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IAN BASSINGTHWAIGHTE

## The Elephant Walk

IT WAS IN THE FOOTHILLS of northern Thailand that Noi first learned elephants were better swimmers than fish. She was nine and thought they were tanks, or buildings, or horses that ate too much butter.

“They’re practically submarines,” said Ajaan Yo, a man like her father even though he wasn’t. “Go to the river and look if you don’t believe me. You will see ten trunks poking upward for air; there are giant creatures under the surface, and they are swimming.”

Noi was afraid of the elephants because even the small ones dwarfed her by a factor of twenty. She kept her distance from them. Even the old ones. Even the blind one, who was calmest, who moved around the fields, proceeding slowly, collecting his food.

“Go touch one,” said Ajaan Yo.

“What if it steps on me?” she asked.

“That’s not their purpose.”

“But there are accidents.”

He named her Noi-Tao, which meant “little turtle,” the day he found her sitting by the moat in Chiang Mai, the old part of town that used to be walled. It was halfway through the monsoon. The sky opened every afternoon and dropped its burden for the trees to drink. She was sitting there, in the rain, which collected in her hair and her clothing and even in her skin, like she had stopped being a girl and started being a sponge. She was younger then, hardly eight.

Ajaan Yo sat down next to her and asked if she had an umbrella, if she was cold, and whether she’d eaten that day, but she bit him and tried to steal his wallet.

The heat came in March and the elephants spent all their time in the water. Noi liked to stand in the grass and watch them swim, which meant what she really did was count trunks and wonder how deep the river was. It was thick and brown

like soup, so she couldn't see what the elephants were doing beneath. Maybe they weren't swimming at all. They could've been doing anything. Dancing, racing, wrestling in the underwater mud.

Sometimes she threw in a stick to see if an elephant would throw it back. But the stick would buoy on the surface, then disappear downstream.

Ajaan Yo opened the rehabilitation center one year after an elephant sat on his leg. The center was land and the river on it. There was a giant hill in the far parts that seemed more like a mountain if you were climbing it and sweating. The property was acres and acres and acres of shit that was no good for farming. There were no fences. Just this place he called the Valley even though it wasn't one.

He left Bangkok when he was young and his skin was lighter. He moved north, where the rice got sticky and the mangoes got sweet. But he didn't go for the food. He went for the opium, for the dense land it grew on, and for all the money he thought he could make selling bulk highs.

People called it the Golden Triangle. Only when he arrived, there was no gold left for him. He ended up working the fields instead of owning them, which had been the ambition. To leave home, which wasn't a family, not really, just a mother obsessed with the study of Buddhist sutras, who meditated more than she ate.

An older man with a hammer and a whip sat on top of a fat black beast. The man was called a mahout, the driver, the one who steered the elephant like it was a bus. Like there was no heart in its chest, just an engine that turned rhythmically. The man shouted "Nam!" which was the beast's name, and meant "water." Water was a good name because that's what a river is and a river never rests. The mahout whipped Nam's skin but Nam didn't move any faster. Instead, Nam dropped the log she carried in her trunk. The mahout whipped again, and again, then hit Nam hard on the skull with his hammer. Nam screamed like elephants do. She walked slowly in a circle. She waved her ears. She screamed again, louder. Her muscles tightened and her eyes got wide.

The old man shouted to Ajaan Yo: "Boy! I lost my spike. Throw another! Boy! Quick! Why are you waiting?"

Ajaan Yo learned about the spikes the day he started logging. (He cut the wood and the animals moved it.) That first day at noon, when the sun was hot, a drunk worker talked in between spoonfuls of white rice: "If you work many years they

will let you ride the elephant. You will be the driver. You will make more money and you will work less. But don't think it is so easy! The elephant may go crazy, you never know when. If it does, the elephant will throw you. You will fall and you will lose your breath. Try running. Try to stand up and run. Try finding a tree the elephant won't kick over. Good luck hiding behind it. The animal will find you. It will use its trunk, which looks flimsy only when those fat beasts sneeze or are scooping water, and it will grab your leg and pull you into the air and you will dangle and the beast will stare you in the eyes. I have heard that sometimes the really angry ones, those ones are a darker color, something about their blood is different—they whisper things. But you are dangling by the leg and you are seeing the world upside down and you think all of it will end soon and then it does. The elephant will slam you onto the ground and you will lose all of your air and maybe your back will break, but it doesn't matter because the elephant will put its foot on your chest. The elephant will press down slowly and, you know, they weigh more than a bus."

