

## Endangered Species

It was early morning in the jade-green, foliage covered mountains and the last of the cloud-fog still hid the mountain tops and hovered over the valleys. On a large, earthy, hand plowed, brown patch in the middle of one particular green mountain, Glopa (up and about before the sun) stood up straight, stretched her arms toward the sky and breathed deep to relieve the pressure on her lower back. She rubbed her hands together to remove any loose dirt particles. Then, putting her hands on her hips, she surveyed her handiwork: nice humps of *kau kau*<sup>1</sup> mounds, each about four feet square, 15 rows across and 15 rows length ways all told. Some of the plants already had mature *kau kau* on them. *Tomorrow, maybe I can start planting kumu.*<sup>2</sup>

She heard the baby starting to stir at the corner of the garden in the *bilum* hanging on a tree branch, so she went to nurse him. As she adjusted herself comfortably at the base of a tree, her mind wondered back to the previous week. She had gone with Lepi, Baike, and Mendil to the mission station to see the new church that was being built. She had heard three *amma kondolyas*<sup>3</sup> there discussing a literacy class for village women. A surge of emotion rose in her chest at the thought of learning to read. Her eyes started to water and then she remembered what her husband had said, “But why? The sun is already setting.”

Her thoughts were interrupted by a strong, warm, baritone voice singing out across the wet, luscious, emerald mountaintops. It settled down into each valley as it floated overhead and as each new voice picked it up and continued its message, it rang out melodic, full, and beautiful.

*Mendlg ool de*  
*Mendlg ool de*  
*Molgon colgya kainapol*  
*Molgon colgya kainapol*  
*Molgul yol de -- oool oool– de*<sup>4</sup>

(It was time, the song said, for Little Mendlg, who had been visiting her extended family in the bush, to go home, which was in Mendi town. The bush tele-communication carried the message.)

*Well, Glopa returned to her thoughts, I might be 30 years, but the sun has a long way to go before it reaches my horizon.*

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Susan smacked her hand down hard on the alarm clock to stop the annoying sonar sound. As she did, she inhaled the lovely, warm, comforting aroma of fresh coffee brewing. She rolled over on her back, and her mind turned on, like a radio announcer that she couldn't turn off. *Why doesn't he disengage the alarm before he leaves the room? He's so thoughtless. He just doesn't think! 6:00? Kids have another half hour to sleep, and me too. Bus arrives at 7:30.* Then she rolled over again, stuffing her nose into the clean smell of her plush pillow. She pulled the soft sheets up around her neck and sighed. *Love my bed.* She could hear John moving around in the kitchen, making himself his daily tea for his thermos (which he drank more religiously than an Englishman) and clinking pans as he made his epicurean omelet of eggs, fresh tomatoes, fresh spinach, sharp cheddar, and his special spices. She smiled at that thought because he always brought her some.

What would she do today? Work, as usual, work, work, work, she knew. She had to pack school lunches, get the kids on the bus, laundry (Mt. Neverest: someone had called it), iron a few shirts for John for next week (he had some "no iron" shirts but they were uncomfortable, he said), dust, vacuum (People were coming over Sunday), empty the dishwasher, reload it, and mop the kitchen. She suddenly remembered the gooey, cheesy, tomatoey casserole that her friend, Vera, had made and brought to the picnic last weekend and that she'd planned to duplicate this Sunday for her extended family. That would mean a trip to the store would be necessary. No worries, she

told herself, she might look for a blue or white top for her navy suit while she was out and about. John interrupted her thoughts by opening the bedroom door and handing her a tray which held a plate with an omelet and a piece of warm, buttered toast, and a cup of coffee.

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Glopa hurried back to her house, a four room structure with woven, yellowish-brown *pit pit* walls and a dried *kuni* grass roof. She stirred the fire, which was in the middle of the largest room, an about five foot square space that was empty of anything but the fire pit in the middle of the floor. (The other rooms, about four foot square, were pitch-black-dark and were for sleeping.) She placed a number of *kau kau* in the ashes strategically so as to cook them through without burning or hardening the outside. Her husband would eat some, her boys would eat some, her daughter would need one for now and one for later (her school lunch), she herself would eat a couple now, and if she cooked more for later in the day, it would save her time and energy.

She held the olive green *minbeygomo* leaves over the fire to warm them and got the yellow rice bags ready for Toropa's little feet. At about 7,000 feet above sea level, Tambul was high in the mountains in the Southern Highland Province of Papua New Guinea, and it got cold there. The *minbeygomo* leaves would serve as socks in her rice bag shoes. Little Toropa had a walk of about four miles to the elementary mission school where she attended. Glopa was blessed and she knew it. Her daughter, the next to the youngest of her five living children, got to go to school with her bothers. She was smart, too, and a little strong-willed, Glopa thought as she smiled inwardly. Toropa reminded her of herself when she was that age.

