

H.E.C.

(Human Elephant Conflicts)

by

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“Human Elephant Conflicts”

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SCENE SEVEN

The Elephant Sanctuary, Hohenwald, Tennessee. Aaron sits with KASEM, an elephant rehabilitation expert from Thailand. Kasem seems preoccupied and moves about the room, working.

KASEM

Insanity. That's the reason why most of the elephants come here. They're going insane.

AARON

It sounds to me like you're trying to attach a human condition to something that's animal.

KASEM

Your point being?

AARON

I have no doubt that the elephants here at the sanctuary are traumatized. But I find it hard to believe that you can categorize them as being crazy.

KASEM

I never said "crazy."

AARON

Insane, crazy, what's the difference?

KASEM

What you fail to understand is that all the research dedicated to this phenomena over the past few decades has revealed profound similarities between elephant social culture and *ours*.

AARON

Yes, but...

KASEM

Therefore I find using human qualities to describe their behavior quite appropriate, and necessary. That is the case *if* we are to move ahead.

AARON

And the reasons behind all the sudden violence?

KASEM

Survival. And it isn't all that sudden, the world just hasn't been paying attention.

AARON

Ok, but what about the elephants in protected reserves, or natural parks?

KASEM

What about them?

AARON

If they've been rehabilitated, why not let them back into the wild?

KASEM

It's not that cut and dry. These creatures have been severely damaged. They will never be the same as they once were.

Aaron gets up and takes a sip from his water bottle.

KASEM

Forgive me for saying, but you're not getting any of this, are you?

AARON

Excuse me?

KASEM

You've been here for almost an hour and we seem to be going around in circles. In fact, you've asked some of the same questions twice. Are you feeling all right?

AARON

(defensive)

I'm perfectly fine, thank you. And maybe if you stopped what you were doing for a minute and actually looked me in the eye...

KASEM

(abruptly)

I'm a very busy man Mr. Bradshaw. I'm sorry if you feel slighted. Not all of us have the privileges that you're accustomed to. Some of us have to work for a living.

AARON

I beg your pardon?

KASEM

I'm only entertaining this conversation with you because my superiors are making me. You see, we are all very much aware that you come from a wealthy family with a strong history of making donations to organizations such as ours. I usually don't mind situations of this nature, but you have yet to be up front with me.

AARON

Just what are you suggesting?

KASEM

I'm not suggesting anything. I just would like to know what this is all about.

AARON

Information.

KASEM

Please, Mr. Bradshaw, there are plenty of journal essays, text books, even web logs documenting everything I've told you today. It's all public record.

AARON

I realize that.

KASEM

Then just what is it that you're looking for?

AARON

A personal account. Human connection. I for one actually believe it makes a difference when it comes to understanding things. It seems clear to me that I came to the wrong place.

KASEM

I'm in the middle of preparing a lecture for tomorrow. Maybe we should continue this conversation another time. Perhaps a time when you feel *less* confrontational?

Kasem gets up to leave.

AARON

I highly respect your work Kasem. That's why I requested to see you. I'm only here for the day. Please.

Kasem returns.

KASEM

My time is very valuable Mr. Bradshaw. I will not have it wasted.

AARON

I apologize. Please, go on.

Reluctantly, Kasem continues.

KASEM

There was an experiment done recently that dealt with self identification. Perhaps you're familiar with it?

AARON

I'm afraid not.

KASEM

A mirror was placed in front of a matriarch and she responded to her reflection.

AARON

Makes sense. Dogs do the same thing.

KASEM

Yes, but the experiment went one step further.

He goes to his blackboard and continues.

KASEM

They drew a line under her eye with a piece of chalk and waited. Later, when confronted with the mirror again the elephant acknowledged her reflection as before, only this time she *noticed* the chalk line and touched the line by raising her trunk.

AARON

She recognized herself.

KASEM

Precisely. She didn't accept the reflection as another elephant, but instead recognized the reflection as her own. Now when you consider that study with all the other research concerning the importance of family structure, memory, mourning rituals... it all suggests something incredible.

AARON

And what's that?

KASEM

That by understanding them, we create the unique opportunity to learn more about ourselves.

Aaron picks up a small Hindu statue from Kasem's desk.

AARON

Ganesh.

KASEM

He's the god of wisdom. It was a gift from a colleague of mine. I take it that you know a little something about Hinduism?

AARON

I can get by. He's also the god of humor too, right?

KASEM

And the remover of obstacles. He's also considered to be auspicious for new beginnings.

AARON

Wisdom, humor, trouble shooting... can't ask for more than that in a deity.

KASEM

I presume not.

Aaron carries the statue as he walks the room.

