Natural History
Neil Cross

Chapter 1

It was only a dead ape. Patrick had seen dozens, one way or another. He'd seen them die naturally, of old age and disease - and heard the war-shrieks as they murdered each other. He'd watched them cannibalize their young.

But this was Rue, who'd been at Monkeyland since 1982 - fourteen years. She'd been rescued after a tabloid ran shots of her, a powerful ape at a travelling circus, cowering in baffled misery while a trainer beat her with a riding crop.

Rue had grown old at Monkeyland. And Patrick, who knew better, couldn't help but think of her as wise. It was her toffee brown eyes, her pursing, grey-haired lips; the unhurried way she sucked at half an orange.

That morning, Saturday, he found her corpse in a far corner of the enclosure. She was twisted up, her face locked in a death grin. The other chimps, alarmed by the spastic violence of her seizures, had retreated to the edges of the compound, leaving Rue alone to die. They were still there - softly grunting, curious - when Patrick arrived.

He knelt to inspect the corpse. Late the previous night, somebody - kids, probably - must have entered Monkeyland and thrown poisoned food into the A-Compound. Perhaps Rue, most trusting of creatures, had been alone in accepting it; because only Rue, most trusting of creatures, had died.

Patrick knew that local kids gained entry to Monkeyland through a gap in the northern perimeter fence. One of the groundsmen had told him about it, in the very early days.

The gap was behind the adventure playground, far from the animals. Kids had been using it for years; the gap was fixed, they cut it open again. Sometimes on Sunday mornings you found cider bottles and lager cans and tacky splats of vomit, the occasional condom. It was a pain in the ass, but Patrick had let it slide. There was so much else to do before the next government inspection, so much else to worry about.

Now Patrick wandered along the figure eight of the footpath. But for the animals and the keepers, Monkeyland was deserted. It was closed for renovations and, because Rue had been killed, Patrick had given the contractors the day off.

Walking, he was watched by spindly gibbons that drooped from their rope-draped pillar. He passed the ring-tailed lemurs, the squirrel monkeys and the A Compound where Rue had lived and died. Finally, he arrived at the decrepit adventure playground.

There was a fort of rotting wood, from which hung slimy, frayed old rope swings. Tyres were secured to bending branches that couldn't take their weight. There were rusty slides and a squeaky roundabout.

They'd closed the adventure playground to the public before Health and Safety got the chance. Seeing it depressed him. Always did; it was a waste of space and a waste of time.

He walked over to the wooden seating shelter. It was chicken scratched with graffiti, urine-stinking.

A dozen metres behind the shelter ran an overgrown hedge, which obstructed the hole in the fence. Kneeling at the hedge was Stu Redman, their local copper. He was based at Minehead police station - but Patrick had called him at home that morning, and Stu had come to Monkeyland on his own time.

Patrick said, 'Anything?'

Stu looked up, surprised to see Patrick, or just surprised to be asked. He straightened, brushed himself off. Laconic, West Country, squinting.

'Not much, mate.' He pointed to a muddy footprint. 'One of them was wearing Dr Marten's. If it helps.'

Patrick laughed, sorely. 'Cheers.'

Stu's mockery, friendly enough, waned. He squinted at the drizzle-lashed playground. Then toed at a crushed Stella can.

'God knows why they come here in the first place.'

It seemed like such an effort, for such little reward - to drive out here to this gimcrack shelter, just to drink cider and smoke cigarettes and maybe do some necking.

'I was in the desert once,' Patrick said. 'In a coach. No toilet. The way it worked, when enough men needed to go, the driver stopped to let them off. There was nothing around for miles, just sand and the road. And the men - do you know what they did?'

Stu shook his head.

'They turned round,' Patrick said, 'and pissed on the wheels.'

Stu scratched his nose, considering.

'I'll have a quiet word round the village.'

'But you don't think it was kids?'

'Ah, there's a few local bastards, a few tearaways - tattooed Harries. But, be honest - if any of them wanted to kill a monkey, they'd most probably have brought their dad's shotgun and blown its head off.'

Patrick looked at him, blinking.

'They're not that clever,' said Stu. 'As a rule. The kids round here.'

'Right,' said Patrick.

He and Stu walked back, their heads bowed in the rain. They shook hands near the Bachelor Compound, and Stu went home. Patrick crossed to the infirmary.

Jane was there, in the vet's office. She'd been present at the morning's necropsy. She wore faded jeans and shirt, old walking boots. Her hair was in a casual pony tail. She looked dressed for Africa. She always looked dressed for Africa; even in North Devon, in February.

