

## TIME AND TIME AGAIN

*Eley Williams*

How well the skilful gard'ner drew  
Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new;  
Where from above the milder sun  
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;  
And, as it works, th' industrious bee  
Computes its time as well as we.  
How could such sweet and wholesome hours  
Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!

— FROM ANDREW MARVELL'S *THE GARDEN*

I RECOGNISED him from the care home. The nurse's name was Amir and he blinked in the beam of my torch. I tried to keep my adrenaline in check and held my voice low. When I spoke I sounded more surprised than angry. 'What are you doing?'

He swept a thumb across his forehead. It left a faint trail of mud above his eye. Maybe it was manure, compost, topsoil. Honestly, I've no idea what the difference is. Not a green finger in my body, or whatever the phrase is.

'I'm gardening,' said Amir. Somewhere in the trees beyond the fence in the darkness an owl hooted and we both jumped.

'It's three o'clock in the morning.' I cast my torch about. Trowels, little pots and bulbs, a watering can.

'Yes,' he said, glancing at his feet. 'I thought it must be.'

'Gardening?' I repeated. Amir didn't say anything so I went on: 'I just happened to be watching the CCTV and you popped up.' I tried to maintain an even tone. 'I thought you were breaking in.'

I could see Amir was abashed. He did not put down his tools, however. 'This is the first time you've noticed in three years,' he said.

'Three years?' He twiddled with his spade handle as I spluttered. 'You're lucky I didn't come out with the dog!' I stood a little straighter and tried to muster an air of authority. I had to raise my voice over the owl. 'We could have woken residents and you'd be hauled before management. Did you say you've been doing this for *three years*? After work, between shifts? You've been coming here?'

Amir was still in his work trousers, the same dark blue uniform that all nurses and members of staff wear at the care home. I'm the only one who gets a black uniform with the word SECURITY stitched over the breast-pocket.

'Please,' Amir said. 'It's only gardening. Please don't tell. It's a favour to someone.'

I looked around the plot. I never really came out to this part of the grounds. There were neat little beds planted in careful rows.

'It's only gardening,' Amir said again. 'I can – look, can I meet you tomorrow and maybe explain?'

'Surely they have contractors,' I said. 'Ground staff . . . this feels like trespassing.' I coughed. 'It *is* trespassing.'

'This is special work,' said Amir. He stepped carefully around the plant-bed. 'Please. I can explain tomorrow.'

I tried to seem steely. I had heard about Amir. He was highly regarded amongst the care home staff. I put what I hoped was a kindly hand on his shoulder and I could feel the damp of sweat through his shirt. He must have been at work out here for hours.

'Meet me tomorrow?' he asked again. I kept my torch on his face and he did not drop his gaze.



We met in my office, Amir bouncing in through the door looking fresh as a daisy. This was disarming: I had thought he might be contrite or about to tell me that he had handed in his notice.

‘Have you met Mr Waverley?’ Amir asked by way of greeting.

‘Is he on the staff?’ The name did ring a bell. I collected myself and gestured at my CCTV monitor. ‘Amir. What were you playing at last night?’

‘He’s a resident,’ Amir said. ‘Mr Waverley. I want you to see him.’ He literally tugged at my sleeve.

I said, ‘Wait a minute. I don’t want to get you in trouble and we all have different ways of dealing with stress, but I can’t have you up at all hours doing secret “gardening”. It’s not right. I could lose my job and you certainly could. I really should be taking this issue higher up.’

‘Don’t say it like that,’ Amir said, miming the air-quotes that I had carved through the air with my fingers. ‘It *is* gardening.’

‘Whatever.’ I put unconvinced fervour on the word. ‘Amir, I can’t turn a blind eye.’

‘I was replanting the pimpernels,’ Amir said.

I stared at him.

‘They prefer soils in the pH range 5.5 to 8.0,’ he clarified.

‘I really don’t care,’ I said.

Amir looked hurt. ‘Will you come meet him? Mr Waverley?’

I pretended to check my schedule.



