



An African Story, Ernest Hemingway

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HE WAS WAITING FOR THE MOON TO RISE and he felt Kibo's hair rise under his hand as he stroked him to be quiet and they both watched and listened as the moon came up and gave them shadows. His arm was around the dog's neck now and he could feel him shivering. All of the night sounds had stopped.

They did not hear the elephant and David did not see him until the dog turned his head and seemed to settle into David. Then the elephant's shadow covered them and he moved past making no noise at all and they smelled him in the light wind that came down from the mountain. He smelled strong but old and sour and when he was past David saw that the left tusk was so long it seemed to reach the ground.

They waited but no other elephants came by and then David and the dog started off running in the moonlight. The dog kept close behind him and when David stopped the dog pressed his muzzle into the back of his knee.

David had to see the bull again and they came up on him at the edge of the forest. He was traveling toward the mountain and slowly moving into the steady night breeze. David came close enough to see him cut off the moon again and to smell the sour oldness but he could not see the right tusk.

He was afraid to work closer with the dog and he took him back with the wind and pushed him down against the base of a tree and tried to make him understand. He thought the dog would stay and he did but

when David moved up toward the bulk of the elephant again he felt the wet muzzle against the hollow of his knee.

The two of them followed the elephant until he came to an opening in the trees. He stood there moving his huge ears. His bulk was in the shadow but the moonlight would be on his head. David reached behind him and closed the dog's jaws gently with his hand and then moved softly and unbreathing to his right along the edge of the night breeze, feeling it on his cheek, edging with it, never letting it get between him and the bulk until he could see the elephant's head and the great ears slowly moving. The right tusk was as thick as his own thigh and it curved down almost to the ground.

He and Kibo moved back, the wind on his neck now, and they backtracked out of the forest and into the open park country. The dog was ahead of him now and he stopped where David had left the two hunting spears by the trail when they had followed the elephant. He swung them over his shoulder in their thong and leather cup harness and, with his best spear that he had kept with him all the time in his hand, they started on the trail for the shamba. The moon was high now and he wondered why there was no drumming from the shamba. Something was strange if his father was there and there was no drumming.

David had felt the tiredness as soon as they had picked up the trail again.

For a long time he had been fresher and in better shape than the two men and impatient with their slow trailing and the regular halts his father made each hour on the hour. He could have moved ahead much faster than Juma and his father but when he started to tire they were the same as ever and at noon they took only the usual five-minute rest

and he had seen that Juma was increasing the pace a little. Perhaps he wasn't.

Perhaps it had only seemed faster but the elephant dung was fresher now although it was not warm yet to the touch. Juma gave him the rifle to carry after they came upon the last pile of dung but after an hour he looked at him and took it back. They had been climbing steadily across a slope of the mountain but now the trail went down and from a gap in the forest he saw broken country ahead. "Here's where the tough part starts, Davey," his father said.

It was then he knew that he should have been sent back to the shamba once he had put them on the trail. Juma had known it for a long time. His father knew it now and there was nothing to be done. It was another of his mistakes and there was nothing to do now except gamble.

David looked down at the big flattened circle of the print of the elephant's foot and saw where the bracken had been pressed down and where a broken stem of a weed was drying. Juma picked it up and looked at the sun. Juma handed the broken weed to David's father and his father rolled it in his fingers. David noticed the white flowers that were drooped and dying. But they still had not dried in the sun nor shed their petals.

"It's going to be a bitch," his father said. "Let's get going."

Late in the afternoon they were still tracking through the broken country. He had been sleepy now for a long time and as he watched the two men he knew that sleepiness was his real enemy and he followed their pace and tried to move through and out of the sleep that deadened him. The two men relieved each other tracking on the hour

and the one who was in second place looked back at him at regular intervals to check if he was with them.

When they made a dry camp at dark in the forest he went to sleep as soon as he sat down and woke with Juma holding his moccasins and feeling his bare feet for blisters. His father had spread his coat over him and was sitting by him with a piece of cold cooked meat and two biscuits. He offered him a water bottle with cold tea.

