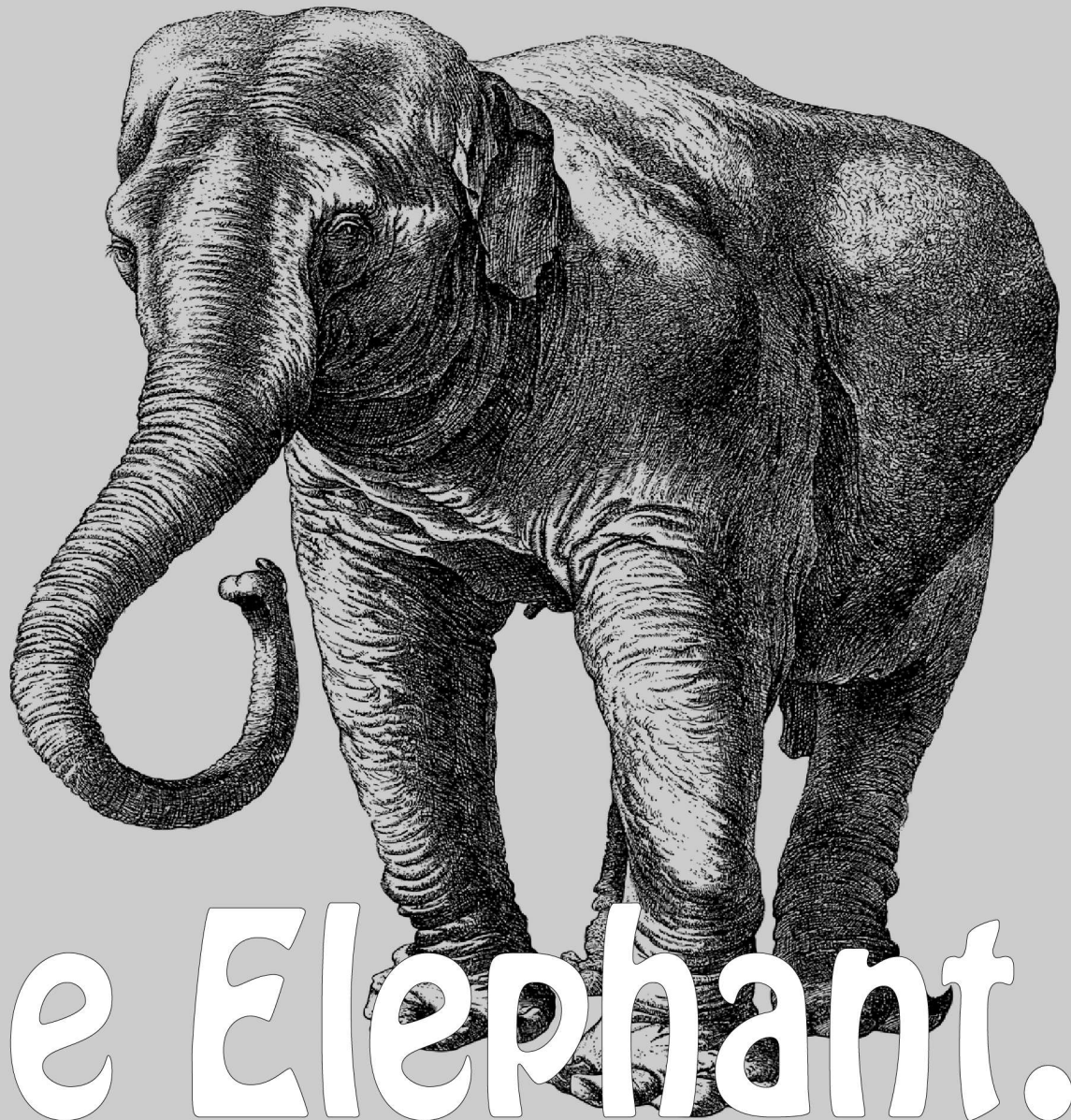


# The Toad

&



# The Elephant.

William Randolph Wade

**For Sue.**

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My six year old baby girl bounced down the driveway ahead of me, her blazing-hot-pink and lightning-fast sneakers reflecting the rich late-afternoon sun.

Pigtails fought to control her rebellious hair with the little red elastic bands snugged tight at the bottom of each braid. I had to work as carefully as a surgeon to scrunch those elastic bands on properly.

"Owwwww, Daddy," she would complain. "*You're pulling too hard.*" I would stop, hug her, and kiss the hurt away. Then, as gently as possible my thick fingers would try to stretch the rubber bands painlessly onto her braid and trying not to be frustrated. With my thick-fingered hands it was like trying to sort shards of glass with a hockey stick!

It is hard to learn how to put a elastic band on your little girl's pigtail without inflicting pain. It is hard to learn so many things that I hadn't needed to learn before now.

I feel I am still drowning where air and water collide, always gasping to inhale another life extending breath while fighting to keep my head above the deep, choking water.

The four week, three day, seventeen hour hell - during which the elephant-in-the-room lurked in the hospice-room corner – felt like an eternity. When it was finally over, when drifting off forever was the only option left to her, that ugly, trunk-sporting beast staggered to its feet and plunked itself down in the middle of my chest. Every attempt to breathe since has been an oxygen-starved near futile battle. Most days I want to just stop. To give up! I'm aching to surrender to the constant, crushing force and slide from here to the same forever where she is now. I hope. Yet I cannot. I am beholden.

"Hang on; hang in," I mutter to myself. My mantra helps me drive the sucking whirlpool of desperation away from me for just one more moment.

