Taken

By Alex Stone

This we know, for it is historical fact: that in June 1879, at Msansi Bay just north of Dar es Salaam, four Indian elephants were unloaded to begin a fateful trek into the heart of Africa. They were to be put to work in the forests of the Congo for Leopold, the King of the Belgians, in the vast country that was his own personal estate.

His agent for this expedition was Henry Morton Stanley, the Welshman-turned-American turned celebrity explorer. The man who became famous for finding Dr Livingstone. And for losing himself.



This new earth has a hum that is unnerving. The soles of our feet are burning with it, with the depth of our incomprehension of it. Yet, and yes, we are indeed to be scalded by this immeasurable strangeness.

So much so, I am convinced it is this eminence from this unknowable earth, and this alone – forgetting all the other dire affronts to us in our persons, already – that has lead to the death of three of us already on this journey. And now I am forced to walk on. To follow a setting sun, when I have seen lives set already.

We are to work for ‘a philanthropist’, an aged King with a white beard and insatiable ambition and a buxom 18 year old companion. This we learn from the people accompanying us, in their tales around each evening bivouac campfire. This King, they say, he owns for himself the biggest country any single man ever has, even more than a Moghul Emperor. But he has never set foot on his land of his. He sends us and his minions instead. And we will never set foot on his land either. Such is the cruel humour of history. I am no longer sure of this man’s philanthropy.

I am Pulmulla, the last of the four elephants forced, insistently prodded, to traverse this burning land. How is it that we of such weight and dignity must march to the shrill ambitions and admonitions of these inconsequential humans? How will the history of our kind view our acquiescence, reluctant, resentful, and fated though it is?

I am Pulmulla for the purposes of this sad tale, for this is the name humans know me by – my mahouts and the porters that follow me, and the man who sold me into this insane enterprise. I will die with my own true name, (known only to other elephants), if not my soul, hopefully intact.

I am Pulmulla, late beloved of Mahangi, who died of heat apoplexy brought on by unrequited musth and cruel uncomprehending restraint, the thickest of chains brought out and employed in the thwarting of him, back in Mpwapwa.

I am Pulmulla. I carry myself with the regal bearing of all kumera, the highest caste of all elephants. But here I am reduced to a walking shadow of pain.

And here I will die, lost in Africa, not halfway to our destination, lost between our family and despair. Just another failed expedition of men, to add to history's long litanies of disappointment; and further disillusionment for us, in our problematic partnership with them. Another grand dream turned into a faint, stale and rancid footnote to the great sagas of being. We will be conveniently forgotten, except by our families, our descendents, for whom legend must make up for what became of us. Perhaps stories may percolate back to our homes, stories in which our misadventures may be further marinated in murmurings and misapprehensions. Perhaps some meaning will be found in them. There is no way they who might hear of this could ever feel the depth of our distress. For although we can feel tremors, faint as they may be, for untold miles through the earth, their feet – the feet of our kin – cannot listen across an ocean.

But we are already well into, too far into, this tragic tale. It is proper manners that insist I return, with due consideration and measured-ness, as an elephant should, and begin where I should begin.

In India.

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We are four: that much is true. Two males, two females.

Our names (remember, they are not our real names) are Mahangi (or Sundergrund – an even uglier name for such a beautiful animal, one of the Mriga 'deer-like' physique), Naderbux, Sosankalli, and myself, Pulmulla.

I am the last. These are the names you will know us by. Our real names have more gravity – more than you can bear.

We are not a family. Among us, representing all three castes among Indian elephants, we have our own hierarchy. We are our entire world transported here, all representatives of it, even our partners in toil, our mahouts, equally uncomprehending as they are of the value of this enterprise. But our world does not help in any way in this disorienting new setting.

And although we travel with a company of thirteen mahouts and one sergeant, we are all confused, lost and scared.

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A man with moustaches, and a swaggering strut, he came to our compound three months ago. And our world was surely, inevitably, torn from us.

Our ship is called the *Chinsura*. Built of steel, in England, and in our time plying the trade routes of the north Indian Ocean.

And we travelled within it. We were, for the first time in our adult lives, transported within the echoing skin of a being (the ship) more massive than ourselves. This belies the natural order of things.

