

## **Episode 122: Ella was trampled by an elephant**

I love all animals, but one of my favorites is the elephant.

Couple of things you might not know about elephants:

When you see a herd of elephants, the leader of that family group is one of the females. When a male elephant is born, he sticks around with the family until he's around 12 years old, then he heads off on his own. The female elephants will usually stay with the family herd their whole lives.

And even though elephants are the largest land mammal, they're actually pretty fast – they can run up to 25 miles per hour (or about 40 kilometers per hour).

And they're incredibly intelligent (maybe that's why they put the females in charge!). Elephants are one of the few species to recognize themselves in a mirror. And they have really complex emotions and compassion. They mourn the death of their loved ones, much like we do as humans.

Today we're going to hear from Ella, about the time she had an encounter with an elephant. For a while it was great – she felt like she was really connecting with this amazing creature.

But suddenly things went very wrong.

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### **Scott**

Before this happened, had you ever seen an elephant in real life, like, in a circus or something?

### **Ella**

Yes. When I was a kid, we went to the zoo a lot. I've been to the circus. Actually, in high school, I would protest animal cruelty against the elephants at the circus. Yeah, I've always loved them.

### **Scott**

I'm with you on that. When you see when in real life, they just seem much bigger than maybe what you would have imagined.

### **Ella**

They're huge. They're maybe 2, 3, or 4 times as big as a horse, and a horse is big.

### **Scott**

This happened in Thailand. What were you doing there? You lived in America.

### **Ella**

I live in America. I was visiting my best friend who was teaching English in Taiwan. She had a little vacation coming up. I was living in New York with my family. I had saved all my money from a bakery job. I was in between farm seasons. I was farming in Long Island. In between farm seasons, I've saved up all of my tips and all my money from my bakery job over the winter to go and visit. She had been already in Asia for a year. I had never been there. I thought it would be a really great opportunity to visit. So, we went on, kind of, a backpacking trip along Asia and had

a bunch of stops planned - mostly Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. So that's what we were doing in Thailand.

**Scott**

What was your method of travel while you were there?

**Ella**

It was very cool. A lot of trains - which I love - and boats. Our first stop on the trip was Thailand. We had spent a few days in Taiwan already and I loved it. It was very, very cool. We took buses and trains and flew to Thailand. So we flew there. In Thailand, we were mainly taking boats to the little islands in the South. Then, we took a train up north to Chiang Mai.

**Scott**

How many people were in this group? Who were you traveling with?

**Ella**

I was traveling with my best friend Margy and her partner, Bobby.

**Scott**

So the three of you were just taking in all the sites all around Thailand.

**Ella**

Yeah, it's beautiful.

**Scott**

Yeah, I've seen pictures but never been there. It looks like it's a great place to visit. You ended up at an elephant sanctuary. When I hear "sanctuary", I kind of picture older elephants who just want to live out their lives in peace. Or was it more, like, "Hey, tourists. Come ride the elephants" - like a money-making thing? Can you describe that?

**Ella**

It definitely turned out to be a little bit of both. When I initially heard elephant sanctuary, I imagined, "Rescued elephants living out their days in peaceful coexistence." What we ended up realizing is that, to fund a park like that - if you don't just have a ton of funding - you do need to make the animals kind of work for it in a way to pay for the feeding and the care. So they offered, like, rides. I didn't realize that we would be riding the elephants but that was, I think, part of the tourism pull and marketing strategy. You'd get these experiences with the elephants riding, taking pictures, feeding, and things like that, which was maybe a little bit exploitative to the animals more so than what I thought that we were just going to be, like, looking at them, hanging out, and watching them. So it was a lot more of a money-making kind of tourism.

**Scott**

They weren't being exploited like they would be in a circus or something.

**Ella**

Not in a zoo. Exactly. They weren't being transported around and being kept in enclosures that were unsafe - I don't know what the possibilities are for rescued elephants. I mean, they were saved from poaching situations, hunting, or really terrible traumatic situations. They are very sensitive animals. When we fed them at the very beginning, we fed them sugar cane- it was part one of the first interactions. I noticed that they had chains around their feet, so it didn't seem

overtly cruel or anything like that, but it did seem like, "Oh, maybe these are animals that need some level of control around them."

**Scott**

How many elephants live there?

**Ella**

That's such a good question. It seemed like, maybe, up to 20.

**Scott**

It would be rather a big expense to feed 20 elephants. I mean, I can imagine they must eat quite a bit with their size.

**Ella**

Yeah, maybe it was between 10 and 20. It seemed like there were some that were maybe newer. I'm sure they have a situation where they're always kind of— I know a lot of rescue organizations like Animal Rescue and things like that that always, kind of, want to save animals and they'll want to make room for any sort of animal that needs to be rescued because, if not, the consequences are so much are so dire. So I'm sure that they love the animals so much that they wanted to have as many as possible.

