Keith J. Powell

**Elephants**

Sit. Have a beer with me. Just one. It’s never too early. Besides, I’m celebrating. Guess where I just spent the night. Close. I spent the night as a ward of the state. That’s right. Kidnapping. I kid you not. They just let me out like an hour ago.

I appreciate you not asking me if I did it by the way. I really do. It’s an ugly accusation. One of those things you can’t really put behind you no matter how hard you try. It’s going to pretty much ruin me here I imagine. No one is going to hire an ESL teacher who’s been accused of kidnapping a six-year old girl regardless of the circumstances, or the good intentions, or how everything eventually shook out. Once this misunderstanding is cleared up—and it is a misunderstanding just in case you were wondering— it’s not going to matter that I didn’t do anything wrong. Like I said, the damage is in the saying of the thing. You can’t take it back. You can’t make people forget.

So I’m done here in Korea is what I’m saying. I’ve got no reason left to stay. Which is just fine with me, really. I mean, is there anything more miserable than Seoul during the summertime anyway? Cheers.

\*

I wish you could have been there to see how happy Mihyun was when we got to the elephant cage. That’s the real kicker here. Mihyun was crying she was so happy. I scooped her up and held her close to the railing pointing at the two elephants. They were massive and gray. One of the elephants, the larger of the two, lifted his trunk in the air like it was waving. I took Mihyun’s hand and waved back. I set her down on the pavement and leaned forward against the railing to watch. It was so hot. I could feel the heat just radiating up from the asphalt. My phone started to vibrate in my pocket. It was Jiyeon— my ex. I knew it was her, so I didn’t answer.

\*

The day started off so vanilla too. I showed up at Mihyun’s apartment near the 63 building. They live in one of those giant cement apartment buildings— the kind you see all over Seoul— the ones that look like Saltine boxes turned on end. Mihyun’s mom, Mrs. Kim, let me into the apartment. It’s this huge sterile place, all white tile and cream wallpaper up on the twenty-eighth floor. It’s always nice and cool in there. Even if they weren’t paying me for the lesson, I’d come over just to get out of the heat.

Mrs. Kim was dressed in her usual Korean upper-class casual, tan pants and a floral blouse, her black hair trimmed to her shoulders, and of course a pearl necklace with matching earrings. She looked sad. There were bags under her eyes like day-old bruises. She always looked so sad these days— but I’ll get to that later.

\*

It wasn’t that I was avoiding Jiyeon exactly. I just didn’t know what to say to her. We had only communicated through texts since the incident and I thought it was probably best to keep it that way.

\*

Mihyun came into the room with her mom walking behind her, her mom’s hands pressed against her back scooting her forward like a puck across ice. Mihyun’s arms were crossed and she was clutching a book to her chest.

“Hello, Teacher,” she said. She was always so happy to see me.

“Hello, Mihyun,” I said. “What do you have there?”

“A book. We can read it?” she asked, her eyes fixed to the floor.

“Can we read it?” I said, correcting her.

“Can we read it?” she said.

“Absolutely.” I patted the couch and she hopped up onto the sofa. My phone buzzed. I flipped it open. It was Jiyeon.

*Will you have the money?*it asked.

I flipped the phone closed.

\*

I met Mr. Kim— Mihyun’s father— once. It was when I first started. He answered the door, and he didn’t look great. Sickly, you know? It’s hard to describe. He made me think of a party balloon that has begun to deflate after a few days. His skin seemed thin and hung loose over his features. I remember grimacing at how clearly I could see the veins in his neck when he spoke. I never saw him after that, but I guess I never really thought too much about it. I figured he just worked a lot like the father of every other student I had.

\*

I remember last year Jiyeon and I were supposed to go to the countryside. We were going camping. It was so hot, like it always is, you know? At the last minute I told her I just couldn’t do it. The heat would bake me. We ended up spending the day at this park instead. I don’t even remember the name of the park. How weird is that? Anyway, we were at the park and I got to talking about the trees. I couldn’t tell you why. And so Jiyeon tells me growing up Arbor Day was a national holiday. They’d get the day off from school and all the kids would go out and plant trees. I asked her why and she looked at me and goes, “Goddamn Japanese took all our trees.” I’d never heard her swear before. I started laughing so hard I had to sit down on the grass, laughing so hard I was crying even. And the whole time I’m cackling and rolling on the ground, I’m thinking to myself, *Yeah, I could do this. I could do this.*

\*

A few weeks went by and I showed up for my normal lesson with Mihyun, only Mrs. Kim didn’t answer the door. Mihyun’s aunt did. She stopped me from coming inside and stepped out into the hall to tell me the news about Mr. Kim. She also told me not to say anything to Mihyun because the family hadn’t told her yet. Auntie says,Mihyun’s mom is too upset and waiting for the right time. I was pretty floored by this naturally. Talk about denial. When exactly is it going to be a good time to tell your young daughter her dad is dead? It’s not like she’s just going to forget about him like a broken toy or something. Avoiding it isn’t going to make it go away.

