

CHAPTER ONE

There was, essentially, nothing to do. Outside were the eyes and the others that howl and claw. Looking back, he tried to remember a time when he had not been sick or frightened, but he could not. He found himself sleeping for large portions of the day, occasionally rousing himself at nightfall to stretch his legs on



the side streets or the decrepit factories of the industrial estate, the shadows motivated by the night breeze, tree limbs capturing a slow-motion agony, wakened by the chill to twist and shiver and find no peace.

Sitting on the roof one night, the moon so low, he said to his confidant, “Roly, I do not think I was meant for this world.”

And Roly replied, “Why would you say such a thing?” because he was a simple soul and did not reflect on life, but rather took it for what it was. His heart would go out to his sad friend; impotent heart, it did no good at all.

In truth, poor Orange felt little affinity for his brethren, whose motives often seemed so shallow and cruel. Yet he felt no antipathy towards them, just incomprehension, and they in turn were perplexed by their cousin who held fast to the darkness and refused to entertain their customs.

Slowly Orange began to spend more and more time with the monkeys. Engaging with the creatures, he could lose himself entirely; he was quite sure that they loved him. Only he had to be careful. Once, lost in play, he had scratched a monkey by mistake and the beast had shrieked and hit him. Monkeys are very strong and unpredictable and might turn on you at any time. And yet he had to admit that his own monkey was his best friend. They would sometimes share their food, or curl up to sleep beside one another, warm and cosy beneath the duvet. This was where he felt safest of all. Here, upstairs with his monkey, he felt not the eyes. There was no one to hurt him.

“Oh Monkey,” he would say, “I do love you.” But the monkey was witless and simply smiled and turned away. Or at other times it would say, “Blah blah blah. Blah blah blah,” in its crazy monkey speech. Silly monkey.

It was an otherwise beautiful day when Monkey disappeared.

Sun streamed through the windows and cast brilliant white-yellow rectangles on the carpet, warm beneath his feet. Outside the sky was blue and an enormous black crow squawked from atop a

telegraph pole. “Oh do come here, Mr Crow,” said Orange in his special crow voice, but the crow ignored him. He remembered thinking that Monkey wasn’t there, but that was not unusual; Monkey would come and go. Orange went back to sleep.

By day three, however, he was very, very worried. Though the sun shone toasty and the nights were cool and still and lazy, he paid the clime no mind as he stared out through the top-floor window, apprehensive and wakeful, overwrought. Oh where had Monkey got to? Did the eyes get him? But no, how could they? For monkeys are so strong – yes, but so foolish also.

He searched high and low for his monkey, through the factories and woods and side-streets. It was night and the eyes were on him, but he saw best in darkness and was frantic and unmindful. Perhaps Monkey was in danger and perhaps he could help. Oh that silly monkey! He hardly slept at all and instead sifted the house for clues as to his monkey’s possible whereabouts. Where might he have gone? It was impossible to tell. One image, however, stood out from the rest – a discarded brochure, a photograph of sand and a pyramid against a cloudless sky, a statue of a cat with the head of a monkey. He had the oddest feeling that this was where Monkey had gone. It seemed a ridiculous speculation at first, one that he would have dismissed as fancy had he been sleeping properly. But as the ordinary rhythm of days collapsed into an endless melancholy, his mind took hold of the faintest and most extraordinary of hopes and magnified them beyond that which good reason and logic might dictate.

Staring from inside out to the horizon he cried into the nothing, “Oh Monkey, Monkey, you are not the brightest of creatures, and the world so dangerous and full of pain. What could take you from me and to the sands so distant?”

And then on the fifth day he collapsed, exhausted, on top of the old brochure which had consumed him.

The sound of an engine brought to a sudden halt, a half-familiar note, must have triggered some memory in his sleepy head, for it brought him around, that sunny afternoon in late August. He stretched and opened his eyes. How long had he slept? It wasn’t easy to say; the brochure was still crumpled beneath him. Then the remembrance of his situation came crashing down from the sky, his heart so lonely and the dream-world evaporating, like the rainbow vanishes when the sun disappears and the wind grows stronger. He heard the footfalls on the stairs, noticed the door opening, just a fraction. And then his Uncle Bryan standing before him, looking somewhat distracted, or perhaps looking as if he did not wish to appear distracted.

“Uncle Bryan?” said Orange. He was, despite himself, unnaturally excited to see his ageing relation. It was a very welcome distraction.

