

I knew my aunt would be visiting that day because thousands of damselflies settled on the pristine lawns and garden furniture in our estate. They were always so dazzling against the grey sky and I much preferred their warm hum to the clatter of beetle wings I was used to. I scooped one up into my hand and ran inside the house.

“Daddy, Daddy! Aunt Anis is coming. Look,” I said, setting the whirring creature free in our living room. It settled on a vase that sat on the fire surround, its iridescent wings creating a kaleidoscope in the cut glass.

“Get that thing out of here. We’ll have enough trouble keeping them all out without you physically carrying them in.” *Thwack*. Daddy’s newspaper hit the bug and sent the vase crashing to the floor with it. Three or four stag beetles scuttled away avoiding the falling shards. I quickly grabbed the dustpan and brush and made sure to catch the beetles as well as the bits of glass, before my father spotted them. I set the creatures free outside the front door, remembering with a wince their companions crunched under eager feet earlier in the day.

The Murdochs’ barbecue was the highlight of summer on our street, although my father preferred not to go at all. That year had been no exception. It was always a huge affair with bunting strewn across Mr Murdoch’s topiary cypress trees, which were meticulously clipped into tight spirals. Everybody on Thistledown Street was invited.

My father and I walked the 200 or so yards along our street to the party, he with a Tupperware of potato salad under one arm and I holding a dried flower arrangement as a gift for Mrs. Murdoch. He passed his free hand over his shirt front, nervous as usual on social occasions and constantly checked the ground as we neared the house.

“It’s okay Daddy,” I whispered up to him as we reached the door, “I’ll keep watch for you.”

He stroked my hair and a half smile escaped his mouth. "Thank you."

"Luca! Harmony! Come in, come in, it's sooo lovely to see you," Mrs Murdoch clucked opening her front door and startling my father as she moved in to kiss him on the cheeks.

"Henry!" she called back into the house, "It's Luca Brown and Harmony. Do get Luca a drink, dear and whatever Harmony might like."

I handed the flower arrangement to her, "We thought you might like these, Mrs Murdoch," I said.

"Oh, how lovely," she said holding it at eye level, "So much more practical than fresh, don't you think?" My father nodded and I noticed him staring down, his eyes following movement on the floor. He looked panicked.

"These will look just perfect on the sideboard in the morning room. Thank you sooo much."

I followed his stare down to the laminate floor and saw two black male stag beetles battling each other in the shadow of Mrs Murdoch's high heels. I motioned with my hand for my father to move into the other room.

The door bell rang again and Mrs. Murdoch opened the door to the Harpingdon family from number 23.

"It's sooo lovely to see you all. Henry! Max and Maureen Harpingdon are here. Do get them both a drink."

Millie and Max Jr. came out from behind their parents and spotted me picking the beetles up.

"What's that?" Max asked.

"Nothing," I said, "I dropped something, that's all."

"Show me," he ordered. Max Jr. was four and had no regard for me being almost three times his age.

"It's none of your business, Max," I told him, but it was too late. I heard Millie scream.

“Bugs! Mummy look horrid black bugs!” and before I could stop her she stamped her patent leather sandal down on another two beetles I hadn’t had chance to save. Max stomped down, laughing, on a green beetle that came out from under a potted plant by the doorway. I heard its hard carapace crunch.

“Millie, what a brave girl you are,” said Mrs. Murdoch, “Thank you sooo much, Max. How helpful you both are.”

Just as I had predicted, Aunt Anis arrived later that evening in a haze of red damselflies. She wafted the insects away with one graceful move of her pale hand as she moved through our front door.

“How’s my little ladybird?” she said, crouching and hanging out her arms for a hug. I was too tall for crouching now, but it felt wonderful to be enveloped in the femininity of her; it had been so long since Mummy had gone.

“How are you Lucanus?” she called to my father.

“Anis, you know nobody calls me that anymore. It’s just Luca now.” He walked from the kitchen and kissed his sister’s cheek lightly.