For weeks I showed up at the door and I would brace myself for the big hurt. The only thing is it never came. Mrs. Kim was feeling it that’s for certain. Each week she opened the door and I could see it. Grief. Real and up close, hanging around her so heavy I thought she might collapse. In the moments between knocking on their front door and waiting for her to answer it, I found myself wondering what Mrs. Kim would do next. She was a housewife with no source of income that I knew of. I wondered if she had any kind of a degree. I wondered if they would have to move out of their palatial apartment. I wondered if she would cancel my lesson with her daughter.

\*

Mihyun was reading to me from a book of hers called *Ella the Elegant Elephant*. I was correcting her pronunciation, quizzing her on vocabulary and such. Mrs. Kim walked into the room with her purse tucked under her arm.

“I have to go out now,” she said. I could hear it in her voice that she had been crying. “I will return in one half hour.”

“Okay,” I said.

Mrs. Kim walked away and waved to Mihyun. She offered me a weak smile and put on a pair of large black sunglasses. Then she turned and left. That’s right, she just left! She left me alone with her daughter so she could go run some errands or whatever. I mean, what kind of a parent does that? Leaves their child alone with a virtual stranger? Had she stayed and looked after her daughter I wouldn’t be here right now, that much is certain. Had she done her duty as a parent this all would have been avoided. I mean, far be it from me to cast stones, but if I were a parent there is no way I would leave my daughter alone with someone I hadn’t vetted a thousand times over. There’s just no way.

\*

I only met Jiyeon’s parents the one time. A dinner at their house—kalbi, homemade kimchi, and that murky looking broth I call Han River soup. There was a big hoopla in the run up to the dinner itself. On the taxi ride over, I remember holding Jiyeon’s hands; I remember them shaking.

Her mom seemed to like me okay. She was neutral at the very least. Her father didn’t seem very impressed though. But in my defense, I remember I had a pretty wicked hangover and wasn’t feeling particularly impressive.

\*

After Mrs. Kim left, Mihyun and I read on and finished *Ella the Elegant Elephant*.

“Okay,” I said. “Why don’t you go ahead and get us another book to read.”

Mihyun slipped off the sofa and dashed into her room. She returned a moment later with a copy of *The Story of Babar*.

“You really like elephants, huh?” I asked.

Mihyun nodded. “They are so fun,” she said.

“They are so funny,” I said.

“They are so funny,” she said.

“Have you ever seen a real elephant?”

Mihyun shook her head, her ponytail flipping from side to side.

“That’s too bad. You should make your mom take you to the zoo sometime.”

Mihyun’s face lit up. “Daddy will take me when he comes home,” she said.

Confused, I shook my head. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding furiously.

“And where is he now?”

Miyhun’s smile dissolved. Her features scrunched together in careful consideration. She shook her head.

“You don’t know?” I asked.

She shook her head again.

“Who told you he would take you to the zoo?”

“Daddy. He said before he go.”

“He said so before he went.”

Mihyun nodded. She began chewing on her lower lip. She looked so sweet there with her big round glasses; it made me furious to know she was in for such heartbreak. Who were these parents of hers?

“Do you want to go to the zoo now?” I asked.

I was as surprised as Mihyun by the offer. I hadn’t known I was going to say it. Mihyun put a finger over her lips and considered the offer. She began to twist back and forth at the waist.

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I think I wait for Daddy,” she said.

“Oh come on. You don’t want to wait. Let’s go right now.”

Mihyun shook her head. “I want to go with Daddy.”

It was too much for me. I put my hand on her shoulder. “Sweetie, your Daddy would want you to go with me. Now go get ready. We’re going to the zoo.”

Mihyun waited for a minute, not moving.

“Trust me this will be so much fun, just the two of us.” I took her hand and led her to the door to get her shoes.

\*

I left a note for Mrs. Kim on the counter before we left. I said we were going on a field trip and would be back soon and not to worry.

Outside it was miserable. The humidity was smothering. My shirt was damp by the time we flagged down a taxi and climbed into the backseat.

I had never been to the Seoul Zoo before and had to ask Mihyun to tell the driver where to take us. My Korean’s not that great. Bar Korean most people would call it. Jiyeon was always pushing me to learn but I figured why bother? Everybody here wants to learn English anyway.

\*

Traffic was heavy on the bridge. We kept our windows rolled up against the smog and the heat. The only sound was the perpetual *hush* of the air conditioning. Mihyun sat behind the driver, her short legs dangling, not reaching the floor. Her seatbelt was fastened, a habit I had long since abandoned since moving to Korea. She was gazing out at the city skyline and the mountains in the distance, her small hand pressed against the window. She was such a good kid. She didn’t deserve a mother who left her with strangers, a father who made promises he couldn’t keep, who smoked himself into a grave forty years before his time.