Now although this new land may superficially look the same as ours – thorn trees, noisy birds, big cats, mangy dogs, scurrying brown people – it is as alien as the graveyard that we know it will become to us.

We'd known there'd be other elephants here – obviously we can decipher the thin language of the mahouts, we read them more than they ever could us, this is why I am imparting all this information that would otherwise be painfully self-evident – but the language of these massive elephants we understand only with difficulty.

We read in them the same confusion we feel, in their fretful stomping, their flapping ears, their mock charges (frightening still), the heavy trembling of their footprints. They call out to us, in aggressive challenges – "Who are you? What are you doing here? You look similar to us, but are not of us!" – we understand this much, but we cannot answer adequately, for we hardly know the answers ourselves.

We see the leader of our expedition, one Captain Carter, shoot some of these other elephants. He seems to want to shoot everything that moves. Except us – we are too useful to him. Elements other than, larger than, Carter's baneful bullets will ultimately despatch us.

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Of course we can swim. But we also have memory intact. So when we are swung out over the side of *Chinsura*, the slings painfully compressing our ribs, and lowered down into it, the water is at first a relief. But home is in the opposite direction

to the nearby shore toward which we are pointed. We turn around. We purposefully strike out for home.

Men in rowboats cast thick ropes around us. So begins a agonising elephantine tug-of-war. We are winning, but slowly. An elephant swims stronger than eight men in a longboat can row, and has more stamina. But we are beaten by duplicity.

It is only when the mahouts are ordered to scramble along the ropes, spluttering, to perch as is proper on our necks, and whisper to us the sacred commands that we must obey – for they are reghawan, those mahouts who use love to control their elephants, and so it is our contract to obey – that we reluctantly turn, and swim toward this unknown shore. We place our trust in them, this I now ashamed to say. Even so, it takes a few sharp jabs with the ankusha, the pointed stick, to turn Mahangi, so determined is he to swim all the miles home.

People are there, on this new shore, jabbering loudly in tongues we must yet decipher.

We rest in the shade of palm trees on the beach. Captain Carter makes a stirring speech. A cloth is draped over each one of us, a great gold star, five-pointed, in a field of a singing blue. The banner has a festival air. But we cannot sing along. The festival is not ours; and our song would be misunderstood. Even though we elephants do like dressing up, occasionally, as the situation commands. And we can sing, too, when we want to.

We know the affairs of men – more than men can make out. We read in the frantic patterings of their feet, their ever-busy bodies, their overweening ambition, their unreasonable dreams, their eternal restlessness. We have long experience of how easily these turn into cruelty. More is the pity.

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Food in this strange place is strangely unsatisfying. I wish we were home, being the guests of honour, and dignified at Aanayoottu, the feeding of elephants festival.

Only one of us was ever at Vadakkunnathan temple in Thrissur city, in Kerala, for the festival which falls on the first day of the month of Karkkidakam (in the Malayalam calendar), which coincides with the month of July. Soskanilli told us how a number of unadorned elephants were positioned amid a multitude of people, and then worshipped and fed.

The good people Soskanilli tells us about believe that offering poojas and delicious feed to the elephants is a way to satisfy their god of wealth and of the fulfillment of wishes.

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There is so much patter in the dust of this land, a noise in the earth – but more so than in India, I cannot tell. Only here there seems to be even more in the traffic of history. From ancient time to this painful present, there is traffic overlapping, a syncopated rhythm of comings and goings, futile all.

I hear the tremulous, hesitant feet of six men from China (they have a unique way of walking) coming towards us. They have left the brutal gangs of Bula Matari, who under his orders and the frequent lashes of his whips, are grinding out a passage for a railroad to bypass the raging cataracts of a great river on the other side of the continent. They are walking home – following only the rising sun, for that is all they know of where their distant home might be. I fear for them. I fear they will never arrive home.

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Perhaps this land is our purgatory; a land of testing, inhabited by Rukh – the mythical enemy of us elephants, a giant bird, or enormous winged monkey. Naderbux thinks he saw the monkey flying through clouds that obscured a thin moon on the third night of this journey.

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And we have hardly come to the limpid lakes who's pattering waves beckon us through the soles of our feet; or the ethereal Mountains of the Moon yet. Or the Mitumba mountains, beyond which the watershed of the great Congo River begins.

