HANNAH MUMBY

Birth, Death
& Family
in the Lives
of the Giants

Hannah Mumby
The Secret Lives of Elephants

Аннотация

Elephants are as unique as people. They can be clever and curious or headstrong and impulsive, shy or sociable. Learn to know them as individuals as well as a species in this evocative account of years spent studying elephant behaviour in the wild.Watching a family out for a swim on a hot day, Dr Hannah Mumby notes grandmothers, mothers, sisters and children exchanging noisy greetings, a consistent stream of close-range vocalisations, intermittent touching, co-operative herding of babies and frequent stopping for snacks. A close and interconnected family. But in this family, the adults weigh several tons each and the babies wave trunks playfully at one another. This is a herd of elephants.That elephants are intelligent, sentient beings is common knowledge, but so much about their day-to-day lives and abilities remains unknown. How do they communicate with one another over seemingly impossible distances? How do males spend their lives once they have left their mothers' herds? And how much do they really remember?In this lyrically written and deeply personal account of several years of field research, Mumby reverently describes her own elephant encounters, alongside an exploration of the most up-to-date discoveries about the lives of these gentle giants. Learn how elephants live, travel, have sex, raise children and relate to one another, and reflect on how they think and feel. Understanding elephants as

individuals closes the gap between human and animal and has powerful applications in the critical field of elephant conservation.Previous published in hardback as Elephants: Birth, Death and Family in the Lives of the Giants.

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THE SECRET LIVES OF ELEPHANTS
Birth, Death and Family in the World of the Giants

Hannah Mumby

WILLIAM
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Copyright

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Praise for *The Secret Lives of Elephants*

‘Combining lyrical writing about trumpeting at sunset with a pop science sensibility, [*The Secret Lives of Elephants*] is both smart and elegant. Walking with these elephants, and with Hannah, will appeal to the *Planet Earth* viewer and the Robert Macfarlane reader in equal measure.’

Dan Jones, *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Plantagenets* and *The Templars*.

‘*The Secret Lives of Elephants* is an informative and entertaining memoir, in which scientist Hannah Mumby details her experience researching elephants in Africa and Asia. She works alongside conservation giants like Iain Douglas-Hamilton while unearthing connections between elephant and human life histories – often in the midst of alarming spikes in poaching. With descriptive prose, Mumby transports readers to Kenya, Myanmar and South Africa, where she and her colleagues discover surprising facets of elephant behaviour and intelligence.’

BBC Wildlife magazine

Epigraph

Quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous … Ah! Insensé, qui croit que je ne suis pas toi!

When I speak to you about myself, I speak to you about yourself. What mad person are you, to believe I am not you!

Victor Hugo

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Prologue

What do you see when you look in the mirror? A sentient being? One with a family and broader social network, a history and memory? An individual with myriad identities, complex relationships fostered over a (potentially, hopefully) long life? Someone capable of expressing emotion, conveying information, communicating with and recognising lots of other individuals and members of other species? Someone aware that they're looking at a reflection of themselves in the mirror?

When I look in the mirror, I see an elephant. That might sound implausible. Let's peer again. Of course I see glasses (or the blur that comes with the lack of glasses) and blonde hair and more spots than a 32-year-old should ever have. I don't see grey, wrinkled skin (at least not to the extent I could seriously be classified as a thick-skinned pachyderm) or tusks. I don't have a trunk, although I heartily wish I did for practical purposes. But we all know that when you look in the mirror, it's not actually *you* that you're looking at, it's a perception of reflection.

