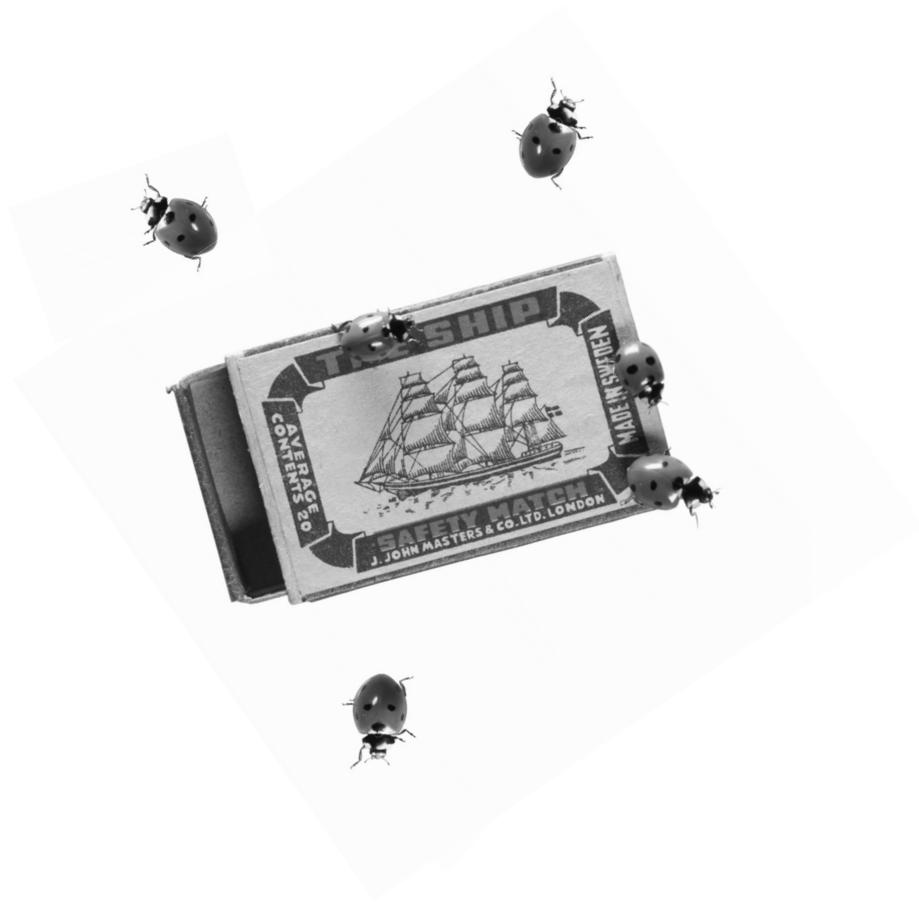


I

Brand New Savage



The Collector

July 1966

‘I’M SORRY, I haven’t got change of a ladybird.’

The ice-cream man had opened the matchbox expecting a sixpence but instead found a six-spotted beetle that was now scuttling manically over his counter, defiantly refusing reinterment in its crisp little cell despite repeated repositioning. He gently pressed his cupped palm down on the fugitive and as it squeezed free of his fingers managed to flick it back into the box. Green juice specked his nail. He tutted, wiped it on his trousers and stretched over to hand the doomed specimen back to the beetle-keeper just as a girl he knew as Anna simultaneously thrust a thick wodge of bubblegum cards at the little mush and demanded, ‘Why don’t you let it go?’

The boy ignored her, shook the box next to his ear, fanned through his worn wad of Batman and Tarzan cards and then wrestled them into the bulging pocket of his shorts.

‘You wouldn’t like it in there,’ she snapped before she looked up to Mr Whippy and said, ‘He’s had it in there for days and he never lets them go until they die. I’d like a Sky Ray.’

Yellow chin lights speckled her freckles, radiating from three daisy chains, her morning’s work. Ghostly grey eyes and pig pink cheeks cuddling close to the grubbiest teddy bear. She had sun-blown blonde play-curved hair that flopped in tattered curtains over her milky brow and tickled those tickly arcs of soft skin beneath her eyes. The boy was skewy-fringed and silent, gazing at

the pavement in mandatory scuffed sandals, and both wore too-tight over-washed T-shirts, hers with a smiling fox's face, his with fresh pearls of Airfix cement constellating its front.

'Please. I'd like a Sky Ray *please*,' she repeated to be sure her manners would be recognised.

The suns flaring from the side of the van lit the scruffy waifs up like camera flash as they squinted hard at the pictures of lollies in awe of Strawberry Splices and Orange Sparkles. Her fist unfurled into a cup of sweaty pennies that would smell of bitter money till bedtime and when she came to lick the melted lemon as it dribbled down the stick that metallic taint would bite back and make her wince and spit and her big sister would scoff and giggle.

The bloke picked out six coins and handed her the Sky Ray, which she unwrapped fiercely, leaving strips of paper glued to its frosted sides. She sucked at its cherry red tip and after a pleasurable pause poked the boy, who flinched and magically produced a thrupenny bit for his thrupenny ice-lolly. As they left a gang of panting nippers with rattling trolleys charged up. These dad-made pavement racers rolled on rusty wheels scavenged from dumped prams and pushchairs and were clad in garish strips of threadbare carpets and daubed with the sticky dregs of their parents' house paint pots. They steered them roughly with their rope loops into the wall and all at once told him there'd been a massive crash in the woods over by the council flats yesterday and that Axell had broken his arm and been taken to the General by his mum. On the bus. He was their hero, king of the juniors. They brandished their scabs, which they squeezed to get fresh blood, and without a shilling between them stormed off to kick a ball against a wall until teatime and *Crackerjack*.

