1

# Wildcats and wilderness

The Scottish wildcat isn't just any old cat, it's special – no, way more than special. It's unique, and unique in so many different ways, bad and good. It's Britain's most endangered mammal – that's bad, capital BAD. And it's wild, *wild*, WILD, with its own marque of spitting, feline wildness – that's far beyond good, it's brilliant.

From the sort of glimpse you might be lucky enough to get in your headlights, a wildcat can look a bit like an oversize farm tabby, but that's where the resemblance ends and the conflict lies. It's the black that defines both the wildcat's fur and its sombre northern climate, an aggressive camouflage that breaks up its outline into bands of shadow exactly as a tiger's stripes do, but without the perpetual sunlight shafting through jungle. Its bushy club tail with a dense black tip has four to six clear black rings; its fur is of dulled zinc with vertical sooty stripes – stripes that also run up and outwards from its burning, emerald eyes. It hunts at dawn and dusk, retiring bandit-like to its lair to lie low throughout the day. A stealthily prowling, silent, green-eyed arch-predator of the dark and dripping Highland woods, it is reputedly untamable, a top carnivore. Ferocious. A snarling, hissing, spitting demon of a cat with murder etched into its soul.

The trouble is that we humans have been introducing domestic cats into wildcat habitat for centuries. Wildcat toms

cannot resist domestic pussy, and vice versa. The evolutionary lineage of both is too close and the hybrid progeny of such unseen nocturnal pairings are fertile. Invisibly their genes blend and nowadays many hybrids stalk the Highland woods. By their own promiscuity our precious wildcats are genetically polluting themselves into extinction, a situation only humans can resolve.

In 2012 we at the field studies centre joined forces with Scottish Wildcat Action to implement their optimistic-sounding 'Conservation Action Plan' to try to save the last few remaining wildcats in the Highlands (*Felis silvestris grampia* – cat of the Grampian woods), part of which would be captive breeding for release into carefully monitored, prime quality habitat. That was the bit that interested us: the breeding and release of sexually mature kittens to bolster whatever remains of the wildcat population still out there. If there is any. We don't know – nobody does. We hope there might be a few left in the remoter mountain reaches of our local glens.

The Scottish wildcat is the very essence of wildness and wild places, and, hope or no hope, it's ours. It badly needs a marketing manager. Throughout recent history our wildcats have been present the length and breadth of Scotland, a top predator in some of the most rugged and wild landscapes in the UK, perfect for a super-cat. If your average domestic tabby is a Ford, our wildcat is a Ferrari. They call it the Highland tiger: bigger, stronger, meaner, sleeker, stealthier . . . and, like poor old Shere Khan, the tiger in the *Jungle Book*, it's in serious trouble because of us and the way we've always treated land as a resource without much thought for wildlife: there for exploiting and to hell with the consequences. It's our fault – our ignorance, our stupidity, our negligence, our selfishness, our greed. That's bad, very

bad. We could do much better if we put our minds to it – if *only* we would put our minds to it. We could, you know: humans don't have to behave like mindless vandals. We have the wit and the ways; it's the *will* that snarls us up. We could stop the rot and reverse the destructive trend for most wildlife if only we could focus minds. The wildcat is precious. We must not lose it.

It seems to have taken forever to get some official conservation action, but it has happened at last. We pray it's not too late. The whole bureaucratic machinery of government recently lumbered into action. The National Lottery stumped up. Money shouts and has claws. Suddenly there were press releases, websites, blogs, tweets, posts – all that social media guff buzzed around the world before you could say kitty. We held meetings, published plans to neuter or remove feral domestic cats and hybrids, created research and monitoring jobs, consulted everyone except God and the cats themselves. We were beginning to feel a bit smug – dangerously smug. After two years and twenty meetings we hadn't saved a single wildcat. So I took myself off to Spain to learn about their highly successful captive breeding and release project for the Iberian lynx – just what we were trying to achieve with the wildcats at home.

I met up with the Spanish biologists near Seville. We all spoke the same language of nature conservation, if not in quite the same tongue. Spanish wildcats are slightly smaller than ours, the same species without the *grampia*. From the illustrations and photos, theirs – *gato montes* – have a paler pelage to reflect the higher levels of sunlight and make the black stripes look blacker, but they are otherwise identical.

They've suffered the same old problems: loss of habitat to industrial agriculture and forestry, persecution by gamekeepers and hunters, hybridisation with domestic and feral

cats, and road kill . . . all the familiar insults we've thrown at ours. We think we're down to the last few hundred animals in the Highlands, and it's pretty doubtful whether any of those are pure wildcats. The Spanish don't seem to have much of a clue about their *gato*, but they're doing great things for their lynx.

So I headed for Coto Doñana National Park, 1,300 square miles of coastal dunes and salt marsh, *Las Marismas*, and semi-natural pine forest stretching from just south of Seville down to the Portuguese border, the Gulf of Cadiz foaming at its fringes and one of the last refuges of Europe's most endangered cat, the deliciously spotted Iberian lynx. I longed to see one in the wild; a slim chance, but one I wanted to try. I would not see a lynx, but I was to discover much more about myself.

