

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS

A Beast-Fable by Eleanor Grandin

I was updating my Facebook page when a rhinoceros fell through the ceiling. You won't believe me of course. Everybody says to my face that I'm a liar, so what they say behind my back must be even more colourful. I hope so anyway. What I put in my diary is the truth, mostly it is. But nobody wants to hear "Had bacon and eggs for breakfast, cleaned my teeth" dull, dull, dull. So when I talk to people I make it more interesting, just decorating a little. There's enough dullness about as it is. I know I'm lying, I've got that in my favour. When people ask me what I do and I say I work at a zoo, they always say "Oh! How interesting." I agree and smile, it isn't though. I think my job title is 'General Labourer' or something like that. What it means is cleaning out the animals' pens. So I shovel dung about for a living and one pile of dung is very much like the next. My name's Ismail, you can believe that, who'd make that up? But most people call me Izzy. I live in a bedsit. Shouldn't say that, it's just a room really. Though there is a bed in it and I do sit there sometimes when I haven't got enough to go down the Queens Head. It's alright, but I keep most of my stuff here because I've been burgled I don't know how many times. My stuff's pretty safe here. Nobody's going to burgle the hole they've given me here to keep my brushes, buckets, stuff like that in. Anybody would think it was for keeping the animals' food in and they're not going to rob that. It's underneath the white rhinoceros's pen. Well not its pen so much as the room that it goes into at night. It was in there when it fell through. I was exaggerating back there. Only one of its legs came through. And not even all of that. I'm looking at the bottom of its foot, never seen that before, and there's a bit of leg showing, wrinkled and a dirty grey colour. There were two surprised grunts when it came through, one from him and one from me. He doesn't seem to be trying to get out of his predicament. Perhaps there's something sticking out that would hurt his leg if he pulled it back up. Or perhaps all his weight has tilted over onto it and he can't move. I can't hear anybody doing anything. Suppose I'd better go and tell somebody.

They wouldn't believe me at first, but came over here in the end. Then they all got so excited they got the vet to sedate the rhinoceros. He looked the calmest one amongst them to me. Then the builders came to make the hole in my ceiling even bigger. But he still couldn't get out, so they brought in a crane, put a sling round him, made a hole in the roof of his pen and hauled him up. Turned out he wasn't hurt at all and seemed surprised at all the confusion going on around him. But he had to be moved to another pen. After all that they came down into my hole to look at the damage from here, and promptly threw me out, buckets and all. Something to do with the insurance they said. I asked where I was supposed to go and they said there was an old shed round the corner where some animal feed was kept that would do for me. Thanks a million. You should just see it. Old and tiny and draughty. I wouldn't mind if it was the gorillas' food they kept in here. I could eat some of that myself. But, no, it's hay and bamboo leaves. The hay smells nice I suppose but there is death-watch beetle in the ceiling. When I'd got my stuff settled in I went to see the rhinoceros. He seemed OK.

It's a couple of days later now. My shed isn't too bad. There's an old padlock on the door. I had thought of going and getting a new one from the stores. But that would only make people think that there was something in here worth stealing. I'm going to go and see how the rhinoceros is doing. He's always been nice to me.



“How do you like your new place Rhinoceros?”

“It’s all right I suppose. How’s yours?”

That was a surprise. He’s never spoken to me before. I’ve often spoken to him and found him a good listener. Perhaps our synchronised grunting when he fell through my ceiling has made him think that I’m a proper person after all.

“There’s more space than there seems. It’ll be alright. They’ve moved your notice from your old place and put it up here I see.”

“My what?”

“That notice that tells people about you.”

“Is that what it is? People look at that more than at me.”

“They may think you look a bit u... uh frightening.”

“Yes. I can be dangerous when roused. But I’m beautiful with my very fetching and smart grey colouring. You’d think they’d want to look at me. What does it say on my notice?”

“It says you are a Northern White Rhinoceros. Then there’s a bit of Latin. It says you are an endangered species and kept here for breeding.”

“Breeding? I don’t get any of that. Where are all the females then?”

“I’ve often wondered.”

“Who’s endangering me?”

“It doesn’t say.”

“There are mice in here you know, it might be them.”

“I’ve got mice at home. I feed them cheese and biscuits.”

“Cheese and biscuits?”

“I don’t think you’d like them. I’ll bring you a jaffa cake tomorrow.”

“What about some of those prawn cocktail flavoured crisps?”

“Yeah. I like them too. We can have a packet between us.”

“That’s obviously a lie about me being white. Why does it say that? Everybody can see I’m definitely not white.”

“That’s what I thought. I asked them about it. They said that where you come from ‘white’ means ‘wide’.”

“Am I wide? Wider than you I suppose they mean.”

“Yeah, that’ll be it.”

“What do you mean ‘where I come from’? I come from here.”

“They mean your parents or somebody came from Africa.”

“Where’s that?”

“South of here somewhere. They told us in school but I’ve forgotten. Perhaps I wasn’t listening.”

“Pity.”

“Yeah. I sometimes think so myself.”

“I wonder if it had green fields and trees.”

“What does a city person like you know about green fields?”

“I’ve seen pictures.”

“Me too. There’s a park near here.”

“What’s a park?”

“Like fields only smaller.”

“Has it got trees I could knock down?”

“Lots of trees. I could sit on your back and we could gallop round it. You would be gorgeously caparisoned.”

“Whatted?”

“They do it to elephants, but you are much more majestic than an elephant.”

“Of course. It is because I haven’t got a long dangly nose.”

“We could have a tight-fitting golden helmet for your horn, with ribbons at the top which would stream backwards as we make our progress at full tilt. And a crimson silk mask with gold embroidery around the eye-holes. Then your cloak would have to be matching crimson and gold. I’d be sitting on that, just behind your shoulders I think.”

“Is red really my colour though?”

“Definitely. We could rush all round the park. But we’d have to have a warning so that we didn’t run

anybody over. You could have bells fixed to your ears that would ring to tell people to get out of the way.”

“Nothing touches my ears. No bells.”

“No bells. OK. Then I’ll carry a gong and bang it all the time.”

“Do you think I could have a black ostrich feather fan tied to my tail? I’ve always wanted one of those.”

“Course. That’ll look really cool.”

“We will charge round and round. What a sensation we will cause. Do you suppose it will get us some of that breeding that they promised on the notice?”

“It can’t fail to.”

We thought about it in silence for a while, then we did some synchronised sighing. But I had to go.

I thought that he might like to go and look round the park, or at least get away from the mice for a while, so I left the gate to his enclosure open and went home. Nobody will know it was me.

THE END