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# The Rain Tree

Written by Mirabel Osler

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MIRABEL OSLER

# THE RAIN TREE

## A MEMOIR

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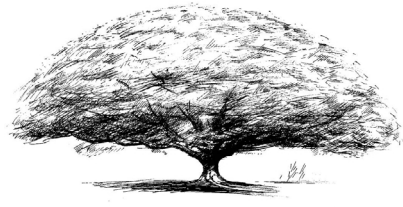
# *The Rain Tree*

A Memoir

MIRABEL OSLER

BLOOMSBURY
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To the new friends – indispensable and generous, and they'll know who they are – who have surprised and delighted me in old age.



The '*arbre à pluie*' gets its name from the sound of rain falling through the folded leaves at nightfall . . .

# *Preamble*

I have just been to seek out a shroud. There's a young woman who makes environmentally friendly felt shrouds decorated with leaves. Sounds lovely. Sounds suitable for me. For the way I think. I've never believed in an afterlife. Never had the comfort from faith in a divine being concerned with each one of us – God won't let me. Instead, not believing in immortality, I find solace in contemplating space: that tempting void without significance. Considered against infinity, how can we be anything but disintegrating dross floating through time?

Anyway if I'm wrong, how is there no answer to the classic question: Why is a lightning conductor necessary on a church?

Edmond de Goncourt when discussing immortality with Alphonse Daudet said, 'We are mere ephemeral gatherings of matter.' That is how I feel. I'm a nothing – agnostic if a label is needed – and because I want to save my children from coping or feeling guilty if they don't send me off with a fanfare, or in theatrical splendour, I decided to get the practicalities sorted. A felt shroud or cardboard coffin would suffice.

To evaporate like dew at sunrise would be my aim, but life isn't like that, nor seemingly is death.

This isn't an autobiography but a paean to friendship. Janus-faced, looking both ways – love and death, ends and beginnings – the unavoidable human apophthegm of those who mattered in my life before I was a sentient being. I write of the *upside* to old age in spite of loss of faculties and physical prowess, or of the necessity of making lists, of repeating a word aloud so that I haven't forgotten by the time I reach the top stair.

As a non-believer with nothing to hang on to, I write of the compensations, the unexpected liberations and friendships I have not anticipated as I've grown older, in a series of seven episodes – the fifth being the reason for the book's title – or parts of my life as I jump about like a grasshopper on speed between loss, writing, gardens, friendship, food and grief; Europe, Asia and finally, today, facing the edge.

The taproot is mine, and although I begin with a few pages on gardens, it's the accumulated letters, diaries and photographs that are the catalyst in an attempt to leave my children some sort of background to where they've come from. The chapters, not in chronological order, are disparate chunks of recollections prompted by a letter, painting or photograph of the people and the overlapping lives of those who have been germane to me and my family in England, Thailand and Greece.

My past is the shadow I can't avoid. Now in old age, through corridors of memory these people still reverberate.



# 1

# *'That Pretty Blue Thing'*

The act of shared gardening, not the garden, was what mattered when my husband Michael and I returned to our house in England after years of living abroad. We had no intention of 'making' a garden. Certainly not anything that imposed sophisticated geometry on the landscape. Rather, as though we were painting colours and shapes on a vast canvas, we were drawn into an activity where neither of us had been before.

Our intuitive feelings had grown from nowhere cerebral, nowhere ambitious. They came from standing about ruminating on our stream, the undulating land, fruit trees long past their use, sheep grazing in meadows beyond our boundaries. Design hadn't come into it, nor had horticultural wisdom, and that holy cow of gardening – lawns – was non-existent. All that was needed was a light touch where sporadic blotches of floral enhancement seduced both nose and eye, where old roses followed the contours, bulbs appeared among unmown grass, and primulas, irises and ferns grew beside water.

Unintentional, arbitrary, were our spontaneous responses as we succumbed to what was surrounding us. How could a

tug at our primeval senses not tempt us to scatter a few plants about the place? At least that's how we began. With no plan or know-how. Stone, water, bulbs, trees and roses were to be our ingredients with the built-in proviso that we could leave it all for little bouts of travel.