AARON

Created by Parvati to provide protection at her door in Shiva's absence. Only when Shiva returned, Ganesh prevented him from seeing her. Shiva then retaliated by cutting off Ganesh's head. Later realizing he had actually killed Parvati's son, Shiva dispatched his attendants to fetch him the head of the first living thing they saw to bring Ganesh back to life. The first living thing they saw was an...

KASEM

...was an elephant. Bravo. You do know your Indian tradition. I'm impressed.

AARON

Like I said before. I get by.

Aaron notices a small poster hanging.

AARON

(reading)

"To avoid confrontation, don't worship elephants."
Where did you get this?

KASEM

I ripped it from a wall in northern India. The problem there is huge. During my visit I learned there has been over 300 human deaths in the last 4 years alone as a result of H.E.C.

AARON

H.E.C.?

KASEM

"Human elephant conflict." Catchy, isn't it? Hindus are finding themselves in quite a spiritual dilemma. Worshiping Ganesh these days can be fatal.

They look out the window into the Sanctuary.

KASEM

Many of the elephants here are circus or zoo elephants. Animals that had been severely mistreated or abused. They suffer from severe psychological trauma. The saying that suggests that they never forget is quite true.

AARON

So they all carry their past experiences around with them?

KASEM

Just like us. The memories of seeing and experiencing violence is scorched into their memories forever. The younger they are, the more impressionable they are.

AARON

Do all of them act out in the same way?

KASEM

For the most part. But there are exceptions. There's one particular case that comes to mind. I was told of it while I was in Thailand.

AARON

Is that where you're from?

KASEM

Yes. I transferred here from the Nature Park in Chiang Mai Province.

AARON

What happened?

KASEM

There is a documented case from an expedition that took place in the 1950's in Indo China. It claims that a captured female elephant actually took her own life.

AARON

How is that possible?

KASEM

Evidently when the creature was tied up and left alone, she voluntarily tightened the rope around her neck by walking in circles. When the rope was tight enough she threw herself forward onto her knees and then strangled herself to death.

Silence.

KASEM

You see, we are very much alike Mr. Bradshaw. In times of absolute despair, when there's no longer any hope, humans and elephants can and *do* react the same.

AARON

I don't understand. Why didn't she fight? I mean, she could have attacked. Why did she give up?

KASEM

Good question. I wasn't there, but I can only presume she simply lost her will to live. She most likely she lost her family. Soon after that, she lost her purpose. She saw no future. Mr. Bradshaw?

AARON

Hmm?

KASEM

Why do I get the feeling that there is something else on your mind besides elephants?

Aaron moves away from Kasem.

AARON

I think I've got enough. Sorry we got off on the wrong foot. I have to get going, I'm off to Africa in a few days. Thank you Kasem.

He begins to leave.

KASEM

I do have one last story. A personal one, if you're interested.

Aaron sits.

KASEM

When I left Thailand ten years ago, I went to work for a sanctuary in Missouri. Smaller than our facility here, only about 150 acres, but still, they did good work. When I was there I met a young bull named JoJo. When he came to me he was distraught, completely out of control, and very dangerous. He was a circus elephant and was considerably abused. The trainer used to feed him lit cigarettes. I worked with JoJo very closely, he was my first assignment. Within a very short period of time, we formed an incredible bond. Eventually the therapy worked, and he he make great progress. He was a success story.

AARON

Encouraging.

KASEM

Wait. There's more. About a month ago I got a fax from Missouri. It was about JoJo. They were transferring him here, to Tennessee. A healthy role model for the others.

AARON

A reunion.

KASEM

I waited at the gate until JoJo arrived. As you could imagine, I was very excited to see him. Very excited. What happened next may surprise you.

AARON

I wouldn't count on it.

KASEM

(fondly)

When JoJo was brought through the gates, he *looked* at me. This look was more than just a passing glance, this was different. It was a deep, thoughtful look. It had been over 10 years and JoJo recognized me, instantly. He remembered our history together. Our bond. I know it sounds fantastic, but it's true. He expressed *affection* towards me. I had almost forgotten what that kind of affection felt like. Not even with my own family have I ever experienced such raw emotion as I did when that creature looked at me that day. His returning to me is one of the biggest gifts I have ever received. Now my work is more vital than ever. Was that helpful Mr. Bradshaw?

AARON

Yeah. It was helpful.

KASEM

I apologize for the remark I made earlier. I know you do very good work. It was uncalled-for. I'm still paying back student loans so I suppose I'm still a bit bitter.

AARON

Don't worry about it. It probably wouldn't have bothered me so much if it weren't partly true.

Aaron begins to exit.

KASEM

Here.

He hands Aaron the Ganesh.

KASEM

For your new beginnings.

Aaron exits.

BLACKOUT