The reason I see myself as an elephant is that when you strip back all the packaging, I don't think I'm different to an elephant in many ways. All the questions I posed above could be answered in the affirmative by an elephant if she were asked. You don't even have to ask her; you just have to watch her live her life. In this book, I'm asking you to squint a little bit into the mirror

and reflect on the fact that you might have a lot in common with an elephant. I will go through my experiences with elephants, loosely based around key landmarks in the map of an elephant (and human) life. I'll discuss their behaviour, physical changes and interactions with humans they have over the course of their lives. The ultimate aim is to reintroduce you to elephants, not just as majestic and incredible creatures, but also as relatable individuals, friends or even family members, which they become to the people who live alongside them. This is not to lose the science or the wonder, but to give us the tools to rethink our approach to animals and perhaps our priorities in conservation (or just how we define our friendship circle). And to highlight the fact that who we are isn't always as obvious as we might think.

To be very clear, this is not the book I intended to write. Early in the process, as a visiting scholar I sat on an oval of grass at Colorado State University, the bright sun glaring on the screen as I typed on my laptop. It was a devastatingly sunny early autumn day, unfamiliar enough to surprise me and challenge me to confront my barely concealed resentment that a season defined by endings and the spectre of death should be so riotously bright and beautiful. Autumn in Cambridge (the one in England, the one I knew too well) was somehow less contradictory, much more comforting in its gloom. A student approached me and asked what I was doing, and I told him I was attempting to write a 'popular science book' about elephants. He told me it was a bit presumptuous to suppose it would be popular. So, advice heeded,

I decided I was trying to write a science book on the topic of elephants. It seemed like an opportunity to convey my ideas to a wider audience than I'd ever had before. I was also excited to go beyond the bounds of my academic writing. After all, there's writing about elephants and then there's writing about actually being an elephant. I know which I think is more fun, and if you can't guess, I'm trumpeting as I write this.

So there I was: Colorado, fall (autumn in my head), my scientific knowledge distilling into something resembling a passable Scotch. Where could I go wrong? Then I wrote something which didn't feel right at all – a chronological and stale list of 'stuff about elephants'. I talked to people and they kept telling me the same thing: I can't see you in this writing and I don't see the science shining through. I had wanted the latter without the former. As with many scientists, I like to take myself out of the equation, because it makes the equation simpler. We are taught to be reductive, to shave everything down with Occam's razor. And in a lot of cases this leads to elegant and rational solutions. But in this case, I had executed a bit of a Sweeney Todd on myself and haemorrhaged all over the floor. I didn't even make a decent pie from the remains. So it was decided: I would enter the book.

I don't find writing about myself interesting; instead, I often find it embarrassing, narcissistic. I judge myself harshly even as I type. But for the purposes of navigating the jumping timeline of this book, my trajectory becomes relevant. I first became

interested in animal lives as an undergraduate, between 2004 and 2007. I have worked with elephants since I was an intern in Kenya in 2010. I continued through my PhD, for which I did fieldwork in Myanmar, and my first post-doctoral position. I was fortunate to receive a series of academic fellowships to return to research in Africa from 2015 onwards, where I built up a team and had the joy of taking my own students on. In 2019, I became an Assistant Professor and moved back to Asia. After a decade of elephants, and a decade and half or so of academia, who I am now is someone wholly consumed with thinking about animals and how people relate to them. It's my job as a scientist, but it's my passion as a person too. In particular, I think about my favourite animals, the elephants, and the animals I have the most complicated relationship with, humans. I think about how elephants interact with each other, with the abiotic and biotic aspects of their environments including us. It's not just thinking, though. I watch elephants and ask people about them. I try to test what the elephants are doing and why, and sometimes I sit in a hide and hope something will happen beyond my legs going numb. I do all of this to the point that I completely lose my sense of whether steamy balls of elephant dung are appropriate for conversation over dinner. I'm going to tell you they're absolutely marvellous for me, but that for other people they might be best reserved for post-dinner drinks, particularly if anything spherical, brown or sticky is on the menu.

