

Look what the cats dug up!

by Chris Rose

I live in a town where lots of people live, a town which is a suburb of a city where millions of people live. It's very crowded. Where I live there is one apartment block after another. I look out of my window and if I look to the left I can see another apartment block. If I look to the right I can see the railway and the local train station, and after that there are more apartment blocks. If I look straight ahead of me I can see another apartment block. But if I look straight down, I can see something different.

If I look straight down I can see a garden. It's not a big garden – it's about fifteen metres long and fifteen metres wide. It's almost square-shaped. The space is as big as a small apartment block. The garden is there like a hole in the middle of lots of other apartment blocks. It is a space left by an apartment block which was bombed in the Second World War and – unlike all the other blocks around it – never rebuilt.

An old woman lives in this garden. Well, to be accurate, she doesn't exactly live in the garden. She has a very small two-storey house in the corner of the garden. There only seem to be two rooms in her house, one room downstairs and one room upstairs, but I don't really know because I've never been in it. But that's what it looks like from the outside.

The woman who lives in the garden looks very old, but nobody is really sure how old she is.

In her garden, she mostly grows oranges and lemons, and in the winter when the oranges are in season, the dark green trees in the garden are covered in hundreds and hundreds of tiny orange dots. It's really beautiful. You can lean over the balcony and call the old woman, and if you lower down a basket on a piece of rope, she'll fill up the basket for you with oranges. The oranges have quite a bitter taste, to tell the truth, they're not sweet at all, and they're full of pips, but I always think that the old woman is very kind to give away all her oranges anyhow.

The old woman isn't the only one who lives in the garden, though. About ten stray cats live there too. I say "about ten", because there always seem to be different cats there. Sometimes you can look down and there are only three or four cats lying out in the sun or in the shade of one of the orange trees. Other times, though, especially if you throw a leftover bit of fish over the balcony for the cats to have, lots of them come running, sometimes as many as twelve, sometimes too many to count.

A lot of people want to come and live where I live now. The nearby city with millions of people who live in it is too crowded, and the prices of flats in the city are very high. A lot of people want to move out of the city to the small town where I live, because it's a bit cheaper and a bit quieter.

Some people who live in my apartment block are saying that the old woman has been looking very unhappy recently. My neighbours are worried because they say that the old woman is very old and that she isn't well and that if she dies, someone will come and build another apartment block on the space where her small, green garden is. The people who live in our apartment block – me included – love the small garden. It's beautiful to wake up in the morning and go out onto the balcony and look at the orange and lemon trees, and the small vine where she grows grapes to make wine in the autumn, and the stray cats asleep in the sun.

One day we saw a group of men in the garden. They were all wearing suits and carrying maps and charts. They looked like engineers and builders. Everyone in my apartment block was worried. "The old woman's going to sell her garden", they said. "Those men are engineers and builders and they're going to build another apartment block where the garden is." Some of us went to speak to the old woman.

"No" said the old woman, "I'm not going to sell my garden. I love my garden. Yes, those men were engineers and builders, but they don't want to build another apartment block here."

"Well what do they want to do then?" we asked.

"They want to build a road across the garden."

"A road!?"

"Yes – because it's near the train station. Because a lot of people are coming to live here now, they think they need to build a new road from the station to the motorway to make it easier for more people to travel into the city."

We all went home and were very worried. But what could we do? Some of us wrote letters to the local council and the local newspapers. But the council said that it was necessary to have a new road so more people would come to our small town and bring more business with them. They said that there was too much traffic on the one small road that existed at the moment. The local newspaper agreed with the local council. The building work on the road was to start almost immediately. It seemed like there was nothing that we could do. Now, instead of living next to a beautiful, quiet green garden we would be living next to a big, noisy road.

The night before the builders and bulldozers and diggers were supposed to come it was very hot, and I stayed awake late into the night, sitting out on my balcony looking out over the garden for the last time. Even though it was dark, I could see something strange happening in the garden. I was sure I could see all the stray cats who lived there, as many as twelve or thirteen of them, and they were all digging a big hole. Sometimes cats dig holes, that's normal, but I'd never seen anything like this. All the cats seemed to be working together, digging an enormous hole on one side of the garden. Because it was very late and very dark, I couldn't see properly though, and thought that perhaps I was just imagining things. I went to bed thinking that perhaps I was already dreaming.

The next morning I woke up feeling unhappy because I could hear the noise of the builders and the bulldozers already. Big, loud noises of heavy machinery. "This is it", I thought, "this is the end of the lovely garden." But I was surprised when the noises stopped and everything went quiet.

I got out of bed, pulled on my clothes and went out onto my balcony to have a look what was happening. Why had the builders and bulldozers stopped?

When I got out onto the balcony I could see a big group of builders, one big bulldozer and an important-looking man in a suit who must have been the boss. They were all scratching their heads and looking very puzzled. The old woman was standing with them. She was looking very pleased. The stray cats were all lying asleep under the trees around the edges of the enormous hole that they had, indeed, dug. Everyone was looking into the hole.

At the bottom of the hole was an enormous mosaic. "It's Roman" I heard somebody say. "It's must be ancient" said one of the other builders. The boss was looking very upset. "We can't possibly build here" said another one of the builders. "He's right" said another one, "This must be a historical site." The boss walked away and threw his hat on the ground.

They never built the road. Now on sunny mornings I sit out on my balcony I sit out and look at the beautiful green garden with its Roman mosaic. The mosaic shows a picture of a huge banquet, with lots of people sitting at big tables eating, and lots of cats eating fish and sleeping under the shady tables.

THE END