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Elephant

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By: Rebecca Costello

Muted sunlight pushes through the dusty window, struggling to find a place to rest. An opening door scatters the beams, casting a shadow on the smallest table where a tiny girl sits. I'm told she's sat at that table for three years. I am the first to see her there. My heart shatters for not knowing her until now. I follow her gaze to a bookshelf across from her. It is crowded with children's books and childish games. She stares for the sake of staring, completely uninterested in the view.

I'm too young to be a mother, I think. All the paperwork has gone through and I no longer have a choice. Long dark curls cover the girl's nametag. "I'm Bridget," I say. The girl looks up. I look down. Her small face, framed by sunlight, is blank. I'm still standing in the doorway. I hesitate to speak, worried about saying something that will upset her. If she doesn't like me, will they change their minds? My mother was nineteen. I am just four years older.

"Alyssa," the girl finally says, pulling at the chair next to her. As I sit, she stands and moves away. Frustrated at my failing attempts, I stand to go after her. "No, no," says Alyssa. "Just wait." She goes over to a bookcase, one of many lining the room, and pulls out a box. The faded maroon color almost masks the only slightly brighter word "Scrabble." I study her as she sets up the board and carefully counts out seven squares for each of us. Her sweater is too big, her sneakers are doodled on, her nail polish is barely there. Her face is reserved, while her eyes, her wandering eyes, make her so vulnerable. She looks anywhere but at me. I try to compare her to myself, but she continues to avoid my gaze.

Alyssa scrutinizes her tiles, concentrating. A minute passes. She lays her first word on the board: P-L-A-N. Her gray eyes move their stare to me; I wanted this, but now it only scares me. Her nose is mine, I see it now. I wonder at her mouth; it must belong to her mother. I'll never know. The "L" on the board jumps out at me. Flicking back and forth between the board and my tiles, I can't believe my luck. I place my own letter carefully, trying to have as much concentration as my opponent. Alyssa looks down at the word, E-L-E-P-H-A-N-T. Triple word score. She smiles for the first time. My heart constricts at the sight of my father's face, at the smile I haven't seen in almost a year. Alyssa is his copy in every way except for the secrets that he kept for so long.

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Johnny Longstreet and the Chapel-gate

By: Robert Stewart

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I was standing in the parking lot near the Chapel the day I first met Johnny. I was at the freshman orientation for East Coast Christian University in 1983. A brand new grey '74 Nash Rambler came speeding around Old Main, the administrative and classroom building, and came to a screeching halt in front of me.

The driver rolled down the window and hollered, "Y'all get in. We're late, man." I rushed around the front of the car got in. Before I got the door completely closed, he was laying rubber across the parking lot.

We tore down the winding gravel road to the entrance of the campus, pulled onto Bel Air Road, and we were two miles down the road before I realized I had no idea who this kid was or where we were going. I turned and looked at him. He was about my height, but much thinner with dark brown wavy hair. He had the look of a guy who was used to hard manual labor. His clothes certainly didn't show it, but I was sure he must have been raised on a farm. There were two Confederate flag decals on the rear side windows. The road was a two-lane, blacktop country lane. The school was located in the middle of a collection of horse ranches, on land that had once been part of a large plantation just outside the small town of Bel Air, near Baltimore, in Hartford County, Maryland. We were taking the curves on two wheels.

I turned to him and said, "Who are you, and where in the world are we going?" He looked at me with a broad grin and a devilish twinkle in his eyes and said, "I ain't sure yet, but we all are sure makin' good time."

It was at that moment that I knew I really liked this guy and we were going to become friends. We were both rebels in a conservative, bucolic, university. We were both going to get into trouble and now we would probably do it together.

"My names, Rodney, Rodney Chamberlain" I said.

"Chamberlain? Y'all a descendent of Joshua Chamberlain, fought for the Union in the Civil War?" he said with a drawl.

"Don't think so; don't know. I'm from Pittsburgh. Never been farther south than Baltimore."

"Johnny Longstreet. We all are decedents of General James Longstreet, most hated man in the South. Don't brag on that too much. But he fit for the South and was a good general in the war. Became a carpet bagger afterward though. I'm from Winston-Salem, North Carolina."

