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Passeggeri

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EVENTUALLY, THE ELEPHANTS make it across the Mediterranean. When Paolo comes back from the market with cheese and olives, he is giddy.

The shore is full of them, he says with his head in the fridge, his voice jumping with excitement. Paolo loves elephants.

How many do you think? I ask.

Hundreds, at least.

The lines around his eyes deepen with pleasure.

Look. He shows me a grainy video on his phone. On the beach, large gray bodies, and more slowly emerging from the ocean. He must have filmed at the port, but even from a distance, I can make out individual elephants twining their trunks in a silent greeting.

I'll go and do some research, Paolo says and shuffles off to the computer in the small study.

Research for what? I call after him but receive no answer.

When the small herd arrives a few days later, Paolo has prepared the garden for them: he's used a blue plastic band to section off the flowerbeds we planted for the bees and wasps, and has moved all five bug hotels to the back wall of the house. The elephants wait patiently while he opens the front gate, and I watch him give them the tour of our property, gesticulating wildly to make sure they

understand not to trample the vegetables. The five giants follow him in an orderly row, the smallest a calf barely taller than a Great Dane, holding on to its mother's tail with its miniature trunk. Paolo leads them to the patch of land he's cleared next to the small shed.

They need a mudhole, he says when he comes into the house, knocking the dirt off his boots. I'll dig one behind the shed.

Don't use up all the water, I say. Please.

He nods distracted and kneels down to pull out his toolbox from under the sink.

Is this it, or will there be more of them?

I don't know, he says and gets up.

He seems to sense my hesitation because he says, You should go say hi. They're very nice.

I will, I say.

But then Giulia calls.

I don't know about this, I say to her. They're very big, and she says, You know what he's like, Mama.

How is Scotland? I ask, and she tells me about their new house in the countryside and her husband Tom's flourishing palm tree business. The nearness of her voice defies the miles between us. I imagine her sitting in her living room, legs pulled up under her, folded on a couch I think must be gray, her favorite color. I imagine no ocean between us. When she and Tom decided to move to Scotland, she wanted us to come with them. A safer place, she insisted, where water would still be in abundance years from now—but I couldn't bring myself to leave home, to uproot Paolo from his garden, me from my past, and so I let her go.

All I have now is her voice on a phone. I imagine her here at the kitchen table, home with me, affirming her words with the determined gestures she's inherited from her father.

Paolo spends more and more time outside, working around the five elephants, who seem to appreciate his efforts. They leave the property every afternoon for a stroll through town, giving him space to dig the mudhole.

He portions off three square meters at the edge of our garden where they can relieve themselves. When I point out that they produce a lot of shit, he reads me an essay from the internet on the fertilizing merits of elephant dung.

It still stinks, I say.

We have to get used to it, he says. Where else are they going to go?

I don't want to get used to it, I say loudly. I want to be able to smell the ocean and the lime trees and the freesias I planted last year. And I would like to see something more than gray boulders every time I look out the kitchen window.

Paolo refuses to take up the fight, more aware than I am of its futility. È così. He shrugs and shuffles off to fix one of the bug hotels that last night's storm knocked off the wall, leaving a handful of dung beetles stranded on our terrace, feet pedaling the air desperately.

I look out at our giant tenants peacefully munching the hay we now receive by the ton from a neighboring farm. The calf is playing in the mudhole, legs covered in half-dried dirt. Everytime it moves, the mud smacks happily.

I gather my gloves and an empty basket and go out to collect vegetables for dinner. While I kneel on the ground and dig up carrots and radishes, I hear the elephants' soft snorts nearby, their ears flapping in the afternoon sun like the ripples of waves.

I try to ignore them on my way back to the house, but when I pass the enclosure, the calf staggers towards me curiously, trunk swaying to its steps. Close up, it's even smaller, head barely reaching my belly button, and although I know it will grow to be a colossus, now it is no more than a beginning, a half-being, unruffled by the storms of life. It eyes my basket and I present it with a carrot that it takes off my hand, grazing my palm with the soft hairs on its nose.

From her place in the shade of a pine tree, the mother examines us calmly, watching over the child she took with her across the ocean, with all its cousins and aunts, the family entwined like a wall of stubborn ivy. We lock eyes, hers in a bed of gray folds like pieces of amber. I look for judgment in them, but all I see is the ocean she came from and the savanna beyond it—the parched plains of her past, the haggard skeletons of leafless acacias and bushwillows; branches reaching for the sky.