

THE ELEPHANT VANISHES

Translated by Jay Rubin



When the elephant disappeared from our town's elephant house, I read about it in the newspaper. My alarm clock woke me that day, as always, at 6:13. I went to the kitchen, made coffee and toast, turned on the radio, spread the paper out on the kitchen table, and proceeded to munch and read. I'm one of those people who read the paper from beginning to end, in order, so it took me awhile to get to the article about the vanishing elephant. The front page was filled with stories of SDI and the trade friction with America, after which I plowed through the national news, international politics, economics, letters to the editor, book reviews, real-estate ads, sports reports, and finally, the regional news.

The elephant article was the lead story in the regional section. The unusually large headline caught my eye: ELEPHANT MISSING IN TOKYO SUBURB, and, beneath that, in type one size smaller, CITIZENS' FEARS MOUNT. SOME CALL FOR PROBE. There was a photo of policemen inspecting the empty elephant house. Without the elephant, something about the place seemed wrong. It looked bigger than it needed to be, blank and empty like some huge, dehydrated beast from which the innards had been plucked.

Brushing away my toast crumbs, I studied every line of the article. The elephant's absence had first been noticed at two o'clock on the afternoon of May 18—the day before—when men from the school-lunch company delivered their usual truckload of food (the elephant mostly ate leftovers from the lunches of children in the local elementary school). On the ground, still locked, lay the steel shackle that had been fastened to the elephant's hind leg, as though the elephant had slipped out of it. Nor was the elephant the only one missing. Also gone was its keeper, the man who had been in charge of the elephant's care and feeding from the start.

According to the article, the elephant and keeper had last been

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seen sometime after five o'clock the previous day (May 17) by a few pupils from the elementary school, who were visiting the elephant house, making crayon sketches. These pupils must have been the last to see the elephant, said the paper, since the keeper always closed the gate to the elephant enclosure when the six-o'clock siren blew.

There had been nothing unusual about either the elephant or its keeper at the time, according to the unanimous testimony of the pupils. The elephant had been standing where it always stood, in the middle of the enclosure, occasionally wagging its trunk from side to side or squinting its wrinkly eyes. It was such an awfully old elephant that its every move seemed a tremendous effort—so much so that people seeing it for the first time feared it might collapse at any moment and draw its final breath.

The elephant's age had led to its adoption by our town a year earlier. When financial problems caused the little private zoo on the edge of town to close its doors, a wildlife dealer found places for the other animals in zoos throughout the country. But all the zoos had plenty of elephants, apparently, and not one of them was willing to take in a feeble old thing that looked as if it might die of a heart attack at any moment. And so, after its companions were gone, the elephant stayed alone in the decaying zoo for nearly four months with nothing to do—not that it had had anything to do before.

This caused a lot of difficulty, both for the zoo and for the town. The zoo had sold its land to a developer, who was planning to put up a high-rise condo building, and the town had already issued him a permit. The longer the elephant problem remained unresolved, the more interest the developer had to pay for nothing. Still, simply killing the thing would have been out of the question. If it had been a spider monkey or a bat, they might have been able to get away with it, but the killing of an elephant would have been too hard to cover up, and if it ever came out afterward, the repercussions would have been tremendous. And so the various parties had met to deliberate on the matter, and they formulated an agreement on the disposition of the old elephant:

1. The town would take ownership of the elephant at no cost.
2. The developer would, without compensation, provide land for housing the elephant.
3. The zoo's former owners would be responsible for paying the keeper's wages.

I had had my own private interest in the elephant problem from

the very outset, and I kept a scrapbook with every clipping I could find on it. I had even gone to hear the town council's debates on the matter, which is why I am able to give such a full and accurate account of the course of events. And while my account may prove somewhat lengthy, I have chosen to set it down here in case the handling of the elephant problem should bear directly upon the elephant's disappearance.

