

There's An Elephant in the Room

By Julie Peppper

Scene 1

Milton and Lucy, two elementary school age kids, lie face up across the gravestones in a cemetery in Freed, West Virginia.

Milton: Ya ever think about it?

Lucy: I don't like to.

Milton: I don't either, but you can't always control what you're thinking.

Lucy: I suppose.

Milton: So I try not to, but then I do. Still, it's like a game to make myself believe it.

Lucy: I bet your daddy thinks about it every time he leaves for work.

Milton: I don't know about him, but I know my mama does.

Lucy: *My* mama does soon as my daddy picks up his lunch and hard-hat.

Milton: Mine waits til he's just about out the door, then she stops barking and her face gets this lost look, like she's lost something already.

Lucy: It's hard to picture never being here again, but it's not as hard to picture somebody else never being here, because at least you're here to picture it.

Milton: Because when you're gone where *are* you?

Lucy: In God's hands, I guess.

Milton: What's it look like?

Lucy: Not like here.

Milton: Not like now.

Lucy: Not like anything. Nothing. Gone. Like maybe you were before you were here?

Milton: And where was that?

Lucy: Nowhere I know.

Milton: It's tough to picture.

Lucy: But then sometimes I do.

Milton: Can't always help it.

Lucy: Can't.

Milton: And if we're never gonna be here again, what's the point of all this?

Lucy: That's why I don't like to. Who wants to think like that?

Milton: That's why it's a trick to really get at it, because it ain't natural to want to get it.

Lucy: It ain't natural.

Milton: But sometimes I can't help it.

Lucy: Because it's one of those things that you've got to look at over and over again to see it, and even then you can't always.

Milton: Especially the forever part. Sometimes I roll the idea around and around in my mind that I'm never going to be here again, ever; over and over again until it finally sinks in.

Lucy: And when it sinks in you finally sort of get what forever means. Because it seems like nobody's here long enough to get what forever means. But then if death isn't forever, what is?

Scene 2

At school during a biology class, maybe studying a frog, a different day.

Lucy: But what would you be if you could be anything?

Milton: I can't.

Lucy: If you could.

Milton: Can't.

Lucy: I think I'd be a teacher.

Milton: Not a frog, that's for sure. Something with people I guess.

Lucy: Isn't everything with people?

Milton: Well, somewhere I could talk with them, you know, without it being so dark and loud I have to use my hands to show them what I'm trying to say.

Lucy: I could sew or I wouldn't even mind cleaning folks' houses.

Milton: Maybe something with my hands. Nothing underground though. Somewhere you can see the light of day so you know what time it is.

Lucy: You think *they* don't know?

Milton: Oh, they know, cause the clock ticks to tell them and the bell rings to tell them what to do next.

Lucy: They know cause they're hungry.

Milton: Yep.

Lucy: I wonder who invented that job.

Milton: Somebody who doesn't mind having no windows, I guess.

Lucy: Somebody who doesn't mind that bell telling em what to do next.

Milton: Want to go to the cemetery after school?

Lucy: I can't. I got to help mama with the baby.

Milton: How about if I race you to the front of the school and whoever loses has to give the other one a piggy back all the way home?

Lucy: It's all right by me, Milton, so long as you're okay with breaking your back.

Scene 3

A residential street in Putney, West Virginia. Milton and Lucy sit on the stoop in front of their houses.

Lucy: I could feel it all the way from here.

Milton: And smell it. That burnt hair smell.

Lucy: Mama's face went white and the baby started screamin. Then mama passed her to me and ran to the bathroom looking all white.

Milton: No one made a sound at dinner, and my mama just kept touching my daddy as she passed by him; A pat on the back or on his chest and touching his fingers and everybody so quiet.

Lucy: My mama came out of the bathroom and she told me to look after Lena, she had to go find out what happened. When she came home, it was dark and she brought my daddy and she kissed me and hugged me and almost smushed poor Lena's head hugging her so hard, too.

Milton: Imagine what it was like at *their* house.

Lucy: I can. Wish I couldn't.

Scene 4

The middle of the night, Milton is throwing pebbles at Lucy's window.

Milton: Lucy!

(He throws another pebble and calls her name in a loud whisper.)

Lucy!

(She comes to the window half asleep.)

Lucy: What are you doing?!

Milton: *(whispering)* Can you come down for a minute?

Lucy: Hold on—

(She comes to the front door and closes it behind her.)

What's gone wrong with your head?

Milton: Lucy. I don't want to smell that smell one more time or hear that alarm bell ring.

Lucy: Are you having a bad dream, Milton?

Milton: I think so, Lucy. It's pretty bad. It winds up with me down there smelling burning hair for the rest of my life.

Lucy: You've got to go back to bed.

