

The Old Dog Fox

Alec clearly remembers the first time he heard about the fox, because it came with the realisation he'd become 'Auld Alec'. Walking into the common stair a couple of months ago, he'd come in on a quarrel between two of his neighbours. Apparently that young lass Marie downstairs was leaving out leftovers to attract foxes. A good roast lamb last weekend. Marie was saying 'But I like seein' the foxes. That auld yin with the limp is ma favourite. He looks like he could do wi' some dinner.' Old Mrs Wallace was having none of it - 'Whit the hell are ye daein' that fur? They're vermin, we want rid o' them, no attract them!' Alec thought he'd keep out of this one, so he smiled affably, continued up the stairs and let himself into the house. Within minutes, the two women were blethering like the best of neighbours again. What they seem to forget, is he can hear everything that's said in the stair. Marie put in, 'Ah'd like tae huv seen Auld Alec when he was younger. He's still a cutie, isn't he?' 'Aye', replied the older one, 'Auld Alec can put on the charm when he wants.' Alec smiled to himself at that: folk have been telling him he's a charmer most of his life. But 'Auld Alec', eh? Ach well, back to the gardening for some peace.

Alec has made a garden of sorts at the back. The house (he'd have said 'flat' in Peterborough) is almost identical to the one he was brought up in, in Lochend. When he returned to Edinburgh ten years ago, after Susan died, the Council offered him and his two youngest sons this place on the west of the city. Like a lot of council houses built between the wars, it's a nice place in a good-ish area, top floor, two bedrooms, and a big backgreen that's shared among the six households in the block. Out there, you feel surrounded by other folk's windows. The housing blocks on three streets form a rough triangle that contains fifteen backgreens, fenced off from each other, with fourteen of them of roughly equal size. But his block has an extra piece of land in the middle of the triangle that for many years nobody really wanted. So, there it was, appended to their reasonably neat backgreen, an unloved wasteland they called The Jungle, a feral place of thistles, couch grass and brambles, and, if you looked a bit more closely, of rusting tools and abandoned toys from years past.

According to the Council, half of the wilderness goes with his flat. In the first few years, he turned a blind eye, but five years ago, when he finally retired at sixty-six from his two part-time jobs, he surprised himself, never mind the neighbours, and started creating a garden out of 'his' half of The Jungle. Over the next few years, he laid down old carpets that he

and the boys carried home, laughing, from skips. Once the weeds were smothered, he dug the soil and grew a few flowers and shrubs. He planted a hedge along the boundary with the remaining Jungle to help keep out the ever-threatening weeds. The boys helped him build some raised beds for vegetables, and the mother of one of Ryan's pals gave him her old greenhouse. He hadn't been near a spade since his teens, but he found he was actually enjoying his wee garden. Jason - amused at first - now asks if he thinks he's Alan bloody Titchmarsh. When he's out there, Alec thinks a lot, in a way he never did as a younger man. At his age, there's a lot more past than future, he supposes that's it.

He was Edinburgh born and bred but nature was always kind of there. His first memory is of his parents' allotment. He must have been about four and he was 'helping' his mother. While she was weeding the lettuces or whatever, he made wee worm houses, stacking up the crumbly earth, poking a hole for a door, and proudly introducing juicy worms to their new home. He was gutted when they returned the next day and the worms had disappeared, but his Mum explained - 'Well, they're wild things, Ally, and they can go where they want. They need tae worm their way aroon' tae find food. And we need them tae dae that tae keep the soil airy.' She certainly knew her gardening, his old Mum. Over the years on the allotment she'd developed a nouse for it, and he must have picked things up from her, because it was all coming back to him now. Somehow, he knows what to do when, according to the seasons, which plant likes rich soil and which needs good drainage, and how to encourage worms and beasties that are good for the garden.

Now and again, he hears talk of the Council clearing up The Jungle. The latest is that it might help prevent foxes nosing around the bins. Like Marie, other neighbours down the street have told him about a handsome old fox they've glimpsed around these parts. Nobody has ever actually caught this fox raiding the bins, but there's been two or three sightings of him limping off into the night. Alec can't remember seeing foxes in his childhood, but in the ten years since he's been back he's seen several around the city. He's always taken a shine to them, living as wild creatures, hunting and defending their young and being themselves, alongside all the clatter of the town. He's quite intrigued by this old one; he'll look out for him.

