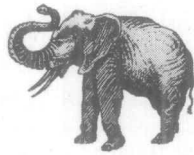


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THE NIGHT LISTENER



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ONE



JEWELLING THE ELEPHANT

I KNOW HOW IT SOUNDS when I call him my son. There's something a little precious about it, a little too wishful to be taken seriously. I've noticed the looks on people's faces, those dim, indulgent smiles that vanish in a heartbeat. It's easy enough to see how they've pegged me: an unfulfilled man on the shady side of fifty, making a last grasp at fatherhood with somebody else's child.

That's not the way it is. Frankly, I've never wanted a kid. Never once believed that nature's whim had robbed me of my manly destiny. Pete and I were an accident, pure and simple, a collision of kindred spirits that had nothing to do with paternal urges, latent or otherwise. That much I can tell you for sure.

Son isn't the right word, of course.

Just the only one big enough to describe what happened.

* * *

I'm a fabulist by trade, so be forewarned: I've spent years looting my life for fiction. Like a magpie, I save the shiny stuff and discard the rest; it's of no use to me if it doesn't serve the geometry of the story. This makes me less than reliable when it comes to the facts. Ask Jess Carmody, who lived with me for ten years and observed this affliction firsthand. He even had a name for it—The Jewelled Elephant Syndrome—after a story I once told him about an old friend from college.

My friend, whose name was Boyd, joined the Peace Corps in the late sixties. He was sent to a village in India where he fell in love with a local girl and eventually proposed to her. But Boyd's blue-blooded parents back in South Carolina were so aghast at the prospect of dusky grandchildren that they refused to attend the wedding in New Delhi.

So Boyd sent them photographs. The bride turned out to be an aristocrat of the highest caste, better bred by far than any member of Boyd's family. The couple had been wed in regal splendor, perched atop a pair of jewelled elephants. Boyd's parents, imprisoned in their middle-class snobbery, had managed to miss the social event of a lifetime.

I had told that story so often that Jess knew it by heart. So when Boyd came to town on business and met Jess for the first time, Jess was sure he had the perfect opener. "Well," he said brightly, "Gabriel tells me you got married on an elephant."

Boyd just blinked at him in confusion.

I could already feel myself reddening. "You weren't?"

"No," Boyd said with an uncomfortable laugh. "We were married in a Presbyterian church."

Jess said nothing, but he gave me a heavy-lidded stare whose

meaning I had long before learned to decipher: *You are never to be trusted with the facts.*

In my defense, the essence of the story had been true. Boyd had indeed married an Indian girl he had met in the Peace Corps, and she had proved to be quite rich. And Boyd's parents—who were, in fact, exceptionally stuffy—had always regretted that they'd missed the wedding.

I don't know what to say about those elephants, except that I believed in them utterly. They certainly never felt like a lie. More like a kind of shorthand for a larger, less satisfying truth. Most stories have holes in them that cry out for jewelled elephants. And my instinct, alas, is to supply them.

I don't want that to happen when I talk about Pete. I will try to lay out the facts exactly as I remember them, one after the other, as unjewelled as possible. I owe that much to my son—to both of us, really—and to the unscripted intrigues of everyday life.

But, most of all, I want you to believe this.

And that will be hard enough as it is.

I wasn't myself the afternoon that Pete appeared. Or maybe more severely myself than I had ever been. Jess had left me two weeks earlier, and I was raw with the realization of it. I have never known sorrow to be such a physical thing, an actual presence that weighed on my limbs like something wet and woolen. I couldn't write—or wouldn't, at any rate—unable to face the grueling self-scrutiny that fiction demands. I would feed the dog, walk him, check the mail, feed myself, do the dishes, lie on the sofa for hours watching television.

Everything seemed pertinent to my pain. The silliest coffee commercial could plunge me into profound Chekhovian gloom.

