

An excerpt from
Elephant and Bird

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GOOD-BYE

Bird

Nobody wants to live in a nursing home. Nobody except me.

I mean, what eleven-year-old girl would choose this? But the truth is that if I *could* choose, like a multiple-choice question, I would pick living here every time.

Well, maybe ninety-eight percent of the time. And the two percent of the time when it's not my favorite are times when my chores stack up so high that it feels like they're going to topple over.

Or days like today, when someone leaves.

When I say “nursing home,” it’s not what you think. There are no long, beige corridors with people clustered in doorways and the smell hanging in the air. That would be Granite Manor, the other nursing home in town.

We’re different. Just our tall Victorian house in our little neighborhood on a hill, and no big sign out front. Heck, we don’t even have a name.

We get the folks that can’t or won’t follow the rules at Granite Manor.

The rebels.

Because even when you’re eighty-six or ninety or whatever, some people just want things the way they want them. The head nurse from Granite Manor calls Nana when they have a special case. We set them up in one of our bedrooms and ask them to ignore the peeling wallpaper and chipped paint. Then they settle in, for as long as they like.

We never take in more than three people, because three is Nana’s favorite number. She says, “We get the best bunch of dying people around.”

We’re lucky like that.

We try to make their last few weeks or months the kind they could order off a menu. Sometimes I play my harmonica for them, or give them a run for their money at Rummy 500 or Old Maid.

And sometimes they want to shut their door and sit alone in the quiet. We give them whatever they want. Like Nana did for Mom before she died when I was eight.

I've heard the whispers at school. Kids talking about our family, calling them Old Fogies, Blueheads, the Crinkled Prune Gang.

One time, a kid found a shriveled old grape, put it on my desk and said, "Hey Bird, I found your uncle under the radiator."

But I like to think of our family as Vintage Oldsters. And I don't care what the kids at school say about me. Not as long as I had my best friend, Saffron. She stayed my friend no matter how many trips the hearse or the ambulance made to our house.

All that changed last month, though. The morning after the last day of school, Saffron climbed into the back of her parents' rented Winnebago, and as they rolled down the hill with their moving van kissing the back bumper, she opened the window and shouted, "Bird, I'll call you!"

She never has.

Not a text, not an email, not even a crummy snail mail postcard from some cheesy touristy place.

I've texted her. I've left her messages. But after calling maybe sixteen times, I've started to lose hope. I keep thinking maybe she's gone off and forgotten all about me.

They're moving to California and blogging about their ride out there, about food trucks or something, hoping to get a book deal. I wish she wasn't so far away from me here in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

I peeked at their blog. Looked like lots of stops, so maybe that's why she hasn't called me. I hope I didn't say something to make her angry before she left. I mean, maybe it's hard work to eat *and* blog. That's what I tell Nana. But Nana's told me over and over again, "Bird, my darling, sometimes there are friendships of convenience and sometimes there are friendships of substance."

I don't want to think about that today.

I stand and watch the paramedics wheel Mrs. Ackermann's body past my bedroom door. I salute, bow, and bless myself as she goes by, covering all the God-

related bases. I feel a little rusty doing it since we've been extra lucky this past year. The hearse hasn't been to our house in three-hundred and seventy-two days, which had me forgetting that we'd have days like this, days that change our family.

One year, our house was busier than Carson's deli counter on a Saturday afternoon. The guests come to us when they're near their last chapter in life, kinda like one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. We didn't even have time to know what kind of cereal they liked before they went out the exit door and we were making the bed for the next person.

Mrs. Ackermann broke our lucky streak last night, just rolled over and stopped breathing. Punched her one-way ticket on the spiritual train to the ever after. Mrs. Donahue and Mr. Briggs, our other two guests, aren't too sad on account of Mrs. Ackermann's addiction to the sound of vacuums.

Her first afternoon here, she called out, "Bird, I need the vacuum please!"

I ran, dragging and banging it up the stairs, clunking it down the hallway across the creaking floorboards and into her room, and asked, "Where's the dirt?"

But it wasn't the fur balls from Zeus, our cat, that she was worried about.

Turns out, early in her life, she got a strange love for the whirl of the vacuum. She'd have me park it in the corner by her bureau, then hit the ON button and let it sit, screeching away.

Mrs. Donahue and Mr. Briggs tried to escape the increased volume in our house by scooting closer to his record player and turning up his collection of old jazz records. Mrs. Donahue would grab her cane and slam that door shut.

Zeus hated it the most. Whenever I turned it on, you'd see a blur of dark gray fur whizz by as he zipped out of the way, hoping not to be swallowed up whole by that roaring machine. But he looks content now, sitting and waiting for me on the window seat. He knows the sound of the hearse, and as soon as it starts up the hill, he jumps onto the cushion, cleaning himself in the sunshine.

Down the hall, Mrs. Donahue says to Mr. Briggs, "Lord have mercy. Somebody have them take the Hoover in the ambulance too. Bury it with her. Maybe now we can get some peace and quiet."

A song from Mr. Ray Charles pours out of the speaker, and I raise the window screen and duck out,

shimmying out onto the ledge with Zeus on my heels. He's the only one who'll ramble to the top of the house with me. Saffron's parents told her climbing was a liability and, apparently, that's a bad thing.