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I hear familiar feet from history. Twenty years prior to this, a bombastic English Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Napier brought four times our number with him.

Forty-four trained elephants were sent from India to carry the heavy guns on the march, while hiring commissions were dispatched all over the Mediterranean and the Near East to obtain mules and camels to handle the lighter gear.

A railway, complete with locomotives and some twenty miles of track, was to be laid across the coastal plain.

The force consisted of 13,000 British and Indian soldiers, 26,000 camp followers and over 40,000 animals, including the elephants. The force sailed from Bombay in 280 ships.

An advance guard, under Sir William Lockyer Merewether, pushed up the dry bed of the Kumayli River to the Suru Pass, where engineers built a road to Senafe for the elephants, gun-carriages, and carts.

All this to oust Theodore, the Emperor of Ethiopia. Oh, the madness of men!

It is an ironic footnote of history that Theodore, rather than face capture by the British, shot himself with a revolver that had been given to him by Queen Victoria. That shot reverberates even now. I can feel its tiny echo. Tragedy has infused this land; and we will contribute still more to its seemingly endless catalogue.

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In Hindu mythology, the mythology of which we are most well-versed, there are three jewels of creation:

Surabhi – the cow of plenty whose udders never run dry. It appears the people of this land also worship this fecund beast. Some live off the milk, almost entirely. They make a soup from milk and a living cow's blood.

Uchchaishravas – a pure white stallion. There are horse-like animals here, they call them zebras – is it the pure white stallion, made shorter, rounder, with fragments of other colouring, as if it had overeaten and split its coat? A local legend almost makes this case. Perhaps this is a parallel world to ours.

Airavata – the elephant who carries Indra, Lord of the Universe, on his back. We four also carry the weight of the world – while the haughty locals that look like us, but cannot speak with us, do nothing but run away. The elephants of this land are not beasts of burden.

Do we carry more than the weight of the universe on our backs? Perhaps we do, for we carry the mad dreams of those who wrest countries from others, from the people who have

lived in them since time immemorial. This is a deeply disturbing to be a part of. It is not our intention to be a part of such epic thievery.

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Such are the bald facts of our journey. But can it be called a journey if nothing is accomplished, no destination attained?

We started, accompanied by 700 porters, under the command of Captain Carter, of the International African Association. Our expedition was arranged by the agent of King Leopold, one Henry Morton-Stanley, Mr Bula Matari, the Breaker of Rocks. We had thirteen mahouts when we set off. Was that thirteen an unlucky number? Or is there greater, more essential folly in all of this?

An elephant can carry fifteen human loads, and we have – or at least tried to so far, until each of us sickened, weakened, and died. They had said costs of this expedition would be offset within a year. What of the costs now?

Of all those porters who started this journey, most have deserted. Most, I can hear from faraway scufflings of human feet, have been captured by slave traders.

The porters needed fifty labourers to precede them, with axes and machetes cleaving trees and branches so our elephant loads could pass through. Those machetes now lie un-used. At least for that kind of work.

Mahangi, my love, my died at Mpwapwa of ‘heat apoplexy’

Naderbux died in September

The two remaining female elephants, myself and Soskanilli made an impressive entry into the town of Tabora. We wore our star-spangled cloths.

In December, on the way to Karema, Sosankalli died.

I, Pulmulla, will pine and fade away at this same place Karema.

“The death of a single elephant on an expedition without porters could paralyse the entire enterprise,” Captain Carter once said. Now four of us are gone. And he lies stricken with malaria.

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Tomorrow I will die, here in this place called Karema. My mahouts, the eleven who have survived to tend me now, are grief-stricken too; and not only for me.

My great heart is overcome. I have one sunset left. The tremor of my lonely feet on this inhospitable earth will be stilled.

May I trust you with this story, so that you would take it into the future with you? So that we may not be forgotten?

Bula Matari, the Breaker of Rocks – not just the individual man, but all the compatriots of his unfeeling species – has broken us, broken me. And Africa must make space for one more unnecessary grave.

Will any of our family visit us in this graveyard? No.

Will we each die alone? Yes. We have.

And so will I.



This we know: Four Indian elephants died on a forced trek through what is now Tanzania in 1879, on their way to the forests of the Congo.
All that remains of them is this faint fragment of their story, gleaned from tremblings in the earth of Africa.