long stick, just like Bala, and when they went on forest walks, she scampered fearlessly amongst the snakes and bugs while Bruno hid in the car. He sulked and threw stones at her.

She must have seen him playing with Sheba, because one day Julie came to Bruno in the garden and nudged him. He snorted and got up. Then he stopped. In her hands, she held a puppy. Soft and yellow and warm. Bruno took it and ran his fingertips through its fur. Then he kissed it and Julie clapped. She disappeared for a moment and when she returned, she had a puppy of her own. Together they climbed into the mango tree.

Below them, Sheba appeared, searching for her missing babies.

At the top of the tree, Julie sat down on a branch. With her puppy in one hand, she began to twist and bend the branches.

At first, Bruno didn't understand. Then a memory came to him. He was in the forest, in his mother's arms. As night fell the trees whispered, and all the animals scurried and hid, as though a living thing had come to hunt them. Snakes and lizards fell still as the air grew cold. Birds hurried to roost. Through the gloom, Bruno's mother broke and bent branches and twisted them together, her lip drooped in concentration. She was building a nest for them; a bed to sleep in. When it was finished, she would line it with leaves and they would lie down together...

Bruno blinked, and the memory was gone. Julie took the two puppies and placed them in the nest she had built, panting happily as they mewled and crawled around. Down below them, Sheba began to howl. Bala appeared, to see what the fuss was about. When he saw the puppies in the tree, he shook his head. Then he started to climb. He placed one foot gingerly on the first branch and groped for the next one.

Julie watched him and laughed. It was a soft chimp laugh; a laugh that started in her throat and spread down to her belly until her whole body shook. When Bruno heard it and saw Bala, he laughed too.

Then Julie turned and began to groom Bruno. Her fingers ran through his fur, checking it was straight and clean and free of dirt. It felt nice. Bruno turned to groom her back, and as he heard her grunt of contentment, he knew at last he had found a friend.

