**Forget Me Not**

‘*Crocosmia,*’ says Virginia.

It is softly exclaimed but Henry, one ear cocked, is yanked from sleep and halfway out of bed before he realises that he is awake. For a moment he sits there, clutching his juddering ribcage, one leg on the floor, his ragged gasps filling the moonlit room.

Virginia is standing by the window, a pale, silvery phantom, staring down at the garden. She has the stillness of sleep around her but she is not sleepwalking. She rarely gets more than a couple of hours a night now.

‘It’s *Crocosmia* Henry. *Crocosmia ‘*Lucifer’,’ she says. ‘Next to the *Hostas* and that white flowering *Hebe.*’ And he remembers. Remembers her bewilderment the previous afternoon when she couldn’t name the fiery little blooms. And the sudden anguish, the heartbreaking, unreasoned anguish, as the word had continued to elude her. Anna had tried to intervene but he had bustled her back in through the french windows.

‘Go home darling,’ he’d said. ‘I’ll sort her out. It’ll be fine.’

Anna had twisted in his arms to watch her mother rocking backwards and forwards on the lawn amidst the scattered teacups. A peaceful afternoon shattered.

‘But she’s always forgetting words. What’s wrong with her now?’

Henry had resented that ‘now’…

‘Not her garden, darling. You know that. The garden’s different.’

And so it is. No matter how forgetful Virginia has become in the two years since her enforced retirement, no matter how many friends’ faces she has misplaced or memories that have slipped down the back of the sofa, how many times Henry has found books in the fridge or mugs in the washing machine, the garden has always been a bright refuge in her increasingly foggy world. Often, when events threaten to overwhelm, they sit on her favourite bench by the bee garden and gradually, magically, Virginia’s body loosens and her panic subsides as she names each shrub, each perennial, each wildflower, with the same fond confidence she used to have pointing out her ex-pupils in the marketplace.

Until yesterday.

‘Come back to bed,’ he says. The adrenaline is still pumping through his body but his mind is drugged with fatigue and he can’t make himself get up to join her. Slowly he collapses backwards onto the pillows, his caftan rucked up and one foot still out of bed. He can sense, rather than see, Virginia drifting across the room towards him. She smells of earth and lavender. As she gets under the covers she is whispering softly:

‘*Crocosmia, Osteospermum, Tradescantia, Valerian, Buddleia, Spirea… Myosotis. Myosotis. Myosotis*…’ It is a charm, he thinks; a defence against the invading hordes that creep up to steal her away.

Henry sleeps late the next morning. It feels as if just moments have passed but the moonlight has gone and bright sunshine is pouring into the room. He is alone and the house rings with silence. He no longer trusts himself to wake whenever Virginia wanders, so last month he had new locks fitted on the front door and windows, and the wrought iron gate from the garden down to the river is padlocked. The keys are dropped into the dusty copper umbrella stand each night and fished out with Henry’s ornately-carved walking stick before breakfast. He won’t hide the key to the back door though, whatever Anna says. What if there was a fire or he became ill? The garden will look after her; she will always be safe there.

Virginia is lying spreadeagled on the lawn in her nightdress, her face turned towards the sun, smiling as she soaks up its energy. Henry waves from the bedroom window, but she’s not looking at him. Around her the garden shimmies in a light breeze, its beds, banks and planters full of Summer colour, the air already humming with insects. Paved pathways lead off the lawn to sheltered spots under the fruit trees, and tall shrubs, steps and stone walls break up the space. As Henry watches, a blackbird bounces on to the grass, head tilted, tail up. It takes no notice of Virginia, hopping fearlessly between her feet as if she were just another piece of stonework.

It has always been Virginia’s garden; Henry hasn’t a clue about planting and pruning. In the early years she was the one who gave it shape, carved out its borders and boundaries, mothered it with tenderness and discipline. As it has matured she has gradually stepped back, giving it the space to flourish in its own way.

‘She loves that garden more than me,’ a teenage Anna had complained, so many years ago. Henry, looking down from his window, suspects that nothing has changed.

Two days later it happens again. They are wrapped up against an unseasonal breeze, drinking coffee outside the french windows, when Henry suddenly becomes aware that Virginia’s soothing monologue has meandered to a halt. Squinting into the sun, she rises and crosses the lawn to the banked bed running diagonally from the east wall to the steps. There she runs her hand gently up green sword-like leaves and taps her fingers against deep orange-red flowers. She breaks one off and rubs it into her palm.

‘What is it?’ Henry asks, but Virginia avoids his eye.

‘Oh Henry… you are a hopeless old thing. I told you… I told you its name the other night. All these years and you still don’t know the plants.’

But Henry can’t remember. It takes him twenty minutes to find it in the RHS encyclopaedia, while the coffee cools and Virginia treads nervy loops around the lawn.

‘*Crocosmia*.’ She rolls it around her tongue as if trying out a new flavour. There is no light of recognition in her eyes. ‘*Crocosmia*.’

