

Special Lesson Short Stories, Long Impacts

The Elephant Keeper

The orphanage

When Aaron arrived at the orphanage, two men were playing a board game with bottle caps at the gate.

One of the men recognized him and called out,

"Good afternoon, Aaron!"

"Hello," Aaron answered shyly.

"I'm Samuel. Did you come to visit Zambezi?"

"Zambezi?"

"It's the name we gave the little elephant." So the elephant was alive! Aaron beamed, his heart beating faster. Samuel motioned for him to follow. Zambezi lay on a bed of straw in a corner of a stall. He looked like a wrinkled bag of bones, covered by blankets. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

The image of his father, lying under blankets at home just before he died, flashed through Aaron's mind, and he felt a lump in his throat.

Samuel nudged him forward. Aaron knelt and, with shaking hands, reached out to touch Zambezi's thick skin. It felt surprisingly warm. Zambezi opened one eye. Slowly, his trunk curled upward and brushed Aaron's arm.

"How are you?" Aaron whispered.

He sat down on the straw, and the elephant rested his trunk on Aaron's leg. They stayed like that for some time, while Samuel watched them curiously.

"Here," Samuel whispered, handing a milk bottle to Aaron. "Maybe you will have better luck than we've had."

Aaron had seen enough babies nurse to know what to do. He tilted the bottle, spilling some drops onto the elephant's lip. Zambezi licked the milk off his lip and then began to suck from the bottle, looking Aaron in the eyes as he did. Samuel shook his head in amazement. Aaron's mind rushed back to the day he first met the elephant.

The Rescue

The sun was a glowing red ball in the eastern sky when Aaron left his family's hut. Aaron headed to Lion's Inn, where he had been working for a few months. As Aaron approached the gate, he was startled by a strange noise. He couldn't believe his eyes—a small elephant was flailing around in the swimming pool! The elephant held its trunk in the air and kicked wildly.

Aaron glanced around nervously for the mother elephant. But there were no other elephants in sight, and this one needed help fast. Aaron raced to the cottage where the gardener slept. "Help! Hurry!" he called. He ran to the pool shed and grabbed a rope and a rake. When he got back, the manager, the gardener, the cook, and other workers had gathered by the pool.

After Aaron threw the rake down on the deck, he jumped straight into the water. The little elephant snorted and splashed wildly. Aaron got close to it with the rope. One of the boys who worked in the kitchen jumped in, too. Together they were able to get the rope under the elephant's belly. With the cook and the gardener pulling from the edge, Aaron and the other boy finally managed to drag, pull, and push the exhausted animal onto the deck. He watched the elephant, lying on its side, shaking. It looked straight at Aaron and blinked.

A truck pulled up, and some men in uniform stepped out. Aaron saw them waving their arms and overheard bits and pieces of their conversation with the inn manager: "only one month old ... found the mother ... killed ... poachers" The men loaded the elephant into the truck.

The Mother

Aaron awoke from his thoughts when the head keeper found him and Samuel and said, "So, you are the boy who rescued Bezi from the pool. How would you like to work here? We're short on workers, and it seems you're good with animals."

When Aaron went back home and told his mother about the job, she said, "Your father would be proud, as I am. We'll miss you, but we'll manage. And, of course, you'll come home on your days off." And just like that, his decision was made.

The first few nights at the orphanage were not easy. Aaron hardly slept at all. With every snort Bezi gave, Aaron sat straight up, heart hammering in his chest. He missed the familiar sounds and smells of home, especially his sister's soft, rhythmic breathing as she slept near him. But it wasn't long before he began to find comfort in the closeness of Bezi and the warm smell of straw.

Samuel and the other keepers showed him tricks to get Bezi to swallow pills and how to take blood for the veterinarian to check. Bezi was still very sick, sleeping most of the day in the quiet stable. But now, at least, he drank the bottles that the keepers offered him every few hours.

Aaron recorded the amounts that Bezi drank. He held Bezi's head as the veterinarian took his temperature or administered medicine. He even recorded the elephant's bowel movements. He felt proud when Bezi finished his milk and covered him with a blanket at night. "I'm turning into an elephant mother," he joked to Samuel.

But mothers worry, and so did Aaron. Each time he saw the veterinarian frown, Aaron's stomach got tense. When Bezi spat out his medicine, Aaron feared that he'd never get better. One morning, he noticed that Bezi's heartbeat was very, very slow compared to his own. Samuel reassured him that all elephants have a slower heartbeat than humans. But that didn't stop Aaron from worrying. Bezi still had a fever. Aaron knew only too well that medicine couldn't cure everything.

A Hope

One morning, Aaron watched sadly as the other elephants played, kicking a large can and rolling joyfully in the mud. He was wishing Bezi could have the company of other elephants, when suddenly he heard Samuel shout, "Come quick!" Aaron dropped the rake he was holding and ran to where Samuel and the other keepers crowded. On a dusty truck lay the still, gray body of a young elephant. She had an ugly wound on one of her feet from being caught in a trap.

After eight men carried her to a stall in the stable, the veterinarian covered her leg with green clay, a natural healing remedy. Aaron ran for blankets to cover the injured elephant. He stroked her head while the veterinarian checked her heart rate and administered medicine.

It wasn't until the new elephant was settled in her stall that Aaron realized with a start that he'd forgotten all about Zambezi. He had never left him alone this long before. He couldn't believe he'd been so careless! What if something had happened to him? Aaron dashed toward the stable.

He had been preparing himself for the worst, but he got a shock of a different kind. The little elephant was standing up with his trunk hanging over the half wall of his stall. He seemed to be trying to reach some plastic bottles. Aaron laughed with relief. "Bezi! Are you hungry? Are you getting into trouble now? I guess that's a good sign!" He rubbed the little elephant's trunk, and Bezi nuzzled Aaron's arm.

Bezi was getting better each day. His sunken skin slowly gave way to a round belly, and his cheeks filled out, too. Before long, he was moving around more, even trying to leave his stall. The other orphans approached curiously, prodding him all over with their trunks.

Eventually, Bezi was allowed to venture outside. He seemed to love the older orphans, following them around the pen and imitating their behavior. Bezi's eyes lit up as he splashed in the mud. And whenever he spotted Aaron, he came running over to search for a bottle with his trunk.

Aaron still sleeps near any little elephant that needs him, keeping watch and feeding him or her around the clock. Aaron dreams of a time when all orphan elephants will roam the African plains as free, wild animals—when there will no longer be a need for elephant orphanages.