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The Last Few Minutes of an Asian Elephant

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It was noon when we reached Kudiraivetti—part of the Kalakadu Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, which lies between 8º25' and 8º53' north latitude and 77º10' and 77º35' east longitude and has an area of 895 km^2. In fact, this was not part of our itinerary but then we learnt that an elephant (*Elephas maximus*) had been sighted in a hamlet close to Maanjcholai Estate (a tea estate), so we changed gears.

We obtained permission for stay at Kudiravetti. The guard, who had already been informed of our visit, was waiting for us. We asked him for details about the elephant. He said it was an old female elephant and had been sighted around Kudiravetti. The villagers, who worked in the tea estate, did not worry too much about the elephant's presence, as it didn't pose any threat. But they maintained a safe distance.

As there was hope, we went in search of the elephant. We scanned the area from the watchtower with our binoculars but the elephant was not to be seen. As we settled down at our resthouse for dinner, a few villagers came to inform us that the elephant had been sighted in the village. They took us to the spot. Some villagers had already gathered there, watching the animal. The elephant was standing under a big tree in the clearing of a slope. As it was dark, we could see the animal only with the aid of a torch. I went down the slope, cautiously, for a closer look. Yet, I could not see its profile in detail, to judge its age. The elephant kept on feeding itself in a languid manner. After a little while, we left requesting the villagers to let us know as soon as they sighted the elephant during the day.

We retired for the day. I woke up early and went out in search of the elephant; it was around 8 am when a villager informed us that the elephant was right behind our resthouse. We rushed out. The elephant was there, standing at the fringes of the wood that was behind the rest house. Yes, it was an old female elephant. We used the binoculars and watched the old giant. Her skin was loose and was a network of wrinkles, particularly around her ankles. It was easy to see her bones jutting. Her large ears were tattered.

Though we waded through the tall grass and moved closer to the animal with care she did not show any sign of discomfort. We inched our way towards her and stopped at about a hundred meters. She just stood there, making small circling movements on the grass, with her trunk, as if to grab tufts of grass (Fig. 1). However, she did not attempt to eat anything. Her actions, it seemed, were more idle than purposeful.



Figure 1. Old female.

The villagers shared their experiences—one of them, indicating the white smudge on her body, said that the smudge resulted from her leaning to rest on the walls of the houses. Another said she had never bothered anybody; she only made mock charges, that too only when they tried to chase her away.

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We stood there watching her for almost twenty minutes. Then my friends wanted to move. Respecting my wish to stay for a little more time, they left. I moved a little closer. I was so close that my telezoom lens at 170 mm did not fit the elephant in its frame. I sat down on the ground observing the old female. She just stood there motionless. The only movements were her trunk's churnings and her ears' slow back and forth action. At times, she was also shifting her legs as if to transform her body weight from one to another. It seemed she didn't mind my presence. She was looking at me as I settled down. As I looked at her, she seemed to want to communicate something to me. I could see the pain she was enduring—may be due to some internal ailment or old age; I wasn't sure.

I felt sorry for her. To me, she looked like an elderly woman tarnished by age. As I was watching her, I realized that she continued her gaze on me. Then she moved a little forward and stayed in that posture for a while.

It was then the most unexpected thing happened. As she lifted her left front leg as if to move, her left hind leg went backward and it buckled. She raised her right front leg, may be in an attempt to steady herself. Then all of a sudden, she fell down on to her left. Her whole frame collapsed with a thud. Even in the grass-covered ground, her huge body created a dust storm as it reached the ground. She attempted to get up by lifting her right hind limb but without success. As the dust settled the elephant's movements stopped (Fig. 2).

A villager seeing the elephant fall informed my friends who rushed to the spot. Briefing them in haste what had happened, I moved towards the fallen giant. As we reached the spot, she was still breathing. Just as we got to her, she let out



Figure 2. Collapsed female.

a huge sigh. My friend, Jayachandran called his friend, a wildlife veterinary doctor, to find out if we could do anything to save the elephant. But the doctor said that it was only a matter of time before she breathed her last. In the mean time, the Forest Department staff and inmates of the village arrived. It was a sad sight to see such a magnificent animal lying on the ground (Fig. 3). I felt awful for our helplessness. We wished her no more agony and a quick, peaceful death. It wasn't long before (just 45 min.) she breathed her last.

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Figure 3. Female lying on the ground.