Idiots! Slowly, surreptitiously, we were coerced. We had no idea we were moving into a world of blackmail where on a summer's day, slumbering among bees and an infusion of scents from the shrub roses, a coil of bindweed throttling a hollyhock threatens all thought of inertia. I call it floral blackmail. And that's why, when I used to visit and write about gardens, I knew instantly if they were the work of proper or improper gardeners. Proper gardeners don't sit. They can't. They have a couple of benches – one on the patio, another beside the 'water feature' – from where, in less than a minute, they catch sight of some neglected chore and involuntarily spring up to make amends. Once up they keep going. The improper type, however, have seats scattered about the place like a beckoning finger offering hospitality and unrestricted idleness.

I started writing about our garden through no volition of my own; it just happened. I found that the process of grubbing about in verdant corners provoked thoughts that had nothing to do with me. Unprompted, they rose to the surface from some deep source of stillness: lightweight or puzzling. Ever since I'd first picked up a spade I'd felt an undertow to gardening, like the statue in the rock waiting to be hewn by the carver. The enigma lay quiescent, yet impossible to ignore.

On scraps of paper kept with a pencil in my pocket, I wrote them down. Abstract or trivial – the layers of geology that had gone to make a tree; how pointless it is the way gardeners devote hours to something that's entirely perishable; how like a

rosary of stones was the arrangement of pebbles I'd put around the thick stems of *Lewisia*s to protect their necks from winter wet. And as time passes – unlike food past its sell-by date or lines on a face – a garden goes out in triumphant florescence.

Think too how few gardeners exult: we meet, commiserate and complain. Only in June did I encounter people who spoke with rapturous buoyancy about the beauty of their gardens. The rest of the year we spend apologising. Cooks hold their tongues, never admitting that the sauce shouldn't be like this or the soup is really from Neal's Yard, but gardeners only say, 'You should have seen it last week.' Other things intrigued me as I moved among the roses: the tyranny of birds. Nesting close to the house just where I wanted to work, their black eyes would watch me. Intimidated, they annexed my territory, forcing me into a Groucho Marx crouch in an effort to keep below their eye level.

Lurching was what Michael and I did. Inconstant, erratic or just pure foolhardy: wild and unstructured, the place evolved. Through mutual cohesion our commitment burgeoned – but we hadn't intended to be taken over this way.

Whatever the pundits advised, however fashions changed – from white gardens, to grasses and gravel, to exotic rarities or Japanese gardens – roses never lost their bloom. 'A rose-red city – half as old as Time', as Walter de la Mare described Petra, was just one of the childhood rosy recollections we shared:

> . . . Oh, no man knows
> Through what wild centuries
> Roves back the rose.

For us, Michael and me, they became of primary importance after we'd visited a rose nursery in full spate. All their flowing,

tumbling effect, their huge loomy mounds and the porcelain perfection of single-petalled blooms took precedence over herbaceous borders or lawns.

Gardens are as unpredictable as human relationships. There are no right ways to make one, only alternatives, and nobody knows what you haven't done – a comforting thought when faced with disillusion over plans made while lying in the bath or before going to sleep, when I haul in garden thoughts like net-fulls of kelp. We soon learnt that death is a part of gardening as inherent as slugs or our fickle climate, and though disappointment may be a built-in ingredient, surprises proliferate. The first time I saw the waxy petals on our *Clematis armandii* I realised I had an asinine smile on my face. Another time I was misled by a thread of brown bootlace on what I took to be dead clematis until in the spring I found a pinhead of green at its base. Blessed pinhead, auguring life. And how comforting it was not just to contemplate the plants that bloomed against the elements with such bravado but to look at some of the dismal black sticks of winter. I could put out my hand and know with certainty I was touching the colours and scents of next summer.

Starting a garden is the beginning of making a series of mistakes. Books don't warn you; they tell you how and when, but never hint at the capriciousness – the quintessence of gardening. Another thing: until we began gardening I hadn't realised we were taking on potency behind those gentle words – the annual resurgence meant whatever happened one year would never happen again – timing, performance, weather, disease or sheer overwhelming luxuriance proved the garden's transience. How different from the written word.

And until summer ended, I hadn't appreciated the bliss of hip sockets. After months of stooping or shuffling behind a

heavy wheelbarrow, standing upright and walking with swinging limbs along autumn lanes I discovered my body with all its moving parts had been returned to me. How exquisitely contrived was my thigh to my hip.