Mr Waverley was sitting in one of the comfier chairs in the care home’s conservatory. I recognised him vaguely from the corridors and from communal meal times: a soft-spoken,

polite gentleman with a thick white head of hair and a strong jaw. As we approached, Amir gave him a little wave. I said my hellos and Mr Waverley fished a hand into his wallet. I'm used to this. A lot of the residents like to show me pictures of their family or loved ones in well-thumbed photographs.

'This is me in Belize,' Mr Waverley proffered the photograph. It showed a handsome man wearing a stained shirt and khaki shorts. He must have been in his thirties. The photo showed him squatting in a shallow riverbank, grinning. I handed the picture back.

'Did you see what's in his hand there?' Amir asked. I squinted.

'*Dactylorhiza waverlii*,' Mr Waverley intoned. He seemed to relish every syllable. 'Nice little orange one there.'

'He has an orchid named after him!' Amir said. He hovered by Mr Waverley's elbow, a look of excitement on his face. 'He discovered it and they named it after him! Can you imagine?'

'That's great,' I said. It was. I wished I had looked more carefully at the photograph but Mr Waverley had folded it back up and repocketed it.

'Cormac, isn't it?' Mr Waverley said to me. This took me aback. No one usually bothers to ask Security's name.

'That's right,' I said and tapped my ID badge.

'Some people think that name means *son of the charioteer*,' Mr Waverley said.

'Sounds good to me,' I said.

Mr Waverley went on, 'Others think it means *son of defilement*.' Amir suppressed a laugh.

'Less good,' I said.

'Mr Waverley told me that my name means either *prince* or *sunlit portion of a tree*,' said the nurse. He had a huge grin on his face.

'*Topmost boughs*,' said Mr Waverley.

'Is that right?' I said. 'A little inexact, all this,' I observed.

‘And,’ said Mr Waverley, warming to his subject and overlooking my interjection, ‘my surname comes from an old English word meaning *meadow of quivering aspens*.’

These pleasantries were all very well but I wanted to nip this situation in the bud. ‘I’m here because I came across Amir’s little early morning hobby,’ I said.

Mr Waverley and Amir shared a look.

‘Amir is doing it all under my instruction,’ Mr Waverley said after a while, clearing his throat. ‘He hasn’t taken a penny for it either.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it!’ said Amir. ‘It’s a pleasure. Pure pleasure.’

‘And I would be out there myself if it wasn’t for the state of my back and the arthritis,’ said Mr Waverley. He glared at his hands.

‘Mr Waverley and I have been talking for years about gardens and plants,’ said Amir. He drew a chair up to the older man so that they could sit closer together. They unconsciously angled their shoulders towards one another. ‘He can tell you about every plant-derived drug in the book.’

‘Not just plants. Of the most-prescribed 150 prescription drugs,’ Mr Waverley said, ‘at least 118 are based on natural sources, did you know? At least 3 per cent come from vertebrate species such as snakes or frogs.’ This was the most animated I’d ever seen him. Usually he was a taciturn man. Polite, as I say, but not exactly a chatterbox.

Amir was enthralled. ‘Are you getting this, Cormac? The *recall* that this man has!’

‘That’s great,’ I said. ‘But I’m here to talk about the gardening.’

The two men moved their heads closer together and set their lips in a firm line. I crossed my arms.

‘You look like a pair of conspirators. What’s going on?’

‘I can explain,’ said Mr Waverley. Nobody spoke.

‘Are you growing drugs?’ I said finally. Some of the

other residents in the conservatory glanced our way then returned to their chess games and coffee.

Both men, nurse and resident, looked appalled.

‘Good Lord, no!’ said Mr Waverley. ‘Amir here,’ and the older man placed a hand upon the younger man’s shoulder, ‘is helping me build a clock.’

I thought I must have misheard.

‘A clock,’ I repeated.