I knew a bit about Doñana. Memories came lancing through. I'd been there once before – back in . . . was it *'65* or *'66*? – when my parents had stayed at the grandiose former hunting lodge Palacio Doñana, a large, ornate, whitewashed mansion, back then a stylish hostel for intrepid visitors. My father had rushed back to London on business and left my mother there for a few days. She'd loved it and urged me to join her. There were good reasons for always wanting to please my mother.

A tantalisingly brief visit all those years ago, just one night – supper and a schooner of dark amontillado together in the Palacio, her silvery laugh, a gentle totter out into the glove-soft moonlight – all her fragile health could cope with. The heady perfume of night-scented jasmine, *dama de noche*, wrapping us round, then back to the fireside in the echoing, whitewashed salon, olive logs crackling like pistol fire till bedtime. In the morning we were off again, driving away. A toe dipped in, just that and no more. I had always hoped

to make it back one day. Now, almost fifty years later, I was there again.

I turned off the main road and bumped down a sandy track. To my left the tidal marshes and rippling reed-beds stretched away toward the Guadalquivir river. Then, a mile or two later, wholly unexpectedly, and without any announcement, the imposing edifice of the Palacio loomed up in front of me like a mirage, tucked into the edge of the forest, its compound enclosed by a perimeter wall of startling white. 'Oh my God! I've been here.' I called out, forgetting that there was nobody to hear me. 'That's it! That's where my parents stayed yonks ago.'

It had been a grand hunting lodge like many that were built in the Highlands of Scotland at the height of the Victorian sporting era, although this was considerably older. The Duchess of Alba had entertained Francisco Goya there in the eighteenth century and it had harboured many other dignitaries, including General Franco, to hunt deer and wild boar. So had Lord Alanbrooke, the British Field Marshal and Second World War Chief of Allied Staff who'd had a stormy relationship with Winston Churchill but still managed to be powerfully influential over the Allied victory.

When Alanbrooke rented the Palacio in 1958, he and his wife had hosted a natural history expedition led by the founding triumvirate of what would later become the World Wildlife Fund: Guy Mountfort, Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson, three towering grandees of the embryonic nature conservation movement. With characteristic brimming enthusiasm, my mother had bought me a copy of Mountfort's splendid book, *Portrait of a Wilderness – The Story of the Coto Doñana Expeditions*, and I had spent many hours poring over the black and white photographs. I still treasure it today, her

fluid handwriting in the flyleaf, 'I hope you can join expeditions like this one day.'

Memory billowed in – jaw flexing and a lump forming in my throat. Yes, it was here, on the edge of these marshes. That was the building; I'd stayed here in the '60s, spent a night with her here. Then, just then, trapped by that implausible cocktail of circumstance and emotions, my abstract notion came flooding back in.

I suddenly saw that it had taken me most of a lifetime properly to understand that from early childhood every encounter with nature, each little glimpse of truth and comprehension of the natural world, had braided together to make me what I am. From some formative vital spark I had been hoarding images of birds and mammals, of reptiles and insects, of plants and soils and landscape and of their very essence, the wildness that defines them all, until at some consciously unordained past moment they had silently taken me over and modelled me into the creature I have become. Over the decades of working with nature everything had coalesced into a deeply personal *raison d'être* – yes, I suppose I mean a vocation. It was an extraordinary sense of destiny, mildly unsettling, and demanding questions I could not at that moment answer. But why? How did it happen? Was it one principal influence, or several flowing together like mountain streams? When, exactly, did it start? And just who or what could have been responsible?

In those few minutes my world had shifted. That notion – that misty, blurry, hovering thing I had been ducking for years – was suddenly as crisply defined as a bright mountain peak when the clouds part. My brain was fizzing. I needed to reconnect with that last haunting image of my mother.

Was it her unflagging love and encouragement that had been the determining force? The rare chance of being

together in that wild and beautiful place, the squeezed hand, the gift of a book? Is that what had been happening all along? Had her fortitude and zest for life been the moving force throughout my childhood? Or was it the unintended consequence of her ghastly, life-shortening illness that had somehow funnelled me into what I am? My head was spinning. Memories and images crowded in, colliding, swamping each other and leaving me light-headed, floating in an emotional limbo. Did she spark a flame that night in the Palacio? Did it spin me off into a dizzying parallel universe, from which I would never fully return? I needed to capture that moment again and follow its lead.

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There are thought to be no wildcats left in Doñana, but there is a stable population of around fifty Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), a mesmerisingly beautiful, medium-sized spotted cat with ear tufts and a bob tail, closely related to the longer-legged Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), the one that used to roam Scotland 750 to 1,000 years ago and that many would now like to see reintroduced. The park authority works closely with a lynx captive breeding complex on its western boundary, a shining conservation success: by the time I visited, sixty-nine radio-tagged lynx had been released into good habitat since the project started eleven years ago. Those lynx are out there and breeding. That's exactly where we would like to be with the Scottish wildcat.

The welcome by Dr Antonio Rivas bowled me off my feet, his enthusiasm mirrored and endorsed by his entire team. Two days later I came away elated, rejoicing that nature conservation held such splendid people at its noble heart. I was exhilarated but tired, very tired. I turned in early.

