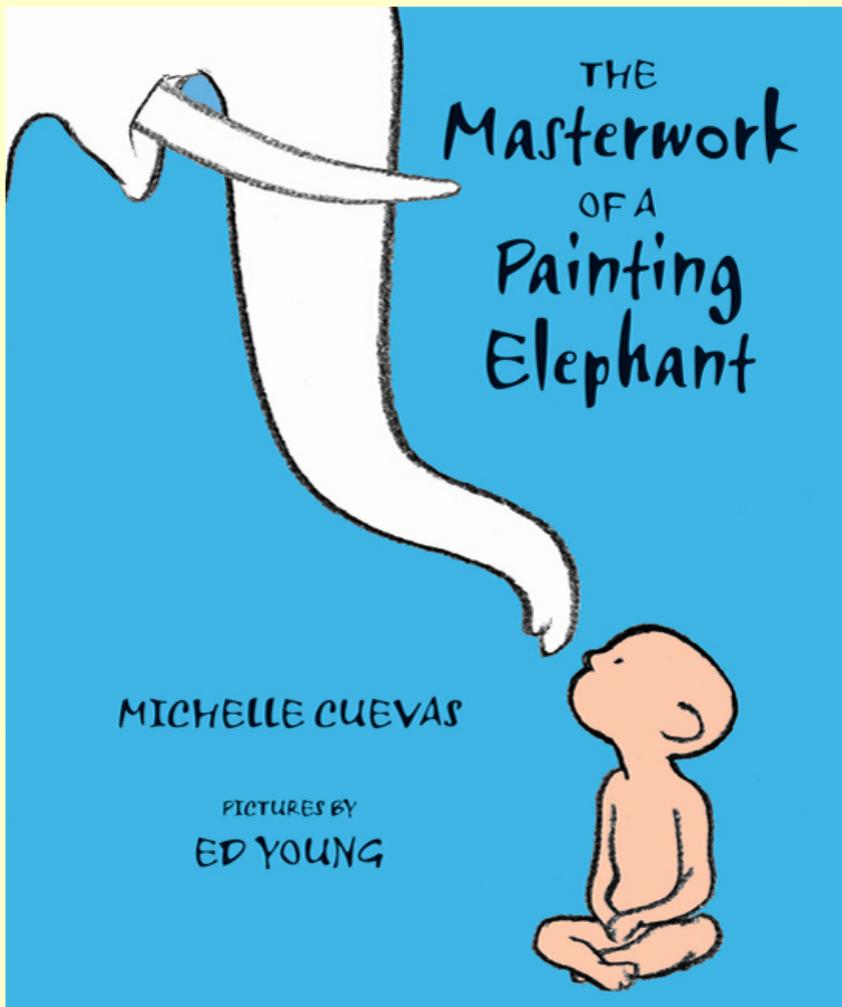


**READ IT FIRST**



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ONE

## But He Has Such Big Ears

My name is Pigeon Jones, and I was raised by a painting Indian elephant. This is how my adventure started: one day when I was an infant in my crib, a pigeon flew into our house through the window. This is not, as you may be thinking, why I am named Pigeon. The bird did, however, cause my mama to become quite upset.

“Get that filthy bird out of here,” she shouted. “Don’t let it touch the baby.”

My papa didn’t see the bird at first, but he stayed calm, sat still, and whispered under his breath, “Just be quiet now. Wait till she lands.”

The pigeon was fat. And clumsy. She landed on the side of my crib and flapped her wings so hard she got tangled in the

solar-system mobile overhead. Several planets went flying. Venus fell into my crib with a thud and missed my head by only a few inches.

My mama screamed, “Grab that stupid bird.”

The bird didn’t seem to mind being called stupid, and when Papa approached, she climbed onto his outstretched arm one foot at a time.

Papa put the bird on a tree branch outside the window, and that crazy bird began to sing. Loudly. And not very well.

My mama and papa came over and stared down at me. The sun filtered through the leaves on the tree and dappled the light, making continents on my skin. I wasn’t crying. In truth I was enjoying the show from my crib.

