

## Elephant

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The Coney Island Wonder Wheel creaked on its axis, fluorescent lights dampened by the crisp chill of the newly arrived Autumn season. The parks were closing or in the middle of settling down for the winter and the college kids returned to the semester with fresh hickeys and stories to tell. Food stalls packed up a week ago for the waning businesses and moved along now deserted streets, grazing upon tumbleweeds of Nathan's wrappers, discarded flyers for the aquarium, and used condoms. The countdown to the next hotdog eating contest glowed its scarlet lights for no one. It was overcast. The occasional gusts of wind brought to land by the chilling water smelled of funnel cakes and frying oil.

Mr. Jem pulled Gilda along with an invisible leash. He walked with a limp from a wound suffered from a shoot-out in his gangster days. Because today was the last day of the Island's summer, it was the first day of his business. He wore a bowtie and leaned on a cane with a gilded ruby on its handle. Last year he wore coattails and a top hat to hide his balding hair. This year it was reduced to wisps that held onto his liver spotted scalp with astonishing grip. His nose was so crooked from a bar fight in the eighties that his nostrils threatened to dip into his mouth.

Gilda sweat from the heavy trench coat that Mr. Jem made her wear. He said that it was important to keep their product a secret, and that sometimes seeing it in passing was enough to satisfy the curious. That was what Mr. Jem referred to it as *their* product. As if Gilda was more partner than producer. Her golden curls were tied up in a bun and held together with a scrunchie which even she knew was out of style. Mr. Jem always made her dress this way whenever they left the apartment. Over the years Gilda realized that Mr. Jem not only wanted to keep her as

concealed as possible, but also wanted to make her feel as ugly as she felt she looked. Gilda knew it worked, and she hated herself for it, among other things.

She walked behind him, her hands in the deep pockets of the coat. She played with a straightened paperclip. Mr. Jem ushered her along. He gave directions by shouting without turning his head, frustrated with her for whatever reason beyond her comprehension. He acted as if Gilda failed to remember the location they returned to at the precipice of every Autumn. They turned into an offbeat street featuring a bar which only sold two types of cheap beer and a pinball arcade that, if given enough care and marketing, could be something memorable and arguably enjoyable. Yet, year after year, summer after summer, both the bar and the people within get more old and misshapen, and the arcade falls more into the recesses of that glimmer of hope of what it once was and could, fleetingly, revive itself to be.

The crate was waiting for Gilda. It tried its best to be a pedestal and was adorned with caught pieces of trash and cigarette buds. Gilda found her footing in the familiar grooves where her feet stood the summer before. Mr. Jem fished out a spliff from his pocket, straightened it, and took a drag. Gilda looked behind her shoulder. Her chin rubbed against the soft leather of the coat and she could almost hear the cow crying in the afterlife.

Mr. Jem nodded.

Gilda undid her hair. It fell to her breasts in beautiful, perfect curls. It was buoyant and the color of the sun. She slipped her arms out from the sleeves of the trench coat and rolled her shoulders back, letting the heavy cow hide fall to the ground like a nest. Her wings unfolded with a heavy gust, scattering squashed cigarette buds at her feet. Her spine arced, her wings stretched

in the open air; four feet in each direction. And her feathers. As ivory as porcelain, as soft as any down pillow. Her wingspan was larger than most mortal men had ever seen.

When she was a chick her sisters poked fun at her particular care for her wings; how she would preen them every morning and every night. Having her wings out in the open, even under these circumstances where the chilled air dug underneath her feathers and ruffled her quills all the way from the tips to her spine, felt like a good stretch from a long sleep. Had Mr. Jem not held the chains which bound her to Earth and the land of mortal men, Gilda could have taken off and flew to the clouds where her family waited for her. Or so she believed. Or so she wanted to believe she believed.

Mr. Jem coughed into a handkerchief. He croaked, “Are you just about done yet?”

The amount of tobacco that Mr. Jem puts into his body on the daily should be enough to kill any man. There were times when Gilda thought cruel thoughts about finding him dead, his lungs closed from smoking and chewing so frequently. In theory, her immortality could wait out her captivity. But Mr. Jem will never die if he has Gilda in his gnarled grasp. People live longer in the presence of an angel. People become immortal if they own one.

“Are you?” Gilda said. Her brows furrowed. She rolled her shoulders back; her wings folded and unfolded.

A blue raspberry sour straws wrapper crawled by.

