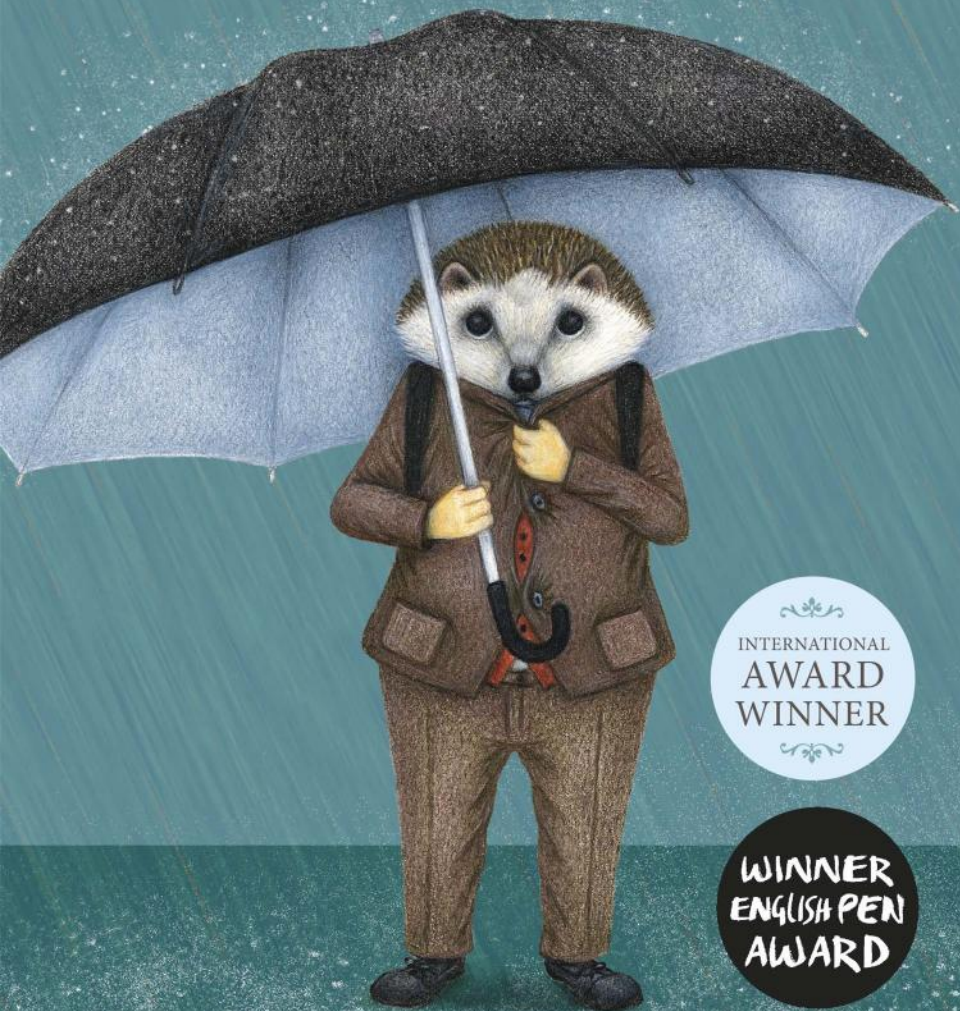


JEAN-CLAUDE MOURLEVAT

TRANSLATED BY ROS SCHWARTZ

Jefferson



INTERNATIONAL
AWARD
WINNER

WINNER
ENGLISH PEN
AWARD

Jefferson

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For my children, who opened my eyes
JCM

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Author's note

The land where this story begins is inhabited by animals who can walk on their hind legs, talk, borrow books from the library, fall in love, send text messages and go to the hairdresser's. The neighbouring country is home to humans, who are the most intelligent of animals.

1



The young hedgehog Jefferson Ponsonby-Smythe hummed to himself as he finished tidying his abode, *pom-pom-tiddly-pom*, like someone who was in a very good mood. When everything was hunky-dory, the brush shaken out of the window and the dustpan back on its nail, he set his oven timer so that his creamy potatoes would be cooked to perfection by the time he came home. Then he put on his jacket and fastened the middle button, noticing how the fabric puckered over his budding paunch. He'd have to cut down on the biscuits from now on.

