

The Paper Bag

by Michalia Arathimos

The elephant was a sickly hue when he came to stay. His skin pooled at his ankles – ‘cankles’, Justin called them, unsympathetically I thought – and his torso sagged in many places. He was meant to sag, of course. To sag, and roam, and meander, and bury his dead, and remember. Which is why, perhaps, he had this great surfeit of skin, as if every pore contained a memory and every line a thought about a species lost, a hunter encountered, a waterhole dried up, the memories pulling at him, till at last he would lie down, a bag of memory draped over not much else, a carcass of story.

‘Cankles seems too strong a word,’ I said to Justin. ‘Look, there’s a little definition there.’ But he refused to see it.

It was an inopportune moment for the elephant to arrive, as we had two young children, and my mother-in-law was coming to stay. I didn’t know where to put him in the house (it was a him, this at least was obvious), so I took to Facebook. I was part of an online group of feminist mothers that shared encouragement. We also shared our outrage. Because I no longer throw Molotov cocktails at the police, and because I have ceased to think that yelling at fascists helps to effect change, my anger has no other outlet. I, like the other mainly white, over-educated-but-in-debt women in this group, funnelled my rage into small complaints. Molotovs are more satisfying, the sound of the impact, that gorgeous, ephemeral flame.

When I logged in, Patricia M had written that her husband wouldn’t get up with the baby in the night, and that he expected her to cook for a gathering they were having that day, by default. Punk n’ Nasty had said that despite agreeing to do half the household work and working the same number of hours as she did, her male partner wouldn’t do the dishes. And Katriona Delight had said that her boyfriend had punched her in the face, taken the car and withdrawn all the money from their shared bank account, and that she was afraid for her life.



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I sent Patricia M and Punk n' Nasty commiserational emoji. The answers to Katriona Delight's post ranged from 'Sorry you're going through this. I hope you can find the strength to heal,' to offers of money, practical help and refuge. I wrote that although I was in another city, I truly sympathised, that such behaviour was abusive, and that I hoped she could get the help she needed. The person commenting after me offered to put the boyfriend, when he appeared, in the path of a large truck.

'My MIL is arriving in a few days,' I wrote, 'and an elephant has appeared in the laundry. It's surprising. He's not really grey. He's more of an ash-lavender. We have no shared language, so I'm not sure what his requirements are. The spare room is made up for the MIL and I'm pretty sure Hubby hasn't thought about feeding the elephant, so it's all up to me. Pls help!' This last, I hoped, would come across as light-hearted, when in fact I had spent the afternoon sobbing into the kitchen sink. But after Katriona Delight's post, my problem seemed almost insignificant. What was an elephant in the laundry to a punch in the face?

The second day, I went into the laundry to fetch some nappies, and the problem didn't seem insignificant at all. He was there, crammed into the space between the toilet stall and the washing machine. He was looking at me. His trunk swayed delicately.

'What do you want?' I asked. His big eyes blinked. 'Why are you here?' He made to back away but bumped the wall. 'Where are you going to sleep? We only have one good set of spare sheets.'

At this, his tail swept a pile of laundry off the top of the washing machine and onto the floor. Justin had put it there. 'It was too much to expect that he'd put the washing in the machine,' I would write later, to the mother's group. 'And turn the fucking thing *on*.' Instead, here were the crumpled socks, the dirtied underwear, scattered at the elephant's feet. His toenails needed a trim. I swept the washing off the floor and ran a load.

'I hope you're happy with yourself,' I said to the elephant. I spoke in my mother's voice, one that I heard now frequently emerging from my own mouth. 'As if I didn't have enough to do.' I slammed the door loudly behind me.



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I felt fantastic, for a moment. Then I wondered if I was an animal abuser. The elephant didn't know the pressure I was under. It didn't know that my mother-in-law would consider its presence an imposition, as the elephant would divert attention away from herself. It didn't know that Justin, despite identifying himself as a feminist, considered all the dirty underwear in the house my responsibility. It was helplessly, wordlessly, an animal, and probably in distress.

I went back into the laundry, patted the elephant, and left him swaying slightly in the small room. His skin was dry and leathery, perhaps too dry, and he smelled like something alien – desert or savannah. I'd have to put moisturiser on the shopping list. But Justin had forgotten where his keys were, and the search absorbed everything for the next ten minutes, and when it was over (they were on the hook by the door), the moisturiser had escaped my mind.

