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DAVID ROSE

Flora

I CAME ACROSS her first in Kew Gardens. I watched her scrambling over the rocks of the rockery, and wondered how long it would be before a warden (are they called wardens? Not guards, surely) remonstrated with her.

Strangely, none did.

A little later, she was in the Alpine House, peering at a saxifrage on the Arctic bench, notebook and pencil in hand. I contrived to peep over her shoulder. She was sketching it, not merely noting its name in the manner of most botanical tourists. The sketch was most accomplished, in my humble opinion.

Later still, she was back on the rockery, sitting on a slab, her feet in the stream, plimsolls by her side, sketching a contorted pine. This time, after a few minutes, she *was* cautioned by one of the staff. She tossed her hair, picked up plimsolls and rucksack and walked away barefoot across the grass.

I completed my seasonal tour of the woodland beds, then went to the Orangery for a little sustenance.



I have never believed in Fate, although I have several times been tempted. But there, in my carriage on the train home, she was. Feet—sans plimsolls—on the opposite seat, a hibiscus blossom, picked, I surmised, in the Tropical House, braided into her hair.

She was blissfully unaware of my disapproval.

I was preoccupied in the weeks after my visit to Kew. I had discovered a fungal infection on a Japanese maple which—the nub of my concern—is host to a rare codonopsis, one I had (I'm boasting here) grown from seed brought back from China.

I spent anxious days swabbing the bark with softsoap and water, checking morning and evening for any fresh irruption.

Yet even as I swabbed and scrubbed, I had to admit to a sneaking regard for the fungal growth—not only its persistence, but its own strange beauty, the subtlety of its opalescent colours, the intricacy of its structure. Are we right, I wondered, to divide Nature as we do?

Nonetheless it had to go, in deference to the codonopsis. Anxious to implement some prophylactic measure, and as my modest library had exhausted its usefulness, I went to the local reference library.

Needless to remark, there she was, still barefoot, her hair, draped over one shoulder, curtaining the book over which she was hunched.

I went on to the next bay, Pests and Diseases. I removed several books *en bloc* for perusal, and noticed that through the resulting gap, I could observe her at her desk. Her posture was one of total concentration. Her stationary arm, deeply tanned, pointed toward me. The elbow was

rough, dry, white against the tan. From propping up bars, perhaps. But that, on reflection, was prejudice, for which I mentally rapped my knuckles.

In fact, on further reflection, I realised that what I had caught in myself was closer to tenderness, almost pity for that nonchalantly uncared-for patch of skin.

I took my pile of books over to the furthest desk and arranged them into a little wall.

They turned out to be limited in scope. My best option was to consult the bibliographies and order the most promising titles commercially. I whittled down the list to an economically feasible number and came away. I think she was still there. Appeared, in fact, not to have moved.

Such is the demand for quasi-academic textbooks that it was some weeks from my initial enquiry before I was able to collect them. I went straight round after receiving the bookshop's postcard (I rarely answer the telephone).

She was—I had almost expected it—there, in the Botanical recess. As I waited for the assistant to locate, price and wrap my books, she came to the counter. She was holding a copy of Wilson's *Flora Pyrenaica* from the second-hand section, but judging from the binding, it was the 1907 edition.

Hesitantly, I said, You do realise there is a later edition, superior to that? Your edition is incomplete; it suffered a partial appendectomy in the printing. Do they not have a copy of the 1912 edition secreted somewhere? Let me ask for you.

She finally looked up.

She said, This is okay. I only need the illustrations. And it's cheap.

I said, You're on a budget? Student, then? Where are you studying?

She gestured vaguely. Up at the College. Holloway.

Botany? I understood they had closed the Botany department. They have sold off the Botanical gardens, I know.

Oh, it's rumoured.

What does your course comprise?

A little of everything.

A foundation course?

I suppose so. But I want to concentrate on botanical illustration.

I thought of the fungus, and the little patch of dry skin.

I said, The departmental library—doesn't it have the Wilson in any edition?

I don't think they have the library now. Perhaps it was sold with the gardens.

I said, That's scandalous. But look, I have a modest library at home. You would be most welcome to use it. It would save your book grant. I take it you have a book grant?

I gave her my card. It was slightly dog-eared from my wallet. I rarely have cause to give them out. But she didn't seem to notice, just tucked it into her book.