She was slender, tall, suntanned. Years of squinting in the sunlight had left its mark at the corner of her eyes. Her hands were long and callused with hard work. Jane could tie knots like a sailor.

Patrick said, 'So?'

She lifted her cup of tea and sipped. She looked at him from under her brow; shrugged a shoulder.

It meant, Who knows?

They didn't speak until Don Caraway emerged, still dressed for surgery; all but the latex gloves. Behind him, Rue lay dissected on a stainless-steel table; unzipped from throat to pubis, still wearing that lurid death grin.

Patrick said it again, 'So?'

Caraway was tall, hunched; sandy hair combed over a freckled scalp. He had the air of a benevolent vicar. Years before, if Patrick had been told the truth, he'd spent his spare time, and all his money, hunting the Loch Ness Monster. But there was nothing in Loch Ness, except perhaps some unusually large eels.

Caraway said, 'I'm thinking some kind of rat poison - Warfarin, chlorophacinone, diphacinone?'

Jane said, 'We treat for rats every day.'

'Absolutely. We use Warfarin. And rats - I expect you know this - they leak urine, dribble it wherever they go. Scent trails and what have you. So I'm thinking, perhaps rat urine is contaminating the food supply. Perhaps Rue has eaten contaminated food - and she's so old and weak, you know. A healthier chimp could take it.'

'But it's not that?'

'No. it's not that. Rat poison is slow-acting. She'd have shown symptoms - blood in the urine, nose-bleeds, bleeding gums. But she was asymptomatic.'

'So, what was it?'

'Not sure. But the symptoms - the vomiting, the defecating, the violent seizures...'

'Yes?'

'It looks like the effects of a rodenticide called Ten Eighty: sodium fluoro-acetate. They use it in New Zealand, to control possums. It's got no odour, no taste, and it's phenomenally potent in small doses. A few mils will kill you in a couple of hours. If you're going to poison a chimp, that's the way to go.'

'So where does a kid get this stuff?'

'I don't know if a kid does.'

Patrick scratched his hairline, irritated. Jane patted his shoulder, nodded for Caraway to continue.

'Ten Eighty's a restricted substance. So first, he's got to get hold of it. Then he's got to survive handling it - and it's dangerous stuff. Breathe it in, get it into a minor abrasion - just a scratch - and you're in big trouble. Inasmuch as you're dead.'

Patrick said, 'Don, you've been round here for years. Has anything like this happened before?'

A contrite, curate's grin. 'Dogs blinded with air-rifles. The odd bonfired cat. Sheep with their throat torn out. Someone brought in a fox once - some sod had lopped off its front legs. But dead chimps? No.'

'Jesus,' said Patrick. 'What a day.'

Monkeyland stood on eighty-five acres, close to the North Devon coast. It homed two hundred primates of nine different species - and two aberrant Spanish donkeys, rescued bonebags with slow-chewing mouths and sad eyes, who sometimes skittishly sidestepped when children grew too loud.

But its main attraction was the thirty-nine chimpanzees - thirty-eight, now Rue was dead.

They had chimps from Spain, Greece, France, Holland, Cyprus, Dubai, Israel: chimps that had been experimented on, used as props for beachfront photographers; chimps that had been driven insane by living in small apartments; that had been dressed in sunglasses and baseball caps and featured in TV sitcoms and advertisements; chimps that had been starved and beaten and burned with cigarettes. Several had arrived addicted to tranquillisers.

Visitors enjoyed this; it made the apes seem plaintively human. Visitors came to gawp, to coo and cluck at their reassuring captivity.

For years, those visitors had been rare, and declining - an endangered species - but still the animals had to be cleaned, and fed, and medicated; and still the people who did the cleaning and feeding and medicating had to be paid.

Monkeyland was failing. It had been failing when Jane decided to buy it, nearly a year before.

She'd decided to buy it precisely because it was failing; she was like that.

They'd driven out one weekend. It wasn't a long trip from their unhappy home in Bath - fifty or sixty miles south-west - but Patrick soon lost his sense of direction. He unwound the window and smelled the sea. It made him happy. Always did.

Soon, Jane was pulling into Monkeyland's car park. Patrick got out of the car, and anxiety effervesced inside him. It was a mid-June weekend, and there were only half a dozen vehicles in the visitor car park. Three of them were Hondas; old people.

Monkeyland's perimeter wall was cracked and water-stained. The gate resembled a Soviet border crossing.