I don't think we are very good judges of who we are, which

is why I wish I could ask some elephants to introduce me. Unfortunately, I can't adequately put into words all of what they express. For example, on one of my field trips a couple of years ago a young male African elephant stopped to dip his rounded head in the South African dust and then lifted it and shook it about, ears fanned. He was displaying how big he was and perhaps saying I needed to be shown my place. The older males who pointedly ignored me on the same day might have disagreed, ambling as they did past our vehicle in slow motion. To them, I was nothing more than background scenery. Failing elephant explanations, my human family would be the next best when it comes to providing an introduction. My parents would tell you that I was always an odd child. Big eyes, earnest, absorbent as a fancy cushioned loo-roll. I was at home in my head and stubbornly silent much of the time. Occasionally, I had a lot to say. They'd tell you about me asking my dad to film me on a bulky camcorder because I wanted to make a documentary. It was of me on the seashore giving a serious and detailed commentary on the real and imagined creatures I had found there. My parents would point to the flickering footage of that child prodding at the seaweed and they would say it was meant to be – I was always a field biologist.

I shy away from certainty, though. I don't know if I was always meant to find elephants in order to find myself. I don't know if I was meant to be a scientist, a professor, a teacher, a conduit through which a little bit of discovery and knowledge flows, an

elephant person. But that is what happened. I think curiosity, luck and fearlessness (sometimes borne of naivety) brought me here. When I think of me, I see myself standing eye to eye with an elephant, then shaking my head, realising elephants aren't great for eye contact and instead holding out my dirty laundry for them to sniff. And I mean my actual dirty laundry. It smells just like me (rather than what I want to smell like), and who better than an elephant, with its magnificent olfactory abilities, to distinguish every layer of the stench. If you are going to give yourself, your absolute on-the-nose flaws and ugliness and all, this is a comprehensive way to do it. And safe too. Elephants are keepers of secrets. A rather big secret being that if you can see past the grey skin and the bulk and the majesty and the fear of them, then sometimes, in some ways, they are just like you. So however I got here, to this place of fascination and science in a joyous positive feedback loop, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. And I'm going to keep on charging ahead.

Some elephant names have been changed in this text at the request of organisations involved in their care and/or conservation.

CHAPTER 1
Becoming an elephant

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl.

Julio Cortázar

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Honestly, just feedback, wasn’t his last point here?’

‘Oh, but that point was very early this morning. Let’s look for him.’

I sighed and took the radio receiver from my ear. I was tracking a male elephant named Bulumko up in the very north-eastern corner of South Africa with Ronny and Jess, two experienced field workers. I had expected to hear a clear and firm ‘bleep, bleep’ from the tracking collar which Bulumko had been wearing for several years now. The collar communicated with a satellite, so we could know Bulumko’s movements from afar, and usually with the antenna that I was holding up in the air. But not today. Instead, there was no trace of him, just a tantalisingly close GPS point we’d received several hours ago when he was foraging nearby. I felt mildly exasperated that the technology had

let me down. Or perhaps it was just that I hadn't downed enough tea and rusks since we'd set off at daybreak.

Ronny was already scanning the horizon from the canvas roof of our beautiful new vivid green pickup truck, lovingly known to the Elephants Alive employees as Shrek. After tracking elephants from an enclosed *bakkie* 4x4, an off-roading vehicle, we now had the freedom, luxury and coolness of an open vehicle. It was almost autumn, but the daytime temperatures could still soar up to 34 degrees, and Shrek was the best place to be if you couldn't make it to a swimming pool. I clambered up to join Ronny and then jumped back down to get my binoculars, remembering the gulf between my eyesight and his.

Up on the roof, my hunger and frustration slipped away as I felt the precious light breeze fluttering my untucked shirt. I could hear melodious bird calls and buzzing flies attracted to our sweat. After a second, I started to become aware of the landscape. This place could seem vast and monotonous. But after a few visits I had started to pick up on the variation – in parts it was an immense and undulating expanse of flat-leafed mopane trees, joining into a blanket; in others it was more open savannah punctuated with termite mounds, spiky barked knobthorn trees and the broad-canopied and fragrant marula. I happily noted the subtle gradient in vegetation along the slopes and riversides. It shifted with the seasons too. We'd had a little more rain this year, and there was a layer of green underneath the trees. Not thick, or deep, but somehow speaking of life and its persistence in a

place that could be so harsh and arid. I thought of last year, of the blistered, sunburned hippos wallowing ankle-deep in what should have been pools and shook my head to rid myself of the memory.

