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THEY LIVED where the rhino took dust baths, where the gazelle gathered, and where the giant buffalo roamed. By day they could be glimpsed making their way across the vast savannah, vague upright forms that were decidedly not animals and yet lithely intermingled with them. They moved from tree to acacia tree, foraging among the ambling giraffe, the skittish, dust-kicking wildebeest, the swollen zebras, sticks in hand, wary of lion, their gait purposeful and yet very cautious—a slow and steady and gliding gait. Certainly it was not the stooped and lumbering image commonly accorded to cavemen.

Some carried ostrich eggs and kindling twigs, others water baskets woven with hide and ambary fibers, still others wooden poles or slender stone blades. Their bare feet, padded with thick, leathery calluses, crunched against the tufts of parched grass and haggling brush, toes gnarled by poorly healed bones. Near the foothills a dust devil sucked fine baked clay into its vortex and made its way to the strange pedestrians, who were more advanced than anthropologists would later give them credit for being. A few privileged ones wore crude terracotta-colored cloaks, knotted at the shoulders; others swaths of ragged antelope hide. Others were nude, the dust and ocher their only accoutrement.

Nama, one of them uttered, and two companions looked toward the volcanic highlands. Languidly they scanned a distant jungle that was a Noah's Ark of lizards and birds. Any form of life

seemed possible in the festoons of liana and creepers, in the leopard forest that rimmed the savannah, in the microorganisms that mutated and multiplied. The sloping terrain, holding runoff from the heights, was so rich in wildlife—from apes to ants, with buttressed trees, with creeping and flying things—that it fairly whispered the secrets of evolution.

This was sub-Saharan Africa 200,000 years ago. There were glaciers slowly moving across other parts of the planet, sheets of ice that grew like algae from the poles. But Africa was eminently hospitable, warm and lava-rich; a home, several million years before, to the first two-legged hominids, the man-apes; then to ape-men known as *Homo erectus*; now to the very first modern humans.

Though there were at least a million very primitive people living in the Old World, only from this small, isolated population in Africa did we all descend. They were the only *Homo sapiens sapiens* at the dawn of modern mankind, and when all their clans were counted, their number was less than 10,000.

The rest of Africa and the world beyond it was inhabited by far more archaic people who bore many resemblances to this new band in the sub-Sahara but were still too much like the forerunning *erectus*—low-skulled and beetle-browed. They had spread throughout Africa and into Asia and Europe, these archaics, many developing into what would be known as Neandertals. But they were destined for extinction, and it was only the relatively small band of higher-skulled and gracile Africans, evolving much more swiftly out of the *erectus* stock, who would serve as our ancestors. They spread out of the sub-Saharan savannahs and took control of the rest of the world—wresting it from the archaics—by 30,000 years ago. Just 300 centuries after that, there would be a nearly inconceivable number of their offspring—5 billion of us—in every corner of the globe. The last of the ape-men had been overrun, conquered systematically (and perhaps brutally) by these fledgling humans from the sub-Sahara. The conquerors had changed in a unique and fundamental sense. They were able now to speak and make better weapons, and no longer apelike or shambling or beetle-browed.

This was the scenario we were to investigate: that a pocket

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of new people from Africa, as yet minuscule in number, would turn out, as scientists now claimed, to be our only direct and common ancestors. It was their destiny, it seems, to reinhabit and reshape the world. From them came the Aborigine and nuclear scientist alike, the Pygmies and towering Watusi, the Egyptians who would take stone-building to new heights on the desert to the north, the Jews up along the sea, the Greeks and Romans, the Samurai and English king, the Russians and Chinese and Americans, the beggar sleeping on a sidewalk grate and the billionaire in a Hyatt hotel.

The original modern humans learned how to escape natural calamities and manipulate the environment. They could build themselves shelters. They could cook. They were organized, their scarce numbers divided into rudimentary clans and subclans, twenty or thirty to a basic, functioning group, living both in temporary camps set in dried riverbeds near the lakes (during this, the dry season) and also in more permanent manyattas out of floodwater reach in the higher land, 200,000 years ago.

It was worth a close look at one such clan, because in it was a woman we have been searching for since the days of Genesis. Alas, according to the scientists, she has been found. Her people still carried remnants of primitive traits, their browridges slightly pronounced, their bones a bit robust. But most had the fully smooth and rounded skull of present-day humans. Some of their noses came to a point, others flared wide and pointy and arching at the same time. They had brownish eye whites and high cheekbones and their skin was dark—sometimes pitch black, in other cases nearly olive. In stature, too, they were like people alive today, but with far more sinew. Even in females, the biceps were prominent, the calves arched with hard muscle, the jaws strong from chewing roots, shoots, and tubers, or a delectable chunk of thick honeycomb.

