THE QUARRY

Mr Rigby's Elephant

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Pieter De Wet was Pretoria Zoological Gardens' chief elephant keeper, and it was certainly his abilities with calming the beasts which excused the amounts of scotch he drank before arrival each morning.

On my first day, I was met by a young woman named Lerato, who insisted I call her Lera. With six years of experience, she would act as my minder while I acclimatised. There was a whole team of us who worked as elephant keepers, and we would only work with one species.

The first impression afforded to me of De Wet, which was provided in a summary by Lera, gave me fright.

'He's rude, but he doesn't say much which means I get to do the talk each day. He is very good with the elephants but we are mostly just obliging him until he retires.'

When we met, it was his skin that reminded me most of the beasts we kept: its wrinkles were old and leathery, identical in texture and patterning to those on an elephant, only

shallower and Caucasian rather than grey. He wordlessly offered me a similarly-patterned hand to shake, and I could smell that he had been drinking when he introduced himself. He was moderately tall but rotund, and had short white hair ringing his bald head. Lera left me in his hands while she delivered her talk and De Wet wasted very few words explaining how he ran things.

I wasn't able to get my hands dirty until the afternoon, when he sent me to clean the yard, as a basic test of my capabilities.

At the day's end, he would habitually invite everybody to go drinking after work, but nobody ever accepted. Lera had warned me from the beginning that nobody accepted, and that I shouldn't. His haunts weren't safe to visit, and he drank far more than any of us would have liked to see him under the influence of.

Over my first month, I began to see both sides of De Wet. He was brilliantly caring with the animals. Every day, he would routinely check their gums and feet, which was the most intimate task. He undertook the major trust-building exercise of sponge-bathing the young elephants. He would occasionally walk in amongst them, which was against the rules and annoyed most of the staff, but I somehow found myself admiring it, ~~and wishing~~, hoping that I could live outside the rules if I attained his position.

As the new boy, I was burdened with the task of refilling his hip flask from a bottle of Dewar's**,** kept in a desk in the offices. He was always short-tempered and cursed like a gangster from a movie. He frustrated everybody by encouraging us to stay late, unpaid. And his attention to detail was absolute. He spoke so little that all he ever really fed us was criticism. I didn't ever see him raise his voice, but received cutting criticisms all the same. His memory was near-perfect, and with each individual criticism he would recite many of the offender's previous infractions, so that one's cumulative mistakes hit at once. And got heavier as time passed.

And yet, every evening he would invite us to join him drinking.

This routine continued. Until my grandfather died. He was a farmer, with an encyclopaedic knowledge for the animals on the veldt. I'd be lying if I said that time spent with him was not a major factor in my desire to become a keeper.

I returned to work the day after his funeral. And for whatever reason, that day was the only day any keeper ever accepted his invitation. I broke the unwritten rule amongst the elephant keepers to never drink with De Wet.

The William of Orange hotel was half English pub and half homestead; a common style in Pretoria. Amidst my glasses of liquor mixed with soda and every three neat scotches he drank for mine, he shocked me.

Perhaps his inebriation exposed some honesty, or perhaps it was the fact that I was the only one to ever accept his invitation. I'm unsure. But before he was an elephant keeper, he was an elephant killer.

The safari parks are always full; the necessary land to host a large population of beasts of that size is never allotted. To keep the populations manageable, the different reserves calculate how many animals their park can accommodate. Then they sell the right to kill the excess to foreigners with outrageous amounts of money; an elephant permit today will cost you more than a million American. That money is then used to expand the parks, to host many more animals. Distasteful as it is, the more that are killed, the disproportionately more that are accommodated.

De Wet was raised on a failing farm in the Transvaal, where every year the number of cattle decreased. There was nothing left for him there, and because he was so far from civilisation, his education was very poor. So, at the age of sixteen, as his parents were considering selling out and moving to a flat in Pretoria, he didn't want to leave the land. His options to stay connected to the veldt were limited: he could join the military, he could try to keep the family farm running, or he could work as a labourer on a larger farm.

Or he could become a game warden.

Game warden was a good job for De Wet. After almost a decade he was still a young man, but he had guided dozens of hunts. Lions, leopards, cape buffalo and rhinoceros were all hunted occasionally, but elephants were always the most expensive. And most sought after.

And it was around this time that political issues greatly reduced the number of foreign hunters. By the season's end, a single old bull was left unclaimed in Kruger National Park, where he was employed. So, with winter approaching, De Wet ventured out onto the savannah, serving in the capacity of the second to a Mister John Rigby.

As the chief hunter in the park, Rigby was a legend in hunting circles. He was thin and wiry, which made him appear taller than he was, and he had a hard face. He had led countless hunts for princes and millionaires, was an expert tracker by all accounts, and a crack shot.

To conduct such a hunt at the season's end was a physically demanding task, and when Rigby selected him as a second, De Wet understood the expectation. After reaching sexual maturity, male elephants are solitary and interact with the herds only to mate. As such, it was much harder to find a bull than a herd of cows. And it was even more difficult to find a single, specific bull.

Rigby sourced an old green Land Rover with no roof. Winter bedrolls were packed first, then small cooking stoves and billy cans, plus a cache of olditary canteens, and plenty of spare fuel. Each of them had a set of binoculars, a compass, a rifle, one box of locally-made ammunition (as the sanctions had starved their supply of the higher-quality German or American shells), and a decent knife, which were to be kept within arm's reach at all times. Anything else was a luxury, for this was a purposeful hunt.

The two departed in their battered chariot an hour before sunrise, day one. They needed sunlight to walk, but not to drive, as the danger from Cape Buffalos or stalking lions was acceptable under the sun. On foot, however, both animals would methodically track them, attacking at the opportune moment, but in the daylight, they'd see them coming.