There was no way around the self-doubt or the panic or the anger. My marriage had exploded in midair, strewing itself across the landscape, and all I could do was search the rubble for some sign of a probable cause, some telltale black box.

The things I knew for sure had become a litany I recited to friends on the telephone: Jess had taken an apartment on Buena Vista Park. He wanted space, he said, a place to be alone. He had spent a decade expecting to die, and now he planned to think about living. (He could actually do that, he realized, without having to call it denial.) He would meditate and read, and focus on himself for once. He couldn't say for sure when he'd be back, or if he'd ever be back, or if I'd even want him when it was over. I was not to take this personally, he said; it had nothing to do with me.

Then, after stuffing his saddlebags full of protease inhibitors, he pecked me solemnly on the lips and mounted the red motorcycle he had taught himself to ride six months earlier. I'd never trusted that machine. Now, as I watched it roar off down the hill, I realized why: It had always seemed made for this moment.

The solitude that followed sent me around the bend. Or at least into the Castro once a day, where I foraged for pork chops and porn tapes, just to be among the living. It was weird doing this after a decade of cocooning with Jess. All those bullet-headed boys with their goatees and tats. All those old guys like me shambling along in their dyed mustaches and gentlemen's jeans, utterly amazed to still be there, still out shopping for love.

And the creeping genericism of it all, the Body Shops and Sunglass Huts of any American mall. The place had become a theme park for homos, where the names of icons were writ large upon the wall of the flashy new juice bar. I couldn't help checking, of course, and there I was, GABRIEL NOONE—just to the left of the wheat-grass machine—between OSCAR WILDE and MARTINA NAVRATILOVA.

THE NIGHT LISTENER

Even in my depression, I got a rush out of that, and the way my name would surface softly in my wake as I walked down the street. Once I was stopped by the tour guide for an operation called "Cruisin' the Castro." With genial decorum she offered me up like a resident artifact to a dozen visitors from Germany and Holland. They applauded politely, standing there in the midst of the busy sidewalk, and one of them asked how Jess was doing. I said he was fine, that the new cocktail was working wonders, that his energy levels had never been higher, that he had a real chance to live, thank God. And they were all so happy to hear that.

I left before anyone could see what a fraud I was. Or notice that the video under my arm was called *Dr. Jerkoff and Mr. Hard*.

Then one afternoon my bookkeeper, Anna, came by the house to drop off checks for my signature. I had explained things to her on the phone, since Jess had always handled our finances. She took it in stride, but I detected a trace of motherly concern. This felt odd coming from a twenty-one-year-old, but I accepted it gratefully.

It was Anna who made the Pete thing possible. Without her intervention that morning, he would never have found his way into my rapidly shrinking orbit. She and I were holed up in the office—Jess's office—sorting receipts and combing the mail for bills. I could have managed this on my own, but Anna, I think, had noticed my red-rimmed eyes and was trying to keep me company. Her own eyes, glossy black in a heart-shaped face, would study me solemnly when she thought I wasn't looking. I remember noticing a faint resemblance to Olivia Hussey in *Lost Horizon*, a reference so hopelessly antediluvian I didn't even bother to express it.

"That looks interesting," she said, pushing a parcel my way. It was a padded envelope, about eight by ten.

"Don't bet on it," I said. "It's just galleys."

"Photos?"

"No. Galleys for a book. Some editor wants something blurbed."

"You can tell that from the package?"

"In the dark," I said, "and blindfolded." I pointed to the colophon on the envelope. "It's from Argus Press, see?"

I might have also told her how the cover letter would read. How it would acknowledge the many demands on my time and the number of manuscripts that must come my way each week. How it would go on to point out that just a few kind words from a writer of my stature would help this searing memoir, this tender coming-out novel, this fabulous celebrity AIDS cookbook, find its way to "the audience it so richly deserves." Meaning, of course, fags.

But I kept quiet. I didn't want Anna to see how poisonous a broken heart could be. I wanted her on my side. I wanted everyone on my side. So I gave her a crooked smile and lobbed the package into the wastebasket.