But strange things happened. Unexpected percipience lurked about gardens. I would be weeding, hearing the intricate song of a blackbird, groping at the root of things in some overgrown corner, when feral abstractions came into my head with such arousal that I looked round to see where they were coming from. I was being manipulated. Pulling up a weed before realising it was a flower, I'd push it back with apologies and heartfelt supplications for its survival: 'Live, please live.' But when I heaved on a recalcitrant dock, whose root was so deep it broke in half, quite contrarily my pleas became curses: 'Die, you wretch, die!'

The emotional pendulum was exhausting.

Less dramatic were the shared moments at dusk when Michael and I pottered together among our shrub roses, grown into floral mounds big enough to live in. Lingering, surrounded by scents, textures and colours, we knew – each flower being ephemeral – that those moments were not to be squandered. Subtly we'd been appropriated. We were no longer in control. We'd become possessed by the fecundity of the place. And we marvelled. Astonished at what we'd started, we looked at each other wondering, 'What have we done?' There is no doubt that for raw gardeners, inexperienced, naive, the amazement of the first summer's production can take your breath away. It certainly did for Michael and me.

Slowly, surreptitiously, our days and nights were spent discussing what next bit of land to annex, what decorative climber to plant beneath a tree, or where to make another

sitting place among the bosky shrubbery and cool galleries of greenery.

One was a platform with two seats made high up between a pair of trees beside the brook. Reaching it by a flight of wooden steps, we viewed our roses with the eyes of a bird. From a rope on a pulley in overhead branches, we hauled up a wooden tray made specially to hold the bottle of wine we'd left cooling since morning in the stream below.

On summer evenings we surveyed our floral landscape with the same passion I imagine a diamond dealer does his jewels in Hatton Garden. I know it's easy for eyes to become unseeing – as though with cataracts – until we no longer look with primary and pristine clarity, yet it would be hard to find one gardener who wasn't still occasionally confounded by a rose.

As the dusk deepened, and feeling agreeably mellow, we were never certain whether it was a breeze or drink making our platform sway imperceptibly among the foliage.

The green light of summer was transformed, and the season of cobwebs turned our listless days into some of the loveliest of the year. Waking to a barely perceptible shift in the garden, we found that autumn had arrived – for some it brings contentment, for others only despondency.

Weeks later, we'd pull back the curtains to a cataleptic world of frozen grasses and leaves brittle and sculptural. Rime outlining spires of plants left standing, the seed heads of *Eryngium*, spiky as porcupine quills, turned to artefacts. Then there would be a morning when the room was full of light reflected from a snowfall during the night; we'd hear the flapping of a tortoiseshell butterfly against the window pane, and with rising excitement we knew that winter had arrived. Proper winter: not the grey days, dismal and short, but the

winter of childhood. Michael would get out his skis, and I'd saddle my horse, put a washing line round my waist and pull him up beyond the Nordy Bank, higher still, to the top of the Brown Clee Hill from where he could ski all the way home and I could return via lanes full of snow, cantering through a silent landscape. This was before snowploughs: the village would be cut off for days and we lit our oil lamps by mid-afternoon.

It may surprise proper gardeners, but we loved the garden in winter for the restful tones under a leaden sky, the grades of ashen gloom, the sallow shadows on the bark of trees. Pissarro or Sisley captured the luminous tonality of misty distances, and as for Bruegel, Michael and I never forgot standing in the centre of a gallery in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna surrounded by his paintings of the Flemish landscape in the petrified grip of winter.

Out of curiosity I tried sitting blindfolded to experience an invisible garden, an attribute that isn't always in the forefront of garden literature although touch, smell and sound are as fundamental as the most recherché planting and supersede any verbal descriptions. Even the photographs and letters I've been wading through aren't as potent as smells and sounds to resurrect the past. Homesick for the gardens of England, a friend in Thailand struggled to grow sweet peas among orchids and frangipani, hoping to be carried back to his childhood. Primroses do that for me. Their damp, fresh smell instantly epitomises an English spring.

Personal and idiosyncratic, we each respond to remembered scents more potent than anything tangible. The smell of toast, of Boots the Chemist, wallflowers in the sun, bonfires – and in the Far East how we longed for the smell of ground coffee! The list goes on.

But how sad that now everything is always! What I mean is that the rhythm of the seasons is no longer defined by the arrival of the first rhubarb or strawberries in the shops. And how many times visitors commented on our old shrub roses that only flowered once. Fine with us – who wants snowdrops in July or peonies in December any more than year-round raspberries?

