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Octavius

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Octavius

When you have money, your house gets a name instead of a number. For example, I do not live at 782 Maplecrest Road. I live at the Mitchell estate with my parents: THE Mr. and Mrs. Bailey Mitchell. The respect and power of that name has been replaced by stories and whispers in the past three years or so of our notoriety. With that you get a street crowded with people wearing Bermuda shorts and wielding disposable Kodak cameras ready and eager to snap up a piece of myth. A lot of my father's money has gone into rubbing out that myth from the television and the news, but I can still see small reminders of Octavius. His dusty dirt paths still slice up the gardens, and when the sun shines right, you can still see the splotches of red paint that Mason has never been able to scrub off the black iron gate that's constructed by necessity across our driveway. It has been extended since with security cameras and guards to block out the crazies, but they do not really come around like they did before when the story first was made public. It's not talked about either. Maybe people are not interested anymore, but at the time, they were.

It's not every day that an eccentric billionaire buys his dying daughter an elephant.

Now I don't want that to sound melodramatic because it isn't. I'm still dying and have been for the last 5 years. It something I have gotten used to. The whole story only started as some minor human interest by a poor fool that was past his deadline. The picture he snapped was actually quite beautiful when you consider that he hung from the bouncing branches of a weeping willow in order to get it. It was of me sprawled across the back of Octavius as he dipped his trunk into our fountain for a drink. I kept it next to my bed until my mother took it away. I was twelve at the time of the picture and was wearing the uniform from my private school, Our Lady of the Oaks. My skin, even then when I was only starting to show visible signs of my illness, had a milky Elmer's glue quality, but back then my blonde hair was shinier, my teeth whiter. My eyes were closed in complete childish contentment. I used to lie like that on his back for hours as he systematically trampled every prize winning rose my mother had ever planted.

My father had seen me like that at my eleventh birthday party orchestrated with a festive circus theme by my mother. The whole day had been a success by her estimation. The hard worked clowns sat scattered about in the aftermath smoking cigarettes. They had taken off their long flat shoes and were waving them back and fourth in defense of the sticky summer air and the rabid flies that longed for a taste of their running makeup. All the workers regarded their cleanup duties with one eye and me with the other as I sidled up to the large yellow truck that had the word "Octavius" scrawled across the side in blue letters. A huge, bald, black man, the same who had led Octavius through a repertoire of simple tricks to the delight of fifty or so 5th graders, stood plucking rhinestones from the elephants large African ears. He was small for an elephant as he was still bit of a baby. Standing at my full height, I could look right at his huge brown eyes that were barely visible through a curtain of thick lashes. My gaze once or twice flickered towards the man whose large left hand was filling to the brim with plastic gems supplied by his busily working right hand. The darkness of his face cracked open to reveal two rows of perfectly white teeth. He said nothing to me, but after he had emptied his hands

into a large Ziploc bag, he hung his hands clasped down between his knees and beckoned me to him. I put one of my delicately shod feet into his hands and was positioned between Octavius' ears before I realized that I was moving. His ears slapped playfully at my knees, and I giggled loudly as the man applauded. He was laughing too. I looked up and saw my father standing on our back porch with his usual glass of Scotch. The black man left that day with a small folded piece of paper and an empty truck.

My father sold one of our seventeen BMW's and made a stall for my baby elephant in the empty space. I spent many long afternoons with Octavius up until around the time that the picture by the fountain was taken. After that I could no longer go outside, but that had more to do with my health than the couple of local news trucks that showed up shortly thereafter. Instead of moving into the hospital, the hospital moved into one of the spare bedrooms on the first floor. My lungs worsened and the doctor recommended plastic sheeting that had to be hung in a tent-like canopy from the ceiling to just past my knees. An armed guard was eventually posted outside of the window after a British photographer managed to climb the fence and snap a picture of me there wrapped in plastic like a white chocolate Easter bunny. The story that had started so benignly catapulted into a full-scale media blitz. It lasted forever. After the medical stories dissecting my unheard of sickness dried up, the focus shifted to Octavius himself and a group of crazies who bore the distinction of having 11 season passes at zoos revoked for what they called "liberation of god's creatures." They'd been on the news two years before for releasing a cage of howler monkeys into San Diego. The granola munchers of Southern California had cheered this heroic act until the little beasts had shown up on their windowsills and birdbaths, screeching their gospel at the tops of their puny monkey lungs. These same liberators stationed themselves outside my family's front gate. The police were pretty sure it was them that scribbled "INDEPENDENCE FOR OCTAVIUS" in red paint across the black bars, but no one had technically witnessed them doing it.

"Independence," my mother had sneered. She had stood next to my bed the morning after they wrote it and blocked my view of the growing group of angry sign holders. She sipped nervously at her morning coffee as she measured out my medicines. "What do they want? For us to set him up in a Malibu condo with his own line of credit?" I turned and stared out the window at Octavius who was blithely walking our same old path without me. All day for months he paced back and forth until lines were worn into the grounds, and Jose, the gardener, quit as a token of his indignation. Everyday, I asked my mother if I could go out, just for a little while and she would insist again that I wait until I was a little bit better. I had to content myself with only watching him. The plastic sheet distorted my view of the yard that now seemed so much smaller and Octavius so much bigger. It also muffled sounds. The night the gun went off, I rolled over and closed my eyes again convinced that it was thunder.

Not only did the person shoot Octavius between the eyes while he slept, he left a letter that included Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech altered for the occasion and written out entirely in magazine clippings. In the end, the assassin claimed that Octavius' murder was an assisted suicide and that he had no ill regrets. That is the information that I managed to piece together. My parents won't ever talk about Octavius.

I wish that they would because my world of dreams and my world of reality

have melted into one another so much that I can barely tell the difference anymore. That's what happens when you spend this much time in bed being told to rest. I still stare out of that window at the dirt lines and convince myself that an elephant named Octavius left them there. I try to remember looking into his eyes and knowing exactly what he was saying. It keeps me from having to stare into my reflection in the plastic, because I can hear what those eyes are saying. I hear it all day, over and over again until I want to scream. Sometimes I do.

—Suzanne Hodsdon '03