When the mayor finished negotiating the agreement—with its provision that the town would take charge of the elephant—a movement opposing the measure boiled up from within the ranks of the opposition party (whose very existence I had never imagined until then). 'Why must the town take ownership of the elephant?' they demanded of the mayor, and they raised the following points (sorry for all these lists, but I use them to make things easier to understand):

1. The elephant problem was a question for private enterprise—the zoo and the developer; there was no reason for the town to become involved.
2. Care and feeding costs would be too high.
3. What did the mayor intend to do about the security problem?
4. What merit would there be in the town's having its own elephant?

'The town has any number of responsibilities it should be taking care of before it gets into the business of keeping an elephant—sewer repair, the purchase of a new fire engine, etcetera,' the opposition group declared, and while they did not say it in so many words, they hinted at the possibility of some secret deal between the mayor and the developer.

In response, the mayor had this to say:

1. If the town permitted the construction of high-rise condos, its tax revenues would increase so dramatically that the cost of keeping an elephant would be insignificant by comparison; thus it made sense for the town to take on the care of this elephant.
2. The elephant was so old that it neither ate very much nor was likely to pose a danger to anyone.
3. When the elephant died, the town would take full possession of the land donated by the developer.
4. The elephant could become the town's symbol.

The long debate reached the conclusion that the town would take charge of the elephant after all. As an old, well-established residential

suburb, the town boasted a relatively affluent citizenry, and its financial footing was sound. The adoption of a homeless elephant was a move that people could look upon favorably. People like old elephants better than sewers and fire engines.

I myself was all in favor of having the town care for the elephant. True, I was getting sick of high-rise condos, but I liked the idea of my town's owning an elephant.

A wooded area was cleared, and the elementary school's aging gym was moved there as an elephant house. The man who had served as the elephant's keeper for many years would come to live in the house with the elephant. The children's lunch scraps would serve as the elephant's feed. Finally, the elephant itself was carted in a trailer to its new home, there to live out its remaining years.

I joined the crowd at the elephant-house dedication ceremonies. Standing before the elephant, the mayor delivered a speech (on the town's development and the enrichment of its cultural facilities); one elementary-school pupil, representing the student body, stood up to read a composition ('Please live a long and healthy life, Mr Elephant'); there was a sketch contest (sketching the elephant thereafter became an integral component of the pupils' artistic education); and each of two young women in swaying dresses (neither of whom was especially good-looking) fed the elephant a bunch of bananas. The elephant endured these virtually meaningless (for the elephant, entirely meaningless) formalities with hardly a twitch, and it chomped on the bananas with a vacant stare. When it finished eating the bananas, everyone applauded.

On its right rear leg, the elephant wore a solid, heavy-looking steel cuff from which there stretched a thick chain perhaps thirty feet long, and this in turn was securely fastened to a concrete slab. Anyone could see what a sturdy anchor held the beast in place: The elephant could have struggled with all its might for a hundred years and never broken the thing.

I couldn't tell if the elephant was bothered by its shackle. On the surface, at least, it seemed all but unconscious of the enormous chunk of metal wrapped around its leg. It kept its blank gaze fixed on some indeterminate point in space, its ears and a few white hairs on its body waving gently in the breeze.

The elephant's keeper was a small, bony old man. It was hard to guess his age; he could have been in his early sixties or late seventies. He was one of those people whose appearance is no longer influ-

enced by their age after they pass a certain point in life. His skin had the same darkly ruddy, sunburned look both summer and winter, his hair was stiff and short, his eyes were small. His face had no distinguishing characteristics, but his almost perfectly circular ears stuck out on either side with disturbing prominence.

He was not an unfriendly man. If someone spoke to him, he would reply, and he expressed himself clearly. If he wanted to he could be almost charming—though you always knew he was somewhat ill at ease. Generally, he remained a reticent, lonely-looking old man. He seemed to like the children who visited the elephant house, and he worked at being nice to them, but the children never really warmed to him.

The only one who did that was the elephant. The keeper lived in a small prefab room attached to the elephant house, and all day long he stayed with the elephant, attending to its needs. They had been together for more than ten years, and you could sense their closeness in every gesture and look. Whenever the elephant was standing there blankly and the keeper wanted it to move, all he had to do was stand next to the elephant, tap it on a front leg, and whisper something in its ear. Then, swaying its huge bulk, the elephant would go exactly where the keeper had indicated, take up its new position, and continue staring at a point in space.

