

VISITORS

Stillness!

A blissful afternoon on the terrace.

A commodity here rarer by the month, stillness. That profound suspension, an aural immobility that is yet not silence, a thing of mountains, resides here in these particular ones in ever shorter duration. When it comes it is surely a kind of heaven in this modern world of incessant noise. On this particular afternoon it was with us. No wind, no raucous oriental ring doves, no motor vehicles, generator engines, wind turbines, yogi drumming, building maintenance, just a beatific ultimate peace within which the quiet calls of smaller birds were subsumed. With me a friend, a musician on a brief holiday from another world, one dominated by sounds and city life. We sat at my big round table set on the corner of the terrace. Vistas down two valleys led to a sea that, one way blue the other silver, seemed to fill two basins. Totally illusion of course, the dimension of distance flattened by a certain light and state of mind into planes. Each blue meniscus filling catenaries slung between mountains. Idyllic after a light lunch, it remains still sharing the table. So we too sat quietly, a silence between old friends.

Nothing disturbed the stillness, no sense of movement, no rustle of twigs nor of body brushing against surfaces. There was no apparent sense of any movement, even out of the corner of the eye. But quite intrusive came a strong sense of being intently observed. Strange these sensations aren't they! It wasn't my companion though. She saw it first, and glancing in the direction silently indicated I met small dark watchful eyes set in a slender prismatic head. No other movement than the occasional flickering tongue indicated that the snake, which had emerged from a kindling bundle on the alcove ledge, was not asleep. Just sunbathing and savouring us. A young and slender thing, slender as all young things should be. Gleaming scales and elegant markings told the world 'I am an immature ladder snake!' These adolescent stages are indeed attractive. This was only a metre long, half grown perhaps. Like us, they tend to grow dull and a bit portly with age, strong and confident enough to bar ones path on a sandy rambla bed but also capable of exceptional fluidity of movement. This one was already confident enough, its gaze steady, assessing us. Then, apparently having had enough sunbathing for the moment and convinced we were inedible and

harmless it turned itself into mobile knots and doubled back on itself but not to retreat into the kindling.

Against this alcove wall is an antique harrow of cut shells embedded in an olive wood sledge. An old peasant tool for threshing grain on the era below, it had been made into an artwork. Taken down from its wall hanging I had forgotten to ask for help to rehang it. So it remained just ledged against the adobe. Too many other problems this long cold winter. So, a convenient mountaineering wall for this young athlete which took full advantage of what was offered, stretched itself and started climbing. At first it was not too adventurous attempting only to reach the nearby window sill. Many times later in the year – this was only February – one can see ghekkos plastered like cheap pottery imitations of themselves bought in souvenir shops high on the walls of this particular alcove. One knew then that there had been a visitor, scaring whole families of these chattering reptiles witless out of their hiding crevices. Quite often too, sitting at my computer I would come face to face with a ladder snake peering in at me from this window sill. Always amusing when they sway from side to side as though responding to some remote snake charmer, though really only to get a better view.



But these are no cobras. Their fangs are set well back in the mouth and although a bite from a mature ladder snake can be very painful it isn't venomous. And one would have to be really careless to permit any part of one's anatomy to venture that far into the mouth of one. At that stage they eat rats; very useful. But these young ones enjoy ghekkos. My reference book says rarely lizards.

We watched it then practise on the climbing wall, peering into corners, behind the sledge plank, trying to reach the window sill. It didn't seem too competent. Too big a chasm there for its size. Ghekkos though, remained resolutely elsewhere. Fruitless! So, like all young things it became more adventurous; or perhaps it was just very hungry waking out of hibernation, needing breakfast. It started to use the sledge to climb the walls. But only ghekkos and few snakes can do that with much chance of success. However the confidence of this youngster seemed boundless. Eventually only one third of its body remained supported on the sledge. Quite how one couldn't know because they have no means of gripping a vertical surface other than scale friction and rely almost entirely on muscle power. The inevitable was then another demonstration of coiled muscle tumbling and clattering, another mobile knot, into the bundle of kindling, disappearing amongst the twigs. But for only a few seconds. A cautious head around the box and then perhaps a quarter of its body and once again it enjoyed a sunbathe, uncloseable eyes immobile, tongue flickering, tasting the air.

After this brief pleasure of strong spring sunshine another adventure. This time it wove rippling snakes and ladders curves between the protruding shell pieces, slowly but elegantly reaching the top of the sledge where

ironwork once used to attach a chain from the device to a donkey gave extra support. From there it reared up. It peered back and forth into the topmost corners of the alcove, though how it might have expected to get to them one could not quite see. Not a ghekkō nor even a spider. So it stretched further and further until support once again ran out and again, twisting and turning it fell the two metres or so into the kindling box. Three more equally futile adventures like this – well, most young things learn this way; only when we get older does caution overrule confidence in attainment, to our detriment – and it decided to reconsider its situation.

Once again it rested on the alcove seat in the sun, its tongue tasting, smelling the air around it. But now it had a scent and became more alert if that was possible. Just below it on the shelf was a metal bracket, also removed for our repaint. Apparently solid metal in fact its arms were hollow with holes in it for fixing. Slowly, a true instinctive predator it slid down from its ledge and edged alongside the bracket, intent now not on staring us out but on a mission. Easing its head sideways over the bracket it peered down one of the screw holes. Then its tongue flickered into the hole two or three times. Pushing its nose into the hole, its tongue obviously smelling around inside the hollow, its watchful eyes alert on top. Another go! A few inches along the bracket arm was another screw hole. Out of this suddenly popped the head and then the upper (can one really call this 'upper'? - torso of a





panicked Spanish rock lizard. Panic can be an excellent defence mechanism, rendering an animal unpredictable to a predator. I have watched a mouse defeat a marsh harrier on an open asphalt road in this way. But not in this situation.

Slender, agile, these lizards are themselves swift hunters. But either the snake anticipated events or the lizard was hampered in a hole too small and before it had time to emerge fully, when perhaps only its tail would have been meat, the snake, with no apparent effort grabbed it just behind its forelegs and deftly flicked it out of the hole. Its tail revealed its youthfulness. This half grown male would never now attain the lesser brilliance of adulthood nor the indignity of being tail-less whilst a changeling. Its struggles served only to allow the snake, in comparative terms its contemporary, to pull it back in and on to its fangs, where it was chewed until it could be turned around and swallowed, tail still protesting, head first.

At this point I realised that, contrary to normal behaviour, hypnotised by events, I had made no attempt to video the drama. Rushing into the

house I returned with my camera just in time to photograph the lizard's bright tail with which it had attempted to pull itself free, desperately thrashing about from the snake's mouth. A spasmodically jerking bulge in the body revealed the lizard's passage along the tube but for so short a time it seemed impossible. Quickly the snake's slender body regained its sleekness, the lizard crushed completely. They have very fine bones that even an ant can carry away. A few seconds to savour the moment and then, giving us a disdainful look – or was it perhaps feeling over confident for a moment! - a few flickers of its tongue, what might pass for belches and it slowly slid down from the ledge, rippling with self satisfaction away around a corner of the wall and into the wilderness of an overgrown border.

Strange! It seemed that the magical stillness of the afternoon had been completely broken. So many visitors. And a wind had arisen unnoticed.

Whew! Time to make tea!

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(You can see the action on my website page 'Other Creatures'!)



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