

MAÑANA

The trouble with Root is that she was extremely lazy. Her days were spent trundling around the house seeking a quiet, sunny spot. And she was brilliant at hiding. There was a great deal to be said about not being found, a sense of satisfaction to acknowledge Prash and Kave's cries of mounting frustration as they searched high and low until sooner or later they'd give up and go back to their toys. But Root always showed up for a cuddle by supper time. She loved her food and would never miss a meal.

Life was good. The Seville sun warmed her back. Sleep and solitude reigned. Root felt loved and at peace with the world. She didn't really have to do much at all to be happy. She simply existed and that was enough. The summer days rolled fluidly into one another without much to report, and that was just perfect.

Until one day, whilst sunbathing under a cactus plant, she noticed a strange shape in the vegetable patch that hadn't been there yesterday. From her elevated position on the porch, she squinted into the sun, her eyesight as sharp as ever. At first she presumed it must be an overgrown cabbage covered in mud and hazily drifted off to dream, imagining crunching into one of its succulent leaves. Soon enough she stirred. Blinking herself awake, she was about to change positions when all of a sudden she froze. Her tiny black eyes widened and peered straight ahead! Goodness gracious! Whatever that thing was, it was alive! Alarmed, Root maintained a rigid eye-line as the intruder crawled at a rate of zero knots from the cabbage patch towards the potatoes, her little mind both fascinated and repelled. Of course she could chirrup her displeasure but that would require effort. Besides, the intruder was a long way off and probably wouldn't hear. No, thought Root sensibly to herself. Things must run their own course. Assuring herself the ugly lump would have moved on by mañana she returned to the far more serious occupation of day-time snoozing.

Mañana arrived, as it never does. Eager to find a new hidey hole before the children awoke and check the stranger had gone, Root readied herself for a busy day. She helped herself to a light breakfast from her feeding station then ponderously

creaked across the hallway floorboards to the porch. The doors were already open as Grandpapa liked to rock in his favourite armchair whatever the time of day but he especially favoured the sunrise over the faintly visible snow-capped mountains. Root and Grandpapa had a special relationship. He never bothered her but enjoyed her company and she liked it just like that.

Once outside she tucked herself around the sunny side of a large earthenware pot and extracted her neck, relishing the gentle warmth on her face. Ah, that felt good! So good, in fact, that she almost forgot about yesterday's intruder. Comforting herself with the promise of an extra long nap, she summoned the energy to lift her head. Expecting the vegetable patch to be lump-free she suddenly froze. For holed up by a clump of tomatoes, the intrepid trespasser was *still there*, in *their* garden and moreover it appeared to be *eating*! A stranger eating *their* food! For the first time in her life, Root experienced a trickle of discomfiting sensations which caused her to feel extremely ill at ease. She began to tremble, her tiny heartbeat sped up, and her brain began to fire off all sorts of warning bells. She felt flustered and anxious and knew it wasn't because of the heat. Horrified by what she was witnessing she could only stare. Whatever that thing was, it was her job to tackle this awful problem down and out. Then again, could it be dangerous? Perhaps it was stalking the house, preparing to attack! Should she warn the children? Shortly they'd be leaving to go to school. It made sense to have the matter sorted before they returned and no-one need know any better. A surge of protectiveness overcame her and before she even had time to reset her thoughts in order, she was on the move.

Oh boy, this was hard work! Root had never been further than the house before. Normally she enjoyed the sun cooking her back, but with the extra exertion her saviour role demanded, she found the morning heat unbearable. No wonder the locals worked long into the evening whilst the temperatures cooled. But she was on a mission, to serve and protect her owners and that mattered more than her personal needs. Placing one stubby foot in front of the other she shuffled forwards across grassy strips, stony bumps and muddy pockets, pausing now and then to rest and gauge her progress.

It must have been about midday by the time the vegetable patch came into view. Overhead, God's golden globe blazed down mercilessly. In the distance, the offending brown lump had moved to a new corner of the allotment and was now munching on a selection of beans. The cheek of his appetite spurred Root on. There'd be nothing left for supper, she thought indignantly!

It had been a particularly stressful journey. Along the way Root had met inquisitive worms and caterpillars, roaming spiders and ants, slippery lizards and cockroaches even a pesky bird that had cockily given her foot a sharp peck before cawing and flapping away. Root surveyed her terrain and breathed a sigh of exhaustion. A lovely nap was precisely what she needed, right here under the shade of a wild flower. Perhaps a small one wouldn't hurt before the intimidation tactics began. After all, it was important to be on form to defend the family! Lulled by a breeze fanning her shell, she gently closed her eyes and succumbed to temptation.

