

Tending the Elephant
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As the sun rises, she squeezes the circus yellow sponge over her giant pail and climbs the 30-foot ladder resting against the elephant's side. The elephant is perfectly still.

Everything is perfectly still. On the other side, her companion hasn't shown yet. Every day, she washes one side, and he washes the other. They miss each other sometimes, but the elephant gets washed every day; she might be half clean by noon, fully clean by dinnertime, then dirty again every morning. They live in different time zones. This is only natural.

The soap washes out the wrinkles so that the elephant's skin is bone-smooth. She makes huge circles with the sponge. She can hear her breath, working harder. The soapy lavender water spills over her fingers. Her ring glistens in the sun, which is higher than the birch trees now. She wonders if he'll come by this morning.

It's been three days.

The sky pierces blue.

The Ferris wheel behind her begins its daily spin, its colors gain ground. Children scream with delight and fear. The elephant lifts one foot, then the other.

On the other side, she hears the clanking of the handle against the pail, the shaking of the ladder.

“The big girl is so dusty today!” he says. She can tell he’s about the height where she is, on the other side of 30,000 pounds of flesh. She lays her palm flat on the elephant skin.

“Yes! I know!” she says. “I’ve been here since sun-up.”

“Late night for me. I’ve had a long day already.”

He sings, he whistles.

She’s never seen his face, but she imagines it.

“This new soap smells so good,” she says. “Like a bath.”

“Oh, yeah. You know she’s loving this.”

She gets back to washing. Cirrus clouds morph to cumulus. She’ll have to go soon. She smells popcorn, hears a laugh track in a movie somewhere.

She wants to wash around the elephant’s eye before she gets to the legs and feet. No matter how much of a rush she’s in, the eye is important. There are flies, and what’s good about the lavender soap is that it repels them. She uses a cotton swab to apply a thin line just below the eye. You can’t be too careful. The eye’s orange orb is huge and still. She sees her white t-shirt in the reflection.

“I’m so glad we do this together,” he says. “It helps me.”

The elephant's eye shifts toward the sound of his voice.

"Me, too," she says. She kisses the bumpy skin of her eyelid.

Her husband's coffee wafts over on a cloud of air.

"I need to go."

"I understand," he says.

She tends to the elephant's legs and feet. In between toes. The bottom of his ladder is on the other side, just there, next to his giant pail like hers. It could be days before she's with him again.

She lets the sponge drop in the bucket and hears children cry out behind her. Under the elephant, the sun is blocked entirely. Dust gets in between her toes. It's colder, too, under here. By the time she gets to the meridian, the exact middle of the elephant, her body has gone through three time zones and is shaking and warm.

His silver ladder jostles. His worn leather shoes, his blue worker pants.

Spent

The time she wet her pants in first grade, the time she imagined kids stepping on her in the playground as if she wasn't there, the time she saw a deer strung up on wires by hands and feet in her uncle's back yard, the time she looked in the mirror and figured out she could lie, the time she bled through her underwear, the time she got asked out as a joke, the time her face flushed fire when a boy asked her out for real, the time her boss called her parents for stealing makeup, the time he offered to let her come back to work, the time her mother caught her touching herself to porn on Preview, the time her friend told her it was wrong to steal, the time she stopped being friends with that girl, the time she stole money from her mother's purse, the time she stole money from her stepmother's purse, the time she bought expensive British import albums of her favorite band, the time she pretended to be drunk so she could kiss a boy, the time she threw up all over the kitchen floor, the time she stole credit card numbers from a friend of a friend so she could call her best friend in another state, the time she realized her feet were ugly, the time she had a seven-week-old fetus in her belly she didn't want, the time she walked a mile to work in winter because she had no money for the tube, the time she borrowed money, the time she borrowed money, the time she borrowed money, the time she got a job in a university library, the time she skipped the final exam because she was in bed with the trumpet player, the time she paid the money back, the time she finished her degree, the time she got another good job, the time she moved in with a man who drank too much, the time she moved up north and fell in love, real love, the time she went to a

doctor about her curved toenails, the time she left the man and moved to another country, the time she fell in lust with a man and loved it, the time she wrote about it, the time she wrote and wrote and wrote, the time she moved back home, the time she wept at her father's funeral, her brother's funeral, her mother's funeral, the time she fell in love again, for real, the time she held her baby on her chest, the time she carried her baby and the hand of her toddler in the park, the time she lent her friends money, the time she kissed her husband on a mountain in another country, the time she told her teenagers it will be all right, it will be all right, the time she coughed up blood, the time she held her husband's hand in a stranger's house, the time she said she was sorry, the time she said I love you all.