He spritzed himself with *Fern* eau de toilette, went into the hallway and put on his spotlessly shiny shoes, placing first his right foot and then his left on the little stool. Then he slipped on his rucksack and went out. The reason he was so cheerful that morning was

simple: he'd decided to go to the hairdresser's. It had suddenly struck him when he was getting washed and dressed that his elegant quiff was a mess. And one thing he hated was looking unkempt. Right! He'd go into town and have his quiff trimmed!

While there, he'd return the book he'd borrowed from the library the previous week, an adventure story called *Alone on the River*. The action took place on the Orinoco and the hero, a young human called Chuck, overcame a whole series of challenges with fearless courage. Solitude, hunger, thirst, mosquitoes, hostile forest-dwellers, torrential rain, scorching heat and wild animals . . . Chuck triumphed over all adversity.

Snuggled under his blanket, his steaming cup of herbal tea on the bedside table, Jefferson had imagined that *he* was Chuck. He sometimes caught himself clenching his fists as he read, his eyes popping. In any case, the book had kept him awake till dawn two nights in a row. He'd especially loved the chapter where Chuck, lost in the jungle, tries to find his way using the star technique. You set off in one direction at random, walk straight ahead for fifty paces and then, if you find nothing, you go back to your starting point and try your luck in a different direction. He'd

also enjoyed the chilling episode where Chuck, starving, decides to kill his dog and eat him to survive, but at the last minute he relents, starts to cry and spares the poor creature. On reading those pages, Jefferson had to rummage under his pillow for his handkerchief and dab his eyes. Later on in the story, the dog saves Chuck's life, paying him back in kind. Again, that brought tears to Jefferson's eyes. That's one of the best things about living alone: you can sing loudly and out of tune, wander around naked, eat whenever you like and cry unashamedly.

It was a glorious autumn morning. Jefferson locked his front door, put the key in his left trouser pocket, took his phone out of the other and texted the following message:

Dear Gilbert, don't come over this morning. I'm in town. I'm going to have my quiff trimmed at Cut 'n' Dye. I'll be back around lunchtime. I've put a potato dish in the oven, if you fancy it . . . Ciao, buddy!

Then off he set with a song in his heart. What more could he ask of life? He was blessed with robust health, he had a roof over his head, plenty of food, a wonderful friend in Gilbert the pig, and he lived

in the most delightful surroundings on the fringes of a beechwood.

The town was close by. You just had to walk downhill for a few minutes along a path lined with currant bushes and you soon came to the road. Jefferson followed this road, rounding bend after bend.

Was it because his thoughts were still with Chuck on the banks of the Orinoco? Or because he was already picturing himself in the gentle hands of Sophie, the young hairdresser's assistant who would shampoo him? Whatever the reason, it meant he crossed the road at an awkward spot, just after a tight bend.

A car heading away from the town came hurtling towards him at over eighty miles an hour. Jefferson caught only a glimpse of the two people inside. The driver was a tall, very thin human with a shaved head. He looked as if he'd had to fold himself up to fit his lanky frame into the car. The passenger, another human, much beefier, was wearing a woollen beanie and his elbow was resting on the door with the window wound down. The driver slammed on the brakes with a screech of tyres. Jefferson let out a terrible squeal, leaped out of the way and tumbled

backwards into the ditch. The jeep swerved and the passenger barked out of the open window something that began with ‘You . . .’ and ended with ‘. . . hedgehog’, preceded by an adjective that can’t be repeated here.

‘Same to you!’ grunted Jefferson.

He watched the vehicle accelerate and vanish. He got to his feet, adjusted his clothes, felt his soaked bottom and wondered whether he should go home and get changed. He dithered for a moment and then decided he couldn’t be bothered to walk all the way back. My trousers will dry out on the way, he said to himself. And he’d go to the library first. Then the wet patch would be gone by the time he saw Sophie, so she wouldn’t think . . . goodness knows what.

Busy with these thoughts, he was aware that his heart was still thumping annoyingly. The incident had shaken him badly. He’d come within a whisker of death and it had nearly been ‘Bye, bye, hedgehog!’ That was life: one minute you feel light, joyful and carefree and then, in a split-second, everything changes. Happiness is so fragile, he said to himself, and tried to think about other things.