Ronny's eyes were fixed in the distance. He knew how to track elephants and other animals, so I knew to take my cues from him. He grew up at a nearby safari lodge, where his mum worked in housekeeping, and his uncle was a tracker. Today we were searching for tell-tale signs of elephants: movement in the trees on the horizon or the sound of breaking branches. I could complain about the flashy technology letting us down, but this was really the way to find elephants. You got more of a sense of scale, of how they fitted into the picture; to rely on your senses and be aware of the bush, the sun, and of yourself within it all. Having said that, I'd made plenty of phantom elephant sightings, mistaking rocks, tree trunks or buffalo for one of our big grey study animals. Today, we were going to get the real thing.

Suddenly, Ronny smiled. 'There he is! In that big block of trees!'

I held up the binoculars to my myopic eyes, a result of too many hours looking at screens and books close-up and not enough out here. Of course, Ronny was right. Bulumko. He was a towering and impressive bull in his prime. He was old enough to have distinctive notches in his ears. He probably caught them on branches or thorns, and elephants tend to have more ragged ears the older they get. We used them to confirm his identity. He'd

also grown a pair of jutting tusks, by no means the biggest I had seen, but each over a metre long. He had been tracked for years by Elephants Alive; and knowing the elephants as individuals with their own lives and experiences over time was what attracted me to them in the first place. What's more, the elephants had names, not just numbers. Bulumko's name meant wisdom, but what always struck me was the way he moved. He ambled, feeling the trees with his trunk and taking time to determine his route. He favoured travelling along the dirt roads that we drove along in our vehicle, and he occasionally lingered by water sources longer than the other males. Like every elephant I had ever known, Bulumko had his quirks and unique features. But he was a little different even beyond that. Bulumko was blind.

In many species, a blind individual just wouldn't survive. But sight isn't as important for elephants as it is for other animals. Hearing and smell are much more critical. Bulumko has not just found a way to navigate the world without his sight, he'd also found a way to navigate social life. He could displace other males for access to the freshest water or a prime shady spot to rest in. Even if he wasn't receiving direct care from other animals, he was certainly accepted and even dominant because of his stature, age and tusks. Our relationship with Bulumko was singular, because while the other elephants we watched became habituated to our presence, Bulumko accepted us as friends and co-travellers. We could stay with him for hours by a waterhole as he bathed and we enviously sweated in the sun. When he moved

off, he rumbled, a short but low and sonorous sound indicating to us to follow – let's go! I often wondered whether Bulumko was more likely than other elephants to communicate with us in this way precisely because of his blindness. With him, we were beyond being observers, we were almost another elephant. Perhaps not seeing us made it easier for him to interact with us as companions, and our car was like another big animal. Except it smelt of people and talked like us too.

Excited to 'talk' to Bulumko again and, of course, to listen, I clambered down off the roof, eager to drive to a spot where we could get a better sighting of him. I smiled at Ronny and Jess. 'This is the life!' Jess laughed and shook her head at me. But it really was what I wanted, to be treated like an elephant by an elephant. Then Jess revved Shrek's heavy engine and we drove to Bulumko, leaving a trail of dust in our wake.

