

*“The Elephant’s Foot” takes place in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl. It is a novel about mankind’s complex relationship with nature, but it is also a novel about love and the powerful tension that can arise between people in a close-knit group. The love story is set against the backdrop of the exclusion zone’s post-apocalyptic landscapes, created by man, which force the main characters to face themselves: here it is impossible to escape one’s responsibility. In that respect the novel also portrays the hope for regeneration – as paradoxical as the savage explosiveness of the vegetation in the zone’s abandoned cities.*

The novel, “The Elephant’s Foot”, is set in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl. Several years have passed since the nuclear disaster and an international team of scientists are trying to observe the wildlife in the radioactive area. Katarina – a young Swedish biologist – arrives at the research centre. She is the narrator of the novel and she reveals how she joined the team of scientists ten years previously (the book’s now) and how she fell in love with her Ukrainian colleague, Grigorij. When she looks back on the past she asks herself: What actually happened to me? Who was that man?

“I try”, she says, “to remember the events that took place at the time - so long ago now – without sizing them up, without demanding any sort of truth, but allowing them to come to me; it’s like shaking off a ten year-long sleep.”

When she arrives at the Centre she is immediately thrown into an immersive and intense unity. She instantly develops a solid bond with American Joshua (“if he kept any secrets, they certainly did not weigh him down. He looked like a human being who had decided to look upon life with a good-humoured air”), and he becomes her confidante throughout her stay, even if it is a friendship with complications. Susan, also

American, is the leader of the team: a middle-aged woman with a very powerful aura, someone who makes “neurotic people desperate to please her”. The team also consists of Grigorij, Andrej and Lev from Ukraine and Jean Luc from France, as well as Olga – raised in the former Soviet Union. On the outside she appears girlishly brittle but Joshua warns Katarina not to underestimate her capacity. “She looks like an elf”, he says, “but in reality she is a Soviet tank”.

As Katarina is introduced to Grigorij she immediately realises he is a man she won't be able to escape, she is *compelled* to get to know him, but they both feel awkward when they first meet. Katarina also understands that Grigorij and Olga are having a relationship, not only professional, but also personal. This makes her feel confused – she believes that there should be no alliances in a research team and that any sexual tensions that may arise should be prohibited.

When Olga is taken ill with fever Susan suggests that Katarina temporarily take her place and work alongside Grigorij. At first, Katarina feels anxious at the mere thought, and also Grigorij appears uncomfortable, but following a meeting at a café in town, where Grigorij vividly tells her about his experiences in the zone and cities Pushkin in Russian, they start to feel more at ease with each other.

Katarina decides to learn Russian and secretly practices in the evenings, but with little success. This brings back memories of language difficulties in her childhood; her father, a famous conductor who worked in several different countries, made his family pack up and leave on several occasions, but the moves did not only mean a change of address but also a change of language. Katarina remembers the vulnerability she felt at each of the family's constant separations.

Katarina embarks on her first journey into the exclusion zone together with Joshua and Susan and is immediately struck by how the awareness of

the elevated radiation affects every situation: the wild dogs, the abandoned doctor's surgery, the buried and overgrown villages. "The radiation", Katarina writes, "is the master of the zone". On their return journey she experiences a strange sensation that something, "a shadowy character", is moving at a distance inside the vegetation against a background of flickering colours. Ill at ease she keeps this to herself, but decides to mark the spot on a map and remember it.

The evening after their return, Katarina stays behind at the laboratory when Grigorij suddenly appears. At first he pretends to have an errand to the centre, but soon admits that he has come purely to see her. He approaches her: they kiss and later make love at Katarina's flat. When Katarina brings up Olga, Grigorij feels distressed and gives evasive answers to her many questions. "What is this?" he asks "the KGB?"

This leads them through a period of unspoken promises and fleeting trysts while Katarina's friendship with both Joshua and Jean Luc deepens. Grigorij asks Katarina "not to spend time alone with Olga", but does not tell her why.

But Katarina has secretly begun to observe Olga. One day she finds her standing in front of the so-called "skull cabinet" – an archive cabinet in a corridor, where they keep tinned mice and mouse craniums found in the zone. She sees how Olga takes mouse craniums out of the cabinet, carefully observing each one. Katarina perceives the situation as both remarkable and frightening. Joshua later tells her that Olga's father, once a renowned nuclear physicist, died at the nuclear accident. This gives Katarina more reason to wonder who Olga really is. She has a sense of foreboding – is everything alright with Olga?