‘Yes! Carl Linnaeus first thought of it. He called it *Horologium Florae*. Of course,’ Mr Waverley said, clearly warming to his subject, ‘Linnaeus’s flowering times are based on the climate and sunshine hours of eighteenth-century Uppsala, where he taught, so we’re having to adapt a fair bit for a south-facing garden in Maidenhead.’

‘Mr Waverley had me order all these books about Linnaeus to the library,’ Amir said. ‘I’ve got a whole bookshelf dedicated to him in the break room.’

‘It’s great to have a student again,’ Mr Waverley said. ‘I used to work and lecture at Kew Gardens, you know.’

I spread my hands, trying to stem the flow of their conversation.

‘This is all fascinating,’ I said, ‘and I care, I really do, but I need to know you’re not doing anything untoward late at night on the care home’s grounds. And I need you both to reassure me that it won’t happen again. It’s a question of health and safety.’

‘You’ve heard of Linnaeus, I presume?’ Mr Waverley asked. He looked over his glasses at me.

‘That’s neither here nor there,’ I attempted to say.

‘He dedicated his life to creating a classification system of plants, animals,’ said Amir.

Mr Waverley nodded. ‘All living organisms.’

‘You know when an animal or plant has a Latin name in italics?’ said Amir. ‘*Felis catus* for domestic cats, that kind of thing. That’s thanks to Linnaeus.’

Rousseau called him “the greatest man on earth”,’ Mr Waverley chipped in. ‘And Goethe called him a genius on the same scale as Shakespeare.’ The older man closed his eyes, and a smile made his face glow. Years seemed to fall off him just by thinking about this topic. ‘Imagine being remembered like that.’

‘You two are big fans, I get it,’ I said. ‘But, please. The matter in hand.’

‘It’s all relevant,’ urged Amir.

‘Haven’t you got work to be at?’ I said, somewhat sharply.

‘This is all about healing,’ Amir said. We regarded one another for a moment. The sound of the care home air-conditioner buzzed and the chink of china teacups across the room sounded like tiny cathedral bells.

‘You mentioned a clock?’ I said.

Mr Waverley coughed. ‘That I can explain. Something else that Linnaeus hypothesised was that flowers could accurately predict time based on when their blooms opened and when they closed. I mean, lots of people before Linnaeus had observed that some plants raise their leaves during the day then they droop down during the night. Androsthenes did in the time of Alexander the Great, and Pliny the Elder, of course, in the first century.’

‘Right, right,’ I said, letting the words wash over me.

‘But,’ said Mr Waverley, sitting up, ‘Linnaeus was the first to posit that a garden could be grown so that as the hours change different flowers would be shown to open their blooms. Stick all those flowers in the ground, look after them right and according to when their petals open you can tell the hour of day just by looking out of the window.’

Amir and Mr Waverley shone upon me. Their eyes were wide and gleaming.

‘That’s nuts,’ I said.

Amir pulled a list from somewhere in his uniform. ‘You

know the scarlet pimpernel, the thing you saw me laying down this morning?’

‘*Anagallis arvensis*,’ said Mr Waverley. Amir nodded.

‘That opens its flowers at eight a.m. pretty much on the dot. While spotted cat’s ear opens at six a.m. and closes between four and five p.m.’

‘Excuse me,’ I interrupted. ‘*Spotted cat’s ear*?’

‘Perennial herb with pale yellow flowers,’ Mr Waverley said impatiently. ‘*Hypochaeris maculata*.’

‘It looks a bit like a dandelion,’ nodded Amir, trying to be helpful.

‘Dandelions open at five a.m. and close at about eight to nine a.m.,’ responded Mr Waverley.

‘There is no way it can be that exact,’ I said. I had decided I should humour them for a bit. Their interest was infectious and it was impressive to hear Mr Waverley call up so much information. This was definitely the longest I’ve ever heard him speak the whole time he had been in the care home. ‘It must be far too haphazard to be of use.’

Mr Waverley snorted dismissively. ‘Precision is over-rated,’ he said. ‘It’s the *scope* of vision that’s the key. There’s never been a successful Linnaean clock. Can you imagine if we pull it off?’ And I saw it again: his eyes had a new lustre to them. ‘Time rooted right there in the garden, slow and steady in the sunshine?’

