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IF YOU GOT CLOSE ENOUGH to the metal, you could pretend it wasn't there. Look through the gaps in the fence, the wire hooked between your knuckles, and all that lay beyond was dancing white petals. Daisies, dozens of them. A brief fever dream amid the brick and concrete.

I'd last walked past it last a couple of weeks before, wandering back from a dinner that had been served up in a courtyard. It was a civilised thing to do on a Sunday night: meet with friends and crack open shellfish, mop it up with bread. Someone had taken a selfie, posted it online. This was a mark of our comfort, our accomplishments. These were the kinds of things my generation had been made to want: simple delicacies with like-minded people somewhere we could walk home from, even in London, on the first balmy night of late spring.

Josh and I headed home up the hill holding hands, and I pulled him back to look at these flowers. Sometimes it felt like a novelty, that this was what life was. A bit of an elaborate joke, of playing pretend. It felt both too good to be true and yet never quite enough;

always at a slight remove from what the roaring essence of life should be. Perhaps that was because it wasn't really meant to be this way.

Everything punctured after that, the air rushing out so quickly that it left me dizzy. Here I was now, taking in this rare patch of undeveloped scrubland littered with wildflowers and wondering where I would end up. How I had been in something that just didn't exist any more. If somebody mowed these flowers down, would they grow back the next year? Maybe we were just to have them for the few days that they drifted in the fading light before crumpling, weighed down with seed.

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When I was a child, wildflowers were weaponry. We saw nature's offerings as something both prosaic and powerful, plentiful ammo to be deployed in the constant fantastical battles that defined our countryside upbringings.

Stickyweed was to be pulled down, balled up and tossed so lightly towards the victim that, ideally, they wouldn't know they had been targeted for several hours. They would be left to wander around unwittingly, the bright green barbs stuck to their T-shirt and covering their spine or shoulder or, best yet, their bum, for as long as it took for someone to point out what had befallen them.

Dandelions served other potentially punitive purposes. Come May, when their scraggly yellow flowers had blossomed into far prettier drifts of fine fluff, they became soothsayers. Those blowing the seeds off a dandelion head could divine many things with their breath, but mostly chose to establish whether two people

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– often a nervous friend and either the most or least desirable boy in class – loved one another, or not. More potent horrors lay inside the weeds’ stalks, though. Those encouraged to suck on the snapped stalk of a dandelion – usually by being promised a delicacy – will find instead hearty bitterness from the milky sap that had landed on their tongue, a grim taste that lingered and contorted the face, much to the glee of the perpetrator.

But the most cunning of the lot were the grasses. As the days lengthened, they would grow long and swaying, erupt into seed heads that held tiny spears and scatter bombs. We never knew their names, but we knew how to pick a good one – something with plenty of seeds but not too sparsely distributed. The opulent, fluffy ones were bold and advanced choices; rookies would be taken in by the shinier, spinier types, but these were too compact and would not deploy themselves well. Rather, something in between was needed – and it took experience to spot. In spite of spending the first chunk of her childhood in the suburbs, my sister learned this swiftly and was bolstered by knowing my gullibility and my desires well. She would choose her weapon, tell me to let her lay it across my tongue, grit my teeth and close my eyes if I wanted to know what it felt like to fly. Then, blade correctly placed, flying sensations suitably hyped up, she would tug the stem that emerged from the side of my lips and cackle as I felt the hard, dry seeds explode behind my teeth. I’d open my eyes and see her laughing as I spat out the seemingly endless supply of seed, removing it from inside my chops. A whole new kind of language left on my tongue.

I know these tricks because I suffered them plenty and rarely succeeded in dishing them back out – I tried to make Hannah

grit her teeth over grass, but she knew full well what I was up to. The littlest sister of a family born in the town, I was ripe fodder for these school-run crimes when we moved to the village while I was still too small to enrol.

But I learned quickly, came to navigate the fields and poorly marked footpaths around our rural home as I did the bounty in the hedgerows and the timekeeping of the changing crops. Never formally, with proper names or agricultural understanding, but merely as a matter of fact. All manner of life and death lay here, in this small gathering of lanes and cul-de-sacs. Frogspawn would arrive in classrooms in jars and featherless baby birds would find their way out of the nest and onto the patio for inspection, their eyes large and unseeing. Rabbits would dash across fields. If badgers were seen out of their setts they would be at the side of the road, upside down, puffed up tragicomedically with their own fetid gases. Lambing season would be several weeks of joy and fear; we understood that those wearing two fleeces did so because death had unfolded alongside the new things.

