

# We need more elephants!

by  
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Sometimes you have to leave whole chunks of words out to fit the story in. This happens to be one of them.

Nevertheless, let me tell you the bare bones of an extraordinary tale about a Grandpa and his beloved granddaughter, Mia. Imagine if you will, a small girl living a carefree existence in a home built by her father. It sits on the edge of the most beautiful beach you could only glimpse within the pages of a glossy travel magazine. Life is simple, but life is good. Caring for her is a free-spirited Mother, a woman who wears nothing on her feet and makes the most remarkable embroidered tapestries. Also a Father, who toils every day in a workshop repairing clocks. And not forgetting her older brother, who helps out his family, but dreams of being an intrepid explorer. Grandpa lives on the periphery of this close knit group, in a tumbledown shack, requiring nothing more in life than to gaze out on the ocean and receive regular visits from his family to keep loneliness at bay.

Into this tranquil picture, lands a tragedy of such magnitude, it can scarce be explained. It is not the purpose of this story to reveal the harrowing details, suffice to say that Mia's world changes forever, when a tsunami hits the beach. In a matter of minutes, she is rendered an orphan, saved only by the quick action of her Grandpa - and it could be said, by divine intervention.

In the days and weeks that follow, Mia retreats into her own silent world, populated by the one creature she held onto with such might, as the ravenous wave lunged, consuming everything in its path. A small elephant named Blue, a birth gift from her Mother.

Grandpa put away his own grief. All his focus needed to be on Mia, on re-building a future, but more importantly dealing with the



present. One fine spring morning as the sea lapped the sand beneath his feet, he had an idea.

“We need more elephants,” he remarked, pointing at Blue, who sat contentedly in Mia’s lap. Mia had not moved from her perch on an upturned oilcan for three hours straight. She was gazing out at the horizon as if waiting for the wave to bring her family home again. Bending down to her level, he repeated, “We need more elephants.”

Mia looked up at him and shrugged her small shoulders. They were painfully thin, another symptom of her closed up grief.

“I’m not getting any younger, you know,” he went on, wincing as he got up off his knees. Grandpa had continued to talk to her, ever since it happened, even though she never answered him. It filled the silence between them.

“What I mean is, I will need your help. I can’t do it on my own.”

The question of what, hung between them.

Grandpa stood up. “I’ll make a start then.”

Over the course of the next two weeks, Grandpa was kept busy. Mia sat gazing out towards the horizon; but occasionally her gaze was distracted and she looked across to see what her Grandpa was doing. He noticed, but said nothing.

In his younger days, Grandpa had been a champion sailor. He once said to his beautiful young bride. “Before you, there was only the ocean. Now I have you *and* the ocean; my life is complete.”

The utter devastation caused by the tsunami had produced vast swathes of wood. Planks that had provided shelter for hundreds of people had been lifted up and thrown a great distance. Splintered and battered, there were a great many large chunks, which remained usable. Grandpa approved of recycling. Felt there was a purpose to be gained by saving the remnants of destruction. By taking a negative and creative a positive.

Mia watched with more interest each day, as the structure took form and shape, grew larger and larger.

At the end of three months, Grandpa's work was finally completed. It stood tall and proud; a testament to his endeavours. It had also piqued interest in others further up the beach, who were still struggling to create order from chaos. To rebuild their shattered lives. Seeing his labours they had left offerings for him; some rope, hooks and material. Mia would not be drawn into conversation with these visitors, but she and Blue watched them from a safe distance, accepting that they were somehow trying to help.

Grandpa stood back to view the results of his efforts and felt a sense of satisfaction. He felt the presence of Mia, close to him.

"Tomorrow will be a good day for it," he said.

Mia nodded silently.

Grandpa had, through the generosity of others, secured provisions for a long journey. But first he needed to make a connection between granddaughter and the vessel he had built. Guiding her gently towards it he handed her a small paintbrush.

