

Entry 18

BILL'S GARDEN

Bill's garden was not what I'd expected. It was neat and pruned, symmetrical and arranged like a geometrical puzzle with everything under control and in its place. It looked more like a still life as nothing was tall enough or delicate enough to sway in the breeze. It was static, lifeless and dull. Half of it wasn't a garden at all but decking - polished looking as if you needed slippers to be allowed to walk on it. The lawn was perfect with its even colour of an unusual deep emerald and it was only when I bent down to look closely that I realised it wasn't grass at all but a plastic imitation. There were some fine looking shrubs but they'd been cut back savagely so it appeared as if they had given up on growing altogether. It wasn't my sort of garden but who was I, a seventeen year old volunteer with the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, to change anything?

Bill Standish was eighty and in hospital for a long overdue hip operation. While he had been waiting, he had been unable to tend his garden and had apparently paid a firm to come in and tidy it up a little. 'Gardening Magic' had assumed he required something maintenance free and while that seemed sensible, I wondered if it was what a lifetime gardener really wanted.

I'd only got involved in the scheme to get out of the house. It meant camping trips in the wild, long hikes and throwing myself into community activities like helping Bill with his garden. It was a legitimate excuse to escape from my mother although that didn't come without an emotional price. Every time I stepped out of the front door, I felt the guilt running through my veins, but I couldn't sit in that dreary front room any more, so dusty and dark, full of bent cardboard boxes which were brimming over with yellowed paper and stained clothes. It smelt of pond water and stale food, and I needed fresh air.

Mum was depressed and wouldn't leave the house. She had hoarded everything for years so that each room was crammed with junk and broken old furniture. She would sit

day after day staring at the TV which blared out jovial daytime programmes while she looked grimly on. I had taken over the cooking and running of the house which was a lot while I was studying for my A levels but there was no one else to assist her. She had rejected any offers of outside help.

I tried my best to get her involved in my life, to remind her there was a world beyond Philip and Holly and Loose Women. When I got back from Bill's bungalow I made her a cup of tea and attempted some conversation.

'Not much to do,' I explained, 'just a bit of weeding. I thought someone had told me Bill Standish liked gardening, but I suppose...'

'Did you say Bill Standish?'

It was unusual for my mother to speak at all let alone interrupt me. She pushed herself out of the armchair and shuffled over to one of the boxes, changed her mind and reached into a carrier bag, scattering pieces of torn paper everywhere. Then she retrieved what she had been looking for and handed me an old newspaper cutting.

Underneath the headline was a faded photograph. I stared at it as if waiting for it to come into focus. Then I saw her. There was my mother, dressed in a long green skirt and cheesecloth shirt, standing tall and looking right into the lens of the camera. Behind her was a wildflower meadow and she was holding a placard - SAVE BROOK MEADOWS.

I felt sad knowing my mother had once been active, fighting for nature, trying to make changes and was now stuck inside, fearful of venturing beyond her own walls.

'That meadow is still there,' I said. 'So it worked. I'm proud of you.'

I was rewarded with a flicker of a smile across her weary face. Then she pointed to a man behind her. 'That's Bill Standish.'

'Then I'm right. It isn't the garden for him. I need to do something completely different.'

I thought for a moment, then asked her, 'will you come to Brook Meadows with me tomorrow.'

I had expected too much. My mother shook her head and sunk back down into her armchair, allowing it to envelope her so that she seemed smaller somehow. She stared at the TV again and it was as if the conversation had never happened.

The path to Brook meadow took me up to the top of the hill so I could perch on a bench and look down on all the colour and life of a wild meadow in May. The tall grasses performed a ballet in the breeze and the entire field was splattered with the red of the poppies and dotted with ox eye daisies and yellow cowslips. There were clusters of red campion and china blue forget me nots in front of me. I breathed in the sweet perfume of flowers and the sour scent of moist grass. It was a taste of the countryside only moments from the town centre and I silently thanked my mother and her friends for saving it. The drone of traffic that thrummed in the distance was so faint that I could make out the soft song of bees and the nearby chatter of birds. As the sun slapped down on my bare shoulders, I stood up and began to wade through the reedy grass and clusters of flowers. It was all so wild and free and welcomed me in like the sea.