**Scott**

It's like any other animal rescue place. I mean, yes, you have to consider it as a business, but when you see an animal that needs help, you can't just say, "Sorry, we don't have room anymore." You just somehow figure it out.

**Ella**

Absolutely, you find a way. It did seem like they really did love the animals. Each elephant had their own human that, like, lived with it - like their kind of constant buddy - and they all seemed to be young men who would live with the elephants and care for them, kind of, not exactly a trainer, but like someone who was in charge of that animal - kind of like rehabilitation and companionship.

**Scott**

What kind of instructions were you given before the ride began?

**Ella**

That's a great question. It was actually many hours of instruction. When we got there, they gave us these denim jumpsuits and we wore them throughout the entire experience. Like I mentioned, our first experience was feeding the elephant. We got sugarcane. We got to feed them and interact with them. Then, for the next couple of hours, we spent a lot of time learning commands and communications to have with the elephants. We learned how to tell them to, kind of, get down on one leg so we could climb up to ride them. We learned how to give them water. We learned how to thank them. We learned how to give basic commands, communications and, like, respect to the animal. We spent a lot of time doing that. The trainers would come and ask for volunteers. So there was a lot of, like, observation of the elephants and learning these communications and techniques. We weren't given a lot of commands in Thai, which I think was nobody-on-the-trip's first language. We were learning to do that. So we did that for a couple of hours - instruction about how to interact with the animals. Then, we had lunch. Then, we started the ride.

**Scott**

It's really interesting that they would spend that much time. Also, now, if anybody ever asks you, "Do you speak Thai?" "Yeah, but only to an elephant."

**Ella**

Yeah. Obviously, my communication is not the best.

**Scott**

You mentioned one of the things you learned was to help to thank the elephant at the end of the ride. Do they just have so much respect for the animal that they want to make sure to include that? What did that sound like?

**Ella**

Yeah. It seemed like a simple gesture to communicate that you're a friend of theirs and that you're not an enemy because I think they are very sensitive animals who have come from situations where humans were harmful to them. So, thanking them and creating a bond or a connection, I think, was a part of it. Also, from a tourism perspective, I think people would want to. I mean, everyone came to the elephant park because they love elephants and wanted to interact. So I think that was part of it.

**Scott**

How tall are you? And how much taller was the elephant when you were standing next to him?

**Ella**

I'm 5'10". I think the elephant was probably about 6 feet, like, at eye level - it was maybe not exactly at eye level, but close to it. It wasn't, like, towering above me.

**Scott**

I'm picturing this animal is, like, twice as tall as you are, but it's not that much, though.

**Ella**

Not for me. I'm a relatively taller person, so I didn't feel like it was towering above me or anything super intimidating in terms of size - it was definitely large, wide, and heavy. There were some baby elephants too that were on the younger side - they were of different genetics like lines of elk. There were some particularly smaller ones and some that were larger.

**Scott**

What's the process for getting on the back of an elephant?

**Ella**

It was so cool. Elephants are so beautiful and interesting. I never thought about this before but, in the training, they had the elephants kneel down so that their foot was essentially creating a stair for you to step on to get up onto their back. If you've ever ridden a horse, you'd have a saddle that you put one foot on and then hoist yourself up to get the other leg around. So this acted like a step to go right directly onto the back.

**Scott**

When they were kneeling, stepping on that foot gives you enough height to swing your other leg over and then you're on?

**Ella**

Yeah. It's wider than a horse's body, so it spreads your hips a little bit wider than riding a horse or something like that.

**Scott**

Were you nervous at all dealing with an animal that huge?

**Ella**

I don't think I was. I have continued to have this rose-colored glasses, sort of, idea about the world.

**Scott**

Like, "These guys are professionals, obviously. Nothing can go wrong."

**Ella**

Yeah. And I love elephants and they love me. So, I was like, "Nothing bad's gonna happen." I was on a hike a couple of months ago in North Carolina and I saw a bear. Where I live in California, there are deer and turkeys everywhere in. I'm used to seeing wildlife. I just walk right by it. You'd just walk right by like someone on the street in New York. So I guess I just had this kind of tendency to think like, "Oh, nothing's gonna happen." So I had a pretty, maybe, naive view. I wasn't nervous, to answer your question - I didn't feel any. I mean, yes, they're big - I have so much more respect now - but I wasn't nervous at that time because I trusted all the trainers and the elephants. Thinking of what could have gone wrong— I mean, before I went on the trip, my mom said, "Oh, this Australian woman was just killed by an elephant in Thailand. Be careful." I was like, "That can't happen to me. You worry too much. You watch the news too much." That sort of thing.