"Hey," she said, looking mildly affronted. "Aren't you even curious?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't handle someone else being brilliant right now."

She mulled that over. "Maybe it'll be shitty."

"Then why read it?"

"I dunno. To cheer yourself up?"

"It doesn't work that way. I identify with the shitty stuff."

"You do?" She looked utterly perplexed.

"It's hard to explain," I said. "It's a writer thing."

"I guess so," she murmured, giving me up for lost as she turned back to her labors.

THE NIGHT LISTENER

★ ★ ★

I was tempted to blame this nonsense on the crisis at hand, but the truth is I've always been unsure about my literary powers. My work, after all, was originally intended for radio: grabby little arm-chair yarns that I would read for half an hour every week on a National Public Radio show called *Noone at Night*. My characters were a motley but lovable bunch, people caught in the supreme joke of modern life who were forced to survive by making families of their friends. The show eventually became a cult hit; listeners would cluster en masse around their radios in a way that hadn't happened since the serials of the forties. While this fulfilled me hugely as a storyteller, it left me feeling illegitimate as a writer, as if I'd broken into the Temple of Literature through some unlocked basement window.

Never mind that the books compiled from those shows have never stopped selling. Or that Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com now use my name in their promotions. In my heart I remain a clever impostor, a sidewalk magician performing tricks for the crowd outside the opera house. A real writer makes star turns at conferences and summers at Yaddo and shows up in the *New York Times Book Review* as someone to Bear in Mind. A real writer would never have stopped writing when his life collapsed around him. He would have caught every last detail. He would have pinned his heart to the page, just to give his readers a closer look.

But the fight went out of me when my marriage began to unravel. I lost a vital engine I never even knew I had. Those gracefully convoluted plotlines my listeners cherished had been driven by a bedrock optimism that vanished overnight. And once that was gone my authorial voice deserted me in the most literal way possible—in the midst of a recording session.

We were taping that day, as usual, at the local public-radio station, which fed the show, via satellite, to the rest of the system. (As a space-struck teenager I'd kept a scrapbook on *Sputnik*, so I'd always loved knowing that one of its grandchildren was beaming my stories to the nation.) I hadn't been able to write for several weeks, but I still had a backlog of five or six episodes that would buy me some time until I could get my head together.

But ten minutes into the session, when the engineer played back a troublesome passage, I made an unnerving discovery.

"What's the matter?" he asked, reading my confusion.

"It doesn't sound like me," I told him.

He shrugged. "The levels are all the same."

"No, I mean . . . I don't sound like me."

This time he widened his eyes and deedled out the theme from *The Twilight Zone*.

"I'm serious, Kevin."

"Do you wanna take a break?"

"No. Let's just start from the top of the page."

So I began again, but my voice felt even more phony and disembodied. I found myself tripping over the simplest words as I attempted a lighthearted domestic scene. (The couple that most resembled me and Jess were fighting over the sovereignty of their remote control.) After half a dozen takes I'd run so far beyond my allotted time that the panelists for the next show—a trio of Silicon Valley pundits—began to mill about in the control room with obvious irritation. Wary of witnesses to my self-annihilation, I apologized to the engineer, took off my headphones, and left the room, never to return.

The following week, without explanation, NPR began to treat its listeners to *The Best of Noone at Night*.

* * *

So there I sat, useless, while Anna worked and a flock of winged toasters flapped across the face of Jess's Mac. That had always been his favorite screen saver, so there was no reason to believe he had left it there as a parting comment. Still, the irony was inescapable. Those jaunty appliances seemed the very essence of our lost domesticity, the dependable homeyness that had come and gone. I felt a clear sense of relief when Anna hit a key and made them disappear.

"Have you updated the Quicken files?" she asked.

"No," I told her. "I don't know how to get into that thing."

She batted her eyes at me dubiously.