On the allotment, his Dad took charge of growing the tatties and any hard digging. There was always a different atmosphere when it was Dad's turn, harsher, more work-driven, certainly no time for playing around with worms. When he thinks about it, he realises that

he can't remember his Mum and Dad ever being at the allotment together. He reckons now his Mum took whatever peace she could get. Dad got him and his brothers working too, with spades and rakes borrowed from the next-door allotments. 'Ye's'll huv tae toughen up' seemed to be his Dad's best advice to his sons in those days. Mind you, his Dad might have been a bit of a bully, but he did grow good tatties.

Once a year Dad made them take a wheelbarrow up Arthur's Seat and collect sheep's purls to add to the compost heap. It wasn't so bad when the three lads all went together and made a morning of it, playing cowboys, pretending to herd the sheep on the hill, but by the time he was twelve, with his brothers out working, he was sent to do it on his own. He can still feel the shame of it, trundling that ponging wheelbarrow the full mile home. He'd meet some of his pals on the way and they'd either laugh out loud or turn away with embarrassed grins. Kids younger than him would jeer openly. Years later, when he had his own sons, Alec vowed he'd never humiliate them, and although there had been times when his resolve had run a wee bit thin, in his heart he believed he'd done a better job than his Dad.

When he was fifteen, he simply refused to do it. That's when his Dad went mental, telling him, 'Ye'll bloody well dae whit Ah say!' Alec had puffed out his chest, pulled back his shoulders and said, almost in a whisper, 'No Ah'll no', and you cannae make me.' His heart was pounding but he knew something had changed. His Dad turned and left, growling to his Mum about 'thae bloody sons o' yours.'

After that, he felt he could look after himself. He still has the scars to show for it. That same night, he and some pals got into a fight in the Grassmarket, after being refused service in the pubs. A lad managed to dodge one of his punches and Alec's hand went full force into a wall. His wrist still pains him quite a bit, and it's getting worse as he gets older, like the rest of his joints. And he still has a funny V-shaped scar on his head where some daft bugger took a metal fence post to him; his hair never grew back in that V, and it can still be itchy. Personally, he never used more than his fists and occasionally his feet, and, truth be told, he got tired of the constant brawling. Gradually he learned a way of holding himself that told other lads not to mess with him. By the time he reached his early twenties, his fighting days were over. The atmosphere with his Dad wasn't getting any better, though, especially when he was the only brother left at home. He acted a lot more on instinct then, and his instinct was telling him to find a way out.

He married Susan when he was twenty-one, after they'd been going out for only three months. It wasn't much of a romance for her, he saw that now. He'd just felt it was time to marry, and she was there, three years younger, a real good looker, and eager to have him. He still wonders why she saw him as such a good catch: by that time, he'd learned how to talk to girls, asking them about themselves, intuiting what really interested them; he supposes that's it. They had a registry office wedding and a pub tea after for close family, and they moved down to Peterborough almost immediately. He doesn't remember now why they moved so far. Just that instinct of his to find new territory, and a chance encounter with a bloke who told him there were plenty jobs going in the brick factories, and plenty new houses.

The time he recognised he'd come to love her was when she was a few months pregnant with their first. One evening after his work, they'd taken a break from decorating their new place, and were reminiscing how, as bairns, they'd been allowed so much freedom to roam. He told her how he and his pals would run around the streets, sometimes walking miles to find somewhere new to play. There would be rumours of a good place and they'd go off on an expedition to find it. One time they decided to go down the Figgate Burn. They must have been playing one of their hide-and-seek games which usually ended in a fight, but this time he was lying under a gravelly overhang next to the burn, making himself as small as he could. As he heard the boy who was 'Het' thundering above him, Alec found himself eye-to-eye with a female duck, waddling painfully with one seemingly useless wing outstretched. His Mum had told him about this, how a mother duck will put herself in danger as a decoy to protect her brood. Alec wondered how near he was to the nest, and knew he needed to keep quiet about it. No point in telling his pals. Years later, Alec found himself saying to Susan 'She was so brave, waddlin' around right in front o' me. I must'a seemed like a giant tae her, even though I was lyin' prone in aw that muddy gravel, tryin' no' tae make a sound!' Susan looked at him with that soft, kind way she had, and said 'That's the kind of mother I want to be. Brave. And fierce.'