I was fascinated with his accent. He had a long drawl and a lilt in his voice. He said, "Nawth" instead of "North."

"Well, Rawdney, y'all ever had a Red Bull - not the steer, but the drink?"

"Nope, don't even know what that is; doesn't have alcohol does it? I don't think we're allowed to drink, going to a Christian College and all."

We were freshmen, of course, and unfamiliar yet with the colligate system of discipline at ECCU. While college campuses all over America were in turmoil with riots and sit-ins over the war and students rights, ECCU was virtually untouched by such shenanigans. The university was run by a group of evangelical churches and most of the students there, except for the girls, of course, were majoring in theology and hoped to become pastors some day. Most of the teachers either were, or had been pastors. They practiced something called "in loco parentis," which meant that the administration was responsible for us and had authority over us, just like our folks, and they had some really strict rules.

"Well, y'all are about to have goo-ood thing. This one's on me, Yank," he drawled.

We went to a little drive-in restaurant called "The Arctic Circle." They had some of the best ice cream, hot dogs, Philly cheese steaks, and all the other foods that weren't good for you. And, it was cheap, a college student's paradise. There were carloads of girls, mostly high school girls, everywhere. Even better, they were impressed with college guys. I had my first Red Bull, a mixture of birch beer and vanilla ice cream, and a Philly cheese steak. Got to meet a couple of real nice waitress chicks too.

We got to shooting the breeze. I learned that his daddy had a tobacco farm and he had a younger brother, Charles, who was the quiet one in the family. Apparently his folks thought Johnny was a little on the wild side, and comparison to his brother didn't help much. So they sent him to this school hoping that a Christian college would calm him down some. Were they ever wrong?

By the time we got done eating, talking and laughing our butts off at each other's stories, we realized that we were a half hour late for the orientation. We wouldn't have been so casual about it if we had known the dean of men, the dreaded Reverend Doctor, Earl Prince.

Prince was not your average clergyman. He must have descended from the hell fire and brimstone preacher, Jonathan Edwards. He could have written, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in far stronger and darker language than his notorious progenitor.

The orientation was held in the chapel which was a large room in the lower level of Old Main. It had a doorway to the outside in the rear, and a few rows further up on the left had one that led to the stairwell. There was also a wide wooden staircase in the hall on the main floor leading up through the other floors to something called "The Widow's Walk."

We entered quietly through the outside door, and sat in the back row. The academic dean was just finishing his remarks and the president was about to give his speech. We were a major violation, subject to suspension or dismissal, for a member of the opposite sex to enter the other's dorms at any time. We were informed that chapel occurred three times a week at 11:00 am, and was mandatory. Attendance would be taken. There was a demerit system and students accruing too many were subject to a whole variety of punishments.

We were dismissed to meet with our advisors to finalize our schedules for the semester, but Johnny and I never made it out the door. The portly man who had been watching us, stopped us and his glare told us we better remain seated.

"I am Dr. Prince, the Dean of Men. I realize that you two gentlemen are freshman and new to our ways here. We do not follow the same sloppy and inconsiderate practices you may have become accustomed to in your worldly secular high schools. By your tardiness you missed a very important message about academic procedures, and more importantly, your late arrival is an insult to Dean Curnning. Because I am a man of great patience I will ignore this misdemeanor, so long as you both provide Dean Curnning with a letter of apology no later than five o'clock today. Now may I have your names and student ID numbers please?" He carefully wrote them down in the book and told us he would be keeping a close eye on us.

Though we were tempted, we realized it was no use to lie to him, because the student body was so small that he would find out who we actually were at some point. We both knew that we were just going to love this guy. He went through the side door into the stairwell, and we could hear the distinctive thud of his artificial leg as he climbed the stairs. I noted that recognizing that sound might be very important in the future.

We hustled to the appointed rooms to meet with our advisors. Members of the faculty would shepherd us through the process called "matriculation," a word that always sounded slightly sexual to me. You know, like, "So, I saw you with Susan in the back seat to the car, did she matriculate yet?" I've never been especially lucky but luck was with me. I didn't get Dr. Prince for an advisor; I got President Segraves, probably the next worst thing.