“He’ll have to feed, Davey,” his father said. “Your feet are in good shape. They’re as sound as Juma’s. Eat this slowly and drink some tea and go to sleep again. We haven’t any problems.”

“I’m sorry I was so sleepy.”

“You and Kibo hunted and traveled all last night. Why shouldn’t you be sleepy? You can have a little more meat if you want it.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Good. We’re good for three days. We’ll hit water again tomorrow. Plenty of creeks come off the mountain.”

“Where’s he going?”

“Juma thinks he knows.”

“Isn’t it bad?”

“Not too bad, Davey.”

“I’m going back to sleep,” David had said. “I don’t need your coat.”

“Juma and I are all right,” his father said. “I always sleep warm you know.”

David was asleep even before his father said good night. Then he woke once with the moonlight on his face and he thought of the elephant with his great ears moving as he stood in the forest, his head hung down with the weight of the tusks. David thought then in the night that the hollow way he felt as he remembered him was from waking hungry. But it was not and he found that out in the next three days.

The next day was very bad because long before noon he knew that it was not just the need for sleep that made the difference between a boy and men. For the first three hours he was fresher than they were and he asked Juma for the .303 rifle to carry but Juma shook his head. He did not smile and he had always been David's best friend and had taught him to hunt.

He offered it to me yesterday, David thought, and I'm in better shape today than I was then. He was, too, but by ten o'clock he knew the day would be as bad or worse than the day before.

It was as silly for him to think that he could trail with his father as to think he could fight with him. He knew too that it was not just that they were men. They were professional hunters and he knew now that was why Juma would not even waste a smile. They knew everything the elephant had done, pointed out the signs of it to each other without speaking, and when the tracking became difficult his father always yielded to Juma. When they stopped to fill the water bottles at a stream his father said, "Just last the day out, Davey."

Then when they were past the broken country and climbing toward the forest the tracks of the elephant turned off to the right onto an old elephant trail. He saw his father and Juma talking and when he got up

to them Juma was looking back over the way they had come and then at a far distant stony island of hills in the dry country and seemed to be taking a bearing of this against the peaks of three far blue hills on the horizon.

“Juma knows where he’s going now,” his father explained. “He thought he knew before but then he dropped down into this stuff.” He looked back at the country they had come through all day. “Where he’s headed now is pretty good going but we’ll have to climb.”

They climbed until it was dark and then made another dry camp. David killed two spur fowl with his slingshot out of a small flock that had walked across the trail just before the sunset.

The birds had come into the old elephant trail to dust, walking neatly and plumply, and when the pebble broke the back of one and the bird began to jerk and toss with its wings thumping, another bird ran forward to peck at it and David pouched another pebble and pulled it back and sent it against the ribs of the second bird.

As he ran forward to put his hand on it the other birds whirred off. Juma had looked back and smiled this time and David picked up the two birds, warm and plump and smoothly feathered, and knocked their heads against the handle of his hunting knife.

Now where they were camped for the night his father said, “I’ve never seen that type of francolin quite so high. You did very well to get a double on them.”

Juma cooked the birds spitted on a stick over the coals of a very small fire. His father drank a whiskey and water from the cup top on his flask

as they lay and watched Juma cook. Afterward Juma gave them each a breast with the heart in it and ate the two necks and backs and the legs himself.

“It makes a great difference, Davey,” his father said. “We’re very well off on rations now.”

“How far are we behind him?” David asked.

“We’re quite close,” his father said. “It depends on whether he travels when the moon comes up. It’s an hour later tonight and two hours later than when you found him.”

“Why does Juma think he knows where he’s going?”

“He wounded him and killed his askari not too far from here.”

“When?”

“Five years ago, he says. That may mean anytime. When you were still a toto he says.”

“Has he been alone since then?”

“He says so. He hasn’t seen him. Only heard of him.”

“How big does he say he is?”

“Close to two hundred. Bigger than anything I’ve ever seen. He says there’s only been one greater elephant and he came from near here too.”