“Still in denial I see,” she said sweeping shimmering dust from the back of her long skirt and taking a seat on our leather armchair.

“I hope you’re planning on getting rid of those bugs. The neighbours won’t stand for it,” my father said. He walked back to the kitchen.

“But Daddy, they’re so lovely. Can’t they stay?” I pleaded. Aunt Anis’ last visit had been the previous summer and I hadn’t seen a damselfly since.

This was a rare treat in our town.

“They can’t stay. Your aunt will have to send them away or I’m going to have to spray them out of here.”

She hardened. “You keep that filthy stuff away from my damselflies.” My aunt’s brow crinkled and she bit her lip.

“Just for a little while. Please Daddy,” I held his hand and leaned into him, looking upwards. He inhaled deeply, but his eyes softened.

“Ok, but they have to be gone first thing in the morning Anis. Do you hear me? And keep them out of the house.”

“That’s fine. They won’t last long around here anyway. You’re not the only spray fiend in this town,” she sighed. “You’re no fun anymore. Is he Harmonia?” she winked in my direction, lightening the mood for my benefit.

“Daddy calls me Harmony now,” I said, immediately sorry I had mentioned it. “He thinks its sounds more...” I hesitated to say the word knowing it wouldn't sound right to her.

“Normal?” she finished the sentence for me rolling her eyes at my father.

“Whatever,” she shrugged. “You’re still my ladybird whatever your father calls you. Shall we go and see my lovely *zygoptera*? There are some real beauties this year. Let me show you.”

I took my aunt’s hand and followed her through the kitchen to the back garden. Outside, the sun was about to set and the damselflies were starting to swarm in the air above the house, obscuring the usual vista of smoke stacks in the middle distance.

Aunt Anis reached into the air and a bright blue specimen settled on her hand. She brought it down towards me.

“*Coenagrion scitulum*,” she said, “the Dainty Damselfly. It's been extinct in England since 1953, but here it is in all its glory.”

“How come?” I asked. It made no sense to me that an extinct insect could just follow my aunt to the midlands.

“There are some things it’s best not to wonder too loudly about. Just enjoy. It really is gorgeous isn’t it? There are lots more out there, too.”

I nodded and stared up into the cloud of insects, seeing flashes of blue and red and green. It was a display better than any I had seen on Bonfire night.

I grabbed Aunt Anis' hands and we twirled our way through the flies and across the lawn.

The next morning there was no sign of them. It was back to the grey, old Stockstown I knew. It was drizzling and colder than the previous evening. "How long are you going to stay, Aunt Anis?" I asked her at breakfast. She had made me pancakes with stewed apples and a dollop of ice cream. I tucked in trying to eat it before my father came down the stairs. "Just a few days," she said. "Long enough to celebrate a certain twelve-year-old's birthday."

"Really, will you still be here on my birthday?" It was the best present I could have hoped for.

"I will and I think we have a party to plan. Who do you want to invite?" Before I could answer my father came into the kitchen with a can of *Sectivore* in his hand and launched it towards the rubbish. It flew in a practiced arc and hit its target rattling against several identical cans that already filled the bin.

"What's this about a party?" he said smiling, "Whose birthday is it anyway?" he looked around the kitchen pretending not to see me.

"My birthday Daddy!" I whacked him on the arm forcing him to look at me.

"I see your birthday has come early," he said staring at my breakfast,

"Since when has ice cream been on our morning menu?"

"Since I came to visit," Aunt Anis said, "Stop being such a responsible parent. Loosen up. Have some ice cream."

He took her up on the offer and all three of us sat at the counter finishing off the tub. We were scraping out the last drops of melted vanilla when my father got up.

"Time for work."

“On a Saturday?” I groaned.

“Good overtime pay. They’ve got a huge *Sectivore* order to fill by the end of next week and we’ve all been asked to go in over the weekend.”

