

The Garden of Presents

Heather Child

1

“I’m building a maze,” he said, popping the poplar into the bucket-shaped hole, grabbing the trunk and working it in, stamping around its base. Dilys stared at him, pulling the cola Chupa Chups lolly out through her lips. These few plants wouldn’t make much of a maze; you could just squeeze through the gaps.

His eyes fell upon her handbag, the one from Whitby with shells stuck all over it and a chain as a strap. She liked opening and closing it, the little metal buds sliding round each other as the bag locked.

“I have something in mind,” the man said, “and that big shell on your bag would be just the thing.”

She stepped back, frowning. “It’s mine.”

He swivelled his cap so it was back to front, and took out a pair of secateurs. “It’s coming loose anyway, it wants to come over to me.”

She brandished the lolly. “My mum is on that bench over there.”

He sighed. “I’m not a thief. You can give it to me in exchange for three presents, if you want to.” He turned back to the new hedge, standing on his spade to make a neat cut in the turf. She watched him for a bit longer.

“What presents?”

“Just presents.”

She stuck the lolly back in her mouth and fiddled with the oyster shell in the middle of her bag. It was definitely loose, might even fall off by itself. One of her fingers slipped behind it and wound round the plastic thread, which snapped. She handed it over, feeling an uncertain regret as the mother-of-pearl caught the light. It vanished into his hand, and then into a deep pocket of his trousers. She waited, clasping and unclasping the purse.

“Did you know, we’re going to make a sundial for longitude,” he remarked, “with here as its centre.” He scratched his shaven head. She knew it was rude to ask for things, but he had promised.

“What about the presents?”

A breeze washed away the cola scent of her lolly, rustling the young poplars. His eyes were waxy like their leaves. He said:

“At present, your husband is sleeping with another woman.”

“My husband?” she was disgusted. “I’m only nine. What about the present?”

“It’s the truth. And it’s the present.”

“No it’s not.”

She bit the last shard of boiled sweet and bent the damp white stick into a circle. He tilted the next tree, as though letting it consider where to be planted. He had cheated her.

“You said three presents.”

“You’ll get two more the next two times you come to Burghley House.”

“I might never come back.”

“You will.”

2

She forgot about this conversation until she was twenty-nine, spending Easter in King’s Lynn with her boyfriend’s parents. Adam took her for a walk through flat farmlands, among bold Fresians. They came to a halt on a stone bridge, not another human in sight, and Adam seemed to be shrinking. She could see the little bald circle towards the back of his scalp, and realised he was on one knee.

“Yes,” she said, cutting him off before he had quite finished, “of course I’ll marry you – why not?” A cardigan spread over the damp chaff at the edge of a field was all they needed to celebrate the engagement. Then, nestled amid the warm innards of the afternoon, they found the conversation turning to past relationships. By nature Dilys was more curious than romantic; she wanted to know how Adam lost his virginity.

“Well,” he rubbed the red straw marks from his elbow, “it was in one of these barns. I was fifteen. It was summer.” He lapsed into uneasy silence. Going out with an older man had its perks, but it did mean a longer backstory. She would have been about nine. That was when those words came back to her, out of nowhere.

“When?”

“You want the actual date?”

“It just might be a weird coincidence.”

“I’ll have to think.”

Young poplars sprung up in her mind, the gardener with his smooth face conning her out of an oyster shell. What was he playing at? The memory was all but overwritten by the rest of her visit to Burghley House, the exhibition of swords and old English weaponry, pocked blades conjuring up ancient battles. In the mind of a nine year old, the gardener was just another smart-arsed bully, like the teenage boys who would try to scam her at school. Now a chill was fingering her back. *Your husband* – which Adam would soon become – *is sleeping with someone else.*

“Well?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Was it May Day?” This was when she went to Burghley, for her mother’s birthday. To her huge relief he shook his head.

“No, definitely not that early. I was still doing exams.”

The rest of the day was spent laughing together and fielding messages about their engagement. On Easter Tuesday she drove back to Bristol, leaving Adam to enjoy the rest of his break from teaching, the meticulous sewing of costumes for his historical society reenactments.

As she neared Peterborough, there was a brown sign for Burghley. She would hardly get in before closing, yet she swung the car round.

“Just the gardens,” she said to the ticket seller.

“Garden of Surprises is through that gate,” he pointed to the left of the house. This was a new feature. She hurried through, knowing it was ridiculous to expect the same employee to be in post fifteen years on.