**Scott**

My whole podcast is based on people who thought, "That will never happen to me."

**Ella**

No one ever does.

**Scott**

Okay. So the ride started. How many elephants and riders were there? How many guides? What did it look like as you started out?

**Ella**

I would say it was about 10 elephants. As far as I can remember, I remember about 10 elephants and about 20 people. Most people who were there, who were participating, were couples on their honeymoon or friends traveling. So there were mainly couples on each elephant. So, there were about 10 elephants, two people on each elephant, and a trainer by the side of each elephant.

**Scott**

So were you on with someone else?

**Ella**

I was. I was on with Bobby - Margy's partner. Margy maybe has a healthier fear of situations in life, so she chose to ride a baby elephant at the front. Bobby and I were on one of the larger elephants towards the middle or the back.

**Scott**

How long was the ride supposed to go? How long was it supposed to last?

**Ella**

I think a couple of hours. I think that the end route was supposed to go through this forest trail, and then end at a big watering hole. Then, you were going to be able to swim with the elephants and interact with them in a water setting. I think that probably would have taken a couple of hours.

**Scott**

So you guys took off on this ride. Take us through what happened.

**Ella**

We were riding along this beautiful jungle trail and they had us practice getting off a couple of times and, then, getting back on the elephants. Each time, we would give them water, thank them, and then get back on. There was a guide at the front of the trail of the line of elephants who was, kind of, making these decisions about where to stop and where to get back on. So, when we stopped, I didn't think much of it because we had been doing this a few times. The ride was just us kind of going through this trail. We got off at this spot that was, like, near a fenced area. It didn't really seem like there was anything to look at. It seemed like the other spots were a view to look at or some, sort of, attraction to look at.

**Scott**

And the elephants were probably used to stopping at these same points from having done it many times before.

**Ella**

Yes. I'm sure they had done these rides every day for a long time. At this one particular stop, we got off the elephant and everyone was kind of standing around. I went to the front of the elephant and, kind of, looked her in her eyes. I thought, "Oh, we're getting off the ride. I'm gonna thank her." So, I got in front of her and patted her on her trunk, which was what we were told, and I said the words in Thai for, "Thank you." She had this look in her eye that she was maybe a little scared. She immediately, with her trunk, grabbed my arm that I had been using to thank her, pulled me towards her with so much force that knocked me to the ground, and then she started kicking me around like a rag doll. It happened so quickly. I don't think I really even had time to register what was happening. At one point, when I was on the ground feeling myself beneath her feet. I yelled, "Help me!" I kind of realized, like, "Oh, I'm in over my head here." I needed help, so I yelled, "Help me." I didn't realize what was kind of going on above the ground, but I think her trainer had gotten on her back and tried to, like, get her off but she had thrown him off. At the moment when I was yelling, "Help me!", she had her foot on my shoulder, not pushing her weight down - nothing like that - but just, kind of, had me pinned to the ground. That was the first moment I was scared because I didn't know what was going to happen. When I yelled or when she may be realized that I wasn't a threat to her at all, she shifted her body weight, released her leg, and then she ran off in another direction.

**Scott**

Did everyone else see this happening?

**Ella**

I think a lot of people did, at least, see the aftermath. They saw me lying there on the ground. Because my best friend was in the front of the line, she didn't really see what was going on -

she just kind of heard some commotion - but her partner who had been on the elephant with me saw all of it.

**Scott**

Yeah, Bobby was with you on the elephant. You both had gotten off but Bobby was smart enough not to go thank the elephant, I guess.

**Ella**

Yeah. Smart enough. I thought I was doing a polite thing and a friendly thing. What I find out later was that was the reason why the elephant was particularly anxious at that moment and that I wasn't approaching an animal who was calm and happy - I was approaching an animal that was very nervous about what was happening around her.

**Margy**

I was at the very front of the line of people and elephants,

**Scott**

Ella's best friend, Margy:

**Margy**

I was on a baby elephant because I was very scared of the big elephants. Because I was so far ahead, there was a little bit of delay. When I realized what had happened - because there was some commotion of elephants - I couldn't tell if they were just, kind of, shuffling around. Then, I looked back and I saw Ella lying on the ground. We were on these trails - these unpaved, really dry, dusty, reddish-brown dust - and she was just covered in this reddish-brown dust lying on the ground. She looked dead. They had us all in these, like, denim outfits, so everyone was wearing the same thing. So, it took a second for me to realize who it was. Then, to process that my best friend was lying on the ground in the dust with people starting to gather around her - I didn't know if she was alive. I didn't know what had happened. When I went over to her, the guides were trying to talk to her and see if she was okay. At first, she wasn't moving. Then, they were encouraging her to get up. I was getting upset because she could have, like, a spinal injury, or maybe she shouldn't stand up right now. But I had no idea what to do. They had no idea what to do. Then, they helped Ella stand up. On the one hand, I was so relieved because she was alive. Then, I looked at her - her eyes were open but they were white. Her eyelids were open but they were, kind of, fluttering - it was, like, totally just the whites of her eyes - and it was absolutely terrifying. She wasn't responsive. People were saying stuff and Ella wasn't really answering. Then, they did start responding, which was a huge relief, but still taking almost like robotic tin man steps, just walking in a way that was like - I just couldn't tell what was going on as Ella was trying to put one foot in front of the other. It was the scariest thing that I've ever seen in my life.

