

## In The Garden

MARILYN:

It works out quite cheap as a hobby, nudism. You don't need much equipment.

When Leo and I first started, we didn't even know we were doing it! It was a hot summer and we couldn't make any sense of wearing clothes. We just went about our daily task naked: the tidying, the gardening, the laundry (not much!); such a lovely warm summer that one, we were brown as berries all over.

Although that's a funny saying because I have never seen a berry with quite the aeneous glow we had in our heydays, they are all, by my observation, more a reddishpurpleblack or yellowishorange. I mean beautiful but not quite as beautiful as us. Oops! Didn't mean to say that, not out loud. I've gone too far again, haven't I? Can you forgive an old lady? Anyway, it was only when Leo popped to the shop for a paper forgetting his textiles that we heard the word, or Leo did.

“Get back up your hill you bloody nudist!”

When he came back without the paper, we laughed about it and put a sign by the hook with the car keys: ‘Remember Your Clothes You Bloody Nudist!’ It was that autumn we planted our hedge.

One day, Leo came home with a magazine and we found out about the resorts in France; it was a whole new world. We were not alone. No-one in those supermarkets gave a fig! In fact, it was rude to wear clothes. We went every year, twice some years. Tried a few places in this country too, but you can't really guarantee the weather here can you? Met some fascinating people. When my money came through we spent the whole summer there, but I didn't like to leave the garden, so in the end we used to go the France in the winter, when the garden didn't mind. What was the name of that place?

The garden is our masterpiece. A victory of human endeavour against nature's will. Perfume and colour in harmonious seasonal patterns. Given half a chance, bindweed and balsam would presage the return of the moorland this land once was and probably will be again. But whilst we reign we will have jasmine and foxgloves by a silky soft lawn. We won't take all the land, we leave most of it for Foxy and her deer friends. We have bound our kingdom with a magnificent beech hedge. We will sit on lounge chairs on the patio and we will drink our tea like kings. Weather permitting, we will trip through the French windows naked and eat our meals al fresco! I'm a bit hungry now actually, I fancy a chocolate biscuit. Do you think there are any left in the cupboard?

LEO:

I have fought Death before and won. Death is as real as you or I, make no mistake. You can feel him when he's close, if you're still, you can feel him sucking the air out ever so gently. When Marilyn had the cancer, I was on guard, I felt him slipping in; I caught him by the throat, made a deal with him. I told him straight he could take our children but not her. She was young for it you see, the cancer; our children had not been born. Otherwise I don't know what I'd have done. I have no regrets; she's been well these forty years. Until all this forgetting.

Marilyn went to the supermarket naked. She forgot where she was and didn't get dressed. It didn't go down well. Luckily she remembered our number, so I was called. I got a taxi down to bring her back. They'd tried to take her through to the office but she wouldn't go, so she was standing by the cigarette kiosk with the manager, demanding her rights. They had fashioned a skirt for her from white carrier bags and someone kind had given her a cardigan. It was a soft blue; it made her look like a girl again.

“What's the fuss? It's perfectly acceptable in Antibes.”

Her logic, at least, remains faultless. Once I'd got her home, I saw the funny side with her. It was all my fault apparently for not buying chocolate biscuits. The biscuits are there. I know how much she likes them, she's forgotten which cupboard they're in, that's all. I went back to town while she took her nap and bought bolts for the doors. I drilled them in, higher than she can reach. Had to do it without the blessed spirit level, couldn't find it. This house swallows things up now, without her memory. Not perfectly straight, but they'll do the job. It's no trouble for me to take her if she wants to go out. A doctor would say she shouldn't be driving now anyway, if we asked one. There are enough of doctors in this house with my troubles.

The hedge came about because some of the lads from the farm thought it was funny to watch us in our garden and it wasn't that we cared a fig for them, they were just lads, but their parents complained that they could see us in our nakedness. I said,

“Who are you to worry about that, Adam and Eve?”

They said of course they weren't and neither were we and could we please follow recognised codes of decency or they would call the police next time. It helped us realise what we were doing was out of the ordinary, that if we wanted to live this way we must put precautions in place. So we put gowns by the front door, in case the postman knocks, and a note on the steering wheel which says: 'That's a nice shirt.' Aide-memoirs. Even though, in order to see us in our garden, those boys had to be trespassing in our field, we decided to keep things cordial and paid a lot of attention planting our hedge. The correct depth of trench, bone meal feed and suitable spacing in between saplings. Two feet of growth a year, if you get the right feed. By next summer they wouldn't be able to see a thing, even from our field. As it happened, those boys had gone by the summer anyway and the hedge was flourishing. It is a thing of beauty, our beech hedge.

