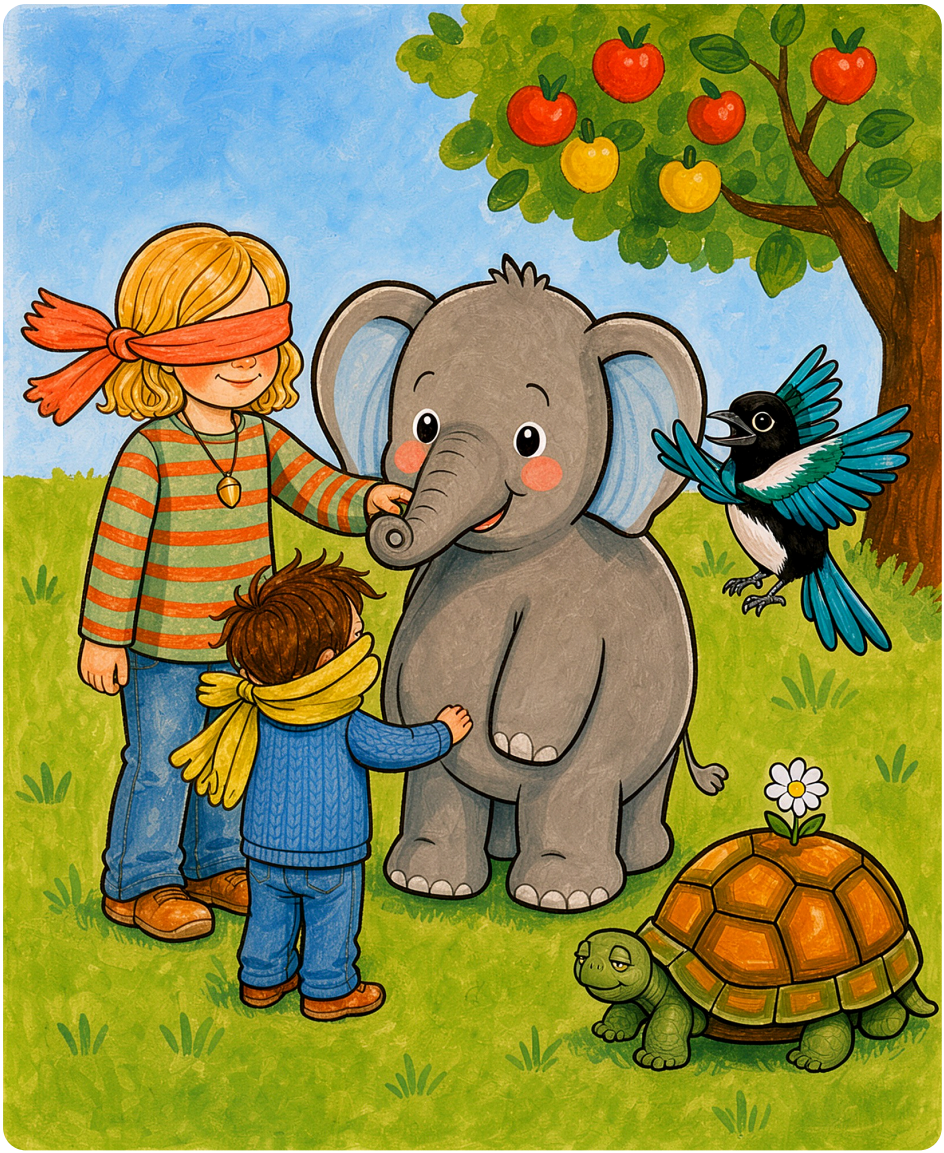
QUESTIONS TO SLEEP ON

The Elephant in the Garden



Book 4 · For Lara and Zac



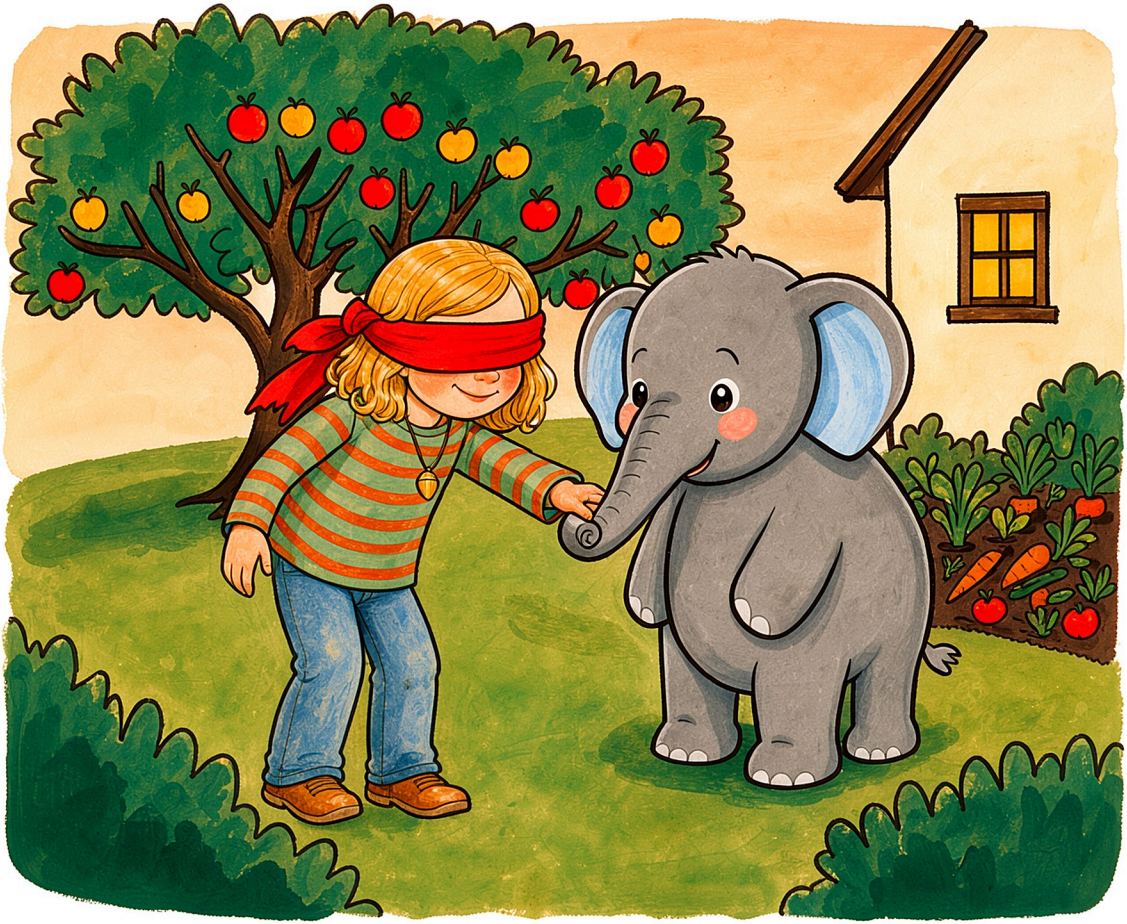
When the lamp goes warm and the garden goes quiet, Ponder comes out to wonder.

> Tonight Lara and Zac were still giggling about the afternoon, when an old friend of Ponder's came to visit, and everybody played the Blindfold Game.



That afternoon, Ponder had a surprise. “Close your eyes,” she said, “and put these on.”

She had four soft scarves. One for Lara, one for Zac, one for Pip, and a tiny one for Bunny. “Somebody has come to visit me,” said Ponder. “Who is it? You may only touch.”



Lara reached out and touched something long and wiggly. "**I KNOW what it is!** A hose!"

> It was warm, and a bit bristly, and it curled around her wrist and blew softly on her hand. "A hose that breathes," said Lara. "A very friendly hose."