That afternoon, Glopa went to help with a young mother in the village that was having trouble giving birth. She wasn't originally from there but had married a man in Glopa's village. Things didn't look good for her. The young woman had already lost three babies and this one was not coming like it should. Two hours after Glopa arrived to help, a baby boy was born and

he had green *pek pek* all over him. She didn't know that the stress of being born had caused his bowels to release, nor the medical term for it, but she knew he was in trouble. They washed him and his mother tried to nurse him, but he was too weak to respond. He died a few hours later and the young mother's wailing was heard all that evening and into the night. The mother of the baby who had died had been a twin at birth, Glopa knew, but her sister had been drowned because twins were bad luck. She felt sorry for the woman and wondered what it'd be like living so far from one's family, especially at a time like this.

She went back to her own hut with a heavy heart. Why did things like this happen? Why? She sat alone for quite a while in the semi darkness on the soft, dirt floor, her chin resting on her bent knees, her arms wrapped around her legs. Occasionally, she absentmindedly poked the fire. She was thinking about her own babies that were gone. Finally, she heaved a big sigh and started making plans for the next morning. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

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This was a morning that the kids fussed and carried on. Larry couldn't find his shoes. Sarah suspected that Joseph had hidden them but she couldn't prove it. Ben and Nathaniel wrestled constantly, even up to two minutes before it was time to go out the door. She got the lunches packed and the kids off, finally.

Passing by the thermostat, she turned it up a little. It was a little chilly for a fall morning. She ate a bowl of cereal and put a roast in the crock-pot, processed the laundry (put a load into the dryer and put another into the washing machine), showered, put on a clean pair of jeans, blow dried her hair, put lotion on her face (all over actually), and got the vacuum out to run when the phone rang. It was Caroline.

As she sat listening to Caroline, she could see her friend in her mind's eye, her body filling the recliner in her living room, curlers in her hair, with her faded, pink, bedspread-

textured robe over top of her baggy, matching, faded pink, pj's, floor littered with debris, and her face frowning as she told Sara her troubles. Caroline thought her husband was having an affair. She had no proof at this point, she just suspected it, and she talked about it (with the little bit of information that she kept nurturing) for two hours. Sarah thought she needed a life, or to get control of the one she had, but of course she didn't say so.

After she hung up the phone, Sarah processed laundry again, put potatoes, carrots, and onions in with the roast, dusted, vacuumed, and mopped the kitchen. Then she collapsed on the sofa with a bowl of hot, buttered popcorn (sprinkled with honey) and a novel she'd been reading.

At 4:00, the kids piled pell-mell into the living room and began making hunger sounds at the smell of the pot roast cooking. John came home, and they ate supper.

After supper, Susan stacked the dishes up to do tomorrow and everyone filed into the den to watch *Gilligan's Island* reruns. Of course, moans met the announcement that it was time for showers. Eventually, after a long drawn out process, where snacks were devoured, showers were taken, and teeth were brushed, everybody went to bed.

Early the next morning, Sarah called their bank's 1-800 number to get the deposit amount of John's check so she could run down her balance in the check book. She got everyone out the door as usual and then went to do her shopping. She groaned as she seemed to catch every light in town. *Where do all these people come from? Why don't they stay at home when I'm out?* She wasn't brave enough to lay on the horn, but she was tempted!

It was just turning out to be one of those days. The store had stopped supplying her favorite salad dressing. She managed to find the right color blouse that she wanted but her size wasn't there (sold out). The store was so cold, it aggravated her and she was starting to wish she'd stayed home. *There is no sense in this! They can afford to make it a little warmer in here!* And when she wanted a clerk, none could be found! She couldn't seem to get her act together

and had to keep retracing her steps to get everything on her list. Every time she turned around it seemed like she almost bumped into someone. It must be the first of the month, she complained to herself, and remembered that it was. *Why does life have to be so stressful?*

She finally got finished (for the most part) what she wanted to do and steered herself toward home. Supper still had to be fixed and she was tired. Two of the boys had violin lessons this evening so there'd be no getting to bed early. And tomorrow evening one of them had ball practice. Would she ever get a decent nights rest?

Her cell phone rang and she answered it. It was John. Had she remembered to pick up his suits at the drycleaners? No, okay, no worries, he said, he just needed to know. He'd get them. He was on his way there at that moment. *Do I remember? He didn't mention it this morning, I know, but he sure thinks he did. I know he didn't. Oh, well, back to work. What are we going to have for supper? Here I just came from the grocery store and I still don't know what to have for supper!*

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That evening, Glopa sat with the baby over against the wall and listened to her husband and boys as they sat around the fire, ate *kau kau*, and told stories. First, the boys talked about their day at school. Wane (wa' nee) had finished a section of books and had gotten an award. Someone brought up the woman from the other village that was wailing. That, in turn, caused someone to remember their Grandpa (Glopa's dad) and the time he bought his third wife, who'd also been from another village. (She'd been a mean one.) They moved on to talk about who would help them pay for Glaimi a wife. Their father spoke up and said that he'd given a pig for his brother's son's wife and he was sure that his bother would give one for Glaimi. Then they started talking about the *kondolyas* at the mission station. They had funny ways but they were glad that they were there. They ate some kinds of food that were desirable but some of the things

they ate were disgusting. Glaimi described a food that was red, that you could see through, that wasn't a liquid or a solid, that shook and quivered in the bowl, that was sweet (the *kondolyas* put fruit with it), but it made you want to retch. It felt awful in the mouth.

