

*Starflower Bloos*

*Or*

*A walk down Gardner Street, 14 June 2020*

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In Glasgow, suspended on a steep residential incline somewhere between Hyndland and Partick, teeters Gardner Street. For the last few minutes of the downhill journey on foot, small squares of city garden jut out, their privet hedges and wild rose bushes spilling prettily over spindly black railings and onto the pavement. There's something magical and unlikely about the placement of these little patches of domestic lushness. Or perhaps, it's the subconscious sense of respect one feels towards the city planners or architects who dared to squeeze quite so much garden onto a street that already held the illusion that everything on it, from the tenements to the lawns to your own two feet, is about to slide off and tumble down over Dumbarton Road in a manner slightly queasy and Carroll-esque. Either way, it was today during my walk down Gardner Street that a small voice emerged from somewhere amongst the tall spray of greenery on my right.

'Hallo!'

Turning towards the sound, my own eyes found the huge brown ones of a little girl of around four years old. Behind her, her father paused in his pruning of a rather out-of-control Fuschia to survey the progress of his daughter's sociability wearily.

'Hello!' I said to the girl.

'Hallo. What is this?'

She held out a sticky hand. Clutched inside was a blue thing, crumpled and fragile-looking.

'I'm not sure!' I said. Her father cleared his throat in a 'sorry' type of way. I giggled softly through my nose to show I didn't mind.

'Did you know something,' said the girl presently. She frowned down at her hand; inhaled and exhaled through her nose several times in quick succession, as if frustrated. I waited to hear the something I should know, but it didn't come.

'Did I know something?' I probed gently. Her eyes snapped back up to mine, focussed again, and determined.

'Yes. Did you know, this is one too. Of the thing in my hand.'

The girl crouched to her knees and pointed to a pale blue flower growing amidst a pale spray

of green foliage growing nearby the Fuschia, but closer to ground level. The flower, along with the frail greenery around it, possessed an almost underwater quality as they rippled very slightly in the breeze.

‘Did you know something else,’ the girl was saying now.

‘What else?’

‘It looks like a star. Blue one.’

The way she said ‘blue’ made me think it should be spelt ‘bloo.’ This thought, combined with the sight of her serious, eager little face looking up at me, made me giggle again. And yet, looking down at the flower, with its beautiful, curiously pointed petals, I had to agree with her observation.

‘Yes. It does look like a star.’

‘Bloo one.’

‘Yes. A bloo star, isn’t it.’

She looked up at me and breathed in and out again quickly. I could see there was something in my responses which was frustrating her – there was still some secret or inherent truth she wanted me to acknowledge, or touch on, which would validate or reassure her.

‘Yes but did you... did you seen one... like that... before.’

The strange thing was, I had been sent a photo of a flower just like this one very recently. Before that, though, I had never seen a bloom like it. It seemed strange, and sweet, and sad somehow, that it should have come into my consciousness twice in such quick succession. I told her so and, again, her face filled with frustration. I realised that, again, my response had been the wrong one. She wished to have been the one to show me this rare, twinkly flower first. I rushed to appease her.

‘Yes, but only in a photograph, you know. And I thought it was very pretty. And I wished I could see a real one. And now I have, because of you.’

The girl’s face split suddenly into an enormous grin. Her smooth dark cheeks flushed with an undertone of pink, and she hid behind her father’s legs.

‘Are you shy now?’ he asked her, smiling.

She peered up at me and shook her head, emerging again into the sunlight from the shelter of her father’s limbs. She *had* been shy, she seemed to say, but that wouldn’t do - she would have to get past it - as the conversation wasn’t finished yet.

‘Why did you get a picture?’

‘Well, somebody sent it to me.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, I think they thought that I would like it.’

‘Did you want a real one when you saw a picture. A real flower.’

‘Yes! I did. But usually it is nice to let flowers grow. Even though they are very pretty, and it makes you want to keep them.’

The girl looked thoughtful.

‘They are nice to touch as well.’

‘They *are* nice to touch. They’re delicate, aren’t they? You can touch their petals very gently. But you can’t always keep them.’

‘Yes...’

‘Let the lady go now,’ said the girl’s father.

Though the tenement window behind them was darkened and gloomy against the glare of the afternoon, I could make out the outline of a woman sitting at it with her back to us, facing the room beyond. She had the same long, beautiful black hair as her daughter. I lost myself for a moment, staring into the obscured space beyond her. My *Sertraline* had run out before the weekend; as a result the last few days as had been long and confusing and fitful, and last night I’d thought it was Monday today, and that I could pick up my prescription. I realised, as the sunlight seemed to pulsate a little behind my temples, that I’d probably left taking my pills a day longer than I ever had, and as a result, I was now truly in the throes of SSRI withdrawal. The thought worried me, but I was also exhilarated. *If I got pished tonight, I thought, I would probably get really pished. Which might be good. Actually though, I should just go to Boots and get emergency tablets. I should go straight away. To Boots.*

Back outside my head, the little girl was wading around in the pale green bush sheltering the celestial blooms.

‘Do you want this one?’

She pointed to the crumpled flower’s brother, which was growing happily in a spot of shade.

‘I’d love to keep it. But we should let it grow. I’ll remember it, though. Like the photograph, but in my head.’

‘But what if it falls down. The other one falled... fell down.’

‘If it falls down one day, then you can pick it up and keep it. And this time, you can put it in the back of a book, and then stick it on a piece of paper after a while. And it will last forever!’

The girl looked up at me, her mouth open slightly. She seemed utterly mesmerised by this notion. Her father stroked her hair fondly.

‘Maybe one day I can find out what the flowers are called and I can grow my own,’ I said.

‘Starflowers. Bloo. Do you have a garden?’

‘No. One day I will, maybe!’

‘Have this one. Flower. I can pick *one*.’

‘Don’t pick it, Preeti. And anyway, you can’t touch the lady, remember’ said her dad.

‘But I can touch the flower.’

‘But if you touch the flower, then the lady touches the flower, it’s like you have touched her.’

‘Because germs,’ said the girl solemnly.

‘Yes, because of germs.’

All of a sudden the girl looked tearful and very tired.

‘I wish Roshni could come and play.’

Her father sighed and rubbed his temple, then his eyes. He glanced behind him, through the window, but the girl's mother was still facing the room beyond. I smiled at him, then at the girl.

‘What’s your name? Preeti?’

‘Prithika. Pree-ti-ka,’ she said, shy again. Tears glittered in her deep eyes, catching the Sunday sun.

‘It was nice to meet you, Prithika.’

She smiled and a tear fell to the grass, barely glancing her cheek.

‘Bye.’

‘Bye!’

As I continued down the hill, I feel tears spring to my own eyes. I thought of my messy, dark room back at the flatshare, and I felt alarmingly alone. I wandered aimlessly on, startled now by my dizziness in the heat and glare of the day. In a newsagent on Dumbarton Road, I bought a large bottle of *Glenns* and, emerging back into the humid afternoon, felt immediately as sick as if I’d just tanned half of it at once. I decided to go back the way I came, thinking of the steep ascent back up Gardner Street as some sort of pilgrimage, or atonement.

Looking briefly through the window at Prithika’s garden, I saw three shapes were now moving in the dark and cool of the tenement home. I felt truly lost, in a way I hadn’t for a long time. Then, something caught my eye on the railing nearby. There, weighed down by a round, smooth pebble, sat a perfect, plucked *Bloo Starflower* on a piece of white paper. I carried it gently on the palm of my hand, all the way to *Boots*, then home, my pinky on its stem to stop it from blowing away.