

## A GUIDE TO THE ALLOTMENT

### *Prologue*

In the pleasant garden suburb of old Ealing, with its fine provision of allotment holdings, vegetable growing is an excuse for all manner of play. People are attempting to regain their childhoods, hiding from their present domesticity, gossips and perverts, solitary loners who would be bossy if they had anyone to boss, merry types without a single scrap of social clout, formers of committees which nobody wants to join, cheats, would-be thieves, proto-rapists and most probably murderers as well. All human life thrives on our allotment. In their oldest clothes they stalk and steal, waiting, waiting for something salty to occur. How they long to be involved in something worthy of repute! How Lily longs for adventure.

*It scrapes back the earth, claws rattling on the frozen crust, scrapes and scuffles, then a glimpse of luminous white and, with the tip of its paw, it exposes the bony blue edge. The ground is soft with pine needles, so that it's easy to brush the soil aside. A path passes by the playground of a primary school and through the metal link fence the smaller children post their offerings, the holes between the links being just large enough for a biscuit or tangerine; once the vixen found a whole uneaten sausage.*

*Tonight she finds the skull, no bigger than a doll's, a tuft of infant hair curling comically in a patch of remaining gristle, along with two gap teeth, fine filigree nostrils, perfect and upturned in merriment, hollow eyes stare as it prods with a single elastic claw. The little jaw drops open in astonishment and before she can stop herself Hera gasps in pity for the poor lost thing.*

I remember, I think I remember, standing in a dark border with a trowel raised in one hand and a small bucket in the other. They must have been meant for the beach but I am at more serious work, not sandcastles for the sea to wash away. At three I imagine I am gardening. Gardening is what the grownups do. I concentrate, peering into the earth, under the overhanging branches of a dusty quince. The adult me flinches at that child self. What can I hope to grow there? Am I damaging the tree roots? Now I examine the photograph more closely and I catch myself looking out from under that fringe, straight at the camera, hoping even way back then that I might be able to charm you.

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The fox passes in front of a low winter moon, thin tail lifted, each whisker silver against the night. Raising its nose into the air, it sniffs, and looks about in a bored sort of way. It has been here many times before and oh how it longs for new savage adventure. Suddenly it screams, once and then again, twice, shrieks sharp and

high like a child, and then resumes its walk, paws held high, clip-clop, on the cold ground.

Someone is watching the vixen, watching over the allotment, over the sleeping suburb. If you looked up quickly into the half-dark you might think you saw a woman there, shrouded in the folds of a great swirling cloak. You strain to see her more clearly but then the firmament fast forwards - and it dissolves and she is gone; you turn away dizzy and uncertain. For she is vast: larger than any statue, she seems part of the sky itself - and yet her flesh is warm. She flinches in the nip of the night air. In the summer midges bite her, oblivious of their insolence. No statue has ever evoked her true grandeur; and nobody thought to wonder if she ever feels as puny as us, as we crouch in our tick-tack terraces on the outskirts of London, smug in the knowledge of superior catchment equity.

Well, Hera may be powerful but something seems to have gone awry. She is capable of pain and loss: she menstruates a river of blood; she can be tender as well as fickle; she dreams of human love the way an unbeliever imagines belief as comforting. Shivering in the witching

air, she sniffs and wraps her bronze hair about her, coiling it around her wrist and watches it shudder free. Older than this great city, older than the wheel, than the dinosaurs, older than the first pulsing amoeba that mutated, and so on and etcetera, she is usually oblivious to the things that concern us earthbound things. But tonight she is troubled. She for whom human feelings should be irrelevant – tonight she cannot escape their persistent prattle. She has become drawn into our little lives and she means to sort us out as quickly as she can.

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This is what happened and this is what she did about it. She allowed herself the embarrassing joy, the silly pleasure, of influencing a few paltry lives, that's all. Some she helped and some she did not. When you are Gaia, great goddess of the earth, queen of the sky, jealous as the moon, perhaps you can allow yourself such condescension, once in a while. She happened to look down, on such a night and place and time and to her surprise found herself a little interested in us.

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The vixen has returned, a rat swinging lifeless from its mouth. Then, what was limp, wriggles, its grin grows broader and it hurries home to crunch and kill in deep dark privacy. The voles in their secret burrows in the grass hear her pass and resume their meal of sunflower seed, scattered by an ancient compost heap. In one allotment shed, apparently no different from the rest, a small light burns and something human calls out, as they gaze short-sighted at that same shadowy sphere.