With the kids gone the ice-cream man had a quick fag and picked himself out a Woppa. When he slid the freezer shut he saw the 'ladybird boy' standing staring at him from the lawn beyond the wall. From each hand dangled a shiny jam jar and it was painfully obvious that he had returned with these trophies because he wanted to share them. The man checked his watch, then flicked his head to beckon him over. The boy snaked across the grass to the gate, put both jars down, clicked the latch, moved them outside, setting each gently on the tarmac before dragging the hinge-less flaking panel shut behind him. He then carefully laid out the string handles and picked up the pots synchronously and slowly so they didn't swing. These were sacred things.

The man leaned across the counter and out of the window and the boy offered him one. Through a mist of condensation he could see a muddy base, three or four large pebbles, several sprigs of wilted greenery and a pink plastic dinosaur. It was standing upright, snarling, and just visible beneath it was another pale blue prehistoric form lying on its side. The prey. He scrutinised it; everything was very precisely arranged, a perfect diorama modelled on some encyclopaedia's illustration of the world one million years ago. He rotated it carefully, judged he had spent just enough time in rapt appreciation and handed it back.

The second jar held a similarly contrived miniaturised scene but had no discernible ancient reptiles. Its sides were also dripping wet but its lid was roughly ventilated and so presumably housed something living. But the amiable geezer couldn't be bothered to look that hard. He passed it down and the boy frowned as he adjusted the handle to ensure symmetry and then looked back at him, his eyes slit tight against the hot bright light. He should say something, but what? What do you say to a weird kid with

dinosaurs in jam jars who never speaks, who only ever points, who buys your cheapest ice-lollies and seems to think that bartering with various bugs is a viable currency for exchange? So he nodded, a nod which he hoped would signify approval, and grunted, 'What happened to your lolly?'

The kid put down the jars with robotic precision and then pulled the stick out of his pocket and held it up. He then reached into his other pocket and withdrew a bundle of about twenty more bound to a small spoon with a bent neck. As he drove off Mr Whippy nodded again and when he checked his mirror at the corner he could see the kid still kneeling on the pavement. Peering into the pot with nothing in it.

Back in the garden the boy carefully unscrewed the lid. The jar belched a bitter breath and peering into the sweaty cell he found this afternoon's ladybirds running unnaturally fast, baked into a panic, scuttling and slipping on the wet sides. He set the lid and jar at the dead centre of a paving stone then rested on his elbows to watch them all escape.

He could see their flat feet on the grey glass, winding and failing, black-bellied, oval, with their feelers tapping feverously, struggling to find fresh air. The first beetle made it to the lip and at once began to circle the rim, pausing to change direction and crack open its ruddy back, trapping a twist of orange tissue in a momentary tail. Round and round, another appeared and then a third, a crowd, busy bumping, he knew what they wanted. He shuffled across to the unkempt edge of the lawn and pulled a stalk of grass, bit off the limp base and then the flower spike to leave a long straight straw that he placed in the jar leaning against the edge. At once the gyrating carrot beads climbed it and at its pinnacle

took flight and wafted away. Finally, as the last prisoner reached the gleaming parapet and trundled to the base of the launch tower, he dragged the jar closer and watched the mini machine's six legs organise the ascent. He traced its line up the stem and placed his finger at the tip so the insect crawled onto it.

As it turned he swivelled his wrist to face its front. Two white patches like eyes above its tiny head and waving, it stood up flailing legs and falling back, then shuffled and settled, and he knew it was time. The ripe little ruby split, its concealed wings unfurled, it lifted, hovered, twinkled and sunspun up, glistening for a second before vanishing into his piece of sky.

He shook the fetid salad out of the jar onto the lawn and pawed at several blackened grains, which had expired before the great escape, crushing one on the tip of his finger. It smelled sharp and strong and stained his skin brown despite a feverish wiping on his shirt. He wondered at how quickly they died and tried to imagine how many died every day in the whole world. It was sad that something so beautiful, so perfect had to die, it seemed unfair and wasteful and was difficult to understand. Things were either dead or alive, they were alive right up to the point they were dead but there didn't seem to be anything in between. They could be a little bit alive but they were always completely dead. He didn't know any dead people but one day he would, he knew some old people, they would die, maybe soon, maybe even before he had his next ice cream.

He wondered how many of the old people he'd seen but didn't know had already died. He would die too, one day. But he didn't want to. All this thinking about dying made his chest ache, he was nearly crying. There was a dead ladybird stuck in the bottom of the jar. He shook it hard to get it out but it wouldn't budge until

he used the grass straw to dislodge it and flick it away. He didn't like it dead.

He sucked the mark on his shirt and scrubbed his fingertip again and then straightened the T. rex that had fallen over the Brontosaur in his other jar. Then he took out his matchbox and climbed onto the wall alongside Mrs Greenwood's ladybird bush. It was teeming with blood-red beetles and soon his fingers were stained by their little bleedings and he was shaking the box to listen to the many captives rattling inside. He'd put them in the jar later but now he jumped down and lay on the dusty lawn. Clicking gurgled squeaks rattled and rhythmically wheezed from the bird on the chimney pot whose glossy feathers flashed bits of rainbow from its spiky crest. He lay back and whistled, the bird spluttered on, he wet his lips and whistled again adding a flourish and the bird whistled back mimicking his notes, he waited, the bird rambled through its repetitive repertoire, then he whistled again and the bird replied. The duet went on until the mimic vanished and then he whistled and answered himself, stroking the polka dotting of daisies with sweeping arcs of his arms, in synchrony and symmetry. He swam in his paradise, his heaven of a million living things.

The Suburb

August 1966

BRIGHT AND POLISHED, stacked up like a giant cake iced in layers of brilliant white, sky blue and rich buttery yellow. Chrome quarter bumpers at the back flashed pricks of silverlight and crowning the cab above the windscreen were two freshly whipped cones, each

stabbed by a matt chocolate flake. The sun blazed through these plastic lamps and the van's roof and fluoresced softly on the pages as he pawed over the morning's news. Myra Hindley was glowering at him, black-eyed, blonde but bloke-ish and so obviously ruddy evil. He turned it over, she was too creepy.

