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The White Elephant

by Mari Syrad

Her pale skin shone pearlescent like the light reflecting fur of a stricken polar bear left alone to die on a drifting crack of ice. The girl was beautiful like a china doll playing the role of a real girl, her life coloured only by grief and a single rule: to be seen but not heard. She would wait for their attention as her mother and father entertained, lips united in a polite smile, pursed tightly to suppress her illegal screams.

When her mother died, her father gave her a small, white, porcelain elephant. A gift to remember her by. She treasured it above all other possessions, keeping it in a dark green velvet pouch, the drawstrings tightly pulled for safety. Taking the toy turned talisman out to admire became a ritual for the girl who felt soothed as she fingered the dips and curves of the animal, distracting her briefly from the memory of her mother's dying screams.

After the funeral, she waited for her life to continue. It was as though time had got caught, like a glitch on a record, and her mother's laughter that used to echo in the walls of the house had now died to a whisper. Her father spent his time in the study unable to even raise his eyes and look at his daughter, whose white skin bore the same hue as her mother's. It had become a house of ghosts caught between one world and the next.

The white elephant had become the only link to her former life, and the ritual had become a compulsion, the only way to stop the racing thoughts that ran rapidly behind her glassy eyes. She carefully pulled the fine strings of the velvet bag, and reaching in, clutched with forefinger and thumb, the delicate tusk of the elephant. But as she did so, an urgent wind blew the tree branches like a shot gun against the windowpane. Startled, she dropped the elephant which struck the corner of the dressing table on its way to land.

She knew without looking that all was now lost. Reaching down, she felt for the pieces of the elephant, which had cracked perfectly in two. Revealed within it was a thin strip of cotton, pristine, baked within the clay. There were three words written on the paper: 'Wait For It'.

The girl heard another finger tap of branches lashing out of the night, snapping her out of the shock of the moment to pull the heavy crimson curtains closed against the dark. She smoothed a wisp of hair behind her ear and returned her gaze to the elephant. Her eyes caught her reflection in the mirror as she did so and where they were glass before, her eyes were now kiln-fire.

Blinking through the flames she saw with horror that a segment of her face, from hairline to ear to upper lip, was no longer skin but bone, gleaming skull where her face should have been. Raising her hands to her mouth she brushed the other still flesh cheek, which fell away until her whole face gleamed the same porcelain as the broken elephant.

Looking down, her fingers were stripped, bloodless, pulling at her clothes, she tore away the lifeless skin until she stopped dead still, her fused ivory silhouette now complete, her silence giving way to permanent stasis. It was the paralysis of grief embodied.