The bottom of the meadow was different with shorter, tuftier grass rainbowed with red clover, buttercups and speedwell.

'It's beautiful,' I said out loud and my voice must have startled a group of hidden skylarks and suddenly there were birds ascending almost vertically, hovering, then parachuting down again like an aerial circus display. And all the time their sweet chirrups filled the air, an unceasing outpouring of joy.

I knew then what I had to do.

I found myself back at Bill's bungalow, standing on the decking, looking at the neatness and predictability of his little garden. Where an earth did I start? It had all seemed so simple when I had been standing in Brook Meadow. I had wanted to create a

mini meadow for Bill like the one he'd saved from being built on. But that had been a vast area and this was a simple square on a housing estate. I would need to think of something else but I would have to be careful not to create work for Bill or the expense of hiring a gardener after I had left for university. In the end, I decided to put my ridiculous ideas to one side and just tidy up what was already there. Then I remembered the birds in the lower meadow and I resolved to build a bird table for him. At least that would bring something wild into the garden.

I asked my mother for the key to the shed where I knew there was some old wood.

'I'm going to make a bird table for Bill,' I told her.

She looked up and actually switched off the TV. 'We have an old one in there you could mend,' she told me.

I enjoyed re-furbishing the old table but then realised it was not something I could easily take on the bus. It was weighty and awkward and hard to carry. My mother had a car but rarely drove it but I asked her if she could drop me off at Bill's without much hope for a positive response.

'I haven't driven for a while,' she said and then added, 'I'm going to bed.' It was only eight o'clock.

I gave up on taking the table to Bill's. I had made it too heavy and cumbersome to get it there on my own. But I caught the bus anyway. As I stood once more in his garden, I realised I did not have the experience or expertise to make the transformation I needed. I felt angry with my mother for letting herself get so depressed but then felt guilty as it was not her fault. I transferred that anger onto myself for being unable to help Bill. Then I closed my eyes and allowed calm to wash away the rage. I decided to visit him in hospital and tell him how full of life Brook Meadow was. He needed to know all about his legacy and what he had done for my generation. I sat on the decking for ages, not wanting to go back home.

I heard a vehicle out at the front and went round to look. My mother had arrived with the bird table and beckoned me to come to the car. It was loaded with seeds and plants, bulbs and all her old gardening tools.

‘You need more than a bird table to attract the birds,’ she explained. ‘You need insects and good worm filled soil and we need bees and pollinators. Everything is connected, you see. It won’t just be a garden to look at, it will be an ecosystem, a hive of activity, a local centre of biodiversity.’

Turf arrived along with two men who laid it out for us and took away the plastic.

Mother began to plant, to plan, to create, to turn my dream into reality.

A transformation then took place. I don’t mean the garden, that would take time although a good start had been made. But my mother changed from being a depressed woman in a darkened room with only the TV to distract her from her downward spiral to being a woman with a purpose. She also became the mother I had once had and the woman who had stood on Brook Meadow with her placard all those years before. She and I worked on Bill’s garden and joy came into our lives with every seed that we scattered, every slab of turf that was laid, every flower we planted.

By the time Bill came out of hospital, sound had arrived in the silent garden, the low drone of bees, the high pitched chirps of birds. The garden smelt of cut grass and marigolds, and colour and movement came to liven up the space as if a film had just been switched on. The garden became a living organism, a green paradise and a waiting friend to Bill.

It was a work in progress and Bill knew that when he finally arrived home. He remembered Mother and Brook Meadow and told her they were threatening to build in another wild space just out of town.

'I'll be there,' Mother said. And I knew she would, alongside me and Bill. Because this was a story of life returning, not just to a garden, but to an eco activist mother. Gardens have the power to do that.