One of the *amma kondolyas* who taught at the mission school, a lady who probably had 25 years and still wasn't even married yet, was Toropa's teacher. She was kind and patient and she really liked Toropa. Glaimi (the eldest) spoke up and said that it was probably because she's so smart. Mondu (the third boy) glared at Toropa at those words. *Who needed a smart girl?* She stuck her tongue out at him, and her father swatted at her. She ran over and sat next to her mother.

The other teacher was a different story. She got frustrated quickly when the younger children didn't understand what she was trying to communicate. (Her *Imbongu* was terrible and her translator only showed up when he had absolutely nothing else to do.) She fussed and fussed over so many things that weren't important at all. She wouldn't let anybody in her house except her work-girl, who spent a lot of time mopping the floor. She had two goats that she milked and she kept honey bees. The honey was what made her tolerable to everybody else, Papua New Guineans and missionaries alike. They could put up with her if they could look forward to having honey later.

Then they went on to talk about the *ye kondolya* who spent almost all of his time repairing existing buildings and building new ones: the station's three one room school houses, the clinic, the church, his house, and the dorm they had for younger students who lived too far away to walk every day. The moist, tropical weather, hot, noon-day sun, the rains, and the tropical insects took their toll on the wooden structures. When he wasn't doing construction, he was in charge of the gardens that grew food for the school. (This was another one of the *kondolyas* funny and strange ways, because garden work was for women.) His wife was a nurse

and worked in the clinic from noon until before the sun went down. The mornings she spent in their house teaching their three children, ages 12, 10, and 8, from books sent from America.

Glopa listened for any new information about the literacy class the *amma kondolyas* had talked about. Maybe they had just been talking... again. They had said they were so busy. Nevertheless, Glopa had hoped.... But nobody said anything about it.

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That evening, Sarah passed her deep blue, fish-filled aquarium (as she always did) on her way to bed. She fed the fish and sat down on the brown ottoman to watch them eat. She had clown fish, butterfly fish, puffer fish, and a couple of gold fish with babies. Her fish were therapeutic. She found them relaxing. She loved to watch them swim gracefully back and forth, sometimes slowly, sometimes darting in and out, and imagine that they had some kind of communication. *Just think, they think their world, that aquarium, is the whole world. With the refraction of the water and glass, they probably can't even see me. They have no idea that any life exists in the universe except for themselves.* She often wondered what it would be like to live in a very small place like they did and not even know it, to think your little world was the only one that was. She went to bed with that thought on her mind.

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The next morning Glopa got up before the sun, as usual, and went to her garden to collect the choicest *kau kau*. She filled an old *bilum* with them, about 50 pounds, and cross-tied the ends across her head, letting the heavy part of the *kau kau* rest against her backside. Then she added the *bilum* with the baby in it on top of that, letting it rest against the middle of her back. She walked slow and steady, with her hands holding on to the pile of *bilum* ties on her head. After walking about 10 minutes, she was joined by Lepi and Kewa on the main road. Lepi was big with *bel*,<sup>5</sup> and little Kewa rode on his mommy's shoulders, above her *bilum* full of *kau kau*. Her

other children had stayed home with Lepi's sister. They had walked a couple of miles when a PMV<sup>6</sup> came along. They climbed on the back and rode the rest of the way to the open air market in Mt. Hagen. After having left home about three hours before, they finally arrived. They set up their produce and sat the remainder of the day selling their vegetables and commenting on the many different and interesting people who came by, some to buy food and some just to look.

When the day was over, at the Bank of Mt. Hagen, they changed all of their money into K1.00,<sup>7</sup> a large silver coin that was minted with a small hole in the middle. These they strung up and carried with them. (Paper money didn't hold up good in the bush.) Glopa's would be used to pay for Tolopa's future schooling. They headed back, tired but happy. It'd been a good day. Maybe someone would come yet, if the *amma kondolyas* were too busy, who would teach her how to read. And if they never did, Tolopa could already read. This fact, and the weight of the *kenas* in her *bilum*, made her smile.

<sup>1</sup> sweet potatoes, <sup>2</sup> greens, <sup>3</sup> women that are white, <sup>4</sup> Imbongu is a real language in Papua New Guinea., <sup>5</sup> pregnant, <sup>6</sup> Public Motor Vehicle, <sup>7</sup> *kenas*, like dollars