In my hotel room I re-read my notes, added a few more and climbed into bed. I sat tapping into my laptop. Suddenly my eyes weren't focusing, lids leaden, sleep rolling in like a fog. I jerked awake, once, twice, three times . . . just catching the laptop before it slid to the floor. I gave in. In free fall – altogether out of it.

Much later, at an unlogged moment in the small hours, I surfaced sufficiently to dream vividly. I was back in the Palacio, aged nineteen, with my mother. Not just vividly, I was there. It was as real as a dream could possibly be. I caught her perfume on the sultry air, heard her voice and felt her arm in mine.

The notion I had harboured for ages was that a very long time ago some accident of fate had made me want to be a naturalist – no, not want, *NEED* to be a naturalist, a person wholly engaged with nature, philosophically, emotionally, practically and professionally. Now, after a long career in nature conservation, I needed to look back and tie down influences, analyse roots and causes, and above all work out just who and what had spun the wheel, handed me the potion, spiralled me into being what I am and have been for more than fifty years.

My mother was no naturalist. She had no scientific training at all, very little knowledge beyond what she had read, and even less opportunity to spend time in the wilds anywhere. My parents came to Spain every year for her health – British winters were always bad for her. They had built a home here, an eyrie high above the ancient Roman and Moorish fishing village of Fuingerola, long before it became a tawdry tourist resort. That one brief expedition to Coto Doñana was an exception, but one she loved.

The book she gave me, Guy Mountfort's natural history classic with its wild boar, fallow deer, lynxes, flamingos and

imperial eagles, had sparked a new sense of purpose. I don't believe that the idea of her son becoming a naturalist had ever entered her head – the profession barely existed in the 1960s. No, I'm sure she only saw it as an uplifting hobby, a worthwhile pastime; but that was it, that was the moment the idea of participating in such an expedition and perhaps one day even mounting one myself had fired me with a restless, vaulting ambition.

In that time-eliding dream she was beside me, eyes flashing, smiling, laughing, encouraging – 'Why don't you stay here for a few days and try to see some of the wildlife?' In a burst of memory as bright and shining as leaves after summer rain, I saw her chatting to the locals, old women swathed in black sitting in the afternoon sun outside their whitewashed cottages, and the little children playing in the dusty street. There she was; in self-taught fluent Spanish she was embracing the local people she so loved – '*¿Son estas sus nietos?*' – and I watched her throw back her head with a little flick of her hair as she always did when laughter bubbled out of her like a mountain spring, and that slightly startled look, wide-eyes flashing, as though her own mirth had caught her unawares.

She had died suddenly and shockingly in her fifties, catching us all off guard – my father, my sister, me, her own twin sister, everyone who knew and loved her. None of us were prepared for it, although for God's sake we'd had enough warning. Years of it. She'd been an invalid since my birth, battling with a degenerative heart condition, a struggle against hopeless odds with never the remotest chance of winning, yet never giving up. We knew it but we hadn't seen it. We hadn't seen it coming because we ruddy well didn't want to and because she'd fooled us – brilliantly fooled us – for years and years. Even when all the chips were down

she still managed to trick us into thinking she was OK, that somehow she'd pull through, that she'd always be there for us. She'd led us through a lifelong masterclass of endlessly loving, benign deception – a life of perpetual, courageous, stoical, dogged, resolute, unflinching – yes, bloody astounding – concealment because never once through all her trials did she ever complain about her ghastly, crippling condition, never once gave up hope or gave in to the slightest flicker of self-pity. We all knew she was seriously ill, but we blindly and stupidly refused to believe it. It's called denial.

Suddenly it was night. She leant on my arm as she walked slowly and unsteadily, only a few yards, all she could manage, away from the dim lights of the Palacio, out into the warm, thick darkness. Her aluminium stick clicked with each step and her breath came short and sharp. Stars winked and glistened high above us and a weakling moon hung like a segment of white peach among rags of back-lit cloud. We stood and listened to the night sounds of *Las Marismas*: nature's wild orchestra in its finest fling. Far off geese haggled excitedly out on the distant water, the soft fluting of flamingos rising and falling, broken by shrill arpeggios of waders from the shallow lagoons in front of us. 'I love this.' Words whispered with an instinctive reverence for wildness. I knew exactly what she meant.

My dream was as vivid as a dream can ever be. I was with her in body, mind and spirit. Right there. I could see the moon-gleam on her greying curls and I could hear the way she rested her front teeth invisibly on her lip and drew air through them with a thin, barely audible whistle when she was thinking. I could feel the warmth of her arm as that old familiar perfume wafted out to bind me to her as it had done ever since I was a small child climbing into her bed.

Our conversation was brief – no need for elaboration –

words primed with resonance of the moment, the place, the mood. A collusion of loaded silence and love piling in like grace. I felt my spirit lifting off and soaring to the stars. It was as though something I had been searching for all my life was suddenly there beside me. We laughed together, as one.