We had settled into a spell of fine weather, so I was spending more time in the garden. I even had time, between tasks, to admire the results of my work, to enjoy the garden as a visitor might. The maple was showing no sign of further infection, and the codonopsis insinuated through it was budding nicely.

As I raked the gravel of the dry pond in the Japanese section, the sun was setting, the light sifted through the black bamboo, shadowing the stupa. The breeze stirred the windchimes.

I crossed to the bench in the Mediterranean section to catch the last of the sun before beginning my watering regime. My footfall in the gravel released the scent of lavender and cistus, and suddenly I felt absurdly happy. Also, a sense of—privilege, I would have to call it—that I was able to enjoy all this. I felt obligated to share it all; that my work was in vain if it were all for myself.

I looked across into the sunset, watching the bronze heron as it sank into the dark.

Next morning it was raining.

I answered a knock at the door around midday. She stood, one foot on the step, the other still on the path. Her hair was gathered into a single braid which hung round her neck and over one breast.

I waved her in.

She said, I'm so sorry to intrude. I just wondered. Do you happen to have *Orchidaceae of the Amazon Basin*?

I noticed then that she had a faint accent which, despite my years of travel, I couldn't place.

I said, As it happens, I have.

I led her into the sitting-room-cum-library.

As I unlocked the glass of the book-case, I could see her peering in.

You have *The Clematis in Western Culture*.

Yes. First edition, as it happens. With the hand-coloured frontispiece.

And *Plant Hunting in Nepal*. Where did they come from?

Oh, one collects, you know. Over the years.

I don't normally use the formal construction, but there are times when one finds it appropriate. I handed her the orchid book. She went to put it into her bag.

Ah, I said, as you may have gathered, this copy is quite rare. I can't really allow . . . You understand?

She coloured charmingly.

You are welcome to use my desk. Stay as long as you wish.

She sat at the desk, unpacked sketchbooks and a pencil case embroidered with beetles. I left her to it.

To mitigate any abruptness in my tone, I took her in a tray of coffee and chocolate digestives. She was immersed in her copying.

Around five, she put her head round the door, to say she was going. I showed her out, and insisted she returned. To show I meant it and in token of my trust, I showed her the spare key to the bookcase. I said, This will be hanging in the hall by the clock. I want you to use it. Books need airing, after all.

I watched from the window as she walked up the street. And as she was met at the corner by a friend. A man, I realised, with a short pony tail, so short as to be almost a pig tail. In my years abroad I had encountered such fashions, years before they were commonplace here. Likewise the anklet above his sandal.

They embraced in the street, in the manner of the young.

Despite my broad-mindedness, I did think to check the library. The book was neatly closed on the desk, the chair exactly in its place.

She returned the next morning. We both smiled as she took down the key. I had left a tray of milk and biscuits on the desk, in case.

The sitting-room-library was originally dining- and

sitting-rooms until I had them knocked through. The serving hatch was now unused, but I hadn't bothered to have it bricked up. Open, as it now was, I caught a glimpse of her arm, sleeved, moving at her work.

After she had gone, I could tell from the disturbance of the books what she had been copying. She had gone on to the genus *Convolvulus*.

I said, before she settled down for work the following morning, Why not work from real life? I have a *Convolvulus mauritanicus* in flower on the Alpine bed.

She followed me out.

I had a camp stool waiting, but she turned it down, squatted cross-legged on the grass with her sketch book on her knee.

She came back mid-morning for her snack. I had realised that milk and biscuits were hardly suitable, and laid out martini, buttered crackers and a dish of olives. As I brought it in, she began to enthuse over the garden. She said I hope you didn't mind me poking about, but it's all so lovely, like a miniature Kew.

I said, Not at all, I'm delighted to share it. Come and go as you please. Bring your boyfriend sometimes.

Oh, he's not my boyfriend.

Just a chum? Bring him anyway. I will arrange to leave the gate unbolted between ten a.m. and eleven p.m.

She blushed and bent to her books.

He turned out to be considerably older on closer view, or as close as my kitchen window allowed. Still, they made a nice couple as they foraged in the garden.

A week later, she handed me a package as she unpacked her bag. I unwrapped it carefully as she watched. It was a

painting of the *Convolvulus mauritanicus*, in ink and water-colour, in an antique frame.