What is an elephant? A favourite character in a childhood book, a weapon of war, a religious icon, a draught animal, a pest, a conservation flagship, a source of income, a drain on income, a hunting prize, a tourist trap, a terrifying beast, a gentle giant, a source of ivory or a source of power. It has at one time or another been all of these, and the diversity of responses illustrates the complexity and history of our relationship with our world's biggest land mammals. Few animals evoke such heartfelt passion and division of opinion. It often strikes me that these enormous animals carry with them so much meaning, symbolism and sometimes baggage, but at least they have the strength

for it. Many scientists have to carefully introduce and describe their study species of cichlid fishes, fruit flies, honeyguides or sticklebacks. When I say that I work with elephants, most people already have a firm image in their minds, which can be hard for me to compete with. But the way I see elephants is as personal as it is for everyone else. For me, elephants are the biggest, most complex and endlessly fascinating puzzle I have ever faced. And I've done one of those thousand-piece jigsaws. How elephants can make evolutionary sense with their long lives, inefficient guts and slow reproduction in a world where being small, reproducing fast and multiplying exponentially is an option continues to intrigue me. How do we have giants in this world? And how do we live with them?

It wasn't inevitable that my life would end up this way, defined by elephants: their lives, their movements, their habits and the similarities and differences between us and them. I didn't grow up in the bush like Ronny. I'm not South African like him and Jess. If you'd asked me when I was seven what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd have said Indiana Jones or David Attenborough. But these early field-based dreams drifted away as I was increasingly buried in academic literature, revision and exams. I feel as though I came to from my teenage years as an undergraduate student at King's College, Cambridge: slightly baffled as to how as a first generation university student I managed to end up there, but equally determined that I had been very sure it was where I should be. I was overwhelmed

by the looming architecture, at once oppressively cloistered and staggeringly grand. It echoed my inability to engage with both the nuanced and visually spectacular traditions, acted out by others with an ease and naturalness I couldn't hope to emulate. I was equally intimidated by the wider features of the student experience. I didn't row in one of the college boats, I didn't act or write for the newspaper, I didn't get a glitzy internship. I sat in the library, shell-shocked by how very little I knew and could ever hope to know.

Feeling adrift, I needed a framework to understand myself, as an individual and as a human being. I decided the solution to understanding my place in the world was to get to the bottom of what it means to be human. Unsurprisingly, even this task was a little over-ambitious for my undergraduate dissertation. Then, in a second-year lecture, my Cambridge experience turned around dramatically. I found the ideas of life history, and, with it, an elegant clarity that comes with the most beautifully constructed scientific theories. At its core, the theory is about explaining how living organisms balance energy and time in their development, reproduction and senescence.

For me, it was about understanding any living organism by getting to the nuts and bolts of how it is born or comes to being, grows, reproduces (or not) and dies. These are universal traits that bind us living things together, but we experience them as individuals. This means we can observe enormous variation both between organisms and between lives; for example, the overall

picture is that humans are long-lived animals with slow-paced lives, but this masks the fact that some of us live a few minutes or hours and others live for over a century. How do these patterns of mortality put pressure on the shape of our lives as a species? It was the perfect lens through which to see myself and the world. It allowed me to put aside the idea of humans as exceptional and use the principles to understand my own life as just another creature.

With this in mind, I started studying the lives of primates. Non-human primates like monkeys, apes and lemurs are the go-to comparative organisms for humans. This makes complete sense on one level, because they are our closest relatives. I launched myself into conducting an ambitious study for my undergraduate dissertation. I was trying to use a life-history formula to determine whether the pace of human life was typical of a primate, or if it was an outlier, standing out from the usual pattern. What I mean by the pace of life isn't just the lifespan. I mean whether key 'milestones' in our life history, such as weaning and age at first reproduction, are very spread out, or if they are clumped together. It's often useful to view life histories as on a continuum. For example, in mammals it could go from a 'fast-living' creature like a mouse, which matures rapidly, has many offspring and a relatively short life, to animals that have a longer development, space out their offspring more and have a longer life, like humans. All of this can be influenced by body size: large bodies take longer to grow, so we have to take this into account. Without celebrating myself too much, I was excited to

discover that although humans are living in the slow lane even among primates, we humans aren't an absolute outlier. We aren't even the slowest of the species I researched.

