

Fiction

The Only Elephant in the World You Can Walk Through and Come Out Alive

By xxxxxxxx

It started to rain. They could see the drops splatter the ocean and the beach and the boardwalk. Greg clicked the switch under the steering wheel to activate the convertible top. He looked skyward toward Lucy's glassy, white and red-rimmed eyes as the black canvas unfolded over them.

"Op!" cried Jiffy the baby.

"Top," Kirby laughed.

Greg latched the top shut. Through the rain, they could see Lucy, six stories high, her trunk dipped in a round wooden water tank.

"Goggy," Jiffy shouted.

"Elephant!" Greg exclaimed. "We can go inside her because she used to be a hotel."

"He thinks you're pulling his leg," Kirby said.

"I'm only reading the Lucy the Elephant sign on the fence."

"I know that, but Jiffy doesn't."

Jiffy sucked on the rear view mirror.

“Give me a sec with the old girl,” Greg said.

He handed Jiffy to Kirby. He pulled on his rain jacket and climbed the stairs to the boardwalk. Only a few people were around. The surf boomed against the sand. Greg could smell the salt and fish. Seagulls dipped over the crests of waves, screeching, diving, and snapping up clams on the beach.

Greg squinted through the rain at Lucy. She looked complacent, unperturbed by rain or responsibilities. She’s like me, Greg thought. Jobless. Demonstrating lack of initiative.

Greg had grown up a few miles from Lucy. She was built by James V. Lafferty, Jr. in 1881 in Margate, New Jersey, as a novelty hotel to attract visitors from Philadelphia. Lafferty constructed her out of 200 kegs of nails, four tons of bolts, and a million pieces of timber fashioned into 8,560 ribs. Skin made out of 12,000 square feet of tin covered her elephant frame. Total weight – 90 tons. People drove long distances to gawk at her two 17-foot, 2,000 pound ears and her two 22-foot tusks. One night, sailors on a sea voyage up the Jersey coast caught a glimpse of Lucy through their telescopes and gave the alarm, “Elephant!”

Inevitably, in the salt air, Lucy began to decay. Greg joined the Save Lucy the Margate Elephant Committee, which raised millions. Lucy was restored and moved several blocks on flatbed trucks along Pacific Avenue to her new home.

Peering upward through the rain, Greg pictured the dry space inside Lucy's hollow skull where her brain and white stalks of optic nerves should have been. (Sometimes he thought his head was empty, like Lucy's.) He and his father would peer out Lucy's eyes at the ocean. "Lucy used to live in Africa and eat bananas," his father explained. Lucy seemed alive. Would she stroll toward the surf and swim to Africa? Would she float upside down on the ocean waves to get the tread of human feet out of her skull?

Greg glanced down at Kirby and Jiffy in the car. Suddenly, through the windshield, he saw Jiffy throwing himself off the dashboard onto Kirby's face. Kirby caught him and held him up by one leg. She wasn't used to babies. Greg ran down the stairs to the car and yanked open the door.

"Come here, monkey," he said, grabbing Jiffy.

He put Jiffy in the back seat and ran around to the driver's door and climbed inside.

"You're soaking wet," Kirby said.

"I'm having fun," Greg said. He grabbed Kirby's hand and kissed it. She pulled back, laughing, pressing her palms against her face.

Greg leaned over to kiss her. Kirby winced. She squeezed Greg's hand. "We can't keep on like this," she said.

"Jiffy won't talk."

"I'm serious, Greg." She leaned into Greg and kissed him. "No one can walk through adultery and come out alive."

"Oh, bosh."

"It's true."

"Where's Rusty going on his next trip?"

"India."

"How long will he be gone?"

"A week. Three months. Five years."

"Perfect."

"He wants me to go with him."

"Hell, no—"

"He *is* my husband."

"Don't decide anything."

"Greg - "

"We can talk later."

On the way back to the house, they stopped at Rapetti's to get the lasagna. Greg jumped outside and ran through the rain.

"I hope you guys like lasagna," he said, returning to the car.

The windshield wipers slapped back and forth, splattering the rain left and right. Jiffy stood on the edge of the back seat and pointed to the wipers.

"Ahgee!" he cried.

"Sit down, Jiffy, before you fall down," Greg called. He reached back and nudged the baby gently back onto the seat. Jiffy kicked and fell over.

"We should put him in the car seat."

"We're almost home."

They rounded Newport and Winchester and then turned on Portland and stopped in front of the cottage. Greg switched the ignition off and studied Kirby's face. Her mouth pursed as she watched the rain pelting the pavement. She looked troubled, half-heartedly resisting a twinge of bafflement in her eyes.

"What?"

"I don't know—"

"Tell me."

"Things are —"

Just then Jiffy fell off the back seat onto a can of paint. Greg lunged back and brought him up. Jiffy was screaming, his leg cut and bleeding. Kirby grabbed a kleenex and pressed it against his leg.

"Poor baby!" she cried.

They ran with the baby through the rain. Rusty and Melissa were in the living room looking at Rusty's cameras. Rusty was wearing an orange polo.

"The baby cut his leg."

