

DAY LILIES

It was too hot really, for a trip into town, but they went, anyway.

‘I don’t see why we should have to change our plans’, Eva said, as she stood before the mirror in the hall. She unscrewed her lipstick, and as she ran it across her lips, a series of quiet moist clicks penetrated the hush. Standing back to study the result, she revealed the reflection of Jonathan, leaning against the doorframe behind her. The two reflections exchanged smiles. Eva put away lipstick in her handbag. Straightening before the mirror, she found Jonathan again.

‘I wish you wouldn’t stare so. You make me feel - uncomfortable’.

Jonathan merely opened his hands in an expansive gesture, that could have meant – *forgive me, or whatever you want, or even, I can’t help it.*

The road into town led through a dark tunnel of trees, bisected at intervals by bright beams of sunlight, causing a curious strobe-lighting effect as the car sped along. No sooner were they accustomed to the dark, than they were dazzled by the brief brightness. Eva turned her head to one side and closed her eyes, but found that this did little to lessen the effect.

When finally, the light levels appeared to have steadied, she opened her eyes, and was startled to meet those of Jonathan, who immediately turned to concentrate on the road. Eva set her mouth and turned away.

Just then, the car crested a hill, and a brief glimpse of the town was revealed, shimmering beneath them in a blue-grey heat haze, with the occasional bright flash of light as the sun caught an open window, a car windscreen, a mirror.

Soon they arrived at the quiet side road where they'd often parked before, in order to enjoy a walk to the town centre through the public gardens, across the main stream of the river.

It was only mid-morning, but already every building, every tree, every person, seemed drenched and heavy with the heat. There was no noticeable breeze, and sounds appeared muffled.

Perhaps heat, like snow, could absorb sound and deaden it, mused Eva, and found this prompted memories of childhood, and how it had seemed then to have only ever been either the height of summer or deepest mid winter. Had every summer really been that hot, and had they really spent every summer's day at the beach?

How clearly she could recall this same sense of dulled sound then, in the strange flatness of her own voice, calling to her parents from the shallows, the persistent quiet lapping of the waves along the shore, and hearing those same flat cries from other children which, like hers, would not carry through the still, hot air.

Today, she was only aware of an all-pervading quiet rushing hum, a background noise so synonymous with heat, that hearing it at any other time of year would still invoke the atmosphere of a hot day such as this.

By now, they had entered the park, and emerged from a shady side path into the full glare of the sun, before approaching the river. Instinctively they paused to

look down into the cool inviting waters beneath. The dark river was brightened by waving fronds of clump, after clump, of vivid green waterweed. Eva thought they looked like teams of water sprites, swimming against the flow of the river, their long green hair streaming out behind them, and she knew from that moment that she would never again be able to see them as anything else.

Beside her, Jonathan was already easing a finger around the inside of his collar, and taking out his handkerchief to run across his brow. Eva smiled, and, taking his arm, guided him on towards the shade on the other side.

Leaving the park through the main iron gates, they crossed the road, and turned into the main street, where they stopped short. The whole length of the gently sloping street, which, like a narrow canyon, cut a swathe between the tall buildings on either side, appeared to be filled from top to bottom with a seething stream of bobbing, bubbling heads.

‘Why on earth would they possibly want to come *here* on a hot day like today?’ cried Eva, unaware of the irony.

Jonathan smiled. ‘I don’t know - but think of the advantages; we can easily lose ourselves in this crowd, and hopefully we won’t be seen by anyone we know’.

Eva, unable to find words to reply, instead threw him a look of slight reproach.

Setting off through the masses, Eva cast careful glances at the people drifting by. Young girls swung summer limbs boldly through the balmy air, proud to draw attention to their new light clothes. Working people strode purposefully, no doubt on their way to their next appointment, expertly weaving through the trudging clumps of weary shoppers.

They paused to allow an old man to pass. Correctly dressed for his summer in a Panama hat, pale beige linen jacket, white shirt, dark tie and trousers, they both watched as he picked his way through the crowds with his walking stick, smiling benevolently at the sea of unknown faces, raising his hat to the familiar.

They smiled at a dog, pulling taut on its lead, trying to convey to its lady owner that it didn't wish to stand in the full sun as she idly chatted to her friend. Likewise, the friend's youngest child was doing the same, by banging his feet against his pushchair, whilst the older of the two leant heavily against his mother, sluggish and bored.

Eva noticed it was only ever the tourists, cameras standing proud against their chests, maps and guidebooks dangling limply from their hands, who ever seemed to look up and around them. And why was it that their voices seemed louder than those around them? It could only be that their unfamiliar accent and language stood out above the predominating English rhythm that hummed as an undertone from the surrounding crowds.