Inside, they wandered the sanctuary grounds, tracing the main path's Mobius Strip, its eternity symbol.

The animals looked healthy enough, but their compounds were tired, and so were they. The orangs were listless. The capuchins crouched in watchful groups, munching on apple cores. Spider monkeys hung inverted from their beams, strung together like broomsticks.

Then Patrick and Jane reached the first of the two chimp compounds. This group consisted entirely of males.

Patrick watched them for a long while. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up in the sun and he wore sunglasses. He could smell the unease that radiated from the Bachelor Group - a murky air of damage and suspicion and scarcely restrained violence.

'This, here,' he said. 'This group. This has got to be a mistake.'

'Apparently,' Jane told him, 'none of them can integrate with the mixed group. Some of them are quite - - '

Dangerous, she was going to say. Patrick had never been inside a prison, but that's what he was looking at: the violent offenders' wing. All those men in there together, left to fight it out alone.

Chimps were stronger than people - seven or eight times stronger. They had denser bones and thicker hides. In play, they chucked and flung, and slapped and playbit one another: a playful chimp could, with ease, badly injure someone it loved. A malevolent chimp could shred a human being like wet paper. And here were a dozen such males, turning their sullen eyes away from the scattering of bored visitors ogling them from behind a high wall.

He knew that such creatures practised rape, sometimes murder. He also knew he shouldn't use those words; he was wandering into perilous territory. He wasn't a primatologist. He wrote old-fashioned, unpublished adventure stories. He was a sidekick.

He said, 'Christ, how do we deal with this?'

Jane grabbed the curved, concrete edge of the enclosure and watched as a small knot of males came together in a throwing, slapping, shrieking scrap that was followed, at some length, by sombre grooming.

'The place is falling to pieces.'

He looked at the cracked and weedy paving, the dense and uncut hedges lining the dreary walkways, the rusting chain-link fences; the jerry-built jungle gyms, the chewed tyres on the pale, bald trunks of dead trees. And he looked at these half-crazed primates.

'Come on,' Jane said. 'I'm bored.'

'I'm bored, too. Let's go somewhere. Let's leave the country.'

'I've spoken to Richard.'

Patrick had a feeling in his stomach, like descending in a lift.

'Richard. Of course you have.'

'He's talking about a show. Two series, maybe three. Fly-on-the-wall. Following Monkeyland as it gets to its feet. A bit like *The Park,* but about the animals, not the boardroom.'

Patrick scratched his scalp. *Fucking Richard*, he thought.

'It's a good idea,' Jane said. 'It can't fail.'

There was no point arguing; this is what Patrick had wanted - change and adventure. And it wouldn't be for long; nothing ever was.

Jane looked around, expansively. 'It was built by some mad old spinster, apparently. Biddie something. Born and died in Devon; never left.'

Biddie Powys - the kind of reclusive old woman who, a few hundred years earlier, might have burned as a witch - had endowed Monkeyland and her family home to an animal charity. That had been twenty years ago, and now the charity itself was struggling. It had offered Jane a good deal. Monkeyland would be hers, outright, and so would the house - situated on the coast, four miles beyond Monkeyland's far perimeter.

In addition, the charity would maintain a decreasing level of funding for another five years.

'That gives us enough time to turn it round,' Jane had said. 'Bring it into profit. Sell it and move on.'

'Yes,' said Patrick, with exaggerated patience. 'But how much will it cost?'

'Everything,' said Jane.

And now they were here, and gentle Rue was dead.

Late in the afternoon, Patrick made a nest of Jiffy bags beneath his desk, curled up under his nylon parka, and went to sleep.

Charlie woke him at 8 p.m. Patrick blinked up, into his boy's triangular face; the beardless chin, the high forehead. Charlie had a face which belonged to another age. All the scruffy hair in the world couldn't mask it.

And he stood there now in Army surplus boots, jeans, parka - seventeen, the age Patrick's grandfather had been, when he went to fight.

He said, 'I brought sandwiches.'

'Cheese?'

'Corned beef.'

'Corned beef.'

Patrick crawled out from under the desk and stood. His knees popped, as loud as it was painful.

An icy starfield suspended above them, they trudged the curve of Monkeyland's main footpath, heading for the adventure playground. Faecal and urine odours drifted to them; the hot smell of life.

From the macaque cage came a sudden, shocked detonation - a frightened creature leaping to the safety of a high branch, to cower and watch.