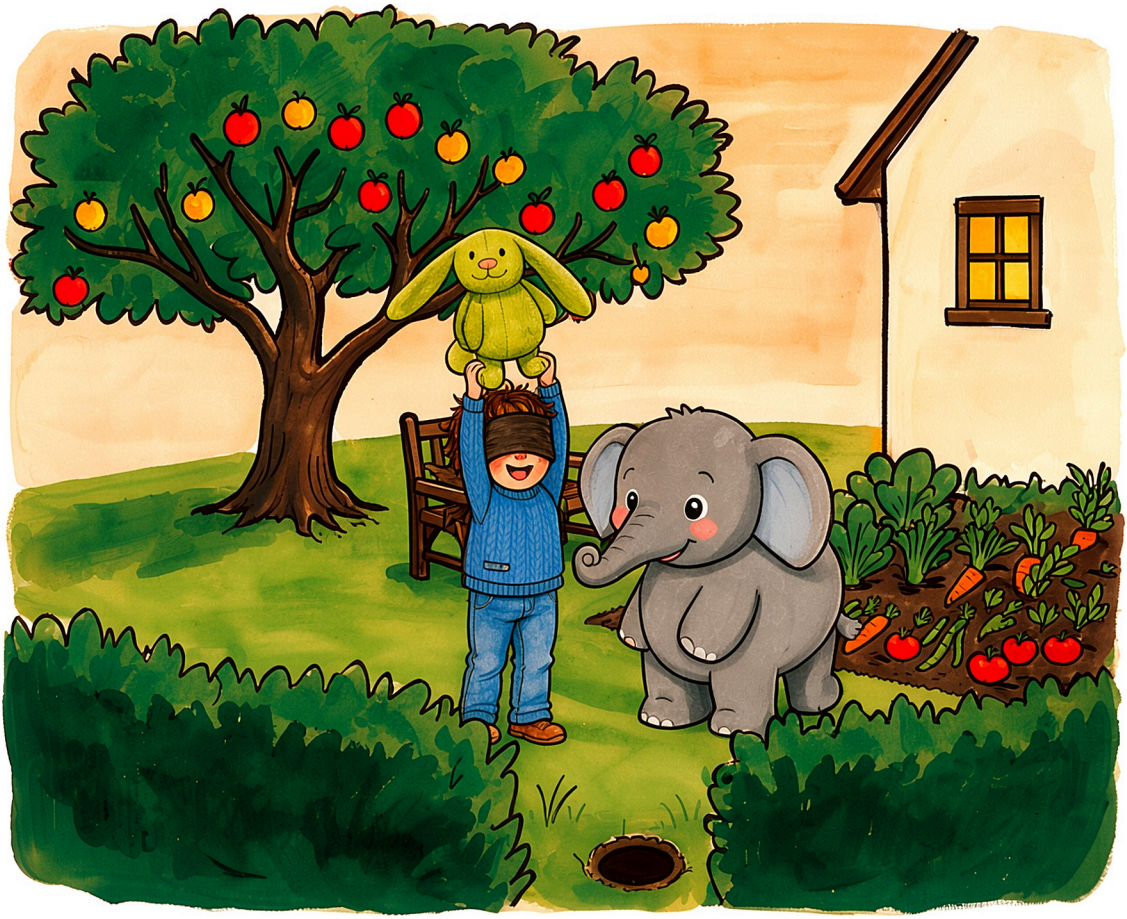
Zac bumped into something thick and round and wrinkly. "**I KNOW what it is! A tree!**"

> It was as wide as a tree, and as rough as a tree, and it went up and up, higher than Zac could reach. Zac gave it a hug. The tree shuffled its foot.



Pip flew into something big and flappy. "**I KNOW what it is!**" he squawked. "A FAN!"

> It was thin and wide and soft as an old glove, and it went whoosh, whoosh, and blew all Pip's feathers the wrong way. Pip did not like that one bit.



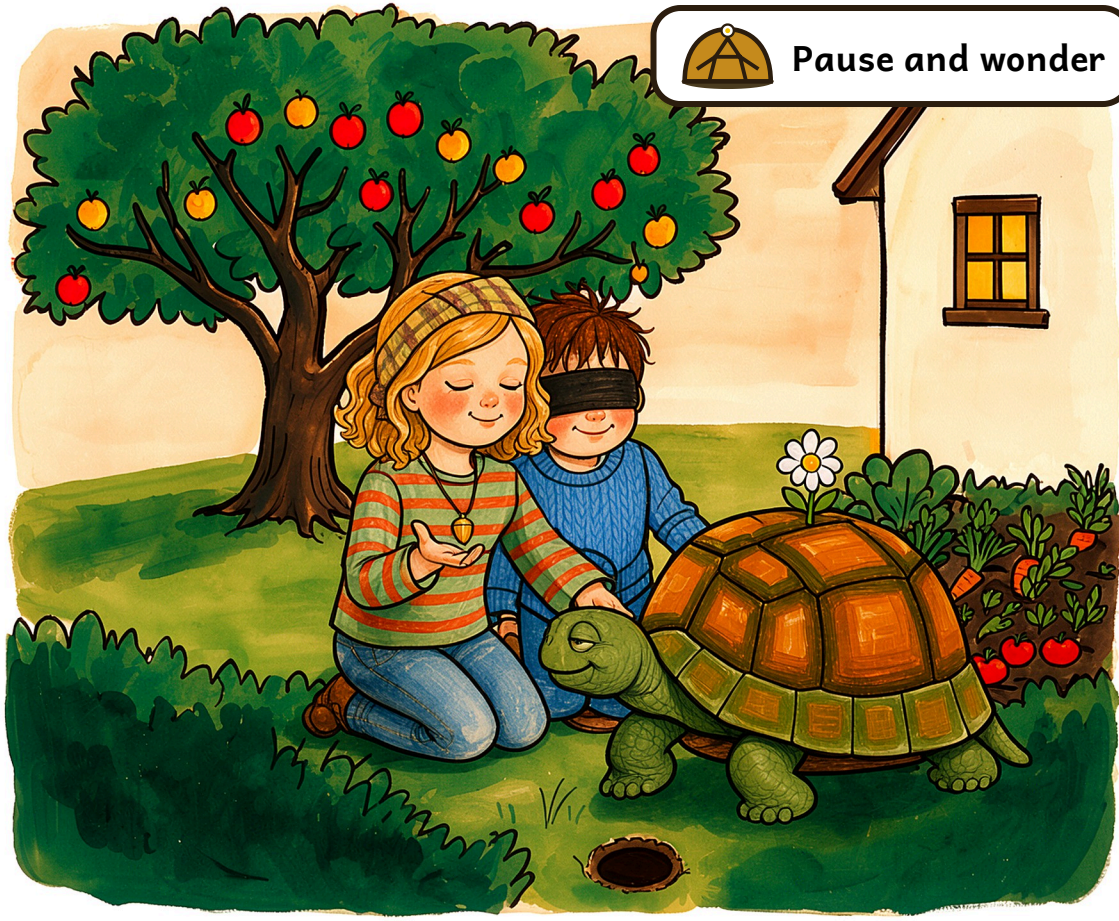
Zac held Bunny up high. Bunny touched something thin and tufty. “Bunny says it’s a paintbrush.”