At sunup, they parked, left the keys in the Rover, and set off. Their starting point was just south of the Limpopo River, which served as the border with Rhodesia, or Zimbabwe as it had been recently renamed.

De Wet kept up with Rigby's pace all morning. They moved off the track and headed eastwards, towards the border with Mozambique. It took them two hours to move ten kilometres across the moonscape of dried gorges. By midday they took a break and changed their socks. Their feet were their primary weapons in this hunt, and they had to be maintained as carefully as the rifles.

The afternoon saw them move into the foothills along the border. Rigby walked into a dry river gorge between two tall hills, before scrambling up the slope. As De Wet heaved after Rigby, he was reminded by the man of a mountain goat by his slimness and incredible maintenance of pace over any terrain. To climb, they grabbed at the sickle-bushes which littered the hillside, and at the crown of the hill they made good use of their binoculars.

Several elephants were seen to the south, so they rapidly descended back into the river gorge. They followed the dry riverbed south until it forked east, and they scaled another line of hills to continue south into a large veld of red bushwillow. Amongst the scorching-red trees and rocks, they sighted the first trio of males. Although separate from the families, bulls will associate with other bulls in small groups lead by the strongest and most aggressive. The bull they were seeking was older and likely submissive to a new, young bull or simply on its own. Neither of the two groups they saw that day counted an older member, which was unfortunate as a bull living solitarily for an extended period would mean more aggressive and unpredictable behaviour than one which had submitted to a younger, stronger male.

They swept back to the vehicle in the evening, and De Wet was tasked with putting on a brew. Tea was a central morale booster, and after a day of hard movement and cold food it was a welcome injection of energy. They slept on their ground mats with a moderately sized fire opposite the vehicle, sleeping between the two for more security. Then just before dawn they awoke, and De Wet made a brew while Rigby plotted the day's movement on their huge map sheets. After breakfast they drove a short way to the next location, and began the search again.

The second day they pushed south, ending their search along the Shingwedzi River. They had to camp further away that night on the plains between that and tomorrow's task, the Olifants River, to avoid the danger from Nile Crocodiles.

Despite its name, which is an Afrikaans derivative from the word elephant, they failed to find their bull on day three. They saw two families and a number of bulls, but none of them was their quarry.

Day four they moved further south again, rising, mapping and brewing, followed by a hard day of constant movement, ending with a return to the Rover. Day five they managed to push south hard in the morning and search along the Nwaswitsontso River throughout the day. Rigby was pushing things now, and they stayed until shortly after dusk before even beginning their trek back to the car.

During the evening walk, they had to really move. Rustlings in the nearby bush which may have been a stalking lioness or a Cape Buffalo saw them both fire off a few shots in an attempt to ward off whatever it was shadowing them.

De Wet was growing restless by day five, but dared not voice his doubts to Rigby. It was possible the bull had crossed over into Mozambique, but Rigby maintained a cool head of certainty that they would find him.

And on the banks of the muddy, wooded Sabie River, they found it.

Then it all went wrong.

The two hunters approached the elephant, who was moving in and out of the trees to drink, from the side to get a clear shot. The heavy wooding allowed them to weave in close to the bull. They would then break the cover of the trees onto the clear and sandy banks for the shot. They were on the beast's far side, so Rigby would approach from downstream, while De Wet covered him from the bank, safely shooting in an L-shape.

So, Rigby broke cover into the open while the elephant was facing De Wet; the perfect angle for a shot under the shoulder.

Now, Rigby may have hunted with his feet, but he lived by the gun. His rifle, manufactured by the infamous Westley Richards of London, was always perfectly cleaned and oiled. He personally replaced the firing pin regularly, while most others would leave this up to an armourer. And when he shot, the blend of Turkish Walnut and brushed steel seemed welded to his nervous system.

What he couldn't control was the ammunition.

His first round fired and missed. In hindsight, De Wet said, its inferior quality would have accounted for the miss. But it still hit the old bull in his flank.

He tried to cycle the rifle, only to find the bolt locked up. Later, upon inspection, De Wet discovered that the cartridge had suffered an overpressure, cracking the bolt face and jamming everything up.

The bull charged.

Rigby roared to De Wet that he now had to open fire. The elephant had turned to charge Rigby, exposing his side (and, thusly, shoulder) to De Wet.

It was De Wet's job, as the second, to shoot now. But he didn't.

De Wet lowered his face but kept his eyes fixed to mine in accounting for this. He nursed the glass of scotch on his lips, and stared into my soul.

'I could have taken the shot. And I didn't. Deliberately.'

You see, De Wet had guided one elephant hunt too many. Unwilling to shoot the elephant, he simply stayed in the trees.

The cow's tusk caught Rigby under his left arm and speared his intestines out. She then trampled him, crushing all four limbs.

'He screamed, for a good ten minutes' De Wet recalled.

De Wet returned to the body after an hour or so, certain that the elephant was gone, and the scene of butchery was indescribable.

I asked him why. He replied he just could not kill another elephant. And has not since.

I'm unsure whether the endless parade of drinks was giving me courage, or if I felt somehow entitled to an answer after all I had heard. So, I asked him.

'Should you have gone out, knowing that your head wasn't in the game?'

The glare I received broke all the others I had received that night.

'No'.

After letting Mr John Rigby die, De Wet was unemployable. Unable to return to the veldt, he got as close to the animals as he could by taking the post at the gardens. But after less than six months, he turned to drink.

'Trust me kid,' he said to me, before I dizzily left for a taxi that night. 'If I saw Pretoria Gardens on the cards that day, I would have put one behind her shoulder'.