Ajaan Yo ate his rice, too. He stared at the field and the trees at the far end of it. Then the man continued: "There is a soft spot on the elephant's skull, right in the middle where the plates meet. You put the spike there. When the elephant spins, when it screams, when it is about to shake, you hammer twice. Once for the bone and once more for the brain beneath it. I saw it happen my first year. The elephant found its anger and the mahout found his fear. Then his hammer, which he swung. It sounded like the man was making something out of wood, bang-bang, then the elephant fell back into the grass and died in the sitting position."

Noi played at the water's edge. She threw rocks instead of sticks, aiming not for the gray trunks directly, but near them. The goal was to lob each stone precisely so that it would hit the water, sink, and rest on the back of an elephant, which would be under the surface doing whatever it was doing, maybe building something or kissing another elephant it loved. When the stone landed, the animal would feel something tickle its skin. It would think there was a fish nibbling, maybe the fish had mistaken the elephant for a piece of food. That would be a good reason for an elephant to laugh and it would do so. That laugh would make bubbles and when those bubbles hit the surface, Noi would know her trick had worked. She would know there were bodies attached to those trunks.

She threw stones and watched. Then she threw more stones and stared more at the water. No bubbles came so she tried a stick again, but it floated away. Then she

threw a flower, which she thought was very smart of her. Flowers were so beautiful and the elephants would be stupid if they didn't come to the surface to smell and maybe eat one.

But the flower had no weight and there was no wind to carry it. When she threw the plant, it didn't hit the current and was eddied back to shore.

Noi wasn't born, she was hauled out of her mother legs first through a hole in the woman's stomach. The day it happened: a doctor with a very fine knife sterilized the mother's torso with iodine, then said a prayer in his head like he always did. Steady-my-hand, et cetera. Then he carved her from sternum to below the navel and pulled the baby out in a rush before the mother's blood pressure tanked and she turned purple.

Staff congratulated the doctor on saving the baby even though he wished he could've saved more. The mother, whose face was mangled when the car rolled. Her son, the little one in the backseat, who would've been Noi's pesky but protective older brother had he lived even a few hours more. It wasn't the impact that took him. It was the belt, in which he was tangled. When the ambulance arrived, the car was still sideways and he was still hanging upside down, kind of flying.

Noi was an only child when she was born and an orphan a few minutes later. She was premature and couldn't breathe or cry. A machine pumped air into her lungs and a tube fed her. Slowly she grew, and the Thai government tried to find her a home. But she was passed around because nobody wanted a girl. A girl was a mouth to feed and body that would never be good for farming.

A bamboo steamer sat between them. Ajaan Yo pulled the lid off and Noi put her hand in the rice.

"It's hot," said Ajaan Yo.

Noi handled the rice quickly and shoved it into her mouth. Her face turned red before she spit the ball onto her plate. Then she touched it again and burned her fingers before she found enough patience to wait.

"You've been here a year now," said Ajaan Yo. "Today it's a year."

"That's almost like a birthday!" said Noi, who didn't know the date of her own.

"Then it's a good thing I brought a gift."

"What is it?" she asked. She stood up. She forgot her hunger. She forgot everything and began to shake.

He stood up, too, then leaned against a stick and hopped to the cupboard. He

pulled out a book of pictures and gave it to her. It was the whole world in two dimensions. Photographs of cities. And mountains with snow on them. And weird animals she'd never seen before, like frogs the size of pin tips. It was many pages and all of them were colored.

Ajaan Yo sat down to eat again and Noi sat with him, flipping through her book. With every page she said, "What's that?" and, "Can we go there?" and when she got to the end she asked if there were more pages hidden somewhere else. When Ajaan Yo said no, that's all there is, books don't go forever, she cried and he hugged her. Then she opened the book again and started over.

The old man shouted to Ajaan Yo: "Boy! I lost my spike. Throw another! Boy! Quick! Why are you waiting?"

The elephant spun. Her ears flapped and her anger grew and her skin got blacker.

Ajaan Yo pulled a spike out of his bag. But he didn't know how to approach an animal that was the size of a bus. He needed to be closer. Ajaan Yo needed to throw the spike accurately, probably underhand so the mahout could catch it at the top of its arc, just as the metal was about to fall again, when it was moving slowest, almost floating.

"Throw it!" is what the mahout shouted, so Ajaan Yo ran close, as if that was his only purpose, and tossed the metal like it was fragile. The mahout caught the spike and placed it on the elephant's skull, against which it looked more like a nail.

Bang, and the elephant spun again, screamed, and took one step backward toward Ajaan Yo, who stared like elephants couldn't trample men in reverse.

Bang, and the beast went quiet. Then she slouched a bit, as if beginning to sit. Ajaan Yo kept watching because it felt like a movie or a painting of some kind. But gravity took over and the beast fell back. Ajaan Yo dove but his leg was trapped, and he, too, started screaming.