Milton: Tell me what you would want to teach, again, if you could?

Lucy: I'll tell you tomorrow, Milton.

Milton: Tell me now, Lucy.

Lucy: Go home!

Milton: Can you meet me out back before school, tomorrow?

Lucy: I can try—how come?

Milton: I'm not going to school tomorrow.

Lucy: Why not?

Milton: Can't.

Lucy: How come?

Milton: I don't know.

Lucy: What do you mean?

Milton: My dad said.

Lucy: I'll meet you out back as soon as the sun is up.

Milton: Thanks Lucy. (*He starts to go.*)

Lucy: Hey, Milton—I would teach crocheting and knitting and sewing and maybe even math and anything else they'd let me.

Milton: I hope they'd let you teach all of them, Lucy.

Lucy: Thank you, Milton. I'll see you first thing.

Milton: Tomorrow.

Scene 5

Several weeks later. Milton is walking home from work. Lucy catches up with him.

Lucy: Hey, Milton.

Milton: Hi Lucy.

Lucy: How's it going?

Milton: It makes you tired.

Lucy: I bet that ain't all it makes you.

Milton: It makes you tired and then it breaks your back, okay?

Lucy: Okay.

Can I walk the rest of the way with you?

Milton: If you like.

Lucy: I do.

Are you mad at me for telling you not to run away?

Milton: No. I'm not mad at you. I'm just mad I didn't.

Lucy: I'm glad you didn't.

Milton: I imagine it's a little like what it must feel like to go off to war everyday.

Lucy: It feels that way to me whenever I see you go.

Scene 6

Milton and Lucy are about 18 years old now. They are at a celebration for someone in the mining community.

Lucy: It just seems like we're always going in opposite directions.

Milton: Seems like it, Lucy.

Lucy: But it's good to see you now.

Milton: You, too.

Lucy: Mind if I sit with you a while?

Milton: So long as you don't talk about my running away.

Lucy: What's to talk about? You're back ain't you?

Milton: Seems like it.

Lucy: Well are you gonna stick around for a while?

Milton: Doesn't feel like I have much choice in it.

Lucy: But you have a choice about how you stay.

Milton: Maybe.

Lucy takes a hold of Milton's hand and studies a scar on it.

Lucy: How'd you get that?

Milton: A piece of equipment slit it open when my headlight went out.

Lucy: I'm sorry. *(She continues to hold his hand.)*

Milton: Hey Lucy, you need that hand for something or can I have it back now?

Lucy: Kind of nice holding it.

Milton: I don't think Beck would like it much.

Lucy: You run away and I don't know if you're ever coming back—you expect me to never talk to anyone while you're gone?

Milton: *(He starts to get up.)* I knew you couldn't help yourself talking about it.

Lucy: Why do you push me away so? You make me feel dirty for wanting to hold your hand.

Milton: I feel dirty for wanting to hold yours.

Lucy: Why?

Milton: Cause I can't promise I'll be here for you even if I never run away again.

Lucy: That doesn't mean I can't love you while you're here.

Milton: That's a burden I couldn't ask you to take on.

Lucy: No, you couldn't, Milton. But I'm not sure you can do anything much about it now I have.

Scene 7

A greasy spoon in Cokely, West Virginia. Milton is behind the counter in a white apron. It is many, many years later. Milton and Lucy are in their seventies.

Milton: No, it's still Milton. Milton Jenks. The name hasn't changed, though you're right, they used to call me Roderick, "The Mechanic"—but that's a long story and I won't tell you about that, now, cause when you recover from a four-year coma seems everybody'd rather hear about that some.

Strangest thing really, waking up, not knowing how much time has passed. I remember everything in the room looking white—white sheets, trays, curtains—everything white, except for a green garbage can stuck in the corner.

Nurses walking by me with their white shoes and their white uniforms and I remember feeling thirsty. So I asked one of the nurses walking by me might she fetch me a glass of water and it looked like her eyes were about to fall out of her head.

"Wha-ter?" she said, like maybe she wasn't sure what it was, so I repeated it real clear like this—"Water."

But she still didn't get me any. She just started pushing buttons around me and her face got as white as her shoes and she held onto me like I was going somewhere if she didn't. "Water," I said again, this time pretending to drink, thinking maybe this might help her to understand. And it did seem like this time maybe she did because she looked over at this clear pouch I had attached to a tube attached to me and then she looked like she might jump clear out of her skin, but luckily not until she went over to the sink and brought me some water back.

After that a whole mess of doctors came in and started talking to me like I'm in a tunnel or something. Looking into my eyes like they're going to find something buried in em, taking a pulse and holding my hand. Then one finally says, "Welcome back, Mr. Jenks." And I say, "Thank you." Then pretty soon the whole town is coming in to see me even my old boss, Mr. Lansing, who owns this place. He says, "Anytime you're ready to come back to work, we'd love to have you, Milton." When they let me out, I came back to work like usual and here I am.