I said, Thank you so much, it's charming. Your own?

I couldn't read the signature, and besides, I didn't know her name.

She said, Yes, but framing it was Jerome's idea.

I said, Thank him for me. It's just right. How clever of him.

She reached for the key of the bookcase. Evidently she had exhausted—temporarily, I hoped—the profusion of my garden.

The desk, she said, you've moved it.

Only a foot or so. I thought it would give you more leg room.

I left the tray on the side table.

Now, with the serving hatch open, I could see her entire. The scuffs on both elbows, the down on her neck, the vertebrae above her top. But someone loved her and I was glad of that.

The fine weather persisted and often, after her work in the library, I would catch glimpses of her, sometimes them, sitting on the benches or strolling in the sun. I had dug out my old birdwatching Zeisses, and could see them comfortably from the bedroom window. She would bend and stroke the foliage on her cheek while he stooped to check the name-plates. Fortunately I was confident of their accuracy, since it had crossed my mind that he may have been her tutor. Such things are not unknown. Certainly he seemed protective.

There was an incident one afternoon—I was in the

kitchen, binoculars not to hand—when I heard a little scream, or maybe a moderate cry. All I could make out was him stamping, almost viciously, on something on the grass. I was at a loss to work out what it could have been. A slug which had somehow evaded my beer traps? But slugs are no more than an irritation to a botanist, although I as a gardener would be dismayed at one.

I searched that evening for some squashed remains but found none, only the outline of something lozenge-shaped and sharp stamped into the lawn.

That, I realised later, was the last time I saw him.

She, after a few days, was back as before, working quietly in the library, her arms more tanned but still scuffed at the elbows. Her concentration was even stronger, and she was taking from the bookcase more and more titles, but always returning them to the shelves as she finished with them. I guessed she was completing a project, up against a deadline. Such was the pressure on her time that she didn't even consume the contents of her tray, except for the martini.

This continued for several days. I thought it better not to break the rhythm of her work, and she came and went ungreeted.

Then she stopped coming. A week had elapsed, then a fortnight, then I knew she wouldn't be back. Her project, I assumed, was finished or she had exhausted my library.

I confessed to a slight hurt that she hadn't said goodbye. I had the framed convolvulus, of course, but I felt that a word of thanks or goodbye wouldn't have been amiss.

The library felt heavily empty when I finally went in. The desk was tidy, the chair straight, the books back in order

in the bookcase, or almost. One—*The Clematis in Western Culture*—was out of alphabetical sequence.

I took it out. Between the pages at the top, like a minuscule bookmark, was a hair. I pulled it out, held it to the light. It curled and wiggled with static, clung to my cuff.

I sat at my desk with the book, fingering the embossing and the scuffed buckram edges of the boards. I began to lose myself in the index, in the neutrality of the Latin.

As I laid the book down flat, it began to open to the middle, the illustrations flapping past like a lantern slide show.

I had suddenly to catch a page, turn back. The *Clematis integrifolia* didn't look right. It shouldn't have tendrils—it's herbaceous.

I looked closely. The tendrils had been added to the engraved plate in pencil. They were almost obscene in the outline they limned.

I hastily took down other books I had noticed her using. In *Terrestrial Orchids of the World*, I found a *Cypripedium reginae* with its bladder flower grossly distended, a *Paphopedilum* whose freckles had been added to and a waxed moustache imposed. In Sutton's *Primulaceae*—the original monochrome edition—a *Primula flaccida* had extra stems, wiltingly arched, and a *Primula hirsuta* a clump of frond-like hair drawn in at the base.

I couldn't open any more.

I piled them on the desk and fell into the chair.

The books were stacked with the bottom edges facing me. All of them had a letter inscribed in red—a W on the Sutton, N on *Orchidaceae of the Amazon Basin*, L on *The Clematis in Western Culture*. I was now as much curious as distraught.

I took down almost the entire middle shelf, rearranged the books into correct order, bottom edge facing me on the desk. They now spelled—with gaps where the books had been replaced out of sequence—ON LY WIN TER IS TRU.

I sat looking at them for a long time. The shock of desecration had subsided. I felt only a wearying sadness.

I returned the books to the bookcase, locked the glass doors and tossed the key away. It landed somewhere under the desk.

After some thought, I retrieved it, and hung it, with the spare, by the clock, in the hall.