

Pergolas

It's my birthday. You phone and say we will go out for the day. 'It's a secret!' The road we travel becomes familiar. I recognise the almshouses, then the church, then see a 'Garden Open' sign and an arrow pointing: Easton Lodge.

You pay at a little shed as I walk to the lawn amid memories like mists. Flower beds, as they were, the cedar still there. The house...vanished, spellbound into tall shimmering birch trees, just the east wing remaining. A swirl of wind in the trees sounds like leaves being swept together with a broom... I grew up in this garden.

My mother was in charge of a small staff; a housemaid, a gardener, the man who looked after the animals, the stable/gardener's boy (who wasn't a boy at all but a silent, grey, stooping man with a scarred face), and me. She was assistant, secretary, cook, and anything else the Countess required. Frances Evelyn, Countess of Warwick, known to her friends as Daisy. My mother was fourteen when she arrived here to become a housemaid.

You, my granddaughter, know nothing of this. You just want to give me a nice day out. You help me down the only remaining steps into the sunken garden, and settle me onto a seat, then go off with the children, my great-grandchildren, to explore the glade.

It is quite still in this sunken, ruined space. The stone from the walls has gone and ivy climbs the bare edges. I squint to recall the six sets of steps, the granite balls on the piers. There is a scent of lavender.

The scent of the Countess's clothes.

Because my fingers were tiny, and I had learned sewing at school, I was put on repair work for her everyday clothes. I used to darn socks and woolly jumpers, and put leather patches on sleeves. She had a wardrobe full of finer clothes in silks and satins, which she never wore. Once, when I reached in to feel the soft material, a musty, herby smell puffed out, making me sneeze. My mother said the dresses were made by someone called Worth and came all the way from Paris.

I much preferred being in the garden, weeding with the gardener, Joseph.

The balustrade round the pool has spaces with orange and white tape across them, and there are daisies in the cracks of the few remaining paving stones. Bees fly in and out of the Canterbury bells, and circle the annual poppies.

My father, Frank, was a gardener here. He was in charge of bringing cut flowers to the house, which is how he met Mother. The Countess gave them permission to marry, and they were wed on May 5th, 1910. The next day, King Edward VII died. The Countess wore black and walked around the garden picking flowers which she put in vases either side of a picture of him when he was Prince of Wales. Later, when I knew about such things, I realised they had been lovers. It was said that he loved his 'Darling Daisy' more than anyone. I knew about people dying, and seeing them in their coffins, looking not at all like themselves, and then not seeing them ever again. Like my Grandmother. Like my father, I suppose, when he died not long after I was born.

Mother didn't talk about him, but sometimes, when she was dusting, I saw her pick up his photograph from the mantelpiece, kiss her finger before putting it on the picture, then give a little audible breathe before she put it down. To me, he was just a man in a uniform. I had no understanding of war. All I knew was that people talked

about 'before the war' and 'after the war', and sometimes stopped talking altogether when they saw me listening. I didn't know then that my father had come home half blind, with only one arm and unable to work. I was lucky really to have been born at all.

A dog barks; from the walled garden? Where once a dog lay in the sun watching me digging...

When the Countess came out for her walk with the dogs, I would hide. I found her alarming. When the Countess was resting, Mother made tea and we would sit in the kitchen or courtyard and she would tell me stories.

'Before I came here the Countess had huge parties with very grand people, Lords and Ladies. But then, the people changed. They were politicians and writers like Mr Shaw and Mr Wells.' I knew Mr Wells, because his books filled my head with time travel and far-off places with monstrous animals. 'Then there were the Trades Union people. They argued a lot, and complained about damp beds, and sometimes I found it hard to feed them all.'

I learned words like 'Labour Party', 'TUC', 'Socialist', which stuck in my head the same way as 'Americans' or 'Catholics'. No meaning, just words for groups of people. Then I found that these groups had to do with Parliament because when there was an election, the Countess was a member for Labour. Mama told me her whole family voted against her and many of her friends never spoke to her again. I didn't really understand why, but I felt sorry for her

I was in the garden every day, learning how to look after the plants. Joseph taught me how to dead-head, something that needed to be done every day so the border

was always in flower. Mother found me a book that the Countess had written where she had listed all the plants people had given her, Lady this and Lord that, the Honourable Mr and Mrs something or other and Edward, Prince of Wales. But I was much more interested in the plants' names and, with Joseph's help, matching them to the plants in the garden.

One day, I was outside sweeping up leaves in the cobbled courtyard, something I loved to do. It was warm, and, with the sound of water from the fountain, it seemed like summer. I was concentrating hard on making the swish of the leaves against my broom keep time with the splashing water so I didn't hear the Countess coming into the yard. I turned round, and there she was, sitting on a stone bench, an old coat around her shoulders, watching me.

'Do you enjoy doing that?' I nodded.

'I love kicking through leaves! Do you?' I nodded again. 'Shall we go and find some more?' I thought I should say something, so I said 'yes' but it came out like 'yeth'. She smiled.

'Come on then.' She got up, put her coat on properly, and held out her hand. I didn't know what to do.