"So how do you like your eggs?"

Lucy: I still want to know why they called you Roderick the Mechanic. That's a funny name.

Milton: I always thought so.

Lucy: Maybe you were good at fixing stuff?

Milton: You might say.

Lucy: I always liked you, Milton.

Milton: You too, Lucy.

Lucy: But I never figured you to be working here.

Milton: No way to figure it.

Lucy: It's good to see you Milton Jenks.

Milton: Can I get you a cup of coffee?

Lucy: That'd be nice.

(He goes to get her coffee.)

Lucy: It's like a miracle, but there you are walking and talking and fixing those eggs.

Milton: And you?

Lucy: Well, Beck never let me work in no other folks' houses. So I did a little mending and crocheting. But now Beck's gone, I don't know.

Milton puts a plate of sunny-side up eggs in front of Lucy.

Milton: You never did tell me how you liked your eggs, but I figger if eggs is like people you'd be sunny-side up.

Lucy: Well thank you, Milton, that's very kind of you.

Milton: And what about those sweet little ones? How big must they be now?

Lucy: I gotta crank my neck up just to see the bottom of Jimmy's chin, and Darla's having her own babies.

Milton: Which law school did Jimmy end up in?

Lucy: How do you know he's going to law school?

Milton: He would naturally do that the way he was always arguing about nothing.

Lucy: These eggs are good, Milton.

Does your head hurt at all?

Milton: Just missing time. Sometimes it hurts that way.

Lucy: How do you think it came to happen this way?

Milton: I try not to think about it.

Lucy: I was happy for you. That you left.

Milton: Maybe too many elephants down there in the dark crowding me. I thought I'd get out and clear my head; Maybe that's what the coma was for: To clear my head.

Lucy: Strange that it happened so many years after you got out.

Milton: I don't know. Sometimes these things happen quickly, sometimes they kind of creep up on you.

Lucy: Nothing wrong with making eggs and talking to folks, but you shouldn't have to get a four- year coma to feel comfortable in it.

Milton: Yep, that's probably going a little overboard.

Lucy: Four years—ain't that something?

Milton: It's something all right. I don't know what, but something.

Lucy: How does that happen to a person?

Milton: I don't know how it happens or how it stops happening.

Lucy: I know what you mean about all that white in the hospital. I came by a few times while you were out.

Milton: You did?

Lucy: You looked so peaceful. Just like you were having a nice long rest.

Milton: Did you talk to me?

Lucy: Yes, I did.

Milton: What'd you say?

Lucy: I told you about my kids and Beck and that I was all right. I felt like you heard me.

Milton: Did you come often?

Lucy: I came when I could.

Milton: What about Beck?

Lucy: He passed a couple of years into it.

Milton: Did he mind?

Lucy: Did he mind passing?

Milton: You coming to see me.

Lucy: I don't think he would've, but I don't know, cause I never told him.

Milton: Was he in a lot of pain when he went?

Lucy: A bit, mostly from all that coughing.

Milton: That was really good of you to come see me.

Lucy: Milton, these eggs are good. I'd be pleased if you'd stop by my house sometime and let me return the favor.

How do you like your eggs?

Milton: Coffee is good nuff for me.

Lucy: Oh, never you mind. Sunny-side up is *me*, then I guess maybe *you're* a little scrambled.

Milton: You always were a funny one.

Lucy: You remember me?

Milton: Often. I remember how you used to carry your baby sister around on your hip, how fast you used to run, that you smelled a little like lavender.

Lucy: And not even so much as a see you later, Lucy, when you picked up.

Milton: I didn't think about it so much as leaving. I just started going and turns out I never came back.

Lucy: Is that so?

Milton: That's so.

Lucy: I guess maybe after all those times you ran away, this time you just walked.

Milton: I had a hard time with all of that, you know, Lucy?

(Lucy moves her plate aside.)

Hey there, you didn't finish your eggs.

Lucy: My mama always said, "Better to eat a part, than to eat none at all."

Milton: But you left the best part.

Lucy: Yeah. That's a hard thing to do.

Those sunny side ups are the best part for me, though. Whatever happened to that young one you used to let tag along with you?

Milton: Nothing good.

Lucy: That why you left?

Milton: I was going forwards and he, of course, backwards, both of us digging with our hands. We got so close and we were humming the whole time, and just as I saw the light peeking through, the roof came crashing down behind me—All that digging and it's like he buried himself alive.

Lucy: I don't blame you for never looking back.

Milton: I just wish John Hansley could've raised his eyes from the dying day. And that night Colquhoun came around to help us eat the duck jes like he never noticed the roof ain't been right.

