

Sitting Ralph

or

Love in as many names



RALPH SIGHS. And when Ralph sighs it's a big thing. He breathes in a thousand gallons of air, wheezingly, never-endingly. Then he holds, so long you think he could burst. Twenty minutes later, and this is not long for Ralph, trust me, he lets it out in a burbling, lip-flapping gush, and rumbles and rocks, racked by internal seismic activity way beyond the ken of us lesser mammals, his 3,000kg bulk shuddering intensely, his blubber shaking for long moments afterwards in the bad-breath stale-fish silence that follows. The world recoups, and so do I. Even trees are taken aback. We wish for the breeze to resume, to clear the air.

It's an event alright, a sigh from Ralph. He doesn't do much else. I wonder if it's big enough to log in my incident diary. It would be sigh number eight for today.

But I let it go, as I have overlooked his other sighs before. Let the guy sigh in peace, I say. I put my feet up on the chilly bin, gaze absently at the silver flickering light (beautiful beyond compare) scattered by leaves at the top of the windbreak poplar trees; and wonder at the perverse character of the being that (who?) took it upon him (her?) self to torment us with such unbearable loveliness on this little planet, to give us so much to absorb, as if it's a challenge to be taken up. Yerr...something to ponder on. I crack another Tui. I sip, and sigh, though of course I'm nowhere near Ralph's league.

Ralph is surprisingly far inland, considering his awkward locomotive efforts over dry earth. He has harrumphed mightily, covering nearly a kilometre, across the beach, a dune, then through a scraggly pine forest, across a raupo wetland, to this paddock. All this way, lured by the erotic scent of ...cows. A dozen Jersey heifers, just enough in number to make up a new harem. Only, understandably, they are not interested. An ageing male elephant seal, horny, possibly senile, is not attractive at the best of times.

After the sigh, the herd of cows, the subject of Ralph's amorous intentions (thankfully – for them – unrequited), move further away. They don't trust, and I suppose with good reason, the electric fence that has subdivided their paddock, the gaily fluttering orange tape that marks the demarcation line. The blokes from Gallaghers had installed this electric fence, and they're world experts in these things – even selling elephant and rhino-strength electric fences to Africa! – but this was the first time, they tell me, that they've had to contain an elephant seal. And in a damp paddock on the far side of the Coromandel.

They use their biggest wire, they crank it up to serious voltage, they have a quiet brew to celebrate their work, and leave me with Ralph. I have the gossamer thin nylon of a tent between him and me. And their electric fence. I should be as nervous as those heifers. But then I don't have the limpid, sensual eyes, those irresistible pools of allure belonging to a sexy Jersey heifer in her prime. No wonder Ralph is smitten. Only he does very little about it. He just lies there, sighing, occasionally roaring. Which doesn't endear him to the cows either.

I have been employed – if only temporarily, for surely this cannot last – to sit in a field and watch a lost sea lion that has lumbered, blundered, heaved its way inland. A veritable marathon for a sea lion, inexplicable too. Unless you consider the cows. Ralph has flattened part of the fence and a gate to get this far. Now he lays about, and pervs cows. But I suppose I'm a layabout here too – such is the limited work I do, watching Ralph, and keeping press photographers and rubbernecks at bay. But Ralph, I reckon, could do that anyway. He has a fearsome bark, and worse halitosis.

A local woman brings me food. She has a beautiful face, riotous hair, a bounteous nature, a big bum, and ugly toes. But I am happy to overlook these, as I overlook so many of Ralph's flaws.

She has the habit of gaily introducing herself at every arrival. She has the knack of appearing when no one else is around. And – curious thing – she gives herself a different name each time. But each name, I realise, following themes of serendipity, of felicity, and in alphabetical order. So far, she has been Asha, Esperanza, Felicity, Halona, Hope, Joy, Nadia.