Soon they were approaching the narrow bridge that led the street over another, smaller, branch of the river. Suddenly Jonathan was assailed by a familiar but always slightly disturbing smell – neither perfume nor odour – that always emanated from florists shops, and prompted in him another, unwanted association: churches.

Just at that same moment, Eva stopped and caught his arm.

‘Look – oh, look at those – aren't they just *glorious*?’

She was pointing at a cluster of florist's vases arranged around the doorway of a small corner shop. She ran to kneel beside them, her hands closing around a pale

brown cellophane tube filled with long, oval, green and gold buds, all pointing upwards, like the closed beaks of nestling birds. At their centre, one flower had begun to open, the pointed petals parted just enough to reveal a tantalising glimpse of the dazzling colours within, and from whose dark depths a crowd of dainty stamens, with small, black lozenge-shaped tops, probed the humid air.

‘Aren’t these just the most perfect things you ever saw?’ she breathed, ‘I simply must have them, they would look so wonderful in my blue vase, don’t you think?’

As she carefully withdrew the cellophane bundle from the vase and stroked the petals of the opening flower to better see the promised colours within, she turned towards Jonathan.

To her surprise, he appeared annoyed, almost agitated. He was looking from side to side, not meeting her eyes, nor standing still, his mouth flexing around the words that he was trying to find.

‘I don’t understand you,’ he said, at last. ‘Look at them, *look* at them. Can’t you see – they’re day lilies-day lilies. They may look fresh and bright and new to you now, but the reality is – they’re dying. From the moment the buds open, as soon as they begin to flower – already they’ve begun to die. There’s no point.... Can’t you see...this heat...it’s just making it all worse, accentuating everything...I - I’m sorry’.

Eva looked at Jonathan’s distressed face, then back to the flowers, trying to take in his words. She couldn’t bring herself to look back, or to reply. She must be strong, must stay in control, but, how?

Composing herself, she began slowly, and wordlessly, to lower them back into their vase. Then, suddenly, she stopped.

‘Wait! I know the answer – I *shall* have them. But, I’ll leave them here, and we’ll return for them later. They *will* last, as long as they stay cool. I don’t care if they are day lilies. Even for just one glorious day – aren’t they worth it?’

She stood up, cradling the flowers gently in her arms, drops of water falling unnoticed onto her dress, and turned defiantly to where Jonathan stood, motionless, gazing not at Eva, but at her flowers. In answer, he opened his hand in the same expansive manner as before. He then watched as she marched triumphantly into the shadowed interior of the shop, and could just make out the nodding heads of both vendor and purchaser, before Eva re-emerged into the light, empty-handed.

‘I collect later’, she said, and took his trembling arm.

He could not meet her eyes.

They had only moved forward a matter of steps when Jonathan stopped abruptly, forcing Eva to a halt also.

‘Joan – coming this way – and she’s bound to want to stop us and talk!’

Eva followed his gaze and soon made out the familiar shape and gait of the old family friend he had named, as she made her way through the slowly moving crowd.

‘She won’t, you know,’ said Eva, still feeling rather unsettled, if not a little upset, by his earlier attitude. She suddenly dropped his arm and walked pointedly on.

‘What are you doing!’ hissed Jonathan in alarm, remaining where he was, rooted to the spot, watching helplessly as Eva weaved her way towards Joan, matching her every twist and turn until such time as the two women must either collide or at the very least, pass one another close by.

At the very last moment, Joan looked up, and although her eyes betrayed the briefest flicker of recognition as she and Eva drew level, it was the immediate increase in her pace to a speed that suggested a suddenly remembered urgency, that confirmed Eva's prediction. Jonathan moved forward as quickly as he could, to where Eva now stood, arms folded, triumphantly.

'There! What did I tell you?' she laughed. 'Hardly anyone knows how to deal with people who are... who've had...bad *news*. You've nothing to fear, on *that* score, you know.'

But Eva knew that Jonathan did feel fear, and that the almost audible thudding of his heart was not just a reaction to having hurried in the heat. It was true that he hadn't wanted to talk to people today, he had said as much, but he'd obviously not been prepared, as she had been, for the reverse situation, that other people may not want to talk to *them*.

As the morning wore on, they began to indulge more in the distraction of browsing, even buying a few things: birthday cards, a long sought after book, the daily newspaper.

The cool interior of the museum offered a welcome relief from the heat, and there was an exhibition being held as an interesting diversion, seemingly overlooked by the crowds outside. Only the echoing clicks of their footsteps on the marble floors disturbed the solemn atmosphere as they climbed the massive staircase. In the first floor gallery, the works of local artists hung in self-conscious silence. Usually, Eva liked to make gentle fun of the cruder exhibits, but today the stewards were positioned where they could survey the whole room, and seemed as intent on quietly studying

their visitors, as the visitors were on their works. The lead-heavy silence in the room soon became as suffocating as the heat outside. They didn't stay long.