“Monte Carlo,” said Bryan, having apparently taken over Orange’s vigil at the window. Nonplussed, Orange continued to stare at him. Some seconds elapsed whilst Bryan seemed to be quite somewhere else; then he turned towards his nephew and shook his head, as if suddenly remembering himself, his location. He continued, “How would you like to join me for a weekend in Monte Carlo, old thing? Singular weather at this time of year: you might bask in the sun all day, if you felt like it! What do you say?”

“I hadn’t really thought... Look here, is everything okay? And besides, I’m not sure about leaving here; I’m not sure it’s safe.” The plan was clearly half-baked. Bryan was rattled; there was something else afoot; his large yellowish eyes had reverted to gazing out of the window. And he wasn’t listening. At length he turned to face his nephew with the look of someone trying very hard to look composed and failing miserably.

“Listen here, Orange, I’m off to Monte Carlo and I’m going straight away. It’s a truly marvellous place and I would very much like for you to come with me. And, furthermore, I shall be disappointed if you choose not to, as it’s rather for your own good.”

It was this final clause that alerted Orange, a suggestion of peril which deftly sidestepped the drowsy guardians of Reason and pleaded directly with his blue and swollen centre. In conversational terms, it stood out from its buttery companions not unlike a warped whisker.

Bryan then regarded Orange fully as if for the first time that day. “You really don’t look at all well, old thing. I think a break is exactly what you’re after.”

“I’m sorry Bryan, I don’t think I can. I have to wait here for my monkey. He’s gone missing and I’m very worried about him.”

“Nonsense. No one in their right mind would pass up on a trip to the Côte d’Azur on account of a monkey.” Bryan was clearly doing his level best to appear bombastic and authoritative in the face of mounting desperation. “I have warned you about this before, Orange, if I recall. We had a little chat about monkeys and I was most clear about the whole issue. The very best of them are fit for servitude, the rest are worse than useless. On no account should one form an attachment to them.”

“But I love my monkey!” blurted Orange. Of course, he realised immediately that Bryan would not be sympathetic. At the same time he could see his uncle was troubled and this concerned him, and he enjoyed the concern because it took his mind away from the emptiness within, if only for a moment. Then a thought occurred. He stood up, and, gesturing towards the wrinkled brochure, addressed his uncle. “Bryan, do you, by any chance, know where this might be?”

Bryan looked down. “I dare say that’s Egypt, old thing.”

“And is Monte Carlo anywhere near Egypt?” enquired Orange.

“It’s on the way...” said Bryan, renewed hope mingling with a certain curiosity.

“Then I will go with you,” declared Orange.

“That’s excellent!” replied his uncle, much relieved. “Well, there’s no time like the present. We must be off at once.”

And, that said, the ginger pair stole away down the stairs, out through the cat flap.

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Bryan’s little red sports car was parked in the usual spot, underneath the Renault at the bottom of the terrace. Initially pedalling with his back paws, Bryan edged the nose of the vehicle out from below the Renault’s sills and checked carefully for traffic, before pedalling harder and engaging the motor. As usual, Bryan instructed Orange to “think them invisible”. Orange was not entirely convinced that this achieved much of anything, but he respected his uncle and tried his best. To be fair, the monkeys never seemed to notice them. But then the monkeys noticed very little at the best of times. They were preoccupied; they were always somewhere else in their minds.

Looking over his shoulder as much as straight ahead, Bryan careered through the town at breakneck speed, weaving recklessly between the wheels of the monkey cars. Occasionally he would condescend to pause for a red light, the little engine purring smoothly beneath the chassis of a considerably larger and more utilitarian monkey analogue. Orange clung on to the steel frame for dear life, his eyes half closed in anticipation of the crash that never came, his claws digging at the leatherette. Bryan's expertise behind the wheel never faltered though their little bodies lurched first one way and then the other, his paw stomping down hard on the throttle, then onto the brake with similar force, from one to the other it seemed, with no half measures.

"Bryan, stop this madness, I beg you!" exclaimed Orange over the roar of the miniature V6. They were, by now, deep in the countryside. The traffic had subsided to a trickle and it was quite clear that they were now not being followed, if indeed they ever had been. Bryan allowed the car to drift down to thirty, then twenty miles per hour. He took a right onto a narrow farm track which lead them slowly up towards Firlle Beacon.

Bit by bit Orange's heart resumed its normal tempo. It must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon. Midges circled above a puddle in the trail. He felt the sun warming his fur, saw the ants marching through the yellow grass, spied blackberries in the hedgerows. The little car skipped and jiggled its way over the tracks made by larger machinery; hoof, foot and paw prints baked into the chocolate-coloured mud. Orange said nothing at all. Bryan, though commonly insensitive to such things, was aware that some form of explanation was necessary. He thought about it a bit as he manoeuvred the thirty-inch convertible up the hillside. Approaching the summit he said, "Orange, old thing, I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a pickle."