Predictably there were the boring Beatles and the England team, Moore brandishing the trophy, Stiles's toothless grin and Charlton looking like his old man. Absolutely bloody marvellous he thought as he tossed the paper on his seat and leaned forward to turn on the radio. The Kinks had it right, he was indeed lazing on a sunny afternoon, in the summertime. He hummed it, filling in between the crackles until the tranny warmed up and settled down.

At the weekend, the kerbs would be dotted with Cortinas and Victors, Minxes and Imps but this afternoon the sideways were the wickets and Wembleys for England's fantasising finest. Everywhere there were kids telling tales and blowing bubbles and as he'd steered his way through the roads, crescents and closes, diligently checking his list of stops, his cash tray quickly filled with their pocket money. He passed a row of overcoated old codgers at a bus stop, avoided stray mongrels skipping over walls and dodged abandoned tricycles and bicycles. He watched retired men mowing tiny lawns, their wives hoisting high lines of washing, he heard the ancient strains of grannies and nannies wringing old mangles and saw a bright new football rolling lost in a grassy gutter whilst the goal scorer was at home flob-a-dobbing with the Flowerpot Men. As the last notes of 'Greensleeves' crackled from his loudspeaker he pulled up where Cornwall Road met Cleveland Road at four thirty on the nose.

As he stood in anticipation, arms spread on the counter, he looked up the hill at this stretch of twenty or thirty pebble-dashed houses and smiled. They were clean, tidy, the gardens in front of

him were hoed and manicured, filled with ordered greenery, each gate had been carefully closed and painted in colours to match the windows and doors, many of which were neatly two toned. Purple and lilac, dark and pale blue and one in striking yellow and black, the only one with wrought-iron gates. Butterflies jostled over flower beds, a blackbird listened to the lawn, a large tree was laden with clusters of flaming berries, there were house names and numbers and birdsong, a portrait of a perfect suburbia.

It was also an ant day. The winged masses were rising from a drain immediately in front of the van, a steaming fountain of glossy scales erupting into the hot afternoon sky and this geyser of insects shimmering there in a whorl of twinkling wings showed no sign of slowing up. There must have been millions and millions of them leaving their dirty womb, swarming over a broken blue eggshell and into the sky. How on earth could they all have grown to do this? What tonnage of sweet things had been stolen in how many tens of thousands of forays by the manic workers through the minuscule chasms of this neighbourhood? He played the chimes and still they rose, so hypnotically that his first customer arrived unnoticed. The 'ladybird boy' from last week.

But in an instant he was brushed aside by a soldier, an astronaut, a cowboy and an Indian, a Liverpool striker and two ballerinas. Assorted snot and the smell of fired caps, a few new plimsolls, they spent their pennies and sped away, their dirty little hands catching hundreds and thousands, tiny tongues licking orange, chocolate and blackcurrant drips from pinkening palms, running with stiff arms clenching their soggy cones, staining their dresses with dribbles and their smiles with cherryade, disappearing into the sunniest summers they'd ever have.

There was a birthday party at number seven. He watched them chasing themselves, hysterically happy, and then turned to find the boy had lingered. He was holding a crocodile. He was cradling the stuffed reptile as if it was alive and not the tattered and broken, sparsely scaled ruin that had been abused by a taxidermist years ago. There was no danger of a crocodile being proffered in exchange for an ice cream though; this was a prized possession. Nevertheless it was offered up and he took it. Its earhole was unusual and prominent, its teeth clean, white and needle-pointed, cotton wool was visible behind its glass eyes, its body was bloated and its tail disintegrating around a rusted twist of wire. It was pretty horrible. He handed it back down. A flaky scale lay on the counter and he pinched it up and reached through the hatch to push it into the boy's grateful palm.

'Do you want anything?' He gestured at the lolly pictures.

Without looking up, the boy shook his head.

'Have you got any money?'

He nodded and withdrew a coppery tinkle of coins from his pocket. And then he walked, not ran, off, cupping the scale, which was worth more than all the pennies pocket money could provide. He disappeared through the blue gate, head down, in love with his dead pet.

It was peaceful. The *Animal Magic* theme plinked around in the distance, two poodles peeked through the side gate of number eight and a spangled starling pitched and scoped the pavement for crumbs. He threw out some broken wafers and was away before the squawking started.

The boy listened to the noisy party across the road then trod the stairs centrally, opened and closed his bedroom door with his left

foot and placed the juvenile caiman – it was not a crocodile – reverentially on his chest of drawers. Then he sat in a preordained spot, his toes touching the dragons he'd drawn on the lino and from where his view of the reptile's mutilations were minimised. He studied it intensely, rocking his head imperceptibly to improve, with ample imagination, the idea that this withered fragment of worshipped wildlife was actually still alive.

Outside sparrows argued, the sun flooded over his wall's mishmash of creased maps and corner-less posters of dinosaurs, Daleks, Spitfires and the solar system. The TV was on downstairs but he didn't care. It was half-time in a Subbuteo match between Liverpool and Everton and he played both teams, it was twelve all. His games were always draws because he played each team until they scored irrespective of the rules of Association Football, a copy of which his father had bought him. Everton only had eight outfield players, the others having been painfully knelt upon. Repeated gluing had reduced them to blobby dwarves and thus imperfect, thus unacceptable and thus euthanised, banished to the battered and collapsed green box beneath the bed. Table football, played on the floor because they didn't have a table big enough for the baize pitch, was okay but it wasn't as good as animals. He turned to his windowsill menagerie, his jam jars, neatly lined up and gently roasting their inhabitants in soft afternoon light.