Walking back through the long dark entrance hall towards the bright sunlight shining through the doorway, Jonathan suggested that perhaps they would benefit from something to eat.

Eva didn't feel hungry, but agreed, nevertheless, to please him.

Assuming that all the open-air cafes and restaurants would be full, they instead decided to try the main department store's own café, situated in the ancient crypt that formed part of its basement and would therefore, hopefully, be cool.

The store's entrance led from a corner of the old market square, and they approached it through barely-moving crowds of tourists trying to photograph the surrounding buildings, or each other in front of them. Others were listening to the hurdy-gurdy man who slowly turned the handle of his instrument, the tinkling notes of which never reached far enough to echo.

The coolness of the store's interior seemed at odds with its bright artificial lighting, and it was a relief to descend to the relative darkness of the crypt café. As they moved down the stairs, Eva experienced a familiar, but unaccountable thrill at this change from light into dark. What subconscious memories did this trigger, she wondered, and why was it only the thrill that had remained, and nothing else? A theatre, the dimming of the lights before curtain up; a bedroom light extinguished on the night of Christmas Eve; a railway tunnel on a train journey up to London. It was, she supposed, the element of the unknown in each of these experiences that still excited her, that same surge of fear and anticipation at what one may find.

At the foot of the stairs they entered a labyrinth of short, wide passages, flanked by lines of tables all of which seemed occupied by shadowy figures. The tables stood within recesses, the gloom only relieved only by small clusters of wall lights, the fittings made to resemble melting candles, and covered with dark red shades. They found a vacant table at the furthest end of the first passage.

The waitress who took their order seemed little more than a child. A Saturday girl, thought Eva, doing extra summer holiday shifts, no doubt. Her pale, plump unfinished-looking face drooped over a round-shouldered body from which hung a shapeless and unflattering uniform. She slouched away, on pigeon toes, and, with no apparent sense of urgency, and stopped to gather some dirty crockery, in a detached and desultory manner.

‘Can’t say I’m impressed by the service here,’ commented Jonathan.

‘I feel rather sorry for her,’ replied Eva, ‘shut away here on a lovely summer’s day, having to serve people like us, who are here purely for enjoyment!’

Jonathan let out a long breath, and shook out his newspaper, holding it up at an angle to read.

With her eyes now accustomed to the light level, Eva sat back and studied their surroundings. The low vaulted ceilings reminded her of the inside of sea anemone shells she’d found on a Scottish beach long ago, and they were no less beautiful. Stretching out a hand to touch the cool stone walls, she marvelled that they must be as cold to the touch now as they had been 500 years ago. This very coldness - and the darkness - had probably preserved their structure and texture for all that time, and would continue to do so indefinitely, regardless of the changes above. It

was a sense of continuity that Eva found very reassuring. Even the stark modernity of the café paraphernalia could do nothing to compromise those dignified surroundings. In fact, it was humbled by them.

After lunch, they sat sipping their final cups of tea.

‘We still have to find a present for your sister, haven’t we?’ Jonathan asked eventually, concerned that a long and futile search might ensue.

‘I know she loves scarves, and there’s a shop not far from here that’s sure to have something to suit her!’ Eva smiled at his palpable relief.

Leaving the tranquil, darkened crypt they emerged once more into the bright light, and as they opened the door, were hit by the intensity of the heat that hung before them like a hot thick wall.

‘I’m not sure that I can stand too much more of this,’ gasped Jonathan.

Eva longed to stay within the safety of the crowds, to perpetuate the momentum of the city and its welcome distractions, but she could not ignore the fact that it was these very things, and not just the heat alone, that were compounding Jonathan’s distress.

‘Don’t worry! We’ll buy the scarf, collect my flowers and then make our way back to the car’.

They set off down a narrow sloping side street, which was bisected by a crossroads. Through its entire length, lines of people moved sluggishly, like thick blood in a narrow vein. A clot of cars was clogging the crossroads, as hot and weary drivers tried to negotiate a safe passage through the flow of pedestrians – their reactions dulled by the heat – constantly trickling across the junction.

Following Eva past this chaos, Jonathan sighed thankfully as she led him through a brightly decorated shop door. Just inside stood a rack, hung with row after row of brightly coloured scarves. He waited, his impatience and agitation carefully concealed, as Eva took down one scarf after another, holding each one up to the light, even trying some on herself.

Finally, she made her choice. As the assistant wrapped it, she turned to Jonathan with a satisfied smile.

‘It’s somewhat brighter than her normal style,’ he remarked, at the same time hoping that she wouldn’t change her mind.