"I'm an IBM person," I said. "Jess always handled this."

She began clicking the mouse. "Save all your receipts, then. I'll take care of the rest."

"Great," I said feebly.

"Why don't you go kick back?" she said.

"You mean get out?"

"Yeah."

The difficult child had been banished to his room.

So the dog and I went for our walk. The street we took—the one we always take—was dubbed an avenue early in the century, though it barely qualifies. True, it's paved with red bricks and lined rather grandly with red-leafed plum trees, but it runs for only a block, dead-ending at the edge of Sutro Forest. The houses along the way are old shingled places with copper gutters bleeding green, but their foolproof charm wasn't working that afternoon.

I reached the woods well ahead of Hugo. Below me lay a gorge furred with fog, where eucalyptus trees creaked like masts on a galleon. I stared at them for a moment, lost in their operatic

gloom, then turned and looked for the dog. He was yards behind, too blind and dotty to get his bearings. When I whistled, his floppy ears rose to half-mast, but he promptly trotted off in the wrong direction. Poor old geezer, I thought. He seemed even more befuddled since Jess had left.

"Hey, beastlet! Turn your ass around."

My voice was sounding disconnected again. I was halfway down the block before I realized why: I had sounded just like Jess. That gruff but folksy tone was precisely the one he had always used with Hugo. And no one else, I can assure you, had ever called the dog "beastlet." There was nothing mystical about this, just a cheap trick of the mind that reconstructed Jess the only way I could manage. How pathetic, I thought. And how like me to play the dummy to my own bad ventriloquism.

The fog was much thicker as I headed home. Out of habit, I approached the house from the sidewalk across the street, where I could see it in context: three narrow stories notched into the wooded slope. Its new cedar shingles were still too pallid for its dark green trim, but another season or two of rain would turn them into tarnished silver. I'd been eagerly awaiting that. I'd wanted the place to look ancestral, as if we had lived there forever.

Upon moving in, three years earlier, we had thrown ourselves into a frenzy of renovation. Fences and decks sprang up overnight, and the garden arrived fully grown, an instant Eden of azaleas and black bamboo and Australian tree ferns the size of beach umbrellas. We had already lived for seven years with Jess's dwindling T cells and had no intention of waiting for nature to catch up with us.

Jess used to joke about this. Sometimes he called me Mrs. Winchester, after the loony old lady on the Peninsula who believed that constant home improvement would keep evil spirits away. And that was pretty close. My frantic agenda for the house had been my

only insurance against the inevitable. Jess was bound to get sick, one of these days, but not until those shingles had mellowed and the new fountain was installed and the wisteria had gone ropy above the lychgate. That was the deal: Jess could leave, but only when the dream was complete, when we were snug in a fortress of our own creation, barricaded against the coming storm.

It didn't occur to me there were other ways of leaving.

But about that package:

It awaited me upon my return, having risen like a phoenix from the wastebasket to a place of prominence beside the fax machine. Anna was gone, bound for another client, but her dry smile still lingered in the room. I sat at the desk and picked up the padded envelope, turning it over slowly in my hands. It had the feel of Christmas somehow, peculiar as that sounds, the brown-paper promise of wonders to come. Anna had been right, I decided; it wouldn't do to stop being curious. Especially now.

I pulled the little tab and out fell a set of bound galleys with a light blue cover. The book was called *The Blacking Factory*. Its author was Peter Lomax, a name I didn't recognize. According to the cover letter from Ashe Findlay (a stuffy but pleasant New York editor I'd seen several times at book fairs), this was indeed another memoir. But one with an arresting difference: its author, a survivor of long-term sexual abuse, was thirteen years old.

I flipped through the galleys, as I invariably do, sampling passages here and there. When I had seen enough, I brewed a pot of coffee and climbed to my attic office. Hugo followed on my heels, whimpering anxiously, as if his only remaining human might also be on the verge of leaving. I made a nest for him on the sofa, using one of Jess's unlaundered T-shirts. The scent calmed him right

away, and he was soon fast asleep at my feet, snoring with gusto by the time I had opened the galleys. It was six o'clock, not yet dark. It would be past midnight when I next looked up.