The cinnabar caterpillars that had trundled so frenetically in their exotic ochre and black stripes whilst annihilating fronds of smelly ragwort had been emulsified and remained only as a brown soup corrupting the bottom of the jar. The last two-legged tadpole, which had bravely outlived so many hundreds of its spawn fellows since March, was now struggling through a mat of

choking algae to desperately gulp for warm air. This year metamorphosis would be understood only from books, not witnessed in nature. A coiled bronze bangle gleamed, a tailless slow-worm, too heavily petted, perhaps too long confined. Fifteen minnows, a tortoiseshell butterfly, three male smooth newts and too many garden snails were already 'gone' and the worm jar was ominously still. However, a riot of glimmering life was exploding in the central Robinsons repository: between three and five hundred newly emerged queen ants were circling with a furious urge to meet and mate with the males who were somewhere outside, rising into the cooling sky, feeding screaming squadrons of happy swifts. These celibate spinsters were rapidly losing their wings, the glass base was already gilded with a fragile skin of golden tiles and the lumpy virgins were tumbling through the kaleidoscope of fractals with diminishing vigour. By morning they too would have all but expired, the last old maids just twitching before his next safari would set off to nonchalantly and excitedly replace them.

Glitterlight sparkled through the dancing canopy and lime-lit the compacted soil with a jigsaw of chasing patterns, swishing and mixing as his eyes chased them trying to find regularity, snatching spots and smudges that almost returned as the branches bounced and shade fell for a cloud-bound minute.

He waited, his knees tingling as the pins and needles sharpened, but he wasn't allowed to feel any pain, he must see the patchwork woven again to match the mind map he'd made. He must pitch his template against chaos and critically identify motifs and ornaments of stability, predictability. And so the sun shot a shard of light, the leafscape formed and for a sub-second the soft patches and shadows projected on the smooth path conformed with a

precise familiarity. Then he was done – it was measured, it had been essentially controlled.

He rolled over and straightened his bloodless legs, his cheek on the warm earth, the grass soft on his face, stripes of fuzzy green through which he peeped with a squeezed eye and tingling toes.

The vast savannah stretched away until it melded with a rising bank of darkness, glazing the middle distance . . . a lake, capturing a bright line of sky that lit the folded reeds and lilies and all the tangle that tumbled from its shores, flickering as rings rang out from the tickles of distant tiny things that twitched on its silver surface and fizzled in peppery swarms on the other side of the garden.

He was lying on a tablet of riches, his wilderness explored: he knew the plains, the forests, the canyons intimately and where all its life lived and hid, the boulders that covered the scaly caverns of woodlice, where quick twisty centipedes were shiny and soft beneath his fingers, the lovely bark where tiny specks of crimson ran and stained those fingers dead red, the corners where secret spiders stood motionless on their soft handkerchiefs and the lake, pool, baby bath, a muddy cradle in which many miracles swam.

On its banks he'd dip spoons for tadpoles and the twitching larvae of mosquitoes. They'd ziggle down in droves as the steel broke the surface and bent all the lines, then they'd relax their fear and drift slowly up, easier to scoop up and transfer to a saucer where against the white he could just see their eyes and bristles and snorkels. Others were fatter, like comma-shaped bogeys, and then there were the un-wettable rafts of eggs that stuck to his fingers or clung to the rim of his dish.

In the stinky sauce that smoked in whorls from the bottom

when he reached down to ransack the leaves there were fierce things with jaws that scissored as he squeezed them, with bulging eyes and robot bodies, creatures that sat still and then picked their way cautiously on legs that appeared from nowhere.

There were maggots with long tube noses, hard tear-dropped bugs that flicked rapidly backwards and stabbed him when he grasped them tightly in his fist as they tried to flee into the tussocks he'd submerged to build a swamp at one end of the oasis. Wasps drank, newts gulped, skaters skidded ... everything was new, everything needed knowing.

The Pet Shop

August 1966

SHE SLID LAST night's whisky glass across her dressing table and tipped the newspaper off her stool. *The Sound of Music* was showing at the ABC again. It was always on, either that or *Dr Zhivago*. Before he'd slammed the door her husband had bellowed from the kitchen that he wanted to see *The Blue Max* at the Classic, a scruffy little place on the high street that was small, smoky and normally ran saucy films. The trailer had been full of old war planes and of equal appeal to him ... that woman.

She'd go, of course, but wished it wasn't 'his' Saturday night, then she could beg him to take her to the Atherley to see *Born Free* again. He'd watched it with her the first time and made a pretty poor job of pretending to have enjoyed it. Virginia McKenna was no Ursula Andress. It hadn't helped that he'd scraped a line of red paint from the side of his precious Jaguar on the way out of the car

park, flown into a furious mood and sulked for a week as a result. It was silly but this accident had completely coloured his take on the film so nothing was going to compel him to go again. There was little point in asking, it would only spark a row and there were plenty of those.

She'd loved the lions, the cubs were so sweet and the scene at the end where Elsa remembers the Adamsons and comes back with her own litter had made her cry both times she'd seen it. A couple of years ago they'd had a pair of three-month-old young lions in the shop, just for a day and a night. She had been so excited, they were irresistible, she hadn't been able to leave them alone, stuffing them with milk until their mauve bellies bloated and they fell into a fidgety slumber on her lap. There were some photographs but they all showed the poor little mites' bald necks and backs, which looked awful and had cost her dearly when the buyer knocked her down supposing they were seriously ill. And although it was ridiculous she so wanted to go to Africa, the space, the animals, she'd stand in her shop looking out onto the dreary forecourt, with its dripping hutches and kennels, and dream of a safari, imagining she was Joy, jumping from a Land Rover, rescuing orphaned cubs, calves and chicks. She drained the dregs of the Scotch, which tasted of cigarettes.

Jesus, Viet-bloody-nam, would they ever stop talking about it? It was either that or this week the papers had been full of those poor dead policemen. She leaned back, seized the wireless dial and twisted it to find some music; snatches of the Ike and Tina quivered and faded under the chirps and whoops and when she centred the red line in the prescribed spot the monotonous 'la la la' of 'Yellow Submarine' started up. Christ, they'd been playing it non-stop on that station, non-stop.

