

Sepia

Almost every day I visit gardens where ancient tombstones and mausoleums have been replaced by modern solid-teak benches, stained a dark-red brown and coated with polyurethane, the design dull but inoffensive.

Well-tended rose shrubs stand separated by lawns of perfect green, their elegant blooms a magic mix of pinks, from pretty pastels to magnificent magentas.

A group of teenagers has gathered on the grass behind the shrubs to sing together, some shyly, others brazenly. Their singing is heartfelt, the harmonies filling the gardens with much-needed joy on this dull summer's day.

Roses were a passion and Christopher was intent on showing me the tall flowering shrubs with their far-reaching canes, a beautiful but odd bunch with eclectic names such as Gentle Hermione, Gertrude Jekyll, Brother Cadfael, Fritz Nobis and The Fairy.

Numerous vases overflowing with roses adorned his living room. "Blooming masterpieces," he called them. Although he had a particular affection for red roses, pink and white ones often graced the vases on display too.

He beckoned me to sit down on a bench facing the shrubs, then pointed at the roses.

"Choose one and make it a character. Describe him or her to me."

Without hesitation, I picked Brother Cadfael.

"Ah, Cadfael's a *naughty* one. This dashing, rosy-cheeked rugged Brother's mind is consumed by sins of the flesh, rather than engaging in prayer and purity of thought. One afternoon he was caught behind the rose bushes engaged

in Brother-on-Brother bother, thorn in his backside. Both Brothers were duly dismissed from the monastery. Last thing I heard is that he now works in the cloakroom of a fetish bar in Earl's Court, his new habit a latex rubber bodysuit."

When there were roses in abundance, Christopher would bring along his secateurs and snip off a couple of branches. He'd leave the park flip-flopping guiltily, but feeling ecstatic all the same.

"You've got to break the rules sometimes," he'd say.

I sit on that same bench, the one we shared all those years ago, and look out over the gardens, past the other benches. My gaze is fixed behind the London planes, beyond the tall black railings, to the street that runs to the side of the gardens. Cobbled it was then, cobbled it is now.

That's where I took his portrait, on black and white film. The camera was a battered old SLR with a scratched body and a dodgy winder.

I'd been in some plays, small parts, and with big hopes had applied to drama school. Blame Montgomery Clift. After seeing his photograph in a magazine, he became my pin-up, my sepia idol to worship forever. I borrowed videos of his movies from the library to watch in my bedroom, closely observing his every move, often reenacting challenging scenes. His acting was sublime. Here was a man fully dedicated to his art, getting right under the skin of a character. I wanted to become just as accomplished.

To help with the audition I needed a drama coach. Sherry, my landlady, a renowned make-up artist, recommended her close friend, actor and coach Christopher.

"He is *simply* the best and I'm sure he will be *absolutely* delighted to help you,

darling, why not suggest you take his portrait in exchange for some coaching? He totally *adored* the photograph you took for my card, said it was *so* Cecil Beaton. Here, take his number, I've already mentioned you to him."

Memorial plaques are fixed to most benches, a present-day approach not that different from the tombstones from past centuries, which are stacked against the boundary walls, where over many years, raindrops have gently touched each stone, smoothing out names and dates, making them illegible or disappear altogether. For now the benches stand proud like the tombstones and mausoleums once did and the gardens continue to be a place to remember loved ones.

BESSIE WILSON

1922-2013

MY BEAUTIFUL ROSE
FOREVER IN THESE GARDENS
AND IN MY HEART

JACK

X

TO ROCKY MY ROCK

THE HAPPIEST LABRADOR

HE LOVED THESE GARDENS
MISSING YOU
ROXANNE

Christopher was a dashing man, his ageing face as weathered and worn as the leather zip-up jacket that never left his shoulders. His side-parted hair opened up his face and lengthened it, which balanced well with the sticky out ears.

It was so much *fun* shooting him; as an actor he was used to being directed and he delighted in being told where to stand and what to do.

“Stay like that, look at me. Directly towards the camera, a gentle smile, yes, lovely... Hold that. Very, very handsome... Now a big smile please, wide like the horizon. *Stunning*. Just turn your head to the right a little, just there... cross your arms, shoulders square. Some more like that. *Brilliant*. Step forward a little, away from the wall. Look at the lamppost behind me to the left... chin down a bit, hold it just there. Yes! No smile now, I want intense, broody. That’s *very* sexy, keep it going, moody and troubled.”

In exchange for the photographs he gave me six one-to-one drama classes. We worked hard at perfecting the two monologues required for the audition, one a Shakespeare, the other something contemporary. I chose *Romeo and Juliet* for the Shakespeare. Mercutio. Act 2, Scene 1. “Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!” Oh how I loved *Romeo and Juliet*.

Lessons started with breathing exercises and light choreography combining modern dance with yoga and Alexander Technique and were rounded off with “loud speakers”, an exhilarating routine. I screamed with ecstasy, cried with pain,

shouted angrily, laughed incessantly and sang loudly off-key.