We would know the laws of some plants, too. Acorns turned into oak trees, conkers became horse chestnuts – or at least those that weren't pickled in vinegar or hardened in the oven for annual collection and battle. For all our japes, we knew that stinging nettles were cruel and off-limits for trickery: the hot, prickling rash that ensued if you ended up in a patch of them and that there would be dock leaves nearby, cool and soft and comforting, to rub on the welts that crept up little legs. Green medicine oozing between our knuckles, sticking to our cuticles, as the leaves pilled between our sweaty palms.

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For all that, though, life was largely lived indoors. The village may have retained its most baffling and charming traditions – hog roasts and playing with sheep bladders and fierce rivalries at produce shows – but I was still a child of the Nineties, as enticed by technology and the siren call of the future as everyone else. I have an exquisite memory of a Windows 95 computer being installed in the study and a similarly crisp one of being shown how to access the internet a few years later. The possibilities of a life online surged through our generation and those around us like a tidal wave, and yet few could predict just how one would unfold.

As a teenager, I grew claustrophobic in the countryside. All that space, but no means to escape it. I lusted for the city, for London, for pavements and street style and a sense of danger and revelry beyond the worry of a too-fast car on an unlit back road. I felt stifled by the village's silence, the expanse of its skies and the sometime smallness of its mind. Meanwhile, our parents and teachers asked us what we wanted to be, chivvied us into becoming things, finding callings and careers and job titles. We'd parrot them, sparking the need and desperation to cast ourselves a future. I alighted on being a journalist, someone who made work out of play. I wanted my words on a page. And so I left for a string of over-growing cities. And I didn't think about the plants or the seasons or the cycles I had left behind until I came to realise how much I missed them.

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When I first started to take an interest in plants, somewhere in my mid-twenties, it was to embark upon a journey that unspooled slowly. There was nothing showy about it. If anything, I kept it deeply hidden. To get addicted to gardening was considered strange and dowdy, a habit enjoyed by the elderly or the tedious. The steady, lingering gratification that remains after discovering a new shoot or unfurling leaf, of opening the airing-cupboard door to find a dozen germinating seeds pushing at the edges of a propagator, couldn't be captured in a photograph that would easily sit alongside the more common fodder of a millennial Facebook feed: three a.m. snapshots from a Hackney Wick club night or the views from a mini-break in Budapest.

And I didn't quite understand why I enjoyed it, either. I hadn't been raised to get stuck into gardening; I'd never before felt a need to study botany or a longing to visit public gardens. The trappings of gardening – slightly naff graphic design, an assumption of knowledge and a certain pernicketyness – still left me cold. All I knew is that it gave me a pure enjoyment I had not found elsewhere; not in London's bright lights, not in fashionable parties or hyped-up albums. To indulge in plants was to ask dozens of excitable questions about how and why the plants were doing what they did. I wanted to know how to answer. There was a silent, unspoken challenge about it all that didn't need to express itself anywhere beyond my own brain. And, unlike the other, more shouty propellants in my life so far (get the best grades, get a degree, find the perfect job, make a group of friends with whom to have the kind of fun that looks good on social media), there was no determination to gardening. The level of effort you put

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in did affect what came out the other side, but the causal relationship was a slippery one, one divined by elements beyond my control. For someone who had spent a very long time trying to push everything in the right direction, this felt like a constantly charming magic trick.

Like millions before me, I moved to London to find work. I adapted well. I found comfort in the noise and the anonymity, and fascination in the constant change. But a city is something humans made out of need, and the result has become difficult to live in. There is little space left for thought and reflection. Here, away from the hundreds of fine, tiny changes in air and earth and branch, strange demands were made of me. The city changes our priorities, forces us to compete in ways we never thought mattered to us: in terms of our income and where we go on holiday. More of us live in cities than ever before. The millennial generation – the one I belong to – flocked to these masses of grey and glass and steel, threw ourselves into housing poverty and clamoured for jobs in recession-scarred industries. We tried to shake off the expectations held by our parents while forging new ways of life; we wanted to do things rather than own them, even while attempting to buy a flat. We scabbled up career ladders that led to futures that were kaleidoscopic, shape-shifting and impossible to predict. We tried to be many different things at once, got good at pretending even when we felt like we were failing at all of them.