"What?" cried Melissa. She jumped up and took the baby from Greg. A drop of blood fell on the glass coffee table.

"How did it happen?"

"He fell off the back seat onto the can of paint."

"Why wasn't he in his car seat?"

"It's my fault," Kirby said.

Melissa carried Jiffy into the kitchen and began running water over his leg. Jiffy gargled and screamed and pressed his back against her chest.

"Do you have first aid cream?" Melissa called.

"In the bathroom."

Kirby and Melissa hurried the baby into the bathroom. Greg followed. He watched from the door, and then came back out. He sat down on the sofa next to Rusty. Then he jumped up. "The lasagna!"

He hurried out to the car. It was still raining. Back in the living room, he put the lasagna on the glass coffee table next to the drop of blood. He wiped up the blood with a paper towel. He threw the towel into the kitchen garbage and then came back and sat next to Rusty.

"I hope you guys like lasagna," he said.

"Everybody likes lasagne," Rusty said.

"I don't know about Cambodians."

"Sorry about Jiffy."

Rusty went out and got some coffee, came back, and poured it into four cups. A few drops of coffee spilled on the glass coffee table. Greg peered through the glass at the green shag rug. It was raining, and there was blood and coffee. It must add up to something. As an accountant, he was used to things adding up.

Kirby came out and sat on the other side of Rusty.

"I think I'd like to have a baby," she said.

"Right —" Rusty said.

"I'd like to have three babies," Kirby added. Her voice was noncommittal, jovial.

Rusty laughed. "What would you do with three babies?"

"I knew it," Kirby said, grimacing at Greg. "That's what he always says. He thinks babies are like diving bells."

Greg wondered what was keeping Melissa. He went into the bathroom. Melissa was holding the baby over the sink.

"How's he doing?"

The baby convulsed under Kirby's arm.

"He'll be OK."

"I am so sorry."

"Sorry, your butt. All you've been doing lately is acting like a baby."

"You're the expert in everything."

Greg went back to the living room. "The baby will live!" he announced. The bathroom door slammed.

"That's no way to talk," Kirby scolded.

"Oh, I like the baby, all right."

"We should have had him in the car seat."

Melissa came out with the baby. Jiffy was sniffing. He had stopped crying.

"Let me hold him," Greg said.

Melissa turned away, shielding Jiffy with her arm.

"What's up with that, Melissa?"

She turned on him. "Next time, for Christ's sake, put him in the car seat – and get a job!"

"To hell with the car seat – and the job!" Greg shouted.

Melissa slapped his face.

Greg's mouth began to bleed. He hurried into the bathroom and held his head over the sink. The blood dripped on the white porcelain, reminding him of when the baby was born. Would he bleed when he died? How would he die? It was a good question.

He didn't want to get blood on his shirt. He unbuttoned the shirt and pulled it off. He threw it over the shower curtain next to Kirby's bra.

After he cleaned up, he went back out into the living room, holding a tissue against his mouth.

"Where's your shirt?" Melissa asked.

"On the shower curtain next to Kirby's bra."

Jiffy was crawling across the carpet toward the coffee table. Greg picked him up and reversed his direction. "Go the other way, Jiffy," he said.

Kirby was gone.

"Where's Kirby?"

"I think she's out on the sun porch," Rusty said.

Rusty was going through old photographs.

"Kirby said you're headed for Indiana."

"India, not Indiana."

"I know. I was using humor."

"Funny."

"What's the job this time?"

"*National Geographic* asked me to do a feature on carvings of Ganesha and other Hindu sculpture."

"Ganesha?"

"He's an elephant - half god, half human. Here I'll show you."

Rusty jumped up, pulled a book off the shelf, and opened it. He turned it toward Greg. Greg looked at a photo of a lumpy elephant wearing makeup. The elephant had a human pot belly.

"Hindus worship him as the Lord of success, wisdom, and wealth," Rusty explained. "His ears are larger than normal so he can hear our prayers."

Suddenly Melissa cried, "Where's the baby?"

The baby had disappeared.

They looked in different rooms. Greg checked the sun porch and found Kirby lying on a chaise lounge, holding the baby on her stomach.

"Look at the baby," she said. Jiffy was trying to stand up, holding on to Kirby's thumbs.

"Melissa's looking for him," Greg said. He called into the house.

"Kirby has the baby!"

Jiffy toppled backward onto Kirby's legs. "Whoopsiedaisies," Kirby cried.

Melissa and Rusty came out on the sun porch.

"Here's mommy," Greg said.

"Hi, buddy!" Melissa called.

"There you go," Kirby said.

Melissa took Jiffy and went back inside, placing him on the carpet.

Rusty followed them. Jiffy fell over and began crawling into the living room.

On the sun porch, Greg sat on the floor next to Kirby.

"I won't let you go," he announced.

"Don't you hate love?"

"I'll either die with it – or without it."

"You'll have to choose between us, you know."

"I know. I wasn't born yesterday."

"Then you know that one of your choices will break everything into little pieces."

"Let's put off the choosing business a little longer."

Kirby was silent, staring at the rain.

"You never said you liked babies."

"Now you know."

"And?"