**Ella**

The people did see what was happening, at least, at the moment of rescue when people were coming.

**Scott**

When you were on the ground with an elephant's foot on your shoulder, were you face up or face down?

**Ella**

Face down.

**Scott**

Did the thought crossed your mind that you might not survive this?

**Ella**

Yes. At one point, I realized that I need to protect my head or something. I think that my biggest concern was that I would get a head injury. I didn't think exactly about the physical consequences but I just knew instinctually that I need to protect my head. I need to not get hit, kicked, stepped on, or hit in the head. So I definitely knew that that was a possibility. I knew that there was a chance that that would kill me. After she ran off, I laid there for a little while. I think I have these maybe parental fears - that I think people just say this a lot - like, if you get hurt or if you're in an accident, don't move the person because you could have a back injury or end up doing something that could paralyze you. I think I laid there for a while just trying to feel my body and feel what the injuries were, but I was in so much shock because it happened so quickly. So, I was not in my body at all. I also couldn't see anything. It wasn't like a blackout - it was like a whiteout. I couldn't see anything. My eyes were open and I don't know how long it took. It must have taken a while because I don't know how far we were from where the trucks were. All of a sudden, they were telling me to get in the truck. I said, "What truck? I can't see a truck." So I had no idea of the period of time in which it took to get the truck up there or what their equipment was like for someone with an injury or who had been attacked or anything like that. I don't think they had a gurney. They definitely didn't have, like, a first aid protocol in which this was a possibility. They just kind of said, "Get in the truck. We're going to take you to the hospital."

**Scott**

Was Margy with you at that time?

**Ella**

Yes, she saw me while I was on the ground - that's what she described. She was also in shock and started laughing - that's pretty common. If you're in shock, sometimes, laughter is like a release that your body's trying to make because you can't logically put things in order. I think, then, Bobby told her what happened and she is just a force. I don't know how she did it but she got all our stuff out of the locker, made arrangements with the people running the park to get us to the hospital, and had some conversation to get our money back from the park. So she was behind the scenes. They ended up riding in the truck with me on the way to the hospital. One of the park employees was driving us.

**Scott**

You mentioned the locker. Wasn't that back at the sanctuary?

**Ella**

Yeah. We must not have been so far because, I think, they must have had some sort of communication - maybe a walkie-talkie or something - to tell someone to come, get the truck, and bring us. In terms of the timeline, that part was a blur to me - like, how things happened in what order?

**Scott**

Right. Because you were in shock...

**Ella**

Mmhmm

**Scott**

I have never heard of lack of eyesight being a symptom of shock.

**Ella**

It's also possible that I had a slight head injury. I mean, I think it's entirely possible that I was knocked on my head at some point during the attack.

**Scott**

Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, so you were in the truck. Margy and Bobby were also in the truck with you.

**Ella**

Yeah, they got in the backseat.

**Scott**

At what point, did you become conscious and aware of what had happened and what was happening?

**Ella**

I do remember the drive to the hospital very well. I remember the air conditioning being very cold. I remember making a joke that I was really glad we didn't go to the tiger park.

**Scott**

That's a good sign, I guess - you're making jokes like that.

**Ella**

That's what Margy said. She said that she was really worried. Then, I made the joke and she was like, "Oh, she's gonna be okay." I think I was like, "Oh, I got trampled by an elephant? I could have probably been killed by a tiger or something." I was starting to put together what had just happened.

**Scott**

How long was the ride to get to the hospital?

**Ella**

It was about an hour. It was very far. I think, also, at that point, when I started putting together what happened, my body started shaking because I was starting to come back into feeling my body and feeling what happened. I just knew that I had injuries but was not sure of the extent of them.

**Scott**

That's pretty scary.

**Ella**

Yeah.

**Scott**

What were your actual injuries?

**Ella**

Well, thank God they were mostly, like, surface. We were taken to an Australian hospital, so they spoke English, which was helpful for me because I speak English. The doctors were able to explain to me my injuries and explained to me what was going on.

**Scott**

Is it common that hospitals there are designated by nationality? It seems kind of odd that an Australian hospital would be in Thailand.