Facing the mirror she found herself frowning but had to relax her face to arch her eyebrows; the mascara was still thick from last night and so was the powder. She drew on the lines and turned from side to side to check them, glanced at the clock, huffed, and furiously backcombed her bleached hair into a balloon of fluffy gold. Breathe in, beige polyester slacks, C&A, heeled sandals, a gold charm bracelet and hooped earrings; she sat back and plumped up her breasts, eat your heart out Ursula.

The Broadway was still quiet as she shook the sticky door open, tinkling the bell. Jackie was knelt sweeping out a cage whilst alongside her a kitten sat idly wasting its moment of freedom and Jimmy was craning on tiptoe over one of the aquaria at the back, the electric green weed illuminating his concentration, tetras flashing over his specs. The thick, the musty, rabbit, papery smell of the shop instantly suffocated her generous bouquet of Guerlain. She left the door ajar, tickled the sulphur chest of Pirate the parrot, whose one dry white eye winked reluctantly, and edged into the space behind the till, careful not to stub her toes and spoil the fresh coral polish.

Picking up a dried seahorse that had fallen from an overloaded bowl on the counter, she let out a Saturday sigh. She dropped the fish back on the pile and it slipped off and rattled, a curious crust of ridges and spines winding into a spiralled tail, nice to touch. This was the shop's busiest day and the weather was going to be nice so there'd be plenty of kids gawping into cages and hutches wishing that they could get a parrot to go with their budgie, a chinchilla instead of a hamster, a python to eat their sister.

He'd be there, the boy with the dad in the shirt and tie who wandered uncomfortably around, dipping into his thick stack

of library books whilst his son crouched or climbed to peer into every corner, studying each creature so, so seriously. The kid never smiled but came every week, and stayed at least an hour before the bloke nodded at him, politely thanked her, handed him back his own pile of books and then ushered him out.

He'd meticulously examine all her stock but she could tell he wasn't particularly interested in the mammals, except the fruit bats, nor the birds or fish. It was the reptiles that he liked best and his staring contests with the resident spectacled caiman had become a weekly source of amusement for the staff. He'd stand fixated with his nose locked about six inches from the tank whilst the static croc floated, dispassionately returning his gaze through the vertical split in its golden filigreed eye.

Last week he'd bought another seahorse. She held up the spilled one and studied its horsey head with its funny little snout and then carefully positioned it back on top of the tangle in the bowl. As she moved her hand away it toppled out again so she flicked it into the bin as Jimmy told her that five more of the tortoises had died.

The Mouse

September 1966

THE PREDATORY DINOSAUR stood radiating menace over the scarred patina of the ancient desk and defined the only true purpose for plasticine in 1966. As I rotated it clockwise to check its form was as perfect as my five-year-old fingers could fashion, I sneaked a glance leftwards. Karen Harris had made a snake. It looked as if it had been feasting on bowling balls and then been run over by my

dad's Ford Anglia. It was ugly but it was, I supposed, at least meant to be a reptile.

It was my first day at school. True to my mother's habit I was late, last to arrive at the red brick Victorian infants where years before my father had crouched doodling doodlebugs whilst they exploded outside. All the other children were already engrossed in shy silence, busy under the aged and benign Miss Beer's delighted grin, fumbling things from modelling clay. Her granny fingers struggled, but tore me a chunk from a huge bolus, handed it to me and told me to sit down and make something, whatever I liked, and what I liked more than anything in my whole wide world was *Tyrannosaurus. rex.*

My fifteen-centimetre-high dinosaur was shaped after obsessive scrutiny of all the illustrations in my own frayed collection of encyclopaedias, in comics, on tea-cards and the marvellous shelf-fuls of books in my hall of learning – Portswood Library, to which I was happily led every Saturday afternoon without fail. Here I would sneak out of the 'childrens' and into the 'reference' section, lower the heavy tomes silently onto the smooth honey-coloured tables and head straight for 'T', 'T-y', 'T-y-r', and if I got no joy, then back to 'D', 'Di' and 'Dino' where my beloved monster vied for page space with *Brontosaurus*, *Stegosaurus* and *Triceratops*.

There was a satisfying degree of consistency in *T. rex*'s variously portrayed basic anatomies, its poise and pose, but precious little in its detail and this really annoyed me. Sometimes it was green, sometimes brown, grey ... it had round, slit or frowning eyes, sometimes it had a crest running down its spine, in other representations it was smooth. How was I supposed to accurately sculpt the tyrant-lizard king out of plasticine if I didn't know precisely what it looked like? What on earth were all these fossil experts and artists up to?

After consideration and some fiddly scissor work to add jaws, teeth, claws, eyes, and to very precisely cut two fingers into the sadly drooping forelimbs of my model, I was moderately satisfied. It wasn't my best effort, not as lizardy as the one sat at home on my windowsill; that was all green, this was a horrid blend of marbled tones, some idiot having mixed all the colours together so the resultant coagulate was mainly orange. Clearly *T. rex* was not orange.

As instructed I positioned my dinosaur delicately on a table beneath the classroom's tall arched windows amongst a terrible rabble of malformed and grotesque plasticine blobs. Some of the kids seemed to have made amoebae, others melted cars and planes and one fool had even tried to build a spider. 'You can't make arachnids out of plasticine,' I thought, 'they have stiff legs, that's a job for Meccano.' I grudgingly realised that Karen Harris's mump-ridden mamba actually wasn't so bad after all.

When I returned the next morning all of the things we had made had gone. A large ball of plasticine balanced on the front of Miss Beer's desk. Miss Beer had murdered my *T. rex*. School didn't get off to a good start.

The day we were all allowed to bring our pets into the classroom was going to be special. It was a nice sunny morning and Batty my black mouse had been spruced up for the occasion. He was in his new second-hand plastic cage, it was mustard coloured, had the mandatory wheel and sleeping chamber but had previously been a torture chamber for my cousin's late hamster. Despite my best efforts to revitalise it the wire remained rusty in places but at least it was more secure than the wooden enclosure my father had made ... and Batty had instantly, and repeatedly, chewed his way out of.