Later Henry locates his multi-coloured Post-it notes and writes the plant name out in capitals. He sticks one on the fridge, one to the frame of the french windows and one to the plastic box of gardening gloves that sits by the back door. He contemplates putting one on the bread bin - Virginia has taken to storing her trowels and secateurs in there - but the words ‘Bread Bin’ are inscribed in black swirls on its cream ceramic surface and he doesn’t want to cause confusion. Anna, in helpful mode, has already placed pre-printed stickers on most of the kitchen appliances. Several now have stuttering scrape marks down them and Virginia’s pruning knife has an undiscussed stickiness on its serrated blade.

At the weekend Anna drops in, laden with cakes and good advice, and immediately spots the Post-its. Virginia is outside, staring again at the vivid red flowers, surrounded by tones of terracottas and yellows.

‘*Kniphofia*,’ she says, ‘*Helenium, Achillea millefolium, Potentilla*…’ And then she pauses, brow furrowed. ‘*Myosotis*?…’

‘I’ll make a map,’ Anna says when Henry explains, ‘or we can put little name sticks in - those lovely wooden ones from Godden’s. Don’t worry Pa. Leave it to me.’

Henry wants to say no but it is too late. Anna is determined to save the day. She hums and smiles her way through the afternoon, seemingly impervious to Virginia’s occasional tart asides and non sequiturs. Henry has seen it before - that bright cheery air that comes when a project, a chance to do good, takes away the need to talk to her mother.

‘You really don’t have to, darling.’ A last ditch effort as they are clearing up together. ‘I know how busy you are.’

But Anna’s hug silences him, her solid optimism brooks no dissent.

He senses trouble as soon as they return from their day out the following Tuesday. A familiar little sea-blue Golf sits on the driveway. Anna has let herself in and has spent the morning at the patio table, calligraphing flat wooden marker pegs. Each peg has a plain central stem for writing and green, leaf-like, protrusions on each side. They litter the main bed like Armistice crosses. On a large sheet of paper Anna has sketched out the shape of the bed and the individual clumps of each perennial. Across the top she has written the words ‘Forget Me Not’ in three dimensional letters and she is now busy colouring a border of small blue flowers. Henry looks at his middle-aged daughter and sees pigtails and freckles.

‘I ran out of markers,’ says Anna. ‘I didn’t realise how many we we’d need. I’ll get some more at the weekend.’

Virginia leans into the foliage, in what has recently become her usual spot. She pulls up the tag next to the *Crocosmia* and frowns at it. Then she grabs the next, and the next…

‘Mum, don’t do that.’ Anna is using her gentle voice. Henry winces.

‘Don’t…’ he says, but he’s not sure to whom. The word hangs in the air, unheeded.

‘Anna, dear,’ says Virginia crisply, ruthlessly lucid. ‘This is not a council park. We are not… tourists.’

Each little marker comes up with a shower of earth and a sharp inhalation. Anna sits statue-still, head down, hand still grasping her blue felt-tip pen. When Virginia dumps the pegs on top of the unfinished map, soil sprays onto Anna’s arms and dress. Still no movement. Henry watches helplessly, heart stretched between the two women as Virginia stomps inside. Both are crying. Neither sees.

‘Well, this will come in really handy,’ he says brightly, sweeping the pegs off Anna’s drawing. ‘I’ll put it up on the fridge and…’ But the tears and the earth have already mingled in swirling smears and his gentle rubbing just makes it worse.

When Anna has finally gone Henry finds his wife crying into a soil-stained tea towel in their bedroom. He wraps his arms around her brittle, bony body and they rock back and forth in silence. Virginia eventually nods off and Henry goes outside to find a spade.

At first the plant seems to fight back, it has spread much further than he realised and there are corms everywhere. The evening air is cooling the sweat on his neck by the time he makes his last trip to the compost heap. All done. Problem solved. Time for dinner.

The next morning Henry wakes with an absurd feeling of lightness, of joy. His limbs feel supple and surprisingly pain-free as he stretches them over to the empty side of the bed. From the window when he rises he can see Virginia sitting on the lawn, watching the blackbird as it rummages about in the big patch of fresh-turned soil, next the the *Hostas* and the white flowering *Hebe*. She is clutching something but he can’t see what.

Henry goes downstairs and brews the coffee. As he moves in a waltz-step around the kitchen he scrunches up the Post-it notes and gives himself a little cheer as they land on target in the recycling box. He can hear Virginia’s soft chanting from the garden.

‘*Spirea, Helenium, Kniphofia, Potentilla… Hebe… Myosotis, Myosotis, Myosotis…*’ Then a silence.

A shadow falls on the chequered tile floor.

‘Henry,’ says Virginia, appearing in the doorway, ‘the *Crocosmia…* it’s gone.’

She takes his arm and pulls him gently outside. He feels a sharp twinge of pain in his back as they slowly cross the lawn, and then another, unrelated to digging, somewhere near his sternum. As he stares at the small wooden marker peg, bright against the rich dark soil, Henry mourns the years to come, a succession of little deaths and uprooted memories, as the garden gradually disappears. He clings tightly to Virginia’s hand.

‘*Myosotis*,’ prays Henry. ‘*Myosotis, Myosotis, Myosotis…*’