

The Gift

Gaea Schoeters

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Translator Michele Hutchison

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In the middle of the Spree, a bull elephant is taking a bath. It slowly lowers its cumbersome body into the water, sinks down and disappears under the water's surface. For a moment the man thinks he imagined it, the alcohol has messed up his brain, but then the animal reappears, its big ears hanging like wet chamois leathers against its head. It rolls around happily in the water.

Then, out of nowhere, another trunk appears beside it like a periscope. A second elephant rises from the river. With a gentle grunt, the behemoths greet each other and entwine their trunks. They push each other back and forth in the riverbed. Are they fighting? No, their headbutts are not aggressive; they seem to be playing. Teasingly, one lays its trunk over the other's shoulders and ducks him under, upon which his opponent resurfaces, snorting with delight. The attacker gives him no respite, mounting his back and pushing his head under water again with both front legs. But this time the opponent resists. His trunk raised, he tries to keep his head above water, tusks pointing up at the sky, until he has to admit that the other is stronger, or at least heavier; then he sinks resignedly into the water and swims a short distance, only to turn back immediately and launch a counterattack. This slow wrestling match goes on for several minutes, until one of the elephants suddenly dredges a rusty bicycle from the water. It swings it triumphantly in the air before throwing it in a wide arc onto the bank. Trumpeting loudly, it shakes its head.

The bicycle lands a long way off on the promenade; an approaching cyclist is forced to swerve out of the way. Swearing, he stops and looks around to see where the bicycle came from, but when he realises what is happening in the river, he casts his own bicycle aside, grabs his mobile phone and starts filming. Above, on the bridge, the S-Bahn rushes by, carrying the first commuters to their work. The city is waking up.

Chancellor Hans Christian Winkler is unaware of any of this. The morning has begun as quietly as ever in his lakeside home on the Wannsee. The alarm clock went off, he got up immediately without pressing the snooze button, shaved, showered, got dressed, and is now entering the kitchen in his shirtsleeves. His wife is just setting their coffeepot on the table. The morning newspapers lie next to his plate. He prefers to read the paper versions than scrolling through the headlines on his phone. Winkler believes in thoroughness. Thoroughness and routine. As long as you quickly correct anything that deviates from the norm, the world stays on track, and so does life. As he pours himself a cup of coffee, he pulls the first newspaper towards him. To his satisfaction, he sees himself on the front page, calm and determined, addressing parliament. The Bundestag passed his ivory import act with a large majority, which means the import of exotic hunting trophies will now be significantly restricted. It's a measure that won't upset anybody. He can use it as a bargaining chip to prevent the

Green party from hitting farmers with new nitrogen taxes. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. That's how good governance works. He quickly scans the article. The photo is smaller than he'd hoped, but he comes across well in the text. Protecting endangered species is always a point-scorer. He takes a sip of his coffee and unfolds the newspaper. Then he stops. The entire double page is filled with an analysis of the interim poll, and even without reading it, he can see from the graph that his party is doing anything but well.

Ten kilometres to the north, Holger Fuchs has opened the same newspaper on his tablet and is looking at the same graph. The expression on his face betrays nothing less than undisguised triumph. As he reads, he reaches for his smartphone which is charging on the countertop. Nothing is stopping him from posting that selfie now. He quickly types a status update: *First we take the Reichstag, then the Chancery*. Without really looking, he clicks on 'add photo' and scrolls through his images to the photo from earlier in the morning. But before uploading it, he zooms in to make sure he looks combative but not too eager. Image is everything; mistakes can be fatal. Then he sees it: on the banks of the Spree, under the footbridge connecting East and West, an elephant. Not a work of art, not a statue, but a real African elephant in a threatening stance. Fucking AI. Furious, he shoves his tablet aside and calls his social media manager. 'My phone has been hacked. A deepfake. Tell me *how* in God's name?'

At Wannsee in the meantime, Frida Böhm Winkler is trying to reassure her husband who is staring dejectedly at the newspaper and rubbing his eyebrows with the thumb and index finger of his right hand. He often does this when he's worried, a tic that after years in politics has led to his characteristic bushy eyebrows.

'It's just a poll. See it as motivation, an extra reason to work together and turn the tide. Perhaps it will do the coalition some good.'

Winkler looks at his wife in annoyance. 'Do you really mean that?'

Frida ignores his acerbic tone and looks at him with the unperturbable calm that has guided their marriage through every turbulent period over the past thirty years. 'Now they'll realise that this is serious, that the time for political games is over.'

Winkler shakes his head gloomily. 'I fear the games are only just beginning.'

At that moment, his mobile phone rings. He glances at the screen and sighs. 'Off we go.'