After a few years working in the garden, Michael and I discovered another thing.

Perversely, the more beautiful it became, the more we left it. Not for the reason of a fleeting escape, but for the bliss of coming home. If you don't go away, you forego an unforeseen pleasure: the return – when we would walk among our shrubs remarking on every altered detail. There was sense in our capriciousness. We couldn't have done that at the beginning when the place was raw, but once it became swarming with roses and the trees had grown mature enough to make their own shadows, we became aware of this other dimension to our garden. Returning home to what we'd been loath to leave intensified the effect. It was a simple device for renewing our eyes, for sharing the floriferous creation surrounding us.

Besides, there was a spin-off. We controlled time.

At home, days trickled by unobserved; years dissolved; familiarity scooped up hours with relentless inevitability. A month would have passed since Christmas while my mind was still with the children opening stockings. But escaping even briefly, we tweaked life to move at our tempo; we lived elsewhere, experienced other places, people, things that gave us the sense of once more filling our skins with living rather than the mundane process of existing.

Experiencing elsewhere meant – without the use of marijuana – that time became prolonged. *Elsewhere* was a hallucinatory means of manipulating perpetuity: 'Was it only yesterday we were breakfasting in the kitchen? It seems like years.'

So why did Michael and I both surrender at the same time, work so well together, spend evenings making lists, hours visiting arboretums, chasing 'open days' listed in the *Yellow Book* and perusing coffee-table books of immense weight and glossy pictures?

The answer lies in our differences. When it came down to it, our gathered inspirations fragmented so that, although nothing was planned as to which of us should do what, we each took on the bits that physically pleased us. Michael, being good at mechanics, took over tinkering with the grass-cutting mower when it went wrong as all lawn mowers regularly do. (I've never understood why they have this inbuilt defect when the Singer sewing machine I inherited from my mother has never failed.) He created 'architectural grass-mowing': paths where the blades were adjusted to allow different levels to make patterns among the orchard trees. Michael held the place together. He used his machine and scythe to give it cohesion like a piece of textured material. Uncut in places, this allowed for wild flowers to seed under the ancient fruit trees, which did little of productive value except blossom each May, when we'd sit on a bench drinking wine under their branches, listening to the hum of bees overhead.

I wanted no flower beds: my idea was to try growing shrub roses in the way we'd seen wild roses abroad. Being planted in the unkempt turf allowed them freedom to festoon and sprawl, filling the place with colour, scent and abandonment.

But no book gives you the one essential fact, no rose catalogue explains (among the information on height, season, colour and so on) that what matters is their characteristics. Had we known their habit, their deportment, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes, would have known how the roses with a compliant disposition were a godsend to ignorant gardeners. It was their behaviour – the swooners, the thrusters, the supple or the inflexible all planted in the wrong place until we despaired as we tried to cope with a thorny *rugosa* or the languishing elegance of a *gallica*. If I'd known beforehand how old shrub roses – with their twiggy, lax or heavy-headed blooms mottled or silky, some on wine-dark stems – have fundamental characteristics, we might not have planted so many in inappropriate sites.

But what an unforeseen learning curve as we discovered progressively that mistakes in the garden are not disastrous or as irrevocable as they can be in relationships or finance. Plants can be repositioned – even in an experimental, reckless manner – and yet survive. (I used to think this about places where we'd lived: a feeling I could be dibbled in various parts of the world and thrive as long as my family were there.) Roses, we found, were equally transferable. Even huge ramblers are agreeable to this treatment of being cut back and repositioned without harming their lusty vigour the following spring.

Bulbs galore also went to our heads. Besides the vast narcissus family there is the whole spectrum of tulips, where once again we ignored proper procedure and instead let our imaginations go wild with visions of tulips growing with abundance among the rough turf. Some worked: the little species tulips for instance. But the photograph in *A Gentle Plea for Chaos* belies reality, I'm afraid; those peerless lily-flowered tulips you see in the picture did not fulfil my expectations. We'd assumed

that, like daffodils, they would appear year after year. And in spite of consulting the RHS Gardens at Wisley, who advised us to plant each bulb twelve inches deep – which we did – their origins in Persia got the better of them. Without baking summers they slowly dwindled over the years. Other bulbs, though, were a triumph. There was something touching about finding fritillaries with their fragile stems thrusting through the tussocks every year. Others too were survivors, such as the pools of blue *Anemone blanda*, dependable and long-lasting.