On weekends, I would drop by the elephant house and study these operations, but I could never figure out the principle on which the keeper–elephant communication was based. Maybe the elephant understood a few simple words (it had certainly been living long enough), or perhaps it received its information through variations in the taps on its leg. Or possibly it had some special power resembling mental telepathy and could read the keeper's mind. I once asked the keeper how he gave his orders to the elephant, but the old man just smiled and said, 'We've been together a long time.'

And so a year went by. Then, without warning, the elephant vanished. One day it was there, and the next it had ceased to be.

I poured myself a second cup of coffee and read the story again from beginning to end. Actually, it was a pretty strange article—the kind that might excite Sherlock Holmes. 'Look at this, Watson,' he'd say, tapping his pipe. 'A very interesting article. Very interesting indeed.'

What gave the article its air of strangeness was the obvious

confusion and bewilderment of the reporter. And this confusion and bewilderment clearly came from the absurdity of the situation itself. You could see how the reporter had struggled to find clever ways around the absurdity in order to write a 'normal' article. But the struggle had only driven his confusion and bewilderment to a hopeless extreme.

For example, the article used such expressions as 'the elephant escaped,' but if you looked at the entire piece it became obvious that the elephant had in no way 'escaped'. It had vanished into thin air. The reporter revealed his own conflicted state of mind by saying that a few 'details' remained 'unclear', but this was not a phenomenon that could be disposed of by using such ordinary terminology as 'details' or 'unclear', I felt.

First, there was the problem of the steel cuff that had been fastened to the elephant's leg. This had been found *still locked*. The most reasonable explanation for this would be that the keeper had unlocked the ring, removed it from the elephant's leg, *locked the ring again*, and run off with the elephant—a hypothesis to which the paper clung with desperate tenacity despite the fact that the keeper had no key! Only two keys existed, and they, for security's sake, were kept in locked safes, one in police headquarters and the other in the firehouse, both beyond the reach of the keeper—or of anyone else who might attempt to steal them. And even if someone had succeeded in stealing a key, there was no need whatever for that person to make a point of returning the key after using it. Yet the following morning both keys were found in their respective safes at the police and fire stations. Which brings us to the conclusion that the elephant pulled its leg out of that solid steel ring without the aid of a key—an absolute impossibility unless someone had sawed the foot off.

The second problem was the route of escape. The elephant house and grounds were surrounded by a massive fence nearly ten feet high. The question of security had been hotly debated in the town council, and the town had settled upon a system that might be considered somewhat excessive for keeping one old elephant. Heavy iron bars had been anchored in a thick concrete foundation (the cost of the fence was borne by the real-estate company), and there was only a single entrance, which was found locked from the inside. There was no way the elephant could have escaped from this fortresslike enclosure.

The third problem was elephant tracks. Directly behind the elephant enclosure was a steep hill, which the animal could not possibly have climbed, so even if we suppose that the elephant had somehow managed to pull its leg out of the steel ring and leap over the ten-foot-high fence, it would still have had to escape down the path to the front of the enclosure, and there was not a single mark anywhere in the soft earth of that path that could be seen as an elephant's footprint.

Riddled as it was with such perplexities and labored circumlocutions, the newspaper article as a whole left but one possible conclusion: The elephant had not escaped. It had vanished.

Needless to say, however, neither the newspaper nor the police nor the mayor was willing to admit—openly, at least—that the elephant had vanished. The police were continuing to investigate, their spokesman saying only that the elephant either 'was taken or was allowed to escape in a clever, deliberately calculated move. Because of the difficulty involved in hiding an elephant, it is only a matter of time till we solve the case.' To this optimistic assessment he added that they were planning to search the woods in the area with the aid of local hunters' clubs and sharpshooters from the national Self-Defense Force.

The mayor had held a news conference, in which he apologized for the inadequacy of the town's police resources. At the same time, he declared, 'Our elephant-security system is in no way inferior to similar facilities in any zoo in the country. Indeed, it is far stronger and far more fail-safe than the standard cage.' He also observed, 'This is a dangerous and senseless anti-social act of the most malicious kind, and we cannot allow it to go unpunished.'

