

HANK

by Philip W Baker

Chapter 1

Lakshmi Old was a nurse.

Quite well-travelled she was born in India, had visited Thailand as a teenager and maintained pen pals there ever since.

Lakshmi moved to Uganda in Africa with her parents in the 1970s but sadly suffered under the regime of the "Butcher of Uganda" Idi Amin.

Asians were effectively expelled from Uganda and like many displaced Asians, Lakshmi later arrived in Britain.

Following training with support from the British National Health Service she got a job in the medical department of a multi-national company and her quality of life improved. But through all the rigours Lakshmi made time to keep in touch with her pen pals.

She once read a book by an English woman named Linda Bick who had ridden around the world on a solo motorcycle, made friends in dozens of countries, and kept in regular contact with all of them.

In quiet moments Lakshmi softly sang to herself the words "Hands across the water, hands across the sky" from The Beatles' Uncle Albert song, and wondered why the world couldn't be a nicer place. But she was a nurse and knew it wasn't.

Through her job Lakshmi met an English doctor named Andrew Old, fell in love, so did he, and they were legally wed.

Friends at work joked that she had become Old before her time, but that wasn't the cruellest joke a newly-wed ever heard! At least she didn't suffer the indignity of an apple pie bed on her honeymoon. Andrew was too astute to fall for that.

From a pen pal in Thailand the new Mrs Old learned of a young female Asian elephant named Mosha who had stepped on a landmine near the Cambodian border and lost her front right leg. What the military dictators would call 'collateral damage' Lakshmi assumed.

From her time in Africa she knew that poachers were extremely cruel and killed elephants for the ivory tusks and feet. Elephant foot ornaments sell for high prices. She even saw a documentary by a French journalist showing an Africa elephant with one of its front legs mostly hacked through by a poacher who got chased off and didn't finish the live amputation. Every step was agony for the animal until a licensed hunter was brought in to end its suffering.

Lakshmi was aware of what poachers did to bears and other animals in different parts of the world to satisfy the market for supposed aphrodisiacs or other fantasy notions of potions. It was all fuelled by the lust for money, the filthy lucre, the root of all evil. But she knew she and her husband were doing good work to help ease the suffering of people and contented herself with that.

The Olds had decided not to start a family too soon. They were both professionals and wanted to concentrate on serving their patients for a while yet.

Andrew's mother told them an amusing story once at dinner. She said there was a TV medical drama series with a hospital character named Doctor Large. His wife was expecting and one day a work colleague asked "Is her bump very noticeable yet?" The doctor replied "Just a little Large!"

Not too far from their home was a zoo and a couple of times Andrew and Lakshmi visited. Perhaps needless to say she did have a few sad thoughts about the earlier "back home" days but was not troubled by seeing elephants, giraffes and all the others in enclosures. "At least they are looked after by people who care" she thought.

An onlooker may not have been surprised that a married couple on a day out at the zoo were mostly amused by the antics in the Monkey House. The phrase "monkey business" did not come from nowhere!

In the shop at the zoo were various toy animals, pot plants such as yuccas, postcards, books, a wide variety of other goods, sweets, snacks, refreshments and forms for adopting creatures at the zoo.

Lakshmi had seen such invitations to adopt before, including "inmates" at a donkey sanctuary in Dorset.

Being a pen pal type of person, she looked up some animal adoption webs on the Internet when they returned from the zoo and found links to people who wanted to contact others about their animal tales and generally "chat".

Andrew served on some medical research and other panels and had told Lakshmi to be cautious with charities and others asking for money because they may not all be as they seem. He had come across cases of monies being diverted from the coffers of seemingly respectable charities by less-than-honest directors.

When Lakshmi asked why they didn't get rid of the "robbers" he said it was because the charities had celebrities on their patrons list, maybe royals, and any hint of scandal would send them running. Then support for the charity would dwindle and the income cease. So the wrongdoing was covered up.

"Wrongdoing covered up, sounds just like Uganda!" she thought, but didn't say it.

Outside the building where she worked there was a "silent vigil" one day in protest against Apartheid in South Africa. No harm was done, just a bunch of people with placards standing around for several hours to express their discontent with something on a different continent.

Chapter 2

During an evening "online chat" via a web forum Lakshmi Old received a request from a girl named Engraçadinha to help with her elephant named Hank, who only had three legs and needed an 'operation'.

Being a nurse married to a doctor, working in a medical centre, and knowing about the other cases in Africa and Cambodia, Lakshmi took it very seriously and felt obligated to find out more.

It seemed unusual to hear from someone with an uncommon Hispanic name having an animal called Hank.

Maybe she is a Mexican living in America and named it after a cowboy, or Henry Fonda whose nickname was Hank, she thought. But there can't be many elephants in the USA, can there?

Remembering what Andrew had told her about charities and being suspicious of sob stories, Lakshmi though she should tread very carefully.

"Hank is a nice name, and so is yours", she said, then asked "Is that Spanish?"

"No, Portuguese" was the prompt reply.

"I live in Great Britain", confided Lakshmi, thinking that asking questions was not the right way to go but volunteering some information may elicit some answers.

"Is it very foggy there?" asked Engraçadinha .