“I’d better get to sleep,” David said. “I hope I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“You were splendid today,” his father said. “I was very proud of you. So was Juma.”

In the night when he woke after the moon was up he was sure they were not proud of him except perhaps for his dexterity in killing the two birds. He had found the elephant at night and followed him to see that he had both of his tusks and then returned to find the two men and put them on the trail. David knew they were proud of that.

But once the deadly following started he was useless to them and a danger to their success just as Kibo had been to him when he had gone up close to the elephant in the night, and he knew they must each have hated themselves for not having sent him back when there was time. The tusks of the elephant weighed two hundred pounds apiece. Ever since these tusks had grown beyond their normal size the elephant had been hunted for them and now the three of them would kill him for them.

David was sure that they would kill him now because he, David, had lasted through the day and kept up after the pace had destroyed him by noon. So they probably were proud of him doing that. But he had brought nothing useful to the hunt and they would have been far better off without him. Many times during the day he had wished that he had never betrayed the elephant and in the afternoon he remembered wishing that he had never seen him. Awake in the moonlight he knew that was not true.

The next morning they were following the spoor of the elephant on an old elephant trail that was a hard-packed worn road through the forest. It looked as though elephants had traveled it ever since the lava had cooled from the mountain and the trees had first grown tall and close.

Juma was very confident and they moved fast. Both his father and Juma seemed very sure of themselves and the going on the elephant road

was so easy that Juma gave him the .303 to carry as they went on through the broken light of the forest. Then they lost the trail in smoking piles of fresh dung and the flat round prints of a herd of elephants that had come onto the elephant road from the heavy forest on the left of the trail.

Juma had taken the .303 from David angrily. It was afternoon before they worked up to the herd and around it, seeing the gray bulks through the trees and the movement of the big ears and the searching trunks coiling and uncoiling, hearing the crash of branches broken, the crash of trees pushed over, the rumbling in the bellies of the elephants and the slap and thud of the dung falling.

They had found the trail of the old bull finally and when it turned off onto a smaller elephant road Juma had looked at David's father and grinned showing his filed teeth and his father had nodded his head. They looked as though they had a dirty secret, just as they had looked when he had found them that night at the shamba.

It was not very long before they came on the secret. It was off to the right in the forest and the tracks of the old bull led to it. It was a skull as high as David's chest and white from the sun and the rain. There was a deep depression in the forehead and a ridge ran from between the bare white eye sockets and flared out in empty broken holes where the tusks had been chopped away.

Juma pointed out where the great elephant they were trailing had stood while he looked down at the skull and where his trunk had moved it a little way from the place it had rested on the ground and where the points of his tusks had touched the ground beside it.

He showed David the single hole in the big depression in the white bone of the forehead and then the four holes close together in the bone around the earhole. He grinned at David and at his father and took a .303 solid from his pocket and fitted the nose into the hole in the bone of the forehead.

“Here is where Juma wounded the big bull,” his father said. “This was his askari. His friend, really, because he was a big bull too. He charged and Juma knocked him down and finished him in the ear.”

Juma was pointing out the scattered bones and how the big bull had walked among them. Juma and David’s father were both very pleased with what they had found.

“How long do you suppose he and his friend had been together?” David asked his father.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” his father said. “Ask Juma.”

“You ask him, please.”

His father and Juma spoke together and Juma had looked at David and laughed.

“Probably four or five times your life, he says,” David’s father told him. “He doesn’t know or care really.”

I care, David thought. I saw him in the moonlight and he was alone but I had Kibo. Kibo has me too. The bull wasn’t doing any harm and now we’ve tracked him to where he came to see his dead friend and now we’re going to kill him. It’s my fault. I betrayed him.

Now Juma had worked out the trail and motioned to his father and they started on.

My father doesn't need to kill elephants to live, David thought. Juma would not have found him if I had not seen him. He had his chance at him and all he did was wound him and kill his friend. Kibo and I found him and I never should have told them and I should have kept him secret and had him always and let them stay drunk at the beer shamba. Juma was so drunk we could not wake him.