As they had the year before, the opposition-party members of the town council made accusations. 'We intend to look into the political responsibility of the mayor; he has colluded with private enterprise in order to sell the townspeople a bill of goods on the solution of the elephant problem.'

One 'worried-looking' mother, thirty-seven, was interviewed by the paper. 'Now I'm afraid to let my children out to play,' she said.

The coverage included a detailed summary of the steps leading to the town's decision to adopt the elephant, an aerial sketch of the elephant house and grounds, and brief histories of both the elephant and the keeper who had vanished with it. The man, Noboru Watanabe, sixty-three, was from Tateyama, in Chiba Prefecture. He

had worked for many years as a keeper in the mammalian section of the zoo, and 'had the complete trust of the zoo authorities, both for his abundant knowledge of these animals and for his warm sincere personality'. The elephant had been sent from East Africa twenty-two years earlier, but little was known about its exact age or its 'personality'. The report concluded with a request from the police for citizens of the town to come forward with any information they might have regarding the elephant.

I thought about this request for a while as I drank my second cup of coffee, but I decided not to call the police—both because I preferred not to come into contact with them if I could help it and because I felt the police would not believe what I had to tell them. What good would it do to talk to people like that, who would not even consider the possibility that the elephant had simply vanished?

I took my scrapbook down from the shelf, cut out the elephant article, and pasted it in. Then I washed the dishes and left for the office.

I watched the search on the seven o'clock news. There were hunters carrying large-bore rifles loaded with tranquilizer darts, Self-Defense Force troops, policemen, and firemen combing every square inch of the woods and hills in the immediate area as helicopters hovered overhead. Of course, we're talking about the kind of 'woods' and 'hills' you find in the suburbs outside Tokyo, so they didn't have an enormous area to cover. With that many people involved, a day should have been more than enough to do the job. And they weren't searching for some tiny homicidal maniac: They were after a huge African elephant. There was a limit to the number of places a thing like that could hide. But still they had not managed to find it. The chief of police appeared on the screen, saying, 'We intend to continue the search.' And the anchorman concluded the report, 'Who released the elephant, and how? Where have they hidden it? What was their motive? Everything remains shrouded in mystery.'

The search went on for several days, but the authorities were unable to discover a single clue to the elephant's whereabouts. I studied the newspaper reports, clipped them all, and pasted them in my scrapbook—including editorial cartoons on the subject. The album filled up quickly, and I had to buy another. Despite their enormous volume, the clippings contained not one fact of the kind that I was looking for. The reports were either pointless or off the

mark: ELEPHANT STILL MISSING, GLOOM THICK IN SEARCH HQ, MOB BEHIND DISAPPEARANCE? And even articles like this became noticeably scarcer after a week had gone by, until there was virtually nothing. A few of the weekly magazines carried sensational stories—one even hired a psychic—but they had nothing to substantiate their wild headlines. It seemed that people were beginning to shove the elephant case into the large category of ‘unsolvable mysteries’. The disappearance of one old elephant and one old elephant keeper would have no impact on the course of society. The earth would continue its monotonous rotations, politicians would continue issuing unreliable proclamations, people would continue yawning on their way to the office, children would continue studying for their college-entrance exams. Amid the endless surge and ebb of everyday life, interest in a missing elephant could not last forever. And so a number of unremarkable months went by, like a tired army marching past a window.

Whenever I had a spare moment, I would visit the house where the elephant no longer lived. A thick chain had been wrapped round and round the bars of the yard’s iron gate, to keep people out. Peering inside, I could see that the elephant-house door had also been chained and locked, as though the police were trying to make up for having failed to find the elephant by multiplying the layers of security on the now-empty elephant house. The area was deserted, the previous crowds having been replaced by a flock of pigeons resting on the roof. No one took care of the grounds any longer, and thick green summer grass had sprung up there as if it had been waiting for this opportunity. The chain coiled around the door of the elephant house reminded me of a huge snake set to guard a ruined palace in a thick forest. A few short months without its elephant had given the place an air of doom and desolation that hung there like a huge, oppressive rain cloud.