I felt thrilled with my contribution to scientific knowledge, and the head of the Anthropology Department recommended that I publish it. I felt accepted and valued in a way that I hadn't in several years of port and cheese parties (although I had managed to develop a taste for port and a fear it would give me gout, and a particular joy in truffled pecorino). Then, I thought more about it, and more, and then just too much. I realised how limited my study really was. I had a horrible, sinking realisation that I was effectively standing with my nose a couple of inches from a pointillist painting and happily telling everyone I could see the big picture. I could in fact just see some lovely green dots, but I could definitely not see a picnic scene by the River Seine (or whatever your favourite pointillist scene depicts).

At the time, I was working on an alumni database at a Cambridge college. Twiddling my thumbs, romanticising about becoming an academic, but not ready to inhabit that life. I began to unpick my failure and re-evaluate my approach. Really, I had put humans into their primate context, but humans aren't just primates. And how much do we have in common with more distantly related primates like lemurs? What I needed to do was forget about relatedness and just look for the slow life-history pattern across animals. If I could find an animal that had evolved on a separate trajectory and wasn't related to humans, it would

be all the more interesting. I could investigate the similarities and differences between lives without having to worry that I was just describing the general primate pattern. I started a list. I wrote down 'whales'. I grimaced at the thought of seasickness and crossed it out. I wrote down 'elephants', and changed the direction of my life.

A few months later I arrived in Kenya. I had never been on a flight with request stops before, never mind on such a tiny plane. A stroke of luck meant that the former master of the college where I had been working had been an influential elephant researcher in the 1960s and 1970s and had recommended I seek out a PhD student he had examined. The PhD student was Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who had become a giant of elephant research. Before I had even met Iain, I had been told he was an 'elephant'. I knew by reputation that he was superlatively intelligent, incredibly productive and passionately committed to his work. But I thought that being an elephant sounded mad. I had heard about him being chased around a thorny bush by a female elephant and being lucky that he had only ended up with a few scratches. The real mystery, he told me, was her intention. 'Did she actually intend to kill me, when she overran me and plunged her tusks nine inches into the ground above my head? Did she change her mind after I was under her, at her mercy, or was it only her intention from the start to frighten me? Either way, she was certainly successful in increasing my heartbeat!'

Despite these fortuitous connections, Kenya was more alien

than Cambridge had ever been. When we landed in Samburu I was in equal parts happy I was alive and proud I had kept down my breakfast, particularly because one of the younger passengers had not managed the latter. I hauled my backpack off the plane and dragged it through the sand to the edge of the runway. I glanced at the rickety table of knick-knacks bearing a 'duty-free' sign, unsure as to whether it was a spirited attempt at a shop or a joke. The airstrip was deserted. I sat on my backpack and wished I had water. The sun was getting higher in the sky and I squinted. I thought I should have reminded someone I was coming here. Could it be they didn't know, and I was going to have to get back on that terrifying little plane? Luckily, my anxious musings were broken by two men asking where I was staying.

'Save The Elephants,' I told them.

The representatives arrived half an hour later: two smiling young men, Jerenimo and Benjamin. I felt uncomfortable that I must have been several years older than them and asked myself if I was being ridiculous by following them, but I realised my alternatives were non-existent. They didn't seem the least bit uncomfortable. On the contrary, they were grinning at me. We chatted in the vehicle as we bumped along the sandy roads. My overwhelming first impression of Samburu was of toasty orange sand and thorns. Thorns so impressive that I didn't want to think of stepping on one. I retreated into my safe space, scientific knowledge, and reflected that plants must have to strongly defend themselves against plant-eating animals to evolve those five-

centimetre protective prongs. While I was lost in my thoughts, Jerenimo stopped the car. He was still smiling.

'We have to walk the rest of the way.'

