

Babies, Elephants, Walks
by Andria K. Brown

On a recent summer afternoon, I stood with my two children outside the elephant enclosure at the Memphis Zoo. Because I'm a complete zoo nerd who knows such things, I encouraged my five-year-old son to call their names. As he said each one – Tyranza, Asali, and Gina – their gargantuan ears shuddered and their eyes glanced in his direction, but they couldn't be distracted from their recently delivered lunch. The kids quickly lost interest and were ready to move on to the pandas and bonobos, but I had a harder time walking away. It had been a while since I saw those girls. I missed them.

Nearly nine years ago, as a brand-new mother with few friends in Memphis, I spent countless afternoons at the zoo. I lived within walking distance and packing my infant daughter into her stroller and making the wide loop to Prentiss Place and back was a regular part of our routine. As a zoo member, I didn't feel a need to see every animal on every visit. But I almost always went to see the elephants.

There were only two then – Gina hadn't get joined the herd. As often as possible, I'd coordinate my trips to the keeper chats and docent talks, and I felt even more connected to these animals as I learned about their histories and habits.

One afternoon, though, I was the only visitor at the exhibit. I held my baby on my hip and looked out on their miniaturized veldt. "Tyranza," I said, my voice no louder than if I were talking to a friend beside me. The stately matriarch turned to look at me. "Tyranza," I said again. The elephant walked toward us, her eyes bright and curious in her paleolithic head. She came as close as she could to the border of her enclosure, looked right at us, and lifted her trunk. The power of her presence, and her awareness, stunned me. I held her gaze for minutes, not able to look away until the baby began to fuss at my stillness.

Tyranza is the grandmother of the herd, twenty years older than her companions. She has been exempt from the recent reproductive efforts among the younger females, efforts that have ended in a late miscarriage for Gina and the tragic accidental death of Asali's newborn calf. The latter captured the compassion and grief of Memphians in a way few local stories have. The loss of that animal seemed to galvanize our worst self-perception that nothing good can last here.

At the time I held my daughter and spoke to an elephant, I was fighting a hopelessness of my own. I felt isolated and overwhelmed, unaware that post-partum depression was coming over me like a shadow. Luckily, I soon found my own matriarchal troupe, a gathering of other new moms at a retail store and community center called Mothersville. This space was so essential to my early motherhood that I eventually became the owner, doing the best I could to create a place for women to find support and companionship during those powerfully, and often surreptitiously, difficult days. When I closed the store in 2008, my greatest sadness was for the mothers who might never find each other.

In the years since Mothersville's end and Asali's terrible loss, however, something surprising has happened in Memphis. Even amid awareness of our tragicomic missteps, there is a growing civic pride that exists almost to spite our own long-standing modesty. (Just say the words "Mayor Wharton" to feel

a sense of this new mentality.) And from the safe distance of a mother of school-age children, I see an ever-growing community among new moms, connecting through social media and planning time to get together in person.

I hope those women find the friendship and understanding that marked my time at Mothersville. I hope they grow into their motherhood together and still have each other's numbers when they need help carting science projects and picking drivers' ed instructors. And if they start to feel under that stealthy shadow, during those earliest, most dangerous days, I hope they'll find a place where they can get some sun – a coffee shop, a friend's porch, or of course, the zoo.

Tyranza and I will be happy to see them.