

My Elephant Neighbor



This story, written by a European who does not live close to elephants, was inspired by encounters with African mothers and grandmothers who live in proximity to elephants.





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My Elephant Neighbor

To Children and Elephants

May your coexistence be harmonious

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Noa, come here. Come sit beside me... I am worried, Noa. I am worried for you, for your future children and for our village. So, for your 10th birthday, I am going to tell you a story that I hope will be useful.



A long time ago, a long, long time ago, before my grandfather and before his own grandfather, humans were not yet on Earth but there were already elephants. They were everywhere: North, South, East, and West. The bush, their territory, was immense.



Much later, the first humans, our ancestors, arrived. At first they were afraid of the elephants because they were big and strong. But quickly, they learned they were peaceful and that they only became dangerous when they were disturbed.



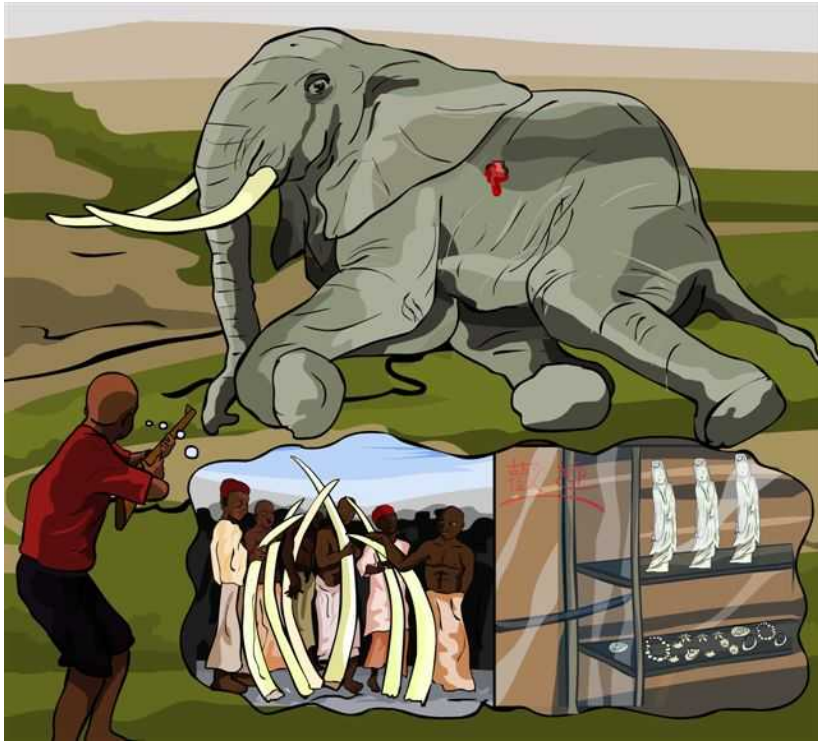
Humans became more and more ingenious. They invented tools that allowed them to make things that they would not have been able to do with their bare hands. They created weapons and hunted elephants and other animals for food. They also invented paintbrushes and drew elephants on rocks in reverence.



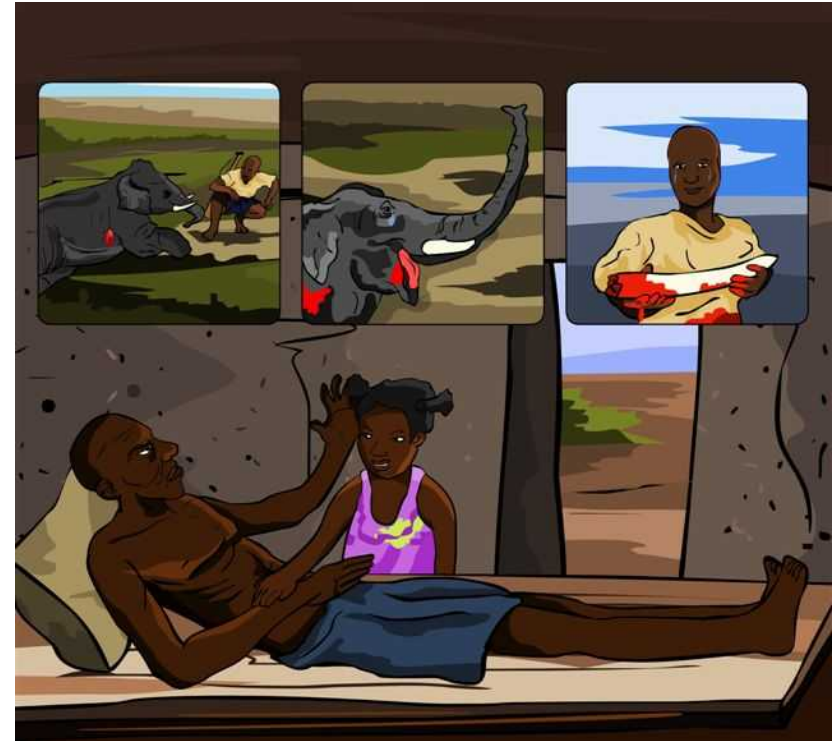
The relation between humans and elephants was built on both fear and respect, on competition and cohabitation. When elephants came to the watering hole, they were left to drink undisturbed. When they were in the woods close to the villages, the people did not enter unless they wanted to hunt. In these early days, when people were not numerous, villages were small and the bush was large and many elephants and wild animals lived there.



