

The Elephant Queen

"She's not a dumb animal, you know," Bonnie was saying. "Elephants are extremely intelligent."

She was still freaked about the elephant. I told her there was not a thing we could do about it. Which was not OK with Bonnie. She was the type that, when she got going on a thing, she wouldn't quit, no matter what.

I was her closest girlfriend, so I knew better than to argue with her. We were at our usual table at our usual bar, Sal's, looking out the window across Route 7 to where the circus was. The circus hadn't been there the night before at 2 a.m. when we closed the place; Bonnie and me had first seen it that afternoon when we met at Sal's. There it had been, suddenly, in old man Johnson's field.

"Wow, the circus!" Bonnie had yelled. "I want to meet the Fat Lady!"

It was nothing but a junky country carnival with a few animal acts really. There were no freaks. There was a ferris wheel and a tilt-a-whirl and booths where you threw a baseball or shot an air rifle and, if you hit the target, they gave you an orange stuffed animal or something. There was fake hurdy-gurdy music playing over loudspeakers. The place smelled of cotton candy and manure.

That day, Bonnie and me had planned to do some shopping in Pittsfield, then come back to Sal's after supper to take advantage of "ladies' night" prices. But as soon as we saw the circus, of course we had to go over there. We ended up spending the afternoon whooping it up -- riding the rides, playing the games of chance and so on. We only left because of what happened with the elephant.

After that, Bonnie said she needed a drink. So we went back to Sal's and drank some more beers and ate a couple of garbagey grinders for supper. Before we knew it, it was night outside. The circus tents were closed; the ferris wheel and the tilt-a-whirl were shut down for the night. Bonnie said it looked lonely, and she was right. There were strings of colored pennants and little unlit light bulbs out there swinging in the wind over the machinery and the closed-up booths, and they struck you as sad. The only sign of life was the blue glow of a TV flickering in one of the Winnebagoes where the circus people stayed.

"It's well-known that elephants bury their dead," Bonnie was saying to Sal as he cleared our empties. "They use their tusks like shovels. It's a well-known scientific fact."

Sal grunted, which meant, No comment. He knew Bonnie from serving her drinks for years, but he had never been friendly. Maybe he thought he couldn't afford to be. Not that Bonnie was that bad. Most of the time she minded her own business, but sometimes she could be trouble. I drank with her all the time, so I was used to it.

"Set us up here with a couple shots of Jose gold," Bonnie said. "And two more Millers."

"Uh uh, not for me," I said. "No tequila. Just the beer."

"What kind of pal are you?" she yelled. "I'm buying!"

I had one just to be social, but after that, Bonnie went right ahead by herself. I could see she meant to get really plastered because of the elephant thing. I could recognize the signs.

"Over in India the elephants are all owned by the Maharanis," she said. "You better not fuck with them over there -- not if you know what's good for you...Uh unh!" She drained her shot, held it upside down and licked out the last drops, then signaled to Sal for another one. "In ancient Mesopotamia they were sacred to the priestesses who ran the country. There were carved idols of them you had to bow to or you were beheaded...Gaak!" She faked a karate chop at my neck. "Just like that."

A couple of men all covered in mud like they'd been working down in a foundation were at the bar drinking beer and watching us. Bonnie let her mouth hang open and stared at them like she was retarded. The men laughed and turned away.

Like I said, I was used to Bonnie. She was always talking like that, like a college professor who knew all about faraway customs and ancient history facts and all. Most of it wasn't true, of course, but I could never see any harm in it. Anyway, I was just about the only one who ever listened.

I had known Bonnie since she was two classes ahead of me at Whitbury High. In those days she was a hot ticket. In fact, I only knew her because she was best friends with my big sister. The two of them were really

something then -- teenage queens with a wild streak, but it was OK because everybody knew they'd eventually get married and settle down and have babies. Their boyfriends were the supposedly tough guys with the D.A. haircuts and the leather jackets. They worked after school and always had money, and Bonnie and her girlfriends tooled around in the guy's cars, and I would hear all about it. At the time I thought it was big-time stuff. I was thrilled.

Later my sister, along with everybody else in town, dropped Bonnie cold. Thinking back now, it's sort of unbelievable, but in those days if a girl got a quote-unquote reputation, that was it. People would call her a whore. Nobody -- not even her so-called friends -- would defend her. And the rest of us were supposed to be perfect little virgins. Yeah, right. But the truth is, we all bought this stuff. We still do.