“Shut it, girl,” he said, grabbing his cane and dragging his lame leg to the front of the pedestal. He collected himself and drew in a breath. He roared into the empty alley and swung his cane with every syllable. “Come one, come all! See her, the golden gal, Gilda the Angel! Her feathers will grant you powers beyond the wildest elixirs. Grind them up and put them on your

tea—you'll get the best tonic this side of anywhere, including heaven and hell! Put one in the pillow of the blind and I promise they will see the sunrise! Her feathers will keep you young! I can attest, I am 150 years old!"

Mr. Jem was most certainly not 150 years old and both he and Gilda knew it.

The afternoon turned to dusk. The teenagers had gone home and the last lap of the Ferris Wheel had gone onto retire for the night. Funnel cake wafted through the air accompanied by the salt from the sea. The arcade to their right looked more reclusive underneath the darkening sky and the neon lights of the bar flickered with as much charm as a wink from a motel prostitute. Mr. Jem called out again to attract the skeletons and vampires which only come out at night from their coffins and graves. It was always the same people, more or less, that stopped by this alley, as if being woken by the alarms of happy hour, warm beer, and sticky bar tops.

"Stand up straight, girl," Mr. Jem said, his head turned slightly over his shoulder. A chilled breeze ran through the wisps of his hair.

Gilda stood up straight as the skeletons limped in, defeated by the long day's work and their resistance to addiction. The first functioned as both the most difficult and easiest. Gilda would spend the entire summer not harassed by Mr. Jem, who only visited her room to give her meals and take her feathers for himself. She could preen and let her feathers grow and fall away naturally. By the time the customers came, she would have enough ivory feathers ready to fall off that handing them out would be painless. However, keeping her feathers preened, fluffed, and presentable week to week provided another challenge in that she could simply not grow fast enough that she was giving away. It was like tearing off a nail not ready to depart.

Conversely, Gilda found the day to be busier because her feathers possessed an addictive quality equivalent to their demons which grasp their bodies and souls already. Drunks, meth heads, deadbeats, and all walks of the underbelly of society come to her and Mr. Jem for *their* product in droves on the first day. They had gone accustomed to the sedation from her gifts and would come scratching the welts in their arms or picking at the pockmarks in their cheeks.

Such was the individual who came to them as the sky turned a dark blue and the clouds disappeared along with the stars. He wore a beanie and looked about thirty. Gilda recognized him from years past. He lived under the boardwalk and his demon was called Hot Helga, a varietal of heroin that was once big in the nineties but has since faded into obscurity but still finds its way around squatters and poor factory workers. He scratched his neck, asking through sideways glances if Gilda's feathers would really grant him wishes. Gilda learned not to speak.

Mr. Jem answered, "As always. They keep you off the Helga for two, three weeks, yeah?" He spun his cane. "Imagine what two feathers'll do."

"I ain't got the cash for two feathers."

"One it is then," Mr. Jem said. He looked upwards to Gilda, who was already folding her left wing so she can pluck a loose feather from the tip. It was like taking an apple from a long hanging branch. She handed the man a feather, and he paid Mr. Jem with a roll of twenties wrapped in a lint glittered rubber band. He held the feather close to his cheek, moving it under his eye as if wiping away a tear, which he was. He disappeared into the bar.

The rest of the day went like this. Occasionally a man would come forward, fiddling with his thumbs, embarrassed to approach. But they were all different. Some knew of Gilda's feathers

and their healing properties from a friend of a friend. Others would come and stare at her chest and golden curls and undress her with their eyes.

“Ain’t never fucked a bird before,” they would say. Usually followed soon after by:  
“How much?”

And Mr. Jem would answer: “Ain’t selling. Only feathers.”

Gilda did not have any genitalia. No angels did. They were sexless but not passionless. They believed in the Higher Order and lived in the City of Clouds, where the only entrance was a heavily secured golden gate that tested both the deeds and misdeeds of all who approach. She trusted His royal army, led by their captain Azazel, whose wings were pointed and looked like the blades that are sometimes pulled on Mr. Jem.

The rest of the day went along like any other. Mr. Jem took Gilda out for McDonald’s. They never went to Nathan’s and Gilda never asked why. The next day was similar, and the day after that. By the end of the week her wings were bare and skeletal. When she preened her feathers at the end of each night the brush seemed to get sharper. Angels cannot bleed but she had seen many mortals do it and figured that if her biology would allow she would end each day with the cuticles of her wings dipped in blood every night.

