

ERICA'S ELEPHANT

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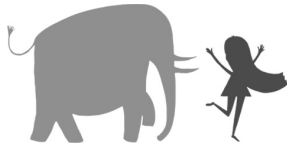
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The First Chapter: In which the Elephant arrives



The Elephant was on Erica's doorstep on the morning of her tenth birthday. There was also a piece of paper stating that she, Erica Perkins, had a Legal Right to the Elephant. "But it's all very well," said Erica, "fussing about whether I have a Right to the Elephant. The Elephant has been Left to me, and that seems to be the bigger problem." She looked the

Elephant in the eye. “Who left you?” she demanded. “And why?”

TRONK, said the Elephant. It seemed to Erica to be the sort of **TRONK** which said, *I am the wrong elephant to ask. I am*



confused by life in general and your doorstep in particular.

She felt a little sorry for the Elephant, **TRONK**ing on the step with no idea why he was there or who had sent him, so she patted him on the trunk and led him inside. He broke the door frame, but **TRONK**ed so sadly about it that Erica wasn't even cross. Besides, it wasn't really his fault. The house was certainly not built for a fine, big elephant like him. It was a two-up, two-down terraced house by the coast, with nice views of the sea but very little space.

Erica had lived in that house for as long as she could remember. At first she had shared it with Uncle Jeff, who

was the only family she had. He meant well, but he was very distracted, and he usually forgot that she was there. He was an ornithologist, which means he studied birds, and he was forever thinking about birds and where he could go to see them and what sort of binoculars he ought to take. Erica had to do all the practical things like cooking and cleaning the house. When she was eight he left to hunt for a bird called the Lesser Pip-footed Woob. He had left some money in an envelope to last until his return, but here she was two years later, with only £30.42 left and no word from Uncle Jeff.

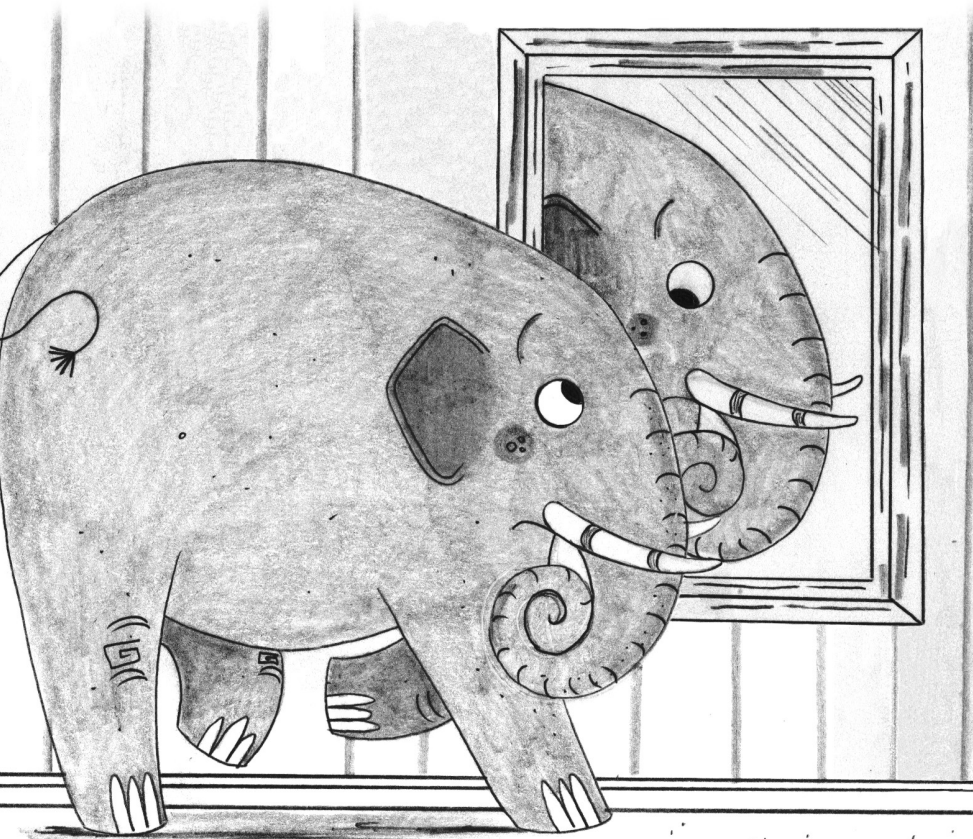
And now there was an elephant in her house.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose you can have Uncle Jeff’s room.”

TRONK, said the Elephant. This time the meaning was a bit unclear, but Erica thought he sounded confused about what an unclejeffsroom was, and unsure about whether it was a good thing to have. She sighed. He was not going to be an easy house guest to look after.

