

## BRIXTON

I STOOD BY THE BALCONY door and watched the light show. Late afternoon sunshine caught in the wind and the boughs of the trees, fighting to land on the walls. An extension lead snaked along the skirting board; a wicker lampshade I'd found by the bins hung from the ceiling; the fierce pride and the late nights I'd spent in the place hung faintly in the air. I would leave it soon. But first, one more shadowdance across the floorboards.

This space – a once-dingy, slightly damp ex-local authority flat – had been a new start. Three years ago, I'd taken the single brass key from the previous occupant: a handful of stability after 15 months of shuffling around the city. I arrived and peeled off wallpaper and polystyrene tiles; I nested with a frenzy for a space that was wholly my own. A friend called it Treehouse, and as I watched the seasons change through the trees outside, the name stuck.

It offered a sense of hard-won, surviving solitude: that this was just for me.

In those first few weeks, I told myself the balcony would wait; there was too much inside to be getting on with. But within a month, on a cold and shining Saturday in late October, I caved. If I wanted colour in the spring, I had to plant bulbs in autumn. Boxes of miniature white narcissi jostled with pasta and loo roll in my supermarket shop; I ordered a handful of others through the internet and they landed on my desk at work. For more than a year I'd lost the ground beneath my feet, but now I could make a garden.

This balcony was larger than the previous one, which had held me when everything else fell apart, and smothered in shade. New ground claimed as much by me as it was squirrels and pigeons. The balcony had been left empty. But I filled it with a strange hybrid of the tropical (bamboo, *Phlebodium*, asparagus ferns) and the country garden (foxgloves, *Erigeron*, sweet woodruff, hardy geraniums) to create an otherworldly oasis. I laid down a plastic rug, I squeezed bentwood chairs through the door, I raised and lowered the flap of the melamine table depending on the season. Barely five metres square and yet large enough to lose whole weekends in. I would grow listless on the sofa, but I would devote hours to the pots and plants on the balcony, watering and feeding and gently tugging away at old foliage. The table swelled with seedling pots, the chairs

became covered with planters. Sometimes I'd look back on my work with satisfaction, after several wintry hours planting bulbs, but mostly I was taken by the doing. The balance of intuition and challenge that happened when I went out there to do just one thing and came back in an hour later, fingertips darkened with soil. The balcony would often catch me off-guard – the palest blue *Iris reticulata* open at frosty daybreak, or the generous tumble of nasturtium – but what I didn't know was that I was nurturing a space that would eventually accommodate two.

Over the course of a spring and a summer, Matt and I worked and ate at the same small table, feet and laptop cables colliding on the floor. We slept until the dawn chorus woke us. One evening in May, on the balcony, we decided to get married. An unexpected change of state happened once I'd said yes, as if we'd somehow made ourselves new. A bright kind of first-date nervousness. Perhaps it was the absurdity of it: that something as simple as asking a question and giving an answer could shape the rest of our lives. It felt fantastic and preposterous, like the world had turned briefly into jelly. We kept it secret for a couple of days before we could make the socially distant rounds of his family and find friends on our daily walks; we told my family over Zoom and watched their little pixellated faces shape into surprise all at once. How heavy, how precious, how featherlight it felt.

For most of my adulthood, I didn't think I'd marry. I

didn't picture a big white wedding as a little girl, and no longing for one appeared as I got older. I loved other people's but I couldn't ignore the strange trappings so many of my friends were nudged into during them. I went to so many weddings where the bride sat quiet as speechifying men around her praised her organisational skills – as demonstrated by the wedding we were all enjoying that she, near-single-handedly, had pulled together – that I wondered where the women I knew, those fierce and funny girls, had vanished to inside their white dresses. We were all capable of more than ordering centrepieces. But here I was, with a ring on my finger, having abstract conversations about what our wedding might be like. I loved Matt, and I wanted to marry him, but I knew that binding my life to a man would come with a compromise he would not have to carry. A wedding is something that complicates and enchants. It changes the lives of the women who seek it, whatever the reason.

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I encountered Mary Delany in a slim academic book I found on the internet, and thought she sounded like the kind of person I'd want at a party. Aristocratic, yes, but canny. She was a fearsome polymath and a creative force. A woman of letters and pictures, she wrote, painted, built gardens and dedicated grottoes to her girlfriends. Delany was in her

seventies when she started to cut foliage from tissue paper and stick the leaves to black backgrounds. This was in the late 18th century; Delany was born in 1700. At a time when botanical artists were depicting the stolen spoils from colonial expansion delicately, without any of the bloodshed of their acquisition, Delany showed off their bits: sepals and stamen, pistils and petals. Forty years earlier she'd turned up to court in a near-six-foot-wide skirt of a black dress covered in botanically accurate flowers. She'd designed the entire thing herself – every other woman wore pastels. When she died, Erasmus Darwin dedicated poetry to her.

Delany resisted things and when she couldn't, she made other ones. A sharp critic of marriage, she was nevertheless subjected to it when her family's fortunes tumbled and she was married off at 17 to a gout-riddled drunk 38 years her senior. 'I was sacrificed', she wrote of the union. She was 24 when she found him, 'quite black in the face'. Her husband had never got around to changing his will, so the inheritance Delany had been married off for wasn't destined for her, but a nephew. She spent the next two decades turning down proposals and writing to her sister about the suitors she disappointed. When she was 43, she married again, against her family's wishes, to a man named Patrick, who promised her 'the encouragement to persevere in her artistic works' – and a garden.