She used to curse Mr. Jem. Occasionally she still did. Over the decades she once felt sympathy for him, believing in herself that no man was as cruel, even in grief, to enslave the very guardian angel sent to shepherd his wife from the battle of cancer to the golden gates of His name. This was a different time, then, when gangsters twiddled their mustaches and paraded around Times Square with their prostitute money and operated underground bars amidst the

heavy fist of prohibition. If there was ever a time when Mr. Jem was a good man she had not seen it.

They first met in the hospital room, his hat in his hands and his breath smelling faintly of whiskey, when his skin did not look like beaten leather and his jaw was pronounced and, Gilda would say, a fine specimen of His creation. Gilda initially posed as a distant cousin to his wife Olivia and when Mr. Jem went on his way back to the horses she leaned in close to Gilda, warm breath tickling her ear. It is against His wishes for an angel to befriend their wards, but her and Olivia had become very close as she lay on her bed faster than Gilda herself could acknowledge that she had broken a rule.

She said, “He was a good man, once. You better believe it. I am ready to die, my angelic friend. I found solace that I will meet Him because you are here.”

“I’ve failed you,” Gilda said, “I have not protected you from the horror inside your body. It was the word of our Holy that you are to be protected because you are so pure. I am sorry.”

“You’ve done right because you have eased my suffering.”

“But I’ve failed.”

She pointed to the door. “Then cure him. Remind him of the man he used to be.”

Gilda tried. At first when she revealed to him her wings and her status one late night on a Brooklyn rooftop she half expected him to begin crying as all mortals do. Instead he took a drag of his cigar and puffed it into her face. He gave her a sideways glance before looking back out over the city where the Manhattan skyline was just coming into fruition and the art deco

movement was bubbling in the frothy minds of all the dreamy eyed architects. Gilda stepped next to him. They stared across the bay in silence.

Finally, she said, “Olivia always hated that you smoked.”

“Olivia ain’t here to tell me I can’t.”

Gilda folded her right wing and plucked a feather. She handed it to him. “Here. Put this under your pillow when you sleep.”

Mr. Jem’s face wrinkled. He said, “No difference than taking the wings of a pigeon. I don’t know where you’ve been.”

Gilda pointed to the starry sky, back when the neon lights did not obscure the world above with an illusion of empty air. “I’ve been up there.” She pointed to her heart, “And with your wife. Please, sir.”

Mr. Jem took the feather and walked down from his rooftop. Gilda sat down and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her wings unfolded and stretched. The nightly breeze laced through her quills like silk. The open hair kissed her exposed back. She watched the night turn to day with a half-smile on her face. She was a good angel, and He would be proud. Mr. Jem came to her the following morning and offered her coffee. He said that when he woke he thought of Olivia and for once in fifteen years did not find the need to smoke. He said thank you.

This was the first and last time that Mr. Jem was ever truly kind to Gilda the Angel, and he never poured coffee for her ever again. Mr. Jem turned sour soon after. He brought friends over and made Gilda hide in their home office while he distributed her feathers. He called them a “miracle cure” for small maladies. Soon he brought people who were not his friends over. People

who caved to the bottle or had warts on their penises. He started charging a small fee that gradually rose to more substantial. Her feathers were ordered in bulk, and without realizing it the home office turned into Gilda's cage. Molted feathers made a down bed on the carpet, matching the scattered papers on the desk opposite of the cum-crusteD couch she was forced to sleep on. There was a golden lock on the door. When she asked why she could not come out to see the people she was healing Mr. Jem called her an idiot and said he was controlling the market.

There were times when Gilda thought that a man as greedy and vile as Mr. Jem might be an agent of the great sinner and most disappointed of His children, Lucifer. There were other times, especially during the long nights when her feathers were plucked to the cuticles and caked with blood, when she thought that her siblings had simply forgotten poor Gilda. She would weep at this thought, and weep harder at the possibility that instead they had not forgotten about her and were perhaps punishing her to teach her a lesson on her naivety of mortals and to not rise above her station. They were laughing at her.

Gilda watched and waited for Mr. Jem to die. Over the decades she watched his hair recede into wisps on his scalp and his beard turn grey. She watched his knuckles shrivel into wicked shapes, like the gnarls of a crabapple tree. She watched the limp develop and gravity get increasingly heavier on his back. She watched his eyes grow tired and envious as Gilda herself remained her illustrious form of perfect skin and shining blonde hair. Mr. Jem had used enough of her feathers, and in such quantity that he aged at a tremendously slow rate. The bastard should have died thirty years ago without the feathers and fifty years ago without all the alcohol and the tobacco which he had taken up again. It was in the 1980's that she found him with a pipe, indulging in the very cleanse that Gilda had personality administered when America was

different. She knew that no feathers could cure the man's demons within himself and if she was not jaded to his cruelty it might have broken her heart.