I checked the text message from Jiyeon again.

I typed a response. *I’m doing my best.*  I hit send and pointed my phone at Mihyun and snapped a picture. She turned to look at me.

“Smile,” I said. Mihyun shook her head. “Come on smile. Say Kimchi.” She shook her head again. “Come on, Mihyun, aren’t you excited to go to the zoo? To see the elephants?”

“I want to go with Daddy,” she said.

“Well, your Daddy isn’t here, so I’m taking you. Now come on, smile.”

Mihyun offered me a pair of peace signs. “Kimchi,” she said.

I took the photo and sent it to Jiyeon.

\*

I bought her a ring once. I’ve never told anyone that before. I bought it at this shop near Namyang Station. I was walking by to catch the bus and saw it in the window and well— it was sort of an impulse thing I guess. I still have it. I never gave it to her. The timing never seemed right. I couldn’t think of the right words, I guess.

\*

Korean zoos are horrible places. They’re not like Western zoos where people at least make an effort to give the animals space. All the cages at a Korean zoo are tight little boxes, all cement and steel with no room to move, no room to breathe. The smell is awful. The thick meaty funk of hair and shit and cooked food made my eyes water. It was especially bad that day because of the heat. The place was mobbed, too. You wouldn’t think so many people would be out in such brutal weather but I bet half of Seoul was there that afternoon.

\*

We were walking past the brown bears when I felt a text message from Jiyeon.

*Who is that?*she asked.

*Mihyun.My student*. I sent back.

I looked at the brown bear in its tiny cage. It barely had room to move. It was slumped over on its side on a pathetic bed of straw, like a boat run ashore, its matted fur rising and falling as it breathed in the hot smoggy Seoul air. I waited a second and then sent Jiyeon another message. *Her dad can’t take her to the zoo so I am.*  I read the message again and then added a final line. *I’d be a good father*.

Maybe it was a little spiteful to have included that last bit but I couldn’t help myself. I took Mihyun’s hand and we began to walk.

“You know, Mihyun,” I said. “You can think of me like your Daddy too, if you want to. I just mean— if you ever want to talk, you can talk to me. Do you understand?”

Mihyun looked up at me. She chewed her bottom lip.

“Cause he might not always be here, you know? You’re daddy. He might go away and not come back. If that happens though, you can count on me. Okay?”

She didn’t answer.

“Okay?” I asked again, shaking her arm.

Mihyun nodded and looked away at a cage full of flamingos on her right.

\*

The last time I actually saw Jiyeon and spoke to her, her eyes looked like pools of gasoline. Shimmering and toxic.Combustible. I shouted something at her I shouldn’t have. It was mean and ugly and I’m not going to make excuses for it other than to say I didn’t have all the information at the time, she hadn’t told me yet, and that if I could do it over differently I would.

\*

The elephant pens were small. I mean really small. There were two of them with an elephant in each cell. It reminded me of old cartoons with circus animals, the way they barely fit. You see it in real life and you have to sort of wonder what those creatures could have ever done to deserve to end up in such a place.

I watched the two elephants in their cage for what felt like hours. I wondered if they were related. Siblings.Distant cousins.Parent and child. My mind wandered I guess. I honestly couldn’t tell you how long I stood there against the hot metal railing watching them shuffle about behind those black bars.

The smaller of the two reached its trunk between the bars and touched the trunk of the larger one. I don’t know why, but I reached out to take Mihyun’s hand. That’s when I realized she was gone. Panic flooded my system like water escaping a broken jar. I stepped back from the rail and spun around but I couldn’t find her. That’s when I saw the two police officers. The younger one walking towards me while the older one held a protective hand out in front of Mihyun, separating us— like I might try to attack her or something.

\*

You ever had the privilege of spending a night under the care and protection of the Korean National Police Agency? Did you know they have their own part of the jail especially for foreigners? They do, and I had it all to myself last night. It’s funny, right, so there I am all alone in the cell, and it’s so hot, so hot, and all I could think about were those elephants. I kept trying to go back over the day, over everything that led me to where I ended up, but I just kept coming back to the elephants and the way they looked behind those bars, the way the little one looked reaching out to touch the bigger one.

\*

They let me out this morning. Maybe Mrs. Kim found the note. I don’t know. I didn’t ask. I just know that once word gets around, I’m finished.

\*

Let me buy another round before you go. Just one more. This is my going-away party, remember.

\*

There was a time— a brief time maybe— but there was a time when I thought that maybe this was going to be my life, you know? I really saw where I was headed and I was okay with that. I think maybe I was even excited for it.

\*

What was I talking about again?

\*

Maybe Thailand is the answer. Easy money, warm weather, beautiful girls over in Phuket. They do this full moon party every month that is just unreal. I could rent a bungalow next to the ocean and still have plenty of money to get drunk on Thai rum every night. No worries. No responsibilities. What more could a person want from life?