

Dotty & Akili

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It's 1931, on a farm in North Dakota. The farm is small, way out in the middle of the prairie. So far out that the trip into town for supplies takes an entire day.

It's the middle of the depression, and the Schroeders don't have much.

Dorothy Schroeder is 9 years old, the youngest of 8 children. In the evenings, Dorothy might have read by the fire, or listened to the radio over the constant sound of the wind outside.

And as she listened to the radio, she might have learned about places so far away, and so different, from North Dakota. And maybe this is why it meant so much to Dorothy when one evening, her mother came back from the long trip into town with a gift. A family of elephants, made of porcelain.

[music]

Fast forward 50 years and Dorothy, who **by then** went by Dotty, was living in California. But she didn't move to the beach, or Palm Springs, or San Francisco. She settled way up north, in remote farm country south of the Oregon border. A little town named Etna. At the time it had fewer than 700 people.

Dotty opened a restaurant, a burger and ice cream place called the Tasty Cone. After a few years, everyone would just call it Dotty's. Her restaurant was a gathering place for the town, more so than the local church, or the public library, or the bar. Kids would come to the Tasty Cone for ice cream after school, families would go there for lunch on Saturdays. Dotty herself was a fixture; she knew everyone's business.

Imagine you're a kid growing up in the 70s, in a tiny mountain town. You're a regular at the Tasty Cone. You go there after school. And one afternoon you look out the window and see a woman walk by, and just behind her you see an elephant. You run outside to make sure what you saw was true. Up and down the street the rest of the town starts coming out of their houses, in awe of this huge creature from a far-away place, something you'd maybe only seen in movies, or comic books, walking past the same old houses, the same old post office, the grocery store, the church. And maybe, that day, for the first time, you got to see an elephant up close, feel the ground vibrate under its steps, reach out and touch its skin.

By one account, the elephant was rescued from poachers in Africa. By another, it was rescued from years of abuse in the circus. What we do know is that Dotty and her husband were driving through Oregon, and stopped, as they often did, at a place called Winston's Wildlife Safari, to see the elephants.

After this particular trip to Winston's, Dotty came back to Etna, and the Tasty Cone, with a young elephant.

The elephant was named Akili, a Swahili word meaning intelligence, and she grew up in a barn back behind the Tasty Cone

The years passed, Dotty raised Akili, and the elephant became as much a fixture in the town as the woman.

For the next two decades, kids would come to the Tasty Cone after school for ice cream, and then go out back to feed Akili peanuts. The elementary school, just down the street from Dotty's, would take field trips to see the elephant. Once in a while, Dotty would walk Akili through town, a crowd gathering around the two of them as they went. The elephant became the highlight of Etna's annual Fourth of July parade.

One winter, Dotty taught Akili to throw snowballs. She would scoop up snow with her trunk and throw them at people walking by, or the children who came to see her. And for a few years, the two of them would sometimes travel down south, where the elephant would throw the first pitch for the Oakland A's. And Dotty taught Akili to paint.

The elephant would paint your portrait like this. You'd stand in front of her, Akili holding a paintbrush in her trunk and Dotty beside her with a palette. Dotty would ask Akili to paint the colors you were wearing. And Akili would look at you, take a moment to think, and then carefully pick each color from the palette with her brush, putting huge streaks on the canvas.

At some point, Akili started appearing in movies, when Hollywood producers needed California hills to look more like the African savannah. The movies weren't big, a third sequel or a made for tv movie here and there. But Dotty was always on the set, right by her side.

But Northern California is not a place for elephants. The winters were too cold, and Akili spent most of her life alone. Elephants are social creatures, they don't do well in isolation.

There's a famous story in Etna, that one afternoon, as a group of kids were eating ice cream in the restaurant, Akili managed to hop the fence and started pounding on the door, trying to break into the restaurant. The kids were trapped inside, screaming, while the elephant tried to get in. But Dotty was able to calm Akili down, and lead her back to the barn.

In one version of this story, the elephant was simply excited to see the children and got carried away. In another, she was just in a bad mood. In every story about Akili, she is described as a person, with comprehensible emotions. She could paint, after all. She could throw snowballs. But then there were moments like this, when the huge gap between the minds of the elephant, and the people in town, opened up.

Akili died on a movie set in Los Angeles in 1998. How she died is unclear. Some Etna residents say it was caused by stress, some say she was fed the wrong food. What is clear is that Dotty was never the same afterward. Akili was her closest companion. By then, Dotty's kids had all grown up and moved away from Etna, to LA or San Francisco, to places with more to do. And Dotty had stayed behind, taking care of Akili, teaching her tricks, and walking her through town on her way to the post office.

Dotty died a few years after Akili, on the fourth of July. Dotty's, the restaurant, is still in business, the barn where the elephant lived is still standing out back. Now there's a huge mural painted on the wall outside the restaurant, of elephants, and giraffes, and zebras standing in grassland. It's an image of a world Akili never had. And perhaps the mural is an acknowledgement. An acknowledgement that for as much as she delighted everyone in town, Etna was not where she belonged.

But a girl who grew up on a farm in North Dakota, in the middle of the great depression, was able to raise an elephant. And for a brief period of time, a couple decades, a tiny town in Northern California, a town that never had much, was home to this elephant. And the town could come and visit it, and touch it, and watch it paint pictures.

