

Life Before Plastic

Libby Angel

The Saviour was a Native

At first, when he awoke coughing violently in the black smoke to find himself lying above the fire wrapped in wet leaves, Ernest thought they were cooking him. When he struggled and protested, they began to laugh. Women's coarse hands gently restrained him, rubbing a poultice of bush herbs into his chest, fanning the fire with wet branches. When they poured something vile into his jabbering mouth, Ernest submitted in weakness. Finally, as the medicine worked its way through his blood, he began to understand he had been saved.

They offered him fish to eat and roasted black python from the coals. He saw they had found his men's tents and painted on them – footprints, eggs, insects, animals, galaxies, gods. The canvases lay sprawled on the ground, a desert gallery. Later, Ernest claimed the natives had painted spirit men with halos, like those of the Christian saints.

The natives had tracked him and his two-toed camel down. He had been lying there as good as dead, choking on the red dirt, his crusty face covered in flies. The camel had been pawing him, beseeching him to live, the bird just idiotically scratching and flapping about.

Ernest reckoned the natives believed he was a ghost – an ancestor come to visit them from another time. But on closer inspection of his bleeding scabs they could have seen that his blood was as red as their own, and understood that he too, was composed of flesh and was a thing of this earth. Yet the natives persisted in treating Ernest with reverence.

Having saved him, the Aborigines did not want him to die on his way home, thereby wasting their charity, so two men escorted him and the other surviving members of his party – the dromedary, Mrs Smith, and the Great Brown Kingfisher – all the way back to the Colony. The bird flit from tussock to tree. The journey took four months.

For lack of any other offering, Ernest gave his native guides the thirteen pounds which he

had been keeping, though the money had been worthless in the desert. The men left him at the gum tree on Glynburn Road, four miles east of town, then disappeared as quietly as shadows back into the hills.

Ernest reported to the Royal Society of Exploration. Admittedly, he had only seen one elephant, and he could not say *where* exactly, because all his instruments had broken. (The barometer was stuck on *stormy* which was clearly incorrect, Ernest pointed out, unless they were several thousand miles above sea level. The compass needle pointed *west*). Neither could it have been foreseen that the encounter with the elephant would be such a mystical experience. Ernest no longer wished to hunt those mighty beasts. He was sorry if he was a disappointment to the Society.

Ernest showed the men some of the tools bestowed upon him by the natives: stones, baskets, a boomerang, a woomera. The natives, he told the men in the Society, could make water appear like magic from the roots of certain trees, fossick seeds from bushes, grubs from behind bark. The men in the Society looked dubiously at the grubby pile of objects from Ernest's satchel.

"I think," dared Ernest at the conclusion of his show and tell, "the natives are a Holy people".

Now the men from the Society were dumbfounded. Of the sixteen men who had joined the expedition, only three had returned, all separately and evidently without their wits. After a public expense of some fifty-thousand pounds, the only recompenses were a few sharp rocks, some crudely fashioned weapons and various accounts of the natives' dismal amusements. It was scandalous. The Society would most certainly be subject to a parliamentary inquiry.

However, to avoid public embarrassment, the government humoured Ernest. In consideration of his (somewhat accidental) ethnographic contributions, they were pleased to oblige him and his family with a house on the River Torrens, where it was hoped he would resume his studies of naturalism. They did not need to mention that the emphasis of those studies should be on

theory, rather than fieldwork.

Ernest did not speak again of the many wonders he had seen. He kept the desert's dry secrets under his tongue. He practiced hymns on his Broadwood & Sons piano, composing new arrangements which he sent to the Reverend Mr Hansen at the mission he had visited. He had new concerns too; he had a son. Nobody mentioned elephants again.

Until now.

Ernest walked this earth without a stick until he was one hundred and three, when he died in his sleep at a lecture on the subject of Monarch butterfly pupae at the university.

Had he been granted eternal life, he may have furthered his studies of lepidoptera which, in the twilight of his life, apparently satisfied his somewhat jaded hunting spirit. Inevitably, though, the time came for Ernest's own metamorphosis from this life into his own peculiar glory and beyond. And his death was the ultimate demonstration that he, as much as any elephant or slug, was composed of organic matter, in spite of any imperialist fibs suggesting that Man was made of superior stuff.

But this is a not a story about butterflies. My father is descended from this man.

Flying Martha May

My mother's ancestors could fly.

Like her ancestors before her, my mother possessed a body hot-wired with nerves of steel and reflexes as quick as a pirate's knife. She was a tough-nut circus chick, a dancer of fire and earth, a real live run-away woman.

My mother's name was Grace, Queen of the Sky. She was the first woman in breathing history to successfully execute a quadruple backward somersault on the high-fly trapeze, the *grand volant*. And once she had at last mastered this impressive trick, she immediately upped the ante and attempted the unfathomable quintuplet.

Grace's mother was a flier as well, who had worked all the way through her pregnancy; merely mellowing her tricks a little to accommodate her burgeoning anatomy. Grace, then, had learnt to tumble in utero, and from the time of her birth, her basinet was the six by three metre flying net which her mother had woven by hand.