Kirby turned away. She snuggled deeper into the chair.

"Talk to me," Greg said.

"You're interrupting my rain."

They watched the rain beating against the panes of glass on the sun porch. The drops looked like pearls, slightly larger than drops of blood. All

the drops in the world in one day, he thought. What were they telling him? Was he missing something? Melissa liked to say he was always missing something. Beyond the windows he could see the rain drumming on the roofs.

After a while, Greg got up and went inside.

"Why don't you get your shirt on?" Melissa said.

Greg got his shirt from the bathroom and put it on. Later, everyone sat at the dining room table and ate lasagna, bread, and salad with red wine. Greg held the baby on his lap and fed him lasagna.

"Don't feed him too much," Melissa said.

Rusty told them about his trip to India. "I'm going to bring back a little statute of Ganesha for Jiffy," he said.

"Ganesha has big ears so he won't miss anything," Greg said.

Everyone had seconds on lasagne, and then they had more wine.

Greg and Rusty and the baby went out into the living room to watch the Army-Navy game. Kirby and Melissa moved into the kitchen. Greg could hear their voices. The Army quarterback threw for 40 yards. The thought came to Greg about all that he had and what would happen if he lost it. He imagined dropping a valuable ceramic statue or vase on a slab of concrete.

Kirby and Melissa came back out. Melissa was pushing hair out of her face. Everyone had more coffee. Kirby brought out apple fritters for dessert. Jiffy sat on the floor and ate an apple fritter.

Greg, Melissa, Rusty, and Kirby sat on the sofa and looked at Rusty's photo albums. The first one was from a trip to Mexico for *Time* magazine. In one of the photos, Rusty and Kirby were posing in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Mexico City. Melissa read the caption. "Note Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical architecture in the cupola and bell-shaped tower crowns. Manuel Tolsa designed the three sculptures – Hope, Faith, and Love."

Rusty finished the story. "Cortes tore down the Aztec temple of Tenochtitlán piece by piece. It lay in ruins, but then he built his own cathedral with the same stones. Now it's sinking into the mud."

"Serves him right."

"Go, Aztecs."

"It's politics, not sports," Melissa said.

"What about religion?" Greg asked. "Christ have mercy on us. Mary full of beans."

The second album contained mostly family vacation photos. In one, Rusty and Kirby were standing in front of a bonfire. Rusty had on a yellow mohair sweater. He was balancing on one foot with his arm around Kirby's shoulder. Melissa was in the background eating a burrito. Rusty leafed through the rest of the photo album.

"Look—more shots of the baby," Melissa said.

"Baby!" the baby exclaimed.

"Baby!" they chimed in.

Kirby tickled the baby's chin. Then she clapped her hands and laughed. "We've got to have a baby, Rusty."

Rusty eyed the three of them. "Greg knows how to make babies," he said.

Kirby peered at him sharply. Rusty was grinning. He polished a spot on the digital camera. Finally, he announced, "All right, Kirby, you win. Let's have a baby."

Kirby kissed him.

"Maybe we should leave," Greg said.

Rusty laughed.

"Actually, we have to get Jiffy home and put him to bed," Melissa said.

They all went out to the car. It had stopped raining and turned warm. Greg put the convertible top down. Melissa strapped Jiffy in the car seat in the back. They said good-bye and pulled away.

After a while, Greg asked, "How's Jiffy?"

"The baby will live - as you said."

"I love Jiffy, too, you know."

They rode along in silence. The traffic was backed up on Pacific Avenue.

"What were you and Kirby talking about?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You know, girl talk - black holes, sanctuaries for endangered gorillas, death by infidelity."

Greg glanced at her. He swallowed. "Melissa, we never -"

"Stop."

They could see Lucy ahead on the left. Melissa was silent.

Greg didn't know what to say. Jiffy started kicking and shouting.

Melissa reached back and tugged at his shoe. "Come on, baby."

"Tomorrow, let's take Jiffy to see Lucy."

Melissa didn't answer. Greg glanced over at her. A ray of sun glowed through the windshield onto her cheek bones and long eye lashes. Then a cloud rolled over, and the light was gone. On the seat between them, Greg covered her hand with his.

"Whatever," she sighed finally. A tear trickled down one cheek. It began raining again. A few drops landed on the baby's face.

"Otter," Jiffy cried.

"The baby's getting wet," Melissa said.

Greg pulled to the curb and put the top up. It unfolded over their heads like a great bat wing.

"Top!" cried Jiffy.

"That right, Jiffy, top!"

Greg snapped the top in place just as the rain began pouring down. They could see the drops bouncing on the howdah carriage on Lucy's back. Up there, visitors could see Margate and Ventnor and as far away as

Atlantic City. Greg remembered the tour guide explaining years ago that they couldn't actually see Africa from the howdah because the earth was curved. Life never seemed to give anyone a clear view. Or maybe there were glimpses, and you had to be ready to latch onto what you believed was true.

Greg pulled away from the curb as rain pelted the windshield. They drove toward Longport to catch the Absecon bridge to the mainland. Behind them, through the rear view mirror, Greg could see the rain falling on Lucy's 12,000 fragments of tin.

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