"No, that's a myth!"

"I wondered if it is foggy in your country" Lakshmi offered, still fishing.

"Where do you think that is?"

"Well, I suppose it could be in South America where all the nuts come from!"

"Are you calling me a nut?"

"Not at all, I was just thinking about those nice nuts people crack open with nutcrackers, and that are put in some chocolate bars."

"Now you are talking!"

Chapter 3

Lakshmi realised that probably she was exchanging notes with a young person, maybe a child, or an immature adult. She wondered about the validity of the elephant story.

The person had a good command of English and responded quickly, so seemed to have an agile mind, perhaps bit mischievous! Doesn't seem Brazilian or Portuguese, or Spanish. Maybe bilingual, though. The chat was text only, so no voice clues.

"Coffee?" The voice drifted up the stairs like magic.

"Just what the doctor ordered!" called Lakshmi down the stairs, "You really are such a wonderful husband and I love you so much!"

He sat down alongside her when he took the coffee upstairs and enquired.

She told him the story so far and asked what he thought.

"Get the rest of the facts", said Andrew. Maybe someone is after a prosthetic limb for an elephant but that would be a job for a vet surgeon, not a people's medic, so I couldn't possibly comment.

She continued with the online "chat".

"Engraçadinha, I was thinking of asking you something and wondered if that would be alright."

"What is it?"

"I wondered why you called your elephant Hank."

"It is a long story."

"Just a mo ... I've got about three days, is it that long?"

"Well, to cut a long story long, it was the insulating tape."

"I am very curious, please go on."

"My uncle is a electrician and uses black insulating tape."

"Did Hank get an electric shock or something?"

No, silly, it was for my Nan!"

That is a British term for a grandmother, thought Lakshmi, now we are getting somewhere.

"Would you like to tell me more bout the tape, then, Engraçadinha?"

"You can call me Grace if you like, everybody else does!"

"OK Grace, what about the tape?"

"It was for the label."

"Go on."

"Well, my nan wanted to stick a label on but she didn't have any sticky tape and glue wouldn't have been any good, but just them my uncle got home and he cut some bits of insulating tape for her. That was good timing, wasn't it!"

"Very good timing, I'd say. Where was the label going?"

"On the elephant, of course!"

"Was the elephant going on a trip, then?"

"Only to my house, which isn't far."

"What did the label say, was it an address?"

"No, it said thanks in big letters, that's all."

"Who was the thanks for?"

"For me, of course."

"So what was your nan thanking you for?"

"For the lovely birthday cake I gave her."

"Sounds delicious, it's making my mouth water just thinking about it!"

"It was delicious, everybody who had some said so."

"So you gave your nan a cake and she sent an elephant with a label to thank you, is that right?!"

"Yes."

"So why did you call the elephant Hank?"

"Because of the insulating tape."

"Can you explain that a bit more, Grace, I'm a bit slow today."

"OK, here goes. My nan said she held the label against the elephant and my uncle put the tape on, one bit on each side to keep the label in place. But the tape covered the letter at each side. They thought I would pull the tape off and see the word. But when the elephant got to my house all I saw was HANK instead of THANKS because the T and the S were covered by insulating tape. The elephant didn't have a name so I decided to just call it Hank"

"What a wonderful explanation, thank you very much, Grace."

"You are most welcome!"

"Tell me, did Hank walk round to your house or was he driven?"

"My uncle drove him round in his car. He couldn't walk because he's only got three legs."

"If he fitted in a car I guess Hank must be a small elephant. Is he an African elephant or an India elephant?"

"He's a woollen elephant!"

"Did you say woollen or wooden?"

"Woollen. My nan knitted him."

"Why has he only got three legs, did your nan run out of wool?"

"No, she did it on purpose."

"Any idea why?"

"Yes, she told me. You know you get dolls hospitals and see dolls with bandages and things, well she thought that if she made an elephant with only three legs I would feel sorry for it and always look after it."

She had been knitting it in secret anyway but after I gave her the birthday cake she decided to send it round as a thank you."

"Do you know why she made a knitted elephant instead of using material?"

"My nan said millions of years ago there were woolly mammoths so she thought a woolly elephant would be nice for a change, that was all."

"Why did you advertise for help?"

"I thought I would try to get a spare leg to fit on Hank, then I can put some pyjamas on him."

"I'll tell you what, if your parents agree I'll get some sizes and ask my husband's mum to knit a spare leg from a hank of wool and send it to you, will that do?"

"Super!"

Later Lakshmi corresponded with Grace's parents. They didn't want to offend Grace's nan by asking her to knit a leg and interfere with her reasoning, so they took up the offer made by Lakshmi.

It turned out that whenever Grace was online an adult sat beside her so she was not at risk from anybody. They knew what was going on.

The father was an Anglo-Indian who had married a girl called Josefina who came from a very poor village in Portugal. The name Engraçadinha was chosen by her mother. The father worked in a factory and Josefina worked as a domestic at a local hospital.

They lived in Thornton Road near Croydon.

Engraçadinha did speak two languages.

Hank now has a spare leg which can be attached with velcro or removed at leisure. He also has a pair of pyjamas. Jumbo size, of course.

The End

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