

Creative Writing by a Rough Writer ...

... Summer of '76

There was an elephant in the room. And a rather large one at that. It leisurely tossed its trunk from side to side. Its flapping ears made the thick brown and yellow curtains move. Mother, whose jaw had already dropped to the floor several times, was staring at it in disbelief. Just a minute ago it had been Nana standing there, her foul-smelling pipe smouldering in hand and looking at me like I was the offspring of Satan himself. Just a minute ago her floral patterned skirt had been floating gently in the draft. Now it was the elephant's tail that was floating in that same draft. And it was all because of me.

Well, I say that, but we can never be totally sure that it was indeed me who turned Nana into a big grey elephant. Sure, we had been engaged in one of our daily fights. Nana wanted me to go make her coffee. I, disgusted by just the thought of doing anything for Nana, told her to go make some herself, God hadn't given her two feet for nothing. Nana, who had never really gotten used to me reaching the ripe old age of 14, puberty, and the ability to talk back all at the same time, had gotten up to teach me a lesson. She called me an insolent little monster-boy, got her stick out to hit me over the head and edged forward. At that moment, while I quickly made sure I was out of reach of her menacing piece of wood, I loudly shouted 'You'll never hit me you big lazy elephant!' If I have to hazard a guess, then I'd say that that was the source of the sudden transformation, but as I said, you can never be sure. Stranger things have happened. Like that time when it rained frogs. Or the story of that guy who ordered a call-girl and opened the door to find his own daughter standing there in nothing but a fur coat. I mean, I don't think they actually had sex; it would have been even weirder if they had. If not more disgusting. Anyway, we were now standing in our dining-slash-living room, looking at, what I can only suppose was, an Indian Elephant. It had relatively small ears for its head. Then again, Nana had always had very small ears and had been slightly deaf since she was 26.

'Nana?' I ventured hesitantly. 'Is that you?'

The elephant did not answer.

'Nana!?' I tried again, a little louder now. 'Are you in there!?'

That should have been loud enough to reach even the smallest of cochleae. The elephant merely blinked at the two humans standing in front of it. It let out a tiny snort.

'Mother?'

I started. It was bizarre hearing my Mother calling my Nan 'Mother'. I thought that right was reserved for me alone. Her name was Nana, even Mother adhered to that unwritten rule...

I was broken out of my pointless reverie when Mother took a tentative step forward, as if to see whether the elephant would move, or maybe even attack. It did neither. All it did was sniff the matching brown and yellow carpet with its long trunk. She moved a little closer; still the elephant did not seem disturbed. In fact, it did not at all seem to be bothered by anything that had happened in the past few minutes. Not by the sudden change of surroundings (I assumed it must have come from some place), not by the ugly carpet and not by us. Mother had now gotten so close to the animal they were almost in touching distance of each other. Not almost, they were indeed in range; the elephant ceased fingering, or nosing, the carpet and stuck out its trunk. It started sniffing Mother now, first her hair, but then her face and clothes. I felt a strange sensation of anxiety and exhilaration pounding through my body; there was an elephant in our dining-slash-living room, and it was smelling my Mother. Best of all, Nana wasn't here to start shouting and scare it out of the house. This was one of those win-win situations I was always hearing so much about but never experienced. I calculated that in win-win situations you should always take your chances and walked up to Mother and the inquisitive elephant.

Trunk, a pet name we started to use on the Elephant more and more, had now been with us for little over a month. After Mother's initial hesitation she'd agreed to keep the animal in the house. Not only because it was much too big to



easily fit through the front door, but also because she was worried about what the neighbours might think if they saw an elephant trudging out the yard and into the street in the middle of the day. The fact that at some point it could turn back into Nana – if indeed that was what happened to Nana; we were still not entirely convinced – was of no less importance. Then, at least, she would be back in her house rather than in the city zoo surrounded by other Indian elephants. And perhaps the odd zebra.

Over time we became great friends with the Elephant. It helped us with the daily chores (it was a brilliant washer-upper), would fan us with its average-sized ears and provide us with first-class manure for the garden. The roses had never bloomed so marvellously. Even the neighbours thought so. They, however, never found out our little big secret. Sometimes they'd ask about the large orders of fruit and vegetables that were delivered to our doorstep once every week or why we'd built a haystack in our front yard. We told them we'd decided to live an organic lifestyle. When the Elephant would sometimes toot loudly, we blamed the Nature Channel. Once, after we'd taken the Elephant for a carefully orchestrated foggy nightly stroll, the neighbour told his wife he'd spotted an Elephant walking the street. She'd hit him over the head with a saucepan and told him to lay off the drink. All in all, the Elephant was a perfect addition to our family.

Mother sometimes missed Nana a little. Although she'd been obnoxious, loud and smelly herself (in this respect it wasn't difficult to imagine the transformation) she'd been Mum's Mother all her life. At these moments it seemed as if the Elephant felt Mother's sadness. It would walk over to her and lay its large trunk over her shoulders, comforting her. Instead of speaking loving words, it snorted softly. In part because Nana had never once helped out around the house, but mostly because she had never put her arm around Mother's neck, these moments of sadness were few and far between. Mother would look into the Elephant's deep black eyes and smile. It almost seemed like the Elephant smiled back at such moments... It was the happiest time of my life.

One particularly gloomy morning – the autumn season was definitely rearing its ugly head now – we woke up to somebody yelling downstairs.

'What are all these bloody apples doing here! What's that god-awful smell?!'

We couldn't quite believe our ears. Was that really Nana's voice coming out of the kitchen? Had she come back? Where was Trunk?

Mother and I ran down the stairs as quick as our sleepy legs could carry us. We almost bumped into her, Nana, holding her walking stick and in her oversized flowery dress. The morning light peeped over the hedges in the garden and hit her face; on anyone it would have looked flattering, on Nana's face the light enhanced her ominous expression even more.

'Who's responsible for this bleeding mess? I almost slipped on a banana peel!' Nana had raised her stick and was now pointing it in my direction. I knew that the happy times had come to an end.

'Young man, tell me at once, what has happened here? I fall asleep for a moment, and what do I wake up to? Eh? I'll tell you what, a god-awful mess! Rubbish! We don't live in a bloody zoo!'

Mother opened her mouth to speak. I quickly nudged her to be silent.

'Nana, I got you loads of fruit and veg at the market, the doctor said it would help with your gout, remember?' Nana looked at me with the gaze she often gave me, a gaze that couldn't or wouldn't totally believe what I was saying. She looked at the heaps of bananas and apples, then she looked at me again.

'Hmpfh' she said, and turned around to walk back to her lounge chair. Mother heaved a long sigh and looked at me for a long while. Then she gave me a big hug and went after Nana.

We never saw the Elephant again. All the fruit and vegetables went into salads and stews. The roses never really got used to fertiliser from the shops and died the next year. Mother and I never again talked about the summer of '76, we certainly didn't talk about it with Nana. Mother did take me to see the elephants at the zoo that fall. We sat on a little park bench and stared at the grey masses for what seemed like a year. When we got up and walked off, she laid her arm on my shoulders and lovingly snorted in my left ear.