I don't know how long it lasted – difficult to tell with dreams – but I sensed that it was long enough to slough off the thirty-four years since her death, long enough to whirl back through the Spanish darkness to those transcendental moments of unity I had never thought I could know again. In all the intervening years I had never come so close, never so distinctively re-lived her presence with such intensity, never guessed that it was possible. I woke up wondering where I was.

The room was hot and airless. I rose and went to the casement, flinging it wide. A breeze off the marshes as soft as thistledown caressed my face. There, only a few yards away, was the moonlight flickering across the black lagoon, the gossip of distant geese, the woodwind of flamingos floating into satin air, the redshanks' piccolo piping and the insistent whistles of wigeon drakes. Then it came. From somewhere deep inside me, from some visceral cavern I didn't know existed, catching me completely unawares, an unstoppable upwelling of emotion rose volcanically within me, choking, convulsing, overpowering. Tears flooded down my face.

I recognised it instantly, as instinctively as you know the sound of your own voice. Grief – Latin: *gravare*, heavy; Old French: *grever,* to burden – that weight, that overwhelming burden of desolation I thought I'd conquered thirty years before had never gone away at all. It was still there, hidden, padlocked, forgotten, lurking deep in the darkest canyons of my hippocampus, silently waiting for this moment.

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I returned to rainy Scotland buoyed up and inspired by the Spanish project and determined to pursue my mother's influence further. I had learned so much, not just about captive breeding. Twelve years ahead of us, they had made and resolved many of the mistakes with lynxes we were now making with our wildcats. For hygiene, we were diligently removing cat faeces every day.

'No,' Antonio had said, 'leave them in for at least a week or two. They contain pheromones, important territorial signals.'

'Oh,' I answered blankly, wondering why the hell I hadn't thought of that.

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For thousands of years since the last ice cap retreated, these deeply glaciated glens, carved through unyielding metamorphic schist, have stubbornly resisted the severest ravages of mankind. Drawing strength from the rock beneath, nature has always fought back. It is how so much of the Highlands' precious wildlife has been able to cling on. Ours is a land of golden eagles tilting on glider wings and the metallic screams of peregrines echoing from the walls of the river gorge. I never cease to catch my breath when I see the Bourneville blur of pine martens filching food from the bird tables. My heart beats faster at the sudden flash of a salmon shimmering up the rapids, and every autumn dawn I awaken to the hills echoing with the roaring of rutting red deer stags. Although we very rarely see them, somehow, against all the odds, a few Scottish wildcats might have managed to hang in there too.

One of the many joys of living among the mountains is arriving home after forays further afield. On a clear day,

turning west just after Inverness, the Highland capital, the great grey rampart of the nearly 4,000-foot Affric mountains looms out of the distance, solid and reassuring. I never tire of that rugged molar horizon, a welcome home that wafts my spirit skyward like the red kites we so frequently see wheeling and soaring over the rich dark soil of the Black Isle fields. Without those mountains my life might have been entirely different.

A squealing, wiggling welcome from my two Jack Russells, Nip and Tuck, a spousely hug with hot tea and a slice of my wife Lucy's banana cake settled me straight back into cosy domesticity. Oh, it was GOOD to be home. But for me home has always been so much more than the cushioned refuge of the complacent. I have lived at Aigas so long that the land has claimed me, shaped me to match its wildness and its contrary needs, so that whenever I've been away I need to relocate and tune up again like a harp that has had to travel. So as soon as I tactfully could, I slipped out into the fresh cool of the evening and walked briskly uphill to the secret forest location of our wildcat project. I needed to stand and look at them with the brighter, wider eyes of the Spanish experience.

We haven't given our cats names. They are identified by gender and their pens: ♂ in Pen 1, ♀ in Pen 2, ♂ kitten in Pen 4 . . . and so on. There's no good reason why we shouldn't name them, but, respecting their innate wildness – as far from fluffy moggies as wolves from a poodle – we have avoided humanising them as much as possible. They have all been DNA tested and are high quality, over 89 per cent wildcat – probably as good as we are going to be able to find in the remaining wild population. By careful selective breeding we can further diminish the hybrid genes, sharing high quality kittens with other captive breeders to broaden the gene pool and reduce the risk of inbreeding.

The pens are big and built on the woodland edge, with grassy spaces between natural cover of broom, brambles and thickets of wild raspberries; the damp patches have sprouted clumps of grasses, rushes, docks and nettles – as natural a wildcat habitat as we can achieve. Sunlight flickers through the trees, gnats dance, bees drone, the breezes shimmy through. Unthinking, wild birds – chaffinches, dunnocks, wrens and robins – dip and bob just out of reach, keeping the cats alert and, unlucky for some, foraging mice and voles make the mistake of blundering in.

As the still evening air settled around me I stood at the gate to Pen 2. The male, a big rangy tom with attitude, jumped silently down from a high perch. Panther shoulders rolling in sinister ripples beneath the fur, he stalked slowly but purposefully across to stare me out. Ten feet from the wire, he sat on his haunches and glared. He glowed with all the assurance of a million years of evolution. He was magnificent. I resented the wire and wanted to be in the pen with him. When I moved to unlock the gate he hissed, lips curled and long fangs gleamed. His ears flattened and he crouched; his whole mask bristled with rancour. The emerald eyes flared, long white whiskers arrayed in a bright fan. This cat has a history of disliking men and makes his feelings clear. The black club end to his ringed tail twitched. And that stare – you get the feeling that he is in charge of the world.