For a start, she didn’t know what elephants like to eat. While the Elephant explored the unclejeffsroom, discovering which bits were strong and which made satisfying CRACK noises when stamped on, she looked it up online. Any plants

would do, she learned – cabbage was a good bet – but he would need 150 kilograms of it a day. You or I might eat, say, two kilograms of food a day. 150 kilograms is rather a lot of cabbage. Erica was a very practical girl, and she thought about the



£30.42 that she had left, and the cost of cabbage, and did a quick sum.

Upstairs, the Elephant discovered a mirror and started **TRONK**ing in terror. Erica had already sighed, and as she was a very practical girl she knew there



was no point sighing again, so she went out to the garden to see what greenery she could collect as a snack.

By the time she came back in with the final bag full of grass, leaving the garden lawn bare, the Elephant had tired himself out and was taking a nap. She left the food in his doorway and went back to bed with a book. Sometimes that is the best response to life.

Rain was battering the roof. The sound was comfortingly normal, and seemed to say that there was nothing she could do about the Elephant Question while the weather was so bad, and she might as well stay warm in her duvet. Suddenly, mixed in with

the rain, she heard the THUMP of shy Elephant steps. They came closer, then went away again. She got up and opened the door.

There was a stuffed puffin in the doorway. It was one of the horrible stuffed birds that Uncle Jeff kept in his bedroom. It lay on its back with its feet in the air, one glass eye fixed on Erica, the other on the Elephant – as if by watching both of them at once, it could work out what was going on. The Elephant looked down at his trunk and flicked his tail around nervously.

TRONK?

“I don’t understand,” said Erica.

The Elephant thought about this. He

went into his room, used his trunk to hook up one of the bags she had used for grass, and set it down next to the bird. He carefully placed the bird in the bag, and the bag at Erica's feet. **TRONK?**

“Oh!” she said. “You're bringing me dinner?”

He nodded, ears flapping.

“Ah.” There was nothing she could say to that which didn't seem rude or ungrateful, so she settled for a noise: a sort of “Mmmmharrhm”. And then, when this didn't seem to reassure him, she said, “Well. Thank you... That's very... Thank you.”

Now, the Elephant was not stupid. There was a lot he didn't know, but that

is not the same thing at all. He knew perfectly well that “Mmmmharrhm” and “That’s very. . .” did not mean that Erica liked the bird. A little sheepishly, he hooked up the bag and took it back to the unclejeffsroom with a sorry **Tronk**.

“No, really, thank you!” Erica called after him. “I mean, I can’t eat it. But it really was very nice of you.” She thought she heard him sigh, but she had never heard an elephant sigh before, so it was difficult to tell. He didn’t come out again that evening.

The next day a postcard was lying on the mat, showing a building topped with what looked like ice-cream dollops made of white stone. It read:

Dear Erika Erica,

I am sending you an elephant!
It was giving rides to tourists but had
hurt its knee so they were getting rid
of it cheap. Hope you like it!

All well here. No sign of the Woob yet but I did see an
Emerald Sprik. In these winter months they shed all their
feathers and hibernate in the mountains to think about maths
problems - so I was very lucky to spot one.

Yours fondly,

Uncle Jeff

TAJ MAHAL, AGRA, UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA



She turned the postcard over a few times, as if hoping to find the part she had missed, where Jeff said when he was coming home or what to do about money or how to look after an elephant. The postcard stubbornly continued not to say any of these things. **TAJ MAHAL, AGRA,**

UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA, said the small type at the bottom. Which was not, as such, helpful.

Whenever Erica felt a bit lost – which wasn't often – she went for a walk to the end of the pier to clear her head. She went there now, first tip-tapping down the pavements and then crunching along the stony beach, while the wind did its best to tug her sideways, like an annoying younger brother that you are quite fond of really.

On the pier she leant against the railings and watched the back-and-forward of the sea. For a while she didn't think anything at all, and then eventually she thought these three things:

1. I am so glad that whenever I am in a Tricky Situation, everything here is Familiar and Soothing.
2. It must be horribly hard to be in a Tricky Situation when you are somewhere Strange and Unknown.
3. Oh. It is probably quite hard to find yourself on an Unknown Doorstep with a bad knee, in a world where things are so Strange that you can't even get someone dinner without making a fool of yourself.

After she had thought these three things, she crunched to the tourist office, filled her rucksack with free leaflets, and tip-tapped back home to the Elephant.

When she went upstairs, he was sitting looking out of Uncle Jeff's window, trunk scrunched up against the glass. Erica coughed. The Elephant, puzzled by the greeting, coughed back to be on the safe side.

“Do you like the view?” she asked.

He **TRONK**ed politely.

“You're in England,” she said.

The Elephant blinked.

“That's the sea you were looking at just now.” She started pulling the leaflets out of her bag and spreading them out on the carpet, lining them up like a game of solitaire. “We're very close to it. And we're right by the Pavilion, where the Prince used to live. We could visit

that . . . although I'm not sure they'd let you inside. . . Anyway. I just thought I'd talk you through it all. Look, here's a map: this is us." She pointed to the squiggle that stood for her road. Then she traced her finger around the curves of her town, stopping at every major landmark to open a leaflet and show him the pictures. He ran his trunk in wonder over the fish at the aquarium, the bright white of the pier, the impossible soaring carts of the Ferris wheel.

