

A garden above the sea

Winding through eighteenth-century fishermen's cottages that climbed the hillside from the shore, it was a short but steep drive from the harbour to Duck Street. Straining, we tried to catch glimpses of the sea between narrow gaps in the whitewashed houses: "Look!" I shouted. When the car stopped, the whole bay, softly lit by the early evening sun, had opened before us. Fifty metres offshore sat St. Catherine's Isle; it was the only break in an otherwise blue desert towards the horizon and my young eyes had never seen anything like it.

We visited grandmother in July when the warm sea air suffocated the interior of her modest cottage. Yet that air, salty and heavy, was intoxicating with the promise of adventure. For such is the joy of being seven years old, with the summer days long and the mind unfettered, that adventure is a tantalising gift: an offering to be devoured, an antidote to sadness.

For two weeks that midsummer such adventures took my sister, Swampy and me into our grandmother's garden. Running wide from the back of the cottage, the garden sloped over ancient rock long since forced skyward from the seafloor. It did not end. Instead the garden merely collapsed into the hillside beyond. An old stone wall, once defending the plot's territory, had, over countless summers, been consumed by bramble and cow parsley: the Cornish landscape slowly reclaiming the borrowed land. This area was strictly out of bounds. Too many thorns. Stinging nettles. Snakes! Somehow these exotic warnings only served to stir my imagination, but Swampy and I never dared venture into it.

This was our first visit to Cornwall; father had always said the drive was too long. Indeed, the journey west did seem impossibly slow. Hours. Days? We were newly orphaned and, languishing in a children's home, finding it hard to fully understand why a conveyer belt of strangers had suddenly replaced our parents: concerned social workers, nervous foster candidates, new teachers. Our grandmother, perhaps out of a sense of duty, or love, or both, had agreed to take us for two weeks. The prospect of a familiar face was wonderful.

There was one brick path that took you through the garden and it was flanked on both sides by endless borders. A rusted, rose clad arbour looked back towards the cottage: it had been strategically placed to afford the best view of the bay. Sitting there with my grandmother I could see America upon the horizon. Africa! Antarctica, maybe. Swampy saw giant sea monsters far in the distance - rising out of the water to challenge fishermen who dared enter their kingdoms. There was no sense of formality; the garden was as riotous as the hedgerows that lined the lanes but every plant, every wonderful flower, had its place. For the garden had really been the life's work of my grandfather. He had grown almost everything from seed and filled small gaps every year with annuals, useful vegetables, and cuttings. His legacy was all over the garden: the raised beds he built, a collection of some two hundred terracotta pots, hazel wigwams that towered above the borders. After he died my grandmother grew his favourite annuals every year - nasturtiums, pot marigolds, sweet peas, cornflowers - planting them out every May as a tribute. Of course, most plants had been self-seeding across the garden for years, which was the surest sign that my grandfather's spirit lived on in this maritime paradise. By the time we visited in July there were towering clumps of delphiniums. Hollyhocks, in all colours imaginable, rising from little cracks

in the path. Roses, mock orange, tree peonies, foxgloves, lupins: they all fought for position and admiration.

Not yet old enough to explore down by the harbour on our own; Swampy and I spent endless days in that garden. How wonderful it was to be there with him. On our adventures Swampy told me about how witches used foxgloves as broomsticks, how rubbing sweet peas over our dens would scare away evil spirits, how we could cultivate thorny roses to defend ourselves against pirates. The swollen borders made excellent places for us to hide from highway men and the compost heap an even better place to bury the cache of gold we had found days earlier on a trip to Lamorna Cove. My sister would sit in amongst the plants with her dolls - only her head bobbing up from a blanket of flowers. Swampy and I would taunt her, throwing worms and slugs in her direction, but this invariably led to tears before grandmother, exasperated, called us in for hevva cake and tea. Afterwards she would take my sister and me hand in hand through the garden pointing out the flowers that were our mother's favourite. "Your mother had these hydrangeas at her wedding," grandmother would tell us. She would have us press our noses against all the sweetly scented flowers and describe the smell. My favourite was honeysuckle: "It smells like ice cream!"

There were jobs to be done. Potatoes: plunging our small hands into the warm soil to harvest first earlies. Sweet peas: deadheading and carefully tying in. Tomatoes: pinching out side shoots. Courgettes: picking. Weeds: destroying. We carried out our jobs diligently; it presented us with a focus and sense of purpose that had been lacking since mother and father disappeared. Yet, there was always fun. Every task was a game: Swampy and I made sure of that.

The pond was a constant source of intrigue. Red valerian and comfrey grew wild in the gaps between its stone edge and countless dragonfly surfed the murky water. We would perform perilous rescues on curious beetles that had strayed too close to the precipice. We would make beaches and launch our own wooden boats across the pond's ocean. Heaven. One day, too reckless in my youthful enthusiasm, I fell in. I called out to Swampy for help, but it was my grandmother, flailing wildly, who pulled me out. My sister cried for an hour; the pond became out of bounds too.

Time had stopped for us there. All the confusion in our young minds, the sense of bitter loss, even the selfish resentment I felt towards my parents for having died: it all stopped. Here. In grandmother's garden.

Sometimes the birdsong was so loud, so gloriously frenzied, that I could barely hear Swampy at all. He would disappear but then I would find him picking strawberries or hunting slow-worms. One afternoon, with a soft, salty breeze pleasantly tempering the July sunshine, we helped grandmother sow her second runner bean crop. Yet Swampy had disappeared for hours and I was distraught. "He'll be back my darling," said grandmother, "he's probably gone for a rest in the phlox." I searched the garden for the remainder of the afternoon: in our dens; in our secret places; under the cover of a tangled apple tree where we confessed our darkest fears. He had gone. My sister was giggling and taking great pleasure in the exhibition I was making of myself. "Swampy's not real," she would say to me. But Swampy was real. As real to me as the trumpets of a campanula, as alive to me as the sweet myrrh of a rose, as loyal to me as the brimstone on the buckthorn. As the last light faded over that glorious jungle of garden; I gave up looking and prepared for bed. "I don't think he is coming back," I said to grandmother as she tucked the sheets tightly around me.

The two weeks merged into one long daydream of stimulated senses: screeching swifts, perfumed flowers, soil beneath our fingernails, sweet bursts of blueberries, all the sun-soaked garden colours. Until, abruptly, it was time to leave. My sister and I cried and hung onto grandmother; this place, this garden above the sea, was the only happiness we had known since our parents died. She knelt and handed us both a marigold. "Cut fresh this morning," she said, "your grandfather's favourite. It will remind you of me and the garden. *Your* garden." Grandmother handed me a second flower, "for Swampy. If he should come back." But I knew he was not coming back. He was lost to the garden. He *was* the garden. This Eden, this lush riot of life, was too irresistible for him to leave.

We held our flowers tightly as we got into the car. Back down towards the harbour and away from this impossibly perfect place. Through the gut-wrenching sadness I felt at having been torn away from there, I thought about Swampy. What would he be doing now? Planning his defence against a pirate invasion. Mixing potions from elderflower heads and spit. Pulling up pots looking for insects. Or, maybe, quite simply, taking a rest in the phlox.



The view to St. Catherine's Isle. Pencil sketch. 70 years later at the spot where my grandmother's cottage and glorious garden once stood.