We had been pushed away from the other living things we shared our space with. We grew plant-blind, ignorant to the power and the purpose of the greenery that we no longer knew how

to identify. And we weren't the first: for generations, people have left the countryside of their childhoods for the fancy riches of the city. Eventually, the land claims us back. We find ourselves seeking it out, this restorative green space. We defy law and doctrine to grow things in soil that is not ours, making the dull beautiful to soothe both the hearts of the masses as well as our own. In the wake of the smut and the smog of the Industrial Revolution, Victorian authorities began to carve out space for parks, so that people could breathe from green lungs when their own became filled with soot. Later, when the frenetic pace of that century's invention left its children weary and worn-out, it was with garden design that the most cutting-edge creatives tried to find new freedoms.

Where do we sit among these generations? What in our indoor lives has come to shape our brains, our needs and wants? I found myself craving the brittle taste of them again, those unexpected grass seeds. I wanted the surprise of it across my tongue, something given, no matter how roughly. I sought an expanse, not necessarily of where I lived – for the city is large and full of as much wonder as it is frustration – but of how I thought. As I stared at those daisies, occupying the pavement for whole minutes as others quickly walked past, I realised I was hungry. Hungry for a kind of understanding, the kind of humble superpower that came with turning stickyweed into a gag, a fattened blackberry into an inky snack or a dock leaf into a remedy. It seemed that if I could only navigate the workings of these plants, to tune in to what made them bloom and shrink, that I could find a whole new way of living.

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THE FIRST HIT OF SUMMER in the city lands with the same high pressure that causes it. Brick walls soak up the unexpected sun, tarmac shimmers with the bake of it. We are sweaty, accidentally bundled up in our tights and coats and boots. A giant palm has been laid above us all and we celebrate by flocking outdoors, to the gardens and parks, to crack open tinnies in a million hissing gasps. We know it won't be hot for long.

People tend to forget how wet and showery June can be. A sunny weekend early in the month, oft declared a heatwave by certain newspapers, will usher the summer open – even though the solstice, the tipping point between light and dark, won't arrive for weeks. But rain will follow, it always does. It's the combination of both the surprising blister of heat and the runaway gurgle of persistent rain that allows the plants to grow.

Because June is fertile. There is a pause between the dainty abundance of spring and the heft of summer in its peak. In June, things are growing and gangly, on the cusp of riotous change. Hollyhocks spring up from the earth, looming on kerbsides.

Tree-lined roads appear to shrink as the boughs fatten with leaves. Grasses become wild and swaying, there to catch the back of knees. Roses explode in softness and scent, ready to become heavy with rainwater. There are so many buds that, after wind and rain, some end up on the pavement, offering a crunch under passing feet. Everywhere is green and teeming and eager with it, this burgeoning sense of new life. The solstice nears, tipping the world on its axis. It changes the shape of the days we fill with everyday things.

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My life had been steady for a while. It was the start of the third summer in the same home, the longest stretch of time in one place throughout my twenties. That flat bore the weight of the seasons, looking, as it did, across the city from the fourth floor on top of a hill, capable of catching both dawn and dusk from the dining table. It would steam up in winter, condensation trickling down windows letting in the feeble dawn, water pooling on the sills. Storms would batter it. And with the bright heat of summer, we would open it up and let the day stream in until the silhouettes of evening painted themselves across the blushing walls. A brisk wind would rattle down the hallway and slam the doors at either end of it, interrupting the blanched calm of the place.

This was the ship that we commandeered, Josh and I. A gleaming white home that sometimes felt too grown-up for the stuff we had accumulated together, too polished for what bound us: adventure and appetite.

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We'd fallen in love five years earlier, in the next neighbourhood along, over a summer of packed lunches in the park and walks along the Thames. Whole warm weeks passed before we kissed, a few minutes after midnight, next to the lions in Trafalgar Square. He was another thing in the new, lonely sprawl of London that I drank from, bitter and refreshing and moreish. After that, we were rarely apart, falling into a relationship without really knowing what one was. His early twenties unravelled into mine. Quiet and thoughtful to my rapid noise, he showed me care unlike any I had known before. I, meanwhile, tried to tug him out of every tight perimeter of his comfort zone.

We were each other's formative loves; the ones that blossom brightly on unsteady ground, root down between the cracks of youth and keep going in spite of unseasonal weather. And we had ticked the boxes of young adulthood: dancing until daybreak, travelling far, falling out. We stuck together in spite of illness and heartache, we learned to put another person first even when it hurt. We worked hard at it, this love. Patched it together out of fierce support and understanding, making do when we couldn't make it better. Our lives folded into one another, as lives in love often do. Human origami; we had become practised at it.

