

At the park, Sherrie-Lee took her notebook and pen from her pocket and flicked over to a new page. She wrote down the date and the time. There were quite a few people around, but that was the good thing about insects, they didn't seem to mind people the way some species of birds did. She took her usual route. Since the fifteenth of March, she had been doing a survey of insects in the park. She was good at this kind of thing. For two years, she had been monitoring birds, and had become an expert on the ones that lived around here. She had taught herself the names of all the ones she had seen and could tell a crow from a raven. A raven was bigger and when it was flying its tail fanned out in a kind of diamond shape, whereas a crow's tail was more rounded. Crows also liked to hang out by themselves, or in pairs. Rooks too, she could spot. They had thinner greyish beaks, and lived in groups, often alongside jackdaws. Jackdaws were the easiest to spot. They had grey heads and pale eyes. All the different kinds of birds had their own special habits. Their own special way of being. There was no end to all the amazing facts you could learn about them. Learning the names of different animals, finding out how to tell one from another felt important. Finding out about them, and finding a way in, opened up the world in a new way. This learning of names, this storing of facts inside herself. You'd be amazed if you took the time to find out. Like how crows never forget a face. Or how they are highly intelligent, and when they encounter a mean human, they teach other crows to recognise that human so they can avoid them. So now, when she saw a crow, she could think of its name and all the facts she knew about it. It was like a story in a way, and that's how she thought of it. Being drawn into a world created by the story of an animal. The library had loads of books about birds. Birds were what she really loved. Probably, there were just as many interesting facts about insects, but she was finding it more difficult to get drawn into their stories. She moved to insects because she had been learning about the insect

population collapse. She had been so fixated on the birds that she hadn't noticed the insects so much. Though it made sense, and you could see that that was probably why a lot of birds were dying out, the insect-feeders anyway. The seed-eaters had problems of their own.

Everything was dying out and it was all happening a lot quicker than anyone imagined. They were losing their habitats on a daily basis. Sometimes it depressed her so much that she had difficulty getting out of bed. The creatures were powerless in it all. They just had to stand by as their worlds disappeared. Powerless and voiceless. They couldn't stand up for themselves. She had a secret wish that she would find an orphaned corvid baby, perhaps a crow, that she would raise it and teach it to talk. Though she knew too that if you found an orphan like that, it probably wasn't an orphan and you should leave it to its parents: they were the best at looking after it. Rescuing baby birds was a bit like giving bread and milk to hedgehogs. It was misguided. A lot of people didn't know that. That bread and milk is poisonous for hedgehogs and that rescuing a bird is almost definitely doing more harm than good.

She spent a lot of time back in March and April learning about the different species of insects, but all the time she still came across ones that she didn't know the names of, there were so many different species, and sometimes some of the ones she knew were hard to tell apart so there was a bit of guesswork involved too. A bit like looking at stars. She found it even more depressing than monitoring birds. All the stuff she had read. Farmers, gardeners, haters of ants, all of them were addicted to insecticides. She went to the garden section of the DIY superstore on the edge of town and hid all the insecticides. It took ages finding places to put them all, where they wouldn't be found so easily. She pushed some behind the grass seed. Some she put inside a kind of fancy metal bin dotted with round holes. Others she put

in a trolley, or hid behind bags of gravel. It was not like other shops, because it was massive and there were not many shop assistants and they didn't seem to worry about shoplifters so they were not always on the lookout like they were at other places. Another time she took a roll of labels from school and wrote on each one – DO NOT BUY THIS PRODUCT!!!! IT KILLS ALL THE BEES AND EVENTUALLY YOU!!!– and stuck them on the spray canisters. People were short-sighted and could not see how bad killing insects was. At first, she thought they were just fucking stupid, but that was not fair, they just needed educating. And all the companies should not be producing the insecticides and advertising them in the first place. She was optimistic in this respect. People just needed saving from themselves. This phrase she had heard somewhere and thought of it each time she found herself thinking about this particular dilemma. Farmers ought to know better, though. Living in nature and being dependent on insects to pollinate their crops, and still they sprayed, even when they didn't need to. Neonicotinoids were the worst. She had been researching all about them in the computer room at school. They were a nerve poison. A nerve poison! And deadly. Just five maize seeds sprayed with the stuff was enough to kill a partridge. And that was just the start, if it got in the soil and the food chain. She could feel the rapid thud of her heartbeat.

All the way up to the folly at the high point of the park, she didn't see any insects. But that part was all rhododendrons and those big waxy-leaved plants with no flowers, so it was usually the deadest part, insect-wise. She probably could find some if she looked hard in the grass, but she didn't do that in this part of the park and she needed to keep to the same routine. Behind the folly was better. There was a kind of small meadow with grasses and tall, wild daisies. This folly bothered her, too. It was a kind of stone seat with four stone columns and a roof above it. It wasn't the thing itself that bothered her. The word was the

problem. She looked the word up once, but it didn't seem right. It was a Victorian thing, this kind of folly. The dictionary had said. Sherrie-Lee thought it was a silly word for a silly thing, and that made it seem worse somehow. They had a lot to answer for, those Victorians. The sign to it saying folly also irked her. She sighed, seeing it now, as she always tried not to look at it. She always tried, but never succeeded. This was like a ritual. Always at the same section of the park she would begin trying not to see it, and then she would see the thing. It was mad, really. I mean, how hard could it be? You just needed not to look that way. But not looking at something was a lot harder than you might imagine. Anyway, the seat itself, when she got there, was a good place to sit for twenty minutes to count the insects in the meadow. The hill was steep. It made her breathless getting to the top, her poor heart working overtime. Made her legs ache, striding up. From the seat, she breathed in the warm air. A small breeze rustled through the pink heads of the grasses, making them all move in the same direction. There were a couple of white butterflies flitting together. She wrote down *two cabbage whites* – there were a couple of other butterflies they could have been but she plumped for cabbage whites. There was a six-spot burnet moth milling around the yellow flower heads of common ragwort. And a hoverfly near to that. She wrote them down in her notepad.