When they had looked at all the leaflets, she pulled an atlas from the bookcase and showed him where they were in England, and where England was in the world. The scale of the world seemed to puzzle him.



Erica watched him flip from the map of Britain to the map of the world and back again with his trunk, as if he was trying to understand how something which took up a whole page could possibly be so small.

“Shall we go for a walk?” said Erica, when he had tired of the maps. “What would you like to see?”

The Elephant looked from leaflet to leaflet in great uncertainty. He looked out of the window at the glinting sea, and back at the leaflets, and at Erica, and for a while at the ceiling. At last, he jerked his head towards the window with a hopeful **TRONK.**

“The sea? Of course.”

And so Erica and the Elephant pattered

and crashed down the stairs, and tip-tapped and thumped along the pavements, and crunched along the beach. The Elephant's steps were a little uneven. It seemed his knee had not quite recovered.

The beach was made of pebbles, not sand, and the wintry sea air was biting at their skin. The Elephant didn't seem to mind. It was obvious that he adored the sea. Erica showed him her favourite game: wading out a little, waiting for a wave to roll in, then trying to jump high enough to clear it. He was very, very bad at the game – elephants cannot jump – but he would earnestly watch each wave with a worried squint, and then stagger about with a loud **TRONK** of victory, believing



he had done very well. She began to feel rather fond of him.

To get to the main road from the beach, they had to climb up using one of the sets of metal steps that were set into the wall, spaced out along the shore. Erica tripped over the final step, turning her ankle to one side as she fell. She was a very practical girl, so she got up and dusted herself off, but a nasty twinge in her ankle turned her tip-tapping into more of a *ti-TUM*, *ti-TUM*.

The Elephant watched her in alarm, and after she had limped on for a few steps, he blocked her path and knelt down in front of her. **TRONK**, he said: *Get on.*

“No,” she said, “you have a bad knee.”

He flapped his ears and **TRONKed** angrily. For the first time, Erica realized how powerful he was, and for a moment she was almost afraid of him. But he wasn't really angry with *her*, just very unhappy about something else. **TRONK**, he repeated, firmly but more kindly. *I'm fine.*

So Erica got on the Elephant's back, and hung on for dear life as he tottered to his feet again (elephants are not well designed for standing up, and they are very clumsy about it). They swayed back home, the Elephant finding the way with a proud THUMP and a very slight limp, pausing to take bites out of people's hedges here

and there. Erica decided to explain “front garden” and “private” some other time; it had already been a big day. Besides, she had something much more important to explain, which she had been putting off ever since the postcard had arrived that morning.

She put it off all through the Elephant’s



first viewing of The News on the TV (which he didn't like at all), and then put it off some more while showing him how to make tea (which he liked once he had got used to the way the kettle jiggled around towards the end). But when he started yawning the most enormous YAWNS, she knew she couldn't put it off any longer. She fetched one last leaflet from her bag. It read:

THE SEABREEZE ZOO

A great day out for
everyone!

This was stamped over a picture of a roaring lion, who was presumably having

a Great Day Out. Erica put the leaflet on the table. “We need to talk,” she said.

Now, humans know that “We need to talk” means “I am about to say something difficult”, but elephants don’t. The Elephant’s **TRONK** was curious, but not worried.

She took a deep breath. “I can’t afford to feed you.”

The Elephant looked politely interested.

“Do you understand? Your food costs money. I don’t have any. I’m really sorry.”

The Elephant tried and failed to hide a yawn. Erica, being a very practical girl, saw that they would be there all night if she didn’t say it very plainly. “You can’t stay here.”

The Elephant reeled in his trunk in shock, and blinked. He looked at Erica. She looked at him. A fly crawling down the window stopped in its tracks and looked at both of them.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Really I am. But you’d starve here. Look” – she held up the leaflet – “I found somewhere you could stay, where they could feed you. There’s a whole enclosure full of elephants!” The Elephant looked puzzled. “Enclosure? Er. . .” said Erica, “well, it means. . . It’s a place you can stay! But you can’t – well. . .” She was a very honest girl, but this was a difficult sort of thing to tell him. “The thing with an enclosure is, you can’t leave it. But it’s *nice* there.”

At this, the Elephant draped an ear over his eyes and refused to look at her. She read the leaflet out loud to him, but he stayed firmly behind his ear, not showing any interest in the Wild Child Play Area or the One-stop Tiptop Treetop



Gift Shop. When she had finished reading there was a long silence.

She put her palm on his trunk. “I’ll visit,” she said softly. “All the time. I promise.”

He stayed behind his ears. But he patted her gently on the shoulder with his trunk. **Tronk**, he said, and it sounded to Erica like *Thank you*.