

LOST FOR WORDS

It started off with plants. In my thirties I'd prided myself on knowing the Latin names of my favourites *Eryngium bourgatii*, *verbena boniarenensis*. The names had rolled off the tongue so well and gave the whole humble business of gardening a sense of history and continuity. But as the years went by the Latin names no longer sprang willingly to my lips and I had to rely on their more mundane English equivalents.

But that was not the problem last summer.

"What's that called, Mum, in the back of the border, dark rosy red colour....?" asked Ellie my eldest daughter.

"It's –" I began confidently, having grown the beautiful perennial for twenty years. "It's – oh, it's gone. The name's gone. How silly, I know it so well." And the more I probed my memory, the more the elusive name scuttled away from me and hid. "I'll look it up when we get indoors."

And I did. It was lythrum of course.

My friend Janice who was moving to a new house was planning her garden from scratch and asked for some suggestions. As we sat poring over her drawings, I began enthusiastically.

"What about some variegated grasses here – in gravel maybe. And then along the fence a swathe of –" I could see it in my mind's eye, purple flowers attracting bees and butterflies, long stems waving in the breeze. "Oh, you know –" But she didn't. She'd never had a garden before and knew only what went into window boxes. "Purple stuff, tall –" Janice waited politely for me to latch onto the comforting name. It wouldn't come.

From then on things got worse. Who was it who had played opposite Colin Firth in "Pride and Prejudice"? What was the name of that fantastic book I'd read on holiday in Brittany? What was the name of my great aunt's cousin from Dorset? I'd written it often enough on Christmas cards.

Friends sympathized, especially those of my own age.

“Senior moment, Chris,” smiled Vivienne as I’d struggled unsuccessfully to remember the name of the lamb dish I’d had at Ellie and Tim’s the week before. “Happens all the time to me too. Too much information on the hard drive” (she’d been an IT consultant before retiring). “If only we could press the delete button and send off the surplus stuff to the recycle bin, we’d all find things easier after fifty, I’m sure of it.”

I was finding it difficult to accept these senior moments. I bought a course of Ginkgo Biloba. I stepped up my consumption of oily fish. I was not going to take this lying down.

“Mum, this is getting silly now,” muttered my son Matthew as I tried in vain to remember the Beatles’ first hit single..

“Well I know it!” I burst out, angry, frustrated but impotent.

“Yes, I **know** you know it. I don’t – which is why I asked you,” he replied cheerfully, “but it doesn’t matter. It’ll come to you. It’s just-“

“Yes I know- a senior moment.”

It got worse. Where was it that Mary had gone on holiday? A mutual friend wanted to know when I’d bumped into her in Asda. Somewhere in Italy. I rummaged in my memory when she asked me.

“Montevideo,” I produced the name triumphantly as we stood in Frozen Foods.

She looked puzzled.

“I thought it was Italy she’d gone to. Not South America.” I flushed and felt silly. Wrong place.

“Yes you’re right. I seem to have forgotten, Monte something.”

When I got home I looked at Mary’s post card. Montecatini.

Life went on as it tends to do. No harm done. I looked up some sites on the internet. Aphasia. No it wasn't that. Not as bad as that, at least I wasn't having to invent complicated long winded ways of avoiding saying the word. Circumlocutions. No it wasn't that bad.

Then Ellie came over to supper one Thursday night when Tim was in Holland on business. I'd cooked a lasagne and we chatted over a bottle of wine during which she poured her heart out and told me how much she wanted Tim to ask her to marry him. She was, she said, just a bit tired of being the independent successful career woman and at thirty five felt the biological clock was ticking away.

"It's all your fault, Mum," she said refilling my glass.

"Me? How?"

"You and the sisters, back in the sixties. Fighting for Women's Rights. Now look at us. We've got it all. And it's very confusing."

"I wasn't doing much about it back then. Ellie. I wasn't exactly rubbing shoulders with Germaine and burning my Cross Your Heart. I was too busy trying to build up a Midwinter dinner service and a nice set of cutlery for my bottom drawer. Not at the cutting edge of feminism. Don't tell me you regret equality of opportunity."

No, of course not. But at least in your day roles were more clear cut."

"You're right love, they were. And I actually liked looking after the house. I didn't feel demeaned. The first house your dad and I had in Palmerston. Nice twenties semi. I loved that house. Simon was born when we were there. Lovely south facing sitting room with- with- that wooden flooring- you know-"

"Laminate?"

"No, real wood," I replied sharply. "In those days. Real wood."

"Floorboards?" She was trying hard.