‘What opens at seven a.m.?’ I asked. Mr Waverley rolled his eyes.

‘Loads,’ volunteered Amir, counting off his fingers. ‘I’ve planted hawkweed, garden lettuce, St Bernard’s lily . . .’

‘Fine.’

‘I introduced bindweed to the car park – it opens reliably at five a.m.,’ Amir went on, ‘but the council quickly pulled it out because it grows so quickly and was covering the Pay and Display signs.’ Mr Waverley reached out and patted Amir’s hand.



‘But what about, like, three p.m.? Teatime?’ I asked.

‘That’s when marigolds close their flowers,’ said Mr Waverley. ‘And in late spring the Icelandic poppy closes at seven p.m.’

‘You have an answer for everything,’ I said.

‘A lot of trial and error,’ Mr Waverley said. ‘A lifetime of it.’

‘How much is this all costing you?’ I pressed.

Mr Waverley blushed and looked out of the window.

‘One can’t put a price on achieving your dreams.’ Amir took the reins of the conversation. ‘Less so,’ he went on, ‘the dreams of others.’

‘I see,’ I said.

‘It’s my pleasure to fund it,’ Amir said. He was shrugging. ‘Gets me out and about. Soil under your fingernails, watching things grow. It’s such a small thing but I haven’t felt this well in years.’

‘It gives me something to look forward to,’ Mr Waverley said in a small voice. ‘So much of life is to do with watching and waiting. But cultivating – ah, that’s what it’s all about.’

‘He doesn’t get many visitors,’ Amir said quietly to me. ‘Before he came here, he’d spent his retirement experimenting, seeding, plotting out designs. He’s explained it all to me – the need for shade and what needs watering at what stage. It’s *extraordinary*, Cormac. He’d almost finished planting a full clock in his back garden before he came here but – well, the landlord dug it all up when he had to leave the building . . .’

Mr Waverley slumped a little in his seat. A cloud moved across the sun and heads of flowers stirred beyond the conservatory window.

‘Look,’ I said again. ‘I can see it means a lot to you. But I can’t—’

‘He’s been tending to the study of living things all his life,’ Amir said.

I looked at Amir in his dark blue nurse's scrubs. 'Like you,' I said.

'One man's weed is another person's wildflower,' Mr Waverley said. He was looking out at the garden. 'And a wildflower is another person's way of passing the time they have left.'

'It's not hurting anyone,' Amir said.

'We've almost planted the full design,' Mr Waverley said.

We all turned our heads again to look out of the conservatory window. I did not know the names of any of the flowers or bushes there and did not think that I had paid them a second's attention the whole time that I'd worked at the home. I really hadn't registered that a garden was even there. Amir and Mr Waverley were also watching the world beyond the window. No; they were peering at the garden, then the cheap white clock above the Formica coffee table and then looking back to a specific spot in the garden. There were tears of satisfaction in both their eyes.



Mr Waverley suffered a fall later that year and was immobile for the rest of the summer. I brought in a picture frame for his orchid photograph and put it on his dressing-table, and I helped Amir reposition his bed so that Mr Waverley could see out of the window when propped up on pillows.

'Uppsadaisy,' said Amir as he fluffed Mr Waverley's coverlet a little.

'Thank you, treetop,' Mr Waverley said softly. 'And thank you, Cormac,' he said to me. His eye drifted to the window. 'Half-past hawkweed?' he said.

'Round about that,' Amir said, checking his watch.

'We put in some *Mirabilis jalapa* last night,' I added. 'Should come up a treat.'

bees and sweet new scents on the breeze. Residents would come and coo as they took turns around the grounds, not knowing they were passing a book of hours, but swapping anecdotes and tips for improving the soil and when to put down netting. And I took my time to stroll there, too, making a point of it every day. I took moments every day to smell the flowers and touch the outermost petals of time embedded and in full bloom.