We keep human presence to a minimum. Every day one of the rangers enters the pens to feed and to clean away the detritus – bones, feathers, the scaly legs of quail or pheasants, rabbit fur. Every two weeks their bedding is changed for fresh, sweet-smelling straw. The rangers had often told me that the tom in Pen 2 was threatening, possibly even dangerous. 'Oh yeah,' I'd shrugged, smiling smugly to myself. 'Dangerous? Nah, don't believe it.'

I unchained the gate and entered the safety chamber, carefully closing it behind me. He hissed again, louder, his anger rising to something akin to fury, ending the hiss with a sharp 'Spat!' A duty ranger would always have food – quail or rabbit, or fluffy, yellow day-old chicks (a by-product of the ghastly intensive poultry trade) we buy frozen – to throw to a hungry cat that came close. It's a routine, expected when we enter the pen: they pounce, snatch up the prey and whisk away into cover, up onto a high perch or into a den. I had none – hadn't thought it important; besides, my head was full of Iberian lynxes and new ideas. I wasn't thinking right, dull stupidity eclipsing brighter reason. I opened the second gate into the pen. He was five feet away, no sign of backing off. 'Hullo,' I spoke softly, shaking my head. 'Sorry, Tomcat, nothing for you tonight.' I showed my empty hands.

It happened so fast, so dazzlingly lightning fast, that I had no time even to flinch. He sprang. He lashed out with both front paws, razor claws fully extended, slashing down my trousers and onto my boots. Then he was gone. Fire without smoke. In one blur of black-striped fury he had launched, slashed, turned and vanished under a clump of broom. The corduroy at my left knee was torn open and blood began to well up from a blade-thin slice in my kneecap. Long white streaks in the green rubber of my boots marked where the claws of both paws had ripped downwards, streaks eight inches long. But for the boots he would have slashed my left leg to the bone.

I had felt nothing. It happened so fast and with such accuracy that the tomcat had not bodily hit me, not followed through with brute force, rather it was delivered at a perfectly calculated distance, the down-swiping claws at full stretch, pulling away the instant they hit home. That cat knew exactly

how to use its claws as weapons of contempt, just as a thug with a knife might slash to disfigure you.

I looked down at my knee as the blood roped and plied itself through the torn weave of my trousers. I cursed, a curse as much at my own disregard of the warnings and my crass appearance in the pen without food as at the tomcat himself. I limped out. Only twenty-four hours earlier I had told the Spanish biologists that even though our cats were captive bred they were still wild animals and totally unpredictable. Some of us only ever learn things the hard way.

I walked back to the house feeling more than a little foolish. 'Serves you right,' my mother would have said – did say many times over – when through impatience or stubbornness, or just mindless folly, I had hurt myself. 'What d' you expect?' she'd ask, gesturing frustration at my stupidity when yet again I had run to her tearful and bloodied after falling out of a tree or grazing my knees.

Once, aged about five, rushing to catch a red admiral butterfly with my hands, I tripped and crashed into a stone wall. I broke a front tooth, splitting my top lip so that blood flowed freely down my chin and onto my shirt. She wiped away my tears. 'Now every time you look in the mirror and see that tooth, it will remind you to be more *careful*.' She hung on the word, hung on to me, love issuing from every pore. But it never did. If it ever existed, the caution gene had been strangled at birth, totally absent from my armoury. I now see that back then, without ever knowing it, I had led both my parents a merry song and dance. My mother, who was never equipped to cope with a rambunctious, hyperactive child always in trouble, must have struggled – must have wondered what she had done to deserve me.

2

# Death of a dog

It was a dog and it was dead, unquestionably dead. On its side with one ear and half its head missing. A dog blotched with its own dried blood lying dead in a ditch under a thorn hedge. A dog flat on its side as if it had been thrown there, or collapsed over sideways from a savage blow. Its mouth was slightly agape. A long canine fang curved down from a lip drawn in a last snarl, a snarl that should have been of rage or pain, or perhaps just disbelief, a snarl shattered by oblivion. Blood and saliva shone on a slightly protruding tongue hiding the lower teeth as though the dog had died with a heavy exhalation, thrusting the tongue outwards, never to be withdrawn. A glazed eye stared opaquely, unnervingly, a stare of shock and despair and emptiness. Something terrible had happened here and that eye had been its silent witness.

To a seven-year-old boy who knew dogs and loved a dog, a dog not unlike this powerful, stocky, brown and white bull-terrier-ish mongrel, a boy who knew the bond of trust, the hot muzzle, the velvet ears, the barley-meal breath, who had romped and rolled and held dogs close, it was a catastrophe. The world had lost a dog in wild and terrifying circumstances I could not begin to imagine. My heart convulsed inside my chest and tried to break out through my mouth. I wanted to touch it, to stroke its smooth fur,

but I held back. I wanted to cry out, to cry for comprehension of the brute forces that had done this thing, to cry for help and for someone to share with me the intolerable burden of this abruptly shattered life. But no tears came. So I ran.