I met her near the end of September. It had been raining that day from morning to night—the kind of soft, monotonous, misty rain that often falls at that time of year, washing away bit by bit the memories of summer burned into the earth. Coursing down the gutters, all those memories flowed into the sewers and rivers, to be carried to the deep, dark ocean.

We noticed each other at the party my company threw to launch its new advertising campaign. I work for the PR section of a major

manufacturer of electrical appliances, and at the time I was in charge of publicity for a co-ordinated line of kitchen equipment, which was scheduled to go on the market in time for the autumn-wedding and winter-bonus seasons. My job was to negotiate with several women’s magazines for tie-in articles—not the kind of work that takes a great deal of intelligence, but I had to see to it that the articles they wrote didn’t smack of advertising. When magazines gave us publicity, we rewarded them by placing ads in their pages. They scratched our backs, we scratched theirs.

As an editor of a magazine for young housewives, she had come to the party for material for one of these ‘articles’. I happened to be in charge of showing her around, pointing out the features of the colorful refrigerators and coffeemakers and microwave ovens and juicers that a famous Italian designer had done for us.

‘The most important point is unity,’ I explained. ‘Even the most beautifully designed item dies if it is out of balance with its surroundings. Unity of design, unity of color, unity of function: This is what today’s *kit-chin* needs above all else. Research tells us that a housewife spends the largest part of her day in the *kit-chin*. The *kit-chin* is her workplace, her study, her living room. Which is why she does all she can to make the *kit-chin* a pleasant place to be. It has nothing to do with size. Whether it’s large or small, one fundamental principle governs every successful *kit-chin*, and that principle is unity. This is the concept underlying the design of our new series. Look at this cooktop, for example. . . .’

She nodded and scribbled things in a small notebook, but it was obvious that she had little interest in the material, nor did I have any personal stake in our new cooktop. Both of us were doing our jobs.

‘You know a lot about kitchens,’ she said when I finished. She used the Japanese word, without picking up on ‘*kit-chin*’.

‘That’s what I do for a living,’ I answered with a professional smile. ‘Aside from that, though, I do like to cook. Nothing fancy, but I cook for myself every day.’

‘Still, I wonder if unity is all that necessary for a kitchen.’

‘We say “*kit-chin*”,’ I advised her. ‘No big deal, but the company wants us to use the English.’

‘Oh. Sorry. But still, I wonder. Is unity so important for a *kit-chin*? What do you think?’

‘My personal opinion? That doesn’t come out until I take my necktie off,’ I said with a grin. ‘But today I’ll make an exception.’

A kitchen probably *does* need a few things more than it needs unity. But those other elements are things you can't sell. And in this pragmatic world of ours, things you can't sell don't count for much.'

'Is the world such a pragmatic place?'

I took out a cigarette and lit it with my lighter.

'I don't know—the word just popped out,' I said. 'But it explains a lot. It makes work easier, too. You can play games with it, make up neat expressions: "essentially pragmatic", or "pragmatic in essence". If you look at things that way, you avoid all kinds of complicated problems.'

'What an interesting view!'

'Not really. It's what everybody thinks. Oh, by the way, we've got some pretty good champagne. Care to have some?'

'Thanks. I'd love to.'

As we chatted over champagne, we realized we had several mutual acquaintances. Since our part of the business world was not a very big pond, if you tossed in a few pebbles, one or two were bound to hit a mutual acquaintance. In addition, she and my kid sister happened to have graduated from the same university. With markers like this to follow, our conversation went along smoothly.

She was unmarried, and so was I. She was twenty-six, and I was thirty-one. She wore contact lenses, and I wore glasses. She praised my necktie, and I praised her jacket. We compared rents and complained about our jobs and salaries. In other words, we were beginning to like each other. She was an attractive woman, and not at all pushy. I stood there talking with her for a full twenty minutes, unable to discover a single reason not to think well of her.

As the party was breaking up, I invited her to join me in the hotel's cocktail lounge, where we settled in to continue our conversation. A soundless rain went on falling outside the lounge's panoramic window, the lights of the city sending blurry messages through the mist. A damp hush held sway over the nearly empty cocktail lounge. She ordered a frozen daiquiri and I had a Scotch on the rocks.