When I logged into Facebook, Katriona Delight had vanished from the group, leading to a long flurry of pleas for the moderators' intervention. Down_to_F_the_Patriarchy expressed concern that the violent partner might have returned. Amelia Bedilia said she knew Katriona in person and not to worry, that she'd taken her children and left and would not be going back. Someone offered to track Katriona's partner down and give him what he deserved. A moderator posted a note about appropriate conduct online and the risks of living in a surveillance state. Amelia Bedilia said that Katriona and her children had been transported out of the city last night by women from the group. Katriona Delight's initial post would be deleted to protect her. If anyone had personal messages for her, they were to DM Amelia herself.

'The elephant is still in the laundry!' I wrote. I needed urgent advice. 'Does anyone know how I can ask him to leave, but subtly, to avoid offending him? The last thing I would want to do is make him feel unwelcome. Counting down to the MIL's stay!' Then I tried to remember what I had been doing.

'You'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on,' my mother used to say to me. 'You couldn't organise your way out of a paper bag.' I think about this as I finick my way through the house, sorting detritus. Hairclips, staples, odd socks, screwdrivers in unsafe places. I try to be methodical. *Underwear – washing machine. Screwdriver – shed.*



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But halfway through returning the objects to their homes, I found myself stalled, clutching at a doorway, with *Plastic block – toybox* and *Eggcup – kitchen cupboard* and *School notice – noticeboard + remember to make sure the money for the fundraiser is sent in an envelope with my child's name and the teacher's name on it and with the permission slip inside + write the date of the fundraiser on the calendar along with a note to make sure my child has a sunhat, extra snacks + a large water bottle + add new water bottle to the shopping list but we'll have to go to the organic co-op as there are no non-plastic water bottles at the supermarket + plastic is the enemy of the environment + all I have to pass on to my children is an inheritance of mass extinction + imminent climate change* in my hands, along with perhaps a stuffed toy and Justin's mobile phone, which he had forgotten to take to work again.

When we met, Justin was raising awareness about climate change. I was organising Reclaim the Night marches, working towards a world in which violence against women would end. Neither of these things seemed to be working out well.

Head if it wasn't screwed on. Out of a paper bag.

And my mother, on a bad day: 'One day I hope you grow up and have children who are as ungrateful as you.' Those are some of the things that have been said to me.

Here are some things that have been said about elephants: They are said to bring prowess in war. They symbolise unwieldy burdens. They are meant to mean patience and calm. Ganesha is an elephant. He is known as the great remover of obstacles.

The third day, I went into the laundry and looked the elephant in the eye.

'What is it you want me to remember?' I asked.

The elephant raised his trunk as though he might strike me.

At last! A small part of me enthused. Punch me in the face!

During our worst arguments, Justin's and mine, I would say, 'Anything would be better than your constant "forgetting".' I meant: Do something. Give me an excuse to leave.

He would look at me, impassive.



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Justin worked full-time and had a long commute. The youngest was one and when I thought of him going to day care I started to hyperventilate. Justin would leave before it was light and arrive home in the dark. We told ourselves we were privileged. The elephant's trunk was raised above my head. He would strike me. I would take to Facebook, and everyone would see my bruise. People would offer help. Women would come, and take me away from all of this.

The elephant's trunk hovered. A smell of savannah, and tigers, and unfamiliar leaves. It stroked my face.

I went into the lounge, chastened.

On the fourth day, Justin called me into the laundry. The elephant had shat in the corner. Compared to the shit of the children, the elephant's shit was immense.

'What do we do?' I asked Justin. 'We can't go on like this.'

'I was meant to leave for work ten minutes ago,' Justin said.

From the other room I heard the baby start to cry. We looked at the shit.

'I think you'll have to use the garden shovel,' Justin said.

The kids had shown no interest in the elephant. I'd taken them in several times to see him, but they'd acted as if he wasn't there.

'What are you feeding him?' Melania B wrote on Facebook. 'I'm a veterinarian and, depending on the species, the elephant might not do well with GE food. You'll have to buy organic.'

After googling, I had decided that my elephant was an African elephant. Where was I going to find organic elephant food? I supposed that would be better than the grass I had been feeding him.

'That elephant should be returned to the wild,' Christini Ara wrote. 'The laundry isn't an appropriate enclosure.'

'I agree with Christini Ara!' Lucy Tree wrote. 'But there is no appropriate enclosure for an elephant! Free the elephant!'



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I slammed my laptop shut. Did anyone in the group know my actual address? They might stage an intervention. I wouldn't log in anymore.

That night, a bellow came from the laundry. When Justin and I entered the room, it was clear what had happened. The elephant had opened the washing machine and was trying to extract the wet washing that Justin had forgotten to put out that morning. The washing had a doggy stink and would need to be washed again. The washing machine lid had fallen on the elephant's trunk, trapping it.

