

Elephant

The misplaced tie five minutes before seven was par for the course, and he could almost predict that one of the boys was going to come down with something just as he was stepping out the door, but the elephant lying on the driveway was quite unexpected.

He nearly backed into it, late as he was, not paying as much attention as he should have been, but, in all fairness, there were very rarely elephants on the driveway. Once there was a cat, but this was entirely different.

Not sure the image in his rearview mirror was reliable, Raymond pulled into park, stepped on the parking brake, and got out of the car to investigate. Indeed, there was an elephant, and indeed, it was huge, stretched out over the entire length of the driveway, its back rising almost halfway up to the ceiling. He could just barely make out the house across the street past it. He could probably jump over it if he had a running start, but he certainly couldn't do it in his BMW. Maybe if he'd gotten the SUV like Olivia had wanted.

It appeared to be sleeping.

It appeared to be an elephant.

Raymond wasn't sure why it was there, but he was sure that if it didn't move, he would be late for work. He nearly got back in his car and hit the horn, but that would wake up Olivia, and probably Chris, and probably half the neighborhood, and that couldn't happen. He considered backing into it at full speed to see if he could push it out of the way, or at least get it to wake up and go elsewhere, but the hippie kid next door would probably say that was animal cruelty and he didn't want to put up with that maniac

again if he didn't have to, and besides, you don't ram BMWs into elephants. It's just not good for the car.

It became clear to him that he would not be driving into work this morning, which was terribly irritating. The elephant was being awfully inconsiderate. The whole world shouldn't come to a halt just because it needed to take a nap. But there was a way around this, at least just for this morning. Gus next door, Raymond was pretty sure, left for work at around the same time, and also went into downtown Boston. After briefly considering a dramatic running leap over the elephant, Raymond went back into the house and exited through the front door.

Sure enough, Gus was walking out of his house at the very same time. Raymond jogged around the elephant, noting that it wasn't just the body of an elephant but indeed the whole thing, with trunks, big ears, tusks, and everything. And it was indeed asleep, and in front of his driveway. "Gus!" he said, walking by the elephant's back and tail. "Hey, Gus!"

"Hm?" said Gus, standing by his front door. He looked over the top of his car, which now struck Raymond as being incredibly low to the ground. "Oh, good morning."

"Morning, morning, look, Gus, can you do be a big favor?"

"Can it wait, I'm kind of late . . ."

"Me, too, that's just the thing. See, I was pulling out of my garage and there seems to be an elephant in front of it . . ." He gestured toward the elephant.

"Huh. So I see," said Gus.

"So I can't get my car out, you see, and I was hoping you could give me a ride, drop me off at work . . ."

“Psss, Ray, I’d love to help you out, but like I said I’m late as it is and I don’t think I have the time to drop you off.” He started getting in his car.

“Wait, wait—”

“Sorry, I really have to go. Tough luck about the elephant.”

“Gus—!”

“I’ll see you later, I’ve really got to go.” Gus’s car pulled out of his driveway, sadistically unimpeded by any elephants, or even a hippo. Raymond stood on his own driveway, watching Gus leave. It occurred to him that it had been several seconds since he last saw the elephant, and maybe it had disappeared.

He turned around. It was still there. He was still stranded.

He walked back into the house and woke up Olivia. He nudged her shoulders, and she muttered something indecipherable, probably not about an elephant, before rolling over and sleeping unimpeded. “Olivia,” said Raymond.

“Hmmm?” she seemed to say.

“We have a problem, Liv,” said Raymond. “I can’t get to work, there’s . . .” He was reasonably sure she was still asleep so he called her name again, throwing in another nudge to the shoulders for good measure.

“Hm, whaaaat?” she mumbled.

“I can’t get the car out of the driveway, Liv, there’s an elephant in the way, and I’m already late for work and I can’t get the car out around the elephant and—”

“Take . . . take the bus,” she said. She returned to sleep.

There was a bus stop nearby, relatively. Nearby, by car, which rather defeated the purpose of a bus station, but there it was, five miles away. Deciding he had very little

choice, he went back into the garage, grabbed his rusted red bike from its cluttered corner, and opened the garage. As he did so he recalled that there was an elephant in the way, so he closed it and brought the bike through the house. A bit of paint chipped off by the kitchen when the right handlebar scraped against the wall, but Raymond let that go and got the bike through the front door. He found himself looking toward the top of the driveway, where the elephant lay, mocking him. But the elephant would be dealt with later. Raymond hopped on his bike and pedaled away as fast as he could.