The announcement held little surprise for Orange; indeed the sheer velocity of their recent passage suggested understatement on the matter. Nevertheless, he yielded to his uncle's narrative, "A pickle, Uncle Bryan?"

Bryan dropped the engine into second, then neutral as they rounded the crest, bringing the pair to a gentle halt. The sun was drifting low to the west, yet the light was still strong. Rolling hills stretched out to the left and elsewhere, a patchwork of green and yellow fields, crops slowly ripening for the harvest. On their right the land gave way down towards the river and there, out before them, shimmered the sea.

"Yes, a pickle, you might say. Or perhaps, rather a giant kind of pickle... perhaps a gherkin, it's difficult to say."

"A gherkin, Uncle?" Bryan was clearly stalling, scrambling for a line. Orange understood well enough that his uncle's expositions were at best the most casual acquaintances of Veracity; nevertheless, he entertained the romantic notion that a deeper rapport might be contrived. He turned to face his driver who, somewhat stubbornly, refused to meet his gaze. Still, in the interests of civility and with due deference to the dignity accorded to one's elders, he played along. "Exactly what kind of a *gherkin* are you in?"

"Oh the worstest kind of a, ah, gherkin, dear boy. A *financial* gherkin."

There followed a pregnant pause, which briskly sauntered up to the limit of Orange's patience, then whisked on past. "You have frittered away your fortune, haven't you?"

Bryan failed to respond, leaving Orange to extrapolate on the silence. "...Furthermore, you have gone on to consume your poor mother's estate, much of which was foolishly entrusted to you on account of her infirmity. You now plan to escape with what little is left and leave the poor creature to fend for herself, though she is sightless and in possession of less than the necessary in the upstairs department."

Bryan swallowed hard; his reputation was legendary, of course. Though by now well into his middle years, he continued to live with his mother, who he appeared to resent terribly, as if blaming her for his own lassitude. Nana Alice, as Orange knew her, was noble born, her grandmother a British Blue, and, sadly, she demonstrated the characteristic follies of her stock. When little more than kitten she was seduced by a rather handsome ginger from the locality and from this untimely union bore four sons, of which Bryan was the eldest. Whereas his brothers had chosen to take the more orthodox path of departure from the parental nest, Bryan had elected to stay behind, engaging in the passions of the dilettante, tinkering with motor vehicles and knowing just enough about everything to convince those who knew nothing that he knew a great deal. Over the years he had developed expensive tastes, a failing which ought not to have proved problematic given his mother's enormous wealth, had he not additionally shown such poor judgement at the gaming tables of Park Lane, Biarritz and, recently, Atlantic City where he had been found by his brother Chivas face-down on a tray of exquisite Bolivian fondant mice.

All of this would have been quite tolerable and excusable had he shown his mother even the slightest thanks for his parasitic lifestyle. On the contrary, however, he was known to be quite abusive towards her and would sometimes lurk in corridors to bat her ears as she ambled past, now quite blind and ill-equipped to predict the attack. This she took in good grace, being a half-wit and incapable of any great emotion save contentment and an undying love for her treasured son.

Bryan, however, was magnanimous in the face of Orange's indignation. Indeed, he almost fell over himself in his apparent willingness to affirm his nephew's interpretation of events. "Yes – that's exactly it!" he exclaimed. "You've hit the nail on the head! Not so easy to pull the wool over your eyes, is it? Yes, indeed, I am afraid I *have* spent all the old girl's money. Problematic, of course. Well it would be, that is, if it weren't for my dynamite chum Jean-Claude, who lives in Monte Carlo and who is going to give me a wonderful price for this old motor car of mine. A handsome price. And from there we will take the train back home – the TGV no less – and I can repay your grandmother and put a little aside for your future, old thing, what do you say? I can hardly believe I have failed to mention Jean-Claude before today. Marvellous fellow."

Orange's natural scepticism softened under the downy quilt of flattery. Yes, it was a believable tale alright, so typical of his uncle. But then why had they left town with such haste? Although, now he thought about it – or perhaps, as it suited him to reflect – Bryan had always enjoyed the *frisson* of automotive endeavour.

Bryan gently eased himself out of the driver's seat and stepped out onto the grass. Orange, more sprightly, hopped directly over the passenger-side door and bounced down the slope for a yard or two, taking in the fresh country air. From the boot of the car Bryan produced a gingham tea towel, two glasses, a bottle of sparkling milk and a packet of cheese and onion crisps, which he proceeded to arrange on the ground in front of him.