When Olga travels to Crimea on an assignment, Grigorij takes the opportunity to bring Katarina into the exclusion zone on a ten-day-long

expedition, where they get the chance to not only work together and explore the zone, but also to determine how they feel about one another: desire, but perhaps also love.

During their expedition they travel further and further away from civilisation and further into the zone and the Red Forest – the most contaminated area. The journey also extends into a mental journey, towards shadow-like memories and a lost world where we can sense a pain. They visit overgrown villages and board a rusty trawler, half-slumped in the reed on the river Pripyat. This is where Katarina confronts Grigorij about Olga and he finally confesses that Olga is occasionally affected by delusions: periods when she needs to medicate and get away in order to rehabilitate. “In this country”, Grigorij claims, “we are used to being observed through a rifle scope. And Olga is afraid to lose her position as a scientist, and she is also afraid of herself, of really losing it”. “It’s strange”, Katarina replies, “how little you know about people that seem so close”, and she also realises that she still knows far too little about Grigorij – a “homo sovieticus”, as he calls himself.

They drive towards the vacated ghost town Pripyat and make a stop at the demolished nuclear power plant Chernobyl. It looms ominously above the ground, enveloped by its sarcophagus, a beast of inhuman dimensions. The Geiger counter moves the decimal point one step to the right on the display. They talk about the molten mass of corium, the formation that has been compared to a giant elephant’s foot and that still rests inside the sarcophagus. “The monster only has to jiggle and buck for the cracks to expand into the air and the groundwater. What sacrifices will it require in order to stay calm?” Katarina says.

The beast seems to be watching them during the rest of their journey; it breathes down their necks and keeps them under close observation, an inexorable point of orientation on the horizon, impossible to escape.

The silence across the vacated city of Pripyat is chilling and Katarina understands that she and Grigorij are the only humans around. Perhaps they are also unneeded – here is a place where nature has gained control, where deer wander into the houses, where trees extend their branches through the windows and a peregrine has built its nest on a balcony. They witness how the bird spreads its wings and flies out over the city.

A thunderstorm approaches and is followed by a downpour. Grigorij offers to fetch the car while Katarina waits in a doorway. But Grigorij is late and Katarina becomes worried, and yet again she is tortured by painful memories from the past. When Grigorij finally appears they end up arguing. Katarina runs off while Grigorij obstinately walks towards the car. When they finally reunite, Katarina is sitting on a bench at the train station, next to the rusted train carriages. Is this how I have lived? she asks herself. Ever since that day? Have I never moved on? It is evident that she carries a trauma from a young age, the story's incentive, something she is constantly hauling around, locked up inside a shell, as she describes it: "pupated". She reconciles with Grigorij and they promise each other, like all lovers, never to part again...

They work, talk, make love. The days go by quickly and at the same time they extend into eternity – time does not exist in the zone, here other laws prevail. This is something they experience first hand when they, during one of their excursions, realise that they are approaching the spot Katarina once marked on the map the first time she visited the zone. There is a clearing in the forest and they step through a gate, where they suddenly find themselves in an extraordinary garden that seems to have emerged from nowhere and where the scent of herbs almost hypnotises them to proceed further in. They walk among garden beds, flowers, vegetables, through glaring sun and unexpected shadows. Grigorij constantly remarks that the garden goes against all laws and regulations, that it is forbidden to

grow anything here, while Katarina is delighted at its sheer beauty. How come it is here and who has built it?

When they finally leave the mysterious garden they run into an armed man by the gate. He also seems to have appeared out of nowhere and he only gives monosyllabic answers to their questions. Then he vanishes on his bike, just as rapidly as he appeared. Grigorij is tense and wary after the encounter and keeps repeating that the garden should not be allowed to exist and that the zone needs monitoring. Katarina, meanwhile, cannot stop thinking about the stunning garden, “it felt like it was all ours”, she says. “You’re right”, Grigorij says and turns around to face her, “but it wasn’t”.

That same evening, when Katarina confronts Grigorij about the events earlier, he reveals that he was one of the many that were commanded to sanitize the zone following the nuclear disaster. As he expresses it: one of “the polluted”. He tells her about his ordeals and points towards his head: “Chernobyl is here, on the inside. This was the only thing I could do: to stay in the zone”. His confession creates a separation and a silence between them and they go to sleep on their own.