As he carries his cup to the kitchen sink, he answers the phone. 'Otto, good morning. Although... the day couldn't have started much worse. What did you say? An elephant? In the Spreebogenpark? Are you joking? Are you trying to cheer me up or something? Not the only one? What? I can't hear you, the line... No, yes, okay, I'm on my way.' He hangs up, turns around and grabs his coat from the chair where he had neatly hung it.

Frida looks at him, amused. 'What kind of code was that?'

Winkler shakes his head uncertainly. 'No idea. Apparently, elephants have been spotted along the Spree. Probably escaped from the zoo. I'm not entirely sure, Otto was on the underground and the signal was patchy. Anyway, it's not my problem. It's a municipal affair. No idea why old Haas can't sort it out himself. If I have to start dealing with escaped elephants as well... Is Klaus here yet?'

His wife glances out of the window at the street below, where the official car is already waiting, and nods. Winkler kisses her quickly on the cheek and goes to leave, but she stops him. 'Wait a minute, I'm coming with you. Elephants in Berlin? I don't want to miss that.'

By the time Winkler reaches the city centre, it begins to dawn on him that the escaped elephants are indeed a problem that goes beyond the mayor's remit. When he left home, the radio was reporting four animals, all in the vicinity of the Spree. Perhaps they had escaped and headed for the water, although Winkler couldn't understand how that was possible without anyone seeing them first – Berlin never sleeps. Ten minutes later, the reporter interviewed a biologist who had been hastily summoned and confirmed that the animals were African elephants. Frida, sitting next to him in the

back seat, pointed out in surprise that they couldn't have come from the nearest zoo, because they only had the smaller Asian variety there. 'Something you couldn't possibly know, because you never had time to take the children to the zoo.'

He had Otto check it out, who confirmed that the Tierpark in Friedrichsfelde was indeed the only place in Berlin where African elephants were kept. This made the matter even more incomprehensible, because it meant that the animals must have travelled not five, but fourteen kilometres unnoticed. Before Winkler could ask about this, Otto added that renovations were indeed taking place at the elephant enclosure – 'You know, new animal welfare regulations, larger living areas, a replica natural habitat' – which could explain an escape, but that all the elephants had been transferred to other zoos as a precautionary measure and, after counting, none were found to be missing. In short, where the elephants had come from remained a mystery. Reason enough to see it as a possible terrorist act and call in crisis management. Winkler had agreed immediately. However unlikely the terrorism angle sounded to him, working with the army was probably the best way to capture these colossal creatures without causing too much damage. What's more, the emergency protocol would keep the press busy and distract everyone from those unfortunate polls. From that perspective, this whole elephant situation was actually rather handy. Nothing like a minor, mediagenic crisis to improve his image. If he handles this decisively, he'll win a few percentage points on the right-wing party and land a more stable position within his own government.

Meanwhile, the black Mercedes glides through the park; just a few more minutes and they'll be there. Winkler gazes thoughtfully out of the window; atop the Victory Column, the golden statue of Victoria glimmers in the morning sun. Whether she is an angel of peace or a goddess of war, Winkler greets Golden Lizzy every morning – she symbolises the start of his working day. At that moment, the car spins twice on its axis. Winkler ducks down instinctively. The Mercedes comes to a screeching halt.

Only when he is sure that everything is safe does Winkler straighten up. 'Damn it, Klaus! What was that for?'

But before his driver can answer, the answer thunders past. A column of elephants crosses the roundabout head to tail. They emerge from the park in a long line, each more majestic than the last. The largest specimens must be four metres high, easily reaching the windows of the gatehouse. Younger animals walk between them. Winkler watches breathlessly as the procession passes the car window. A van that didn't stop in time is almost crushed; one of the elephants pushes it aside with its shoulder, like a cardboard box blown onto the road. For the first time in his career, Winkler is glad of his armoured service car and his driver's special training. As soon as he saw the elephants, he skidded the car around on the handbrake, bringing it to a halt at a safe distance from the animals.

Behind them, the traffic jam grows: drivers lean out of their windows to take pictures of the elephants. But as quickly as they appeared, they disappear again. The large elephant that remained at the side of the road like a traffic policeman joins the tail of the herd and crosses the road now too. Before entering the park on the other side, it turns back with its ears spread, raises its trunk and trumpets briefly. Winkler has the feeling that the animal is looking at him as if to say, 'You haven't seen the last of us.'

'That was crazy.'

Only now that he hears the voice does Winkler remember that his wife is sitting next to him. He turns to her in shock, 'Are you alright?'

She nods wordlessly, staring in the direction the herd disappeared.