A man, cocooned in lumpy army-surplus sleeping bag, opens his eyes and sees the moon clear, stares down at him, so pale and distant, and for a moment he is still and forgets to remember some old, worn out disappointment. He wonders what he is doing here cold and alone. And then he feels the weight of his body, itch of his spine, ache of his bladder, thrill of the sciatic nerve in his flank, and he remembers and hides his eyes and forces a fist into his mouth to stop himself from howling too.

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Meanwhile I am at home. What do I look like? Like Michelle Pfeiffer, only without the heart-shaped face, without her figure or her colouring and my eyes, like most people's, are brown. I am lying in a cooling bath, flannel across face, sucking in air through the thin red towelling, stomach tense. This is why Americans prefer power showers, and I open my eyes into its warm allure. Neil rattles the door handle,

- Are you in there?

I have locked the door again and neither of us has mentioned the change. Despite myself I leap to the familiar irritation and cannot bear to formulate a single recognisable word in response.

- Ahahhr... through the flannel, and I drain some white hair from the soapy water, opaque as the canal.

- Jolly good. Best thing on a day like this. You take it easy. I'm out tonight – remember? Just another meeting – don't wait up.

- Umhmm..., but my most amenable tone. But I shouldn't be so bad-tempered, should I, for what has he done to deserve it?

- There's some winter roots' casserole in the fridge.

There's glamour. Swede and potato and sweetened with the last carrots from the allotment. He doesn't hear me, and who can blame him?

We have become too polite together and I wonder if he feels this dislike too, but it is more likely he is preoccupied with plans - and if he feels any exasperation it will be more to do with having to use the downstairs bog, that is freezing and has a temperamental flush. Also I remember there is no paper and cannot help smiling. He is a strong believer in conservation so it really should not bother him too much – and healthy roughage makes for neater stools. When did I become such a cow?

I try to recall all the reasons why I loved him and realise they all survive – he is still honest, passionate even, but just not about me anymore. And if I were a better sort of woman perhaps the fact that he now had a sense of purpose would impress me. But I preferred the

old Neil, with a peculiar enthusiasm for her and not this single-minded man ridding the world, or at least the borough ward, of a particular brand of evil.

I suspect he may enjoy my discomfort at the photographs of mutilation he likes to leave about the drawing room. Every time the phone rings it is for him and sounds urgent, important. He whispers conspiratorially behind cupped hand and nods at me kindly, the sweet old idiot. Perhaps he would like me to be more curious, more impressed, and my silence has begun to make me seem like part of the wicked apathy he is up against. The magazines and pamphlets disgust me but I realise it was not pity for the monkeys and the rabbits and the dear doleful donkeys, rather a disgust for him that I can hardly admit. It is something of a turn-on, these glimpses of their pain, and I suspect Neil relishes it too.

It is out of the bath and into a dressing gown, nicked years before from the conference hotel at which we met. How handsome he had been – far too high in the pecking order for me - and I wonder at the importance of this silly fact, even now. I recall the height and weight, the jaw, the fine ears, strong hands, arched feet – and all

the foolish conventional details of his smell and manner that should be immaterial, shouldn't they? I loved him for his material hair and sour saliva self, under my nails and in between my teeth, yet I needed him to notice me and now that is not possible. We have become a cliché, that's what it is - and neither of us wants to admit it, so we go on being convivial, and I run out of love.

Romantic nonsense, of course. I am just as tired of him with his eco-babble and that air of certainty. I smile into the sweaty mirror; ruffle up my hair just like Michelle and go downstairs to find him.

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*Lily at Twelfth Night*

She stares at the horizon, at the faint glimmer that will become the moon. Lily arches her back carefully, one hand steadying against a spade. The lunar rhythms on the earth's magnetic field are dangerous to a woman of her age: she should be planting something, but she does not trust the new mild season, as if one were living on the Continent.

- This may be the south-east but it certainly *isn't* Provence.

That is what she would like to have said to him when he came and stood by the shed, fondling his stomach, is if she didn't count. This was the chairman of the committee, their Mr Toad, Colin Drake, the Councillor:

- We hope you'll find the time to look at our web site. There are some rather useful organic disease-prevention tips.

The gall. Yes, that is what he had said, as if the beans and peas could wait another fortnight. After all, she is not a superstitious woman. She prides herself on facing awkward truths yet as she gazes back across the bleak beds bare or covered in old carpet, curling up their black rubber lips, and farther out towards the tube line and all its sordid secrets, she feels the pull of the moon. She wonders if a low growl would go unnoticed. And then she remembers something about today that cheered her up – what was it?