By the time he reached town, he was almost back to his usual chirpy self. He whistled as he sauntered

up the high street and then took the left fork at the fountain. The staff at the public library knew him well and they greeted him with a delighted, ‘Hello, Jefferson!’

‘Did you enjoy it?’ asked the librarian, a kindly mother duck with heart-shaped spectacles, as he handed *Alone on the River* in at the returns desk. He remembered that she was the one who’d suggested the book.

‘Enjoy it? No!’ he began, and then, because she looked crestfallen and he didn’t want to tease her any longer, he added, ‘I didn’t *enjoy* it, I LOVED it. Thank you so much for your advice. I’m going to recommend it to my friend Gilbert.’

‘Oh, Mr Jefferson,’ said the librarian, blushing. ‘You had me worried. And surprised, too, because I was certain that you’d find Chuck’s adventures thrilling. You can renew it now if you like, and lend it to your friend yourself.’

He thanked her, then rooted around among the stacks for a while before perching casually on a corner of the radiator to flick through some magazines. Half an hour later, he left the library, *Alone on the River* still in his rucksack and his bottom almost dry.

*

The hair salon Cut 'n' Dye was at the very end of the same street. It was an unpretentious, old-fashioned shop which could only hold three customers at one time. Edgar, the owner, was a kindly, easy-going badger who had, in Jefferson's eyes, or rather ears, a rare and precious quality in a hairdresser: he was able to cut your hair in silence.

A customer of the salon for many years, Jefferson knew he wouldn't be deluged with chitchat. He smoothed his jacket, thrust out his chest, took a few deep breaths and cleared his throat. Supposing he invited Sophie for a drink when she finished work? A very good idea, that. An excellent idea, even. He would wait until Mr Edgar was on the telephone, for instance, and pluck up his courage: 'I say, Sophie, what time do you finish? Because I was thinking, um . . . I mean, I was saying to myself, as it were . . . that maybe . . .'

Sophie was Mr Edgar's niece, and had been taken on by her uncle, who was getting older, to help him out. Jefferson loved it when she shampooed him, massaging his head with her supple fingers. He adored it when she asked whether the water was too hot or too cold. Whatever the temperature, he would reply that it was perfect. She could have poured

freezing or boiling water over him and he wouldn't have complained. Comfortably settled on the booster seat that was necessary given his diminutive height, he'd close his eyes with pleasure and imagine that she was his girlfriend. Because, although living alone has some benefits, as we've seen, sometimes it can feel . . . a little lonesome.

When Jefferson tried the handle, he was surprised to find that the door wouldn't open, even though the Cut 'n' Dye sign above it was illuminated and the metal shutter raised. He peered in to try and see through the curtains. The lights were on. A matronly nanny goat was asleep beneath a hood dryer, a plastic cap on her head. Everything seemed to be in order, except that there was no sign of the hairdresser, Mr Edgar, or of Sophie. Jefferson tapped on the window and waited. He tapped again, a little harder, to no avail, and, recalling that there was a window at the back, he decided to walk around the building.

The double window was open, but climbing in would be illegal, and there was nothing Jefferson hated more than breaking the law. He had always tried to keep to the rules, partly out of public-spiritedness but most of all, it has to be said, so that he'd be left in peace. So he went back to the front door, rapped

on the glass again and, since nothing moved inside, came to the conclusion that he'd just have to go home.

Remorse stopped him in his tracks. What if something had happened . . . ? What if Sophie was in danger! The idea that he could be some sort of hero in the young badger's eyes prompted him to make a sudden and irresistible U-turn. Two minutes later, he was standing once more beneath the open window at the back of the building.

'Mr Edgar! Miss Sophie!' he called, and since no one bothered to reply, he mustered all his courage and heaved himself up through the window, at the risk of snagging his jacket.

He found himself in an office cluttered with bottles, boxes, mousses, shampoos and other hair products. The only sound he could hear from the front of the shop was that of the local radio. A gabbling voice was urging listeners to dial a premium number without delay, thanks to which, with a lot of luck, they'd win nothing at all. He advanced gingerly, and called out again: 'Mr Edgar? Miss Sophie? It's me, Jefferson. I took the liberty . . .'

The nanny goat was fast asleep under her hood, her half-open mouth revealing a perfect set of

dentures, a thin trickle of saliva dribbling slowly down her chin. She appeared to be floating in a gentle state of rapture. Perhaps she was dreaming of her great-grandkids.