Sadly the species list for the class was a meagre four: rabbit, hamster, guinea pig and . . . one domesticated house mouse, Batty. They all ignored him, they cooed over the 'bunnies' and those chubby fat-faced tailless things whose eyes bulged when you squeezed them a bit, and queued to offer carrot and cabbage to those cow-licked multicoloured freaks with scratchy claws, but not one of the kids wanted to see, let alone hold, my mouse.

By mid-afternoon the teacher finally caught sight of the lonely boy whispering into his mouse cage in the corner and gingerly agreed to let the rodent walk onto her hand in front of the class. Batty promptly pissed and then pooped three perfect wet little pellets, the classroom erupted with a huge collective 'urrgh' and then a frenzy of giggling, she practically threw him back in his cage and then made a big deal about washing her hands. With soap. Then we were all meant to wash our hands, with soap, but I didn't and no one noticed.

With the mouse cage on my lap and Batty quivering in his favourite toilet roll tube I sat idly waiting for my tardy mother, wishing I had a friendly polar bear who would gobble up all their useless pets. I carried him up the hill, all the while tightly hugging the cage lest he attempt another escape, and as a treat was allowed to have him in my room until bedtime. Then it was judged that my obsessive desire to sit and stare at him might prevent me from sleeping so he was despatched to the dank seclusion of the down-stairs toilet.

In spite, I lay listening to the incessant trundling squeaks that he wrung from his furious nocturnal marathons until my parents stopped creaking and were asleep. Then I crept down and using my father's sacred torch shone a milky beam through the door to spy on my remarkably athletic companion. He was relentless,

he'd pause to sniff the air, whisking with a web of glassy hairs rooted behind his neat pink nose, and then run, run, run, his tiny feet too quick to see, his tail curved up behind him, all to generate a monotonous symphony of metallic squeals – no doubt also a contributory factor in his nightly solitary confinement.

Batty was the most important thing in my life, but in truth, I didn't really want a mouse; as the name suggests what I really wanted was a bat. I had spent hours pacing the garden staring skyward, hoping to glimpse one, had snuck out of the gate and crept down the road to be closer to a massive tree where owls sometimes hooted but these enigmatic creatures only ever fluttered over the pages of my *Ladybird Book of British Wild Animals*. On page eight it asserted that noctules, or great bats, 'come out to hunt just before sunset' and 'you may be lucky enough to see them in spring and summer' – sadly not in Midanbury.

Eventually, after exploring a number of what I decreed were definitely 'batish' locations – churches, an old school and our loft, which we clambered into several times a week – my father took me camping in the New Forest. We pitched the tent in woodland beside a stream and as it got dark peered over the bank. And then, as he stroked the searchlight slowly back and forth, we spotted some real live bats! It was amazing. I was allowed a go with the torch too, and one of the tiny superfast things flickered just in front of my face. I nearly burst, it was the best thing ever and it made me want one even more.

I had owned a number of floppy 'Made in Hong Kong' bats, which wobbled on fragile cords of shredded elastic and whose rubbery smell was more enjoyable than my vain attempts to get them to look in any way realistic. These crude black blobs were

a regular purchase from Portswood petshop, my favourite place on earth and site of a weekly pilgrimage when library duties were done.

It was a short walk down the busy Broadway, if I wasn't dragged into boring Woolworths or dingy Hills the toy shop, which was jammed with too many prams and bikes, past the very dull jeweller's and the wedding dress boutique where my mother would inevitably pause to gaze wistfully at the display and across from Andor Arts where on rare occasions I would accompany her to buy a posh ornament for some luckless relative's birthday. This emporium was carelessly cluttered with a polished fauna of precisely nothing interesting, ever, despite the fact that it was all obviously 'very dear'. Thus I was strictly and repeatedly reminded that I was not allowed to touch anything, because if a vase, bowl, figurine, candelabra or any other gilded trophy were to tumble I'd have to pay for it forever out of my 'pocket money'. Which I didn't even get. In all the years of trailing my quietly 'oohing' and 'ahhing' window-shopping mother round this minefield of gaudy overpriced bric-a-brac I never once saw anything there I wanted to own myself. But across the road, past Alec Bennett Motors, I could have spent everything I'd ever earn, ever.

Portswood Pets and Aquaria had the usual fare: puppies, kittens, the rabbits and rodents, goldfish, budgies, hundreds of terrapins and tortoises, but they had real animals too. Pirate the blue and gold macaw was 'not for sale' but sulphur crested cockatoos were, mynah birds were, and so were flights full of amazing exotics which I would try to identify by matching their biro-scrawled name to the skittish explosions of feathers that would nervously erupt when I peeped into their cramped cages. Their wings whirred like shuffled cards, their beady eyes

flashed brilliant fear, the perches crowded with fluxing flocks of Gouldian finches, Java sparrows and pin-tailed whydahs left me awestruck.

But even better than the birds were the tropical fish at the back. These ‘ridiculously expensive’ things, as my dad called them, made my colouring sets look wholly inadequate; in their verdant pools of waving weed they sparked parts of the spectra I’d never seen, they zipped out of the shadows and flashed brand new colours. They were entrancing and standing in the muggy, damp, bubbling room was tantalising, it was a portal into another world where all the life swam and couldn’t be touched, juggled or jostled by my all too eager hands.

Hung like earrings on ribbons of swaying green, coiled and curled, there were once living seahorses and I nearly burst! These peculiar fish ranked alongside bats, otters and snakes, they were ultra special. But they only had them on one occasion and I wondered if they had died because at the front of the shop, by the till, they sold dried starfish and seahorses. And these fragile and easily lost curios were my must-haves or there’d be serious repercussions at home. Just like the plastic bats, desiccated marine life was a necessary zoological sedative to keep those long hours between Saturdays bearable for my parents, so my father always gave me half a crown for a new seahorse.