The net was pulled taut with ratchets and shackles and Grace lay swathed in its apron. When the fliers missed a trick and fell into the net, she bounced higher than is normal for a baby.

This is how Grace learnt to fly – she was pushed.

She climbed the rope-ladder. She stood eight metres above the ground, on the plank of wood which served as a platform, and calmly powdered her hands with the sock-full of resin which was tied to the cable. Her mother, who was standing next to her, hooked the trapeze in and Grace took the bar in her chubby hands with her thumbs on top (the grip favoured in Paris to this day). Her mother lifted her by the seat of her red pants then dropped her to her fate like a fledgling.

When the trapeze reached the zenith of its swing, Grace pointed her feet to the apex of the tent and flung herself up until she felt a moment of weightlessness. Her brain shut up for once, and she was at peace.

"More!" she said as soon as she had fallen safely into the net. She bounced joyfully from one end of the net to the other and climbed the rope-ladder again – sideways – because that is how it is done.

Footprints Matter

My father flew to London in his socks. Finally, he mastered minimalism like a monk, but unwillingly and without the goodwill. After everything in our house vanished, he had no choice. There was no time for him to buy shoes before he left for London. As he walked through departure gate number four at the airport, he cursed my brother, whose fault it was.

When he arrived at Heathrow, he bought new shoes – leather-soled, hand-stitched – footprints matter. Stories of his ancestors wandering blindly through the desert in top hats and Punjabi suits then tracked and saved impressed upon us all the importance of decent footwear, if not any sense of direction.

As soon as he had tied his laces, my father addressed the problem of our house having been scoured. (Everything had vanished from the hot water tank to the toilet roll. Parts of the house itself had disappeared too; the doors from their hinges for instance, and the bluestone from the

floor). Bypassing the police, my father rang Mr Gore long distance from his room in the Royal Horse-Guards Hotel. He requested that the contents of our family home be restored. Though he had not stolen the things himself, Mr Gore would know whose trucks they were now on, and in which direction those trucks were headed. Mr Gore had contacts.

My father could have negotiated the wings off a chicken without breaking the law. Less than twenty-four hours later, my mother and I returned home to find everything had been returned and stacked in the front garden, all neatly packed with styrofoam beads in boxes. My mother sat down at the piano, which was standing in the middle of the front lawn, and played a sonata. The piano was out of tune.

My brother turned up three days later on the top floor of a bed-bug ridden budget hotel in town. He'd registered under the neighbour's name – Mr Lancaster.

"Picked that a mile off," said my mother as we collected him from the lobby and settled the account. "For a criminal, you don't have a lot of imagination or class."

The front bar smelt like a wet ashtray.

"Check out the carpet in this joint!" my mother said to me as we stormed through the revolving door.

On the way home my brother told me that the manager had salvaged the mattresses for his hotel from the Wingfield dump and that he'd been staying next door to a prostitute.

Generally, my ancestors did not travel in style.

Life Before Plastic

So in the grips of a persistent safari fantasy, my great-great-great grandfather Ernest came to Australia to hunt elephants. I shall now present, for your edification, the story of this ridiculous elephant hunt.

Firstly though, an historical note:

Synthetics were invented so ladies could control their legs in pantyhose and were soon discovered to be infinitely adaptable to a number of previously unfelt needs. Plastic soon became the omnipresent deity of modern industry.

Imagine now, life before plastic. A number of

other mediums were used instead for the manufacture of hair accessories and other instruments of finery. Some materials were rudely stolen from animals; silk from worms, shells off the backs of tortoises. Bones were ripped out of whales and used to construct the indispensable corset, for a woman could not stand up of her own volition. Finally, walruses, sea-lions and elephants were all the unwilling benefactors of that most precious commodity – ivory.

In life before plastic, ivory embellished the lives of men – bangles and bracelets, brooches, bookends, billiard balls, hair brushes, chess pieces – snuff, pill and dice boxes, perfume flasks, combs, letter openers, umbrella staves, piano keys, decorative inlays for coffins, spillikins for pick up sticks ... Best and most necessary of all, ivory decorated the butts of pistols and hunting rifles.

In 1857, when he was still an excitable young man in England, Ernest Lord opened the morning paper and read that David Livingstone had outfit an expedition down the Zambezi River in Africa.

The progression of explorers had long been of interest to my great-great-great grandfather. He believed a study of the natural world revealed the more intangible premise of philosophical inquiry.

He decided to research the subject of Africa. Over the ensuing weeks, he consulted universities and libraries and ordered an illustrated collection of essays by the vanguard of exploration from a bookseller in Convent Garden. It was a limited edition. (In life before plastic, most things were limited.)

Several weeks later, a heavy parcel bound neatly in layers of thick brown paper and tied in coarse brown string, was brought to the door by a young gentlemen from the Royal Mail. That evening, Ernest perched on the edge of his leather studded chair at his desk. He lit the oil lamp. In the parcel was his usual copy of the periodical he subscribed to, *Wild Sports*, along with the volume of essays he had ordered. Its leather binding creaked as he opened the pink, marbled cover.

