

The Elephant

When Olive walked into the kitchen, she found an elephant sitting beside her father at the small wooden table. They both wore the same weary expression and stared out the window, as if it was a painting they had never seen before. The elephant had on a small black hat and its shadow filled the room with darkness.

“Hi, Dad,” said Olive.

Her father swung his head away from the window and looked at her with raincloud eyes.

“Hi, honey.”

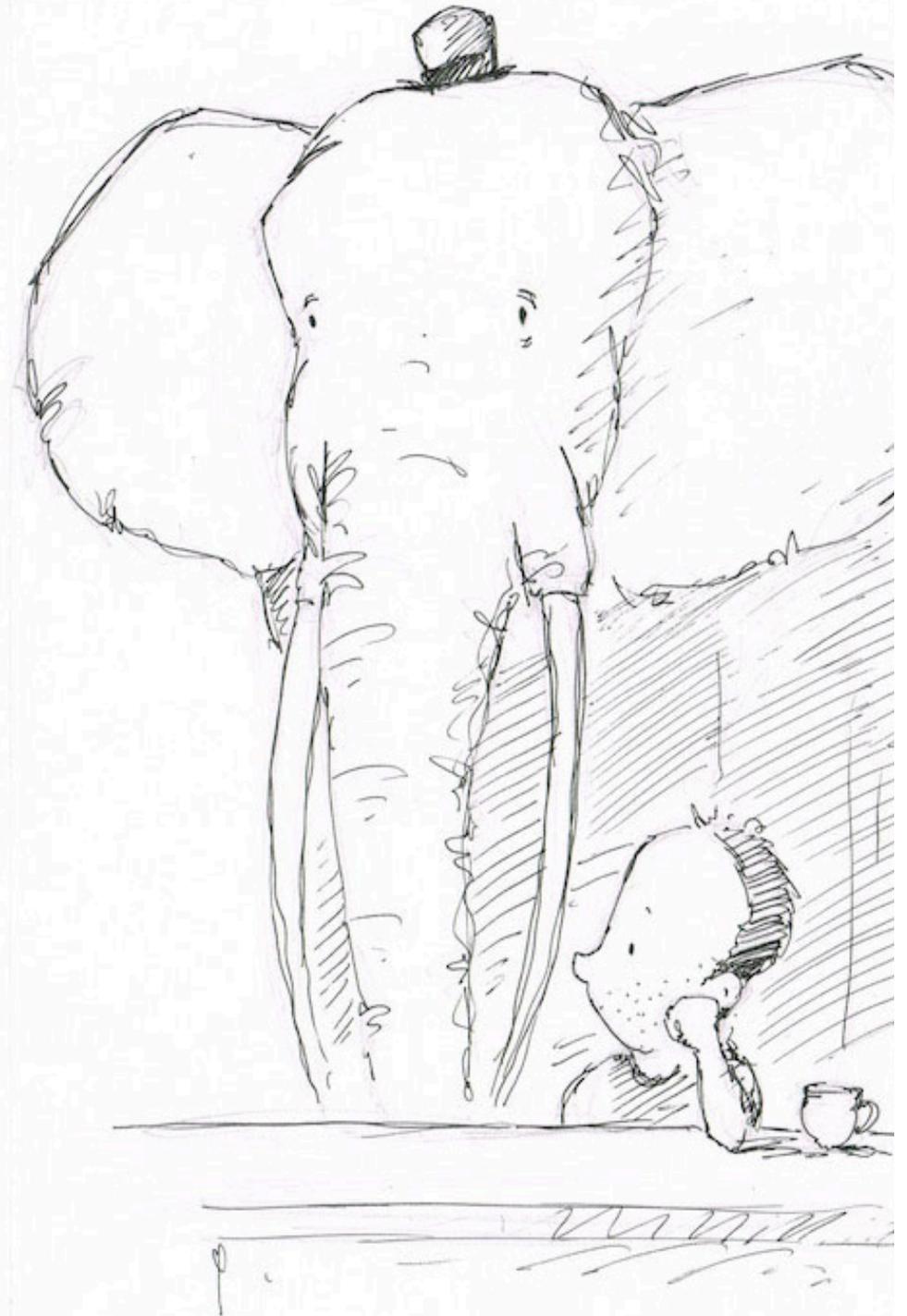
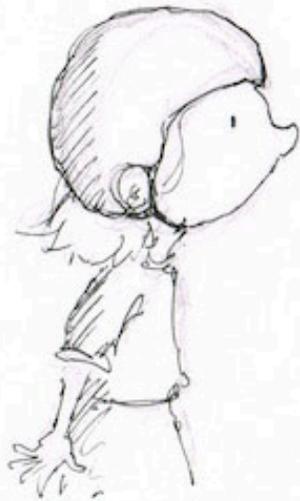
A frown fell upon his face. 'Why are you wearing your bike helmet?' he said. 'I haven't fixed your bike yet.'