Fortunately, the bike still worked. Unfortunately, he was in a business suit with dress shoes, trying to balance a briefcase in the small basket he was very glad he'd never gotten around to getting rid of. His speed, he found, was limited, as was to be expected, but he managed to make it to the bus station without falling down or being insulted too terribly by the early-rising neighborhood kids. He barely managed to catch the departing bus into Boston, drawing the driver's attention just in time.

The driver, an old man, looked Raymond over. Raymond became aware that he was drenched in sweat, his suit was dirty, and he'd just left his bicycle at the station without a lock. The driver pointed out none of these things. "Fare's two bucks," he said, and Raymond paid him. "Never seen you on here before," said the driver as the bus entered traffic.

"I usually drive," said Raymond, breathing heavily. "There's an elephant in my driveway."

"That's too bad," said the driver.

Raymond was sure he was terribly, terribly late for work. He pulled back his sleeve to check his watch, but this only revealed that he'd forgotten his watch, which he

blamed on the elephant. The elephant, he was convinced, was sleeping on his driveway just to make Raymond's life miserable. He had had no idea elephants were so vindictive.

Only after he got off the bus, walked the five blocks to his office building, and entered the lobby could he look at a clock and confirm that he was indeed terribly, terribly late. This was bad. Generally he was expected in around seven-thirty, and he was certain some problems would arise from the fact that it was nearly nine. The last time this had happened, Olivia and Max had both been sick and Chris was drawing on the walls and in all the confusion he'd forgotten to call, and it hadn't been his fault but that was still just a couple months ago. He'd worked hard, really hard, to make up for it, and he couldn't lose this job, he had a family to support.

He couldn't be late again. But he was. Thank you very much, elephant.

Raymond found himself frantically tapping on the elevator's up button. The door opened. He checked to make sure there wasn't an elephant inside, then walked in.

He had only been at his desk for a few minutes, and was still catching his breath, when Friedlander stopped by for the inevitable confrontation. "Twice now," said Friedlander. "This is not acceptable." Friedlander had been ready to fire him last time. It had taken a lot of begging and pleading and promising and additional begging to convince him not to.

"I know, I know, sir," said Raymond, "but it wasn't my fault, there—"

"I'm not looking for excuses."

"But there was an *elephant* in my *driveway*," said Raymond.

"Elephants happen!" said Friedlander. "Elephants happen, Ray, but you know what? You take that elephant, you push it aside, and you get to work on time."

“But the elephant—”

“One more chance. One more,” said Friedlander. He held up a finger. “See this? See this finger? Just once more. You will not be late again, you got it?”

“Yes, sir,” said Raymond. Friedlander walked away. Raymond tried to focus on work, but could only think about the elephant, sitting in his driveway, on *his* property, like it owned the place, like no one would tell it what to do just because it was an elephant.

It would have to be dealt with.

* * *

The first bad thing was that he had to ride the bus in the first place. That shouldn't have been.

The second bad thing, when he got off the bus, was that his bike had been stolen. Raymond wasn't sure what anyone would want with a loud, rusted bike from 1982, but clearly someone had taken it and he would have to get home some other way. He removed his cell phone from his pocket and nearly dialed his house to ask Liv to pick him up, but if the elephant was still there she wouldn't be able to get out either.

He called anyway.

“Lo?” said Liv.

“Yeah, Liv, it's me,” said Raymond. “Is there an elephant in our driveway?”

“Um, maybe, I'll check,” she said. After a quick pause, she said, “Yep, yep, seems to be.”

Raymond would have to walk. Five miles. It was, fortunately, not raining, and not cold, both things he found himself certain the elephant could have orchestrated. So he hiked, business suit, briefcase, and all, down the sidewalks of his town, and as he did so he began to think rationally about what Friedlander had said. *Elephants happen, Ray, but you know what? You take that elephant, you push it aside, and you get to work on time.* This was not, in short, unsolvable. There were things to be done: animal control, for instance. There were things to be done.