MARILYN:

This is my last summer and I intend to make the most of it. Our reign may be coming to an end. I haven't communicated this information to Leo. He's such a tender fool it would upset him terribly. If my scheme works out he'll never know. I don't think my mind has quite gone yet. Do you know what he asked me to do? He asked me if I could count back from 100 in 7's! I laughed in his face, "Leo, never in my life have I have never been able to count back from 100

in 7's, why would you ask me to do that now in my eighth decade?" I laughed, he looked frightened and then I got very, very angry with him. I may have thrown something. A glass vase perhaps. There seems to be some pain in my foot and blood on the tiles. That's why I'm making this salad now to have in the garden, cheer us up. We hate to argue. Good Caesar salad and French bread. We might have a cheeky glass of wine if I can damn well find one and chill it. I'm not really cross with him. Even for hiding the wine.

After lunch, we'll lie on our loungers in the sun making the most of the warmth on our skin, watching the cats do the same. Cats are not clean animals you know, that's a myth. They litter the house with tattered corpses. Shrews, any kind of bird, moles, even rabbits. Small ones. Mother nature is cruel as life. There's Tabby now, over by the window licking her claws in the sunshine. But I expect you've got better things to do than listen to me babbling about my cats. Maybe we'll lie on a blanket, so I can touch him. I could trace the cerulean patterns on Leo's legs with my finger for hours, mapping the choices we've made. If he's reading, he quite likes it. Better get his book. In a way we looked much nicer then, but not as interesting. I know you won't believe me, but he has found the progression of the female breast to be fascinating. It is just one breast now; I had an operation. That's one thing I'm glad I've forgotten. Did I say I forget things?

I expect him to go first, the men usually do. And his heart's not good in one sense, although in the other sense, I never knew a more gentle loving one. So I have a plan, you see, a jar of powdered foxglove. I picked some and dried them last year, just in case. I'm a liability without him, now my mind has gone. I know that, I'm not daft. I'll get him to have his heart attack out there in the garden and then I'll just lie down next to him and the cold will get me. Two birds with one stone. Maybe not exactly. The leaves will cover me and we'll be half rotted away by the time anyone finds us. Might even make the papers!

“Leo! Look! I've made a salad.”

LEO:

Death desires suffering. He is toying with us and taking his time like a bloody cat. I am trying to come up with another deal. Offer myself as well, up the ante, that might speed things up a bit. She doesn't want to be like this and she will not improve. Though she has her moments. She smiled at me this morning over breakfast and asked me to dig her a flowerbed. She took me outside and showed me where it should be. I have never been able to resist her smile. She has beautiful teeth. I know everyone has those now, but they didn't used to.

She was ahead of her time. There's no rain forecast so I may as well start it now. Just put my boots on. She wants the flowerbed under the hedge. I'll have to mind the roots, the bare bones of it all, twisted together. Might try some late summer pruning while I'm at it, see if we can't keep some of those leaves on this winter in spite of that wind.

Oh no, she's putting the kettle on. I hold my breath and watch her, ready to spring into action. Her body still looks perfect, aged a bit, but golden all over, like a model in a magazine. Well, a model with one breast. Specialist taste. Don't judge a book by the cover, Leo. I wish she'd let me help her with that kettle; I was half an hour taking the glass out of her foot the other day.

MARILYN:

He's digging that flowerbed for me just like I asked. He drank his tea first good as gold. Not a word about the bitter taste; my jar of foxglove is half gone. I'll put the other half in mine but I don't expect to have any trouble. There he is, digging. Just his boots on and brown as a berry all over. I always thought those tan lines were rather common, a mark of fear. He looks so marvellous and brave. He's down. You've done it now, Marilyn. Give him a minute. There,

he's stopped moving. That's worked out nicely. I'll leave my gown in here and slip in next to him, take his last little bit of warmth. Goodbye Tabby!

What a lovely lawn. Quite puts the spring in my step. Ooh, the smell of him!

Still, after all these years. I'm a lucky woman, I can see him in my mind running through the seaspray in Antibes, his arms fly up, what's he doing? Ah, of course! He's turning a cartwheel. I didn't really forget those, Leo. There he goes again,

“Well done darling, that one's a ten.”

If I pull this turf over my legs like...that...it might stop Foxy from dragging at my bones. Get the winter blankets out! My face is quite covered with the leaves, a mulch face pack. I'll slip my arm round him and nod off now. I can see Death sitting on the patio, no point him leaving when he'll only have to come back. Give me a minute Mr...