

The Little Lemur Who Spoke

(Excerpt)

In just a few months, I had made significant progress. By partaking in social sunbathing, I had discovered a way to connect with the lemurs. Yet Obi and I still lacked the mutual understanding needed to forge more meaningful bonds. However, one lucky breakthrough would soon lead to another. Our inability to communicate clearly would create one final point of mild tension with Obi. Through that challenge, an opportunity to bridge the gap would soon present itself.

My responsibilities grew exponentially once my second-years graduated. Although I spent as much time as I could with Obi, I could only sit and sun with him for fifteen to thirty minutes at a time, rather than spending hours as I had before. Each time I got up to leave, Obi would grow visibly distressed. Uncertain about where I was going or why I was leaving, he would hop around frantically on the bars. As I walked away, he would watch me go, always with wide, pleading eyes. Although it hurt me to leave, I had no way of explaining. Our relationship lacked language.

On rare occasions, Obi would leave first, opting to spend time alone or with Janga. One day, I heard a faint sound when he got up and turned to go. For a moment, I doubted my ears—but then I heard it again. As his four little limbs carried him away from me and his long tail waved in the air, I heard him make a soft *hoot* or *hmm* sound, which he repeated every few seconds as he strolled. Spotting Janga sleeping on the far side of the enclosure, I knew he had directed the sound at me. The third time I heard the almost imperceptible call, I repeated it back. Without turning around, Obi promptly repeated it, but this time more audibly. I repeated it once more, and again, Obi answered. We went back and forth for four or five rapid iterations before he stopped responding. I could only guess what the call meant. I assumed at the time that it was a way of saying goodbye.

Ring-tailed lemurs have a rich repertoire of vocalizations—far more than many primates. Yet Obi was not a particularly vocal lemur. The only sound he regularly made was a strange, panting “honk” when the zoo’s gibbons erupted into song. Months later, when I listened to audio samples of every known ring-tailed lemur call, I learned that this bizarre call did not match any of them. It was unique to Obi, and I suspected it was yet another effect of being hand-raised. In contrast, this faint *hmm*

was common among ring-tailed lemurs. I was still unsure of its meaning at the time, so I decided to put it to use and monitor Obi's reaction.

The next time I had to depart, I made a soft *hmm* call as I stood to leave. A couple of seconds later, I made the sound again as I slowly walked away, just as Obi had the day before. Looking back, I noticed Obi sitting there calmly, watching me as I began to round the circle and leave his line of sight. He did not jump around frantically, nor did he make desperate attempts to watch me go. He seemed to understand and accept it. From then on, I continued testing the *hmm* call, using it as a way of saying goodbye. Each time it had the same calming effect.

It seemed I had learned my first lemur call, and I was eager to learn more. The most challenging and distinct call I managed to imitate was the *early-high wail*. Its high opening pitch required some experimentation with my vocal cords. Although Obi did not teach me this call or its function directly, I inferred its obvious meaning on the few occasions I heard him use it. Every time I came to visit, the little lemur's excitement was palpable. As soon as he saw me, Obi would dash counterclockwise around the branches that crowned the upper reaches of his enclosure, bounding from tree limbs to bars and back, as he energetically raced in a loop. Sometimes he would do the same on the ground, trotting in a tight circle with his tail held high. Typically, a purr of contentment thrummed in his throat as he circled; but sometimes, if he spotted me at a distance, he would call with a sharp wail. The strength and inflection of the call seemed to match the intensity of his excitement. With some practice, I managed to mimic the purr as well. Upon hearing my reply, Obi would run and jump faster.

More calls would come in time. But I had now grasped enough of the basics for us to relate to each other. Then, one day, Obi took our communication to a whole new level by using a gesture. People often take this method of expression for granted. While we use and interpret body language subconsciously, gestures tend to be conscious and deliberate. Lemurs commonly use body language, including tail rubbing or open-mouth threats. However, many researchers assume that their limited intelligence precludes the ability to use conscious gestures. What I was about to witness, however, suggested otherwise.

While sitting and sunning with Obi one day, I had an itch behind my right ear. Obi watched curiously as I reached up and scratched in the usual manner, raking the nail of one or two fingers over the spot by repeatedly flexing and relaxing my digits. Noticing Obi's intense, direct gaze, I returned his curious stare. To my surprise, Obi carefully raised his right leg and placed his toes against his right ear. Without taking his eyes off mine, the little lemur slowly and deliberately scratched the equivalent spot.

A full second separated each of the two or three drawn-out raking swipes. Then, lowering his leg, he sat placidly and continued watching me. His eyes told me that he awaited my response. I assumed he expected me to mimic him again.

With difficulty, I attempted to demonstrate that I could not put my foot behind my ear. Instead, I placed all four fingers on my right hand behind my ear and scratched the spot by raking with my fingers rapidly, moving my entire forearm in the process, almost like a dog scratching. After calmly watching my improvised imitation, Obi lifted his little nose slightly and broke eye contact. To me, his contented look said, “Good enough.”

Lemurs respond to an itch with a scratch reflex. Like dogs or cats, they raise a leg and rake the itch rapidly with their sharp toenails. Occasionally, they will scratch slowly and more thoroughly. When they do so, they usually grip their ear between their widely divergent big toe and the rest of their digits and gently scrape the sensitive inside of the ear. However, I have never before or since seen a lemur scratch the way Obi did that day, holding my attention with his eyes while slowly and deliberately raking his nails over his ear.

I later learned that captive lemurs can use their gaze to direct attention. In this case, Obi seemed to want me to watch the way he scratched his ear and then sat waiting for me to try it. Only after I had attempted to mimic him did he release his gaze. I assume that Obi understood that I was learning through mimicry, beginning with sunning and vocalizations. So, from that day forward, I started scratching the way Obi had taught me. It stuck, and I continue to do so fourteen years later. Admittedly, I might have misunderstood. Instead, maybe he was asking me to scratch his ear, too. I will never know for sure. Regardless, it would have been no less impressive, for it still would have been a conscious gesture with implied meaning. But from then on, Obi demonstrated that he understood humans far better than we had assumed and that he could find novel ways to communicate.

Obi was a bridge, in the metaphorical sense, spanning the gap between two distinctly different worlds. Sometimes people can act as bridges, too. While some people only care about their own narrow cultural experiences, others strive to share and learn despite any boundaries. In that sense, I believe I am a bridge, too. Like Obi, I partially abandoned my natural ways of communicating when around him. Instead, I found new ways to communicate.

That little lemur was unique. He seemed torn between the ring-tailed lemur world and the human world, and he did not hesitate to accept a curious man into his life to share this dichotomy. Obi

was more than a companion. By gradually sharing everything with me, he was becoming a true friend. And in return, I shared as much of my world as possible.

Obi reached out, so I reached back. And we met somewhere in the middle.