Earlier today, on Her Majesty's command, I rolled her pant legs to the top of her white socks. The roll had to be just so, you know. The jeans could not be rolled too high to bare the skin above the socks, "*Cause when it's cold, that lets the 'freezies' in, Daddy.*" The pant legs can't be rolled so low that they brush against the tops of her shoes, "*Cause that's just yucky!*" She is fussy that way. I know she gets that from me as I glance down and see that my jeans are rolled up - just so - above the lower boot yet well below the 'freezie zone'.

My daughter has a favorite jacket with a sequined butterfly flashing ruby and emerald across its navy-blue back. Her mother bought it for her on one of their shopping trips together.

The sparkle from the jacket's sequins wink and blink at me, the reflections first clutching the sun and then flashing it back to the air as my child hops, runs a few steps, zigs, zags, and spurts ahead again. She, like most kids, is restless with life. No plodding advance toward the next attraction for her. No sir! She's all in and moving fast, every limb hurtling into play, whether to get across a room or all the way to the other side of a field.

She did not want to wear a jacket today, opting instead to enjoy the sun's solar hug. Or, it's more likely that she's in too darn much of a hurry to let me dress her properly.

Stubborn! I wonder where she gets that from I thought, and I am glad I insisted she wear the jacket, even if the battle was almost won by her intransigence. She's unbuttoned it, a display of independence I guess,

even though the scalpel wind must be stripping heat from her bare skin like leaves from a late autumn branch.

I wish I had insisted that I wear my jacket. I shiver, my light shirt providing little protection and I rub my hands together making a sound like skin on whiskers, then stuff them deep into my pockets and reaching for the hidden warmth.

The sun is still fooling us with its false promise of heat and what little of that it offers is quickly stolen by the wind.

She dances further ahead, shoes blurring up puffs of driveway dust with each slip and step.

Ours is a long driveway wandering eastward and boomeranging around a cluster of rapidly spreading sumacs. The driveway boasts fringes of tall field grass for much of its gravelly length and the grass stems wave hello or goodbye at the whim of the wind. Their verdant tips are interspersed with random clusters of wildflowers offering bursts of colour in grape-skin purple, saucy orange or an angry, angry red, in vivid contrast to the sage and olive greens of the grass.

As she bobbed on down the driveway past the sumac leaves brushed in scarlet and lemon by the overnight frost, she stopped suddenly and rocked back on her heels, then bent way over, right-angled from her waist, as only the young or professional gymnast can.

My mental alarms awakened.

Her upper body was now bent motionless with her arms stretched way out to her rear, backs of her hands facing the ground. That she remained unmoving was sufficiently aberrant to further concern me and I hurried up my footsteps to reach her more quickly, turned my ankle on a frost-heaved

rock, and with pain chasing up my calf I stifled a curse and lurched on until I reached her.

She is a lot closer to the earth than I, bent in half with her face just a foot or so from the ground. What had rooted her to this spot?

"What's up, hon?" I whispered.

"Daddy?" she said.

My ears were now always attuned to her pain. The angst in her voice was like deep-water ice cracking beneath my feet.

Again, "Daddy?" A little louder this time, and now the word was a fear-filled syringe liquefying my guts.

What could it be? I bent the better to see past my tiny, living statue.

It may not have been a big toad when it hopped out of the long grass onto the driveway. It was certainly bigger now, a dusty pancake shape, driven into the gravel and driveway sand by the rubber rolling pin of a car tire.

So this is where the rubber meets the toad, I thought. Laughter threatened to erupt and I choked it off, blurring the impulse into a hoarse cough.

"Awww honey, uhhhh, it's, uh, a toad." Brilliant, Dad! As if she couldn't see that for herself. But then, what if she didn't know what it was? It could be just a randomly arranged flapjack-like substance, looking like a child's hand had stretched some toady-type play-dough, pancaked it flat, and ground it into the gravel and dust of the driveway.

We both could see the conga line of ants scurrying along their invisible insect trail to the remains as another line rushed away, toady bits burdening their mandibles, as they force-marched to feed their nest.

"Daddy, is it...?" she whispered. I just knew she didn't want to turn that horrid word into sound. In my mind I hear her saying, "Is it Dead? Dead like what, Daddy? Dead like who...Daddy?"

We were already carrying so much. Now this... another slicing, random, razor-edged load of mental shrapnel crushing and burying us deeper. Can we stand any more?

I felt helpless as a frisson of eager, sickening pleasure took hold of me. I screamed out, "*Yes honey, it's dead. It is dead. Dead, dead – dead!*" and I heard myself shrieking, and aghast, using every ounce of will I had, was able to check my horrid torrent, knowing that I was still edging ever closer to an abyss.

She turned towards me then, flipped a pigtail out of the way, and shot an extremely adult look of scorn over her shoulder. It was as if she was declaring, "What's with you?"

Then she said, so simply and softly, "Okay!" and standing up fully while rotating on one sneaker - as only young sprain-free muscles with apparently no bones attached can - she trotted back up the driveway with her blazing-hot-pink and lightning-fast sneakers reflecting the rich late-afternoon sun.

"Okay?"

"Really?"

I slumped my head a bit and chewed on that. I looked up and watched her gallop away - leaving the dead behind her - and I booted the remains of that sad, flat toad into the field grass.

Clutching my shirt closed to help stop the *'freezies'* driving down my neck I followed my little soul-restorer back towards our home.

The elephant shifted its weight off my chest just a bit, and I drew breath.

--The End--