

WHERE IS HOME

By Namrata Dass

“Ganesa Saranam, Saranam Ganesa... Wake up, you useless creature!” cried Raghu, the mahout although morning was two hours away. I then felt the cold rod making contact with my left side, my weaker side where he had already driven a sharp, hard, shiny stake in the toe of my front leg. Strike one. I suppressed a roar. Raghu was thinner than the rods he used to beat me and the others, but I loathed him more than those glinting sticks of torture. No, I wouldn't open my eyes. He would never be my master!

I wiggled my trunk and tried to distract myself by inhaling the rich, sweet scent of the ripe mangoes that surrounded my home for the night, a quiet little village, one of many I would visit before I attended the processions. The thought of walking in the dizzying heat with heavy, jangling things strapped to my body made me want to spear Raghu with my good right tusk, the one he hadn't chipped off during the months of torture I had endured before he deemed me “procession ready”. Unfortunately, the appealing mango odour was overpowered by the stench of our dung piles as the others were tethered too close to me.

“Ekadanta! Up!” Raghu yelled. I heard the bar whooshing through the air and THUD... Strike two. I would have collapsed from the pain that shot through my flank if it wasn't for the uncomfortable position I was bound in- one hind leg bent and tied to a tree stump with my front legs chained to a large mango tree. I knew he would go for strike three. “I mustn't yield,” I thought. But the moment he twisted the pointed, shimmery stake further into my toe, my eyes flew open and I trumpeted loudly. Fresh blood flowed over afternoon's semi-dried gash and tears stung my eyes. Raghu smiled wickedly at my wounded pride. “Ganesa Saranam... Saranam Ganesa,” he taunted.

For the millionth time, he ruined my once favourite song. The soothing voice of the singer made me flutter my ears in pleasure everytime I heard it in the temple where I was born. Back then, I was supposed to “bless” visiting humans by placing my trunk against their fore- heads in exchange for bananas (my favourite treat!). Sometimes, I had a little fun and lifted thick glittering vines hanging around their necks. They never got angry with me. On the contrary, they

feared my displeasure because the humans believed that I represented Ganesa, a God they called a protector- the strange stony creature with my face and a human's body. Ganesa just sat in the temple's main chamber, had milk and honey baths, wore fragrant flower garlands and received offerings of fruits I longed to taste. I thought I was better than Ganesa (four legs looked more attractive than two) but I couldn't grudge him- he ensured I received good treatment.

Unfortunately, Raghu wasn't like those humans. He reminded me of his anti-Ganesa sentiments, everyday for the last two years since I had been sent for procession training against my will.

Blinking my tears away, I looked around at the others who were in slightly less pitiful states, with only their front legs bound, the chains cutting into their flesh nonetheless. Raghu had gone to rouse Gaja, the oldest tusker whose leg had been broken five times before his spirit fractured. Vinayaka and Kaveesha, the recent, meeker recruits looked at me pointedly as if to say, "Surrender already, stupid!"

"Cowards! Don't even know the sound of your own trumpet anymore," I groused and inched towards the water trough. It was empty! I lifted my head to roar when I spotted a little human boy peeping at me from the branches of a tall mango tree before me. He wore only a white garment draped around the tiny waist of his wiry body and on his bony shoulders sat the funniest embellishment – a plump white mouse.

"Any minute now," I thought I heard the mouse squeak. The boy shushed the mouse and looked at me, his black eyes gleaming seriously, a finger placed against his lip.

"For what?" I asked.

"Training time, Ekadanta," Raghu said, striding towards me with another rod which had an ugly hook at the end. "Ganesa Saranam..." His jibe was cut short by a deafening elephant roar. My comrades in captivity and I exchanged confused glances. Tree trunks shook violently, the ground rumbled, mangoes went flying and a giant of a tusker came rushing into view.

"Get back, you filthy creature!" Raghu cried, brandishing the hooked rod. The tusker charged forward and with a single blow of his trunk, achieved strike one, two and three as Raghu and his evil rod were slammed into a gnarly tree, knocking him out.

Vinayaka and Kaveesha trumpeted delightedly much to my surprise (and theirs).

“You are free to join me,” the enormous tusker said and disappeared just as mysteriously as he had appeared. SNAP... The binds of my hind feet came undone and I collapsed on the ground in an awkward angle to find myself face to face with the strange boy. His hands hovered over my bloodied feet and just as I hissed, “Don’t you dare,” the brat did just that and yanked Raghu’s favourite torture toy out of my body. Before I could curl my trunk around him, he raced away and wordlessly worked on setting the others free with the agility of his pet mouse.

“Relax, my friends. We do this all the time,” I heard the plump mouse saying from his perch on my head. “Now, go to the forest where you belong. Human settlements aren’t an elephant’s home,” the mouse clucked angrily and scurried away to sit on the boy’s shoulder. “Go with Chinnaraja, the tusker. He is king around here.”

“Pardon me, Mr. Mouse. Isn’t a lion the king?” Gaja enquired softly. Before the single tree views of chaining posts, he had briefly lived in a forest.

“Seriously?” the mouse scoffed. “It isn’t lion dung that supports tree growth in the forest,” he pointed to our smelly dung mounds. “And he certainly doesn’t earn the respect of all the other animals for digging up watering holes.” The boy nodded in agreement with his mouse.

“Go live free lives, my friends. Eat as many mangoes and bamboo shoots as you like. Drink to your heart’s content,” he shot a withering look at the empty water trough. “Feel the grass beneath your feet and the wind beneath your tails.”

My defeated companions looked at me with wide, fearful eyes. As the unbroken one, I had become their default leader. It wasn’t long before other mahouts would arrive and we would be chained again. I wouldn’t be welcome at my old temple home. If not Raghu, others would try to break my spirit repeatedly until I finally succumbed. I didn’t know what bamboo was but it had a nice ring to it. Just like the word freedom.

“Let’s go home,” I announced and lead the three unsure tuskers towards an unknown but possibly exciting life. “Ganesa Saranam, Saranam Ganesa,” I hummed, my ears fluttering to the familiar song after ages.