"Where do elephants come from?" asked Noi.

"They drop into the forest when it rains too hard," said Ajaan Yo.

"But that's far and they would die from falling!"

"Elephants are rubbery, fat, and good at bouncing."

"Not all of them are fat," said Noi. "Like that one. Maybe he hit the ground and got flatter?"

She pointed to the field, where Kung was walking. He was the blind one, the one who moved slowly and was always collecting grass. *Kung* meant “shrimp” even though he was at least a million times bigger than one. Still, his proportions were off. He was less round and more rectangular. The hair on his belly was long and the skin there was loose.

Ajaan Yo stood, hopped, and fetched the rest of the chicken from the wok. He returned and they both ate like it was a race. But it wasn’t hunger that moved them. It was the sweetness of the mango peels in which everything was cooked. It wasn’t meat anymore. It was almost fruit.

They finished eating and sat on their own beds, which were mats under mosquito nets. She played with a flashlight and shined all the elephants in the yard while he whistled and waited for her to sleep.

When Noi was very young she was fostered by a woman who was good at loving. The woman was called Khanom Jeen, which was a kind of noodle. She took Noi to the Chiang Mai Zoo. Khanom Jeen wasn’t rich, but she wanted her child—that is how she thought of Noi, as her own in all the ways that mattered—to see the weird things the world made.

They visited the panda family first and watched the little ones wrestle. Afterward they visited the bears, the black ones. There was a lazy one in the corner who rested on his back and stared upward at a sky that was blue and contained no clouds, or water, or sun really because you could look up at it without squinting. Noi stared at the bear for almost an hour. When the bear growled, Noi approached the fence and growled back. Then Khanom Jeen tried to pull her along to see the snakes and the flowers they hid in, but Noi just gripped the bars and growled again.

How many men does it take to tip a dead elephant, balanced upright in the grass? Sitting there. Sitting quietly. Praying almost, with her eyes closed. Seven, it turned out. Seven men and a rope.

They pulled, the elephant tipped, and Ajaan Yo’s crushed leg went free. He didn’t move. He was blacked out, not even dreaming, just pure black in his head. He woke up later in a hospital he didn’t recognize with an envelope full of cash and a note in his pocket that said, “Don’t come back, don’t tell anyone what happened, not the police, we will kill you, here is money, it will pay for your leg.”

He was luckier than most. The landowner didn't ask the muscle to shoot him dead and leave him there for the trees to eat. Maybe the landlord, who had so much to lose, all this information, didn't do it because it wasn't Ajaan Yo's fault. Not exactly. Not fully, at least. Sure, Ajaan Yo was a burden now. A loose end that could squeak to the police about production. But he'd tossed a spike and saved a driver's life, and the forest was where karma mattered most.

It didn't take Noi long to discover a pattern in her various parents. They wore guilt first and looked heavy as they searched for ways to remove her from their lives. Maybe she was too expensive and too quiet and would be too ugly to marry even when she was older and fatter in the right places. But they wouldn't say that, not out loud. The father would then focus on his cigarettes and start coughing, would say he needed medicine, and the mother would yell like there was no money, it was either food or medicine, there wasn't enough for both, even with the government subsidy.

That would happen, or something like it, and days later the tone would change. Guilt would give way to distance when they admitted their love was too much responsibility. They would call the government and the government would say there was no place for her. Still the parents would insist she wasn't right for them and a small truck would eventually take her somewhere new.

Noi cried the first time it happened. Then each time after she stole something out of the house instead and carried it with her. Every bit she took became a recollection that never changed and lived on in her pocket. There was a pendant, and an old coin, and a wrinkled picture of the king.

So when Khanom Jeen got hot and spent her days in bed sweating, Noi grabbed her sandals and ran away because this time she didn't have to be told: Noodle Mom didn't want her anymore. On her way out, Noi tried but failed to steal something bigger. It was one of the cats.

In the middle of the night, when the bugs were spinning in the air, or dancing, or looking for little bits to eat, and the buzz of them was thick, Noi sat up and said, "Ajaan? Are you still there?"

"I'm right here."

He turned on his flashlight and pointed it at himself so she could see him, and he made a funny face.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“How do you know the elephants don’t want to step on me?”

“We sleep here every night,” he said. “We are in this box of cinder blocks and wood and if they really wanted to step on us they would come in here and do it.”

She turned on her flashlight and pointed it toward the field like that would keep the animals away.

Ajaan Yo said, “Don’t worry. That isn’t their purpose, remember? I told you.”

“But how do you know?”

“I spend some time talking with them, especially the fatter ones, reminding them to please not sit on me. They stay quiet except for their breathing, like they’ve never looked at me even once and thought, There is a chair.”