**Ella**

I think it was, like, a Christian missionary hospital that was set up by Australians. I think the doctors there just happened to speak English. One of the nurses was from Australia, so she was able to communicate to me what the injuries were.

**Scott**

And were you okay with the level of care that you perceived could be provided here? A hospital set up by missionaries— I'm picturing maybe, like, a glorified urgent care center or something, but not a real hospital.

**Ella**

Yeah. I mean, it was very cool. It was very interesting. It was mostly open-air. I've been to an airport in Hawaii that was kind of open-air. I think it's like you either pay a lot for air conditioning or you have it be kind of open air. You don't think of a hospital being kind of open-air.

**Scott**

No. I'm thinking of a scene from M\*A\*S\*H.

**Ella**

Yeah, exactly. It was a very nice hospital. I think that the people from the elephant park took us to the best hospital that they could have, that they knew was close enough. I was in a sanitary ER room - that part was not open-air. It was open air on the way to the X-ray, but the room that I was in was actually closed and sanitary. The first thing that they did was clean the wounds. I'd say the majority of my wounds were soft tissue damage - a lot of bruising and road rash. The road rash was from being in a denim jumpsuit - that was like shorts - and then being, kind of, kicked around onto dirt. So, there were lots of little pebbles in my skin. There were lots of there was a lot of dirt. The nurse told me that if she didn't scrape it as hard as she was scraping it - I first started to feel real pain when they were cleaning those larger skin wounds - if she didn't clean them, they would be tattooed forever by the dirt that was getting into the skin. So, she said she had to clean it and remove all the dirt or it could get an infection. So that was extremely painful. That was one of the first times that I was really yelling and screaming because it was incredibly painful. They did a wonderful job as best as they could numbing - I think they tried to numb it - but I don't think they could at that point. They just had to start cleaning. So they cleaned and dressed the open wounds that I had. Then, they sent me to X-rays to see if I had any broken bones or any internal bleeding. Luckily, I didn't have either.

**Scott**

You were pretty lucky here.

**Scott**

Incredibly lucky. It could have been so bad. It has totally transformed the entire rest of the trip from being "I really hope we make all of our stops" to "I'm so glad we're okay. I'm so glad that we're alive."

**Scott**

Did you stay at the hospital overnight or did they send you away that day?

**Ella**

They sent me home after the doctors ruled out severe concussion. They observed me for a few hours, I think, and then they sent us back. The guy from the elephant park was so nice. He stayed with us the whole time, dropped us off back at our hotel, and said that if I needed to go back to the hospital the next day, he would be happy to drive us. So he really was so wonderful in that.

**Scott**

I don't know how Thailand is as far as being litigious like we are here in the United States. But do you think he was just a nice person or was he concerned that you would retaliate financially or legally in some way?

**Ella**

That's a good question. I do think that the legal system is very, very different. At that point, I think the gratitude for being alive was so much stronger than any sort of— I do think if it happened in the US, my friend would have absolutely started a lawsuit.

**Scott**

Meaning Margy?

**Ella**

Yeah. She was able to get our money back. They paid for all the medical bills. I don't know how expensive they were for an ER bill in Thailand, but they were very helpful. Because I wasn't severely injured, it didn't seem like— if I had been paralyzed and lost the ability to make money for the rest of my life or something like that, that would maybe have been more interesting, but I think we were all just so lucky that I wasn't hurt worse. So we were happy to just thank them for the care that they provided and hope that the elephant was okay.

**Scott**

They sent you away with instructions on how to change the dressing. What were your instructions as you left?

**Ella**

The hospital didn't give too many instructions, actually, which I wished that they had. There were some things that would have been helpful to hear from them that we found out later. They just gave this sesame oil-based ointment. Now, whenever I smell sesame oil, it reminds me of this ointment. So it was this ointment. They gave some regular medical gauze, which was excruciatingly painful to remove for a wound that large - I can talk more about that.

**Scott**

What made that painful? Because it would stick to the wound?

**Ella**

Mmhmm, exactly. We were on a backpacking trip. Because of the nature of how we were traveling as young 20-something-year-olds, we were backpacking and just really on our feet the whole time taking buses, and public transport, and staying in hostels. We were in foreign countries and didn't know, like, how to talk to people at pharmacies to get the right level of care.

So, the one thing we really learned was that the medical gauze would stick to a wound as large as I had. We went straight from Thailand to Vietnam. We're staying at a hotel in Vietnam. We had upgraded our accommodations. We talked to Margy's parents, and they were like, "Yeah, whatever you have to do." They helped us out in terms of upgrading. There was one night when I was trying to remove the gauze that they had given me but it was not coming off. It had, like, stuck to my skin and, kind of, scabbed over, which was horrific. Margy was in the shower with me at this hotel spraying saline solution to try to moisten this gauze. I just basically had to rip off an entire layer of, like, my raw skin.