She went in, hesitated under an archway, and there was an explosion beneath her, jets of spring-cold water shooting up her skirt. She gasped and ran ahead, but more fountains came up, chasing her to

the end of the path. A right turn took her to a garden of brass pyramids labelled *earth, air, wind* and *fire*, each with buttons. One began to smoke. *Garden of Surprises*. It felt too new – and surreal – to be here alongside what the website claimed was England’s greatest Elizabethan house.

A moment later she found herself at the end of a pencil-thin pond, a grotto studded with shells. She could not tell why the statue of Neptune was catching her eye, then she saw her oyster shell under the ball of his left foot.

“Back again.” He was beside her, smaller than before, or perhaps she was taller. He wore a thin t-shirt of faded green, and a Super Mario Bros cap. To her adult eyes his cheeks looked too plummy, a sort of innocence about him. He seemed, though it must have been the light, somehow younger than her, his face almost infantile with smugness. She did not give him the satisfaction of explaining about her fiancé, though she was impressed he recognised her after so long, with her makeup and short hair.

“That my shell over there?”

“Yep.”

They stared at it, sounds of water all around, while Neptune stood grandly with his trident. The rest of the conversation trickled back into her mind.

“You said three.”

“Yep.”

“So the second one is?”

“At present, your husband is sleeping with another woman.”

Her jaw tightened. “That was the first.”

“It’s the second one too.”

He looked down to her waist and back, and she realised he was checking to see if the shell bag was on her person. It was at the back of her wardrobe at home.

“Pity,” he added, as though reading her thoughts, “I’ve got a space just there that needs filling.” He gestured into the grotto, every square inch studded with mussels, conches, sea snails, limpets and other shells. Before she could see where he meant, a woman with a managerial air came over and directed her pointedly to the exit. Dilys had no choice but to walk back to her car, but something made her pull out her phone, her heart pulsing faster than the call icon.

“Adam’s phone,” a woman’s voice answered. Instantly Dilys relaxed. It was his mum.

“Is Adam in the tub?”

They laughed, then Dilys made some excuse for having called and drove herself back to Bristol. The gardener probably enjoyed messing with people’s heads. At least she had not given him the satisfaction of knowing she had – for a moment – taken him seriously.

3

It was at the 550th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of Edgcote that she ended things with Adam. In a lull in the fighting, she realised he was wearing his trainers and a smart watch.

“That’s such an anachronism,” she said.

“You’re an anachronism.” In recent months, he’d started to say things a teenager might say. He kept telling her she was too mumsy, and every night she crawled into bed to the tune of his rasping snores, wondering what the hell had happened. So, when the victory cry went up and they were all chatting, and a corpse stood up to ask Adam if the two love birds had set a date, she said: “No, he knows it’s not working between us.” It was the truth. She got a lift home with the corpse.

Four years later she married his housemate, coincidentally another re-enactment enthusiast, though really he preferred to watch. Another older guy – she didn’t know what it was about them – maybe she was just used to a bit of grey hair, maybe it was Rowan’s grateful, hungry look every time she stripped off, his ears slowly turning red whenever they made love.

The wedding was a medieval affair in Tewksbury Abbey, the honeymoon a repeat of his backpacking odyssey through Thailand, only with fluffy towels and wafer-thin cantaloupe at breakfast.

After the honeymoon she noticed a quietening. Rowan liked to go off on his own, take walks along the towpath in the dark. At Society events, he no longer joined in with the battle cry. Then came the day they were driving to Norfolk with some items for her niece.

“Here?” she said, as he turned to follow the brown heritage sign. “I thought we were visiting a castle.” He had been driving fast and she assumed he had a castle in mind. They were both English Heritage members and tried to fit them in en-route wherever they went.

“I’ve got a friend who works here. You’ll love it. They have a Garden—”

“Of Surprises?”

“You’ve been?”

“Yes.” She could not understand why they were there. He had no interest in stately homes, and even less in gardens. Yet the dusk-coloured stone loomed up ahead, and they skidded to a halt on the gravel.

“Hold on,” she told Rowan, as he made to lock the car. She opened the boot and took a small shell purse from one of the boxes, transferring her wallet and phone before hitching the chain over her shoulder. Her heart was hammering. With a sort of superstitious dread, she had steered clear of Burghley these past four years. But now it was out of her hands. She could not shake the premonition that she would see the young gardener again.