Winkler pulls himself together and addresses his driver, 'To the Chancery, now. And afterwards would you drop my wife home, until it's clear what's going on.'

When Winkler enters his office, Otto Berg, the head of the Federal Chancery, is already waiting for him. 'I took the liberty of setting up a crisis centre on the fourth floor. Everyone should have

arrived by now; the meeting starts at seven thirty. I'll update you on what we know so far on the way down. The press conference is scheduled for noon in the press room. Hopefully we'll know more by then. The press service will field all questions in the meantime.' Berg sounds as calm and pragmatic as ever, which is exactly why Winkler appointed him. Nothing can throw him off balance: not terrorist threats, not epidemics, not government crises, and certainly not a herd of elephants. He rarely has big ideas, but that's an advantage – the last thing you want is a head of the Federal Chancery who wants to play chancellor himself. Berg is better at turning Winkler's ideas into concrete plans, and he is a master at selling those plans to unwilling coalition partners and the press.

Not that Winkler has any idea of how he wants to tackle this. First, he needs a clear picture of the situation. Randomly making claims before you know what's going on never results in good solutions; he'd rather leave that to the opposition. No, first he'll wait for the briefing. He glances at his watch. Five minutes to go. He takes a sip of his coffee and looks outside. Out of habit, he has sat down on the windowsill, where he always starts his working day. A moment to focus, a few deep breaths with a view of the park, and then it's time to get started. Looking at greenery calms the mind. But what he sees now takes his breath away: a trail of destruction right through the Tiergarten. The passing elephants have torn off branches, stripped bushes and uprooted trees. It looks as if a column of giant termites has swept through the park. If this is the devastation the animals have caused in such a short time, he must take urgent action before this joke leaves an equally large hole in the budget. Berg, who has come to stand next to him, nods. 'Not pretty, is it? And you haven't seen the other side yet.'

Winkler follows him onto the balcony, a concerned expression on his face. Three elephants are visibly enjoying themselves, bathing in the fountains in front of the building. Further away, on the lawn in front of the Reichstag, a small herd is chewing on the hedges. Is that the herd he saw at the Victory Column? Or are they different animals?

'How many are there, for God's sake?'

Berg shrugs. 'As far as we know, thirty-eight. But more reports are coming in. We're doing what we can to assess the situation.' He nods in the direction of the police helicopter flying overhead, which passes them with a loud roar. At the same time, he subtly manoeuvres Winkler towards the door – it is now two minutes to half past seven.

As they go down the stairs, Berg summarises what he knows. 'Eighteen in Spreebogen park, near the water. That's where the first reports came from, and it looks like more and more animals are gathering there. We don't know if that has anything to do with the government buildings. If the elephants are being controlled remotely, that could be the case – in which case you need to get out of here as quickly as possible. But an aerial body scan hasn't detected anything unusual, and according to the experts, it's perfectly normal for them to head towards water in the morning. Apparently, the animals drink a hundred litres a day. They spend the rest of the time eating. We have called in a veterinarian to sedate one of them and take it away for examination, but that requires time and planning. I think it better not to do this in front of the press and the public. It's always a sensitive issue.'

By now they've reached the sixth floor. Winkler glances through the window at the Spree where there really is a row of dark-grey buildings. And, on the other side of the river, a row of cameras just as long and a crowd of curious onlookers. He nods. 'Be good if that could be done at a more discreet location. Do we know where they're coming from yet?'

Berg shakes his head. 'The reports are coming in from all over Berlin, although it seems the city centre is particularly affected.' Fifth floor. Half a minute to go.

'Any casualties?'

'None so far.'

'Then let's try to keep it that way.' With these words, Winkler pushes open the door of the crisis centre. The next half hour brings little clarification. Chancellor Winkler listens to the crisis team's

briefing with growing concern. The police commissioner gives an update; a digital map of Berlin appears on the projection screen. 'So far, the damage has been limited. Twelve traffic accidents have been reported, none of which directly involved an animal. They were mainly collisions with vehicle damage due to the driver being distracted. Two cyclists fell into the Spree but were rescued by the fire brigade. For safety reasons, we have deployed officers on the riverbank to control the crowd. The red dots indicate the locations of the reports. As far as we know, there are currently fifty-four of them. But they are moving quickly, so there may be double counts.' Fifty-four?! Winkler looks at Berg in shock, but before he can answer, a new dot appears on the screen with a beep.

'Fifty-five. The number keeps rising,' adds the head of State Security. 'And we have no idea of the real numbers. As long as we don't know where the targets are coming from, we can only rely on civilian sightings.'

Winkler frowns. 'They're not just falling out of the sky, are they?'