All of this would have been rendered irrelevant if the elephant was gone when he returned home, which it wasn't. Raymond's legs hurt from the walk, but the elephant seemed perfectly contented in its spot in front of the driveway. It had moved about an inch closer to the front door since this morning, and its eyes and ears seemed to be fluttering around, but otherwise its position was largely unchanged. Raymond walked up to it and felt its leathery gray skin, covered with fine hair he didn't expect to be there. He pushed into it then, tried to move it a bit closer to the garage just to see if he could, but it wouldn't budge and didn't seem to notice. Determining to resolve this another day, Raymond entered the house, where he was a couple hours late for dinner.

* * *

That Saturday, Phil from Animal Control came by to deal with the elephant.

Raymond watched as Phil investigated. Phil lifted up its trunk, which the elephant didn't seem to mind. It trumpeted lightly. He looked into its eyes, ran his hands along the right tusk, and lifted up one of its huge floppy ears. At the same time, Chris was trying to

whip Max with the elephant's short tail, but Max was able to stay out of the way, and the elephant just lay there.

"Yep, it's an elephant, all right," said Phil. He held up the ear again, which Raymond was sure he could fit one or both of the boys inside. "A savannah elephant, if I'm not mistaken. Male, I think, although it's tough to tell if it won't stand up." He walked back to where the boys were playing with the tail and took it from them for a moment. He tapped it lightly, then handed it back to Chris, who managed to catch Max by surprise.

"Mom!" said Max.

Olivia told Chris to leave the elephant and Max alone.

"Looks to be a healthy specimen," said Phil, "maybe around middle age, it's hard to say. What was the problem again?"

"He's on my driveway," said Raymond.

"Oh, yes, yes, right right right," said Phil. "I'm afraid I can't do anything about that."

"Sorry?"

"There's a lot of things I can do to take care of deer, or dogs, or bears, that sort of thing. I have this collar thing in my truck, it's kind of like a lasso, you get it around the guy and pull and you bring him down, but this guy's much too big and he's already down," said Phil. "I got tranqs, but that won't help because he's already pretty much asleep."

"So what . . . what can I do?" asked Raymond.

"I dunno," said Phil. "Take the bus?"

Suddenly they were both distracted by the sound of hissing air and a small crash. They looked down the driveway and saw that the hippie kid next door had slashed Phil's front right tire. "Animal Control is Animal *Kill*trol!" she yelled. She slashed the other tire and the truck leaned forward significantly. "Elephants are people, too!"

As Phil walked to his truck and calmly approached the hippie kid next door, Raymond tried again to push the elephant out of the way, which was rather futile. Finding himself suddenly resigned to the situation, he joined Olivia, Chris, and Max on the elephant's back, and as a family they watched Phil threaten to shoot the hippie kid next door with a tranquilizer dart.

* * *

A few weeks went by, and Raymond learned to adjust to a life with an elephant and without a car. He switched from a briefcase to a backpack and left home every day at six-fifteen on his new bike, which he would lock securely by the bus stop. He would catch the early bus into Boston and make it into work about ten minutes earlier than he used to. Occasionally it rained, but not much so far, nothing he couldn't handle. The wind was more difficult, especially when it was really cold, but Raymond dealt with it.

The elephant, meanwhile, remained on the driveway like nothing had changed, which it hadn't. Chris and Max had taken to playing on it after school, sometimes fighting one another with its tail and trunk, sometimes hiding in its ears, but mostly playing king of the mountain, seeing who could stick around on its back for the longest. Olivia told the boys to leave the elephant alone, but it really didn't seem to mind. It

snorted and moved its trunk around but seemed otherwise to be a happy and well-adjusted pachyderm. Sometimes Max would take a bucket of water outside and give it a bath, reasoning that if he had to take one, so did the elephant. Raymond took a picture of this and kept it in his office. It was a nice picture.

So things went well, basically. Olivia pointed out, quite rightly, that Raymond hadn't gotten this much exercise in years, and the boys always had a good, safe afterschool activity. But still Raymond was uncomfortable. There was a nagging little something in the back of his mind that remained certain that something would go wrong, that this situation was not something that could be adjusted to so easily.