More time passed and humans multiplied. They built larger villages and then cities and then began to transform the bush around into fields to grow grain and vegetables. As would be expected with more and more fields, there was less bush and the elephants were forced to find shelter further away.



My grandfather, who you never knew, was an elephant hunter. He hunted them for meat and for the ivory tusks that they have on either side of their long trunk. Ivory is exchanged for merchandise or sold. It is not vital for us, but certain people want it so they can appear richer and more important than others or because they find it beautiful. They don't realize that elephants will always be more beautiful than anything that can be made with their ivory.



When I was around your age, my grandfather, just before he died, confided in me that he regretted killing elephants. He did it to feed his family and he felt he had no choice. But one day when he had trapped a baby elephant with tiny little tusks he saw the mother cry in sadness. On that day, he looked at the blood stained little tusks that he held in his hands and decided, tears in his eyes, that he would never hunt elephants again, even for their meat. He buried the little tusks at the foot of a large tree and left to cultivate his field.



Sometimes, mostly during the night, elephants trampled on and ripped up the plants people were growing, destroying the harvest. But in the village, everyone helps one another and they learned to guard their fields with the help of their neighbors. Soon the elephants didn't dare to approach and as the years passed they were seen less and less.



At this time I was a child, like you. From time to time we would still see them, very early in the morning or as night was falling, a small group of elephants far away, passing discretely at the edge of the field. It was a glorious sight. My heart beat quickly and I thought that our village was the most beautiful village in the world. As soon as the elephants noticed our presence they disappeared into the bush while giving a worried look in our direction.



When your mother was a little girl we lived at the limit of the village, close to the river, not far from the bridge on the paved road. The soil there was better and richer. At this time the other side of the river was still wild, and regularly, during the dry season, a large male elephant would come out of the bush facing our field to drink. He was gigantic and majestic. I called him “My Elephant Neighbor” and stopped working to watch him. He saw me but he was not afraid. He stayed calm, drank, ate a few leaves, then disappeared into the bush again.



It is a long time since I have seen him or any other elephant around here. The other side of the river was transformed into fields as the village grew and grew. The bush has become very small and the elephants have less and less space to live peacefully. I know... at least I hope, that there are still elephants, but I am not sure. I am sad. I have noticed in the past few years that the droughts have been longer and longer, the rains come less often but there is more and it is destructive. I am worried.



The End...

And you, do you know how to answer Noa's grandmother? Do you think that we will be able to live in harmony with elephants?

We would love to hear your responses. Share your ideas with with your parents or your teachers who will be able to contact us, or if you have internet access, contact us directly at

www.my-elephant-neighbour.net

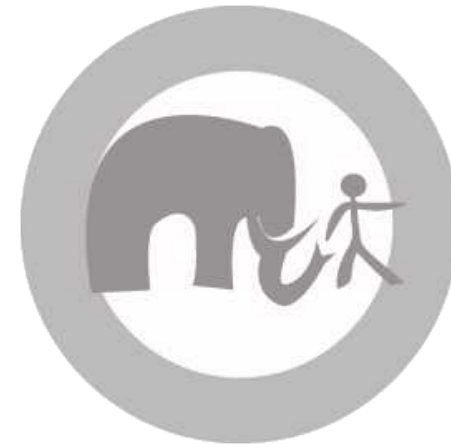
Your most interesting ideas will be published.

Noa, do you know the bush? Have you seen the beautiful colored birds, wild animals and huge trees? Have you ever seen an elephant? I am worried Noa, because I don't know if your children or your grand children will ever see the elephants of our region. Perhaps by then they will have all disappeared. We need land for our families, but we also need nature. Do you believe that we will succeed in living with our neighbor elephants?

"We start by saying that elephants are too big, too cumbersome, that they knock over telephone poles, trample the harvests, that they are an anachronism, then we finish by saying the same thing about freedom-freedom and Man become cumbersome in the long run..."

"Today you say that elephants are archaic and cumbersome, that they interfere with roads and telegraph poles, and tomorrow you'll begin to say that human rights too are obsolete and cumbersome, that they interfere with progress..."

*Romain Gary
The Roots of Heaven (1957)*



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