Now Mr. Jem had no friends to give Gilda's feathers too, for they had all died. He was never invited to any funerals and was never invited to meet their children. He was a father to no one, an uncle to no one, and a friend to no one. He was so miserable in totality that Gilda no longer felt sorry for him in the vein that she no longer felt sorry for herself.

When they got to their apartment Gilda went into the office (Mr. Jem refused to refer to it as her room) without saying a word to one another. She took off her coat and put it on top of the silken flapper dress that was once Olivia's. It was not a gift from Mr. Jem, and Gilda believed he had forgotten to take it back. Every couple of decades Mr. Jem orders her to be a physical stand in for the signing of a new lease, to not rise suspicion why the same elderly man has been living in the same Brooklyn apartment for a little more than one hundred years. The last signing was four years ago, and still Gilda did not pick up the dress. It was tossed along the back of a chair like a dead animal. It had become a part of the furniture.

Gilda fixed herself some tea from the hotplate and watered her plants. She dropped feather in the soil of a jade plant just two days ago as an experiment. It had graduated from the old beer can flower pot to one that was quite heavy and quite wide. She named it Austin. During the Before Times and the Greater Floods, Gilda and her sisters would put many fresh flowers in the soil and thus the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were born.

Mr. Jem knocked on her door and held his hand into her room. He never entered the office. Gilda grit her teeth, folded one of her feathers, and plucked one of the fuller ones closer to her bone. It hurt and her back turned numb. She placed it in his calloused palm. He closed the

door. Her wings were almost skeletal now. Without the feathers they looked bare, thin, and almost like the spine of crustaceans. Gilda did not feel much like an angel. She started to cry and when she realized that her crying was futile she cursed herself for signing a contract so many decades ago and then cried because of her own naivety. She dried her tears with one of her wings, being careful not to poke herself in the eye with the revealed points from the bare feathers.

She leaned against the door, brought her legs up to her chest, and folded her wings around her. She looked almost like a pod. She listened to Mr. Jem's television through the door, as she always did. He never watched anything interesting and thus Gilda never heard anything interesting. Occasionally he would watch sports during big events but most of his flavors involved televised People's Court trials, new spins on "lost and found" motifs, and various manifestations of antique revival/talk shows. Mr. Jem liked the journey of old cars being refurbished into new ones, and pawn shop owners telling the new guest of the week why their signed document of *Masque of the Red Death* was a fake. Tonight, however, was different. Mr. Jem fell asleep with the television on. Through his snores Gilda heard sounds of a televised carnival, followed my interceptions of a psychologist whose name she could never quite catch.

The interview introduced him as a behavioral psychologist and he brought up typical theories of B.F. Skinner and Pavlov's salivating dogs. The interview asked him why he was interested in animal psychology and how it intersects with carnivals. The psychologist said *no, it's not animals in carnivals, Ellen, it's captivity. I study the concept of the trained elephant.*

*The trained elephant?*

*When an elephant is born into captivity, they are naturally more docile. When carnivals capture infant elephants they use various techniques to control their behavior and to train them. These poor creatures are forced into a state of submission through starvation or electric prodding. Eventually, these punishments break their psyche and when they mature no electric prodding is necessary. Trained elephants exhibit powerful notions of learned helplessness.*

*That sounds inhumane.*

*And ironic.*

*Ironic?*

*The creatures are so big, so gentle. We should tremble before their might, but we do not. It's sad. They are so severely mentally broken as infants that they forget how powerful they really are. It's learned helplessness.*

*So you study the effects of this punishment schema in the entertainment industry, or for show businesses?*

*No, Ellen, I study how an animal can submit to being broken by a lower power. I study how creatures break one another.*

Mr. Jem woke Gilda up at dawn the following morning. The vibrations rattled the back of her head. The remaining feathers had molted in a halo around her feet and fresh ones had grown in. She preened them and fluffed the larger ones. With any luck, the second layer underneath will grow to be well and beautiful for tomorrow, so she could look forward to a painless deliverance of her and Mr. Jem's product. She did not anticipate today with such optimism.

He opened the door and her hair got caught in the seams. She handed him a feather and he used it as a stirrer for his coffee. They went to Coney Island and resumed their usual spots. She pandered to the hungry and the weak, which was fine. She gave her feathers to several addicts before noon and a couple runaway teenagers who swore their love to one another. The girl rubbed her belly while the boy tickled her with the feather. He must have really believed in Gilda's powers, or perhaps he believed in faith because he turned his pockets inside out for Mr. Jem.