She woke feeling cool and refreshed. About to stretch her limbs and work her bleary way towards her bowls, she started in astonishment. What on earth was she doing lying under a bunch of drooping petals in the big garden? Panicking she looked around. Had she been picked up and forgotten about? Something felt very wrong! In a flash, she remembered. Of course! The intruder! She must have slept through the entire afternoon! Raised voices and a curt bark alerted her further to some sort of confusion not far away. The hardened earth shuddered as the beat of footsteps approached, a rustle of leaves, the snappy stem-plucking of tomatoes, quickened breathing, a disagreement, a cry of wonder and a relieved 'oh, there you are!' followed a simple rummaging of arrangements. Root observed furry paws, plastic sandals and bare legs plant themselves right in front of her nose, swiftly tailed by eager, small hands that reached in between the bean poles to carefully pick up no less than THE LARGE BROWN LUMP! Four scaly legs wriggled and protested as Root's competition was whisked up and away from the 'eat all you can' buffet, his shell-like mass soothed by tender tones that were all too soon lost to the evening dusk.

Root was dumbstruck, helpless. No-one heard her feeble croaks, the guttural emissions pained and raw. She flexed her neck in and out, trying to make sense of the

disaster, too distraught to think straight. Eventually, she crept out from under the flower, a pitiful version of her happy self. Through a weave of grasses she could make out the farmhouse lights on the horizon, the low-level stone building with terracotta tiles, looming the size of a thumbnail under the setting sun. By this time, the dimming sounds of Prash and Kave's shrill voices had reached the top of the garden. Root imagined them rushing onto the wraparound terrace at their mother's bidding, Galla jumping at their heels, keen to show Grandpapa their discovery. The familiar swing and slam of the side door told Root the children had gone inside for dinner and bed. She cringed in fear. How could she warn them they'd picked up a stranger before they'd fall asleep? She sighed the biggest of sighs admitting there was only one way home.

It was a solitary walk. Except for a wandering scorpion, no creepy-crawlies bothered her. Root picked a route over grubby terrain, her hind claws coarsely thrusting back at dusty stones, each shove a monumental effort. Hours and hours later, guided by the light of a full moon, she wearily clambered the three wooden steps up to the porch. Even Grandpapa had deserted his chair. Galla's pink cushion beckoned but there was still the problem ahead. Root was desperate for a drink and a crunchy bite and these thoughts kept her going.

The house was spookily quiet. Root would normally be tucked up in her box by now with handfuls of fresh straw and a carrot. Creeping along the floorboards she poked a tentative head around the kitchen door, devoid of spark to meet her match. She'd never disliked anyone quite so much as this horrible brown lump. Perhaps the children would be as appalled as Root and dump him in the mulch pit to teach him a lesson. Yes, she thought, confident that would be the case.

The kitchen was empty yet Root didn't feel safe. She knew she'd feel better after a snack but upon reaching her feeding unit almost moaned in dismay as another wound mocked her well-being. This simply was the worst day of her life! For that nasty brown lump had not stuffed up on the family's home-grown produce, he had demolished her supper as well! It was all too much. Root was out of steam. She had

no ambition left to fight. With an empty tummy and a heavy heart she trundled into her boxy shelter by the Aga then almost had the fright of her life!

THE NASTY BROWM LUMP WAS IN HER BED!

Whatever happened next in the cardboard box is not for the faint-hearted. Root was right. Her cosy life had indeed been altered forever.

About one hundred days later, she ventured outside and after a detailed examination of a south-facing grassy hillock, rich in fertile soil she began to dig... and dig and dig. Four over four hours, she dug, using a methodical hind leg kick action to create a bell-shaped chamber, several inches deep. After a brief rest, she sat on the hole for a long while, flattening the surface with the weight of her belly. Next, she covered her nest scooping the earth forwards with her claws until her task was complete. It was the hardest she'd ever worked in all her life. Shaking with fatigue she still wasn't finished. Cleverly ensuring the surface was as smooth as it was blended with the terrain, it was only then she struggled home as wobbly as a loosened blanc-mange and sunk into a deep sleep, drained from such arduous labour.

The miracles of life are exactly that. Just nine weeks later, Root and the nasty brown intruder became proud parents to six babies! The children were delighted and carefully began naming each one: M for Majoy, A for Anesh, Ñ for Ñarboo, A for Ar-alla, N for Nezy, and A for Atuga and presented the newborns in a perforated box placed at Grandpapa's feet. Affectionally he patted their heads before they scampered away and leant back in his rocking chair. On his lap, snoozed Root, calmed in the knowledge that tomorrow never comes.

It's already here.