

| | UNTHANK ROAD | |

Horace had been counting for forty-five hours and fifty-two minutes when Hilary first noticed him. One elephant; two elephant; three elephant, all the way up to 165,120 elephants. There had been precious few distractions and Horace was sure his elephant-clock was keeping good time. So, shortly after 8:20 on Monday morning, as he sensed Miss Hilary Booth approaching, hearing her nostrils flare as his meaty, organic scent reached her nose, he was filled with hope. When she passed without slowing, her footsteps receding rapidly, Horace sagged a little but was careful, nonetheless, not to lose count.

From his years observing the nearby residents of Unthank Road he considered Hilary to be one of his most likely saviours. He'd observed her to be an astute judge of character and, more importantly, to have a keen sense of smell. She'd always found the time to ask after Mrs. Allwood and to offer condolences when the time came, using her handkerchief to surreptitiously keep at bay the aroma of roll-ups, boiled bacon and unwashed trousers, emanating from Mr. Allwood. The Allwoods had lived on Unthank Road for fifty-two years, several Horace lifetimes (and Horace wasn't the first Horace,

truth be told) and when Horace and Reg strolled along the street, twice a day, they witnessed the most interesting comings-and-goings. Hilary Booth, on the other hand, was a relative newcomer, having moved into her garden flat a mere eight years previously but she was herself a veteran compared to the stream of students and casual workers occupying the flats and bedsits that many of the grand Victorian houses had become.

On Tuesday morning (251,100 elephants) Horace was more noticeable and Hilary reached for the white square tucked into her cuff as the miasma enveloped her. What was that smell? Earthy and slightly syrupy, it triggered a long-buried childhood memory of basement mousetraps on a hot summer day. As Hilary passed the bin, she noticed the trees that lined the pavement were coming into leaf and the patterns of dappled sunlight on the grey paving slabs and she soon forgot the unpleasant aroma. She tucked the linen square back into the cuff of her blue jacket and straightened her handbag strap habitually. As she reached No 237 Hilary could see Mr. Allwood sitting in his chair by the open window.

‘Has there been any news, Reg?’ she called, pausing as he slowly got to his feet and leant on the window sill.

‘No dear, nothing. I’m starting to think he must have been stolen, but I can’t imagine who’d want my Horace. He was a scruffy little bugger.’

Hilary nodded her sympathy, 'Don't give up, he's no doubt just got himself lost, following his nose, and he'll show up out of the blue expecting extra dinner.' She waved her goodbyes and quickened her pace, heading for the bus stop and her short commute into the city centre.

As Wednesday morning dawned, many elephants later, Horace hadn't given up, even though he'd been gone for five days, eight hours and forty-two minutes and with every passing elephant, snuggled deeper into his bed of detritus. Strangely he was finding that as his wits diminished, his dreams became more lucid. He twitched and snuffled, silently yelping and barking his way through visions of blackbirds, cats and hot chicken dinners. Oh, for one more chance to chase that atrocious Burmese from No. 229, for just one more scrap of delicious ham fat, left dangling from the bird feeder.

Even though his short wiry coat resembled ever more closely the rotting remains of last Friday's takeaway discarded beneath him, even as his grunts and snuffles faded, Horace was sure that he would be saved. Liberated, before he reached 422,100 elephants and heard the unmistakable sound of the refuse lorry (every other Thursday, 7:45am, grey bin, landfill waste only). Horace still wasn't sure exactly how or why he'd ended up in the wheelie bin. It had been a good game, following his nose, the promise of a tasty morsel, the rabble of kids he vaguely recognised,

kicking a ball back and forth as they dropped a trail of meaty, crunchy, crispy snacks for him. He'd not been at all prepared when the biggest, loudest lad had grabbed his collar and dropped him, with absolutely no regard for his safety or wellbeing, into this dark, dementing place. He'd landed heavily, uncomfortably, mustering only a pathetic yelp as the lid crashed down trapping the echo of running feet and fading laughter, the stuffing knocked right out of him. His mind had drifted to all sorts of strange and wonderful places during his incarceration but certainly his most appealing daydream involved him growling ferociously before sinking his teeth into the meaty flesh of his tormentor's hand.

Days later, he was still incarcerated, still shrinking; diminishing behind his very own eyes, in the stinking sarcophagus. It was getting harder to concentrate but Horace was using every scrap of terrier wile to keep his elephant clock ticking, until inevitably, the moment arrived when his ears pricked and he heard the screeching, lumbering, bin lorry and his world was abruptly turned upside down. He slid and slithered, his clock stopped, his eyes closed and he imagined the face of his beloved Reg one last time, sure he could hear a familiar gruff voice.

'Woah, woah, hit the button, Terry! Quick, over here lads. Now then, what have we got here. Blimey matey, how on earth did you get in there?

Poor little fella.'

What seemed to Horace to be an age later – since his clock had stopped he'd no idea of time – he found himself laying on something much more comfortable than the contents of the wheelie bin. He could smell familiar smells; boiled bacon; roll-ups; trousers that needed a wash, and hear a lilting whistle, or was it birdsong? Horace snuggled deeper into his blanket, wondering if there might be a chance of extra dinner. He'd keep his eyes shut a little while longer though, it might just be his mind playing tricks on him.

|| The End ||

(or was it...)