I looked at the river that he had parked beside and the remains of the bridge spanning it. Benjamin told me that the river had flooded earlier in the year and destroyed the bridge and much of the camp. It had plenty of crocodiles, so we were better off climbing over what was left of the old bridge. Gallantly, Jerenimo and Benjamin took my bags. I wished I had a better sense of balance, another thing I should have been focusing on instead of all that reading. I began coaching myself. *Hannah, this is fieldwork. You said you wanted to do it. You want to understand elephants? You need to live in a tent, go on those dirt roads and climb over this bridge!* I convinced myself that I was not an attractive meal to a crocodile, without giving the idea the scientific scrutiny it might have merited at other times. I climbed clumsily up the side of the bridge and peeked over the top.

Baboons!

The flashing canine teeth of the larger male baboons impressed me much more in the flesh than I had expected. I knew they were mainly for display, but I ducked back down. Jerenimo and Benjamin put their knowledge of animal behaviour into action and pulled themselves up to their full height, puffing out their chests, clapping their hands and shouting out loud. The baboons duly dispersed and I made a mental note to behave more like a baboon when I was around baboons.

A few days later, I had settled into camp life. Despite having been devastated by the flood that had destroyed the 'Baboon Bridge' just five months earlier, the camp was tidy, well-equipped and functional. The days quickly took on a form and rhythm that became familiar, and I realised that I could more easily adapt to living anywhere than I had imagined. I was staying in a tent underneath a corrugated iron roof, to protect me from the vervet monkey excrement dropping from the tree when I woke in the morning. I had an orange plastic bucket to wash in, which a small antelope with a spring in its step known as a klipspringer had also taken to using as a fresh water supply. I would go to the water pump every morning and fill up a transparent bottle. I would leave this in the centre of the camp, exposed to the sun, in order to warm the water for my afternoon bucket shower. I became used to the long drop (even thankful for the breeze it created) and to making sure I put the rope across the entrance so that people knew I was in there. I played checkers using the tops from beer bottles; the gold Tusker brand tops got me thinking of the symbolic power elephants have over us. As well as the curious klipspringer, I met some of the other animals that frequented the camp: a wizened pair of hornbills, still striking in their senescence with white and black feathers and curved orangey-yellow beaks; a band of mongooses hunting by the dining area. The troop of baboons I had first met on the bridge appeared calmer as they traversed the slope next to our breakfast table undisturbed. There was a group of rock hyraxes,

fluffy mammals that look a bit like oversized guinea pigs but are actually some of the closest living relatives of elephants. They slept a lot, and sometimes took a break from basking in the sun to investigate the bags of flour in the food store. But however charming these characters were, I hadn't yet seen an elephant. After all, that's why I had come all the way to Kenya.

The following morning at breakfast, I got much more than chai, toast and honey: my first wild elephant sighting. To this day, I can't imagine a better gateway to watching elephants. I can't begin to explain how lucky I was that it happened when I was on foot and in the camp. The former because it allowed me to sense the scale of the elephant in front of me and my own fragility, which is just not possible in a vehicle. And the latter because I was familiar enough with the camp not to let the experience terrify and overwhelm me. An old male elephant, Yeager, had come to investigate the old collars that had been worn by elephants to mount the tracking devices. The delicacy with which he handled these bulky and decaying pieces of abandoned equipment touched me. He explored them with the tip of his trunk and turned them gently, detecting the scent of their former wearers, faded over time. I remember his face so clearly. It was wide above the trunk, as happens to males with age, with deep horizontal wrinkles traversing the front of his face. Either side, his eyes were looking downwards, the direction of his gaze emphasised by the dramatically long and spindly eyelashes shading them. His tusks were thick at the base, another sign of

his age. His right tusk splayed out to the side and formed a stubby but impressive point, while the left one had a messy jagged break about 5 centimetres down from his lip line, exposing the layers of hard tissue and giving him a rakish, rugged appearance.