Patrick and Charlie walked on, past the A Compound. In the pooled darkness, Patrick saw chimp movement, recognizable even in abstract. And he wondered at the boldness of Rue's poisoner: it was so dark, and the still winter was undercut by furtive snuffles and sniffs, secret whoopings, the articulation of beasts.

Perhaps there was an ancestral memory of the creatures that had once hunted on English soil: wolves, bears, boar. Not chimpanzees. Chimps belonged to a far older habitat, an older region of the mind, and it was eerie, to hear them prowling and rustling and hooting in the Devon night.

He hurried to catch up with his son, and together they passed the donkeys and crested the incline. The adventure playground opened out beneath them.

They found a place close to the tyre-swing and sat. Patrick liked it, heel to haunch in the darkness with his boy.

Another hour of waiting - and they were startled from their meditations by movement; stealthy, sleek, quick. A fox. It came sniffing from the trees, skittering at an angle towards them. Then it caught their scent and stopped.

It stood there - slender and ribbed; a wild animal. Patrick supposed it came here to scavenge easy scraps. He felt for it; he felt sorry that he and Charlie had scared it.

He clapped his hands, once, resoundingly. The fox whirled and sprinted into the undergrowth.

Patrick stood. 'Come on. Nobody's coming.'

That was the problem.

Sunday was supposed to be his day off, and he wasn't going to waste it. So he woke before dawn and crept around the creaky, higgledy old house, bundling his clothes under his arm, shivering, trying not to wake anyone.

Jane was in the deepest part of sleep: her cheek compressed on the pillow, her mouth budded open. She was breathing heavily, not quite snoring. He closed the bedroom door and, to pass the kids' rooms, adopted a high-kneed, cartoon-sneak.

Having been up so late, Charlie would sleep until lunch. But Jo was an early riser, a dawn bird, and she enjoyed having a cup of tea with Patrick, the two of them sitting at the big wooden table in the cobwebby kitchen with the absurd and unlit old Aga. So he had to be quiet.

Downstairs, he pulled on his jeans, his walking boots, a sweater with frayed cuffs and a hole in each elbow. He was tall, strong, thickening, turning in places to flab. A bony face, vertically scored and notched. He wore gypsy hair, shaggy curls that tickled his neck. It too had been dark, once; now it was streaked with grey. And still, a pirate's ring through his earlobe.

He grabbed a kagoul from a hook in the downstairs lavatory - a clutter of coats and piled, muddy shoes that always smelled unaired - and stepped out into the morning.

The house stood alone in its two acres, the colour of biscuit, in need of repair and paint. It was old, ridiculously big, and not well-maintained - its limestone was darkening with green lichen and damp and weathering. Two bats, pipistrelles, drew lightning loops and low dives over its crooked chimney-pots.

Patrick didn't feel like its owner, nor even its custodian. He just lived there.

He tramped across the overgrown acre of rear garden, the wild grass wetting him to the knees. Then he stood on the rotting stile and craned his neck. He couldn't see it - not over the hedge and through the bracken and past the oak trees - but he could feel the ocean.

He crossed the stile into the oak woods, through which ran the South-west Coastal Footpath.

Dawn gave the air a blue-cathode light. Low mist clutched at his knees; it caught like gauze in branches and pooled in moss-draped roots. He walked the squelching topsoil, the leaf humus. Low branches, cold with dew, whipped his face. Then he passed through the trees and walked along the open clifftop, the Bristol Channel calm far below. He hiked down to the salt flats, on and into Innsmouth.

Nearest the harbour, the houses were small, lime-washed; many were now holiday homes and weekend cottages which hugged the narrow belt of the cobbled main street. He followed its bends to the harbour.

The boat was at the weir, bobbing softly on the swell, and Captain Harry was already on board, smoking a roll-up and listening to Motörhead on a tinny portable stereo.

Patrick clambered on board and paid Harry in cash, up front. The boat chugged out on the pewter water, luminous with sunrise, and Patrick smelled the salt and the fuel and the fish and oily, half-rotten wood.

They fished for a while, their silence broken by the occasional muttered comment. Patrick caught some skinny mackerel. He gutted them, and Captain Harry cooked them over a Primus stove; the blue flame whipping in the wind.

As he ate, Patrick noticed a disturbance in the water, a wake that moved against the waves. He followed it, and saw two fur seals, swimming by.

He knew seals were closely related to dogs. And that's how he thought of them in the fizzing instant before the water closed over their sleek wet heads: as dogs, swimming home. Because that's where dogs always went, in the end: dogs went home.

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