Afterward we freshman had a picnic dinner on the large patio of the President's residence which was near the entrance to the campus. I couldn't find Johnny anywhere. When I got back to the dorm I learned that he had gone to Bel Air and taken the two chicks we met at the Arctic Circle to the movies.

Like I said, we had strict study hours, but they weren't enforced on the first night since we had nothing to study anyway, except the girls, which I intended to do.

The entrance to the student lounge was on the ground floor of Hobbs Hall, the residence hall I lived in. There was a stairwell that had a swinging door at the bottom which opened in both directions, but it was solid, no window. I charged down the stairs, hit the door running and it swung open - about eight inches - sleeping with a resounding thud. I slowly opened the door the other way and grimaced. There was Dr. Prince sitting on the floor shaking his head and rubbing his face. I tried to help him up, but really didn't know how to get it about that wooden leg. He recovered quickly and glared at me.

"Mr. Chamberlain," he said as he struggled to his feet, or foot, and attempted to recapture his dignity, "this is not the fun house at the carnival, sir; not Wrangling Brothers. This is twice now that you have demonstrated a dangerous lack of respect. For your sake, Chamberlain, I hope there is not a third. It would lead to grave consequences."

I never even got a chance to say I was sorry. He turned, and to my horror went through a door on the left; the door to his apartment. He lived in my dorm!

It was a Friday night, lights out was at midnight. My roommate, Dave, was a sophomore and he told me about the procedures. Dr. Prince would come out at midnight and walk around the building noting which windows were still lit. The next day the demerits would be passed out. I told him that I had made up my mind not to go to bed until I was sure Johnny was back in the dorm. Midnight came and there was no sign of him.

Dave told me not to worry. He would stay up lots of nights after lights out and Prince never knew. He went to the closet that got a big heavy blanket, army surplus, I think. He had screwed hooks behind the curtain rods. The blanket attached to the hooks and covered the window, which was really a sliding glass door leading to a balcony, completely so that no light came through the window. I later found out that almost every guy in the dorm had the same defense.

Our room was right over top of Prince's apartment. We could hear his door anytime he came or went. He had to exit into the hallway then out the front of the dorm. He could either reenter, climb a set of stairs and exit on the backside, or walk completely around the building on the grass. The former was easier with his artificial limb. There was a door at the end of the hall on either side of the second story, but he seldom used those.

I heard him go out the front and waited quietly for him to count. I heard the hallway door open and Prince coming up the steps with the wooden leg going screech-thud on each step. Then I heard him go out the back. I went to the bathroom, and while I was washing my hands a set of headlights lit up the window. Could it be... Oh, God! This would be the worst time for Johnny to get back.

I heard Prince come back and stumble quickly down the stairs. He had evidently seen the headlights too. Before Prince got out was getting out, I was out the side door and turning as fast as I could around the dark campus to the parking lot. I caught John just as he was the front door and dragged him down behind another vehicle just as Prince came out the front door.

"John, I hope you had a lot of fun, cause now you got both of our butts in trouble. Prince is checking lights out and he saw your headlights. Didn't you read the rules?"

"Well, sure, but no southern gentleman would leave a poor girl stranded. I had to take them home."

"And I would bet you made a stop for them to see the Bay from Carver's Lane, didn't you?"

"Y'all would bet you made a stop for them to see the Bay from Carver's Lane, didn't you?"

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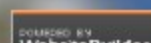
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The World , a Candle, The Sun, its Flame

By: Kody Blankenship

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Just off Ocean Boulevard in the southern state of South Carolina the boardwalk smoothly turns to sand so as to discretely disappear into the beach. This is an area of liveliness, a majestic mound of minerals where people gather like ants on a freshly cut strawberry; where condominiums take the forms of far away forests the father down you gaze and, beautifully, with a ceaseless drive, waves crash and recoil. At times a miniature flash occurs on the horizon of the sea, a distant storm that can't even be heard by the smallest mouse perched on the pier, and pulls your thoughts into the depths of the nautical night.