As they prepare to go back to the centre, they both become aware that the time they spent together was just something momentary, a transient dream. They will have to face Olga and sort things out. While they drive back Grigorij accelerates way too much for Katarina’s liking and he does not slow down even when she asks him to. Suddenly she is paralyzed with fear, images from childhood car journeys appear: the games with her brother in the backseat, her mother’s roaring laughter, her father’s gaze. She shouts at Grigorij to stop the car. Events from the past explode and disintegrate in an eternal chain in the present ... And she remembers her lifelong trauma: how her entire family perished in a head-on collision in the Italian Alps.

Grigorij pulls to the side, stops the engine and holds her tight as they stand together on a field. They have reached one another, they know their love is charged with this energy – Katarina’s personal disaster, but also his own, their secrets and memories, everything that has been sealed off and pupated. “I have always managed on my own”, she says, and he replies: “You don’t need to”.

Back at the centre, they try to maintain their experiences from the zone and their strong feelings for one another, but they notice how they slowly change due to the work routines and the rest of the research team. Grigorij confronts Olga with the truth about his relationship with Katarina and at first she appears to take everything with an astonishing composure. But she is looking unwell and becomes increasingly pale and thin, working around the clock at the laboratory, often together with Susan. Joshua is more withdrawn than before and one day he ends up in a vicious brawl with Grigorij. In addition, Jean Luc informs the others that he is leaving the centre to return to Paris, and he admits to Katarina that he has viewed himself as a “loser” for a long time and does not feel that he has contributed much. It is evident to each and everyone that something has fundamentally changed at the centre and that the teamwork is no longer functioning.

One day Katarina discovers that Susan has hidden a half-eaten box of chocolates in her desk at the lab. Katarina is astonished as Susan has always vehemently pointed out the importance of respecting the safety regulations, which include never eating anything inside the laboratory. A few weeks later Katarina runs into Olga in the corridor, next to the skull cabinet. To her surprise, Olga is carrying Susan’s box of chocolates. “May I offer you a piece of chocolate?” she asks. As Katarina reaches towards the box, she hears Olga’s shrill and sneering laughter echo down the corridor. She notices how all the chocolates have been replaced by a line of

ghostlike mouse craniums. Katarina is unable to move, paralyzed by the elaborate joke. And she cannot stop thinking that Olga set out to humiliate her, to get back at her and to frighten her.

This event forebodes the eruption between Katarina and Olga, which no longer can be avoided. During a late night at the lab, Katarina provokes an argument between them. Olga angrily responds: “The problems began when you arrived.”

The next morning Olga is missing. Joshua tells everybody she has travelled into the zone. Nobody can understand why or for what reason. But Grigorij reacts with great worry and heads into the zone in search of her. As time passes and neither of them returns, Susan and Katarina decide to follow them in order to find out what has happened. After several hours of searching they find Olga’s and Grigorij’s cars parked next to the wooded area where Katarina and Grigorij once found the secret garden. Katarina eventually finds them outside the gate. She can hear their distraught voices. Olga looks very weary. She is confused and leans against Grigorij who embraces her, without letting her go, not even when he is standing face to face with Katarina.

At the centre the team has dissolved. The chain reaction has been impossible to stop. Olga is sick. Katarina feels that she is to blame for everything that has happened and she and Grigorij spend their nights fighting. She is also questioning Grigorij’s love for her. The only solution she can find is to leave the centre – working alongside Grigorij and Olga is inconceivable. And so she leaves the Centre and Chernobyl.

As the novel comes to a close we find ourselves in present time. Katarina is in Sweden where she has received a phone call from Joshua. They have spoken about the nuclear accident in Fukushima, but also about a conference in Tokyo to which several scientists from Chernobyl have been

invited. Grigorij is one of the participants. Joshua has also suggested Katarina as a lecturer. He has asked her to consider the invitation.

Katarina makes her decision. She will take part in the conference. Perhaps she is also ready to meet Grigorij again. “What has happened”, she writes, “cannot be undone, but I suppose there is nothing that says there is no use correcting the mistakes of the past”. She is looking at a photograph that Grigorij once took of the peregrine in Pripjat. On the back he has written: “To Katarina from G: we were there”. She decides to show him the photo when they meet again. “I can see him clearly before me – when he leans over, the way he used to lean over the microscope at the centre and how he first becomes surprised but then ... no, I don’t know what will happen after that, it’s impossible to know of course, but something strikes me. It is more of a notion than a thought, and it fills me with, how should I explain it, a moronic sense of hope.”

And this is where we leave her, on the border between the possible and the impossible.