I'm going to keep everything a secret always. I'll never tell them anything again. If they kill him Juma will drink his share of the ivory or just buy himself another goddamn wife. Why didn't you help the elephant when you could? All you had to do was not go on the second day.

No, that wouldn't have stopped them. Juma would have gone on. You never should have told them. Never, never tell them. Try and remember that. Never tell anyone anything ever. Never tell anyone anything again.

His father waited for him to come up and said very gently, "He rested here. He's not traveling as he was. We'll be up on him anytime now."

"Fuck elephant hunting," David had said very quietly.

"What's that?" his father asked.

"Fuck elephant hunting," David said softly.

"Be careful you don't fuck it up," his father had said to him and looked at him flatly.

That's one thing, David had thought. He's not stupid. He knows all about it now and he will never trust me again. That's good. I don't want

him to because I'll never ever tell him or anybody anything again, never anything again. Never ever never.

In the morning he was on the far slope of the mountain again. The elephant was no longer traveling as he had been but was moving aimlessly now, feeding occasionally and David had known they were getting close to him.

He tried to remember how he had felt. He had no love for the elephant yet. He must remember that. He had only a sorrow that had come from his own tiredness that had brought an understanding of age. Through being too young, he had learned how it must be to be too old.

He was lonesome for Kibo and thinking of how Juma killing the elephant's friend had turned him against Juma and made the elephant his brother. He knew then how much it meant to him to have seen the elephant in the moonlight and to have followed him and come close to him in the clearing so that he had seen the great tusks.

But he did not know that nothing would ever be as good as that again. Now he knew they would kill the elephant and there was nothing he could do about it. He had betrayed the elephant when he had gone back to tell them at the shamba. They would kill me and they would kill Kibo if we had ivory, he had thought, and known it was untrue.

Probably the elephant is going to find where he was born and they'll kill him there. That's all they'd need to make it perfect. They'd like to have killed him where they killed his friend. That would be a big joke. That would have pleased them. The goddamned friend killers.

They had moved to the edge of thick cover now and the elephant was close ahead. David could smell him and they could all hear him pulling down branches and the snapping that they made. His father put his hand on David's shoulder to move him back and have him wait outside and then he took a big pinch of ashes from the pouch in his pocket and tossed it in the air.

The ash barely slanted toward them as it fell and his father nodded at Juma and bent down to follow him into the thick cover. David watched their backs and their asses go in and out of sight. He could not hear them move.

David had stood still and listened to the elephant feeding. He could smell him as strongly as he had the night in the moonlight when he had worked up close to him and had seen his wonderful tusks. Then as he stood there it was silent and he could not smell the elephant. Then there had been a high squealing and smashing and a shot by the .303, then the heavy rocking double report of his father's .450, then the smashing and crashing had gone on going steadily away and he had gone into the heavy growth and found Juma shaken and bleeding from his forehead all down over his face and his father white and angry.

"He went for Juma and knocked him over," his father had said. "Juma hit him in the head."

"Where did you hit him?"

"Where I fucking well could," his father had said. "Get on the blood spoor."

There was plenty of blood. One stream as high as David's head that had squirted bright on trunks and leaves and vines and another much lower that was dark and foul with stomach content.

"Lung and gut shot," his father said. "We'll find him down or anchored—I hope the hell," he added.

They found him anchored, in such suffering and despair that he could no longer move. He had crashed through the heavy cover where he had been feeding and crossed a path of open forest and David and his father ran along the heavily splashed blood trail. Then the elephant had gone on into thick forest and David had seen him ahead standing gray and huge against the trunk of a tree.

David could only see his stern and then his father moved ahead and he followed and they came alongside the elephant as though he was a ship and David saw the blood coming from his flanks and running down his sides and then his father raised his rifle and fired and the elephant turned his head with the great tusks moving heavy and slow and looked at them and when his father fired the second barrel the elephant seemed to sway like a felled tree and came smashing down toward them.