"She needs a name," he said. 'All boats have to have a name.'

Mia stroked the bristles of the paintbrush and squeezed the sand between her toes. He didn't think she was going to react. Patience was always key. Just getting her to eat morsels of bread sometimes took a whole morning. And so he waited. His rheumy eyes saw her place an index finger on her lips, as she did when she was thinking. Then she reached over to dip the brush into the blue tin of paint held by her Grandpa. Mia edged forwards to the boat and began to paint. And so it was 'The Ark' was given its name.

The Ark had been built with a great deal of skill, but love had played its part too. When the time came for Grandpa and Mia to leave the place they still called home, a group of islanders came to see them off. Grandpa recognized the men who had helped fix the sails and the women who had made cushions. Children came carrying armfuls of coconuts and pineapples. Some people had come from far and wide, drawn by the narrative of their story. There were, of course,

many faces missing from the crowd. Grandpa gazed skyward, knowing they were watching down on the two of them.

He had feared that Mia would not set foot on The Ark, since it would take them out to where the Big Wave had emerged, but she seemed drawn to it, tracing the name she'd given it, before climbing aboard.

The weather was calm, the sky a deep blue and the ocean gently swayed its welcome to them, as they maneuvered towards the open sea. The horizon beckoned.

When the people on the land were but a small speck, Grandpa sat down next to Mia and handed her a book and some pencils.

"I want you to draw all the creatures you see on our adventure. That way we will always have a record of our travels and the wondrous things we will see."

Throughout the weeks ahead, Mia set to work, as instructed by her Grandpa and drew pictures of giant turtles with olive green shells, who swam in front of the boat. Of sleek grey dolphins who dived playfully in groups beside them. And when they skirted round some small islands, she tugged at her Grandpa's shirt to point out a long tailed orange monkey with its baby clinging onto its back, swinging skillfully through the trees. The pages of her book swelled with colourful drawings of elegant frigate birds and quirky puffins with their bright orange beaks. She even drew the fish, which they netted to supplement their diet of fresh fruit.

And all the time Grandpa talked to Mia, relating extraordinary tales of his maritime adventures. Of sailing in crystal clear waters and diving to find angel fish. Tales of riding on monumental whales, talking to bright green parrots and climbing sheer cliffs to visit blue mountain birds.

At night, Mia's dreams, which were once nightmares, now centred upon Grandpa's first words before they started this adventure. "We need more elephants." And so, one day when they spotted land, a vast land which spread out before

them, she tapped her Grandpa on the back. Turning away from steering the boat, he looked into her eyes.

“Soon, my little Mia. It will be soon.”

The land was lush with vegetation as they stepped off the boat. Lashing it safely to a tree stump, Grandpa and Mia walked onto land for the first time in two months. Black and white lemurs swung from the trees overhead and unknown creatures rustled in the undergrowth, but Mia was not afraid. She was with her Grandpa and she could sense they were getting closer.

After a while, the forest in front of them thinned out to reveal a clearing. There straight ahead of them was the most amazing sight. Clutching Blue to her chest, Mia let out a squeal, her first audible sound since the tsunami.

“Look, elephants!” whispered Mia in awe. A smile lifted the sides of Grandpa’s mouth.

“Indeed they are,” he agreed.

Mia handed Blue over to her Grandpa, who had sat down on a nearby tree stump. She edged forwards without fear to approach the animals. They lifted their heads as if in recognition and moved slowly forward to greet her.

A little while later she returned to her Grandpa’s side.

“They are safe and they are happy,” she said with a smile on her young face. “We can leave them at peace. They told me that someday, but not for a great number of years, I will find them again and we will be together as we were before.”

And so it was that Grandpa and Mia returned home from their adventure, with special memories and a book populated with the most wonderful of drawings. And on the back page, in pride of place were depicted three elephants, and underneath, written in Mia’s childish handwriting were their names:

Mother

Father

Brother

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