But even the kaleidoscopic splendour of the tropical fish couldn’t match the magnetic draw that pulled me to my knees to gaze into the rows of grubby glass tanks that contained ... reptiles! Fat and wrinkled pythons, the peeling tails of boa constrictors and, amongst a fluctuating show of lizards, geckos and skinks, fabulous green iguanas – and unbelievably they had real chameleons too! I’d stand entranced as these jungle gems

wobbled through their foliage, eyes going everywhere, just dying to see them change colour or spit out their famously long tongues. They did neither but it was here that my craving became insatiable because the penultimately most desirable pet in the shop was the crocodile.

Yes, in a long thin tank near the counter they had a caiman just like my stuffed one. It lay there, quite motionless in a thick green soup, staring with its glistening, exquisitely veined eyes, its little white teeth so close on the other side of the misty glass. It was beautiful, a pocket dinosaur beyond my non-existent pocket money and my parents' purse. I begged and begged for that creature but not nearly as much as I pleaded to own the greatest animal they ever had for sale in this repository of natural wonders.

Over the years Portswood Pets had bushbabies, chinchillas, chipmunks and even small monkeys – and allegedly once upon a time, lions. None of these came close, because on one fateful and unforgettable rainy afternoon, with my sister in the pushchair and my mum moaning about having to wait outside, I stepped in and there, in a parrot cage, hanging, twisting, twitching, licking with sherbet-pink tongues were two fruit bats. Ahhh! How my father's heart must have sunk when he saw them; I'm surprised he didn't break down and weep because in that instant he would have known that for the foreseeable future his life would become about as unbearable as it's feasibly possible for a mono-minded compulsive child to make it. His son didn't want the grand wooden boxed set of Meccano, the Action Man deep-sea diving outfit, the complete array of Thunderbirds toys, Scalextric or a brand new bike ... he wanted a bat. And he wanted that bat very, very badly.

The Bird

Sunday 1 June 1975

UNFALLING, THE BIRD stands chopping air, fluttering and then rolling down smooth, slipping and then sliding away to ring a curve across the storm until it pitches at its apex and begins to dance with the wind, its plumes constantly shaken, folding and flicking to steer it still and . . . balance broken it tumbles and steadies with a twist of grey – cloud-licked and clean, now measuring the weight of the sky again. Then a drop, deckling wings furling – waiting, rich brown back and freckled front – watching, and then the ground quickly surges up and swallows it into the scrolling grass, sucks it down in a greedy rush. And it's stopped, nothing happens now.

Wind licks little furies on the meadow and tousles the willows' petticoats, which flounce into a fit of wild fretting. The evening is set to argue, it's begging for thunder as it cleaves the sun through the groaning barricade of carcassed elms and the drenched field in which the boy lies sour around his torn plastic shoes. But he is unshivering, he needs to see what happens next or all his sodden trudging will have been a waste of Wednesday . . . the bird still in hiding. For him there is no time here, nothing measured, nothing that passes, for him nothing is felt except his indestructible focus. His world is small and shrinking fast and this leaves him alone in the fields of fourteen, tiny in a giant space, safer in himself than in anything of theirs.

And it's up, just there, low, burdened and loping away through the cloak of drizzle. He jumps and runs, runs stumbling and

smashes through the spiny hedge, always with his eyes on the bird, it goes up, it's black now, not so pretty, then it twists to a sliver and folds, flaps past the trees where the cows are puddling mud and then higher, it circles tight and once and through the hassle of his panting and the wash of rain he hears a faint whinnying before it vanishes.

It's prematurely dark by the time he slips the elastic bands over his feet and folds his trousers neatly back, jerks his bike around, his jacket loaded with wet and the stale smell of him and the soft scent of earth. He pauses to pull some thorns and licks watery blood from a scratch that is still bleeding when he kicks open the garage door, crashes his racer into the blackness and smells his dead dinner beneath the grill. Friday, he thinks, Friday... his hand on the door, his mum shouting up the stairs, his sister ignoring her, his dad reading about the referendum, ignoring both of them.

The Farmer

June 1975

THE FARMER AT West Horton lopes out watching the mugs slopping tea, scalding his muddy palm, dodging between the dazzling sunlit sheets that his mother stands pegging to a droop of lines. Unhitching a rose-snagged corner, he dirties it and frowns. The tidy old woman takes the tea and crouches to place it by the basket; she smiles, draws curtains of grey hair behind her ears and continues to hang up the washing. He glances out over the valley and sees a tiny figure moving across the jigsaw of meadows by the railway.

From the edge of the garden he peers, slurps his bitter brew and nods. It's the boy who comes looking for birds. He'd been at the door before eight this morning but he'd ignored it; he'd given him permission to go down there but whenever he came, which was several times a week now, he always knocked on the big front door anyway. He'd answer it sometimes, nod and say, 'Fine. That's fine, yes, go, you're welcome.'

Occasionally after this reiterated exchange the boy would suddenly start to tell him about some bird or other. He'd talk absurdly fast, obliviously tripping through his words, always looking down at the step, he'd tell the mat about something that totally switched him on, he'd lurch from timid and backward to a barely contained mania, rambling too quickly, excitedly crashing through a dialogue that gave no room for conversation and then, inevitably, punctuate this cascade of unsolicited enthusiasm with a question. He'd finally glance at him to ask if he'd seen a 'whatever-it-was'. Which he hadn't because he knew nothing at all about birds.

A clod of shit fell from his crusted boot, so he dragged his instep over the rocky edge of the rose garden, drained his cup, flicked away the sludge and then crouched to push the dung around the wizened stems of the flowers. His mother's shadow eclipsed the soil and he knew exactly what was coming.

'Lavington,' she wheezed, 'I won't be able to do this forever.'