"Time for a spot of tea, Orange old thing? What do you say? We're still a-ways from Dover and we must aim to make good time by night. Let us rest a while here before our little adventure begins in earnest."

Orange stretched himself out in the evening sunshine and closed his eyes. Perhaps he had been too hard on his uncle. He really was such a lovable old thing and had only the best intentions at heart. Maybe he had been judged too harshly; we all have our weaknesses, our vices, do we not?

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Far below and to the west, back in the town from whence our companions had made their recent escape, a dark figure moved with practised ease along alleyways, over fences, through thickets. Powerful muscles worked beneath the large, lean frame; green eyes displayed unusual application and intensity; he moved quickly but without haste, graceful in his determination, focused in his intent. His fur jet black but for his white chin, he slipped inside the side gate at the station to wait patiently for the arrival of the 7:48.

He sat motionless whilst the train pulled alongside the platform and he ignored the passengers who stumbled off, their rushing feet. When he saw that the guard's attention was distracted, he wasted no time, sprinting out from behind the benches and jumping up into the wagon behind him, then nestling, hiding amongst the mail sacks. He then took the opportunity to rest, pausing only to note the angle of the sun through the opposite window.

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Orange dozed in the dying sunlight. He dreamed of exactly where he was and saw the land stretching in all directions, green and rolling, extending out towards a periphery of sand which surrounded the fields so that they appeared in all as an island in the desert. Wind tore through this arid wasteland, casting forth sand devils like miniature tornados, the dunes drifting like waves upon the ocean. And above this madness, a pink balloon bobbing wickedly in the breeze, suspending a mouse with sweet eyes in a miniature wicker basket.

"We must be on our way," said Bryan, gently rousing his nephew. Orange opened his eyes and saw that their picnic had been tidied away, noted that the car's engine was purring and prepared for departure. Sleepily he stretched and dropped himself into the passenger seat beside his uncle, who had donned a ridiculous pair of driving goggles. Orange sometimes despaired for his companion's monkeyist affectations.

It was nearing sunset as they set off down the hill and into the gathering darkness, speeding along the country lanes, passing wooden fences and hedgerows, cottages and oast houses. All this Orange took in with a curiosity and detachment, as if not sure if he were really here or of this world at all. The cool evening air rushed past the little car. In the distance, an owl hooted.

If it ever had been, it was certainly no longer necessary to think themselves invisible. The car was not equipped with headlights – or any lights for that matter – yet the world was revealed to them

in all its dark glory. Bryan's night vision was superb and he gunned the car along the narrow roads at sixty, seventy miles an hour. There was something about the temperature which rendered the evening inert, so that it was not quite possible to tell where you stopped and it began. This comforted Orange, who soon found himself dozing once more against the steady howl of the little engine.

Only this time the gossamer wings of night carried him backwards and inwards, set him down in his cage, just six-weeks old, flea-ridden and terrified, poked by the pencils of malevolent monkey children who teased him from beyond the wire mesh. Just a single cell amongst many, for puppies, mice, hamsters and parakeets, in rows and lines, in purgatory. By night he never slept for the nerves which wracked him so, a foreboding which shadowed the coming light and spoke only of the horrors to come; the unbearable dissonant squawking, barking and yowling, the clatter of footsteps, the giant eager staring eyes of the monkeys, the thunder of lorries and buses outside. Shivering in the far corner of his cage he awaited the coming day with trepidation and, to distract himself, would turn his thoughts to the fate of the myriad creatures around him and ponder whether they too felt as he did. A risible fancy, that these barking, beaky marionettes might carry souls as did a cat; indeed heresy amongst his kind. Yet Orange saw them twitch and quiver as he did, and his heart would reach out to them; in his imagination at least they might be his friends. And not only his heart, but his mind too, which would at times depart the narrow confines of his cell, would transport his strength outside his body to force apart and fractionally separate the bars in the mousy cells just above his head, enough for them to squeeze through and escape, much to the distress of the monkeys the next day, who would curse this race of super-mice who could not be caged and would turn up at odd times, amongst their papers and in-between the boxes.

And all the while the little red car sped like a bullet down to the sea. Arriving at the port of Dover, Bryan barely slowed, only briefly dropping her down to third as he took them off-road, through a ditch, under a steel mesh fence and then back up into fourth as they raced into the channel tunnel, deep beneath the sea and then on out, past the boozy hypermarkets of Calais (Bryan cast a regretful eye over these structures, but poised himself and doggedly pointed the vehicle forwards) and further still, onwards they flew, until, at last, as dawn broke, the city of Paris lay silhouetted before them.