> A swishy, swashy paintbrush, with a tickly tuft on the end. It swished, and Bunny’s floppy ears went flip, then flop.



“A hose!” “A tree!” “A FAN!” “A paintbrush!” Everybody was sure. And nobody agreed.

> “I touched it myself,” said Lara. “So did I,” said Zac. “I know what I felt,” said Pip. “And I’m always right.” They argued and argued.



“Ponder,” said Lara, “which of us is right? We can’t ALL be right.”

Ponder was quiet for a very long time. Then she said, “Hmm. I wonder. Can you be right and wrong at the same time? What do you think?”



“Long ago, in India,” said Ponder, “people told a story just like this one.”

> “Some people met an elephant with their eyes closed. Each touched one part, and each was sure. They argued and argued. And none of them thought to put what they knew together.”



So they took off their scarves... and there stood a small, gentle, grey ELEPHANT!

> "Hello," said the elephant politely. "I'm an old friend of Ponder's." "I was right!" said Lara. "A hose is a bit of you!" "So was I," said Zac. Pip said nothing at all, which was very unusual.



In bed, Zac shut his eyes and patted his quilt. "**I KNOW what it is!**" he said. "My bed."

> "How do you know?" asked Lara. "I just know," said Zac. Lara shut her eyes too, and felt the soft quilt, and the warm pillow, and Bunny's floppy ear. She was nearly sure.



“Some questions are for sleeping on,” said Ponder. “Night night, Ponder.”
“Hmm. Night night. I wonder…”

> Down under the apple tree, a small grey elephant and a very old tortoise were having a long, slow chat about old times.

Ponder's question

Who was right about the elephant?

ZAC

Close your eyes. What can you feel? (Hand over something soft, something bumpy.) Do you KNOW what it is?

LARA

Can you be right and wrong at the same time? How could they have found out the whole truth without taking off their scarves?



Some people think...

Nobody was right, because it wasn't a hose or a tree or a fan. It was an elephant.

Everybody was a little bit right, because they each touched a real part.

You have to put all the bits together to be right about the whole thing.

Or something else?

You're allowed to agree. You're allowed to disagree.

For grown-ups

The question: We each touch or see only part of the world. Does that make us wrong, or partly right? And how can we put our bits of knowing together?

Its name: Perspective and the limits of knowledge; partial truth. In Jain philosophy this is anekāntavāda, "many-sidedness".

Where it comes from: A parable found in the Udāna (6.4) of the Pāli Buddhist canon, and also told in Jain, Hindu and Sufi traditions (Rumi has a version set in a dark room). It is best known in English through John Godfrey Saxe's poem about the elephant (1872, public domain). Our version replaces the original's blindness with a blindfold game.

QUESTIONS, LITTLE TO BIG

1. Was Pip right that it was a fan? (Thumbs up or down.)
2. Why was everybody so sure?
3. Have you ever been sure about something and then found out it was different?
4. What if they had talked to each other before taking their scarves off? What might they have guessed?

WHAT THEY MIGHT SAY

Zac (3): "A tree! It's a TREE!" Little ones trust their own hands completely. That is the starting point of the puzzle, not a mistake.

Lara (6): Six-year-olds often say "everyone was a bit right". Push gently. Is a trunk the same as a hose? What's the difference between being right about a part and right about the whole?

TOMORROW

Play a feely bag game. Each person feels an object through a hole in a bag and describes it without saying its name, then everyone guesses together.

How to wonder together: ask, then wait. Say their words back to them. "Can you say more?" "Someone might say…" Don't say "right" or give your answer; Ponder never does. Too big for tonight? "Let's wonder about that at breakfast." (Then do.)