With time, it felt like we grew into something other and different to ourselves. We were connected by our ambition and determination to get the careers and lives we wanted, but also the things we had built together: impenetrable Escher castles of language and humour, spinning tales that could be reduced to code-like snippets. How we revelled in it, this secret, snow-globe world shut off to others. I'd never met somebody who worried

more than I did until I met him. He made me seem free and easy in a way that others never had. But nor had I encountered someone so committed to looking after me, so strong in their moral compass, so uncompromising in their understanding of what was wrong and right, and so quick in the mind. I loved that he unspooled himself slowly, that to know him was like learning a well-earned secret. And so when we grew up before everybody else did, it didn't seem to matter so much because I was doing it with him.

The flat was a mark of graduation, of commitment entrenched in serious paperwork and legalese. Binding things. We were among the very lucky, very few home-owning millennials, and in London. The ones who bucked the headline horror stories, thanks to a mixture of inheritance, the generosity of others and a beyond-our-years maturity. Made of bricks and mortar and yet I treated it like an eggshell: a precious and often preposterous casing for our nascent lives. More a new toy that had been bestowed upon us than a place to live.

We tried to make a home that smothered even our young world-weariness in comfort, one that copied the Pinterest boards with Freecycle trophies. With time, the novelty of the place softened. We conducted normal life in it, sandwich-making, teeth-brushing. Took in a lodger to help us with the bills and slipped into different bedtimes. And I started to push beyond its boundaries and into the world outside, through the door to the balcony.

The balcony was my favourite bit of the flat. I relished the dinkiness of it – less than four metres long, just over one wide and flanked on either side by weatherbeaten Crittall-framed doors

so small that people gingerly stepped through sideways while commenting, usually with a nervous laugh, that they might get stuck. Once I stepped through them, though, I felt a gush of freedom; to see the sky, to feel as though I was in it, was to breathe properly. My lungs felt bigger; there was more room to exhale.

Tentatively, I started to colonise it. I found myself spending more time out on that little sky platform. I wanted to bring life to somewhere that felt so gusty. I started with herbs – mint, thyme and sage – and crammed them, straggling and rootbound, into industrial-sized tomato tins rescued from outside a pizza restaurant. I drowned their poor fragrant bodies within weeks. I fell into a routine of leaving the house early on a Sunday morning and heading east, to Columbia Road Flower Market, with a £20 note. I'd bundle what looked nice into carrier bags and take them home on the train only to accidentally, goodnaturedly abuse them in all manner of ways. Bargain plants from Sainsbury's and Lidl offered horticultural training wheels. Things died, but others surprised me. It took me a while to learn that I must touch the soil before I watered to judge if the plants needed a drink or not. Instead, I'd just pour liquid love onto already drenched roots. I subjected tender growth to bruising winds. I saw height, plants growing tall if insubstantial, as a triumph rather than a sign of desperation for light or food, and when my plants bolted (going to flower, in order to make seed in a last gasp of energy before a premature death) I left them to bloom out of a mixture of intrigue and pride. And some were justifiably beautiful; even now, I will let rocket bolt quite happily: its delicate, windmill-shaped

white flowers are among my very favourites. Just before they go over, I cut them from their stems and add them to a salad, savouring the novelty of their softly nutty flavour.

While I had grown up in the countryside, the granddaughter of two men who had greenhouses and vegetable patches, who would find solace in thinning-out and breach their upstanding morals by pocketing cuttings from National Trust gardens, I hadn't taken an interest in gardening until now.

It's not that I was averse to nature: my childhood was one of bike rides, field-conquering and den-making. But there were books to be read, pictures to be drawn, fleeting fascinations with friendship bracelets and dance routines. I was prescribed glasses at seven and promptly became obsessed with wearing them; the kind of child so reticent to play outside that my mother would threaten to move us all to a flat without a garden until I did.

When the seeds of interest started to sprout a couple of decades later, gardening wasn't really the done thing. It felt like the most pathetic kind of rebellion at first: no drugs or sexual boundaries conquered, merely the ground. It wasn't clubbing or brunch, a long weekend in Copenhagen or a group holiday to Koh Samui. People my age were expected to do many things, often all at once – travel, work creatively, party hard, present well and sleep with one another in ever more fluid ways – but growing things was never one of the socially prescribed activities.