Well, Bonnie fucked up. What happened was: she had a fight with her boyfriend at the time, and to show him she went on a blind date with a guy from Springfield -- I still remember his name, Donny Patenaude. The two of them supposedly drank a fifth of whiskey down by the reservoir, and Bonnie let him take off her blouse and bra. Then the creep disappeared with them! He went in the bushes to pee supposedly and didn't come back. He was only playing a joke, he said later. I doubt it. When Bonnie realized he had her clothes, she panicked. She went stumbling around calling this guy's name and ran into some other seniors who were down there.

That was it. Next day it was all over school. I was only a sophomore, but I heard about it as soon as I got off the bus. I remember the whispers: "She had no top on? You mean nothing?" The kids loved it. They were thrilled. It was like she had some disgusting disease. Some of the girls, among themselves, said they were sorry for her. They said how tragic it was. But nobody stood up for her. And I was no better. I was one of the ones staring, but when she looked at me, I pretended to be looking somewhere else.

Bonnie couldn't take it. Some girls might have been able to, but not her. That day she went to the nurse and got excused early. After that, she hardly tried any more. Went with the flow, you might say. We didn't see much of her. Heard she was running with an out-of-town crowd. That she was involved with married men. Even today I don't really know what happened. It was years

before I got to know her again and, by then, she didn't particularly want to talk about it.

She'd been married and divorced and so had I. Neither of us had any kids. We were both waitressing at the Busy Bee. For a while, we lived together in the apartment upstairs from the restaurant. Then Bonnie got a job cooking lunch over at the junior high and moved out to her own place. It turned out we could be better friends if we didn't live together. But we always stayed friends.

Sometimes, certain people I won't name would accuse us of being more than friends, but it's a lie. We were two ladies who liked our beer and kept each other company when neither of us was seeing someone, which was most of the time. We watched each other's backs, which you had to in a place like Sal's. Otherwise, the men make assumptions.

That circus was so rinky dink. For the show ring they had put cement highway dividers in a half-circle set against a parked semi with CAPRA CIRCUS painted on it in dayglo red and orange. Then they had set up some bleachers and dumped in a bunch of sawdust. There were curtains hung up at the entrance, except you could see the acts coming and going across the field. I mean, it wasn't exactly Ringling Brothers. But we thought the "big show" might be a goof. Bonnie got us some beers, and we spread out and got comfortable.

First was the bareback pony act -- two mangy nags being cantered around and around by teenage girls in blond wigs wearing sequined bathing suits and lots of makeup. They made it up for one go-round standing on the horses' backs, and everybody applauded. That was about it. I wanted to go back to the bar, but Bonnie wanted to stay.

Next was a pair of clowns. One had springs under his costume, and they jiggled when he ran. The other one chased him with a spray bottle of seltzer, but the bottle wouldn't work, so the clown sat down to fix it and ended up spritzing himself. When they were finally done honking their horns and falling on their faces, I asked Bonnie if she had had enough.

"Let's just stay for the elephant act," she said. "I bet it's too terrible to miss."

So we stayed. Before the act, the ringmaster came out and ran his mouth about "the noble pachyderm, cousin

to the mastodon, daughter to the woolly mammoth, mightier than the rhinoceri, more powerful than the hippopotami," and, while he was doing it, you could see them dragging an elephant across the field. The ringmaster was going, "dauntless mistress of the fog-bound veldt" and "sacred to the Zulu nation," and so on while two guys were smacking this elephant with two-by-fours and yanking it by the ears. Finally, they got it to where it was supposed to go in the ring, and the ringmaster wound up his spiel something like, "And now, from the darkest heart of darkest Aa-free-kah, in all her savage splendor, the all-powerful Queen of the Jungle, the one, the only -- Frieda the Magnificent!"

After all that, Frieda looked pretty pathetic. She wasn't very big -- a few feet taller than the guy who herded her out, and he wasn't very big either. They'd decked her out with a flashy tiara and floppy plumes and sort of a saddle blanket with brocade and shiny stones, which I guess was supposed to make her look bigger. But she was one of those elephants with the teeny little ears, and they made her look stunted, so it didn't work.

The trainer was dark-skinned and greasy as a porkchop, even though he was wearing a clean white suit with tails. Right off, I didn't like him. Later, Bonnie decided he was an Arab, one of those murdering terrorist types you saw on TV. Well, he could have been a Hindu or a Puerto Rican, but one thing is for sure: He did mistreat that beast something awful. And it should not have been allowed.