“The baby kept calm through the entire commotion,” Papa said thoughtfully. “Through the flapping and the flying and a planet almost falling on his head. I wonder if he can hear?”

“But he has such big ears,” Mama gasped. “How could anyone not hear with those enormous ears?” It was true. I had ridiculously big ears. Huge. Gigantic. They looked like someone had taken dinner plates and attached them to the sides of my head. I was, in this way, quite unlike my parents, who both



had remarkably small ears. I think this made it hard for them to hear each other, so they'd end up yelling most of the time.

But the doctor confirmed that there was nothing at all wrong with my big ears. My papa got more and more interested in the way the world looked and sounded to me, such a calm and unconcerned baby. Every time he heard or saw something interesting, he'd say, "I wonder how the baby"—they hadn't yet given me a name—"would sense that?" and write it down. He had long lists all over the house describing things like how it sounds when someone steps on dry leaves or when a dog laps water or the unexpected noise when a child's toy drops in the next room. His plan was to ask me all these things as soon as I was old enough to talk. Of course, as with many plans in life, by the time I could talk, most of the lists would have turned yellow and been forgotten.

And if you think my papa sounds a bit strange, then you've never had the pleasure of meeting my mama. After I was born she became possessed by a heart-racing, hand-wringing sense of worry that something awful might befall me.

"He'll get eaten by a tiger," she'd cry. "Or hit by a bus.

I just know it.” She had daily panic attacks and would have to put her head between her legs and breathe into a paper bag.

She worried and worried, until one day, overcome by tears, she was sent to bed for an indefinite amount of time by the doctor.

“Perhaps there is someone to help you care for the baby,” the doctor suggested.

“I suppose we have no other option,” Papa said sadly. “We must do this for the baby’s sake.” And so, that very night, my mama and papa tucked me into a basket, placed me on the steps of an orphanage, and left town, never to return. Attached to my blanket was a note that read:

PLEASE GIVE ME A HOME.

(AND, IF IT IS NOT TOO MUCH TROUBLE, A NAME.)

LOVE,

THE BABY

TWO

## Pizzazz Shmizazz

Let us leave me and my sad little babiness on the steps of that orphanage for a moment and move across town to the Soap and Suds Car Wash. There worked an elephant. This elephant's name was Birch since he was as white as the bark on a birch tree. Birch worked for a man named the Ringleader. This man had run a circus for fifty years, but when the circus closed, the Ringleader had to run the Soap and Suds Car Wash to make a living. He was pretty bitter about that and treated most of his employees as if they were performers.

“Smile while you wash,” he'd tell the boys soaping up the hood of a Chevy. “Arch your back. Point your toes.”

He was hardest on Birch. Technically, all Birch's job entailed was sucking up clean water with his trunk out of a

wooden barrel, then spraying the soap off the cars. This made Birch sad because an elephant's trunk is an amazing thing. It shouldn't be wasted on washing cars. It should be doing things like touching and lifting. It should be greeting and caressing. It should be doing all the important things.

But the Ringleader didn't care about that, and nothing Birch did was ever good enough for his boss. "Birch, I want to see some pizzazz," the Ringleader would say. "I want to see showmanship. I want to see your zest for the performance."

But Birch had no pizzazz. No showmanship. No zest. In fact, he had never much liked being in the circus, or working at the car wash, or being told what to do at all. Pizzazz shmizazz! Birch felt, as many people do, that he was meant for a life full of more . . . more . . . more something.

And why would an elephant think this? It all started, as many dreams do, with a glimpse of pure beauty.

It was spring and the circus was in Paris for a week. During a break between shows, Birch decided to do a little sightseeing and wandered over to the Louvre, a very impressive museum. He had a hunch they wouldn't let him inside, so he lingered by a side entrance where he saw men moving paintings out of the

building and loading them onto a truck. And that's when he *almost* saw it.

The painting was large and rectangular and covered with layers of padding inside a crate. One of the men carrying the painting saw Birch staring at it and stopped. "You like art, big guy?" the man asked the elephant. "This was painted by a man who had a long white beard, same color as you."