**Scott**

And this is on your leg?

**Ella**

Yeah, behind my calf. It was just one of those things where you're just kind of like, "How is this happening? I'm not prepared for this sort of moment." So they ended up leaving and trying to find a pharmacy that could give us something that would be different from this medical gauze. I knew I couldn't go back to the medical gauze and the ointment - I needed something else. There was a moment at the pharmacy where Bobby was trying to explain to the pharmacist what had happened, kind of, giving elephant and trampling motions, and something that would have looked absolutely ridiculous. So what we ended up doing is taking a picture of my wound and showing it to her, and she said, "Oh..." It was just a lightbulb moment. In Vietnam and in Thailand, they have a lot of motorbikes and a lot of motorbike accidents, so people get road rash all the time. So they have nonstick silicone gauze.

**Scott**

Perfect!

**Ella**

It was perfect! It was exactly what we needed. So it was just, like, these moments of things working out really, really well. It was definitely a lost-in-translation sort of moment of, "Wow, I've never had a wound like this. I don't know what I need. Also, I don't know how to ask for it in Vietnamese." So people were so kind and so helpful at this moment. I still haven't gotten rid of that gauze. I mean, I had, like, a sheet of it left.

**Scott**

For if you ever need this again...

**Ella**

Exactly.

**Scott**

Okay, it's a big question. What caused the elephant to attack you like that?

**Ella**

Okay. What I didn't know because I was far back in the line - Margy did know because she was on a baby elephant in the front - was that the reason that we had stopped at that place was that there were helicopters flying overhead. Elephants are very sensitive to vibrations in the ground and very sensitive to helicopters because, to them, being from a rescued situation, helicopters mean poaching, hunting, logging, and other bad stuff. So the elephants were starting to get anxious and the guy at the front knew it and he did not want the elephants to stampede. I didn't know any of this. I was in the back. I just thought, "I'm gonna go thank my elephant." What I was

doing was getting in the face of a very anxious animal. I didn't know that at that time, but that elephant's nervous system was very dysregulated. It was very on the edge.

**Scott**

And it was recalling the trauma from previous experience.

**Ella**

Yeah, exactly. I had no idea. So that is what was elaborated on when we got to the hospital. They don't typically know when there are going to be helicopters overhead - this was, like, an unscheduled event. They wouldn't have done that ride had they known about the helicopters because they know that these animals have this tendency to be anxious and want to run away from the sound of the helicopter.

**Scott**

Your major wounds were on your leg. Was it one leg or both legs?

**Ella**

It was primarily on my left leg and then just bruises throughout my body. My shoulder that she had her arm on did have muscle tissue damage.

**Scott**

Were you able to walk okay as you're traveling, backpacking, going to airports, and things? How did that work?

**Ella**

Yeah, I had a sling for my arm and I was limping. Bobby was so nice and carried my big backpack for me. I was starting to get better as the days went by. We were primarily traveling by train. We went on a little cruise in Halong Bay, which I called the "Bruise Cruise" because I was covered in bruises. We didn't let it get in the way of the things we really wanted to do. Luckily, my injuries were minor enough that we were able to continue on pretty well. We just had to upgrade our accommodations a little bit while I was in an open-wound phase of the trip to just have very clean sheets and not a shared bathroom like in a hostel.

**Scott**

I have never stayed in a hostel. It seems like low-cost accommodations where people come and go all the time. I would imagine they probably don't change the linens as often as they would in our regular hotel.

**Ella**

Yes. Typically, they're a little lower budget and they're super awesome when you're young and cheap and want to just sleep for a night, but it's not the best when you're injured.

**Scott**

Who cares about bedbugs, right?

**Ella**

Yeah. Not an early 20-year-old's top priority.

**Scott**

After you got back, did you have any continuing trauma or nightmares or anything?

**Ella**

Well, I did have nightmares for a couple of weeks when I first got back to New York, and it really didn't last that long. I think there were, kind of, traumas that didn't really make sense, but there were little things that I kind of inadvertently made a story, like, "Oh, I must be bad if this elephant saw this evil in me or something."

**Scott**

Sort of, self victim-shaming?

**Ella**

Yeah, it was shame, I think. When I first got up and looked around - the first time I was able to see after I got into the truck and my vision came back - I saw, like, all these boyfriends holding their girlfriends in fear and concern, like, "Oh, I'm so glad you didn't get hurt." That sort of thing. So I think I felt this kind of loneliness. I think when you have a near-death experience, it doesn't necessarily hit you right away - the implications of what would happen if I died. It was kind of a wake-up call for me. I was in my early 20s. That year was definitely a journey for me in terms of learning about how I make up stories about the things in my life and who I am in the world. Depression and anxiety - what is that? Before that, I don't think I had a real understanding of trauma and how it can affect you in ways that don't make any logical sense.