"Oh, come on, you're being paranoid," Olivia would say. "Trunkles isn't hurting anyone." (Chris had named the elephant Trunkles.) But every morning, when Raymond pushed his bicycle out the front door and eased it down the steps onto the sidewalk, he found himself face to face with the elephant, sitting there, sleeping peacefully. And every morning, he expected something new and different to be wrong. He couldn't shake the feeling.

And also, he missed driving his BMW. He liked his BMW. He had paid a lot of money for it.

You couldn't get wet while driving a BMW, for one thing. Unless you were in a convertible with the top down, but there's no reason you would do that in the rain. It was about three weeks after the elephant had first appeared, and Raymond was pedaling to the bus stop on a rainy Thursday morning. He could handle it, he had handled it, but it was miserable, and his poncho wasn't keeping his suit nearly as dry as he would like. He was sure the papers in his backpack were getting wet, even though it was waterproof, in

theory. Over time, the bike rides had become easier, and faster, but it was still tough in the rain, the pedals squeaking from the water in the gears, the wheels kicking up puddles into his pants.

But still, this Thursday, like every day, he made it to the stop on time, and locked his bike up underneath the bus stop cover. He sat down on the bench near the old wrinkled man he never talked to, and waited. At a certain point it occurred to him that he had been waiting for what seemed like longer than usual. He checked his watch, and indeed, the bus was ten minutes late.

This, Raymond thought, was entirely unreasonable. He had biked here, to the bus stop, in the rain. He had made it, and made it early, and the bus had failed to live up to its end of the bargain. But this wasn't that bad, not really. His new routine got him into work ten minutes earlier than usual, but Raymond used to get into work fifteen minutes early, so at this point he'd be getting into the office at the pre-elephant time, which was no big deal. And even if the bus was later than that, he could still make it on time.

But fifteen minutes later, the bus had stubbornly refused to come. Raymond was checking his watch so often now it was like a Tourette tic, and he felt the blood rushing into his head and pounding along his skull. He only had one more chance. This wasn't his fault. He didn't want to be late again. He couldn't be late again.

He turned and looked at the old wrinkled man he never talked to. The man shrugged.

Finally, some ten minutes later, the bus pulled in. Raymond got on, and as he paid his fare, he said, "You're thirty-five minutes late."

"I apologize," said the driver, "I—"

“I’m going to be late for work!” said Raymond. “I can’t be late for work again, I’m going to be late, you’re—thirty-five minutes!”

“Hey, hey,” said the driver. “Don’t blame me. I’m not the one who put an elephant in your driveway.”

Raymond had to admit he was right. This was why he’d never relied on public transportation in the first place: It couldn’t be counted on. Sometimes things would go wrong and the bus would be delayed, and that’s just the way it works. And Friedlander would blame him. He would fire him, and it’s not Raymond who should be fired—not Raymond but the elephant, which had no idea what it was like to be gainfully employed.

Raymond thought of the elephant that had blocked away his garage, and therefore his life, and felt an anger building up inside of him, one he couldn’t take out on anyone or anything because there was nothing he could do. Events and elephants had conspired against him.

Once out of the bus, he ran down the Boston streets, in the poncho, with the backpack, as fast as he could to make it there on time. People jumped out of the way, or else Raymond pushed them as he came by. Somebody yelled at him. A Duck Tour quacked at him. He ignored it all, for his mind was elsewhere. He didn’t want to accept that in this modern world of wireless internet and space travel and, of course, freedom, where people could choose their own lives and their own destiny, where people can build for themselves a happy and peaceful society where they can live and learn and be whatever they want, an elephant could come around and ruin everything. A world where that could happen was not a world he wanted to be a part of.

In the lobby, in the elevator, he found himself certain of his fate. He'd made good time, he was only seven minutes late, but he had been given one more chance only one, and he'd blown it. So when he saw Friedlander standing in front of his desk, waiting for him, there were no surprises, and he found himself walking toward the inevitable.

"That's it," said Friedlander. He said nothing else—just pointed back toward the elevator. Raymond turned around, and as he returned to the metal doors he felt not sadness, not dejection, but anger. Anger not just at this elephant, but all elephants, and for good measure Africa in general.