They'd stayed a lot longer down south than they'd intended, had five kids, and though after Jason came along they thought they'd finished with that, Ryan's appearance surprised them all; Susan was forty-six, and Alec nearly fifty when they had that sixth bundle of joy. When he looks back at their forty years in Peterborough, he remembers a tangle of kids

laughing and arguing, constant money worries, and often a work-sore tiredness that made him grumpy. But all that is wrapped in the warmth that Susan created for them all.

Susan and he had always talked about 'coming home' and when she died suddenly ten years ago, he and the two youngest didn't hesitate. There's not an hour in life that he doesn't think of her. Mind you, the boys say he can be too sentimental about those days, and that gives him pause for thought. Jason said the other night - 'Well, you an' Mum were great thegither, but it wisnae aye as hunky-dory as ye think, Dad.'

Anyway, he has four grown-up children and six grandkids living miles south, all with English accents! And, who could believe it, two grand-bairns in Edinburgh, now that Jason and Ryan have both moved in with their girlfriends and have one bairn apiece.

It's mid April, sunny outside, and Alec is happy to escape the telly and do a spot of gardening. As he gets up from his chair, stiff as anything, he realises he's walking to the front door half-bent forward like his Dad as an old man. He collects a tray of wee courgette plants he has germinated indoors and takes them out to the greenhouse. It's pernicky but satisfying work, gently pulling out the little plants by their tiny seed leaves and potting them up. Monty Don, eat yer hert oot.

It's funny, but he feels kind of private in the greenhouse, even though literally a hundred faces could be looking down on him from the flats all around. Charming old bugger that he is, according to the lissom Marie, here he can pick his nose, or scratch his bum and somehow he feels no-one can see him. Ridiculous, he knows, but there it is. He's taken out a radio for some company. Jason bought him one that you can power up in the house, and then it goes for several hours without being plugged in. Recently he heard on it someone saying that people often forget the things that other people do to them, but they never forget how a person makes them feel. And he thinks of how Susan made him feel, and his mother, and how receiving those two types of loving was so different from how his Dad made him feel. He regularly hears Jason and Ryan saying 'I love you' to their girlfriends and their wee ones, but it hadn't been the way of things in his day to show feelings as openly as that. And he wonders: Did he manage to escape becoming his own father?

He gets a funny feeling that someone is watching him. Someone who's not so interested in his bum-scratching but in *him*. He looks up, takes in the weedy elders and the nettles to the right, and then he sees him: an old dog fox, standing alert not three feet away. He's a handsome one, even though his back is covered with a lifetime of scars. He's been a fighter alright. Man and fox gaze at each other in mutual respect. Alec thinks that the fox looks puzzled, raising his muzzle and sniffing the air in his expert way, and he realises that although the fox can see him, plain as anything, he can't get a scent of him, hermetically sealed as he is, behind glass. The exchange lasts a few long moments, then the old fox seems to give up, diverts his gaze and moves painfully off into the clump of elder trees.

Without knowing how he knows it, Alec is sure that the old fighter has come to this no man's land to die. His heart fills with an emotion he can't discern. He thinks about his own scars and those scrapes he got into as a young blood. He admits to himself what he's known for a while, that his father didn't know how to be with his boys as they grew. He can even concede that his Dad did the best he could - it might not have been good enough for Alec at the time, but he feels at peace about it now. Truth be told, the wounds Alec feels aren't from his fighting days, they're from wondering if he was good enough to Susan and his kids. And somehow, in this moment, he knows that he made them feel loved.

He finishes potting up the wee courgette plants. He'll take them indoors again tonight, then gradually harden them off in the greenhouse. He's dug some well-rotted compost into one of the raised beds so he can plant them out in a month or so. By July, he'll have a glut of them. Plenty to pass on to Jason and Ryan and their families and old Mrs Wallace and Marie if they want them. He's got his tatties chitting in boxes and he'll be planting them out soon. When it comes to harvesting, he'll ask the grandkids round to 'help' him dig them up and show them that chips don't start life in Tesco. He had a good tattie-growing teacher after all.