

Mahout

a short story by Jeff VanderMeer

"MARY: THE LARGEST LIVING LAND ANIMAL ON EARTH. 3 INCHES LARGER THAN JUMBO AND WEIGHING OVER 5 TONS..."

-- Billboard for the Sparks Circus, 1916

You watch the bruised sky as the sun sets outside Dan's Eatery. Dan's lies off County Road Twelve, Tennessee. The farms and paint-peeled houses surrounding it form the town of Erwin.

Flocks of starlings mimic the dance of leaves on the dirt road outside. Rust-red leaves. Your hands are brown. People stare at you from other tables, someone whispering, "...East Indian darky..." 1916: you are sixty-seven years old and thousands of miles from home.

You arrived with the circus early this morning, south about a mile, where the railroad tracks crisscross a small station, amphitheater, and coal tipple: a staggering troupe of stiltmen, clowns wielding saws, and highwire women so stiff they cannot bend at the waist, at least until the next show. The trains don't even bother passing through Erwin, but this is your day off and you wanted to escape the swelter of people. Tomorrow your elephants, the ones you have trained for fifteen years, will perform for the Ringmaster. After the elephant show, you will perform again: *Come see the amazing psychic! Can read your mind! Come see the Brahmin holy man!*

You are not truly psychic. Neither are you of the Brahmin caste. You wear a Sikh turban. They expect it, even though you are Hindu and the weather hot. But at least you can be near the elephants.

"I have been with the shows for three years and have never known the elephant to lose her temper before."

--Mr. Heron, press agent, *Johnson City Comet*, Sept. 14, 1916, pg. 1

"'Murderous Mary,' as she was termed by spectators, has been in the circus for fifteen years and this is the first time anyone has come to harm."

--*Nashville Banner*, Sept. 13, 1916, pg. 9

The light fades from the windows until the starlings are blurs of shadow and bar lamps reflect on the glass. You sweat despite the chill; the nervous tic under your right eye where the blood vessel has burst works in and out. Your hands become clenched claws.

The lady to the left with the matted hair and distant stare - she thinks about her next trick, the dull slap of flesh on flesh...the ache in her body, her heart. *Tease, you tease too much* she thinks. The man at the bar who deliberately combs his few hairs and sips his whiskey - he fears his bloodhound. It used to run for miles across his farm, but now the farm is smaller, eaten away at the edges by bankers. His wife has left him. The dog has tumors, weak back legs, and cannot hold its bladder. It lies at home by the furnace and dreams of better days. The

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