Another thing Michael and I discovered was how gardeners are always on the way but never arriving. We couldn't wipe our hands and say, 'Well that's finished!' because it never was. Death, being an inbuilt element to gardening, meant every year was different, but the returning seasons gave us another chance. Gardens are beneficent. So after trying to grow something three times (such as rosemary, *romneya* or magnolia) before accepting defeat, there were the other times when we'd be bamboozled by discovering life in our bay tree struck down one severe winter.

Gardening isn't uphill all the way, but there were few days when I could confidently coast downhill with my hands in the air. 'What shall I do next?' asked the sixteen-year-old Lady Jane Grey of the custodians surrounding her as, blindfolded, she groped towards the block. This was a question I had not infrequently asked myself.

One area Michael and I shared was planting trees: fruit or decorative. We visited Westonbirt Arboretum to make lists and to overcome our ignorance of what full-grown trees looked like. This was a place that would force any gardener to raise their eyes above the flower bed. Although we knew this was a long-term arboreal investment, we had no idea of what

an enjoyable venture we were starting. Planting trees, I reckon, is one of the most satisfying horticultural occupations, knocking messing among the rockery, or with bedding plants in the border, off the calendar.

Before we started, we needed wheelbarrows. Those objects that can rend gardening compatibility apart. Marriages may founder as each person tries to be the first to find the empty one. As tree planting needed a collection of equipment transported about our land, we increased our two wheelbarrows to four. The excavated earth needed one, the disinterred stones needed another; there were stakes, compost, a fork, a spade, an axe, a hammer as well as several watering cans to be carried across the hummocky ground before we started on the pleasurable four-handed business of planting a tree.

The optimism of such an occupation is indisputable: the belief that this small tree will, in the years ahead, seasonally change the outline of the horizon was something to celebrate as we walked home with aching backs. But we couldn't stop there: the following year we planted a small spinney of serious trees.

Our evolving garden led Michael into another unexpected dimension: photography. He used to record our progress by taking photographs which I then stuck in my 'Idiot Book' alongside notes of everything we'd planted, where and when. 'Idiot' because I could never remember the Latin name ('Oh, you mean that pretty blue thing over there?' was my usual response to an erudite garden visitor), nor could we always remember where we had put anything, especially as we were always moving plants about, transplanting roses, shrubs and trees that we'd placed too close together or in the wrong climatic position.

Michael became fascinated by the limitations of the camera's eye. It gave him power to record only the beautiful, leaving anything ugly, diseased or in need of pruning out of the frame. With his tripod spread-legged at some strategic spot when at dawn or twilight the light was particularly enhancing, he would peer through the lens with tireless dedication. He'd always been a patient man, so much so that he was well known by his family and friends for saying, 'I never knew it was so late!' when he arrived breathless for a meal with others who were far from forbearing about his mistiming.

In the garden his perseverance to immortalise a particular moment of light dissolving the colour of petals was inspired. Twelve pages of his photographs appeared in *The World of Interiors* with a double-page, slightly out-of-focus view of our pond at dusk, impressionistic and transitory. This catapulted him into more work, and had he lived longer he would have been on the threshold of discovering how, at whatever age, a whole new occupation can open up.

Besides having patience, Michael had the insight to understand my need for periodic solitude. This is not a charming affliction: it's tiresome and selfish, and for those who aren't sufferers it appears as self-centred indulgence – a debility that never afflicted him. For me a need to walk from empty room to empty room was at times an imperative as natural as breathing. A few hours would do. All it needed was Michael and the children to go off to do the shopping, and like a dry well I found myself filling up until I anticipated their return with serenity.

Now, from this distance, I think how fortunate Michael was. To die when he was on the way is surely better than after

a protracted decline? His photographs commemorate those years together working in the garden when more than half of them appeared in *A Gentle Plea for Chaos*.

His years on the stage are gone for ever, but not this legacy.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*A Gentle Plea for Chaos*

*A Breath from Elsewhere*

*A Spoon for Every Course*

*In the Eye of the Garden*

*The Secret Gardens of France*

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Mirabel Osler is the critically acclaimed author of
*A Breath from Elsewhere*, *A Spoon for Every Course*,
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Rain tree illustration by Frances Carlile

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