Lucy: It's sad to see the young go before their time.

Milton: The old, too.

Lucy: I remember one time being so near the fence, that I could've touched it. And I wanted to. I wanted so much to grab a hold of one of the poles and stick my feet in between the metal holes and climb right up and over it. I wanted to become as small as the smallest itty-bitty bird and fly down that tunnel to see my daddy.

Milton: But you never did.

Lucy: I wasn't even allowed to be near that fence. You remember Emma Harari? Well, her name wasn't Harari, back then.

Milton: Do you mean Emma Jensen?

Lucy: That's it.

Milton: Whatever happened to her?

Lucy: It starts with a b and ends with an r and you not gawna believe it.

Milton: A bookkeeper?

Lucy: Seems more like it, but no.

Milton: A box-cutter?

Lucy: That's another good one, but no.

Milton: A bartender?

Lucy: You're getting closer.

Milton: Come on, now, whatever happened to quiet little Emma Jensen?

Lucy: B-e-lly-dancer.

Milton: Girl, you're coming up with stories now.

Lucy: It's the truth. She changed her name to Harari cause she thought it sounded better for a belly dancer and she's working in this little dive bar in Jargenston. She had to do something. She barely finished grade school when they lost the house.

Milton: Now how did we get on this when you were talking about a fence?

Lucy: I'm just thinking it's funny the way things go.

Milton: Did you ever climb that fence?

Lucy: One time I did.

Milton: What'd you see?

Lucy: Emma Jensen's daddy, moppin' his brow, lookin kind of peaked. My daddy was holdin him up like.

Milton: Didn't he pass of a heart attack?

Lucy: That same day.

I always thought because I climbed that fence, Mr. Jensen got sick. Nobody even mentioned he had a heart attack, they just said he died.

Milton: He shouldn't even have been down there with his heart like it was.

Lucy: You shouldn't of neither with your heart like it is.

Milton: Remember Lucy, when we used to talk about dying? Trying to turn it every which way so we could picture it.

Lucy: I remember.

Milton: I've been gone for four years and now I'm here, I still can't look back.

Lucy: Did you stumble so far as to fall beyond recovery?

Milton: I didn't stumble. I fell. Hell, I plunged. So deep, so far, there wasn't nothing left for me to see or hear. But now I smell those eggs and I see those tired faces walking through the door and I don't want to look back, but I'm sure glad I can see and I can feel and I don't have to wear that tired face myself because I'm alive and I know I'm lucky.

Lucy: You sure are. I just wish I could rewind or something and see what all you been up to.

Milton: I don't know if I do, even if I could. There are a couple of blank spots and maybe that's the best.

Lucy: I hope you don't mind, but I held your hand in the hospital.

Milton: Lucy, I'm—

Lucy: I told you I never blamed you for never looking back, but I sure missed you.

Milton: I missed you in ways I always imagined I would.

Lucy: So you're alive and you're lucky. What you doing with all that?

Milton: Looking at it. Living with it.

Lucy: If this is your second chance, Milton Jenks, what are you going to do with it?

Milton: Is this my second chance, Lucy?

Lucy: You never meant to hurt anybody in your whole life, so I know you never meant to hurt me, but it's getting late and I don't know, maybe you're fixing to.

Milton: How'd you find me?

Lucy: These towns they're not so far apart.

Milton: Far enough.

Lucy: Were you trying to hide?

Milton: Maybe.

Lucy: Well, it's tough when the newspapers are calling you "Milton the Miracle Man."

Milton: Four years is a long time.

Lucy: Long time to live to talk about it.

Milton: Forty years is a longer time.

Lucy: A lifetime.

Milton: I'm closing up soon. If you'll let me, I'll piggyback you to your car.

Lucy: Well, that's right nice of you Milton. But I'd only allow that if you raced me to the door first.

Milton: I'm not too good at running anymore, Lucy.

Lucy: Quit foolin yourself, Milton. You never were good at running.

Milton: Maybe that's why I kept trying it over and over again.

Lucy: You about done with it now?

Milton: I believe I'm all runned out.

Lucy: How about a drive?

Milton: Where to?

Lucy: Our old hang out.

Milton: Freed Cemetery?

Lucy: I hear that's all that's left of that town.

Milton: I hear it's what you'd call a ghost town.

Lucy: I always found it peaceful there.

Milton: Pretty and peaceful, kind of like you Lucy. At least that's how I've always remembered you.

Lucy: Well, why don't you come here and let's see how those old legs of yours are doing?

(Milton comes out from behind the counter and moves toward Lucy. They are at once very close, and though Lucy seemed to be inviting Milton to a race, their proximity after forty long years, seems to render a race for the door, virtually impossible.)

The End