It's not an easy thing to trim Pete's story to its barest bones, to trot out the horror for your examination, minus Pete's wisdom and courage and disarming humor. But that's what I have to do if you're to understand how fiercely those galleys consumed me, and why I slept so uneasily that night, and why, above all, I went straight to the phone the following morning.

Pete was born in 1985. His father was a foreman in a hosiery factory, his mother a housewife. To their neighbors in Milwaukee Pete's parents were nothing out of the ordinary, just average people who ate at the mall and shopped at the Price Club, and showed up at Mass with their cute kid in tow. They were a nice-looking couple, apparently, far too wholesome and all-American to be suspected of anything ghastly.

At home lay the truth. In the backyard was a soundproof shed where Pete was routinely sent for "discipline." His father began beating him at two and raping him at four. His mother knew this; she videotaped the sessions, in fact, and shared them with other grown-ups who liked that sort of thing. And when money got tight, Pete himself was shared. People would drive across three states just to involve an eight-year-old in their games. Pete remembers waiting for them in the slushy parking lots of Holiday Inns. He remembers their grownup toys and the scary sounds of their pleasure and the rotten-fruit stink of amyl nitrite. And the way that afterward his mother would buy off his bruises with plastic dinosaurs.

It stopped when he was eleven. Two days after Christmas, in the midst of a snowstorm, he left the house and ran eight blocks to a

public library with his backpack stuffed full of videotapes. There he phoned a child-abuse hot line and waited in the stacks until a lady doctor came to meet him. Her name was Donna Lomax. She wore jeans with a blazer, he remembers, and had brown eyes and listened quietly while he told his story. Then she took him to her office, where he read a *Star Wars* comic book and she and another doctor watched the tapes in a different room. That was it. He ate supper at Donna's house that night, and slept there, too, in a room with clean sheets and a door he could lock from the inside.

Pete's parents were arrested and jailed. They never saw their son again, unless you count the videotape on which he testified against them. Though Donna was divorced and had never particularly wanted children, she saw something remarkable in this child, something that reached a part of her that had never been reached before. When she offered to adopt Pete, he accepted almost immediately, but without a trace of emotion. Compassion was still alien to him; he had no precedent for trusting anyone, even this lanky angel who promised him safety and expected nothing in return.

So Pete became a Lomax, but in name only. He stayed locked in his room for weeks, leaving only for meals, and even then he would eye his new mother across the table like some dangerous wild thing. Donna didn't push; she let him wander out of the woods on his own, and in his own time. And when he finally did, she was there to meet him, the tenderest of certainties, rocking him in her arms while he cried.

It should have ended there, but didn't. When Pete's body had healed at last, when he had learned to laugh along with Donna, when he had begun the journal that would eventually become his book, he developed a troubling cough. Donna had to tell him what she already knew: that he had tested positive for AIDS.

At the hospital they treated Pete's pneumonia and drained his

lungs with tubes. As soon as he was able to sit up, he asked Donna to bring him his journal. She did more than that: she brought him a laptop computer. It became his obsession, then his salvation. He would write on it for hours at a time, oblivious to everything around him, dizzy with the discovery that words could contain his suffering.

And sometimes, when the ward was dark, he'd listen to the radio. There was a TV above his bed, but he never turned it on. He had seen his own torment on such a screen, so its unrelenting literalness was not his idea of escape. But radio let his mind roam to a secret place where no one's face reminded him of anyone else's. His favorite show was a man who told stories late at night, stories about people caught in the supreme joke of modern life who were forced to survive by making families of their friends. The man's voice was low and soothing, the voice of an understanding father.

And often, though Pete knew better, it seemed to be speaking to Pete alone.