

Paper Elephants

by Frankie Saxx

The last elephant had been a cantankerous old bull, the lone member of his species in a vast preserve. The warden speculated he broke through the fence in search of other elephants. He could not have known he was the last.

An emergency hearing in the capitol declared the last elephant a public hazard and one hundred permits to hunt the last elephant were issued by lottery. Before the conservationists could rally an appeal, a bullet the size of a man's fist felled the last elephant among coarse sage scrub where, a decade earlier, a rolling plain of golden wheat surrounded the town. Rich elephant blood flowed from the wound and drained into the cracked earth.

Aiden's grand-da was there on the day the last elephant died. A picture of him hung above the mantel in Aiden's parents den. In the photo, his grand-da was Aiden's age and stood to one side, among an unsmiling collection of dusty, overalled town boys. All old men now, the ones that weren't buried in the hard, dead earth. The focus of the picture was on Pamela Brooker, a minor celebrity with a show on the Big Game channel and the woman who fired the shot that killed the last elephant. She posed, grinning and triumphant in a camouflage bikini, atop the immobile carcass of the last elephant, large bore rifle raised above her head.

"What was it like, the elephant?" Aiden asked one afternoon in the cozy workshop of his grand-da's garage where Aiden tore newspaper against the edge of a ruler to get long straight strips for the paper mache while his grand-da cut and twisted wire into an elephant shaped frame.

"I never saw an elephant alive but that once," he told Aiden. "I rode with some of Brooker's people out on the plain to find the elephant."

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They had five, six of these Jeeps, each with a driver and a couple hunters with those big dart guns. They took some local boys to help 'em find the tracks and avoid the gulches. They went out for the elephant first, sedated it so Ms. Brooker could bring it down easy."

In front of the cameras, Pamela Brooker made a show of gifting the corpse of the last elephant to the town. After the publicity photos and scripted footage of the mayor thanking her wrapped, Brooker's people severed the tusks and feet and penis of the last elephant and packed their trophies into boxes. Later, on her show, she would reinvent the last elephant as a dangerous rogue, terror of the prairie town.

The people of the town stood in clusters, discarded props, as the crew produced a bottle of champagne and glasses. The production assistant popped the cork and foam cascaded down the neck of the glossy bottle, dribbling to earth and mingling with the blood of the last elephant.

After the film crew left, the people loaded the body of the last elephant on an old hay wagon. It took two dozen men. They towed it into town behind an old John Deere that rattled and grunted all the way, its engine rusty from disuse. The last elephant died at the peak of the famine and its body was a gift the town could not afford to waste.

"I never could eat a mouthful," said Aiden's grand-da, "Not after I saw it out there like a moving mountain on the prairie. But I guess it got some folks through that wouldn't made it otherwise."

On the anniversary of the day the last elephant died, all the elephants from the town were secured on wheeled plywood platforms. Their builders took up ropes tied through holes at the

front of the platforms and pulled their creations to the flat, hard-packed expanse in front of Town Hall, still called the town green. Once, Aiden's grand-da said, it was a grassy space where lovers kissed and the town's children played.

There were fat, fantastic, psychedelic elephants in vibrant greens and neon pinks and purples and sky blues. There was the Fire Department's elephant, fire-engine red. There were glossy black elephants with long elegant tails and warm bronze elephants with lush manes. There was the Police Department's metallic blue elephant with raised golden sherrif's stars. There were elephants covered in glitter and sequins and velvet flocking.

Every year there were fewer of the stone gray elephants with the thick legs and fan-like ears. Aiden's grand-da's elephant was always one of these. His, and those of the other old men who were boys the day the last elephant died.

"Why can't we paint ours orange this year?" Aiden had asked.

"Because that's not how elephants looked," his grand-da said.

On the green, people drank soda pop or nipped from flasks and talked with those around them. Children chased each other, darting between the legs of elephants. When the town bell struck noon, the whole green began to move. A snaking line of elephants rolled through the town, past the ropes cordoning off the out of town spectators where cameras flashed and onlookers cheered.

At the border of the the town, no longer confined by narrow streets and crowds, the elephants spread out across the prairie in a great, rainbow colored herd, all converging on the place where the last living elephant fell.

