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opening extract from

An Elephant in the Garden

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1.

TO TELL THE TRUTH, I DON'T THINK LIZZIE WOULD EVER HAVE told us her elephant story at all, if Karl had not been called Karl.

Maybe I'd better explain.

I'm a nurse. I was working part-time in an old people's nursing home just down the road from where we live. It was part-time because I wanted to be home for Karl, my nine-year-old son. There were just the two of us, so I needed to be there to see him off to school, and be there for him when he got back. But sometimes, at weekends, they asked me to do overtime.

I couldn't always say no – we all of us had to take our turn to do weekend duties – and if I'm honest, the money helped. So at weekends, if Karl hadn't got anywhere else to go, or anyone else to look after him, they let me bring him into work with me.

I was a bit worried about it at first – whether anyone would mind, how he'd get on with all the old folks – but he loved it, and as it turned out, so did they. For a start, he had the whole park to play around in. Sometimes he'd bring a few friends. They could climb the trees, kick a football about, whizz around on their mountain bikes. As for the old folk, the children's visits became quite a feature of their weekends, something for them to look forward to. They would gather around the sitting-room windows to watch them, often for hours on end. And when it was raining, Karl and his friends used to come inside and play chess with them, or watch a film on the television.

Then, just a couple of weeks ago, on the Friday night, it snowed, and snowed hard. I had to go to work at the nursing home the next day – I was on morning shifts that weekend – and so Karl had to come too. But



he didn't mind, not one bit. He brought half a dozen of his friends along with him. They were going tobogganing in the park, they said. They didn't have a toboggan between them. They simply brought along anything that would slide – plastic sacks, surfboards, even a rubber ring. As it turned out, bottoms worked just as well as anything else. The nursing home was loud with laughter that morning as the old folks watched them gallivanting out there in the snow. In time, the tobogganing degenerated into a snowball fight, which the old folks seemed to be enjoying as much as Karl and his friends were. I was busy most of the morning, but the last time I looked out of the window I saw that, much to everyone's delight, Karl and his friends were busy building a giant snowman right outside the sitting-room window.

So I was taken completely by surprise when I walked into Lizzie's room a few minutes later and found Karl sitting there at her bedside in his hat and his coat, the two of them chatting away like old friends.

"Ah, so there you are," Lizzie said, beckoning me in.

"You did not tell me you had a son. And he is called Karl! I can hardly believe it. And he looks like him too. The likeness, it is extraordinary, amazing. I have told him also about the elephant in the garden, and he believes me." She wagged her finger at me. "You do not believe me. I know this. No one in this place believes me, but Karl does."

I hustled Karl out of the room, and away down the corridor, ticking him off soundly for wandering into Lizzie's room like that, uninvited. Thinking back, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. Karl was always wandering off. What did surprise me, though, was how furious he was with me.

"She was just going to tell me about her elephant," he protested loudly, tugging at my hand, trying to break away from me.

"There *isn't* any elephant, Karl," I told him. "She imagines things. Old people often do that. They get a bit mixed-up in the head sometimes, that's all. Now come along, for goodness' sake."

It wasn't until we were back home that afternoon that



I had a chance to sit Karl down and explain all about Lizzie, and her elephant story. I told him I knew from her records that Lizzie was eighty-two years old. She had been in the nursing home for nearly a month, so we had got to know one another's little ways quite well already. She could be a little prickly, and even cantankerous with the other nurses sometimes. But with me, I said, she was considerate and polite, and quite co-operative – well, mostly. Even with me, though, she could become rather obstinate from time to time, especially when it came to eating the food that I put in front of her. She wouldn't drink enough either, no matter how much I tried to encourage her.

Karl kept asking me more and more questions about her. "How long has she been in the nursing home?" "What's the matter with her?" "Why's she in bed in her room, and not with the others?" He wanted to know everything, so I told him everything...

...how she and I had taken a particular shine to one another, how she was very direct, to the point of bluntness sometimes, and how I liked that. She'd told me

once, on the very first day she came into the nursing home, "I might as well be honest with you. I do not like being in here, not one bit. But since I am, and since we shall be seeing rather a lot of one another, then you may call me Lizzie."

So that's what I did. To all the other nurses she was Elizabeth, but to me she was Lizzie. She slept a lot, listened to the radio, and she read books, lots of books. She didn't like to be interrupted when she was reading, even when I had to give her some medication. She especially loved detective stories. She told me once, rather proudly, that she had read every book that Agatha Christie had ever written.

The doctor, I told Karl, thought she couldn't have eaten properly for weeks, maybe months, before she came in. And that's certainly what she looked like when I first saw her, so shrivelled and weak and vulnerable, her skin pale and paper-thin over her cheekbones, her hair creamy white against the pillows. Yet even then I could see there was something very unusual, very spirited about her – the steely look in her eye, the



sudden smile that lit up her whole face. I knew nothing of her life – no relatives came to see her. She seemed to be entirely alone in the world.

"She's a bit like Gran," I told Karl, trying to explain her state of mind to him as best I could. "You know, like a lot of old people, a bit muddled and forgetful – like when she starts up about her elephant. She's goes on about it all the time, not just to me, to everyone. 'There was an elephant in the garden, you know,' she says. It's all nonsense, Karl, I promise you."

"You don't know," Karl said, still angry at me. "And anyway, I don't care what you say. I think it's true what she told me about the elephant. She's not fibbing, she's not making it up, I know she isn't. I can tell."

"How can you tell?" I asked him.

"Because I tell fibs sometimes, so I can always tell when someone else is, and she's not. And she's not muddled either, like Gran is. If she says she had an elephant in her garden, then she did."

I didn't want to argue, didn't want to make him any more cross with me than he already was, so I said

nothing. But I lay awake that night wondering if Karl could possibly be right. The more I thought about it, the more I began to think that maybe there *was* a ring of truth about Lizzie's elephant.

The next morning at work, with Karl and his friends cavorting about in the snow, I was sorely tempted to go in and ask Lizzie about her elephant, but it never seemed to be the right moment. It was best not to probe, not to intrude, I thought. She always seemed to me to be a very private person, happy enough in her own silence. We had got used to one another, and I think both of us felt comfortable together. I didn't want to spoil that. As I went into her room I decided that if she brought up the elephant again, then I would ask her. But she never did. She asked about Karl though. She wanted to know all about him. She particularly wanted to know when he would be coming in again to see her. She said she had something very unusual, very special to show him. She seemed very excited about it, but told me not to tell him. She wanted it to be a surprise, she said.

I noticed then she hadn't drunk anything again



from her glass of water, and told her off gently, which she was quite used to by now. I walked past the end of the bed to close her window, tutting at her reproachfully. "Lizzie, you are so naughty about your water," I told her. But I could tell she wasn't listening to me at all.

"Do you mind leaving the window open, dear?" she said. "I like the cold. I like to feel the fresh air on my face. It cools me. This place is rather overheated. I think it is a dreadful waste of money." I did as she asked, and she thanked me – her manners were always meticulous. She was gazing out of the window now at the children. "Your little Karl, he loves the snow, I think. I look at him out there, and I see my brother. It was snowing that day too..." She paused, then went on. "On the radio this morning, dear, I thought I heard them say that it is February the thirteenth today. Did I hear right?"

I checked my mobile phone to confirm it.

"Will your little Karl come in to see me today, do you think?" she asked again. She seemed to be quite anxious about it. "I do hope so. I should like to show him... I think he would be interested."