**Scott**

Did you get through that by figuring it out yourself or did you have therapy?

**Ella**

I ended up going to therapy for a few years. After that, I started meditating that year and it was like one of those "Wizard of Oz" moments - like, black and white into color sort of thing.

**Scott**

The meditation - that's the effect it had on you?

**Ella**

Yeah. The first time I meditated, I was really affected by it. It had an incredible impact on me. No drugs were involved - not at all. I actually ended up getting sober later that year. I didn't have, like, a terrible problem, but I was realizing that it was causing me anxiety. So, it had a spiritual impact, I think, later on. I had a spiritual reading, like, later that year. I didn't tell the woman anything about the elephant, and she said, "I hope this isn't too woo-woo for your viewers."

**Scott**

It's part of your story. Go ahead!

**Ella**

She said, "The elephants have a message for you." I was like, "Okay, what's this gonna be about?" She said, "The elephants have a message for you that, in case you ever forget, your work is in the ground." I'm a farmer. I've been a farmer for, like, 14 years. So, to me, that was like, "Oh. This elephant, like, pushed me into the ground and rolled me around in it." I was like, "Wow, yeah, you really are of the earth and the work that you will do is, like, in the earth." It was definitely a weird thing for someone who didn't know about it to say to me.

**Scott**

Any lingering injuries? It sounds like stuff that you could all heal from - at least, the physical part - pretty quickly.

**Ella**

Totally. Physically, I have some numbness still in that part of my skin where I lost so much skin. I think there was nerve damage, so it's very numb there. Then, I had pain in my shoulder for a really long time. As a farmer, you use your shoulders a lot. So I was experiencing it a lot. I saw a craniosacral massage therapist who helped me with it. So, yeah, it's just kind of realizing, "Oh, my body's okay."

**Scott**

Our bodies recover amazingly, sometimes, from pretty crazy stuff.

**Ella**

Yeah, it's incredible. The human body is really– yeah. The nervous system and everything is just so fascinating - what it can do with certain experiences that get thrown at it.

**Scott**

Would you ride an elephant again?

**Ella**

Probably not. Been there, done that. I don't think I would. I don't think I necessarily wanted to in the first place. I was happy to feed the elephant, say hi to the elephant, and give the elephant water. I don't really need to ride one. I can walk on my own. They can walk on their own.

**Scott**

That's a good way to look at it. For people that want to contact you, you've got some social media and website. Can you tell us about that?

**Ella**

If you want to follow me– one of the things that the elephant accident probably taught me is that there's so much to be grateful for when we are still able to be alive. So I do a series called "The Gratitude Series." I just post a little video of something I'm grateful for every day. If you're interested, my instagram handle is @smella\_fresh. I also have a website, [www.plantbestie.com](http://www.plantbestie.com). I'm a garden consultant and coach for farming, gardening, or anything like that. I've been farming for almost 15 years. I love plants so much. If you have any questions about any of that, that's my work "in the ground."

**Scott**

Thanks for sharing your story. I'm glad you made it through.

**Ella**

Thank you so much, Scott. Thank you for having me on. It's been fun.

**Scott**

You heard Ella's friend Margy talking about what she saw right after the elephant attacked. Well – if Margy's voice sounded a little familiar, it's because she was a guest on the podcast this past summer. That episode was called "Margy's dad was a hoarder" and it's an amazing story. If you haven't heard it yet, it should be the next one in your podcast playlist.

And coincidentally, I recently heard from Margy when she left me this message, because she wanted to tell me how much she appreciates YOU:

**Margy**

Scott, I just wanted to reach out before I forgot and just say, like, not only have I had the highest volume of engagement I've ever had from being on your show than any podcast interview, the quality of your listeners is incredible. It's not just that a lot of people have reached out - it's like they all have these incredibly thoughtful things to say and share amazing stuff about their lives. Honestly, I'm just so grateful to you. You have done something incredible with the show - like the community and audience you've built. I'm so moved by these people. It's been so cool. People have reached out to me and shared their stories. I've been able to, like, provide resources or refer some of them to people. I have somebody who was just like, "I have 4 cats, and I'm just so overwhelmed with the cat pee situation." So I was able to talk her through some of my tips and she's gonna let me know how it goes. It has just been really cool to, like, use what I've learned from this experience to be able to help these wonderful people and witness their stories. I know I'm rambling a little bit, but it's just been very powerful. I'm just really grateful to you and really, really impressed with what you've created here because this is the gold standard of a podcast - to have such a big, engaged, and kind audience. You should be very, very proud.