I heard later the elephant was acting strange because its two companions that were normally in the act had been sold a few days before. Which makes sense. The poor creature acted like it was out of its mind. It was supposed to parade around the ring at the beginning of the act, and it didn't even want to do that. It kept veering in toward the center, shaking its head from side to side like it was saying no. It reminded me of my friend Bobbi's retarded son, Arthur, who sometimes wags his head like that for hours. But that trainer wasn't going to put up with it. He had a wicked little metal stick with a sharpened end and a curved hook coming off the shaft -- it looked like a fisherman's gaffe -- and he jabbed and stabbed the poor thing, in the side, in the trunk, in the ears, while he yelled at it in his own language.

Beside me, Bonnie let out a hiss and stood up. "He

can't do that to her," she said, really loud.

I pulled her down next to me. "Take it easy," I said. "That's just the way they always do."

Next, the trainer wanted the elephant to stand with all four feet on a wooden block. Well, the two front feet went up OK, but then that elephant decided it wasn't going any further. It just made up its ornery mind it wouldn't do the trick. The trainer took his stick and rammed it up between that lady elephant's legs, right where she lived -- you know where -- and she hopped up there quick.

I thought Bonnie would have a conniption fit. If she'd have had a gun, she'd have blown the little greaser right out of the ring, I know it. Instead she found her voice and booed and hollered something fierce while all the families and teenage kids in the bleachers pretended not to notice and clapped their hands as polite as you please.

I think the trainer knew he was about at the limit though, even with that crowd, so he decided to get the act over with just one more trick. The elephant was supposed to put its giant foot on the head of one of the girl riders and hold it there and not stomp her, then back off and kneel down and let her climb up on its head and ride out of the ring. Well, it started off all wrong. The trainer left the elephant for a second to escort the girl, and the elephant figured this was its chance to vamoose. The trainer had to chase after it, and he didn't like it one bit. He caught it by the tail and punched up with his stabbing stick -- real hard and not just one either -- and that stopped the poor thing. And then he swung back his gaffe and whacked it into that elephant's ear and dragged it over to the block.

Bonnie was fit to be tied. I had to hold on to her, or she might have made a run at the little rat. As it was, she stood up and screamed every filthy name she could think of, which, I could tell, didn't go over too well with the family people.

The girl was scared. She kept picking up her head from that block and looking around, showing a lot of white in her eyes. Even that dumbass crowd knew something was wrong. But the elephant must have seen that if it went through with this one, it would be left alone, because it put its foot down on that girl's head so gentle it never mussed a hair. And then it stepped back and kowtowed, and the girl put her foot on its

curled-up trunk, and it lifted her, and the girl scampered up and perched, tossing her arms around like Miss Teenage America. The audience clapped and cheered -- I guess they were relieved it was over. The trainer led the elephant out of the ring with the girl riding, and he was grinning, if you can believe it. And that was that.

Except for one thing. Before she disappeared, that poor, abused creature let out a bellow; put her trunk straight up and cut loose so loud and high the air seemed to shake. Later, Bonnie said she was saying, "Fuck you" to the whole world of human beings. But after she was good and drunk, she changed that. She said the elephant was saying, "Help me."

That should have alerted me, I realize now. I thought it was just the liquor talking. And Bonnie wasn't all negative. I remember she couldn't get over how the elephant had kept from hurting the girl. "They're very gentle creatures," she said. "In Africa there are thousands of cases of elephants saving human children from lions... And it's true they never forget... They remember their friends until the day they die."

Bonnie drank and talked about elephants till closing time. I mostly listened. After Sal gave last call and finally turned on the lights, we left and went out by our cars.

"Drunk again," I said. It was a joke we always made between us.

"Hallelujah," she answered, finishing the joke. Except her voice had no life in it.

It was real quiet out there in that parking lot after the noise and the jukebox of the bar. We leaned on our cars and looked up at all the stars. The big red neon SAL'S over the bar went "kachunk" and shut down and then in the sudden darkness we heard Sal slam the door and crunch across the gravel to his pickup. He waved at us as he pulled out onto Route 7. We listened to him grind through the gears and rumble off toward town.

"Believe I've got a roach here somewhere," Bonnie said.