I ran the quarter mile across the damp Longbottom meadows and ditches above School Lane; I ran a frantic course, crashing through briars and marshy places, slicing the corners off fields, hurling myself over fences in the most direct route home I could take. I wanted home and to find a grown-up to whom I could pour out this breathless tale of dog destruction.

I ran round the bottom of the old pond, stagnant with duckweed, past the moorhen's nest of soggy rushes on a fallen tree. I hurdled over elm branches wind-ripped from high above, on through the orchard's long grass as high as my waist. I burst through the tangy veil of scent from tall balsam poplars and poured myself over the oak-railed fence into the paddock, hands and trousers smeared and stippled with grey-green algae. Hens scattered in front of me as I dodged through the nettle clumps to the big-boarded gates with the rusty latch. I heaved it wide. Leaping the open drain, I raced through the cobbled stable yard, past the servants' lavatories and on to the back door of the house.

Scratched and muddied I burst into the flagstoned scullery, where low stoneware sinks and scrubbed draining boards stood efficiently bare and empty. Nobody there. On into the big kitchen, with its cream Aga range and huge table of bleached pine topped with flaking American cloth. Nobody there either. I yelled for Nellie. No answer. I ran through to the hall, heaving open the heavy green baize door on its stiff spring, down the single stone step and out into the cool, respectful silence of the black and white chequered floor

and the deep, ponderous ticking of the hall clock called the Bowler in imitation of its booming chime, which echoed all round the house. Empty. I called out for my sister, my father, for anyone, pealing my seven-year-old voice up the elegantly curving stairs to the landing above and echoing sideways down the corridor to the schoolroom library with its shelves of fusty books. No reply.

The furled iron ring of the front door latch was heavy and took both hands and gritted teeth to turn. It clanked up and the huge iron-studded oak door swung inward with a startling burst of sun. I ran out onto the crunching yellow gravel, leaving the door wide. Across the paved terrace and past the French windows to the drawing room and on to the ancient yew tree ringed round with its white painted seat, the tree in whose dark and scaly caverns a tawny owl always roosted, the tree that seemed to brood and cast its long shadow across the smoking-room lawn.

I leapt down the stone steps and over the neatly mown square, past the bronze sundial on its age-lichened stone pedestal and on towards our grandfather's outer sanctum, his holy of horticultural holies, where we children were strictly forbidden to go – the long, ordered glasshouses, four of them in parallel rows, with their dirty panes and worm-drive roof vents that squealed and juddered open and shut when the handles were cranked. I raced past the green corrugated rain butts in which mosquito larvae wiggled and mice mysteriously drowned, and on into the first long glasshouse with a vine espaliered against the once whitewashed brick wall and the slatted benches running full length under the glass, benches crowded with dozens of terracotta flowerpots of many different sizes. And there, at the very far end, hazy through the giddy intoxication of geraniums, he stood.

There he was about his passionate horticultural summer

affairs in a collarless pin-stripe shirt and a tweed hound's-tooth check waistcoat with its gold watch chain, his horn-rimmed half-moon spectacles on his nose above a bristly little silver-grey moustache, and his bald head shining. There were his slender six feet six and a half inches, slightly stooped, long sleeves rolled up and his huge hands holding a pair of parrot-beaked secateurs and a woven trug bulging with dead heads and clippings. There he was with his pipe in his teeth, staring down at me over his glasses with eyebrows raised in pretended astonishment. 'It's dead,' I blurted out. 'And there's blood everywhere.' And then I cried.

My grandfather tossed the secateurs into the trug, placed it carefully on the bench and bent to pick me up. He swept me effortlessly up, up, up and away from the swirling images of blood and death, away from the clutching ache of panic, up and still further up until I too was six feet six and a half inches above the frightening world my exploration had led me into. He held me firmly in his arms and carried me out of the long, airless, stultifying geranium house so unspeakably burdened with sweet and heady scent, out into the sunshine freshness and the birdsong, and back toward the heavy carved oak bench on the edge of the smoking-room lawn.

He sat down and held me on his knees. 'Now you must dry your eyes and tell me what is dead.' His voice was gentle and all-embracing and as deep as a wine cask and as old and wise as Solomon. He drew an acre of silk handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed my tear-salted cheeks. It was soft and springy and smelled of pipe tobacco and bay rum, at that moment the most reassuring incense I could possibly have wished to inhale.

It was the scent of unassailable authority; of great age and timelessness and security and the source of all well-being

and the fount of all knowledge and all hope and all sanctity. It was the aroma that lingered in the long upstairs corridors that led to his bedroom – more forbidden territory we would not have dared encroach – and in the smoking-room lavatory we were not allowed to use but where we had peeped in and seen his silver-backed hairbrushes and a tortoiseshell comb laid out on a marble washstand beneath the gilt mirror. It was the lofty perfume of the olden days, of knights and kings and archbishops, the paternalistic aroma of history and Empire, and, in a peculiar way I could not have begun to describe or explain, it was the scent of love.