'Take my hand, silly goose.' So I did and we went together past the house and to the middle of the lawn between those square beds of flowers.

'Once, there were two identical pergolas here covered with flowers. So beautiful- they blew down in a snowstorm.'

Curiosity overcame shyness.

'What - what's a perg'la?'

She let go my hand, raised her arms, and made great curves in the air.

'You must imagine a tall arch made of wood and then another tall one behind it and then another all joined together, all the way down to the Italian garden.' She stretched up on tiptoe; she was very tall. 'D'you see?' I nodded, but I wasn't at all sure that I did.

'Come on.' She took my hand again. We found Joseph had made piles of leaves under trees near the sunken, Italian, garden. The Countess started to scuff through them, and I followed. She picked up handfuls and threw them at me, and we laughed and laughed. Then we ran down the steps into the sunken garden, between the beds of flowers to look over the balustrade which surrounded the pool.

'The fish will stop eating soon, then they'll go down to the bottom of the pool for the winter.' The Countess put her hand into her pocket, took out some bread and threw it onto the water. 'Here they come!'

We watched the fish speed across the pool, making the water splutter as they jostled for the food. 'Look how the little ones are quicker than the big fat ones!' Soon all the bread was gone.

'D'you know, I don't know your name.'

'It's Mavis Daisy.'

'The same as me! You will be my Little Daisy... you can call me Countess Daisy!'

I never would dare.

'Why don't you pick a little posy for me, Little Daisy?'

She waved me off as she sat on the stone bench with the curly ends.

A lot of the flowers had gone, but there were chrysanthemums, yellow, white and rust-coloured, and pretty evergreens. I was very careful to pick them all the same length as far as I could and surround them with big bergenia leaves to make a posy, as I had seen Mother do. I took the posy to her, and curtsied!

‘For Countess Daisy’. I actually said it!

‘Thank you, Little Daisy!’ She patted the seat and I sat down.

The sun was warm, dipping towards the west, and the paving stones were patterned with shadows from the shrubs.

‘This was all dug out by hand by a lot of men. They had no jobs, d’you see, so we brought them all down here. Everyone had Italian gardens, it was the fashion.’ She turned the posy round in her hands. ‘Every year we had a summer fete for all the people from the estate and the village. A big marquee, with tea and cakes, and the local band. Then after the war...’ She stopped.

I knew she would, they always do.

There was a lot of barking and laughing and several grown-ups came clattering down the steps. The Countess stood up and opened her arms to them. They were all kissing and hugging. I started to creep towards a further set of steps.

‘And who is this?’ came a woman's high voice.

The Countess turned ‘This is Little Daisy. She made me this lovely posy. Would you ask your Mother to put it in water, dear?’, and so she dismissed me.

Being much younger and fitter than Joseph, I gradually took over much of the garden work. The Countess would sometimes pass me on her walks with the dogs, nod, murmur, 'Little Daisy'. Then Joseph retired, the Countess needed two sticks to walk, and there was talk of war. After she died, I filled the church with flowers.

My mother was kept on to clear the house, and then, when the RAF built a runway nearby and took over the Lodge as the Officers' Mess, she worked as a cook and housekeeper for them. I became a land girl on a farm nearby, where the planes roared over us to fly goodness knows where. When I had time off, I would visit my mother and trim shrubs in the Italian garden. I remember sitting on the seat with the curly ends crying because the plane of the pilot I was fond of had not returned. As I sat, I remembered sitting there with Countess Daisy, so I picked a posy for her and for Peter and took it to the little church where she was, and where Mother was married.

I learned the difference between 'before' and 'after' the war. I voted Labour.

What happened to the stone seat with the curly ends? It was over there... Three people are watching fish splashing in the pool: I can't see them clearly because of the sun...

I found work, and love. Mother came to live with us in her last year. She slid gradually into her past.

'You, such a clever girl, the Countess and the animals – my family – '

I was with her when she died. Did I say thank you?

I discovered the 'Country Life' magazines in her wardrobe. One had a picture of Countess Daisy on the front, wearing the most amazing hat with a huge feather,

accentuating her beautiful neck. No wonder the Prince of Wales loved her. There pictures of the garden: the Italian garden looked wonderful, with its statues at either end, but the pergolas! The pergolas were stunning, overflowing with hanging trusses of flowers, matching the beauty of the Countess. These, with photographs of my mother and the framed picture of my father, were the focus of my mourning.

John and I, our family and the cats made me forget all about Countess Daisy and Easton Lodge. The family left home, we retired and concentrated on the garden together, with our third- and fourth-generation cats. Then John died, and I went onto auto-pilot.

Now, as then, the sun is dipping, behind the three figures. It lights up the statues and pergolas beyond, cascading with pinks and blues and greens...

Someone takes my hand.

'Hello Little Daisy.'

The three figures become distinct: a man in uniform, a woman holding a finger to his lips. The third smiles: there is such a rush of love filling the space between us that I think my heart will break...

'Go on, silly goose.'

Leaving my body slumped on the seat, I run to join them.