Jefferson walked around the first customer chair, which was unoccupied, and instantly spotted Mr Edgar's cream-coloured shoes pointing upwards. They were unmistakable: a pair of hairdresser's shoes which the good man was always boasting about, saying they were as comfortable as bedroom slippers. Another step and Jefferson could see his legs lying parallel on the floor, then his white coat carefully buttoned all the way down, and then, further up his body, the big scissors, one blade plunged up to the hilt in Mr Edgar's chest.

The bloodstain spreading from the wound reminded Jefferson of a map of Madagascar. Ironically, the words Cut 'n' Dye were embroidered just above it. Never had the salon's name been more apt.

Mr Edgar looked as if he were asleep, like his customer, but he wasn't dreaming of kids. He wasn't dreaming of anything at all: he was dead.

Until that day, life had been kind to Jefferson and shielded him. He'd never witnessed such a terrible scene before, and his reaction was spectacular. He



started to choke, then he made a strange sound that went something like, ‘Waaaaaagh . . . waaaaaagh!’

That roughly translates as, ‘Oh my gosh! This is a terrible sight!’

He went on with: ‘Guhhhhhh-arghhhhh!’ which meant something like, ‘This man doesn’t appear to have died of natural causes. In my opinion, this is a clear-cut case of murder.’

And he concluded with a drawn-out, plaintive ‘Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!’

In other words: ‘A sight like this certainly shakes you up!’

Then he did the one thing he should never have done: he knelt down beside the body and whispered: ‘Hold on there, Mr Edgar, I’m going to remove these . . .’ as he grasped the scissors in his right hand and pulled them out of the wound, surprised at how hard they resisted. You’d think a blade plunged into a body would come out like a knife from butter, but that’s not true – it sticks!

That was the moment the sleeping nanny goat chose to emerge from her sweet dream. What she saw – in other words Mr Edgar’s body on the floor and beside him the murderer, weapon in hand – left her without the shadow of a doubt. She opened her

enormous mouth and let out a shriek so shrill that one of the hand mirrors cracked: ‘Eeeeeeeeee! Help! Eeeeeeeeee! Murderer!’

Jefferson dropped the scissors. ‘No, madam, it’s not me! I came in and I—’

She wouldn’t let him finish. She screamed all the louder, making the uvula at the back of her throat wobble. ‘He’s killed Mr Edgar! He’s going to kill me too! Eeeeeeeeee!’

Jefferson pressed his hands together. ‘No, madam, I swear—’

She pushed up the hood and tore off the plastic cap, exposing her mauve hair and her head full of curlers. Then she ran to the door and frantically yanked the handle, but the door was locked. She didn’t hesitate. The certainty that she was trapped in a cramped room in the company of a killer gave her an energy rush. She took a two-metre run-up and charged, shoulder first, like a rugby pro. The door gave way immediately. The goat landed on the pavement on all four legs, bounced up as if she were mounted on springs and set off as fast as her short limbs would carry her.

She was shrieking non-stop. ‘It’s him! It’s *hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim!*’ pointing an accusing finger at Jefferson,

who was standing in the doorway stammering feebly, 'No, no, it wasn't me!' much too softly to compete with the goat's ear-piercing screams.

When he saw that she'd already managed to alert two young billy goats, and they were making a beeline for him, trotting at first, then breaking into a run, he obeyed the oldest reflex in the world: flight. In other words, he cleared off, he scarpered, he skedaddled, or whatever you want to call it. Never in his life had he sprinted like that. He felt his legs spinning under him like the wheels of a racing car. Fear gave him wings, and he really did feel as if he was flying as he leaped over a sign saying *ROAD WORKS* and then a hole at least three metres wide. His pursuers had to skirt around it, which gave him a decisive lead. One of them yelled: 'Stop, Jefferson!' but on he ran, without letting up, turning right at each street corner so as to throw them off.

Instinct, combined with, it has to be said, a huge stroke of luck, led him to a patch of wasteland. There, hidden from view, he could at last slow down. He went to ground against a fence overgrown with nettles and brambles, his heart about to burst, his lungs on fire. He realised that during his flight, he'd been stammering continuously: 'It wasn't me, it wasn't me!'

He fell silent, waited a few minutes and, when he had fully recovered his breath, repeated, 'It wasn't me.'

