**WILD AND FREE by Bettina Gantsweg**

Two guides slash a path through branches with huge machetes, another treks behind lugging a shotgun, and we eight adventurers follow. Words crackle over their radios—“Keep going—six—moving fast.” I shove scratchy branches out of my face—thorns piercing my hands, and continue slogging through slush, tripping over vines. The Ugandan jungle reeks of pungent earth and animal dung.

Two hours pass. I gulp water, drench my handkerchief to dab at blood dripping down my fingers. “How much longer?” The guides check their radios—“Getting closer—trackers spotted them up ahead.”

Watch out! Ants! Streaking across in long lines, they bulldoze through everything in their path. We tuck pant legs into our socks and step over their trails, but these deadly creatures find ways to attack.

Heat, humidity, unstable ground, uncertain destination, but nothing will stop us—few humans have seen the 850 mountain gorillas still roaming this planet.

Struggling upward another tortuous hour, stabbing our poles into the ground with each step—the front guide turns with wide eyes, finger to his lips. A moment later—enormous black blotches cluster among the jungle leaves—six mountain gorillas—wild and free! We creep closer—ten feet away—they’re lolling about, scratching with thick-fingered hands, languidly twisting, relaxing. The female gently grooms the silverback lying with his head thrown back, eyes closed in exquisite pleasure. Deep rumbling belches make us smile, while she rubs his thick black hair, back and forth, seeking little critters, which she then eats.

The guide whispers, “Don’t touch the leaves—move slowly—no flash.” We feverishly snap photos, scouting around for better views between branches. They pay us no attention, just lie about, stuff their mouths with clumps of leaves, nibble on bright green tips and gnaw on branches.

An adorable baby rolls over and over, jumps onto a juvenile, scoots about the undergrowth, but mother grabs his arm and grunts, “Lie still! It’s rest time!” He cuddles against her, crawls over her belly, smashes her face, sucks on her finger—can’t sit still. Screeching, the juvenile races up a tree, flings himself high onto a limb and swings back and forth, back and forth. The bug-eyed baby wrenches free, darts over to the juvenile, but unable to climb the tree, scurries back to nuzzle against mother.

Sitting up, the massive silverback fills the space with majesty: silver tinges his brows, frames his face, and shimmers in patches about his body. A wide nose flattens to a “v” with oval slots, wrinkles cross his cheeks, and lips close in a thin straight line. His hands are black puffs, his fingers bare, thick stubs used to snap off leaves, and stuff palm-fulls into his mouth.

In silhouette, his neck-less, rectangular head bulges at the back, and the tiny ear seems incongruous. Eyes deeply embedded beneath an overhanging forehead, his slanted flat face ends with a receding jaw.

Transfixed, it’s difficult to believe that I stand a few feet from magnificent, wild beings, living in freedom—nature’s way. Time passes with conflict—should I just observe with delight, or scurry around recording every movement? I finally decide to breathe in the acrid odors, absorb the humidity, stick fingers in the rich black soil, and fill up my senses with these unique moments, observing a mountain gorilla family’s daily life.

When the signal comes to leave after our allotted one hour, we all grimace in sadness and pain, pack up our cameras, quietly stand, look back to imprint this spectacular scene upon our memories, and start down the mountain.