'It's a dog.' The words choked themselves out. 'And it's dead.' And the tears erupted again, welling into the crumpled silk; the image too stark and the trauma too vivid to be contained in so young a head.

'I think you'd better show me this dog.'

I held his huge hand as we strode up the mossy slabs of the laurel-lined Broadwalk, shady beneath the cloistered intimacy of huge elms and beeches, slabs that had been heaved into tectonic undulations by the ramifications of roots beneath. I had to take three steps to his one long pace, so I jogged along beside him, still jabbering out the awfulness of my find. We climbed the post and rail fences and out into the fields.

White-faced Hereford bullocks frisked away from us as we cut across their moist pasture of buttercups and clover and lanky thistles. We strode up the field hedges of dense hawthorn and may, where blackbirds and thrushes burst out with a shimmer of sun-silvered wings and clucking alarms, undulated away from us and dived back in again far up ahead. A magpie jetted out beside us and flew off cackling like a witch. We drew close and my heart began to pound. I ran forward. We jumped a ditch: a mighty leap for me and one

stride for him as he muttered, 'Where on earth are you taking me, boy?'

And there it was. There it was dead and snarling with a buzz of bluebottles about its nose and crawling over the bloody void where the ear and a slice of skull should have been.

'Hmmphhh,' my grandfather grunted from somewhere deep inside his waistcoated chest as he took the pipe from his teeth and pulled his lips forward and together in a pursed grimace of knowing disapproval. Then he nodded solemnly, 'I know that dog. It's been shot at very close range.' And we turned away and began the long walk back to the house, the silence punctuated only by the regular sharp intake of breath from the side of his mouth.

★ ★ ★

It was mid-afternoon. My mother was away in hospital. My father, I learned, had driven my sister in the old black Rover the narrow twenty miles of the Roman Fosse Way – as straight as a blade – and a few winding Warwickshire-Oxfordshire back lanes into the quiet Cotswold market town of Banbury on some domestic errand. By the age of seven I had achieved a reputation for never being an asset on any shopping trip.

So that day I had been abandoned to my own devices; even by then I had established blissful contentment at being left to explore on my own, under the vague and undefined supervision of Nellie – 'Now don't you go getting lost, young Jack, or I'll be for it' – to catch red admiral butterflies on rotting plums or search for birds' nests, things of which adults vaguely approved but had little desire to supervise. As usual I had wandered off that day into the woods and fields of the Manor Farm.

'They'll all be back for tea,' my grandfather told me, pulling out his gold pocket watch and tapping its glass as if it needed waking up before telling him the time. 'In another hour or so. You mark my words.'

He smiled down at me as he lit his pipe with a Swan Vestas, smoke pluming dragon-like from his nostrils, and then he was gone, leaving me earnestly marking his words, striding away from me, the high priest returning to his altar, back to his beloved geraniums and delphiniums and pyrotechnically bursting camellias that almost no one ever saw. He was gone again, gone for the moment, gone in measurable distances of yards and feet and inches, gone in physical presence with his tobacco trail wisping out behind him like an echo, gone in thought and preoccupation as his passion for flowers hauled him away, but to me he had not gone at all. Like the dog's blood, the events of that day had congealed immutably within my seven-year-old head. My grandfather had become as present and live and tangible and knowable and, yes, as mine, as God to a lonely spinster.

At the ritual of five o'clock afternoon tea at the kitchen table, Nellie sliced the large white loaf in her own alarming style. She would hold the loaf on end, cut face uppermost, and saw horizontally across the top with the blade flashing back and forth toward her own ample bosom. The result was thick, ragged slices for making toast on the ancient Aga hotplate in a folding wire mesh frame. (There was a bread slicer for what she called 'proper dining-room bread'.) This hot toast, with its imprint of mesh-singed check, she smeared with salty butter the colour of daffodils from the farm dairy, heaped dripping onto a platter and placed strategically in the middle of the table where two large jars, one of honey and the other of her own strawberry jam, lay invitingly open.

It was an invariable routine and a near-compulsory gathering of such family as were about, possibly for the first time since breakfast. 'I've baked a cake,' Nellie would announce, delivering to the table a warmly volcanic fruit cake rising to a sultana-fissured crater at its summit. Her toast and cake drew us in like moths to a candle. Only on Sundays was the tea ritual extended to the hushed formality of the Jacobean panelled dining room, and that was an adult affair where from the sideboard they poured their tea into Dresden bone-china cups from a silver teapot and the bread was neatly sliced on the slicer. Children stayed in the kitchen with Nellie, and that suited me fine.

Kitchen tea came from a large china pot, glossy brown, dressed in a knitted and fitted blue and yellow cosy, and was poured through a strainer into big blue-ringed teacups of simple household ware. With a long-drawn sigh my grandfather always collapsed his great length into a big, high-backed oak carver at the far end of the table; my father and my uncle sat on either side, while my sister and I perched nearest the Aga under Nellie's watchful eye. 'Now, no tipping back!' she would hiss at me in an audible whisper, flipping her tea towel against my shoulder in mock anger. 'Or you'll be in right trouble and no honey for a week.' And when my sister and I giggled feebly at this rebuke she would add, 'And just you remember your manners at table.'