Then he noticed his trousers were wet again, and this time it wasn't ditch water. The accident must have happened when he discovered the dead body. You have to understand – the shock, the emotion of it all. He almost wept with shame.

What would Chuck have done in his situation? The question had barely formed in his mind when the answer came: Chuck wouldn't have got himself into such a situation.

2



Jefferson risked a peek through a gap in the fence and saw that the countryside was very close. No way could he expose himself by walking along the road. He just needed to reach that clump of hazelnut trees, for example, and then he'd cut across the fields and go through the wood. Once home, he'd reflect on his situation. The most urgent thing was to find a safe place where he could think. He gave himself a pep talk, saying: 'Come on, hedgehog, be strong!' and he squeezed between two slats.

Less than twenty minutes later, the back of his house at the end of the forest path was already in view. Then his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. The cheerful face of Gilbert the pig appeared on the screen, then the text message:

Hey buddy, don't no where you are but I suggest you
don't go home

Reading as he walked, Jefferson stopped in his
tracks and messaged:

But I'm almost home. I'll be there in a sec

The reply came back instantly:

Keep away, wotever you do! Turn around, go and
hyde in the woods and wait til I

Jefferson had no idea why Gilbert hadn't had time to finish his sentence, but the message was clear: he'd better not hang around. So he turned on his heel and went back the way he'd come. Being told not to go home because it's dangerous is very upsetting, because there's no place safer than home. What could be the threat? The police, already? He gave a few desperate groans of 'Oh no, oh no', and walked slowly, ready to dive into the undergrowth at the first warning.

The day had begun so well but now it was turning into a nightmare. Starting with the horror of the hair

salon, nice Mr Edgar stabbed in the chest with his own scissors, Sophie missing, and worst of all: that stupid nanny goat who hadn't even given him two seconds to explain. He was the designated, obvious, unquestionable culprit, and his running away made him look guilty. The goat had seen him with her own eyes, she'd seen him holding the weapon, and besides, the crime squad would quickly find the fingerprints on the scissors and establish that they were his. The next day, his photo would be on the front page of *The Daily Trumpet* with an attention-grabbing headline in big letters: MURDERER!

The article would be just as incriminating:

Hedgehog Jefferson Ponsonby-Smythe killed the highly respected badger Mr Edgar on the premises of his hair salon Cut 'n' Dye. The motive for this brutal act is a mystery. The murderer fled.

He had reached this damning conclusion when his phone vibrated again. Gilbert! If reassurance was to be had from anywhere, it would be from him. They'd been friends since childhood, like brothers, more than brothers, because they had chosen each other.

The message read:

Hey buddy . . . here I am as promised: meet around
13:00 at the Cross, all right?

Jefferson, who had been stressing for over two hours, felt a mixture of relief and emotion. Good old Gilbert, you could count on him! He replied at once: *OK*, then added:

Oh, and three things: 1) bring me a spare pair of trousers 2) don't ask me why 3) don't ask me why you mustn't ask why.

Then he sped up his pace. The Cross was at the intersection of two paths, a few minutes away.

But as he made his way, feeling invigorated, he began to have doubts. At first it was a little warning bell, a barely perceptible *ding ding* . . . There was something odd about Gilbert's message. He stopped and re-read it carefully. The 'Hey buddy' was Gilbert's usual greeting, and was credible, but the rest bothered him. Gilbert would certainly not have written '13:00' but rather '1 pm'. And that 'all right' at the end

wasn't like him either. He would have written 'OK' or 'okay'. Weird . . .

Uncertain, Jefferson decided to play smart. If Gilbert's phone was in the wrong hands, those of the police, for example, he needed to find out. He typed:

The Cross? You mean the place where we buried marbles when we were kids?

The reply came back less than thirty seconds later:

Yes, where we entombed them. See ya!

Then the little warning bell became a deafening alarm, with a built-in siren. First of all because Jefferson and Gilbert had never buried any marbles at that spot – he'd just made that up – and secondly because of the law of probabilities. You can accept the most unlikely occurrences: that the same person wins the Lottery three times in a row, or that the Pope takes up skipping, but there was one thing that was absolutely impossible, and that was that Gilbert the pig would use a literary word like entombed! His spelling was atrocious and that correctly spelled 'entombed' with the silent 'b', was

beyond him. As for that pathetic ‘See ya!’ intended to sound young and cool, it didn’t fool him: no way had Gilbert written that message.