Chief Superintendent Klemm smiles uncomfortably. 'Perhaps not, but... they... they just seem to appear.'

'Appear?!'

'I know, it sounds ridiculous. But there are no trucks on the surveillance footage. They... just suddenly appear.' He switches channels. An image from a CCTV camera appears. 'Like here. Camera 34B12, on the railway bridge near Friedrichstrasse. At 5:55 a.m., everything is normal. And then, suddenly...' There is an elephant on the bank. Although Winkler knows it's impossible, he sees it too. The elephant seems to appear out of nowhere.

'Image manipulation?'

Klemm shakes his head. 'Unlikely. The IT department is double-checking, but...'

The rest of his words are lost on Winkler; something in the corner of the screen catches his attention. He nudges Berg, who is sitting next to him. 'Isn't that Fuchs? Find out what he was doing there at such an ungodly hour. If he has anything to do with this, it's our lucky day.' Berg nods curtly. Nothing in his expression betrays what he is thinking, although Winkler himself realises that his suggestion is completely absurd. Fuchs may well be capable of endangering democracy with deep fakes, but it is highly unlikely that he can conjure up 55 real elephants out of thin air. Meanwhile, Major General Moser has taken the floor; his presence reassures Winkler. Moser did an excellent job during the COVID-19 crisis and proved that deploying the army in domestic disaster response could be of real added value. What's more, he is well aware of how sensitive military interference in civil affairs can be, and even when he is running the show, he keeps a discreet public profile. And, as Winkler hoped, he also has a contingency plan ready for this unexpected situation.

'Restrict, group, sedate, remove. These four steps will enable us to resolve the elephant problem within forty-eight hours. The simplest solution would be to block the streets with armoured vehicles, but that would cause considerable inconvenience to many civilians. So I propose closing off streets with containers to create a corridor to guide the elephants to an extraction point. We are consulting with a number of veterinarians to determine the best course of action. Firing tranquiliser darts from helicopters is by far the safest option, but it could cause panic in the herd. It would probably be better to use snipers operating from a long distance. After that, it's a matter of transport, either by truck or by water. The loading capacity of even a large cargo plane is too limited.'

Winkler nods approvingly. He can use this when he has to talk to the press later.

'Sounds great but where do you want to take them to?' The question comes from the Minister of the Interior. Always making things difficult, as if this is the moment for arm wrestling within the coalition.

Moser remains calm. 'For that we first need to know where they come from. Unfortunately, that is not within my remit.'

He smiles subtly at Klemm, who looks back angrily and immediately passes the buck back to the minister. 'We are only responsible for public safety. Background checks are the task of the State Security Service.'

Now the head of State Security is also bristling. 'An analysis of the threat is a priority here. We must rule out terrorism or espionage as soon as possible. And so we need to eliminate and extract one of the targets so that we can perform an autopsy.'

'Kill an elephant in front of the press and the public?' Winkler shakes his head. 'Out of the question.'

A loud beep interrupts the discussion; a new dot appears on the map, further east than the others.

'Malchow?! There goes your terrorism theory. It's in the boondocks, nothing there.'

The head of State Security ignores the triumphant tone of the police commissioner. 'Maybe this is our chance. If you hurry, we can cordon off a section before...'

'Forget it. The press is already there.'

With a quick tap on his smartphone, Berg shares the newsflash. A young reporter is standing in front of a supermarket where it looks like a bomb has gone off. Broken glass all over the place, windows and doors hanging off their hinges. Behind her, people are rushing in and out with their arms full of groceries.

'Fifteen minutes ago, two young bull elephants charged into this supermarket and rampaged through the fruit and vegetable section. This caused panic, and passers-by are taking advantage of the chaos to loot the store. We are waiting for the emergency services to arrive...'

Klemm swears.

The head of State Security can't stop himself from rubbing it in. 'Public safety is your responsibility isn't it?'

'Gentlemen, please! This won't help us solve the issue.'

Berg raises his hands appeasingly. 'Let's take five.'

Klemm grabs his mobile phone from the table and disappears onto the balcony to smoke. Winkler is about to walk over to Moser to ask about the specific plans for the evacuation when Berg taps him on the shoulder. 'Phone call for you. Upstairs.'

'Can't it wait?'

'I'm afraid not. The president of Botswana wants to speak with you urgently. I suspect it's about the ivory import act.'

As he walks up the stairs with Berg – neither of them ever takes the lift; Winkler to stay in shape, Berg because he is claustrophobic – Winkler asks Berg about the small print on the ivory import act. He only came up with the broad outlines of the bill, the details were worked out by his cabinet.