- Ah, yes - she grins and Drake is suddenly set aside.

Gardening, particularly on an allotment, does not really lend itself to sexy opportunity, but possibly, just

possibly her luck may be about to change. May be it would in Tennessee or Tuscany, but do they have allotments there?

Lily is tidying up, sorting out, removing the dead - which thought pleases her as she tears out grey stems that might look beautiful in a hoarfrost, if only she would let them be. The remaining cobweb of roots would enrich the soil and keep the sticky lumps of clay from settling back into its ancient clag fudge. She fears the unplanned seed. But she likes to build up a bonfire in this weather, filling the brazier high to make the sparks sting. Her skin tightens, her hair singes and she smells of her father out in the garden years ago. She passes near the skull on the way to collect another barrel-load of chippings from the communal pile by the main gates and as she does the frail carapace tilts towards her in the shifting path, a nod or even a wink.

A last play of the sun trembles on her back as she digs the soil one spit down, and out slippery slide the long white fingers of dandelion and dock, their tributaries snapping in what is left of the frost, grown soggy from the morning. It is evening at five o'clock and small grey

moths flicker through the broken straw grass. Despite the remains of the snow the ground is grey and dry, separating in her hand easily, still sticky within. It is Twelfth-Night and Lily is on her allotment going over the patch she had cleared in the autumn and though she should know better, she can't help feeling that something important is about to happen to her. '*There ain't no cure for love*' she croaks in her best Cohen voice, yet this time she laughs at the complaint. Who would want to be cured of hope? '*No, there ain't no cure for love.*'

Nobody much is about, unless you count the myriad hidden creatures that live here, waiting until she has gone home too, dissolving into the muddy middle distance of their animal sight. The million young red worms slip and slide through the rotting mulch of last year's crop. She tries to concentrate on the rules of proper digging: lifting each spadeful, turning it roughly and then a turn of her wrist, back and forth, the old tidal rhythm drives her on as she slices through the wet earth.

She wears a red fleece with its zip poking her chin, worn magenta cords and her cowboy boots newly

dyed cardinal. In her sprouting ponytail a chewed scarlet ribbon; the holograms of her red butterfly hairclips glint as she stoops; her lips are stained with the remnants of Exuberance lasting rejuvenating, lip-plumping lipstick colour; she sucks on a cherry Tune.

*- Ain't that a shame ...ain't that a sha-a-ame*

She does her best to be Fats, and stiff from the digging and like an old she cat she arches her back luxuriously. Tipping stones onto the path, the good grey soil is getting a jolly good seeing to. She riddles her fork and wonders how it would be. Lily is busy forming a crumbly tilth, working in last year's compost wriggling with life like throbbing veins and planning next year's crop rotation. A frog that should not be about at such a season, watches her from under a pile of broken nettles and the sides of his mouth stretch in his rictus grin. The tongue shoots out then draws back as if considering. She has removed his hiding place of leaves and now his future is uncertain. If anyone is to blame then it is she, thinks Frog, of that there is no question.

Lily is wondering about the man. What is it that she likes about him? She likes the rub between

glamorous and seedy things. When she was an artist, when she was an up-and-coming ceramicist with skills in inter-personal relations too *and* a subtle way of dressing in greige, that invited curiosity both physical and intellectual - how she longed to come up close to a beautiful mouth and find flecks of spit in the corners; she thrilled to a trail of blood on freshly laundered sheets; a nice fresh scar on a bland and downy neck; even the pity of an unexpected pimple; simple joy when she uncovered a disgraceful trait in a jolly good fellow who only lacked a little confidence before he could perform. Ah but then her hair was lustrous long. There were no bristles on her chinny-chin-chin.

This may account, in part, for the reason why, a small lifetime later, the first time she dug up new potatoes, clean white in the muddy earth, held one translucent orb in the palm of her (Chinese chintz chrysanthemum red) glove, she felt, for once, most uncomplicatedly happy. But whatever this was here and now, it was in a quite different category of longing and the whole narrow world seemed to grow; she had to stand still with her head bowed for a moment to catch breath.

Back at the house Neil had huffed and puffed down the stairs and she hears him slamming kitchen cupboards, abusing the fridge. Perhaps he will have a heart attack or choke on something dry and suffocate and then she might relish all that life insurance and learn to love him again, tragically. Perhaps that was all it was: she was a drama queen tired of the old part, relishing the new?