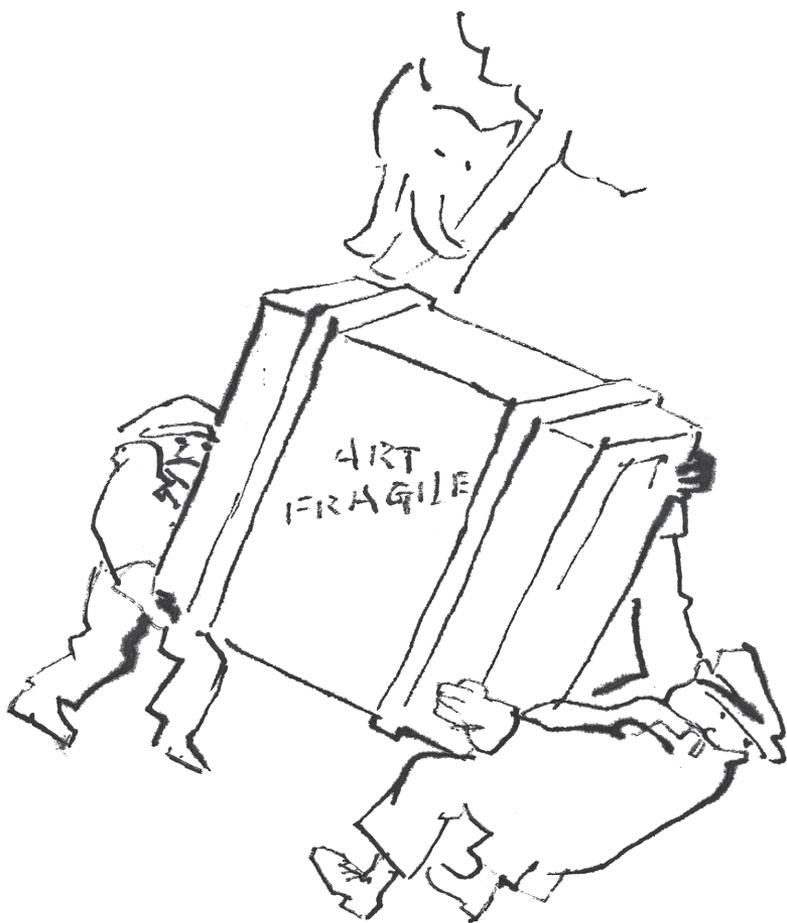
Birch's eyes got wide. His heart wondered what the artist had painted.

"It's a painting of a bird that dies in flames and is born again from ashes," the man said. "A phoenix."

Birch never did get to see the painting. But for the rest of his time in the circus, he haunted the tents and cotton-candy stands whispering to the wind about the time he *almost* saw a painting of a phoenix.

In the meantime, the painting sat in the cold basement of an art restoration business, its paint fading and chipping, its colors staring out at the world waiting to be refurbished by an artist to whom it did not belong.

But what a glorious masterpiece Birch imagined all those years. He envisioned the artist walking the wild fields among



scarlet and gold, searching for the right colors to paint the phoenix. The artist painted by dipping his brush into the flowers and used the stream like a child's water glass to wash his tools, turning it milky brown. He worked until the ink-colored night surrounded him. He continued painting without his eyes, knowing that in the morning the dark would be gone. Maybe the blackness became a bird as well—a raven spreading its strong onyx wings and departing at dawn.

The most glorious works of art, the ones that bring the purest joy—perhaps they need not be touched or known, but seen only with the heart.

Birch often thought about the painting while he washed cars at the Soap and Suds. The way the bubbles formed on the hoods of the cars and caught rainbows of color—blue, green, and iridescent pink, like the inside of a clamshell—made him long to be an artist.

“Back to work. Stop daydreaming,” the Ringleader yelled, and popped the bubble Birch had been staring at. The dream rose up, humming like a swarm of bees, and departed.

Birch knew that throughout history there have been many jobs that elephants have performed.



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