**Scott**

And you know what? I am proud of you and my whole audience. Whenever I interact with one of my listeners, whether it's by email or in the podcast Facebook group, or even in person sometimes, I'm always reminded that you are some pretty special people. And I really appreciate you. And if you haven't joined the other listeners in the Facebook group yet, get over there and join us! [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com).

And I also heard from Leanne -

**Leanne**

Hey, Scott, my name is Leanne. I'm 18 years old, turning 19 in February - I don't know why I feel like I need to tell you that, but I feel like I just need to tell you. I just need to tell you right now that what you do is amazing and it has done so much for me. I've never felt so alone than I had in the past couple of years, and it's been really bad lately, but your podcast is there for me. Hearing other people and what they went through makes me feel better and makes me feel like I can do this. It's currently 7 AM right now, and I just got off of my work shift. I work a night shift - overnight - full time. I would love to send in my story, but I think I'm still going through it - of course, I am - but I think I'm still going through it in a sense where I don't know how I would even start or finish. I would love to tell you my story one day and leave it in a voice recording for you. I just wanted to call, leave a voicemail, and say that what you do is magical. It's magical. It's inspirational. I can't describe how hard every episode hits me. It's not just about the person talking in their story - it's you too as a host. I have another podcast I'm in love with, but you're definitely my favorite host. You're just genuine and real, and I just need you to know that. I love what you do. I hope I can tell you my story one day - I think I'm still going through it. I just need you to know that you need to keep doing what you're doing for the rest of your life because it is truly amazing. I just listened to 8 straight hours of your podcast. I love it so much. I love you. I think what you do with your platform is amazing. Thank you so much.

**Scott**

Wow, thanks Leanne! I love, love love hearing about how the stories on this podcast have had such a strong and positive effect on people. And I'll tell you something, they have a strong effect on me too. I'm not just the host of this show, I'm also a listener, because one of the reasons I started this podcast is because I wanted to hear stories like this.

And if you're a listener and you want to say something, just like Margy and Leanne just did, I want to hear it! I love playing messages from listeners, and it doesn't have to be all lovey dovey and how great the show is – it's okay if you want to offer some constructive criticism too. I'm all for anything that makes the podcast better. Just record a voice memo on your phone and email to me, [Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com](mailto:Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com), or call the podcast voice mail line at 727-386-9468 anytime day or night. Maybe even do it right now, while you're thinking about it.

And here's the big announcement for today – I am now on TikTok. User name of course is WhatWasThatLike, no spaces. And I'm still learning it, so at this point it's kind of a train wreck. It's funny, I have no problem at all being here behind the mic and just doing audio – but doing these short form videos, eh... well, you'll see. What I'm doing over there is a lot less formal, maybe a little bit of silliness, maybe some behind the scenes podcast stuff, maybe some dog videos, that kind of thing. I see it as more of a playground than a recording studio. So I'd love to have you follow me over there, again the user name is just the podcast name, WhatWasThatLike, no spaces, and let me know what you think.

And now we're at this week's Listener Story. This is how we end every episode, so if YOU have a story you can tell in about 5 minutes, send it in.

This story is about something that happened right here in a city called Dunedin, which is here in Florida and about 10 minutes away from where I live.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

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(Listener Story)

This is interesting and traumatic, but I love it - anything traumatic that's happened. I recently moved. I know that you're actually located in Florida, and I just moved to a small town called Dunedin - a really small, cute, quaint, safe town right outside of Clearwater. I had gotten into an argument with my boyfriend. We were at a brewery. We lived about a mile down the road. I said I was gonna walk home, which is something that I normally do. I have a dog. Less than a mile down the street, it got a little dark than I had anticipated. I was just walking down a couple of blocks.

Then, this guy pulled up, jumped out of his car, and shoved me into his car. It was terrifying. The guy kept trying to touch me - my legs - and I was just pushing them off me. Eventually, we got to a parking lot - I guess it was some bar. Clearly, he was trying to assault me. I was able to get out of the car. I said that I needed to pee, so he actually took my shorts off of me, which is just absolutely insane. I hid behind a dumpster and I was able to text my boyfriend where I was. My boyfriend came and saw a strange man. He even hit me behind a dumpster. I didn't even have my pants on. I was terrified. I was crying. My boyfriend stopped the guy, got me, and really begged me to call the cops. Unfortunately, I've been a victim of sexual assault in the past and it has not turned out very well - it's just more traumatizing. Since I wasn't actually hurt, I would say "Attempted abduction and attempted assault," but nothing actually happened to me. I felt like, "It's fine. I'll just continue with my therapy." The interesting part is that I lost my phone. After I realized that, I canceled it. My phone was taken. The next day, it was inbound to Louisiana. So, I think I dodged a trafficking attempt - not really sure. I'm very lucky to be here. Just to put things in perspective, that's kind of what happens even in the safest town. So, be safe.