A VISIT TO KOKO, NDUME, PENNY, AND RON

On November 19, 2000, I visited Koko, her male consort Ndume, and her people, Drs. Francine (Penny) Patterson and Ronald (Ron) Cohn. The way to their place leads off highway 280 north of Palo Alto, California, through the small town of Woodside. From there the road winds tortuously up into the Santa Cruz Mountains, nearly, I judged, to the highest point that can be reached by road. As I climbed higher and higher I was thinking, “This may be an appropriate place for mountain gorillas, but Koko and her male consort Ndume, are lowland gorillas—and this certainly isn’t lowland!”

Steve Wise, a lawyer who specializes in animal rights legislation and the author of the book *Rattling the Cage*,1 was following me, and I was following Penny, who has been working with Koko for the past 30 years. Penny promised to drive slowly (she said with her precise grammar), and as we screeched around the corners I thanked God that she thought she was driving slowly. A few hundred feet after the road split off the main road to the left, she pulled off to the right into a short unmarked driveway interrupted by an iron gate with a padlock. It seemed a strange sort of place for what is probably the world’s most famous nonhuman animal.

I parked just outside the gate and Steve parked just inside. We then took a path off through the woods to get to the office; Ndume’s home was off to the left, and Penny said they did not want strangers to upset him. We learned later that Ndume had diarrhea and throws feces at visitors, which would have been another reason we could have accepted for giving him a wide berth. Because we heard no sounds from Ndume, we assume that he did not hear us go by.

The office is unpretentious, to say the least; it is a one-story remodeled poultry house. However, once inside, you get the feeling that you are in an Apple orchard; that is, there is a profusion of colorful iMacs, one for every one
of the 8–10 desks in the office. Apple was a strong corporate supporter of the
Gorilla Foundation until it fell upon evil times, and the Gorilla Foundation
remains a loyal supporter of Apple. DeeAnn, a full-time employee (really full
time; our visit was on a Sunday afternoon at about 2:00 p.m.) greeted Steve
and me.

Steve, DeeAnn, and I were soon joined by Penny, Ron Cohn, Anthony
(who was then about 8 years old) and the friendliest German shepherd I have
ever seen. Penny left to settle Koko down (Penny had been gone for a week,
and Koko gets a little upset in her absence). Steve and I exchanged informa­
tion and anecdotes for a few minutes until she came back and said it was “time
go see Koko.” We were more than ready.

Koko’s home is perhaps 75 feet from the office. The sliding glass door
outside the sturdy wire mesh was open, and a narrow porch is just outside the
doors. The porch is really more like a walkway, about 3 1/2 feet wide and running
along beside the building for 8 or 10 feet. The day was clear and fairly sunny,
but as we approached I could see nothing inside. Koko’s coat is quite dark, and
she was simply invisible until you got your eyes out of the sun and into the
shade. The glare from the windows on the far side of the building made it
almost impossible to take pictures of anything as dark as Koko, as I found out
later when I tried to print mine.

As soon as my eyes were acclimated I saw Koko squatting (or sitting; I think
for gorillas they are the same) just inside the open sliding glass door. Anthony,
Steve, and I were eager to see Koko, so we crowded onto the porch. Penny
pointed out that Koko liked people to be down at her level (so do bonobos
and chimpanzees), so Steve sat on a short stool, and I sat down on a low
window box that was sitting on the outside part of the porch. As I sat there,
or squatted just outside the door, Koko’s eyes and mine were on the same
level. I got the impression that Koko was about my size, an impression that she
corrected later.

At first I was afraid to touch Koko, and certainly was not about to put my
fingers inside. I remembered too vividly the number of fingers lost at
Lemmon’s primate facility, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh’s short finger and Karl
Pribram being a finger short, all as a result of bites from our frenetic friends,
the chimpanzees. Even Maria Hoyt’s female gorilla Toto was a bad biter. But
Koko immediately greeted me by pursing her lips, showing her tongue, and
blowing through the wire mesh at me. I returned the greeting by blowing
back—our lips were perhaps three inches apart—but then I thought, “What if