An old man with an army jacket, skin the color of porcelain, and a tremendous beard approached Gilda and Mr. Jem just as they were beginning to leave Coney Island and return to the apartment. He smoked a cigar and the tobacco mixed with Mr. Jem's own acrid cigarettes. Gilda wondered if they were in combat for dominance. He asked for a feather and Mr. Jem was too tired to ask why. He had dropped his vaudeville act two hours ago when he stubbed his toe on the sidewalk and spilled tartar sauce on his pants. Gilda handed him a feather and as he turned his back she saw the likeness of an elephant cross stitched on his jacket. The tusks were a tremendous ivory and unaffected by the time and wear of this man's haggard life. She remembered the carnival and the psychologist and watched the elephant limp within the folds of the man's crooked shoulder blades.

That night, Gilda pondered the nature of learned helplessness and the trained elephant syndrome over peanut butter on white bread. She thought it was cruel to manipulate an innocent creature into believing it is smaller than it is. She also thought it was clever in a sadistic sense that such an imposing creature can be psychologically broken that it does not understand its own reality. So much potential in an elephant, and yet they put on invisible chains once they grow out

of the physical ones, and their souls and psyche adapt to this bondage like the bark of a tree growing around foreign objects.

She folded her wings around her and took off her trench coat. She was used to the weight upon her shoulders and how claustrophobic it felt in the subway no matter how sparse the seats were. She stretched her wings and her legs. She picked up Olivia's dress and felt the soft fabric in between her fingers, along her cheek. She stripped and put it on, twisting her body in the light. It was grey, like the hide of an elephant, but in a certain light it seemed to sparkle. Gilda nodded and flexed her wings. They were bruised and sore from the day's work, but the pain subsided when she stretched her joints. The tips of her wings spanned almost the entire length of Mr. Jem's office, and when she unfolded them the loose papers and curtains swayed with the flap.

A cold October wind blew in from the open window, running through her golden locks like fingers made of silk. Olivia's dress, no, *her* dress shimmered and looked like a river along the length of her body. It sparkled with all its bells and gems. The Manhattan skyline looked like luminescent mountains. When was the last time she had seen the skyline in such stillness? The last time she could remember was when she had signed the contract with Mr. Jem after her promise to Olivia. Now it spanned the horizon and stretched farther than her peripheries, reaching to the clouds and sky now empty with stars. What appeared to be a parade of people underneath the building moved by, and Gilda could capture moments of laughter and jubilation, of youth and freedom.

Gilda the Angel grabbed Austin the plant and curled it in her arm. She stepped to the back of the room and just as she reached the wall Mr. Jem opened the door to demand his nightly feather. Gilda caught his eyes and look of shock as he watched her skate across the scattered papers and shed down of the room. His swears and insults were but a fleeting moment of heat in

an otherwise cool night. He even tried to reach out to her, but it was impossible to touch Gilda, for her wings curled in and she jumped through the window and into the cool night. She watched the streets below full of people in a world unfamiliar to the one she was chained to.

She fell downward and caught herself, flapping her wings and regaining mastery of her body. She had forgotten what it was like to fly. She righted the flowerpot in her arm because some soil fell upon the street. Mr. Jem stood in the open window, shaking his fist and shouting. He looked like a silhouette, or those zany tube men outside of car dealerships. Gilda turned and flew over the river, aimless, but not directionless. She flapped her great wings and felt the chilled October air course through her feathers and along her back and legs. She weaved through the streets and landed in Greenwich Village because Olivia was born there and had many fond memories. Her bare feet landed on a rooftop and for an hour Gilda watched the people below.

It was a frolic of some sorts and everyone was wearing costumes and drinking beer and dancing in the streets even though Gilda knew it was unwise to do so. She remembered that humans have a tradition called Halloween. She set Austin in a place where it would get sun and be protected from the elements. She plucked a feather and buried it underneath the soil.

Gilda found her way into the streets and passed all sorts of people that smiled at her. She followed no one. She passed skeletons and vampires and people dressing up as cats. They complimented her wings and her flapper girl dress and she said thanks. She walked into a pub because many people were in it and sat down on a stool. The place was lit with damp lights and the music was calm even though it was Halloween. A bartender dressed as a cowboy wearing a pin reading "There's a snake in my boot!" asked what Gilda would like to drink. Gilda swiveled in her chair. She ordered a Guinness and watched as people celebrated their lives with one

another. Gilda did not know where she was going to go next, but she decided that going back to the City in the Clouds could wait at least one more day.