Yeager moved so slowly, but with so much power and intention. I watched him pull up grass with the tip of his trunk, flick the trunk back and forth to remove the dust from the roots and place the grass in his mouth, chewing methodically and rhythmically. I don't know how long I watched him for. It could have been minutes or hours, but it didn't matter because it was on his time. The pace of my perception slowed to match his, and with it some of the urgency of this world diminished: the irresistible urge to push forward, even when I didn't know why I was doing it. As he eventually eased his way out of the camp, he paused to defecate, dropping five balls of caramel-coloured dung. When he was safely out of the way, I walked over to where he had been, taking time to look at his footprints in the sand, with their crisscrossing cracks like trails on a map. From the flat area at the back of his foot I could work out the direction in which he had been walking. I could see where he had rested his trunk on the ground, leaving a valley of ripples. I smelled his dung, grassy, warm and not the slightest bit repulsive. I squeezed it between my fingers, letting the green-yellow water run down my arm. There was life in that dung. I felt the barely digested plant material, gathered from kilometres away and deposited here; the potential for dung beetles to roll it away, or a frog to take up residence

there, or the seeds in it to germinate. I thought of the worm eggs that I'd only later see under the microscope, and, smaller still, his DNA, the bacteria from his gut, the metabolised fragments of all his hormones. I saw him at once as more than the sum of his parts, a vital part of a system that was both much bigger and much smaller than him.

I had come to Kenya looking for a slow-living animal, a model on which to test my ideas. I laughed at myself for dismissing Iain as an elephant before I had met one myself. What Yeager gave me was the experience of feeling my own life slow down, when I watched him and his face being seared onto my soul. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life working with elephants. But for me, it wasn't enough to watch in awe and appreciate. My love and science had collided again, just as they had done at the first life-history lecture I attended. Yeager raised more questions in me than he answered. The biggest scientific issue for me was that perhaps my theoretical framework had been too reductive: by considering individuals as the embodiment of their life-history landmarks, I had lost too much of their complexity. Although Yeager was alone, I saw so much interaction – the grass he ate, the collars he sniffed, that incredible dung he dropped. For me, this crystallised the fact that elephants in isolation from their environment make no sense. I knew elephants had startling parallels with humans in terms of their life history, but broadening what I could imagine, see, test and understand about them might reveal even more intriguing parallels and contrasts.

I couldn't study them the way I had originally intended, with elephants just as a model. By doing that I would limit them, limit Yeager because he was so much more. I had to understand what it was to be an elephant and try, in the limited and human way I could, to conduct my studies from that point of view. A big evolutionary, ecological puzzle like an elephant deserves more than just our fascination, it deserves our critical thinking. That way I could enhance both my experience of being human and my understanding of being human on every level, from the deeply personal to the scientifically challenging.

I am a human. I am an elephant. The study of life has separated humans from other animals with no particular scientific justification for this exceptionalism, other than that as humans we might be both most familiar with and most intrigued by our own species. Many beautiful and reasoned arguments have been made against human exceptionalism (I refer you to anything by ethologist Frans de Waal), and there are wonderful accounts of individual animals exhibiting behaviours that we might once have thought exclusive to humans, eliciting responses and understanding concepts, from honey bees to scrub jays. What doesn't seem to have changed much is the way we do science. When we study humans, we are ethnographers: we place ourselves within the context that we are interested in and participate with informants trying to understand what they are doing and why. When we study other animals, we try to make ourselves invisible and remove ourselves from the context, just

as I had planned and monumentally failed to do in the writing of this book. Why? Is it because we think we are a distraction, that we will alter the behaviour of the animals? Perhaps, in part. But there is a huge wealth of material on reflexivity, positionality and the role of the researcher in social science that natural scientists could tap into. Acknowledging the presence of the researcher, and all of the complication that comes with that, actually makes the studies richer. I think part of the problem is our deeply ingrained sense of difference from other animals and it is holding us back as scientists. If we were more free, if we were willing to rumble right back to Bulumko, what world of understanding could it open to us?

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