We freed the creature. I looked into his large, human-like eye. I was sure he was trying to help. Over the last few days, the elephant had become almost translucent, his skin more lavender, glowing from within. It occurred to me that he might not be real.

'He's changed since he turned up,' Justin said. 'His features are finer, somehow.' He patted the elephant softly, the *pat pat pat* like rain on the roof.

On the fifth day, I went back online. There were comments imploring me to free the elephant, and ones attacking my character.

'I never meant to cause any harm,' I wrote. 'I acknowledge that I have limited knowledge of elephants and of their needs. I'll be calling in professionals shortly. I never meant to imply that it was okay for an elephant to be caged. Thanks for all of your input. I'm going to go and check my human privilege and my own assumptions.'

I went in to the laundry, where the elephant stood. He turned his head. I stroked his ears. They were papery and silky at the same time. He had long, lustrous eyelashes.

'Is there anything you want me to know?' I whispered into his ear. He stirred, but said nothing.

Back on Facebook, Katriona Delight's partner had found her. She needed to be moved. Amelia Bedilia wrote that Katriona needed a new place to stay until a safehouse could be located.

I DM'd her immediately.



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On the sixth day, Katriona Delight and I sat in the kitchen. All the minutiae of my family's lives sat on the kitchen table and I didn't tidy it away. Instead, I offered her arnica cream for her black eye, and we drank whisky, straight. Her kids were somewhere else for the moment. She looked around in a hollow way. She had long black hair and tattoos. Her eye was a flower of purple unfolding into yellow.

She looked at the messy washing, the dirty floors. She looked at the men's underwear lying beside the kitchen table. She went to the toilet in the laundry and came back, shaking her head.

'Did you know you have an African elephant in there?' she asked.

'I don't know what to do about him,' I said. 'He won't even tell me why he's here.'

'He's been sent by the revolutionaries,' she said. 'He wants you to go with him. We've been planning this for months. You have to get out of here. Don't you remember?'

I didn't answer her. I had forgotten the moisturiser for the elephant's skin, and the fundraiser money, which was due today. I couldn't organise my way out of a paper bag.

'It's not meant to be like this,' Katriona said. 'No-one's meant to do this alone. It's not natural. You're meant to have a tribe.'

'I'm not alone,' I said. 'I have Justin. He's meant to do some housework. It's just that he works so much. Men, am I right?'

I waited for her to say he was a bastard and that I should leave him. I waited for her to say, 'Fuck the patriarchy,' and tell me that all men were useless.

She shrugged.

The last day, I woke early and went to clean out the laundry. The elephant shifted restlessly on his hind legs. He had grown more vibrant now, as if he had sucked something from within the house. His skin was light, almost luminous. I finished shovelling his shit into a bucket. His smell was different today, like the petrichor of light rain. I had thought he had come to us to die but he seemed more alive than ever.



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Katriona called from the backyard. She had readied our bicycles. Our children would ride in the bike trailer. We would pick her kids up on the way. She called out that she couldn't fit my yoga mat in, and that I wouldn't need it where we were going. Once we were there, we wouldn't need our laptops either.

Justin burst through the laundry door.

He had left for work already, but now he was back. There had to be some casualties of the revolution, and I'd figured my relationship would be the first. I'd already cried into the sink.

'I can't believe you'd leave without me,' he said. His eyes were full of tears. 'I can't believe you'd think I didn't understand.' The elephant let out a great huff, and the dirty washing slumped out of its basket and onto the floor. 'I'm sorry about the fucking housework, okay?' Justin said. 'I never wanted to work like this. But when the kids were born—'

'I know,' I said. I handed him the shovel I had been using.

'What's this for?'

'How else are we going to get him out?'

'We were never going to sell out, remember?' Justin said. He took the shovel and struck the laundry wall. At first nothing happened. The elephant shuddered. But with the second strike the wallpaper started to tear, and then the plaster wall showed through. Soon we saw what was inside, jib and cheap wood, easy to tear down.

'I'm so happy you came back,' I whispered.

I took up the ironing board and struck the wall. Then the elephant was moving, pushing at the structure, his head breaking wood. Justin hit the wall again and again, his arms making great arcs, dust flying, until the elephant could walk through. We carried the children out and put them in the trailer. The elephant gestured with his trunk, and we began. When my mother-in-law arrived she would find the house empty, with a great hole in the wall of the laundry, and the dishes left unwashed on the bench.

Katriona went on ahead, black hair moving in the light. She would contact people all along the way, a network of escapees.



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Massive species loss. Imminent climate change. All going to fall apart. My head is screwed on. I'm organising my way out.

I touched the elephant's side, stroked his map of skin. He knew where we were going. To roam, to meander, to bury our dead, to remember.



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