Sipping our drinks, we carried on the kind of conversation that a man and woman have in a bar when they have just met and are beginning to like each other. We talked about our college days, our tastes in music, sports, our daily routines.

Then I told her about the elephant. Exactly how this happened, I can't recall. Maybe we were talking about something having to do

with animals, and that was the connection. Or maybe, unconsciously, I had been looking for someone—a good listener—to whom I could present my own, unique view on the elephant's disappearance. Or, then again, it might have been the liquor that got me talking.

In any case, the second the words left my mouth, I knew that I had brought up one of the least suitable topics I could have found for this occasion. No, I should never have mentioned the elephant. The topic was—what?—too complete, too closed.

I tried to hurry on to something else, but as luck would have it she was more interested than most in the case of the vanishing elephant, and once I admitted that I had seen the elephant many times she showered me with questions—what kind of elephant was it, how did I think it had escaped, what did it eat, wasn't it a danger to the community, and so forth.

I told her nothing more than what everybody knew from the news, but she seemed to sense constraint in my tone of voice. I had never been good at telling lies.

As if she had not noticed anything strange about my behavior, she sipped her second daiquiri and asked, 'Weren't you shocked when the elephant disappeared? It's not the kind of thing that somebody could have predicted.'

'No, probably not,' I said. I took a pretzel from the mound in the glass dish on our table, snapped it in two, and ate half. The waiter replaced our ashtray with an empty one.

She looked at me expectantly. I took out another cigarette and lit it. I had quit smoking three years earlier but had begun again when the elephant disappeared.

'Why "probably not"? You mean you could have predicted it?'

'No, of course I couldn't have predicted it,' I said with a smile. 'For an elephant to disappear all of a sudden one day—there's no precedent, no need, for such a thing to happen. It doesn't make any logical sense.'

'But still, your answer was very strange. When I said, "It's not the kind of thing that somebody could have predicted," you said, "No, probably not." Most people would have said, "You're right," or "Yeah, it's weird," or something. See what I mean?'

I sent a vague nod in her direction and raised my hand to call the waiter. A kind of tentative silence took hold as I waited for him to bring me my next Scotch.

'I'm finding this a little hard to grasp,' she said softly. 'You were

carrying on a perfectly normal conversation with me until a couple of minutes ago—at least until the subject of the elephant came up. Then something funny happened. I can't understand you anymore. Something's wrong. Is it the elephant? Or are my ears playing tricks on me?"

"There's nothing wrong with your ears," I said.

"So then it's you. The problem's with you."

I stuck my finger in my glass and stirred the ice. I like the sound of ice in a whiskey glass.

"I wouldn't call it a 'problem', exactly. It's not that big a deal. I'm not hiding anything. I'm just not sure I can talk about it very well, so I'm trying not to say anything at all. But you're right—it's very strange."

"What do you mean?"

It was no use: I'd have to tell her the story. I took one gulp of whiskey and started.

"The thing is, I was probably the last one to see the elephant before it disappeared. I saw it after seven o'clock on the evening of May seventeenth, and they noticed it was gone on the afternoon of the eighteenth. Nobody saw it in between because they lock the elephant house at six."

"I don't get it. If they closed the house at six, how did you see it after seven?"

"There's a kind of cliff behind the elephant house. A steep hill on private property, with no real roads. There's one spot, on the back of the hill, where you can see into the elephant house. I'm probably the only one who knows about it."

I had found the spot purely by chance. Strolling through the area one Sunday afternoon, I had lost my way and come out at the top of the cliff. I found a little flat open patch, just big enough for a person to stretch out in, and when I looked down through the bushes, there was the elephant-house roof. Below the edge of the roof was a fairly large vent opening, and through it I had a clear view of the inside of the elephant house.

I made it a habit after that to visit the place every now and then to look at the elephant when it was inside the house. If anyone had asked me why I bothered doing such a thing, I wouldn't have had a decent answer. I simply enjoyed watching the elephant during its private time. There was nothing more to it than that. I couldn't see the elephant when the house was dark inside, of course, but in the

early hours of the evening the keeper would have the lights on the whole time he was taking care of the elephant, which enabled me to study the scene in detail.