Panicked by this discovery (but proud of himself for making it!), Jefferson decided to continue on to the Cross. He’d see who was there. In the meantime, he wouldn’t send any more text messages which would immediately reveal his whereabouts. That’s how so many criminals had been caught. You might as well wear a high-vis jacket, grab a megaphone and shout: ‘I’m here, I’m here!’

When he was a stone’s throw from the Cross, he turned off the path and slipped silently and furtively among the tall ferns.

The midnight-blue uniforms stood out from the green foliage, and in the nick of time Jefferson spotted the unmoving backs of two police officers lying in wait. Two Great Danes of course, because the crime squad was almost exclusively made up of that breed. Batons and handcuffs dangled from their belts. He hadn’t been mistaken, the message was indeed a trap. A trap he had brilliantly thwarted. He veered to the right and spied another police officer hidden behind a dead tree, and then another. How many of those burly athletes had been sent to capture

Jefferson? He was all of 72 centimetres tall (with his heel cushions), and innocent to boot.

If they'd placed Gilbert as bait at the foot of the Cross, he wasn't going to walk into the lions' den to check. But if they'd let him go free, how on earth was he to find his friend now?

Jefferson had a little idea. And, with a bit of luck, the same thing would occur to Gilbert. The two of them had built a hut out of branches in a remote part of the woods. That had been seven or eight years ago when Jefferson was a very young hedgehog, still wet behind the ears, and Gilbert an immature young piglet. They'd worked hard on their hut for several months; it was a real labour of love. It had become their refuge, their secret hiding place. They'd spluttered over their first cigarette there, made themselves sick drinking cheap whisky and chilled listening to wild-boar rap (the best). They'd slept, eaten, laughed themselves silly and solved the world's problems there. If there was a hiding place where they could always go in the event of trouble, without even needing to tell each other, it was not the foot of the Cross – ha, ha! What a joke – but their hut!

Jefferson had no difficulty finding the hut, because his legs knew the way on their own, from

sheer force of habit, but he had a shock on reaching it. The roof had caved in, the sides had collapsed, and the interior was overrun with brambles. And worst of all: Gilbert wasn't there. Jefferson checked his phone: it was 2.15 pm. He realised he was starving hungry and very thirsty. He sat down on a tree trunk, feeling pretty wretched.

'I should never have run away,' he said to himself. 'I should have pinned that hysterical nanny goat to the floor before she kicked down the door and called the police myself. I'm going to hand myself in. That's it, I'm going to hand myself in and explain what really happened.' He began to work out what he would say, out loud, with all the conviction he could muster: *'The first thing I saw was Mr Edgar's feet, you see, I moved forward a little . . . I kneeled down and . . . this lady goat was asleep, she didn't see anything . . . I don't hold it against her, you know, she honestly thought that . . . but I swear to you . . . why would I have done that? . . . I was very fond of Mr Edgar . . . he's always . . .'*

So went his confused reasoning as he talked to the empty forest around him, when suddenly he heard a rustling sound coming from some bushes nearby. He threw himself onto his stomach. Then came three little whistled notes, brief and high-pitched: *wh . . .*

who . . . *who* . . . reassured him. He answered back:
wh . . . *who* . . . *who* . . . Their secret code. Gilbert!

Gilbert was taller than Jefferson, but that wasn't saying much. The striking thing about him was his incredibly radiant, happy-pig face. Jefferson would often say to himself that he had never seen anyone with such a gift for joyfulness. A sort of Olympic champion of cheeriness, a champion who didn't even need to train because that was his nature.

'What's this circus?' he laughed. 'I got picked up by three policemen staking out your place earlier. They asked me who I was and I told them—'

'Hold on,' Jefferson broke in. 'I'll tell you the whole story. But first of all, give me that.'

'Oh, yes. Here. They're mine. The legs will be a bit long on you, but you can just roll up the bottoms. Note that I'm not asking any questions and I'm not even smirking, OK. Look, am I smirking? No.'

He kept a straight face for three seconds before bursting out laughing. Jefferson shrugged.

'I got your message this morning, but I wasn't planning to come and see you, I was up to my ears in the *Highway Code*,' Gilbert went on, holding out the trousers that had been rolled up under his arm, and he tactfully turned his back so that Jefferson could

get changed. ‘Do you know that on a roundabout you must stay in the left-hand lane if you intend to turn—?’