'It's not a total ban on ivory imports, just a tightening of the import conditions. We presented it differently to the press, but with the right paperwork, you can still do as much as before. You already needed a permit to hunt African elephants, so nothing has really changed. I suspect that President Tebogo wants to express his dissatisfaction as a preventive measure, to ensure that we don't shut down the entire trade, as the British have done. You can reassure him in that respect. The act has done what it was supposed to do here, and a total ban is not what we want either. There are too many hobby hunters in our electoral base for that.'

Winkler nods and sighs. A discussion with an angry African head of state is the last thing he needs right now. He knows from experience that such conversations take time, because the other person needs to feel they are heard. Rushing something like this in a coffee break is doomed to fail. With mild reluctance, he sits down at his desk. Berg switches on the video link, but remains discreetly out of shot. Tebogo appears immediately on the screen. Contrary to what Winkler had expected, his face is not stormy. The Botswanan president smiles cheerfully at him. 'Mr Winkler!

What a pleasure. I won't take up much of your valuable time. I just wanted to thank you for the new ivory act. It's wonderful that you are so concerned about the welfare of wildlife in a country ten thousand kilometres from yours. Understandable, of course: elephants are special animals that deserve maximum protection.'

Winkler glances at Berg over the top of the screen. Is he being ironic or not? Berg makes a hesitant gesture.

But then Tebogo removes all doubt. 'People are less important, of course. The fact that the inhabitants of Botswana have to live with those elephants every day is not your problem. Protecting Botswana's inhabitants won't win you votes. I, on the other hand, have to explain to my constituents that almost half of my country, their country, is a nature reserve where elephants take precedence over farmers. But I do so with pleasure. The West asked us to focus on protecting endangered species, and that's what we've done. So well that we have far too many elephants. One hundred and thirty thousand! Thanks to our conservation plan, the population is growing by six per cent each year. It's unsustainable. The herds are expanding their territory in search of food and water. Villages are on their path, and children are trampled on their way to school. The biggest victims are poor farmers. One of these animals can eat an entire harvest in a month. That's a year's worth of food. Aren't these people to be allowed to protect their crops?'

Winkler wants to interrupt but Berg gestures for him to wait, so he nods empathetically instead.

Tebogo really hits his stride now. 'My people are starving, especially now that the dry season is lasting much longer than usual due to climate change. In Namibia, the government allows a proportion of the elephants, hippos and zebras to be shot to feed the people. We aren't doing that; we're sticking to our agreement with the West. I am letting my people go hungry so that the elephant herds can grow. Poaching is severely punished, as is the sale and consumption of bushmeat. The inhabitants of my country do not eat protected animals. But it is a precarious balance that no longer works when those protected animals strip their fields. Last year, we gave away 9,000 elephants to Angola, but that's not enough. If we don't curb the population, it will lead to conflict. Elephants will kill people, and people will kill elephants. At random. That benefits no one. Hunting helps us regulate the situation. Isn't that what you do? Germany culls two million deer a year. Those few hundred elephant hunting permits are no threat to the species, you know that as well as I do. An import ban like this is an emotional and diplomatic measure, the real impact is minimal. But for my country, the consequences are dramatic. If the trophy hunters stay away, we lose two million euros a year. That money doesn't just go towards protecting elephants, but towards school fees and compensation for farmers. This will lead to misery. To poaching. If we want to keep up our conservation programme, we need to issue more hunting licences. Attract more hunters. Because of trophy hunting's poor imago, we are already falling short of the 400 kills allowed under CITES legislation.'

'I'm not surprised. The photos of big game hunters posing with animals are in poor taste.' Winkler has had enough.

Tebogo laughs cynically. 'It's not my fault that Western hunters behave badly, but it's true: their mentality is slow to change. Unfortunately, African hunters can't afford the expensive licences, so we need Western hunters to generate income and keep the numbers manageable. If you make it impossible for them to take their trophies home, they'll definitely stay away.'

Berg nods. Now. But before Winkler has a chance to respond, Tebogo cuts him off.

'You Europeans want to tell us how to live. Maybe you should try living with megafauna yourselves. That's why I've decided to gift twenty thousand elephants to Germany. They should have arrived in Berlin by now.'

Winkler's mouth falls open. 'What? You sent those elephants... but how? The ivory act was only passed yesterday!'

Tebogo grins broadly. 'Magic, my dear friend. But let me make something very clear: don't even think about confining them. Any elephant that is obstructed in any way will duplicate itself. They must be able to move freely and given all the space they need. The population will just have to adapt. Save the elephants! After all, they are protected animals whose welfare is an absolute priority. Enjoy!'

He smiles one last time, then the screen goes black.