During one lesson, as I hit ever-higher notes, Christopher joined in and together we sang with unabashed hysteria and undiluted drama, only to collapse into each others' arms, lips meeting for the first and only ever time.

I promised to do a couple of prints, but something went wrong when I developed the film. To my horror the negatives came out cloudy, making every frame unusable. I was too upset to show Christopher the contact sheet, but was relieved when he gladly accepted my offer to reshoot.

“Let’s just call the first shoot a dress rehearsal,” he said generously.

My studio looks out onto the gardens. How odd I have ended up here. When I came to view this space I travelled by underground, exiting at the top of Christopher’s street, the same exit I took when I attended his lessons. Those mixed feelings I experienced just before I rang his doorbell all came flooding back. Nerves. Self-doubt. Insecurity. But most of all, excitement.

My final lesson was also the last time I saw Christopher. He wasn’t his usual upbeat self. Even the roses looked sad; I should have treated him to a bunch of reds. At the end of the lesson he congratulated me on the progress I’d made and wished me good luck with the audition.

“Believe in yourself. You’ve got to believe.”

The audition was a disaster. Shakespeare and I didn’t get on: I forgot the words halfway through. The scene from *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams went a little better. At least I remembered the lines, but I sounded flat and unconvincing.

The letter from the school confirmed what I had suspected. I felt strangely relieved, as if the pressure had been removed. The dream was over. I was not cut

out to be the next Montgomery Clift.

It was Sherry who said, “It’s about time you do something with that camera, you’re a *very* talented young man. And you know, I have a *gorgeous* friend, a *hugely* successful photographer, and she’s looking for a *fabulous* new assistant, someone *young* and *ambitious*, to learn the ropes on the job, just like she did.”

People are leaving the gardens in a hurry. The weather forecast didn’t mention the possibility of rain. I get up too and rush past a bench I hadn’t noticed before. Must be a recent addition. I stop to read the words on the brass plaque. Raindrops distort the letters.

TO DAVID (1966-1988)

THIS IS WHERE WE MET.
OUR LOVE LIVES ON.
HOW CAN I FORGET?

FOREVER YOURS.

STUART X

I sit down on the wet slats as the rain gets worse. This David died when he was twenty-two, a year before I came here with Christopher. A young man. The same age as I was back then. I imagine two strangers meeting in these beautiful surroundings for the first time. A casual glance. An awkward smile. A nervous introduction.

I find his details in an old address book and call his number, changing the 01 for London to 0207. The line is dead. I walk past his flat. I stop to look up. Do I expect to see an old man moving behind net curtains, about to sit down for his dinner?

I ring the doorbell. The voice through the intercom says, "Hello." I ask, "Christopher?" The voice says he will come down.

I recognise him right away, even though he was just a boy the last time I saw him. Sherry's son. He's a proper man now with a big beard attached to a serious face, hair greying to the sides. His blue eyes hide behind round black-rimmed glasses.

"You'd better come up, we can talk there."

I never telephoned Christopher to tell him that I'd failed the audition and had moved away from acting. Life ran away with me once I got involved in photography.

The room is devoid of vases, of roses. Not a trace of Christopher. This is somebody else's world.

"You didn't know? He was diagnosed in 1989. Had to stop working soon after. Mum nursed him till the end, looked after him as if he was her brother. She didn't take his death very well; she lost a great many friends from the theatre back then; it was all so very bleak, so utterly devastating and hopeless. He left the flat to Mum. I'm her long-term tenant."

I walk through the gardens. Slowly. Solemnly. A leaf tickles the back of my head; another slaps my cheek. All over the gardens leaves fall gently from the branches of trees. One after the other they must leave home. They drift, then drop. Autumn is here.

I look up at the overcast sky, then down to the ground, covered in leaves, all brown. The light is flat. The shrubs' long canes have been pruned. I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with air. I hug a tree, wrap my arms around the thick trunk;

my fingertips not even coming close to touching. I absorb the strength of something rooted, old and strong. It stood here then. It stands here now. This old London plane is straight and tall, like a great great grandfather refusing to give up on life.

My assistant has been archiving my past work meticulously. Metal cupboards contain drawers and drawers of negatives and slides. I thought I'd lost the negatives but she finds them in an envelope, alongside the original contact sheet. Looking at them again, I conclude I didn't fix the film long enough. I decide to wash and refix it, salvage it as best as I can. Frame number 19 is the one I choose.

Christopher's smile emerges as the print develops. I fix, wash and bleach it, before submerging the print in sepia toner.

Another drizzly day. From the studio window I see the gardens are deserted. I put on my raincoat and grab my bag. Inside: a punch, a screwdriver, some small screws, a measurer, a spirit level, a tea towel and a brass plaque. I tried to get Christopher a memorial bench, but the woman from the council told me it could take up to ten years before one becomes available.

There's a bench that overlooks the roses. It doesn't have a plaque. As yet.

IN MEMORY OF
CHRISTOPHER HOLLINGSWORTH
1941-1992

“YOU'VE GOT TO BREAK THE RULES SOMETIMES.”

MARK X