*- Shame, ain't that a sha-a-ame.*

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*Timothy in a soft flannel shirt*

Tim from America is busy redesigning. At the moment what he has is a six by eight foot rickety shed and what he sees is a Japanese tea house with veranda, adjoining storage huts cleverly camouflaged as a bamboo singing grass grove, a propagating greenhouse constructed from some leaded windows he's been saving from a skip and a deep lagoon for rain water and perhaps some carp. If only he were better able to do the carpentry himself for although he could easily afford it, it would hardly be the

thing to get professional help. His plans seem vulgar against the slow build up of huts made from scaffolding planks and old doors and besides he enjoys the clumsiness of the allotments. Yet there is something in him that makes him want to try and refine and spoil it. At least he knows this about himself, and he hopes this would excuse him to his ideal unknown friend.

He is dressed in navy linen and the faintest lemon cologne about that bristling manly cheek, behind the counter of his Portobello Road antique textile *brocante*, and he stares down at the clean white moons of his cuticles and wishes they were broken and untended. He has not noticed Lily yet, but he will before the week is out.

Last weekend he tried to speak to the old man again. He occupies the adjoining plot that lies between his land and the standpipe so he had a good excuse to loiter, attaching his hosepipe or at this time of year filling a watering can for the cold frames. He always seems to be there first, no matter how early Tim arrives. There is a chimneystack in his shed, fashioned from an old boiler pipe, and it sticks out of the corrugated roof at a comic angle and even at 7.30 the man seemed to have lit some

sort of fire. As soon as Tim approached, the door that had been open onto his array of bird-feeders, slowly and quietly swung tight shut. He coughed to pretend he had not noticed but there was silence from within the hut.

The man's allotment was so different from his own, set in regimented lines with screens of municipal orange plastic lace to act as wind-breaks and even now a half row of scraggy cabbages, a tuft or two of parsnip, mutilated fists of Jerusalem artichoke that he must have been digging out, grotesque and exposed. There was something about the utility of it all that appealed to Tim with its unexpected follies of broken gnomes, its pond made from an old pink bath, clotted with frog spawn and the line of artificial daffodils and tulips tied to stakes under his window.

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*Charles considers horticulture*

When Charles, (after HRH), had his thirteenth birthday he remembers sitting on a concrete step at school break-time, watching the other children playing and full of

regret for his lost childhood. It was not as if he had been a merry child; there had always been something to worry about. Why had the stray cat, the one with the broken tail, stopped coming into the garden? Hadn't he looked after it? Why would it betray him? At fourteen, when his mother was beginning to re-establish her career, he remembered leaving strategic fluff on his bedroom carpet to check whether she still found the time to vacuum his room. She didn't.

Of course, the cleaning was not crucial, but he needed then as now, something solid to latch on to. Then she had been busy breaking into public funding work after that sense of personal growth gained managing charity outlet shops – as she put it. Madeleine was an excellent spin-doctor for her time.

Now she was retired and at home with him again, in marvellous form as everyone said, so perhaps it would begin to feel safe for Charles? He worked from home and had done so ever since the misunderstanding that had wrecked his confidence. This was his mother's phrase again and he had adopted it without complaint,

limiting the panic and incomprehension that remembering brought. She could be good at tidying up the past.

- It doesn't *matter* what people of that sort think of one. For goodness sake, rise above it, darling. If only you had more guts you'd just laugh the whole thing off. It's a sense of humour transplant you need! Never were much fun. Which is a pity for me, diddums, since I was born for laughter, as anyone who knows me will tell you. Yes, I should have been on the stage, but then you came along – not that I wasn't thrilled, of course, but in those days it just wasn't done to lead your own life. And Daddy would have been jealous – never could bear me to be out in the world, and if he hadn't gone and died, why who knows, perhaps I'd still be a content little housewife?

- Heavens above, why the girl couldn't have seen a silly little fumbling for what it was – just a bit of high spirits – hardly as if you'd be serious with someone like that – but these days people are so precious. No sense of fun at all. Frankly, I didn't think you had it in you. - Quite a relief in a way. Come to think of it, can't think why you didn't fit in! Sorry darling, just my little joke. You mustn't mind.

He didn't. He feels bolstered by her stupidity and makes the mistake of believing it might hide a greater percipience. At least he can work and he knows that the advice he gives people is reliable. To his amazement he can earn quite as much as he had as a broker and he can be safe at home in his bedroom in front of his beautiful new monitor – he was Filthy Lucre, offering daily stocks' advice to his clients, and taking a fraction of the risk himself. For the first time in his life he felt ahead.