As they entered the garden, the air was shot through with screams; children let themselves get caught by the fountains, drenched by archways of water. She found herself growing interested in the new features, especially a metal shed with a chandelier that rained when a visitor came near.

“Do you want a bit longer?” Rowan said. “I’ll go see the Capability Brown sketches – they won’t interest you.” They were just coming to a huge sundial showing longitude, with Burghley House in the centre. She was just about to reply when she saw the gardener, trimming the hedge around a stone bust, filling the air with the scent of juniper. When he turned, his face was so unchanged she felt breathless. His wet eyes slid past her to the purse.

“Ah, you brought it.”

Without hesitation she slipped a finger under the oyster shell on the other side of the purse and snapped the threads.

“So...?” said Rowan, still awaiting her answer.

“Hang on a sec,” she turned to the young man. “Will this buy me three more presents?” A grain of resentment was in her tone. The shell flipped as she tossed and caught it, rough side alternating with pearl-slick concave. The gardener’s fingers clenched and unclenched, his eyes never leaving the object.

“Of course.” Unable to bear more, he reached and snatched it from the air.

“Now listen to this,” she told Rowan. But he was peering through the next archway, hungry for more surprises.

“Let’s meet in an hour or so,” he said.

“Just wait a sec.”

The oyster shell had vanished somewhere about the gardener’s person, perhaps inside the orange *Wotsits* beanie covering his head. Something about his expression made her hesitate. His look of glee had turned to sadness.

“Are you sure you want these three?”

“Go for it.”

These days she could see through anything, and his prophecies were rubbish – she had already proved that.

“At present, the worst letter you will receive in your life is rolled up in a scabbard, in the boot of a car. Shall I go on?”

“Oh, am I getting these three all at once?”

“I’m afraid it’s now or never.”

“Ok.”

He reached up with grubby fingers and folded down the lip of the orange beanie, covering his eyes.

“At present, the blood that will be in your veins next week is being drained from a harbourmaster in Poole.”

He pressed the dirty half-moon fingernails into the caves of his eyes. “At present, something inside of you is...”

Rowan gave his dry laugh, like bark being chipped from a tree. “You’re in the wrong job, mate,” he told him. Then he turned to Dilys. “You take your time. I’ll text you.” He lifted her hand and kissed the top of her wrist, and then he was off. A strange, flat coldness was running through her arms and legs, a liquid shadow. She could hear the hiss of fountains and the slap of water on paving stones, and smell whatever chemical kept the green slime at bay.

“Sorry,” the young gardener added, and turned away with his bucket of clippings. Dilys walked in a daze until she was at Neptune’s grotto again, looking at the space where it was clear her shell would go, under his right foot. The shadow-blade of the sundial cut another slice from the day, and she began to feel like a statue herself. Then something occurred to her, and she went back to the small garden. The gardener was there, snipping around a different bust.

“Don’t you owe me one more?” she said, “the third one, for that first shell? Surely you wouldn’t try to scam me?” She tried a weak smile, her customer-facing smile. The excitement had soured, yet here she was again. It hardly seemed to matter why.

“At present,” he said wearily, “your husband is sleeping with another woman.”

The snipping went on, bits of green leaf flying about like torn birds.

“No he’s not,” she said, outraged at last. “He’s clearly not. And you were wrong last time too. Why should I believe anything you say?” She backed away, the hard eyes of the bust suddenly intrusive. She twisted through topiary into the next garden, holding up her arms against the rush of children. What seemed like a way out became a hedge maze, turning her this way and that. It spat her into the open, to where sculptures were hidden among wooded glades. Rowan liked sculptures. Perhaps he would be here somewhere, strolling quietly, his dry fingers tapping the trunks of trees. She walked up and down the trails, but there was no sign of him, not among the sculptures, nor by the lake above. She paused by a huge hare made of willow wands and realised she could hear footsteps. Then he was there, smiling, smoothing down his hair.

“You got out alive,” his usual gravelly voice was comforting at first, but only at first. She stepped back, hardly believing what she was seeing.

“What?” he said.

Then she was walking in big painful steps back through the hedges, back to the grotto, but the young gardener had vanished. How did he know? she asked Neptune. The sea god gazed down at the two shells refracting the water over his feet. Her two oyster halves, but no pearls of wisdom. He had tricked her, that gardener. Now everything would fall apart, starting with her own present, the gift of a man whose red ears were only now cooling.