On Patrick Delany's land Mary built a garden of her own. She carved out secret spaces and pockets of wildness;

she designed a ‘Beggar’s Hut’ beneath a mound, a suggestive ruffle of muff-like foliage around its oval entrance. The garden fuelled Delany’s creativity, as did her marriage, even if she and Patrick were more companions than lovers. After years of dismissing the institution as an imprisonment, she’d finally found a way to make it work on her terms.

I was not like Delany: not aristocratic, not born in 1700, not reliant upon a man for security or status, albeit still living in a patriarchal society. But I got engaged after swearing off marriage, and I was only gaining access to a garden thanks to the man I was marrying. Years before, when our relationship was tentative and new, I had walked Matt up my favourite street in London. It’s a long, straight road up a hill in Camberwell, flanked on both sides by teetering Georgian houses with window glass so old it bends the light. The front gardens there are good for peering at. Matt told me he’d like to get me a garden, one day. It was exactly the kind of simple, preposterous ambition he tends to make – bold and big and untethered by reality. I laughed. I still think it’s the most romantic thing he’s ever said.

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I pulled the car keys out of my pocket, couched them in my hand. Time to go. Ten final footsteps across the sunlight-warmed floor. This was where I had forged my independent womanhood, where I had been fortunate enough to live

alone. I thought of the dinners I'd hosted around the absent table, the words I'd written there, the bills I'd paid. I thought, a little, of the statistic that women become less happy after marriage and men more so. I thought about the invisible work that happens in heteronormative couples – the buying of birthday cards, the checking of calendars, remembering the dietary requirements of those invited round for dinner. These small weights had been falling into my lap, and I knew there would be more. To build a home – a life – with someone is to compromise with them and to share yourself. In moving, Matt and I were gaining new, shining space. But I couldn't shake the notion that I was letting go of the tethers of independence I'd held when I lived alone.

I wasn't doing anything extraordinary; many of my friends lived with their partners, had got married or engaged. I was excited for the home Matt and I would build together, but I was struggling to grapple with the realities of it. To be a woman in a committed relationship in her early thirties is to constantly dance upon a line of expectation. The question of children hangs ever heavier in the air, sinking towards the ground until it emerges on every dinner and coffee table, in every pub garden, every park one occupies. I was packing boxes when my sister texted with an offer of the stuff her boys had grown out of, because now we might have a bit more room? I told her I'd feel superstitious having it in the house. There was so much I was still working out.

It was always simpler for me to push away the subject of having kids than to look at it properly. Like marriage, it was something that for most of my twenties I just thought I wouldn't do. The planet was on fire, at the time I was in a relationship with someone who didn't want them, I was wedded to my career – perhaps it was easier, *nobler*, even, just to not. Instead, I envisaged an adulthood that was indulgent and independent. Weeknight dinner parties and holidays in the middle of the school term. I vowed to be a really excellent aunt, the fun friend, the confidante my friends' children came to when they were teenagers. And yet it wasn't entirely honest: here I was in my early thirties, and a baby seemed to have snuck into what I thought could be my future. I'd never known definitively if I wanted to have or raise children, and yet I couldn't shake off motherhood as a kind of destination.

When we viewed the flat, I thought about what it would be to raise a child there. I talked about where we would keep the buggy, if the grand front steps would become a daily annoyance with a toddler in tow. I thought about placing a cot next to the bed, a high chair in the kitchen. I imagined all of the trappings of babyhood around an invisible, faceless baby; a downy head pottering around in the kitchen, a little body curled up on the sofa. These thoughts weren't conscious so much as they began to appear to me; a whiff of a life I hadn't known I wanted.

I was scared of how motherhood would change my life.



I would be bad, I thought, stuck in the house with a baby all day. I would fret over – and possibly resent – how new responsibilities would eclipse the time I had to pursue creative work. I thought about the biological changes that happen in a new mother's body; I didn't want my brain to change, for my senses to be dulled by twilight cries.

Gardens can be female spaces, like that built by Mary Delany, but they are also associated with the children women bear. I had seen big-bellied friends make gardens and new mothers wean their infants on crops from vegetable patches as many months in the growing. I had read accounts from women who, after miscarriages and failed IVF attempts, took their angry grief out on uprooting vicious Kiftgate roses, and planting colour in the depths of winter instead. There are gardens that have changed to accommodate children – lawns to play on, flower beds swapped out for trampolines – as well as ones that exist to hold the desire to have them. When I thought of the garden Matt and I would share, I thought of peonies and sweet peas, I thought of digging and how things will grow. I was not sure I thought of a baby.

The relationship between gardening and motherhood felt uneasy and oversimplified to me. Both were messy and wild acts of creation, deeply satisfying in ways that were difficult to see from the outside. But I knew if I had a child my relationship with the garden would change. I feared it would be exposed as an indulgence, a product

of time and energy I no longer had. I imagined it cluttering up with plastic toys. Beyond the practicalities, there was something deeper: if the garden was my space to shape, a place where I could be on my own terms, what might it mean to bring a child in?

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The last day of July and you can smell the heat in the air, see it rippling off the tarmac. I should be painting walls but end up outside in the garden, on my knees, running my fingers over the soil. It is poorer than I had anticipated, the kind of measly parched gravel that clay dries into. I pick up wrappers from water bottles, the metal casings of tealights burned out long ago. I take a bucket and water some frazzled hydrangeas. This is our first meeting, the garden and I. My first acquaintance with the soil. Right now, on this hot, dry afternoon, I can't picture the growth to come. I can't even see how the seasons will unfurl. For now, I will sit and watch where the light falls. How lucky I am to have it. From this moment, it becomes my space: Matt does not, will not, tend to the soil. I see this plot in ways he doesn't, even in this overwhelming hurl of a beginning. I see it as ground to nourish, as growth to bear witness to. He simply sees a green space beyond the windows. I will fill it with life on my own terms.