

The wind felt particularly good today. Frederick was used to life on the road. He was as accustomed to the bumps and screeches of the train car as to the chirping of birds or the buzzing of flies. The bars on his windows were spaced wide apart. Sometimes that meant more flies could get in than he liked, but being able to feel the wind made up for it. The fresh air sometimes made the car chilly, but not unbearably so.

The train swayed gently. Through the window Frederick could see the sun's reflection on a still lake outside. *I would like to swim in a lake someday*, Frederick thought. He could smell the water. The earthy scent of swampy shallows mixed with the piercing chill of the deep water. He closed his eyes and stuck his trunk out as far as he could through the bars.

In Frederick's first few years on the train he had shared a car with his friends, sleeping in a partitioned space alongside horses and lions. When he grew too large to share space with others, the ringmaster gave Frederick a car to himself. Well, almost to himself---boxes of supplies and props filled the front of his car. They were not as good of company as his friends had been, but at least he was not alone in an empty car.

Frederick was too large to turn around fully in the train car; he was too wide and the car too narrow. Frederick could move around enough to avoid getting stiff, and he preferred to sleep standing up. The afternoon sun shone on his face, warming his skin as he drifted into a nap.

A sound woke him. Not a loud sound, but a different sound, like a cough amidst a stream of laughter. His huge ears flopped to life, guided by instincts he had never needed but could never discard.

*Scratch scratch scratch*

Frederick was not scared of the sound. But this was a new sound. An unusual sound. There were no new smells. The grease of the car's wheels was familiar. The boxes with which he shared his space smelled of wood and sweat as it always had.

*Scratch scratch scratch*

The sound came from behind him. Unable to turn around, Frederick looked over his shoulder about, attempting to spot the source.

"Hello?" Frederick rumbled cautiously.

"Hello," a small voice said, "is this your car?"

"I suppose it is." Frederick said. "What's your name?"

"Elsie."

"What are you?"

"I am a mouse. What are you?"

"I am an elephant."

"What is an elephant?"

Frederick had never considered that question. When he was little, Frederick had asked his mother why he did not have bushy mane around his ears like a lion. *You are an elephant*, his mother had told him. *Elephants do not have bushy manes*. Still confused, Frederick had asked why he had a long trunk instead of a nose like a horse. Once again she had told him, *You are an elephant*. When the ringmaster had moved him to his own train car Frederick had asked his friends why he was so big. *Because you are an elephant*, they had said.

Frederick shrugged his huge shoulders and flapped his massive ears, "an elephant is what I am."

"Are you a large elephant?"

"I am not sure. I am bigger than my friends, but I have not met many elephants. Are you a large mouse?"

"No, I am very small."

"Can you turn around?"

"Yes."

"You are a lucky mouse." Frederick did not like being so big.

The squeal of brakes cut through the air. The train began to slow.

A black and white cat crawled in through the window and settled himself on a crate in front of Frederick. "Have you seen any *vermin* around here?" Jerome hissed as he settled himself down and idly licked his coat. He relaxed atop the boxes in front of Frederick. "I heard something."

Frederick was not sure what a vermin was. He shook his head and his ears swooshed from side to side. The train stopped and Jerome climbed out and onto the roof.

"What is a mouse?" Frederick asked quietly after Jerome had gone. *Frederick suspected 'vermin' might be a mean name for a mouse.*

Elsie did not respond.

"Elsie?" said Frederick, "are you still there?"

He did not hear a reply. Too large to turn around, he tried bend down to look at the floor between his legs, but could not reach his head low enough. In front of him he spotted a shiny object peeking out from within a crate. Frederick reached his trunk out, knocked the crate's lid loose, and grabbed the shiny object. He set it down and found a big gray creature staring back at him.

There was another elephant in the car! Startled, Frederick stepped back. The elephant stepped back as well. Frederick scratched the top of his head with his trunk. The other elephant did the same.

It took a moment for Frederick to understand---there was not another elephant in the car, he was looking at himself. *Ah ha!* Frederick thought. *A mirror!* He had seen the clown do tricks with the mirror during the show. Intrigued, Frederick held the mirror in front of himself and searched the reflection for Elsie.

Raucous laughter interrupted his search. Outside Frederick's window, the ringmaster was walking down the length of the train, inspecting all of the animals before the night's show.

"Well isn't that the funniest thing I ever saw!" said the ringmaster, pointing at Frederick. "That elephant thinks he's quite the looker!"