Jefferson remembered that after years of missed buses, broken-down scooters and getting about on foot, his friend had made up his mind to take his driving test, a bold ambition because he was extremely clumsy and it was hard to imagine him at the wheel of anything other than a dodgem car.

‘I’m sorry, Gilbert,’ he interrupted him, ‘but I’m not really thinking about roundabouts right now . . . The police took your phone, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, I told them I was your friend, so of course, as soon as they saw me typing a message, they confiscated it, the dogs! But they gave it straight back to me so I could arrange to meet you. They forced me. Only I’m not stupid, I twigged your trick with the marbles and I purposely used a very grown-up word to alert you.’

‘Entombed?’

‘Yes, that’s right. I just made up the spelling. So, why are they after you?’

Faced with the enormity of what he was about to tell him, Jefferson hesitated. He finished doing up the trousers, threw the other pair behind a bush and



led his friend over to a moss-covered tree trunk, inviting him to sit down beside him.

‘Gilbert, I . . . I’ve been accused of murder.’

Since he’d just been rehearsing, it wasn’t too hard for him to describe the terrible chain of events that had led to him standing before Mr Edgar’s lifeless body. He sobbed as he recalled the scissors planted in the good man’s heart.

‘Oh dear . . .’ said Gilbert. ‘A badgercide . . .’

Jefferson continued with the account of his frenzied flight. ‘I’m going to turn myself in. Come with me. I’m going to turn myself in,’ he ended, whispering into his handkerchief.

Gilbert had listened without laughing, for once. But in the silence that followed, he slowly shook his head from right to left, a blissful smile on his lips, as if in wonder, then he blurted out a surprising and most unexpected, ‘Brill-iant!’

‘What’s brilliant?’

‘I mean it’s brilliant, isn’t it? Thrilling! Think about it! For years we’ve been dreaming about something amazing happening to us, for years we’ve been making up stupid adventures, playing make-believe. And now, this is it! A real adventure!’

Jefferson hadn't really thought about his situation in that light.

'Are you mad or what?' he groaned. 'Can't you see! I'm going to be hanged, beheaded, shot. Maybe all three at once!'

'Stop it, Jeff. Have you forgotten that the death penalty's been abolished? At worst you'll get thirty years. It soon passes. I'll wait for you at the prison gates with a bunch of dandelions and a Zimmer frame.'

'Gilbert, I'm not in the mood for laughing.'

'OK. No more joking. But you mustn't turn yourself in.'

'Why not?'

'Because if they have to choose between believing you, my dearest little hedgehog, or believing that respectable nanny goat, they won't hesitate. I can see only one solution.'

'What's that?'

'You must hide and see how the investigation progresses. We'll rebuild the hut and you will sleep here. Tonight I'll bring you a blanket and something to eat. Come on, let's get to work!'

Without waiting for a reply, he started reconstructing the framework out of branches. He

kept muttering little ‘brill-iants’ and Jefferson had no option but to help him.

When the hut’s frame was more or less finished, they cleared away the brambles, threw armfuls of ferns over the roof and made four walls from leafy branches.

‘There you are, Mr Jefferson! Like in the good old days! Stay hidden in here and wait for me. I’ll be back before nightfall. I’ll leave you my jacket in case I’m held up and the weather turns cold. We can forget about the phone, of course. And don’t worry, OK? We’ll prove your innocence.’

After about twenty metres, he turned around to add, still smiling, ‘I’m sorry about Mr Edgar, by the way. He was a decent guy, wasn’t he?’

Jefferson didn’t doubt his friend’s sincerity. He knew him well enough to be aware that with Gilbert, sadness sometimes took on a strange disguise.

He filled his afternoon as best he could. He washed his trousers in a stream and spread them on a rock to dry. He made the hut more comfortable by dragging in the stump that had served as a stool, then he improvised a mattress out of moss and leaves. But darkness fell over the wood without the tip of Gilbert’s snout reappearing and he had to resign

himself to curling up on his makeshift bed, wrapped in his friend's protective jacket and wondering what was going to become of him. He fell asleep, beset by confused thoughts of bloodstained scissors and an abandoned dish of creamy potatoes.