Africa – Untamed seductress, She of thorned Beauty! From her burning Deserts to the luscious bosoms of her Jungles, only the most Adventurousome and Forthright of

all Men shall know success in Africa, that most unmerciful and challenging Land on all God's Earth. Inhabited by birds of brilliant feather and song, fishes of unimaginable hue, the Unciviliz'd Primitive and other Beast – carnivores who tear flesh with their claws and whose teeth reduce bones to porridge!

Africa Exotica – She offers bounty only to those few valiant Men who can tame her Wilde Spirit, and Survival only to those who escape it.

The continent of Africa lies across churning seas, far beyond the Civilization of Spain and the Mystical Kingdom of Arabia. Beyond the Tropic of Capricorn, the Navigator knows Her chartered emplacement at a Latitude of forty-three degrees South, and a Longitude of twenty degrees East. Where the wind bloweth North for six Months and then bloweth West, the Ocean kisses her nethermost tip.

So said the introduction of the book. Ernest adjusted himself in his seat. The springs were stiff, alert. He knew about longitude – no longer did men in their vessels sail in straight lines, endlessly searching for the edge of the earth. Nor were they blown around and around its circumference, ignorantly dilly-dallying past the same geographic point like witless goldfish in brandy balloons. This was the age of unarguable truths – the world was reduced to the comfort of numbers.

Ernest turned some pages and lifted the tissue protector leaves to admire some of the plates in his new book. They depicted naturalists, ethnographers, and other people of significance, smashing paths through the jungle with tremendous machetes. Large calibre rifles were slung over their backs and they carried bladders of water at their belts. They wore jodhpurs, white cotton shirts, pith helmets and knee-high boots.

Ernest admired these garments.

He made a note on his calendar to order some new pants from his tailor on Savile Row.

He took the book to the sideboard and looked in the mirror. He imitated the sagacious expressions of the men in the pictures. He imagined a caption beside his face – *Ernest Lord, the gallant*

explorer. He poured himself a whisky out of his crystal decanter and replaced the heavy stopper. He appreciated a finely crafted thing.

Ernest read late into the cold London night. He read about secluded tribes who lived without civilised conveniences – black ladies who bound their bodies in yards of brightly dyed fabric, carrying their babies amongst the folds on their backs. These ladies could balance huge pots, bundles of food and all manner of odd-shaped objects on their heads. They had strong, straight spines.

Ernest went back to the sideboard mirror and knelt in front of it. He refilled his glass then put it on his head. Slowly, he lowered his arms to his side and tried to stand, but the glass slipped off spilling whisky down his shirt, onto the Turkish rug. He wondered then, if the African ladies' tightly curled coiffure offered a better grip than his own smooth hair, and was therefore better suited to such capers.

He no longer desired another drink. He returned to his desk and continued reading about men who trapped fish for the evening meal with cone-shaped bamboo and hemp nets. He studied pictures of artefacts, some of which had had been brought back to England for further analysis – carved wooden figures etched with geometric markings, drums which had been played at ceremonies. Some of the masks put the fear of God in a man. Ernest wondered at the nature of God in such far away, primitive places. He practised a fierce face.

The civilised English explorers shot crocodiles, he read, and sometimes had their blood sucked out by leeches. Sometimes mosquitoes bit them and they died in a malarial sweat.

Ernest moved on to the chapter headed "An Inquiry Into the Animal Kingdom." He studied red-bottomed baboons, monkeys, lions, zebras, hyenas, ostriches, the astounding giraffe ... (What exactly, was the purpose of the head-knobs? Antennae? Armour?) Finally, Ernest arrived at a section devoted to elephants.

Elephants, he noted with special attention, were clearly descended from the mammoth and of the *Proroboscidea* order. Ernest had a primary understanding of animals from *Wild Sports*, but also from publications of a more zoological nature.

There was something primitive about elephants, which brought to mind the relatively short time in which human beings had inhabited the planet. Why had Man become sophisticated enough to set a silver service dinner with up to five sets of cutlery, while the elephant had survived in a near primitive state with only minimal adaptations? (Hair loss, mostly).

Elephants made the higher purpose of Man and his dinnerware appear futile. Ernest scrutinised the pictures of the animals. He marvelled at their enormity. To consider elephants made him feel humbled almost to the point of inconsequence. He could however, be reassured there was a way of conquering these great, thumping beasts and reinforcing the supremacy of humanity.

My antecedent, who was not an altogether stupid man, looked long and studiously at the pictures of elephants frolicking about in the quagmires of Africa. Moving the book nearer the lamp, he had an idea so lucid he felt it slam against his skull.

The Author

Born in the dawn of the seventies, Libby Angel lived in Melbourne Australia, Europe and Cuba, making a scant living as a circus performer before re-emerging in Adelaide. She finished Honours in creative writing at Flinders University and works on her PhD at Melbourne University. She lives in Melbourne with Norman, the Jack Russell.

Notes

These pieces are extracts from Libby Angels exciting new book – *Life Before Plastic* – to be released mid 2006.