These ancestors of ours, shrugging off the last remnants of animal behavior, were capable of erecting their living quarters by pounding poles into the earth, anchoring them with piles of stones, and fashioning walls and a roof between them: a thatched, tropical igloo, interwoven boughs plastered with mud and dung, dark and tiny, with room only for a bed or two of gathered grass and the circle of stones to contain a small hearth.

At the center of the huts was a larger structure, nearly forty feet long. It served as the elder's residence and as a warehouse for vegetables gathered by the women. Sapling-walled, it had a wind-screen to protect the hearth and a pit banked with sod to preserve embers. Here the tips of wood spears were hardened by fire. Other tools included hammerstones, scrapers, burins, the elegant new stone blades, and the most rudimentary awls.

Outside, the naked children rolled pebbles into a hole to while away the afternoon as their mothers scraped the fat from fresh hides with sharp little curvatures of rock flaked from lakeside pebbles. There were also heavy choppers and hand axes and grinding stones. Some of the implements were inherited from *erectus*, or even the last man-apes. The stone tools, in their turn, were used to create other implements of wood, horn, ivory, and bone. Smaller pieces of carved wood represented the first glimmerings of ornamentation—a sure sign of self-awareness and individuality. But there was not much time for frivolous labor when survival was constantly at stake. While the men hunted, gone often for two days at a time, the women moved to and from the open brush with hemp-bundled firewood on their backs, or they carved wood bowls and made skin bags before anyone thought they could.

One of these women is the subject of this book.

In a corner of the savannah, six kilometers from the man-yatta, the men were cooperating to outfox a gazelle. Several of them encircled it, scaring it into a clutch of other, hidden men who clubbed it and prodded it with their spears. Meat for the hearth. Hides for the capes. Tendons to tie together the smaller pieces of hafted tools and antlers.

Other animals were simply chased until they were too tired to escape, knocked unconscious by a deftly thrown rock, or scared toward a bog where they became mired. When bravery and pride ruled their emotions and the opportunity offered itself, the men sought a lumbering, unsuspecting elephant, ambushing the lone one at the end of a thundering procession and thrusting spears up into its soft underbelly as the other beasts wailed and stampeded off. Larger, sharply pointed hand axes were strung over booby traps to fall upon smaller but equally unsuspecting game. If good-

sized meat was unavailable collect large rodents.

The language was meant come, go, here, communication was done glance, a smile or frown. the hunt one of the men water hole—a few kilometers the one they were using

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The anthropologist

sized meat was unavailable, it was not beneath our ancestors to collect large rodents.

The language was rudimentary vowels. A dozen key ones meant come, go, here, there, food, help, water, danger. Most communication was done with a nod of the head, a sharp glare or glance, a smile or frown. Or by hand gestures. During a break in the hunt one of the men was able to communicate that last year's water hole—a few kilometers to the south—was now fuller than the one they were using this year.

Although the environment was so plentiful that some clans remained in one place, spreading a few kilometers with each new and more populous generation, the progeny of other related clans would find their location marginal and would migrate in search of better hunting or better water holes.

It was during these expansions and movements that they replaced the ape-men.

Some would become nomads, some pioneers. Others would become extinct. The movements, gradual though they were, would reach the point, 5,000 generations hence, where they were up through Israel and into Eurasia: Neandertal territory.

Instead of huts, they often found themselves taking to a convenient cave. The garbage—twigs, ash, old bones, and blunted tools—was removed to another shelter and simply left there. Communication sounded like deep whispers and "ahs" and "oohs" and grunts, but there was also the high-pitched clicking and clacking of children, forming the vaguest of songs.

Their mouths moved up and down and sideways with excitement as they watched older boys, the future hunters, chase a dik-dik into the scrub. Indeed, the older boys could already catch their own hare. They chased the animal until it froze and watched until it bent its ears. When it did, a deft shift sideways had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the hare's panicked route of escape.

Two other teen-age boys were at a rock shelter. They were grinding the tips of slender sticks against a rough patch of granite in such a way as to sharpen them. They were not adept with the weapon yet, but occasionally a small antelope was killed this way and the sticks were the forerunners of metal-tipped spears.

The anthropologist thousands of years later had no way of

knowing this. The wood would never be fossilized. Nor would the clothes or the huts or the modest language last through the ages. Neither would future scholars know for sure that ocher was mixed with fat and rubbed over the body as a shield from the sun and protection against evil spirits.

The older boys were separated from the rest by the elder, who taught them rituals, indicated legends, and tended to medical matters like toothaches, which were solved by simply knocking or chipping out the offending tooth. The elder was squatting beneath a shady, gnarled baobab, eating hard-shelled fruit. He watched as two dust devils rotated along the lower plains, and as he studied the swirling dust he remembered his own hunting youth, how once they had spotted a rare saber-toothed cat. Back in the old days, before more hunters came through, it had also been possible to see eleven-foot ostriches or a short-necked giraffe.

