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BEACHED ELEPHANT

by

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On a bright Sunday morning, an African elephant staggered up onto the tourist beach behind the tee-shirt shack in Mercury, Florida. He sighed soulfully, shuffled past the morning's deposit of seaweed and shells, past New York tourists who figured they had seen everything, stumbled around trumpeting and frightening small children, knocked over a few palm trees onto the boardwalk, and collapsed on the beach and lay there breathing painfully. A ten-year-old left his portable TV for a moment and strolled over, examined the elephant, and kicked it hard. Several other pre-teenagers saw the brave little fellow do this, and they joined the him in kicking and punching the elephant and throwing sand in its eyes from a distance.

A lifeguard called a deputy, and the deputy called the veterinarian from the health department. She looked inside the elephant's mouth and told the deputy, "He was not in the water very long."

"Must have waded into the inlet, from the woods, a few miles north."

The vet sent for needed supplies, and, when they were brought, she administered dextrose solution intravenously, near the elephant's left ear. She also filled several plastic bags with specimens removed from the elephant's mouth, from between his lips and jaw.

The sheriff arrived in a big black and white Chevrolet, and his first words to the veterinarian were, "You, again?"

"Did you think you would never see me?"

"Nothing personal, but I'd hoped not to. Never again."

"We have a special problem here," she said. She gave a worried look to a hundred bystanders who were pressing against police lines on Oceanside Drive.

"I'm going to clear the crowd and stop traffic," he said.

"Do that. But traffic is not your only problem."

They stared. He blinked.

A Hertz rental truck driven by a lean, powerful man with a pencil moustache came into the parking lot of the tee-shirt shack, and the driver stared at the elephant, then stepped out and unlocked the truck's rear doors.

"Still killing little white rabbits?" the sheriff asked.

"You know they made me stop. Part of the ... understanding."

"Part of the judge's order. We are sentimental here. We don't like doctors who kill Peter Cottontail."

"I killed them for medical research. People are more important than animals."

"You are some animal doctor."

"I'm a humanitarian."

"You caused a riot. They made you a hostage."

"People over animals.... My creed... Is that so hard?"

They stared into each other's eyes, oblivious to the crowd. He blinked.

The driver of the rental truck pulled open its rear doors.

"So, what's the special problem, doctor? A sick elephant where it has no business being?"

She looked away and spoke to the elephant, softly: "Yours is a highly evolved species, yet an ancient species... You are intelligent and capable of forming bonds with humankind." The elephant blinked: he knew she wanted to save his life.

To the sheriff, she said: "I've had horses and cows, but never a patient like this."

"And the rabbits, of course," he added. "So I repeat: what's the problem, doctor?"

"The elephant is stoned."

"`Stoned'? In what sense `stoned'?"

"Do you know how we check a nearly drowned animal for shock? ... We press a finger against its gums. We press hard until the gums turn white. If the pinkness springs back into the gums when we stop pressing, the animal is fit to be moved. ..."

She fished a plastic specimen bag from her pocket. "This is what I found between its gums and cheek."

"Why, that's a condom," he said.

"A condom filled with cocaine.... An elephant filled with condoms ..." she said. "An elephant this size has one-foot-wide bowels, could contain thousands of condoms filled with cocaine."

"The elephant is a walking cocaine tanker," he said. "What we have here is a ten million dollar elephant."

Three men leaped from the rental truck and commence to spray the beach with automatic weapons. The sheriff knocked the veterinarian down to the sand and threw his body over hers. Deputies returned gun fire, but from a distance. The men from the truck threw down their weapons and attempted to rouse the elephant and fetch him to the truck, but he refused even to sit up. After considerable crossfire, which lasted sixty seconds, one bystander shouted and grasped his bloody shoulder and fell down, the elephant had been grazed, and the felons had sped off in their truck, though without the elephant.

The veterinarian deftly examined the elephant and declared the wounds superficial. "In the jungle, they gore one another continually and survive. ... This is not a patient I intend to lose."

"I'm going to bring forward the TV crews now," said the sheriff.

When the TV cameras had come forward, the sheriff directed a deputy to bring him a large rifle. "This is a high powered rifle," he said, straight to the veterinarian. "I am asking you -- as a humanitarian -- to show me where to place one or more slugs, to dispatch the elephant painlessly and instantly."

"Are you mad?" she said. "Are you going to kill my patient on TV? Are you going to kill a healthy elephant on live TV?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, doctor. I am going to kill this healthy elephant on live TV. Because they are going to take hostages. The men who want to retrieve this ten million dollar elephant are going to take hostages. They are going to offer a swap. This elephant for ... who? "

"Surely, not."

"Surely, yes. There are fifteen Sunday schools in this town and I have only five deputies to protect them. These men are going to seize a Sunday school or do something as bad ... unless we give them back their cocaine tanker. ...

"Whatever they do, I won't be able to stop it. So you and I are now going to kill this elephant on live TV, are going to kneel down in front of that camera and disembowel it on live TV, and in front of a live TV audience we are going to dump the contents of its bowels into the ocean and let ten million dollars of contraband wash out to sea. Then we pray ... that they hear about it ... they see no reason to take hostages. That they go away."

By and by, she said, "One bullet through the heart will do it. On the left side, like you and me."

He put a slug through the heart and the elephant shuddered. He reloaded and put a second between the eyes.

"I'll need a surgical saw," she said. "From my lab."

"I have a chain saw in my black-and-white," he offered.

"That will do fine. Even better ... faster. We'll must start at once."