What struck me immediately when I saw the elephant and keeper alone together was the obvious liking they had for each other—something they never displayed when they were out before the public. Their affection was evident in every gesture. It almost seemed as if they stored away their emotions during the day, taking care not to let anyone notice them, and took them out at night when they could be alone. Which is not to say that they did anything different when they were by themselves inside. The elephant just stood there, as blank as ever, and the keeper would perform those tasks one would normally expect him to do as a keeper: scrubbing down the elephant with a deck broom, picking up the elephant's enormous droppings, cleaning up after the elephant ate. But there was no way to mistake the special warmth, the sense of trust, between them. While the keeper swept the floor, the elephant would wave its trunk and pat the keeper's back. I liked to watch the elephant doing that.

"Have you always been fond of elephants?" she asked. "I mean, not just that particular elephant?"

"Hmm . . . come to think of it, I do like elephants," I said. "There's something about them that excites me. I guess I've always liked them. I wonder why."

"And that day, too after the sun went down, I suppose you were up on the hill by yourself, looking at the elephant. May—what day was it?"

"The seventeenth. May seventeenth at seven p.m. The days were already very long by then, and the sky had a reddish glow, but the lights were on in the elephant house."

"And was there anything unusual about the elephant or the keeper?"

"Well, there was and there wasn't. I can't say exactly. It's not as if they were standing right in front of me. I'm probably not the most reliable witness."

"What did happen, exactly?"

I took a swallow of my now somewhat watery Scotch. The rain outside the windows was still coming down, no stronger or weaker than before, a static element in a landscape that would never change.

"Nothing happened, really. The elephant and the keeper were

doing what they always did—cleaning, eating, playing around with each other in that friendly way of theirs. It wasn't what they *did* that was different. It's the way they looked. Something about the balance between them.'

'The balance?'

'In size. Of their bodies. The elephant's and the keeper's. The balance seemed to have changed somewhat. I had the feeling that to some extent the difference between them had shrunk.'

She kept her gaze fixed on her daiquiri glass for a time. I could see that the ice had melted and that the water was working its way through the cocktail like a tiny ocean current.

'Meaning that the elephant had gotten smaller?'

'Or the keeper had gotten bigger. Or both simultaneously.'

'And you didn't tell this to the police?'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'I'm sure they wouldn't have believed me. And if I had told them I was watching the elephant from the cliff at a time like that, I'd have ended up as their number one suspect.'

'Still, are you *certain* that the balance between them had changed?'

'Probably. I can only say "probably". I don't have any proof, and as I keep saying, I was looking at them through the air vent. But I had looked at them like that I don't know how many times before, so it's hard for me to believe that I could make a mistake about something as basic as the relation of their sizes.'

In fact, I had wondered at the time whether my eyes were playing tricks on me. I had tried closing and opening them and shaking my head, but the elephant's size remained the same. It definitely looked as if it had shrunk—so much so that at first I thought the town might have got hold of a new, smaller elephant. But I hadn't heard anything to that effect, and I would never have missed any news reports about elephants. If this was not a new elephant, the only possible conclusion was that the old elephant had, for one reason or another, shrunk. As I watched, it became obvious to me that this smaller elephant had all the same gestures as the old one. It would stamp happily on the ground with its right foot while it was being washed, and with its now somewhat narrower trunk it would pat the keeper on the back.

It was a mysterious sight. Looking through the vent, I had the feeling that a different, chilling kind of time was flowing through the elephant house—but nowhere else. And it seemed to me, too, that

the elephant and the keeper were gladly giving themselves over to this new order that was trying to envelop them—or that had already partially succeeded in enveloping them.

Altogether, I was probably watching the scene in the elephant house for less than a half hour. The lights went out at seven-thirty—much earlier than usual—and from that point on, everything was wrapped in darkness. I waited in my spot, hoping that the lights would go on again, but they never did. That was the last I saw of the elephant.