That night the ringmaster brought the mirror along when he brought Frederick out of his train car to walk into the big tent and in front of all of the people. When they reached center of the tent in front of the crowd, the ringmaster stopped Frederick and handed him the mirror. Frederick took it with his trunk and held it, again using it to look behind himself.

"We're thinking of naming him Narcissus," said the ringmaster. "He thinks he's the best looking elephant in the world!" Frederick did not understand, but all of the other people laughed, and the ringmaster was pleased. Frederick got to keep the mirror in his train car.

Later that night, Elsie sneaked into Frederick's train car. Careful to avoid Frederick's huge feet, she scurried to the front of the train car, just under where Frederick's trunk swayed near the ground.

"Was it a good show?" She asked, her voice feeling tiny as she spoke up to him. His eyes were so high up they seemed like stars in the night sky.

"Hello!" Frederick's deep voice replied, tinged with excitement. "I went for a walk, then some people laughed. I guess it was good. "

Elsie had always wanted to be in the circus. Every night when the animals left the train to walk to the big tent Elsie sneaked along with them. Every night she stared in awe at the adoring crowds.

"What are you talking about?" Elsie asked, "you're in the circus! Isn't it grand?"

"It's OK, I like getting to stretch my legs and move around."

"I have always wanted to be in the circus."

"Why don't you come with me next time?"

"That's just the thing," said Elsie, "last night I *did* come with you."

"You did?" said Frederick.

"Yes. I climbed into the folds of your harness as you got ready to go. When it was time to walk around the stage, I ran behind you and jumped and waved as wildly as I could."

"So you have been in the circus."

"Nobody noticed me." said Elsie quietly. "It doesn't count."

Frederick bowed his head down low so his eyes, still out of reach, were close enough for Elsie to see them clearly in the dim light. Elsie drooped her head.

"Why don't you come with me next time?" Said Frederick, "you can ride on my back instead of running behind me, that way lots of people will see you."

This sounded like a good idea to Elsie. Frederick was so tall, everyone would have to see her on top of him.

When the music and clamor announced that it was time came for the next show, Elsie jumped into Frederick's harness as he got ready. She rode on his back as he walked from the train car into the fading light of early evening. Elsie smelled a myriad of foods mixed with the leather scent of Frederick's harness.

Instead of jumping to the ground when Frederick stepped out in front of the crowd, Elsie climbed up the side of his leather harness. The worn leather was easy for her paws, so even with his swaying walk she reached the ridge of his back in moments, then climbed to the top of his head.

The crowd roared, and for a moment Elsie was filled with Joy. She stood tall and waved, feeling the sound wash over her. Abruptly, the sound stopped. Elsie was still waving her paw. Her furry shoulders slumped, and she put her paw back down. The crowd had not been roaring for her. She was too small for them to notice.

Frederick's ears flapped and Elsie held on as he turned to grab the mirror with his trunk, setting it in front of himself. Frederick looked into the mirror at his reflection, flapping his huge ears to roars of laughter from the crowd.

Frederick felt a tickle along his back. Elsie's tiny feet were moving backward, toward his tail. The sensation disappeared as she moved from his neck onto the harness.

Still looking in the mirror, Frederick scratched the top of his head with his trunk, eliciting another burst of laughter from the crowd. *Where was Elsie going?* In the mirror he saw her tiny shape descend along his leg and hop to the ground and move away, back the way they had come.

Twice heartbroken, Elsie wanted nothing other than to return to the train. She could never be in the circus, it had been a foolish dream.

Suddenly a sound like a trumped call cut through the crowd's laughter. Elsie looked over her shoulder. Frederick was standing tall on his two back legs, his voice erupting, he looked terrified. The stunned crowd was silent.



Frederick returned to all four feet and slowly backed away from Elsie, shaking. He reached out his trunk and pointed it right at her. The crowd leaned forward. What could have scared the massive elephant? Then they saw the tiny mouse standing in the hay; they saw *her*, Elsie, the tiny mouse. And the crowd roared so loudly that their previous exclamations were like raindrops before thunder.

Frederick stopped shaking and extended his trunk all the way to the ground in front of her. His warm eyes met hers and he smiled. He flapped his ears invitingly, and Elsie stepped onto his trunk. He held still as she climbed up to the top of his head, then he knelt down on his front knees in a bow. This is why he was so big, Frederick finally understood. He could help those who were small.

On top of the kneeling elephant's head, Elsie bowed too. Her heart was near bursting with pride; she had been seen.