His body was a ticking elephant bomb waiting to go off. His mind was in a frenzy of pachydermic panic. On the slow ride down the elevator, he could feel his body shaking, and when the doors open he tore out into the lobby and into the downpour outside. The sky was gray, elephant gray, and the water from a trunk plunged down on his exposed head, tripping through his collar and down his back. Raymond turned to the sky just as a bolt of lightning cut through, and he could swear that the severed bolts made up the shape of an elephant.

"Damn you, elephant!" he cried into the storm, his voice blocked by a crash of thunder, like the plod of an elephant's massive feet. Cold, soaked from head to toe, and filled with so much rage that a hundred elephant ears couldn't hold it all, he tore down the sidewalk in a sprint, back to the bus stop, back to reclaim his home before he was forever robbed of that as well.

When the bus pulled up in front of him, Raymond almost didn't get on, elephant-like as the bus was in mass and size, but he stepped aboard just the same and paid his fare

to the driver, a different man he didn't recognize. He pushed the money into the slot, then pounded it when it wouldn't go down all the way.

"Whoa, man," the driver, a younger guy, said. "You need to calm down."

"Elephant," said Raymond.

Through the ride home, Raymond saw elephants everywhere he looked. A mother held up an elephant tail to block the rain. The spray from a trunk emerged from a vent on the city street. The billboard ad for Elephun, where Max had had his third birthday party, featured an elephant saying, "Elephun for everyone!"

"Elephuck you!" said Raymond. The woman sitting next to him moved to another seat.

When the bus pulled into his neighborhood, he tore off the bus, unlocked his bike, and pedaled as hard as he could, as hard as he ever had; every time he pushed down on the pedal he imagined he was pushing down on the elephant's massive, lazy body. Nearly blinded by the downpour, a downpour more at home in an African jungle than in suburban Massachusetts, Raymond screamed in rage and pedaled, harder, harder. His bike fell into a footprint-sized puddle and Raymond lost control, falling off to the side as the bike skidded into a gray picket fence.

Slowly, Raymond rose to his feet, groaning. His suit was torn. He was soaked and freezing. His leg hurt, and he found himself walking with a limp. But then he remembered what waited for him at home, that tusked demon that had made its home on his—*his!*—driveway, and he limped as fast as he could along the sidewalk, finishing the journey on foot. He didn't know how long it took, but finally he saw his home, and there,

in his driveway, was the elephant, surely relaxing in what it must have thought of as a pleasant sprinkle. The bastard.

Screaming, Raymond limped up to the elephant and kicked it as hard as he could with his good leg. No reaction. He kicked again, and again, and again, but nothing happened; the elephant, as always, ignored him, sadistically.

His eyes lit up suddenly in a flash of manic brilliance, and he stumbled into his house. Olivia, on the phone, turned, gaped, and hung up, but whatever she said Raymond couldn't hear. He grabbed his long-neglected car keys from the dish on the counter and limped into the garage, where he found his abandoned BMW sitting still beside Olivia's Toyota. He opened the garage door and watched as the elephant's left side appeared, blocking view of the driveway and the pouring rain. He got in his car, turned the keys in the ignition, and checked to see the elephant was there in his rearview mirror. Briefly he wondered what the hippie kid next door would say about what he was about to do. Then, gripping the steering wheel, he put the car in reverse and slammed down on the gas. She could join her elephant friend in hell.

The car squealed and rammed into the elephant, with as much speed as it could get in just a yard or two of space. It came to a sudden stop, and Raymond jerked forward, nearly hitting his head on the steering wheel. The elephant, meanwhile, did nothing as the car continued to push into its massive body. Raymond shifted gears and drove the car forward as far as it would go, then reversed again into the elephant; again, he was forced into the steering wheel, and again the elephant would not budge. Again and again he slammed into the animal. Smoke began to fill the garage and he could hear metal

crushing and bending more and more each time he charged back into the elephant, but he continued to do it, despite the elephant's indifference, despite his wife's screaming.

Finally, he parked the car and got out, limping towards the oblivious pachyderm. He ignored the broken, twisted metal of his car and instead laid his hands on its leathery skin. "Please," he moaned. He thought his leg might be broken. He felt the spray of rainwater drifting up from the elephant's body into his tear-filled eyes. "Would you, please, please, just . . . just go away?"

"Okay," said the elephant. It nudged Raymond off its body, stood up, and walked away into the storm.

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