Olive smiled, hoping the smile might be contagious.

"Well, it's only a bike helmet when I'm riding a bike," she said. "I'm going to climb my tree, so today it's a tree helmet."

Her father nodded and turned back to the window. The elephant sighed.

Olive left them cocooned in the kitchen. She opened the back door and stepped outside.



Grandad

Olive's backyard was a neat rectangle of grass, with flowers and vegetables hugging the edges. A thin concrete path stretched towards a rusty clothesline and a giant jacaranda tree stood near the back fence, covering half the yard with slow, dancing shadows. A tyre swing hung from one of its branches and a round trampoline stood nearby.

Olive loved the yard, though it hadn't always looked like this. Once it had been a mess of knee-high weeds with no colour, no life. The jacaranda had barely flowered.

That was before Grandad moved in.

He was in the garden now, hunched down in the pumpkin patch, as Olive skipped across the grass towards the tree.

"Heya, Olive!" he called.

He straightened up and Olive thought he looked like a skinny scarecrow, his old straw hat full of holes.

"Hi, Grandad," she said. "How are the pumpkins?"

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a dirty hand.

"You could ask them yourself," he said.

Grandad was always telling Olive to talk to plants.

"You've got your helmet on," he said. "Has your dad fixed your bike?"

Olive shook her head. She felt something brush her legs and she looked down. It was Freddie.

He was a small grey dog with very short legs and a very long tail.

She bent down and scratched him behind the ears.

“No,” she said. “He hasn’t fixed it yet.”

Then she ran to the tree.

The Thinking Spot

Olive began to climb.

She needed to wear her helmet today because she was going to one of the higher branches, to her thinking spot. Hand over hand, foot over foot, she scrambled up and nestled into a comfy nook.

She looked up.

There was a tiny speck in the sky, high above the town. It was a bird, in the shape of the letter V, like a fine pencil mark in the sky.

How might the town look from up there, from the wings of that bird? It would be

something like a storybook town, a toy village. Olive pictured it all as a tiny patchwork quilt, the roofs of the houses like coloured squares stitched loosely together. She imagined the narrow bitumen roads weaving between the blocks of houses like thin cracks in eggshell. The trees would billow and breathe like tiny puffs of deep green cloud and the backyards would look no bigger than the fingernails on her hand.

Olive watched the bird until it became smaller and smaller, a dot in the sky, and then so small that it seemed to disappear, as if it became part of the air itself.

How could something be so light? Olive's gaze drifted back down, down to her own backyard. Her eyes settled on her house and the kitchen window.

All of the lightness fell away, as she thought about the elephant.

The big grey elephant that shadowed her father.

It hung over him at breakfast.

It trudged beside him when he left for work.

At night, it lay by his side, weighing everything down.

Every day she saw that elephant.

And every day, she wished it gone.

Just then, there was a sharp yap. Olive snapped awake from her thoughts and looked down to the bottom of the tree. There was Freddie, his long tail standing tall, his watery eyes gazing up at her.