

## The Rose Arch

When I retired from work, I moved from a flat in Surrey to a house in Colchester. The property I bought came onto the market with perfect timing. What drew me to it was that it was next door to my younger sister, Mandy. I was thrilled to swap a narrow balcony for a proper garden, but slightly daunted by the responsibility. It felt like adopting a pet that I didn't know how to care for. Where I was lucky was that Mandy had been a professional gardener. She knew all the Latin names of plants, what they needed in the way of sun or shade, what type of soil they thrived in, when to prune, and when to feed them. I didn't want to take advantage of her good nature, so I insisted on employing her as my gardener and teacher at a monthly rate. Considering the hours of work, planning and attention lavished on my plot, the nominal fee I persuaded her to accept, was certainly a huge bargain.

The fair-sized garden hadn't been ignored by the previous owner but, like me, they hadn't really known what to put where, so some plants had suffered and weeds had thrived. Mandy set about transforming it with great enthusiasm. Two very large square beds near the house were stripped of brambles and half dead shrubs, ready for replanting. Unfortunately, the sudden onset of a particularly wet autumn delayed restocking. Often during the following December and January, she would look out at the muddy quagmire and apologise for having re-created the Somme in my back garden! I didn't mind a bit, as I'd seen her colourful pencil sketches of the planned design.

Then Covid hit, bringing lockdown and difficulty obtaining seeds and plants. She split some of the plants in her own garden in order to help stock mine. We managed to place an order with a well-known local garden and nursery just before total lockdown. These precious plants were soon transforming the muddy wasteland. At this time, starved of outside company, we had already given some of the trees and shrubs pet names, and I had taken to wishing them a good morning, or praising them for growing well. The laurel tree was named Stan, after the old movie star, the choisya became Conchita, and we called the fir tree Sven, and would thank it for any fir cones it dropped. We carefully collected them ready to make Christmas decorations later in the year. The large square beds were named 'The Beths', after the nursery whose plants had stocked them. It's entirely possible that, if lockdown had continued much longer, I may have started chatting to the lawn.

At the far end of the garden a fence panel was removed creating a link between our two properties, via a narrow path that ran down the side of our sheds. We called this 'the snicket'. Mandy labelled it with a vintage-style sign showing a hand pointing the way, and fixed it to the fence. Because the snicket gave easy access to each other's garden we came to think of them as jointly owned and forming a shared kingdom. We had a series of projects and plans as Mandy transformed every corner of my garden. At my request she made a seaside area called Eastbourne, presided over by a gull, where I have beds of pebbles and shells, and palms that remind me of childhood summers spent on the south coast. There is a Japanese area with a dragon, bamboos, pagoda, and elegant metal cranes named Frasier and Niles. Curving around some large shrubs we made a faux river of coloured stones, with a miniature bridge where a stone Ratty from the Wind in the

Willows rows a small boat. In another area we recreated the look of a park in our former home town. A large stone urn filled with ferns, and a lion statue conjured up memories of the formal gardens there, so Mandy made another of her decorative signs labelling it as such. We let our imaginations run riot, and delighted in being unsophisticated in our choices, and deliberately pretentious with the names.

Mandy painted a luxurious floral scene on the side of my wooden bin cupboard, and thus elevated its status to that of the Taj Mabin. My large garden shed was given a coat of cream paint and renamed the Cabin. She painted colourful herbaceous borders on the inside of its doors, so that when I had them hooked open it created a floral portal. We strung bunting inside and cut out pictures of flowers and gardens from magazines, which we pinned to the walls. If there was a rain shower while we were gardening, we'd go inside, sit in our flowery den and do a cryptic crossword together.

The rose arch was the only project which was slow to respond to Mandy's green fingers. The new metal hoops lent height and perspective to the pathway, but the roses seemed reluctant to climb it. An exceptionally hot and dry spring did them no favours. We used to sit on my terrace with cups of coffee, and try to imagine how lovely it would look when the roses finally managed to scale the sides and grow over the top.

On my birthday she bought me a stone bench to place outside the Cabin, making a firm foundation for it by utilising a pile of old bricks and laying them in a chequerboard pattern. We firmed them into the sand by doing our version of Irish dancing to Riverdance music which she played on her phone. It amused us to think that anyone seeing us would

just think we'd lost our minds out there, as we danced relentlessly. Her cat Fudge, sat wide-eyed watching our performance before walking back through the snicket. We couldn't decide whether he was impressed or simply embarrassed for us.

In her own garden Mandy grew vegetables, and I was regularly summoned to the fence to be given a basket of runner beans, tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots. In her greenhouse and potting shed she grew plants from seed, delighting in any which arrived in her gardening magazine. I'd receive a text telling me that she had 'some goods to fence', and then be rewarded with produce or plants. There is a garden shop within walking distance of my house which sells vintage items. We searched out containers and ornaments which at first sight held little promise, but once stripped of bad paint jobs, were actually rather fine. An ugly shiny brown owl was transformed into a wise-faced stone treasure we called Ollie. For that entire summer we lived in our self-contained fantasy world, revelling in our gardens and grateful for the occupation they gave.

That winter Mandy received the devastating diagnosis of an incurable illness. Treatment left her vulnerable to infection at a time when Covid was still rampant. Obligated to remain safely at home, even when lockdown eased, the gardens continued to be an escape and a pleasure for her. With their cycle of seasons and growth they offered both of us a reassuring continuity, so different from the concerns which gripped the world at large. She carried on making plans for the following year's planting.

We spent as much time outside as we could, wrapping up warmly on cold days, or sitting in her potting shed listening to radio quizzes. Sometimes I'd be in my living room

and hear a tap at my French doors. There would be Mandy, who had come through the snicket and was sitting at my garden table, grinning and miming drinking a cup of coffee. It was my cue to make drinks, grab the biscuits, and join her.

By the second summer my garden was full of colourful flowers, with pots and troughs on the terrace, shrubs undercut to make graceful shapes, and the straight lawn edges sculpted into scalloped curves. It was just as my sister had drawn, except the roses had yet to reach the top of the arch.

Winter came and it coincided with a deterioration in Mandy's health. Then, just as spring was at last repainting the landscape with daffodils and hope, she was taken from us. I like to think that she continues to influence my garden. This year the roses have exceeded expectation, easily growing over the arch and down the other side. They are a mass of brilliant scarlet blooms, so thick and abundant that I want to smile at the excess.

The garden was our escape when times were hard, and it's now the place where I feel closest to Mandy, but also the place where I miss her most. If I look hard enough, I can see her emerging from the snicket, walking up my path and pausing. She smiles in satisfaction at the tunnel of roses. I know she's pleased that the rose arch finally delivered its promise, and has noticed that I've kept up-to-date with the dead-heading and the watering. A breeze catches the leaves, and a couple of petals fall on to her hair. She laughs and looks truly happy. This is the freeze-frame at the end of a much-loved film; the image that encapsulates all that has gone before; the picture I will look at often.