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Marriage and Elephants

by Juliet Robinson

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. A true believer in magic. My friend Joan and I were walking round a frozen pond. Both of us were lovelorn and we were spurring each other on to higher states of emotional misery.

Joan had just been chucked by Tait. He had ended their one-week relationship in the middle of the dining hall in front of everyone! The humiliation. By the end of the day, he had been going steady with Sue Hamilton. I've always had a tendency towards melancholia so my unrequited passion for Terry was a pleasing scab to pick at.

Deep in the throes of angsty pain I picked up a stone and began tossing it in the air. Joan shot me a sideways glance, clearly worried I was going to smack her in the face by accident. I smiled at her then pointed at the mouldering statue in the middle of the pond.

'If I can get this stone in the jar the lady's holding, Terry will ask me to marry him tomorrow!'

Joan laughed and picked up a stone of her own. 'It's an urn,' she corrected. 'If I can, Tait and Sue will be squished by an elephant!'

We giggled and launched our missiles. Much to our surprise they both hit, we hooted with amusement and went on our way.

The next morning I was late to school; our car having broken down again. I was sent to Mrs Glenn's for a dressing down. On the way to her office, I was waylaid by a crowd of excited people, Terry was in their midst. He saw me and pushed through the crowd, his eyes were locked on me, though he wore a vacant slack jawed expression.

He fell to his knee and proffered an open ring box, in which a gaudy stocking filler type ring glistened.

‘Marry me, Amanda!’

I burst out laughing. He looked ridiculous and the ring, yuck. In that moment my young love for him was cured. But my laughter provoked him. His face contorted, he stood abruptly the ring box clattering to the ground and he launched himself at me. His hands fastened round my neck, I fell backwards onto the hard tiled floor and into blackness.

I woke in a busy hospital ward, my mum’s worried face peering down at me. I gingerly sat up and saw that Joan was also there. She gave me a meaningful look as my mum flustered and adjusted my pillows.

‘Can I have some water please?’ I croaked.

‘Of course, darling.’ My mum said. She clucked at the empty water jug, grabbed it and bustled off.

Joan reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper, leant forward and passed it to me. It was a poster for Chipperfield’s Circus, emblazoned with a huge elephant.

‘No.’ I protested. ‘No!’ This didn’t calm Joan, whose eyes were panicked, but at that moment my mum arrived with a nurse and that was the end of our conversation.

The next day I was allowed home. My parents collected me from the hospital, though dad waited outside smoking in the car and reading his newspaper. He rolled the window down and wafted the paper to clear the smoke as mum helped me into the car.

‘How are you pickle?’ he asked as he passed the paper to me in the back seat and started the engine.

‘Fine,’ I replied, scanning the front page of the paper.

Elephant escapes from Circus, two killed in freak accident.

I would like to say Joan and I learned our lesson and that we only threw stones into the urn when we wanted important wishes. But that wouldn’t be true, we were twelve-year-olds who had just come into incredible power.