But he was not dead. He had been anchored and now he was down with his shoulder broken. He did not move but his eye was alive and looked at David. He had very long eyelashes and his eye was the most alive thing David had ever seen.

"Shoot him in the earhole with the three oh three," his father said. "Go on."

"You shoot him," David had said.

Juma had come up limping and bloody, the skin of his forehead hanging down over his left eye, the bone of his nose showing and one ear torn and had taken the rifle from David without speaking and pushed the muzzle almost into the earhole and fired twice, jerking the bolt and driving it forward angrily. The eye of the elephant had opened wide on the first shot and then started to glaze and blood came out of the ear and ran in two bright streams down the wrinkled gray hide.

It was different colored blood and David had thought I must remember that and he had but it had never been of any use to him. Now all the dignity and majesty and all the beauty were gone from the elephant and he was a huge wrinkled pile.

“Well, we got him, Davey, thanks to you,” his father had said. “Now we’d better get a fire going so I can put Juma back together again. Come here, you bloody Humpty Dumpty. Those tusks will keep.”

Juma had come to him grinning, bringing the tail of the elephant that had no hairs on it at all. They had made a dirty joke and then his father had begun to speak rapidly in Swahili. How far to water? How far will you have to go to get people to get those tusks out of here? How are you, you worthless old pig fucker? What have you broken?

With the answers known his father had said, “You and I will go back to get the packs where we dropped them. Juma can get wood and have the fire ready. The medical kit is in my pack. We have to get the packs before it’s dark. He won’t infect. It’s not like claw wounds. Let’s go.”

That evening as David had sat by the fire he had looked at Juma with his stitched-up face and his broken ribs and wondered if the elephant had recognized him when he had tried to kill him. He hoped he had. The elephant was his hero now as his father had been for a long time and he had thought, I didn't believe he could do it when he was so old and tired.

He would have killed Juma, too. But he didn't look at me as though he wanted to kill me. He only looked sad the same way I felt. He visited his old friend on the day he died.

David remembered how the elephant lost all dignity as soon as his eye had ceased to be alive and how when his father and he had returned with the packs the elephant had already started to swell, even in the cool evening. There was no more true elephant; only the gray wrinkled swelling dead body and the huge mottled brown and yellow tusks that they had killed him for.

The tusks were stained with dried blood and he scraped some off with his thumbnail like a dried piece of sealing wax and put it in the pocket of his shirt. That was all he took from the elephant except the beginning of the knowledge of loneliness.

After the butchery his father tried to talk to him that night by the fire.

"He was a murderer you know, Davey," he had said. "Juma says nobody knows how many people he has killed."

"They were all trying to kill him, weren't they?"

"Naturally," his father had said, "with that pair of tusks."

“How could he be a murderer then?”

“Just as you like,” his father had said. “I’m sorry you got so mixed up about him.”

“I wish he’d killed Juma,” David said.

“I think that’s carrying it a little far,” his father said. “Juma’s your friend, you know.”

“Not any more.”

“No need to tell him so.”

“He knows it,” David had said.

“I think you misjudge him,” his father said and they had left it there.

Then when they were finally back safely with the tusks after all the things that had happened and the tusks were propped against the wall of the stick and mud house, leaning there with their points touching, the tusks so tall and thick that no one could believe them even when they touched them and no one, not even his father, could reach to the top of the bend where they curved in for the points to meet, there when Juma and his father and he were heroes and Kibo was a hero’s dog and the men who had carried the tusks were heroes, already slightly drunk heroes and to be drunker, his father had said, “Do you want to make peace, Davey?”

“All right,” he said because he knew this was the start of the never telling that he had decided on.

“I’m so glad,” his father said. “It’s so much simpler and better.”

Then they sat on old men's stools under the shade of the fig tree with the tusks against the wall of the hut and drank beer from gourd cups that were brought by a young girl and her younger brother, the servant of heroes, sitting in the dust by the heroic dog of a hero who held an old cockerel, newly promoted to the standing of the heroes' favorite rooster. They sat there and drank beer while the big drum started and the ngoma began to build.

The End