I'm always doing some climbing on my own; up the sides of our house, scaling the little peaks and angles that jut out here and there, reaching for the tip-top and just perching up there. I like to think that's how I got my nickname, but the real reason is that I couldn't pronounce my real name, Roberta, when I was little.

It's just me and Zeus, placing foot after foot, paw after paw, on the worn shingles and ledges. The sun warms our backs and makes the specks and stones in the roof shingles sparkle.

I make sure that each person gets the right send-off when they depart this life, like when people crack bottles of champagne on the front of ships before they hit the open sea. No broken glass here, but as usual I make my way up to the roof's peak and grab hold of the tippy weathervane, pointing it in the right direction, where the sun is bright and the clouds are soft, sending their soul away on the smoothest road possible.

When we get to the top, I sit on my favorite corner with Zeus leaning in, purring, and I whisper into the wind,

“Mrs. Ackermann, enjoy your new life in the clouds, but please don’t invite Mrs. Donahue or Mr. Briggs to join you in heaven.”

I want to put the brakes on any invitation for another member in our family to go and stand in line at the pearly gates. With so many hearse-free days, it feels like Nana and I have finally found our tribe. I don’t want that to change.

“Oh, and please say hello to Mom for me,” I add.

I hope Mom gets my message. Mrs. Ackermann’s departure seems to bring thoughts of Mom bubbling back up again. I wonder: how many days till you stop missing someone?

I turn the weathervane westward. But a breeze spins it north, as if the wish has changed its mind and wants to go toward the empty fairgrounds. To fly over the vacant field where the carnival will soon raise its colorful celebration.

Elephant

The tired trail of carnival trucks and vans slows down. Brakes squeak as the trucks ease to a stop at the row of tollbooths on the interstate highway under the hot July sun. The exhaust-filled air hangs above the lines of waiting cars.

The elephant doesn't even look up. With over eighty-two shows each summer season in towns sprinkled along the map, the elephant named Pearl knows this is just another stop along the way. Part of the ordinary rhythm.

She continues to dip her trunk into the mesh bag that hangs inside her trailer and swivels out clumps of hay. She curls it up into her mouth and begins to chew. Over and over again.

But something makes her stop. She senses it in the air. She feels it in her bones and breathes in slowly, trying to figure out what it is that makes her feel this way. Reaching the tip of her trunk out through the bars of her window, she inhales a long, deep whiff. It is familiar. Like home. Or what she remembers home smells like, back when she had a home.

She looks out over the rooftops of the cars and sees it. Another truck like hers, with faded paint and swirly words. An elephant's trunk reaches out and waves up and down, side to side. Pearl hasn't seen another elephant since she was a baby and taken from her family in India. In the thirty-nine years with her trainer Carlos, she's only lived with llamas and dogs and stubborn goats. The only elephant she's seen is the reflection in the bottom of her water bucket.

Pearl's eyes widen. She loses her breath and gulps down the bite of hay. Then she trumpets a long, joyful sound to the other elephant whose ear has nudged out between the bars. It has a rip in it shaped like a crescent moon. The sunlight shines through it and glows.

The animal calls back, and Pearl answers in a single note, high and happy. Soon, a loud game bounces back and forth over the tops of the slow-moving vehicles. The echo of the elephants calling and stomping against their hollow metal trailers sings above the motors and horns.

Children sit up straight in the backseats and wave, smiling. Car windows open. People stare with pointed fingers and extend their phones with straight arms. The cars and trucks inch and crawl forward, carrying the audience that watch the elephants bellow and call to each other.

Their trailers vibrate and shake with excitement.

Carlos, in the cab of the truck, watches the commotion in his side view mirror.

“Pearl!” he calls from behind the wheel.

It is their turn at the gate, and the man in the tollbooth leans out the window and says to Carlos, “Whoa, hey man, you got an elephant in there?”

“*Si*,” says Carlos and drops the money in the man’s hand. Carlos fumbles with the gear shift, and the truck lurches through the gate.

As her trailer snakes through the tight opening of the tollbooth, Pearl reaches her trunk out even further and smells the toll man’s fingers: metal cans, potato chips, and the hands of many people. The worker, shocked, leans back and spills his soda on the tall stack of money behind him.

Pearl can see the other truck pulling through the gate too. It moves faster and farther away. Pearl pounds the steel floor with her feet and cries out with a sharp pitch, hoping to stop the other truck, to bring it back to her.

Dust rises around Pearl’s trailer as Carlos pulls it to the side of the road. He leaps down from the cab, running back to open her doors.

“Pearl, *bonita*,” Carlos says, “I saw her too.” He hands her an apple and pats her side.

Pearl drops the apple to the ground and swings her trunk away from him, trying to inch closer to the window, her chains rattling against the floor.

Shane runs out from the passenger’s side and calls to Carlos, “Need help?”

“Nah,” says Carlos. “She saw the other elephant too.”

Carlos looks back at Pearl and leans into her trunk, rubbing her face, trying to soothe her.

“I’m sorry, *chica*,” he says and sighs. Then he turns and walks out, latching the doors behind him.

Pearl watches the elephant’s trailer drive down the road into the distance. The other elephant’s trunk is still out the window, waving, waving, getting smaller and smaller until it disappears over the hill.