The washing. She meant the washing. The housework, the cleaning, the wife's work, the non-existent wife's work. The farmer's wife who wasn't there. He stood up. The kid had stopped by the three big trees on the edge of his herd of curious Friesian heifers, which were crowded round the gate in the bluish wash of mid-morning shade. He stropped his hands over his checked shirt, folded back his tattered cuffs and clipped his thumbs onto

his hips. A radio dribbled the Osmonds over the lawn and the distant cattle bucked and jostled, encircling the figure until he disappeared. He wasn't going all the way down there. He screwed up his eyes; it was a long way off. Thankfully the boy reappeared, silently clapping his hands at the playful crowd, and then flipped over the gate and out of sight behind a plait of hedgerows, still foaming with suds of browning blossom. He shook his head, turned and limped off to the yard. Kestrel, that was it, the bird he was always on about. Kestrels.

The Bird

Friday 6 June 1975

'I FOUND IT!'

Blue biro. I'd tried so hard to inscribe it in my very best curly handwriting but the quality of my calligraphy decayed rapidly and after seven short careful lines impatient delirium had annotated the remainder of the entry and I'd produced a page of inappropriate scrawl. I sat up and breathed and, mildly calmed, gave the second whole page over to a neatly drawn map of a tiny patch of Hampshire. It showed individual trees and there was a scale and a legend that illustrated the symbols for fencing, a bog and a wet ditch, and at its centre a great ballooning oak labelled 'nest-tree'.

But this was all a waste of time, a formulaic exercise, because I knew I'd never ever need to be prompted by this diary at all, I would remember the moment I found that nest in unflinching detail forever. That surge of raw ecstasy as the male Kestrel flew into view

and his mate squeezed out of her cubbyhole had made me physically shake. And that burst of joy had only slowly transformed into an enormously triumphant and vain crown of satisfaction swollen by the smug knowledge that all my hours of cold wet searching that spring had paid off.

But then I had been optimistic that Friday 6 June 1975 would be 'the day' based on the observations made last week when I'd tracked the hunting male close to that particular spot. Nevertheless, I'd still been curled amongst a prickly posy of thistles, swooning in the bouquet of trampled hay and warm sweet dung for three hours before he'd returned, and there hadn't been a peep or a glimpse of the female. She too had been lying low, brooding her six grey downy young in an old crows' nest, shielded by a thick veil of ivy about thirty feet up in the oak. But once I'd found it all I really needed to know was could I get up to it?

I'd had a powerful urge to sprint over and start to clamber up but from somewhere I'd summoned some control and dutifully remained hidden in the shadow of the hawthorn, fidgeting on a spotty bed of its mouldering confetti. As the morning warmed, I'd gazed unblinking at the bushes opposite, bunched across my horizon like a row of freshly permed heads in a cinema, waiting, aching for the next round of Kestrel action.

Three noisy exchanges had marked the arrival of food, the male performing a delightful quivering flight and soliciting the female from the nest with a shrill call before she disappeared to feed the invisible but now audible chicks. Afterwards she'd swooped down onto a fence post to preen and taken a bath in a shallow ditch that ran beneath her favoured perch. I'd perversely fantasised that this final leg of my quest would take all day but it was only eleven o'clock when it had all happened so I'd pried open my Tupperware

box and picked apart a Wall's steak and kidney pie, nibbled a hard green apple and sucked a Mars bar as slowly as possible. This stalling couldn't work for long so I'd packed the rubbish, my binoculars and field guide into my A.R.P bag and dodged the dung-mines as I hurried across the pasture to the base of the tree.

I had made that climb in my daydreams a hundred times, feared the difficulty of the ascent, the sheer height and precarious location of a nest set in the flimsy sky-scraping branches of a giant tree. It would be an eyrie, maybe ropes would be required and obviously I'd be alone as secrecy would be imperative, no one else on earth could ever know the location of such a treasure. I had envisioned it as a rite of passage but although I had written that it was 'quite a hard climb on a thin branch', it wasn't, I'd exaggerated. I had to shin up a bough wrapped with thick ivy with no handholds for about twelve feet but that was easy.

My knees clamped painfully around the branch, my filthy grazed fingers wiped thick brown dust from my sweaty face and then reached forward to part the ivy. I'd hesitated, I could smell them before I could see them, a dry, slightly meaty, warm scent, then I hoicked myself up and leaned forward spitting out a twig. Bright-eyed, blue-eyed, with smoky coats of fluff, they flailed featherless wings and hobbled on fresh custard-yellow legs, their taloned toes tightly fisted. Six, precariously ringing the far side of their stinky platform with gaping mouths, fixing me with terrified stares. They rocked and shuffled, I rested still, not breathing, dizzy after my rapid scramble to their scruffy fortress. I gasped – they flinched, they scowled – I smiled, and gently backed down. They were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen and one of them would be mine. I was possessed.

September 2003

He'd not bothered to disguise his fear. He had pinned himself into the back of the chair as if it was teetering high above the ground, his blue eyes fixed on something atrocious, staring downwards in shocked confusion.

'What did you do?'

After a very long pause he sighed. Then following a deep breath and another sigh he stated quietly, 'I counted them.'

She was conscious not to move, she kept her hands together, her arms folded. She was physically comfortable. Relaxed, composed. But she was pin-sharp now, concentrating on concentrating. Thinking about timing, breathing. She deliberately lowered her eyes to the floor and uncrossed and re-crossed her ankles.

A minute passed. And another.

'How many were there?' she asked gently, but matter-of-factly.

He replied instantly as he always did if the question was objective.

'Thirty-nine.'

She pursed her lips, nodded, and pondered his rationale. He was not rash, he was obsessively self-controlling, but he had also presented a paradoxical collusion of the considered and the recklessly unpredictable. But she already suspected his unpredictable had always been carefully deliberated. So, he would have likely Googled the drug's name and researched its efficacy, he would

have calculated the collective potential at his disposal and undoubtedly the only reason he was sat here now was because there had not been enough tablets in the jar.