

## **ANIMALS 2060**

Not surprisingly the children were the first to notice it. They were playing in Westcliff Gardens when suddenly they saw (I saw it too) a supple, brown shape leap from a branch into a ditch filled with dry leaves. There was a rustling sound and the children who, until then, had been chasing each other up and down the slope, stopped, terrified.

After a while some of the younger ones started towards the ditch but the others called them back : “Stop ! Stop ! It’s an animal !”

At the very mention of the word *animal*, they ran away from the ditch. Seconds later the park was deserted, all the children, big or small, had cleared off, presumably rushing home to tell their mothers.

Once again, the garden became delightfully quiet. I like to go there on warm afternoons. I had not realized that it was a school holiday, one of those October mid-term breaks. I try to avoid them usually, selfish old man that I am, enjoying lounging there by myself. I am retired, of course, and one of my few remaining pleasures in life is to go to a park with a book, reading a little and day-dreaming a lot.

When the kids had left I decided to have a look for myself at the “animal”. With a bit of luck, the children’s stories would not be believed, and most parents would dismiss the report out of hand. Yet it would only take one fussy mother calling the Police, and they would have to investigate. It is said that the only places in the world that still have animals are Canada and Siberia. Some people insist that there are a few in the Italian mountains but there hasn’t been a sighting in a long time. As for the middle of

Southend-on-Sea ! The very thought was preposterous.

The last time I saw an animal - a squirrel I believe - was in 2030, five years after the National Executive Central Committee (NECC for short) had placed a ban on all mammals as “parasites”, “food-wasters” and, by way of consequence, “enemies of the People”.

At that time, I, like millions of others, had to hand my pets over : a faithful old black dog and two hyperactive cats. I still have in my heart, like a gigantic thorn, the look of silent reproach my dog had given me as it was led briskly to the extermination tunnel. I should have had the courage to strangle one of the soldiers. Many had tried... and failed.

“You like your mutt so much? Go with him !” NECC officials would shout. The soldiers roaring with laughter might push an old man, a young woman or even a child into the tunnel with the animals. People hiding pets were officially branded as “traitors to the ideals of the Central Committee” and “enemies of the State”. They and their pets were whisked away in black marias, never to be seen again.

Human beings adapt to all sorts of situations. With the help of the propaganda machine the younger generation quickly learned to hate animals with all their might. Older folks, like myself, have learned to keep their mouths shut. Those who voiced objections invariably lost their jobs, were beaten up, had their houses or flats “searched” and, if they persisted, were sent to labor camps, psychiatric hospitals or re-education centers.

A diet of vegetable protein became the norm and it was surprising to see how quickly we all got used to living without animals. The word *animal* remained, of course, even if books on the subject had been burned and encyclopedias re-written, but it came to

mean *monster*. Children are now threatened with *animals* when they are naughty, although they would be quite incapable of telling the difference between a horse and a guinea-pig.

I got up and went to the ditch where the “animal” had disappeared, and right there, on the path leading to that ditch, were the unmistakable footprints of a cat.

I froze in the contemplation of this reminder of the past. I used to get annoyed when, years ago, my cats would come home on a wet afternoon and leave their marks on a variety of unsuitable places, from bedspreads to coffee-tables... I would give anything now to go back to those days.

My reverie was interrupted by a shout : “Get out of the way old man, we have reason to believe that there is an animal around these parts !”

Totalitarian States can change us into such marvelous liars ! I turned round with the most amused and innocent smile on my face: “An animal ! Surely Officer you’re not serious !”

He shrugged his shoulders : “I don’t believe it either but, as they say, better safe than sorry. Some kids have reported an animal jumping from a tree. It leaves us no choice : we’ve got to check.”

A black electric bus arrived at great speed and stopped by the park with a whimper of tires clinging to the road. A dozen or so policemen jumped out of the back door, sub-machine guns at the ready. The officer gave me a wink and cocked his head towards his men : “Besides, it’s good training, enn’it ?”

He had barely finished talking when something moved in the dry leaves. He pushed me aside none

too gently and poured a stream of bullets into the ditch : enough to kill at least a hundred *animals*.

“I’ve got it !” he yelled as he jumped in. He came out, holding by the tail a small tabby cat whose mangled body was barely held together in places. A profuse amount of blood, for such a small thing, stained a patch of gravel. A few drops splashed onto the officer’s shiny boots. The policeman was beside himself with joy : “Son of a gun, I never thought I would have a chance to see one, let alone kill one !” He started to laugh uncontrollably and mutter things about promotion.

A journalist appeared from nowhere. What a scoop if the Censure Board passed his story ! The Police were now trying to disperse the crowd who had been attracted by the commotion.

“Wouldn’t stay around here Pop”, said the officer “just in case there’s another one !” A loudspeaker urged people to go home and lock their doors. I had to leave, like everyone else.

Westcliff Gardens was sealed off. Eminent scientists, called in from London, said that if the animal had a mate it must have left the area by now. The whole population of Southend-on-Sea was urged to remain vigilant. Responsible parents were advised to refrain from sending their children to the park for several weeks, or until the other creature had been found. As for the Central Committee, they made a solemn promise : if the “Southend Monster” had a mate and if that mate was ever caught, it would be ceremonially roasted alive “as a symbol of all that was still backward and reactionary in our society.”

Within a few days, I was able to go back to my favorite bench in the autumn sunshine. No children, this time, even though the holiday wasn’t quite over yet.

It was another lovely afternoon. I was leafing through a *good* book, well and truly approved by the National Censure Board, but felt also immensely tired. Propping myself against the warm cement of the park bench I closed my eyes. The book fell to the grass, I didn't bother picking it up.

On the point of dozing off I sensed something warm and soft against my ankle. I looked down and my heart started to beat so fast that, for a moment, I thought I was going to have a cardiac arrest. I took a few deep breaths and managed to steady myself. A small tabby cat was brushing against my leg, purring softly... it looked like a female. I took her gently on my lap. She placed her front paws on my chest and started running the sides of her head against the buttons of my jacket. Had I been found at that moment, they would surely have sent me to the same sacrificial pyre the *animal* had been promised.

Totalitarian States bank on the fact that ordinary people just want to go on living, no matter how... and the State always wins. Could I take the cat home? She and I might survive for a few days but, sooner or later, we would both be faced with the prospect of a horrible death. How I despised myself and how ashamed I felt of being human !

That evening my grandson asked me why my eyes were red, as if I had been crying, and why my hands were covered in bandages. I looked at the little eight-year old. Children accept the most profound statements with the same equanimity and innocence as they absorb the most trivial remarks or the most preposterous hate-filled propaganda. That's why I never lie to them. I kept thinking of the lovely furry corpse hidden under the leaves, but as casually as possible, I managed to say : "I was in great danger. I saved my own life and... and I spared someone else a great deal of pain."

The little man took my hand and stared at the bandages : “Did it hurt a lot ?”

[Index Page](#)