And why would it be? The soil beneath our feet was an alien thing, something to launch ourselves off from, into the giddy stratospheres of post-millennium promise. We had been brought up by parents who witnessed the rise of supermarkets; those of

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us born in the last decades of the twentieth century were two generations distant from the people who grew to eat and enjoy. Front gardens weren't pruned in the Nineties; they were paved over. House plants were replaced with artificial flowers and potpourri. Conservatories, bike sheds and endless metres of decking took the space where greenhouses used to stand.

We learned the essentials of housekeeping – how to cook, clean and find vintage furniture on kerbsides – but those of tending to life outdoors became less relevant. Plants were superfluous. Even in the countryside they became merely the backdrop of a world constricting in its distance from other people. I craved asphalt and noise and the freedom granted by having a twenty-four-hour offy within walking distance, and so I found it. First in Newcastle; then, briefly, in New York; and finally in London, where it will keep me for a while, I imagine.

And yet, quietly, I was growing things. By June, jasmine was climbing gingerly up a drainpipe and purple basil was putting out leaves in spite of a shady corner. A courgette plant, still in its seedling pot, was flowering – even if the feathery reaches of powdery mildew would grasp its malnourished leaves soon after (courgettes, like most vegetables, need as much room and food as possible, and I gave them neither). The sweet peas I'd raised from pound-shop seed had been given their training canes. They would never flower, but in hindsight that wasn't a poor feat from such a stubborn-to-germinate plant. Recently I had been feeling inexplicably absent from the life I was living, as if I were going through the motions purely because that was what was expected of me. Fun, work, love: it was all muted, somehow. And yet here

lay real thrill, in every unfurling leaf, every nascent shoot pushing above the surface.

I gardened with an abandon fuelled by curiosity, small successes and crushing failures. I didn't have the money to invest in my experiments, so I scavenged. I'd pot up trays of annuals (plants that germinate, flower and then set seed all in the space of a year) in a mishmash of rescued containers: wooden pallets, oil tins picked off the pavement outside curry houses and leftover plastic pots nabbed from the nursery. The second summer, I made my sweet peas clamber up a hideous wigwam I'd constructed from dead wood found in the park and twine. By the third spring, I'd used that same twine to truss a length of chicken wire down the brick wall of the flat for that year's crop to soar up.

And I did envisage that they would soar, even though they often limped. I was yet to learn about the distinctions of fertiliser, the hunger of the container garden, or the merits of a good feed. I was only just grasping the basics – of light, of shelter, of space – through my errors and some confounding online research. I aspired to grow it all, feeling nature's gentle confines only by pushing up against them: chard will not flourish in a small container, but sow an entire packet of mustard seeds into a series of them, and optimistically reuse the compost, and yes, leaves will appear two seasons later.

My knowledge accumulated like dust, without me realising or measuring it; there was more of it the next day than there had been the one before. It moved and persisted, changed with the seasons, gained with success and stilled with defeat but did not wane. And my enthusiasm mounted with it. I became idly hungry for the balcony and that which grew on it. It would stay more

grey than green for years, but within that ragtag collection of pots and tubs and food tins were living things that existed somewhere in the gap between biology and my control. I'd linger at the balcony door, rest my forehead on the glass and stay there until, if it was cold, the mist my breath painted would cloud my vision. Josh would ask what I was doing, and I would always reply the same way: 'Just looking.'

Here lay endless fascination, but the balcony always remained my space. Others, including Josh, would come out on it sometimes in socked feet (I kept a grotty pair of flip-flops at the door, which I still refuse to throw out) and not know where to stand or look or put themselves. I was growing myself a cocoon without ever considering why.

Inside, meanwhile, increasingly became Josh's domain. I could be restless; tidying became a daily ritual as I attempted to instil my own sense of order on a space two people shared. I would spend whole weekend mornings cleaning strange corners of it, desperate to keep it lovely.

Between us, there would always be flashes of profound joy, the kind borne of years of familiarity; an hour of wild hysteria induced by pure silliness. But the rooms we occupied could also be a silent battlefield with opponent strategies orchestrated in banality: shoes in the wrong place and three-day-old papers never quite reaching the bin. At those times, when it was testy and heavy, the flat felt like an eyrie perched up on that hill, taking in all of London through its windows. A kind of cage. I'd look out over the river, to the east, where we used to live and where my friends still did, and wonder what I was missing out on.