In every modern tribe, the elder was accorded special respect. He exchanged vowels with a woman who passed by with a small parade of children. It was the woman who we have heard about since the First Book of Moses. It really was her. We could hear her talk to the elder, who was actually only forty. She was concerned with the amount and dryness of the wood.

Lambatta—It is still quantity enough, the elder assured her. The woman was highly respected by the men, not only because of her prodigious childbearing but because of her meticulous care of them. And her ability to invent. She was the first to begin the routine of making her children drink herbal juice and eat oranges, and she was the only one who hadn't lost a child to yellow fever and malaria.

She has also devised ornaments of wood shaped like the large hut. It is a way of identifying the clan. They are hung from the neck with a thread of vine.

Dinner tonight is honey and locusts and seeds. The men eat in small groups below the manyatta and the women tend to children near the huts, watching as the sun, just a moment ago so incandescent, begins a precipitous descent such that nightfall is sudden and overwhelming. It is time to think and talk. A fire is rubbed into existence. Grass and twigs are added as the flames leap up, then thick pieces of broken branch are thrown into it. There

is no way to saw apart branches to fuel the twigs send up licks of boil water with their

Time to think. Usually every two sensing their presence elsewhere. It there is the urge to

As darkness resinous smoke from slopes, in the cooling water at the manyatta distant mountain an unseen fire. Someone And by the next night who knows the ba reconnoiter the fire who is inhabiting it

"Swoopa,"

He is of the Perhaps it is archaic Above, the They still mystify embers—campfires fire.

Off to the side young, under a fig with wonder. Her with thorns to keep snakes. They are se of their children b awareness and insti in the history of th her genes—and he tions from now.

Like the other muscle. But she is

is no way to saw apart the trunk of a tree but there are plenty of branches to fuel the flames. The rotten ones break like chalk, the twigs send up licks of orange fire, the stones glow so hot you can boil water with them.

Time to think and talk: When will they move the manyatta? Usually every two or three dry seasons, when the easier game, sensing their presence and thinning out, begin to establish themselves elsewhere. It may be time to move then, but increasingly there is the urge to establish themselves permanently.

As darkness deepens a few more men return, sniffing the resinous smoke from fires that glow like coals on the blackened slopes, in the cooling air, under heavens unbridled. There is chatter at the manyatta, the older man staring across the valley to a distant mountain and a startling sight: a strange and previously unseen fire. Someone new has moved in. It is no one they know. And by the next night a scouting mission—one of the older boys who knows the back terrain even in darkness—will be sent to reconnoiter the fire and see if it is a temporary camp and precisely who is inhabiting it.

"Swoopa," notes the elder again. "Malswoopa."

He is of the mind that it is temporary, but he fears violence. Perhaps it is archaics passing through.

Above, the stars are large and clear through the firmament. They still mystify the "old" man. They glow like very distant embers—campfires of the gods. There is chatter around their own fire.

Off to the side, alone, is that incredible woman nursing her young, under a fig tree. One day scientists will look back at her with wonder. Her latest innovation has been to encircle her hut with thorns to keep away nocturnal predators. Especially she hates snakes. They are serpents. *Sanna!* Most other women lose a third of their children before the age of two dry seasons. She is all awareness and instinct. A very special mother indeed. Few women in the history of the world will be as special as she is. Certain of her genes—and her genes alone—will be evident 10,000 generations from now.

Like the other women, she too is callused and hard in the muscle. But she is the most fertile of the women. She has three

youngsters at the age of eighteen and another on the way. Two are daughters. Those scientists will one day isolate her genes and nickname her "Eve."

She listens with sudden concern as vervet monkeys spill from the branches behind her, indicating a leopard. The commotion gratefully stops. Now there is only the whistling thorn of dry brush and the distant, staccato rumor of hippos.

It is silly, the name. It will irk a lot of people. But Eve, that's who we're looking for. And in a sense, according to certain of those scientists, this sub-Saharan woman, under the starlight 200 millennia ago, is not just an ancestor or another gracile African—but the world's one common grandmother.

THIS, OF COURSE, is a l debate. To extensively alone to claim that th humans, is tantamount

Fundamentalist academics who study su They are the ones wh dimensions of fossil sk who are supposed to sp anthropologists. Their ous lingo that charact

But the scenar fossils, not so much f does from something laboratories—the stud life itself. Since the 19 using techniques simila DNA have been track say, came from that si old, much older than she bore only remote rosanct fossils, spawnin tals and Peking Man. up to the point of the