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CHAPTER ONE

'If you don't stop squawking and snivelling, we'll keep you locked in there all night!'

Mr. and Mrs. Truss on too many occasions

Even in 1947, christening a baby boy Horace Athelstan was thought to be old-fashioned, if not downright unkind. Mr. and Mrs. Truss, Annie and Bill, were hoping that if they named their only child after unpredictable Uncle Horace Athelstan (on Mr. Truss's side) this might encourage him to leave them some of his wealth when he passed on. They were wrong and they never forgave baby Horace Athelstan for not bringing them the good fortune they had counted on. He was obviously an unlucky child, a blighted one, a mistake. They had even started having conversations about how they would spend the money and, when heartless Uncle Horace Athelstan left the whole lot to his friends at the greyhound stadium, they were beside themselves. Gone were the month-long holidays in the Caribbean they had planned, the tailored clothes, the expensive dining table. Little Horace Athelstan, with his unfashionable name, became the scapegoat for his parents' bitterness over the lost inheritance. If, as a family, they happened to walk past someone with a thin dog (It didn't have to be a greyhound.) Mr. or Mrs. Truss, or both of them, was bound to smack their son around

the head and say something pointless like, 'That'll learn you.'

They could never bring themselves to say the name Athelstan ever again. So their son became simply Horace. Hard-done-by, often hit, often humiliated, often humbled Horace.

His was a cold childhood, one of the coldest in the history of the world, Horace suspected. Their address was 117 Turnpike Road. Very early on in his dismal school career Horace discovered that a turnpike was the name given to one of the main roads which led out of a town. He often dreamed of setting off along a turnpike of his own which had no end, which took him beyond the blame and the insults and the forgetting they had locked him in the pantry. One day his class teacher gave the children a lesson about castles and how soldiers fought in the olden days, so Horace learned what a pike was, a deadly steel point on the end of a long staff. When he wanted to cheer himself up, he would dream of taking such a pike and chasing his parents out of the house with it. He would prod them with the point and they would call out, 'Oh, please do stop, Horace! We're ever so sorry.'

Some parts of a town can undergo what is known as 'gentrification'. They suddenly become desirable places to live and there are interesting shops and the grassy areas sprout brightly coloured play areas for children. The opposite of gentrification is what happened to Turnpike Road during Horace's childhood. It was the sort of road which people

hurried to get to the end of and in which they dropped their rubbish along the way. It slid and then it tumbled into being a scruffy, unhappy road with scruffy resentful inhabitants who hated the world and each other. Every morning when Horace went to school he kicked his way through the bottles and paper and packets which had landed on their front path during the hours of darkness. One of his jobs was to collect up all of this rubbish and 'Get rid of it now!' Generally, he just chucked it over a garden wall about ten doors along. An old couple lived there and what were they going to do to him?

Horace hated it when other children at school talked about what they got up to in 'my bedroom'. They had friends around and planned mischief. They had hamsters and possessions no-one else was allowed to touch. It seemed that if he was alone upstairs for longer than five minutes his mother would screech from the kitchen, 'Horace, what are you getting up to? Come down AT ONCE!' Not that she wanted his company. Nobody wanted that. Even he didn't want that. Occasionally, however, he would collapse in fits of the giggles which convinced his parents that he was mad, because they were well aware of how miserable they made his life. Little did they know what was making him laugh. For years when they locked him in the pantry, he had simply cried and, with luck, sobbed himself to sleep. There had followed several more years of cold anger which made him feel ill and which also made the time pass

very slowly indeed. Then he had discovered the bogey trick. He kicked himself for not thinking of it before. In the pantry there were items of food which would never be offered to him, cream sponges or fish paste sandwiches for his parents' Sunday tea. It was so easy to add a few of his bogeys here and there and then wait for that delicious moment when the slice of cake or the sandwich was placed in the mouth of Mr. or Mrs. Truss. They chewed and swallowed and smiled. Horace smiled too. If only he could tell them what they had done. If only he could shout out, 'You've just eaten snot!' but he had to be satisfied with silent pleasure. It wasn't a very sustaining pleasure and most of the time he was quite miserable.

School was every bit as bad as home. Children who attended Turnpike Road School had a reputation and always found it difficult to make friends from elsewhere. No-one wanted to give them Saturday jobs or stand next to them in queues. They were 'a right lot' and Horace soon became an easy victim of the worst children in his class. He didn't even know whether he was stupid or bright because so much of every lesson was spent avoiding missiles rather than listening to the teacher. If he threw anything back he was always the one who was caught and told to leave the classroom and then sent home with a letter for his parents. He acquired a reputation as '*that* Horace Truss' and wondered what you had to do to make even one person like you. Having a dreadful name didn't help but why did he have to be

the one they all picked on? Couldn't they have turned their nasty attentions just for once on the very fat boy or the extremely dense one who wheezed?

His eventual way of coping with it all was to go deeply into himself, to withdraw from the world and let whatever was going to happen, happen. He would sit in class with a fixed stare while pellets stung his ears and the contents of his satchel were kicked surreptitiously all over the floor. In the staffroom the teachers would say, 'That Horace Truss isn't all there. He needs treatment.' Then they would gulp several stiff drinks and brace themselves for the monsters in the Fifth Form who were almost all destined for lives of crime.