“Why don’t you give them your stockpile of cans? That should be enough to suffocate every six-legged creature from here to John O’Groats,” Aunt Anis stared at my father.

“Shall I take you to the library Harmony, or do you want to stay here with your sweet Auntie Anis?”

My aunt and I lay head to head on the sofa in the afternoon looking up at the sky through the living room window.

“How do you send them away?”

“It’s easy, really,” she said, “I just ask them in my mind to leave and they go. They just go.”

“Daddy can’t make his beetles go. He has to use spray. Or a rolled up magazine if there is no spray to hand. They keep coming back. He gets so annoyed.”

Two beetles scuttled out from under the sofa towards a potted spider plant by the side of the TV cabinet as if to stress my point. They were some of the straggling survivors of the daily cleansing my father carried out to rid our house of them. These were green tiger beetles, some of the prettier types that accompanied my father. I often encouraged them into a shoebox and set them free in the garden, though I never saw any outside.

“Your father doesn’t understand his companions. He never wanted them to come. Most of the men in our family have had a problem with it. Some have dealt with it better than others and your father is not the worst case. Do you know about your Great Uncle Apis, Grandma Vespa’s brother?”

“I don’t think so,” I said grabbing a cushion and snuggling into it. I had heard the story probably a dozen times before.

“Great Uncle Apis made his companion’s so angry that they nearly stung him to death. Silly old fool. There was a man who could have had the best honey in the world; sold it. Set up a honey empire, or nurtured them for royal jelly for goodness’ sake, but he spent all his time figuring out how to get rid of them. We’re not all as lucky as him. He didn’t realise those bees were his fortune. My damselflies, as fabulous as they are, will not make me rich, not in cash, at least. One day when a swarm settled in his porch Uncle Apis just went crazy and started bashing at them with a broom. The bees, probably tired of the constant peril, swarmed around his head and stung him so many times that Grandma Vespa said he was unrecognisable when she visited him in the hospital.”

“Did he get better?”

“Physically he did, but the bees never came back again. He was inconsolable. He had no idea what to do with himself once they were gone.” She paused to let the significance of this sink in. "Your father is lucky that none of his beetles bite back."

“And lucky that they haven’t left for good,” I said anticipating the way my aunt always ended this story.

“Exactly,” she smiled, “You’ve got more sense than him about it. You’ll be fine.”

"Has anyone in the family not had companions?" I had asked the question I had wanted to ask my father for what seemed like forever. Insect talk always made him prickly and I didn't often bring it up. With Anis it was easy.

“There was someone, once. A long time ago. I think she was a cousin of Great Grandmother Lucina. She was desperate to have companion butterflies or lacewings. Her twelfth birthday came and went and then her thirteenth, but in the end she attracted nothing at all. Tragic, really. She was never properly part of the family. The story goes that she married a bank

clerk and lived an unremarkable life in the suburbs. Your father would happily have swapped with her, I think. I'm sure she would have settled for his stag and tiger beetles."

I had more questions saved. "What about nasty insects? Has anyone ever had horrible companions?"

"Horrible? That's a matter of opinion isn't it? I know of one distant cousin who went to live in Mozambique as a child and attracted nothing but dung beetles."

"Eughh," I shivered at the prospect and crossed my fingers behind my back wishing away the possibility of such a fate.

"He loved them. I heard that he thought they were the most fascinating insects on the planet. He became a renowned specialist on all the different species. They were his life's passion. It's all a matter of perspective, you see?"

I wasn't sure I did see. Being followed by gnats or house flies, or cockroaches, or maybe worse, was not something I felt I could gladly put up with. How does a girl get any friends if she's constantly followed by dung beetles? How can you get a boyfriend if your companion mosquitoes keep biting all the potential candidates?

"How do you know what you'll attract, Aunt Anis?" trepidation in my voice, "What did you do to get the damselflies?"

"I wish I could give you a formula, but there isn't one. You get what you get. We don't choose them. They choose us."