'So, then, you believe that the elephant kept shrinking until it was small enough to escape through the bars, or else that it simply dissolved into nothingness. Is that it?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'All I'm trying to do is recall what I saw with my own eyes, as accurately as possible. I'm hardly thinking about what happened after that. The visual image I have is so strong that, to be honest, it's practically impossible for me to go beyond it.'

That was all I could say about the elephant's disappearance. And just as I had feared, the story of the elephant was too particular, too complete in itself, to work as a topic of conversation between a young man and woman who had just met. A silence descended upon us after I had finished my tale. What subject could either of us bring up after a story about an elephant that had vanished—a story that offered virtually no openings for further discussion? She ran her finger around the edge of her cocktail glass, and I sat there reading and rereading the words stamped on my coaster. I never should have told her about the elephant. It was not the kind of story you could tell freely to anyone.

'When I was a little girl, our cat disappeared,' she offered after a long silence. 'But still, for a cat to disappear and for an elephant to disappear—those are two different stories.'

'Yeah, really. There's no comparison. Think of the size difference.'

Thirty minutes later, we were saying good-bye outside the hotel. She suddenly remembered that she had left her umbrella in the cocktail lounge, so I went up in the elevator and brought it down to her. It was a brick-red umbrella with a large handle.

'Thanks,' she said.

'Good night,' I said.

That was the last time I saw her. We talked once on the phone after that, about some details in her tie-in article. While we spoke,

I thought seriously about inviting her out for dinner, but I ended up not doing it. It just didn't seem to matter one way or the other.

I felt like this a lot after my experience with the vanishing elephant. I would begin to think I wanted to do something, but then I would become incapable of distinguishing between the probable results of doing it and of not doing it. I often get the feeling that things around me have lost their proper balance, though it could be that my perceptions are playing tricks on me. Some kind of balance inside me has broken down since the elephant affair, and maybe that causes external phenomena to strike my eye in a strange way. It's probably something in me.

I continue to sell refrigerators and toaster ovens and coffeemakers in the pragmatic world, based on after-images of memories I retain from that world. The more pragmatic I try to become, the more successfully I sell—our campaign has succeeded beyond our most optimistic forecasts—and the more people I succeed in selling myself to. That's probably because people are looking for a kind of unity in this *kit-chin* we know as the world. Unity of design. Unity of color. Unity of function.

The papers print almost nothing about the elephant anymore. People seem to have forgotten that their town once owned an elephant. The grass that took over the elephant enclosure has withered now, and the area has the feel of winter.

The elephant and keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back.

DESERT DOLPHIN

Translated by Kenneth L. Richard



A full moon, frigid and arousing. A night bright enough to outline every red drop of blood rain. The astral clock marks midnight; I am fatigued, my spirit a dank, dark forest. I have no definite memory of what I have been doing, where I have been wandering, or even which day or month it might be. I remember looking back up at the moon, and the full orb of it sticking out a mauve, ashen tongue. I am without family or ancestry. My past is nearly extinct. I recollect meeting someone for the first time though it feels as though I have known him forever, and on we talk until my voice grows hoarse.

'It's your turn to sing. Pick something.'

Crooning to the karaoke, one hand in his pocket until this moment, a middle-aged man now reaches over to tap the shoulder of another man who perches alone on the next bar stool. The latter sits rigidly erect, wearing a gray suit and a necktie with a pattern of blue roses. His pallor makes his age indiscernible; he looks bewildered, as though he has been inadvertently snatched from a wonder-world beyond the looking-glass and plunked down without warning in this fetid karaoke bar.

'I don't know. It's something about his eyes. Round like a puppy dog's,' the middle-aged man's lady friend whispers, her voice as fidgety as her body. The man's limpid eyes turn into flies, darting here and there, alighting on nothing.

'By the way, how long have you been sitting here? I'm a little drunk. I didn't even notice you. Sing. Come on.' The words lolling on the tip of her tongue, the long-haired woman nestles seductively against the shoulder of the man who might be her lover, or her boss, as though to make a pass at the unknown quantity with the puppy-dog eyes. 'I know you from somewhere, but where? It was dark. That's all I remember.'