Below the starless sky and sea, which lies awake through the night, your focus is averted to the line of Mr. Bill Marlin, who slouches on his bench eager to hook a fish of some kind. His pole is lengthy and thick, and is held in his gnarly grasp below his weather-beaten beard. It appears that he had been sitting there for several hours waiting for something to show up at the end, and his pole, bent a little reflecting the weights of the fishes that had come before, was motionless. You see his potbelly placed upon his lap, and know that despite his rugged appearance, he is well fed, and wisdom radiates from him like sunrays. Waves crash into the pier, causing the structure to sway slightly, suggesting an eerie feeling.

The condominiums are set in a winding row along the boardwalk and when the sun begins to set in the evenings, the moon has appeared and pulls people out of their rooms with almost as force as it pulls the tides. I have traveled there each summer since the month of my birth, and because of this summer ritual, I met Daniel for the first time.

He and I have since kept the tradition of traveling there year after year, as we are together now. We headed toward the boardwalk after becoming bored watching Mr. Marlin be unsuccessful with his fish tonight. The air smelled of salt, barbeque, and roasted almonds. Wanderers pass us as we make our way down the paved part of the block, the ocean front property in which a skyscraper has yet to clutter the space where the beautiful body can be seen by all. Small black bugs scurry toward the sand as our heavy feet thump the boards they often call home.

In the distance we could hear a band playing on the lawn; shag music reverberated off of every vertical wall in the vicinity. I twirled out onto the square signaling for Daniel to follow. We set this trend, as many others joined in. The band smiled as the crowd expanded, and at the end of that song requests spurted off the lawn like the lights from a sparkler on the fourth of July. Many clutched their drinks and tilted their talking heads toward one another. The women were scantily clad in two-piece swimsuits and transparent dresses with stylish, thin flip-flops on their feet. Men wore knee-length khaki shorts and plain light colored long-sleeved tees. Some wore no shirt at all. Their larger sandals adorned with two large buckles each hung from the railing of the walk way for the sand would likely resist washing out these compared to the thin, seamless shoes upon the dainty feet of women.

At the end of the beachfront concert, fireworks were launched from the sand and exploded in the sky like turbo-charged shooting stars. Almost every color of the rainbow was represented at this time. In contrast of a soft, faint rainbow painted across the sky that lasts for more than a moment, these fireworks were erotic, and could be missed in sight by the blink of an eye; however, they could be heard clearly by even a man such as Mr. Marlin, who is ninety percent deaf. Glowing embers of what once housed the fireworks tumbled lightly to the earth, as more clouds filled up the night sky much like popcorn does to a bag as kernels pop. The air smelled of burning cardboard, masking the calm sea-scented air from once before.

At eleven we decided to return home and selected the sand over the boardwalk because the tide was low and we were only wearing sandals. The beach had dispersed leaving only the waves, the dunes, and us, such that the only sounds to be heard were swishing leaves and the roar of the mighty ocean. The cold wet sand pressed against my toes and the breeze chilled my back and blew my hair a bit. The moon glittered along the water, and dozens of seagulls clucked and swooped over the pier entrance.

The once alive shaved ice stand had been since closed up for the evening, with the brightly colored umbrella no longer remaining outdoors. Maintenance workers ambled like ghosts around the pool deck with their brooms and trashcans, and the lights of the reservation office had gone out. It sometimes feels as though the earth's a candle, burning, melting into a new form, and shrinking around the wick as the sun, the candle's flame, is full of light. When the sun is gone, the earth is as if it has been blown out, ceases to move, and the only light left is that of the moon that softly glows like embers often do after a fire has been put out.

Puffy clouds masked the stars, and gorgeous magnolia blossoms scented the path, and were illuminated by the light of the moon. We rinsed our feet of the sand and salt residue, and the rushing water was as warm as the lap that sits a plump cat. We entered the condo, changed into suitable clothing, and echoes of shag music replayed in my head. We were feeling in the mood for food, so I fixed Daniel a grilled cheese sandwich and myself lemonade. We snacked while we watched the news before bed, and soon fell victim of sleep's ship, our recent thoughts trailing in the wake.

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