She found it in her shirt pocket and smoothed it out and lit it. We each had a couple of hits before she chucked it away.

"Well," I said, "that smooths things out nicely."

"It sucks," Bonnie said.

Uh oh, I thought. I didn't feel like being the target, so I shut up. I yanked open the door to my car.

"But what they did to that elephant, that really sucks!" she said.

"Yes, it does," I said. By that time I was sick and tired of the goddamn elephant. I changed the subject. "Are you going to be OK to drive?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Bette knows the way."

Bette was a '71 orange Datsun with a blue hood and a green passenger door. She had been driving it home drunk as long as she'd owned it.

"Old Bette hasn't had a thing but low lead all day," she said, even smiling a little, which, to me, meant she was finally trying to shake off her pain.

We said goodbye and got in our cars and drove off in opposite directions.

The next day at 7 a.m. I got a phone call from the sheriff's department telling me she was dead. The Springfield paper read:

Elephant Kills Whitbury Woman

AP--Bonnie Hatfield, 41, of Whitbury Center, was crushed to death early this morning when she was thrown and trampled by an elephant belonging to the Capra Circus of Boston. Hatfield had entered the elephant's cage in the circus's encampment on Route 7 five miles north of Whitbury, where she was killed. The death has been ruled an accident.

There were more stories later. The papers loved it. After the shock wore off, the locals seemed to love it too. Lots of theories... lots of gossip. I'm sure a few jokes. People had lots of sympathy for the elephant when they found out it had to be killed. Not that I necessarily blame them.

The police questioned me, and I told them everything I could. As far as I know, the news story tells the facts. But knowing Bonnie the way I do, I feel the facts don't suffice. I've thought about it and thought about it. I've cried myself sick about it, got drunk about it, and there was no relief. I've felt guilty about it, gone over it again and again and wondered what I could have done differently; figured there was nothing and still

felt guilty. I've held it in, and I've talked about it. I've said prayers at her grave with flowers, and I've tried to forget it happened. But it won't go away.

I know Bonnie's death was drunk and foolish. I accept that. But she was my friend, and I loved her for qualities most people never got to see, or ever will, now that she's gone. Nobody really knows what happened after we split up in Sal's parking lot that night. Nobody knows what she was thinking or exactly what she did. The police don't know; the coroner doesn't...

This is a story I tell myself.

On such a warm night the elephant's cage is outside -- within a circle of vans and trucks but unguarded. Bonnie walks quietly in moonlight right to the spot. The gate in the side of the cage is held loosely closed by a thick chain. Bonnie has trouble squeezing through the opening -- she's a big, chunky woman -- but she sucks in her breath and manages.

Now she's inside. The elephant is in a corner of the cage. It's like a hill that blocks out the stars. Some movement or sound or maybe just a feeling tells Bonnie it's awake, that it knows she's there.

Bonnie talks to the elephant. She may be drunk, but she knows what she wants to say. "It's not fair..." she begins, then stops. The elephant is perfectly still, watching her. Bonnie believes it has understood her, that she does not need to speak.

She wants to hug the elephant, to feel that rough wall of warmth with her hands, to press it against her face and body. She suddenly wants to let go and cry against the elephant. She wants to feel its trunk go gently around her like the arm of a good strong man.

Bonnie walks across the moonlit cage and stands looking up at the elephant. She feels so much! She senses that the elephant needs to be mothered. It needs to be comforted, to be petted and stroked, jostled and teased. It needs to be cheered up like a mopey old dog.

Bonnie knows she can ride it. The elephant trusts her. From high up on its huge, bony boulder of a head she will guide it away from its pain and misery. The elephant knows this!

The elephant moves toward Bonnie. It lowers its head and curls its trunk. It will take her up high. The elephant pushes against the side of the cage, and the

bars fall away with a crash.

Bonnie takes the elephant westward. She rocks along, the elephant's ears flapping below her, through the circus encampment. She crosses Route 7, splashes through Phelp's Creek, climbs into the sweet-smelling woods. Bonnie steers with the gentle pressure of her knees, and the elephant picks its way in the direction she has chosen. She will save this elephant! By first light they'll be high up in the mountains, moving steadily, surrounded by the singing of birds. They'll stay away from roads, eventually turn north and head for Canada. They'll be afraid of nothing. Bonnie won't stop. She won't let them cage her again. She's the one and only Elephant Queen, and she's leaving it all behind.