

Elephant Amore – by Maria Alomajan
Highly Commended in the
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In my mind I don't fly the 12 hours to Bangkok then transfer domestically to Krabi, I simply arrive. I smell the orchid and spice scented air, dewy with coriander, chilli, Kaffir lime leaf and hard with industrial output. It's as dense as the population and, unlike the spices and fish it doesn't dry in the heat of the day. I close my eyes and I feel the cool sting of pleasure from a cold face towel scented with lemongrass.

It's 32 degrees, yet the smoky fire doesn't seem out of place, instead, I'm unnaturally comforted by the additional heat.

I'm sitting on the concrete floor of a wall-less hut in Krabi, next to an old tractor tyre. I'm dusty, dirty, smelly and sad.

Despite that, I find myself in a rare moment in life, gratefully aware that I am exactly where I am meant to be.

I am here because I love an Elephant - it's as simple as that. I know the love of, or for, a wild animal is incomprehensible unless you are the one who has shared that love.

The Elephant was four when I first met and fell in love with her.

Just like all other six year olds she is mischievous, playful, inquisitive, affectionate, emotional, sensitive, strong willed and demanding.

One of this world's most precious and threatened animals, Elephants will look you in the eye, hold your hand, steal your heart and remember you forever. But, cross them, disappoint them or make them sad and you will reap their wrath.

And, that's precisely why I'm here, late at night, squatting in a determined state of mind. I have no tyre to sit on because tonight I am not a welcomed guest. The Elephant is cross with me, we are fighting a battle of wills and we are at a stalemate. We're 24 hours into it and I know I can't give up. I only have a day and a half left and

if I don't fix this now there will be no point in me ever returning, she will never forgive or forget.

Our current scenario breaks my heart when I think of all the incredible experiences I have had with her and how she made me fall in love...

Here, the days start with dawn breaking and are so distant from my days in urban Auckland. It's a morning wash down for the Elephant and then a shampoo shower and scrub. I crawl around underneath scrubbing every nook and cranny while she fills her trunk and fires water at me.

After a shower it's time for some breakfast. The Elephant can be quite a madam when it comes to her food – some days she likes grass, some days it's a preference for vines and creepers; other days it's just palm leaves. She will take me by the hand and point at what she wants to satisfy her ton and a half hunger pangs. If I give her something else she'll throw it back and point again. If I tell her to eat what she already has she will gather it up and either throw it out or place it on her head, thinking I can't see it!

Bananas are a staple. She likes pineapples and oranges – peeled please. Watermelons are her very favourite! Coconuts get special treatment - she stands on them, cracks them and drinks the juice. Then she peels the flesh and eats it - never sharing. On one occasion, when I dared grab myself a hunk, I ended up with the finger of her trunk parting my lips to grab it right back out of my mouth!

The Elephant loves soda water, sucks it into her truck, shakes and fizzes it up - then delivers the burst of bubbles into her mouth. You can almost hear her giggling.

These things she likes - what she can't abide are cats. She can spot one a mile away and the sight transforms her - she steps back, ears out, trumpet ready and foot stamping. She's not pleased and it's only a moment before a banana torpedo is headed the way of the cat with precision aim.

Hard to believe that now her aim is at me.

But I'm getting ahead of myself - back to the memories of sunlit days on the beach.

Playtime. She races me into the water then uses her trunk to swing me around as we swim together in the crystal clear aqua tinted Indian Ocean.

She dives around in the water, throwing herself onto her back with legs flailing, trunk out – such a joyous sight. She doesn't so much swim as frolic. Just by watching her, you feel her excitement and share her sense of play.

It's a great way to pass the late afternoon - unless the tide is low and the temperature is high. Then no matter how you try to coerce her, she just won't bother. It's like her water depth radar is telling her there won't be any diving today. I admit, on those days I too can barely be bothered moving. It's just too hot and too hard. Better to wait for night.

The nights - they're special in a different way. They fall with a distinct muggy aroma that is Asia – musky, floral and fishy. Incense burns - an historical scent that lets you know where you are and it's joined by smoky fires, which keep mosquitos at bay.

I treasure the nights alone with the Elephant. It's such a rarity to share stillness with a wild animal.

At night she really is a baby. She is loving and gentle. Gone is the playfulness of the day, the mischief - she is settled.

With the stars spying above and the new moon hiding, the Elephant will un-tuck my t-shirt and use her trunk to blow raspberries on my stomach. She will roll me on my side, curl the end of her trunk and use it to massage my back.

One dark night, as we lay resting, she stretched her trunk out behind her, pulled me up close so I was spooning her head. Then she pulled my arm over her face and she started sucking on my hand until she fell asleep. A moment of magic between man and beast!

Another night, after fussing over grass, blowing trunks and whispering secrets, I was standing in front of her massaging her forehead with my fists when she put her trunk between my legs and sniffed around my ankles. Next thing I know she lifted me up onto her head! That she trusted me enough to put me on up her head thrilled me. I was yelling, “look, look” into the empty night. Di Chiang Dee Jai Muck Muck.

But here I am. What was love may be no longer. How do I know this? How can I tell? It's blatantly clear.

All day she completely ignored me, looked through me, would lift her head high to avoid me in her sightline.

She refused any physical contact and if I approached she would buck me away - though I never felt any danger.

She removed me from her hut, well that's a gentle way of saying she threw me out followed closely by the toys I had made for her and my sleeping mat.

I left my shoes in there so she peed on them.

At the beach today the very mention of my name caused her to throw herself to the ground and throw mud at me.

What did I do that was so bad?

I took a day trip; I missed her daily activities. That would have been excusable except I made the mistake of telling her what time I would be back and I was wrong and she was left waiting. I let her down. In her eyes I lied. The disappointment was insurmountable; her trunk drooped in despair.

Sound improbable? Implausible? Ridiculous anthropomorphism? All I can offer is my own experience.

I raise my eyes from my sunken head to see Puan, the mahout, get up from his rest and signal for me to join them. He whispers to her, chiding her softly, "That enough now. She is allowed to go for day. She very sorry she was late. She loves you and she has come long to be with you. That is enough. She is very sad. You say sorry."

With those few gentle words whispered this great big gentle giant of a baby animal does something only seen by documentary makers and people of the land. She cries. Tears form and roll down from the corners of her eyes.

At this the floodgates opened in me and as she forces herself to hold my hand I bawl. I know this isn't it, it's not an Hollywood ending but I feel great relief. Come tomorrow morning we would be back in love again.