‘I know, but I thought this might cheer her up - somewhat!’ she replied, mimicking his words.

‘She may not want to wear it.’

‘Oh, I think she will – now.’

Having made their way back to the flower shop, Jonathan waited for Eva outside. He noticed that a large group had gathered further down the street, obstructing the free flow of human traffic, and forcing those wanting to pass by through a narrow passage on the opposite side of the road. Faint strains of music emanated from within the centre of the crowd.

Eva returned, gently but defiantly holding the lilies, which were now wrapped in layers of white tissue paper. She had already noticed that the petals of the open flower now seemed less fresh, and the buds surrounding it more swollen, as though the force of the life within them was imminently about to burst open, and so to begin the flower’s expiry. She said nothing.

They moved on, heading towards the passage around the side of the crowd, now only accessible in single file. Through the impromptu audience could just be made out the musicians within, three young people behind music stands in the centre of a wide circle, two violinists and a cellist, playing a slow movement of almost unbearable loveliness.

Jonathan paused a short distance on the other side to wait for Eva, but she had not followed him. Instead she had moved slowly round the circumference of the crowd and was now on the same side of the street as the musicians. The music ended, and a liquid sound of applause trickled and rippled through the air. Eva looked for Jonathan then beckoned to him, urgently. As he quickly moved towards her, she disappeared through the thinner mass of bodies at the crowd's edge.

Following her path, he saw her approach one of the young violinists, exchange words, and then study the score that lay open on the music stand. Despite the burden of her flowers, Eva managed to retrieve both pen and a scrap of paper from her bag, upon which the violinist carefully copied some words. As the girl returned them, there was another brief exchange, followed by Eva handing over the flowers, and then drawing out her purse. The girl folded back the tissue paper to look the flowers, as Eva stepped forward to drop a few coins into the battered black hat that laid on the pavement in front of the musicians. Returning the bouquet, the young violinist said a few earnest words to Eva who, in return, gave a surprised laugh. After thanking her profusely and smiling brightly, she made her way back to Jonathan's side.

As they moved away, the trio began another serenade.

'That piece they were playing, as we were passing, – did you recognise it?' she asked.

‘It did seem familiar, but I couldn’t name it,’

‘It was *very* familiar to me, but that’s the first time I’ve heard it in years and years, and until today, I couldn’t have named it either’. She paused for a moment in thought. ‘When my sister and I were little girls, my mother used to play that piece to us on the piano in the front room, after she’d tucked us up into our beds. She played entirely from memory, no sheet music. I never once thought to ask her what it was called, and I never found out.’

‘And what was the girl saying to you about the flowers?’ Jonathan asked, not wishing to dwell on the music.

‘Nothing really, she just didn’t like lilies, thought they were.... oh, it doesn’t matter’. She tailed off, rather lamely.

By now, they had reached the end of the main street. They crossed the road and walked back through the tall wrought iron gates into the public gardens where the honey-sweet scent of a thousand Alyssum flowers was so intensified by the heat as to be almost suffocating.

‘Anyway,’ finally resumed Eva, ‘the name of the piece, since you haven’t asked, is *Chanson de la Nuite*- and it really *was* our night-song! My mother hoped that it would help to send us to sleep, and that it would make our last waking thoughts pleasant ones. She didn’t play it every night though, I seem to associate it more with the summer, when it was still daylight at bedtime.’

They approached the bridge over the river, on the path that would lead them towards the gateway on the other side.

‘Even when she didn’t play the music’, continued Eva, ‘I don’t remember a single night without her singing all our special lullabies and hymns, and I wouldn’t rest until I’d heard them all!’

She walked onto the bridge, carefully tucking the lily buds into the white tissue paper and then smoothing it down.

‘*Hush Little Baby, Golden Slumbers, Now The Day Is Over*, oh, and of course, her very favourite...’ she began to sing:

The day thou gavest Lord is ended,

The darkness falls at thy behest...

She continued on, humming through the rest of the tune, all the time still smoothing the tissue paper around her lilies.

Reaching the gate in the wall, she turned to Jonathan, only to find that he was no longer there. Back along the path she hurried, only to be brought to a sudden halt in shock at what was before her.

Jonathan stood perfectly still, right in the centre of the bridge. His upper body was bent slightly forward, his arms stiffly held down by his sides, and his face...his face was contorted, out of all recognition, into a terrible rictus of grief, his eyes creased tightly shut, and the sides of his open mouth pulled right down, like a hurt child that had drawn breath to cry.

She rushed towards him just as the first agonised sobs tore from his body. As she flung her arms around his rigid form, the lilies slipped from her hand, and fell to the ground. The pollen from the open flower threw a dark stain across the white path, as its shattered petals fluttered down into the darkly flowing waters beneath, and were borne away.