The Trusses went on holiday once a year because everybody went on holiday, not because they enjoyed it or as a treat for their son. It was only for a week, to Folkestone, and it always rained. While his parents sat on a be-drizzled beach getting back-ache from their deck chairs and hating the sand which cemented itself between their toes, Horace soon discovered how much more fun it was to flatten other children's sandcastles than to build your own. He became almost athletic as he sprinted down the beach, a whoosh of destruction reducing proud sandcastles with their flags and windmills to shapeless mounds decorated only with his footprints.

It was unwise to return by way of the beach after he had upset so many other children, so Horace worked out how he could backtrack along the

promenade dodging behind kiosks. There was the added bonus of creeping up on a six-year old clutching the treasure of a huge ice cream cornet. With a nudge or a flick, Horace could send the cone of ice cream splatting to the ground. As the tiny tot drew in a deep breath before they screamed, Horace was well away.

As it turned out, he was getting in good practice for later. He was learning exactly how much trouble he could get away with and how to duck and weave when angry people were in pursuit.

'Where've you been then, Horace?'

'Just mooching about, mum.'

'Have you been getting into mischief?'

'No, mum. You look really wet. Do you think you'll catch pneumonia and die?'

Then they went for fish and chips which it was cheaper to take away and eat standing in the rain than sitting down in The Seagull Seafood Parlour.

Christmas and Horace's birthday were celebrated at 117 Turnpike Road, although 'celebrate' is far too strong a word to describe what happened. Horace's birthday was, after all, the annual reminder of the money 'wicked' Uncle Horace Athelstan Truss hadn't left them. There were no birthday cards, because these were a waste of money, but Horace received his twice yearly allowance of underpants and socks instead of the fun presents received by everyone else he knew. Special wrapping paper was never used either so Horace couldn't even pretend to

himself that this year they might have relented and bought him a surprise gift he liked.

'I want a puppy for my birthday,' he said when he was due to be twelve and was immediately slapped for his cheek. His mother was as horrified by the suggestion as if he'd made a rude gesture out of the window when a nun was walking by.

And then it was time to leave school. Horace was entered for an 'O' Level but he couldn't remember what it was and he didn't intend to turn up for it anyway. Perhaps the biggest surprise of his school life was saved for the last week before they went on what was laughingly called 'Study Leave'. Horace was stunned to learn that his year were going to be allowed to have a leaving party in the school hall on their final afternoon. He brooded over this for several days. Did the Headmaster really want his school vandalised beyond recognition? Then he twigged. If the school and the Fifth Year parted not as complete enemies, they *might* think twice about coming back to set fire to it during the summer holidays. It was a cunning plan, but not one that was ever likely to work. Try telling Gobby Dawkins or his henchmen to honour the bargain the Headmaster believed he had made with them. Horace merely overheard details about the party; no-one asked him to be sure to be there. Then, on their final morning, when they were out of control and only wanting to bang on desks or write obscenities on the walls in large letters, Jim Biggs, the ultra-ratbag to Horace's

mind, turned to him and said, 'See you at the party then, Horror-arse? No hard feelings, mate.' He even shook Horace by the hand and smacked him on the back without, for once, wanting to hurt him.

'Wouldn't miss it for the world,' said Horace, who, up to that moment had every intention of missing an event where everyone was friends with everyone else and he stood out as the lonely victim. He was having to think very fast. Why hadn't Jim Biggs clapped him on the shoulder and said, 'No hard feelings,' the day before? Horace had spent much of the night full of hard feelings sabotaging the party because he was convinced nobody wanted him there. In an empty cupboard they had piled the banners and balloons that were going to be hung around the school hall during the lunch break. The party would begin about 2-30pm. Horace had punctured as many of the balloons as he could and devastated the banners by snipping off the strings as well as cutting most of them in half. He had also adulterated the packets of crisps and quite a number of the bottles of pop which the Headmaster had bought as a peace offering. He thought he had been very clever until he realised he would have to go to the party now to avoid suspicion and he might end up consuming some of the doctored party fare. From somewhere he had obtained a syringe which he boiled in Dettol to sterilise it. Then he made up a mixture of bogeys and ten parts water to one part wee. This was injected into as much of the food in the party cupboard as he had the energy

for. Just as black witchcraft is supposed to recoil on the perpetrator, so too did Horace's chickens come home to roost. Most of the Fifth Form boys turned up their noses at lemonade and brought their own bottles of beer to the party. The Headmaster was so afraid of trouble that he accepted a drink of beer he was offered. Horace was neither offered one, nor had he brought his own. To keep up appearances, he drank a little of the orange pop which he hoped didn't really have the sharp aftertaste he thought it did have. That night he was sick and his parents accused him of getting drunk. Other people at the party had the same experience and it was generally agreed that the Headmaster had bought crisps which were so old they had gone mouldy. There were mutterings that he had done it deliberately. And who else knew where all their banners were with witty texts such as *SKOOL DUZ YOR HED IN* and *WE HATE ORL TEECHAZ!!!*? A few people strutted about with the remains of the banners wrapped around them, but it wasn't as good as having them strung overhead for the headmaster to wince at.

So it was no surprise to anybody when Turnpike Road School burnt to the ground on the night of August 3rd. Horace sat in his bedroom window and watched the futile efforts of the firemen to save it. 'I probably helped to do that,' he thought and found that the idea didn't bother him at all. His mother was downstairs crying which made it even more of an evening to remember. The school was not rebuilt and

the site remained a dangerous eye-sore through most of Horace's adulthood. It was more of an achievement than his one 'O' Level would have been - whatever the subject was.