As part of my duties here, I hand her the DOC brochure about elephant seals. She laughs delightedly, and as we continue talking (not about Ralph, for we have exhausted him, though he has naturally led us to other things, like the silliness of sex, for instance), she un-folds and re-folds the paper into an expert, almost unconscious origami flamingo. An elephant seal becomes a flamingo – all part of the serendipitous delight she brings to me.

Why are you here? She asks one time. This menial work is just a short-term filler, now that I have been 'released' from the Department after indiscreet acts. OK it was, I'll allow, childish to call the cost-cutting Minister a "Tory fuckwit", especially in the presence of visiting dignitaries from Hungary. But hey, you could also call it passion for the species I am (was) trying to save. Net result: I no longer officially work for the Department; but have this temporary gig baby-sitting a bewildered, lost, ageing elephant seal. After this, I don't know.

Ralph becomes a tourist attraction. Come see a lump of blubber. Come see it burp. Come smell its farts. Tick it off on your list.

We have a stream of curious visitors: locals, bogans, earnest eco-types, curious woofers, and recently, some indigent Lonely Planeters who almost overstay their welcome lingering here for three weeks, sitting around a fire, strumming guitars and sipping mate. They freedom camp alongside me. Sometimes I wonder if freedom camping must, *de rigueur*, include noisy sex. The zoologist in me almost re-awakens. I have learned the words for "*Oh my god!*", "*More!*", "*Don't stop!*", "*Yes, Yes!*" in a dozen languages, in urgent italics.

Ralph doesn't seem to mind. I do. But they (the freedom campers) don't last. Such is the life of the part-time baby-sitter of a lost elephant seal.

TV crews come. One memorable interview was with the wide-eyed girl-like presenter of a children's programme. She asked me a bunch of screamingly obvious questions. ("Is he heavy?" etc) and for every answer I give, she responds with a breathless "Wow!"

Later that night, Nadia comes. She smiles and just says "Wow!" We laugh. We sit in companionable silence. And then we make love. Slowly, and quietly. At one point, in exploration, I find, the numbers 123 – 5 tattooed, tiny, inside her left elbow. I pause. She explains: "Counting my blessings."

"Me too." Later, in the more-pork-quiet of night, I venture, "Will I be number six?"

"Pzzzt!" she raspberries softly into my beard.

"Who was number four?"

No reply. And then, maybe twenty minutes later, just before we drop into deep sleep, "A mistaken thing..."

Ralph becomes his own ecosystem. The mucus that slimes from his trunk and great schlong becomes take-aways for hordes of flies. His bulk creates a depression, which becomes stagnant waterlogged. Ralph doesn't seem to mind. Frogs croak in his pond at night. Herons stand sentinel around him. Indian mynahs take a curious liking to his dung. His back becomes patch-worked with pukeko guano. Which doesn't appeal to tourist photographers.

Two things happen of the same day. Ralph is found dead. The woman with the thousand names disappears. For the first, the rangers decree Ralph has died of natural causes. I wonder if old-seal's unrequited love for cows is part of those causes. Ralph died of a lack of

love, absurd though it might have been. And at only age twenty. The cows, I swear, breathe a sigh of relief. The little town bemoans the loss of its attraction. A digger arrives to put down the giant grave Ralph will need. The local mayor makes a speech. Some people actually cry. A waiata withers in the still afternoon air. The flies have one last feed.

These are the bare bones of my story. But there is more, much more. I have found love in as many names. I have places to go, now Ralph has gone.

So I go looking for her. Locals tell me they don't know who she is. Even with my accurate description. (Though I leave out the numbers, the tiny mole just NE of a nipple, the number of grey hairs – I counted them – she has down south). So amend my earlier description. She's clearly not local. And gone. Along with Ralph.

My tent packed; a yellow patch of sunlight-deprived grass will be my temporary marker. And the faint scent of my piss on that tree, to compete with Ralph's fading funk.

My life was on hold. But I am free to go. Is this the end of the story yet?