The doctor said amputation was best because the bones didn’t break under the weight of whatever crushed them. That wasn’t the right word, breaking. They fell apart and flattened.

Ajaan Yo shook his head like, *What?*

“Crush syndrome. That is what is happening now; look at your leg, it is fat and filled with fluid, literally a gallon or more. Your body is trying to recirculate all the protein, potassium, and acid the muscles in your leg released. All those dying cells. It’s not just a damaged limb anymore. Your blood is diluted and we’re fighting anemia.”

Ajaan Yo shook his head again, like, *These words have no meaning.*

“There’s more. With crush syndrome there is always more. Kidney failure is next. All the stuff in your blood, all that potassium and other debris, it clogs you. Your kidneys could die. You’re on dialysis. That tube, there? That’s dialysis. What comes next? That is always the question. Heart failure, maybe. That’s also from the potassium. But the acid, too. It messes with your blood pH and that makes the heart beat funny. And if that heart gets tired it might quit, you just never know.”

“Take the leg; I don’t care,” said Ajaan Yo. “I will walk with a stick.”

They gassed him and he went pure black again. There was nothing inside him, not even a dream.

Noi found the longest string she could, then tied one end to a stick and the other to a hook. She put a worm on the hook, walked to the river, and threw that worm

into the water. While waiting for an elephant to bite, she considered how hard it would be to pull the elephant to shore and what exactly she would say to it on arrival.

*Who taught you to swim and would they teach me?*

*You might be taller than me but I know how to read.*

*We can take a walk together if you promise not to step on me.*

But no elephants nibbled at her bait, so she screamed at them.

“Come out of the water! You are one hundred times bigger than me; why are you afraid?”

“Why doesn’t Kung go swimming?” asked Noi.

“He can’t see underwater.”

“But he’s blind!”

“That’s true.”

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“A farmer raked his eyes out when he got too old to work. The farmer was going to shoot Kung afterward because he was just a big animal to feed, this thing that might knock over his fences.”

“Did Kung run away? He got lost and wandered here accidentally, like I did!”

She laughed at all the ways she was exactly like an elephant, then lifted her arm to her face and made a loud sound like her nose was actually a horn. She fell over from laughing too hard and hit her arm on the cement floor, which made her quiet while deciding if she was too old to cry over things like that.

Ajaan Yo said, “I brought him here, traded a bicycle and a bag of mangoes for his saggy skin. I got the better deal, I think. I can love mangoes all I want but they will never love me back. With Kung it is different. I touch his trunk and he kisses me.”

Surgery was followed by an infection and a drug haze, during which Ajaan Yo asked if his leg would grow back. He said his knee hurt and the doctor said, “You don’t even have a knee, not the one you’re pointing to anyway; it’s gone now.” Still, it ached and Ajaan Yo tried to touch it even though the whole thing was missing. It was in a biohazard bin or burning in a furnace.

“Crush syndrome!” said the doctor. “I told you there is always more. There’s infection now and that means your blood is sick. I told you that at the beginning. There’s so many things we still need to fix.”

\* \* \*

“Where did the rest of the elephants come from?” asked Noi. “I know they didn’t come from the rain.”

“It took years, but I collected them. They’re all damaged in some way. Mam, the really fat one that is always spitting water, she was hit by a bus; that is why she is very slow. Kluay carried too many logs in his trunk and that is why it dangles there. He can’t use it anymore to pull grass so the others feed him—have you noticed that?”

“Where did the land come from?”

“No one wanted it; there’s nothing here. It was cheap and wide and perfect.”

“Do you have a mom? You never talk about her. I have been here for more than a year now and I want to know.”

“I have a bunch of fat gray friends and a very small daughter.”

Noi tried hard to forgive all the elephants that wouldn’t come out of the water, but it didn’t work so she got madder.

She stood on the shore and yelled to them. “You are not allowed to swim so much, you are not fish, you were not made that way, you were made for the forest!” Then, “Please come out!” Then, “I don’t want to walk through the trees by myself. Ajaan can’t go because he only has one leg and a stick, but all of you have four legs and a giant trunk for balance. You will never trip!”

Nothing happened so she picked up rocks and aimed for the trunks directly, but missed. Then she turned around with the intention of stomping homeward, to her mat with a mosquito net draped over it like a tent, where she would sit and think of new ways to lure them out of the water.

Kung was standing there and Noi’s face turned pink because she stopped breathing. Kung walked over to where the trees started and Noi followed him at a distance that felt safe.

“Please don’t sit on Ajaan,” said Noi. “I would miss him.”

Kung just sneezed, then kicked over a tree and ate it.

Noi moved closer than she ever had before and put her hand on his trunk.