I can remember dozens of such sleepy summer afternoons and kitchen teas, dozens of days of toast and honey and jam and crumbling fruit cake, of Nellie's teasing and the grown-ups locked in yawningly leaden conversation about the abhorrent politics of the day, but only one when, together like old buddies, my grandfather and I held the family in thrall, when the saga of the dead dog gripped them so; only one when I was at the centre of his world and my world

and the whole wide world and everything revolved around him and me and my awful discovery.

'The boy's found a dead dog in a ditch at Longbottom,' he announced as soon as he had lowered himself into the chair. 'He took me out there. It's that wretch Howson's dog – Tramp, I think he called it – a big terrier of a kind. Shot at point-blank range. Half its head is missing.' He loaded strawberry jam onto his toast.

Nellie looked pale and turned away to the Aga to busy herself with more toast. 'Whatever were you doing out at Longbottom?' my father enquired directly.

My grandfather rescued me. 'He was just birds' nesting. It's a good spot. There are magpies in those thorn hedges.'

'Why d' y' think he shot his dog?' my father quizzed, changing tack.

'That man has a terrible temper on him. He'd shoot anything. It disobeyed him, I shouldn't wonder, and he blasted it. Damned shame. It was a decent looking dog and good at the rabbits.'

★ ★ ★

I now see that it was inevitable that those explorations, those dreamy solo sorties into the woods and fields where a child's unfettered imagination could run riot, meeting and treating every encounter with the surging excitement of real discovery, would become an addiction from which I would never fully recover. Every day I longed to escape. I would rush through breakfast, gobbling down Nellie's thick porridge as fast as I could. 'Please may I get down?'

'Yes, you may. Now don't you go getting into trouble, young Jack, or you'll be . . .' But I would be out of the door and away before she could finish the sentence. Usually I

didn't know where I was going. There was never a defined purpose, it was just out and away and come what may.

Perhaps that's why I had loved *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* so much. It was that sense of passing from one world into another, where the known, the measured and the ordered could be cast off like a cloak, and the unknown, alluring yet slightly frightening, became as irresistible as a drug to an addict, while at the same time knowing that safe passage back through the wardrobe was always an option. It was where my imagination spiralled skyward, where make-believe ruled and I could pretend to be anything or anybody I chose, and where nothing else mattered.

My favoured route was up the Broadwalk, a long, paved path that led away from the ordered formality of the gardens to a long avenue of huge old elms and oaks surrounded by brambles and nettles and the tangle of ever-encroaching wildness. If this extremity of the grounds had ever been tamed, it certainly wasn't any more. Wood pigeons fired out of the heights on clapperboard wings, and starlings and jackdaws burst indignantly from nest holes as I approached beating back the brambles and bashing trunks with my precious stick.

It was here that I first met a fox. It wasn't really my own discovery. Old Bob, pulling leeks for the kitchens, slicing the tops with a single swipe of his hook-bladed knife as he spoke, had told me that there was an ancient oak stump at the top of the Broadwalk that was hollow. 'An ol' fox holes up in there,' he had announced. 'You can smell 'im as you pass by.'

I rushed to check it out. The huge oak had blown down and the trunk and branches removed decades before. Wind and rain had worked on the vast root plate, which had slowly subsided back to earth, leaving the stump sticking up at an

angle. At my seven-year-old chest height, its rotted hollow was bigger and deeper than I had imagined, reaching further down into the cavernous roots than the end of my stick. I placed my head right into the hole and peered inside. It was completely empty and all I could smell was the fungally dampness of decay. I probed around its dark interior with my stick. Nothing. I wandered off and forgot about it.

A few days later I found myself passing the stump and thought I'd look again. I sauntered up confidently, expecting nothing, and thrust my head into the gaping void. Too late I realised that the rancid pungency that now assaulted my nose was markedly different from the time before, strangely alive and vital. The fox shot out like a jack-in-a-box, fur brushing my face as he fled, giving me such a fright that I fell over backwards into a clump of stinging nettles.

I would never forget that fox. It would mark a climacteric in my private, cerebral engagement with the natural world. I don't think I had ever touched a wild mammal before, except perhaps rescuing a drowning mouse from the rain butts or rabbits snared by the farm boys. But a fox was different. It was big and strong and very wild. I had seen its gleaming teeth and smelt its foetid breath. When I stood up I was shaking all over, trembling, not with fear – it had happened far too quickly for that – but with the suddenly triggered involuntary rush of adrenaline. For a stretched collision of time and space I didn't know what to do. My pulse was racing. I stood and stared at the stump. Questions swirled. Could it have bitten me? Savaged my face? Would I get into trouble if I told the grown-ups? Was there another fox in there? If there had been danger, it had passed me by, and anyway there was nothing I could have done to avoid it.

I approached the stump cautiously. This time standing well back, I knocked it with my stick several times before

taking a closer look. It was empty, of course, but the cavern reeked of dark, musky animal, intimate and strangely prehistoric, belonging to another world. It was a smell I would never forget, a thrilling essence of excitement as sharp as vinegar, of danger, of adventure and above all a scent of wildness – alive and free.