

## The White Elephant

by Lesley Dawson

Reggie's mum had been asked to help with the village fete. It was a real step forward in her relationship with the other women in the village. They were outsiders and nobody knew anything about their history or family background. Already Reggie had worked out that it was important to belong. He had belonged when they lived in Leeds. Everybody lived next to each other, knew each other well and were part of one big family. In fact, all the kids were in and out of each other's houses all day and could sit down to tea at any house without a special invitation.

Here they knew nobody, except Reggie's aunt who had moved here ten years ago. In fact, she wasn't really family, just Uncle Fred's widow who didn't really like having Reggie around, just couldn't deal with him.

So, the village fete was a big deal. "What will you sell on your stall mum?"

Elsie swallowed hard and looked Reggie in the eye, "it's something called the White Elephant Stall."

She suspected that she had drawn the short straw and nobody else had wanted to take on this job.

"How funny! I didn't think there were any elephants in this village. Where do they live?"

"They don't live anywhere in England, love," Elsie smiled and explained that a white elephant stall sold anything that people wanted to get rid of. Anything for which they no longer had any use. This seemed very peculiar to Reggie. He didn't have anything he wanted to get rid of.

The day of the fete arrived sunny and bright. Reggie had to be there with his mum as she didn't know anyone in the village well enough to leave him with.

Aunty Vi had been asked but refused to be lumbered with a Mongol, as she expressed it. What would her neighbours think?

Elsie and Reggie had plenty of visitors. She suspected they came to see who these odd newcomers were. It was obvious from the way they stared at Reggie, that they had never before met a boy with Downs Syndrome. The adults spoke to each other in whispers behind their hands, but the kids laughed out loud and pointed fingers. Reggie felt a bit like a peep show.

The objects for sale on their stall were a source of wonder to Reggie. He couldn't believe that anyone would ever have wanted a large pink plastic pig. No wonder they wanted to get rid of it. His eyes widened even more when he saw the enormous artificial flowers in lurid reds and yellows. But the large Leica camera on its own tripod was the most amazing thing he had ever seen.

By lunchtime they still had a stall full of bits and pieces. In fact, as the day went on and other stalls sold up, odds and ends from their stalls ended up on Elsie's table. Aunty Vi came by to gloat about their lack of sales. "You can tell that nobody wants this rubbish. Still it seems appropriate for Reggie to be on display on such a stall"

Elsie knew what was coming. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know... nobody really wants you and Reggie here, that is why they gave you this stall"

Thinking back to her life in the back to back houses in Leeds, when her husband had been alive. They had had such fun and she had felt so safe. Here she felt unwanted and Reggie was considered a freak. How she wished she could go back.

"Hello there," a voice interrupted her musings. She looked up to see a tall elegant lady standing in front of her "I have come to see if you have anything that I might buy. Unfortunately, much of this is from my house and the other stuff has been the rounds of jumble sales and fetes for the past ten years"

Although she was unable to find anything to buy, except three hand knitted dish cloths, the fact that the Chair of the Women's Institute had engaged Elsie in conversation seemed to impress her neighbours.

It would be another ten years before Elsie felt at home in this village and many times she had to bite her lip, take a deep breath and count to one hundred before she could respond to comments about inner-city dwellers from Leeds.

It also took that time before the community stopped seeing Reggie as the epitome of the White Elephant stall and began to view him as a normal, beautiful human being.