"No, no, that stuff- little pieces of wood in herringbone pattern. Had to polish it. Most people put carpet over it in the seventies."

I couldn't believe it. I was doing it now. Circumlocution.

“Oh, parquet,” she laughed. “It’s making a comeback. What’s the matter Mum? Why are you so uptight?”

Next day I bought a bumper book of crosswords.

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On Friday I went into town. I changed my library books, did a bit of window shopping to see what the coming autumn season’s ‘must haves’ would be; huge polo necks which would swallow me up and shoes which needed triangular feet seemed to be all the rage. I stopped for a coffee before getting the bus back and as I sat browsing through a homeware catalogue I had picked up, a man’s voice suddenly broke into my domestic thoughts.

“Is this seat taken? Do you mind if- is it?”- “I looked up to answer him and found myself looking at Phil Marshall, heartthrob of the Fifth form at the Boys’ Grammar, easily recognizable, despite a massive expanse of shiny forehead and gold rimmed specs.

He did a double take, then smiled a little uncertainly, his brow furrowed.

“It’s – it’s – don’t tell me I know-the Girls’ Grammar- it’s-”

“Chris,” I supplied. If his problems were as acute as mine we could have been there all day.

“Chris, that’s right. You were a friend of Carole Simpson weren’t you?” No problem with that name I registered. That was typical of those who had ever met Carole Simpson. Males anyway.

“Yes I was. How are you? Back in Midmouth again?”

So he sat down with his latte and we strolled very pleasantly down memory lane- the sixth form dances at the grammar schools before the days of co-ed, college, work, his life, my life, Carole Simpson’s life. Mainly that.

“So she moved away?” he inquired, apparently casually.

“About two years ago. She got divorced – again - and went up north I heard,”

“Divorced?” His voice had suddenly perked up I noticed.

“Mm . Third time. You married, Phil?”

“Widowed. Three years ago.” He looked down at his hand and twisted the wedding ring he still wore. I wondered if Carole still wore all her wedding rings.

“Me too. Hard isn’t it?”

He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. “Yes it is hard. I still miss her so much.”

We both sat in silence for a moment lost in our own thoughts but united by feelings of loss. Then he forced his voice into a jauntier tone.

“Still life goes on and all that. Where did you say Carole had moved to?”

I opened my mouth to tell him but nothing came out.

He was looking at me expectantly but here I was again, chasing that slender needle of fact in the overstuffed haystack of my memory.

Where had she moved to- that aging siren, that vamp on HRT who had always snaffled up the dishiest boys – and the dishiest men? I’m afraid I just couldn’t recall.

“Phil- I’m so sorry-it’s gone. Does that ever happen to you? Completely disappeared into the Black Hole that is my memory.”

“Chris- don’t apologise. It happens to me on a regular basis. T spent the whole of last weekend trying to recall the make of my first car. They say you never forget your first car- but I had temporarily mislaid the name.” He laughed and his pale blue eyes twinkled behind the gold framed specs.

“And did you remember?”

“course. Wolsey Hornet,” he announced proudly. “My daughter tells me these things are not lost, only more difficult to access.”

“Look, write your phone number down for me. I’ll give you a ring when I remem- no, when I can access where it is Carole moved to.”

He did that and we parted with, I felt, genuine pleasure at having seen each other after all that time. He smiled and waved at the door of the coffee shop. As I watched him go, I had a clear mental flashback to the daring length he’d worn his hair in 1963 and the swagger in his step as he’d crossed the dance floor to ask me to dance. We had jived. Three times actually. Then he’d asked Carole to dance and that was that.

I put his phone number carefully in my bag. I’d be needing it. I was certain of that.

That night as I lay in bed drifting off to sleep when thoughts and impressions of the day seem to lose their form and run into one another, I had a moment of blinding clarity. Burnley! That was where Carole had moved. I would phone Phil in a few days.

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When I rang him, his voice was warm and welcoming.

“Chris, nice to hear from you. I hoped you’d ring. It was stupid of me not to get your number. I enjoyed our chat last week.”

“So did I. in fact i wondered if you weren’t doing anything next week one evening if you’d like to come over for some supper.”

“Lovely idea. Yes thanks I would. I’m free every night except Monday- what does that say about my social life?” he laughed.

“Let’s say Thursday then about seven. Oh and by the way I remembered where Carole was moving to if you still want to track her down. It was Barnsley.”

Well, anyone can have a senior moment can’t they? It’s very easy to confuse Burnley with Barnsley. And I had a very strong feeling that Phil would never find me out.

