

Connor McMullen – A Gardener’s Adventure

By Anthony Lovat

Some people adore their jobs. They worship their workplace so much that they leave no time to enjoy a life away from their career. They define themselves through their occupation and, in doing so, find respect, prestige and, ultimately, enjoyment. They take pleasure in their employment and jump out of bed in the mornings to get straight to it. Connor McMullen wasn’t one of these people. He had worked in an office in Reading for the last fifteen years. It was a nice office with a free coffee machine that made good coffee. He had a flat-screen computer and a good view across the open plan office to Debbie who worked on accounts, wore tight little tops and looked a bit like Kirsten Dunst. He went for a pint after work every so often with his mate, Darren the security guard and everyone was looking forward to the Office Christmas Party despite the fact that it was early May. All things considered, it could have been worse. It paid the bills but was never anything that Connor felt able to get excited about. At five o’clock, he would turn off his computer, leave his desk and walk down to Reading railway station to stand on the busy commuter route to Didcot. From there it would be a fifteen-minute brisk walk to his modest semi-detached house. After pulling on some jeans, he would put the kettle on, help himself to two biscuits and eat one, wait for the kettle to finish boiling and then enjoy the other with his tea. He would open the back door and stand on his decking to look at the garden.

You see Connor defined himself through his garden. It was a good size and was divided by a line of short fruit trees and shrubs. They went across the garden half way down so that, before the divide, he had a tidy area of lawn and beds that he had planted up with fuchsias, alliums, campanulas, hardy geraniums and lilies. He was trying to train three clematis plants up some string to get to the trellis he had put up last summer although they didn’t seem to be doing too well. Connor suspected the area next to the fence didn’t get enough sun for them. He had built up some raised beds and had a small vegetable patch for some runner beans. An old, recently re-painted greenhouse was up near the main building with some tender young bedding plants being nursed for hanging baskets and some tomato plants. One edge of the garden had a seven-foot red brick wall that was coated in ivy. Connor had nailed up a bird box two years ago and was as popular with the birds as a fart in a lift. He blamed the bloody cats. A path led down the middle of the lawn to a small gap in the divide.

Beyond this an untamed secluded area sloped down steeply. At the bottom of the incline, two large beech trees created a roof on this hidden garden like a giant tent. Connor kept his compost down here and had an area for a bonfire. The garden ended with a tall ancient hedge composed of hawthorn and holly. This area was his hideout - cool on a hot day, rarely frosting and offering shelter on a rainy day. There were always jobs to be done. The never-ending cycle of weeding, mulching, planting and pruning had to be done before the building, digging, moving and making. Connor would sigh. It was hard work but it was here that he found respect, prestige and, undoubtedly, enjoyment. The only problem was that Connor was as good at gardening as a lemming is as good at flying. They both have dreams but the plans always fall through in the execution. The clematis was dying because it was planted in an inch of soil above a concrete fence post and didn't have enough water. The raised beds were bulging out because the retaining walls weren't built on proper foundations. The lilies were already half eaten by the slugs. The greenhouse was painted but the roof looked likely to fall in any moment on top of his dying bedding plants. He'd optimistically planted a rose five years ago and had added lots of nitrates and no potash, not understanding why it produced such poor flowers but so many bloody leaves. The lawn had as much moss as it did grass and the runner beans didn't run very quickly. No wonder the birds didn't want to move in. Connor, however, saw past all this and truly loved his little realm. He would plan his work with wall charts and graphs. He had kept a diary of the garden's progress over the past sixteen years and would often go back and reminisce happily. This little plot of English soil was a very special place and he loved the cut and thrust of the secateurs as much as a workaholic loves the cut and thrust of a business meeting.

It was a long warm May evening that Connor spotted something different. It was tall, about three feet high, spiky with a single woody stem. It had red and green heart shaped leaves and an enormous green fruit hanging from the top. This fruit was so gigantic that the weight of it pulled the entire plant over so that it was hanging like a chubby hangman on a scaffold. There were light bands going down the fruit from the stalk to the base around the rude bulbous shape. Connor had never seen anything like it before and he was sure it wasn't there yesterday but he decided to leave it. There was plenty more work to be done. It didn't get dark until late now but Connor had a fluorescent strip light set up above the back door and a head torch like a miner so he could keep toiling into the twilight. The following day, the fruit was bigger and

had changed to a bright orange colour. It was drooping so low now that it was almost touching the ground. Connor noticed that all the flowers in the bed were facing this intense fruit as if it was giving out a brilliant radiance. Connor was amazed he hadn't noticed this plant before. It looked as if it was well established and surely must have flowered before it had fruited. How did he miss it? The next day it was gigantic: the size of a watermelon in a dazzling scarlet. It dominated the bed and the entire garden seemed focussed on this bizarre and wonderful creation. Connor tentatively kneeled down next to this fruiting plant and gave it the sort of poke you give a plate when you're not sure if it's hot. The fruit was thinly covered in a soft downy fur and had a springy skin that gave easily to the touch. Clouds had been building overhead and the wind had dropped. Connor shivered and was about to turn back indoors when he saw the fruit was growing. It was throbbing and pulsating like a heartbeat and most definitely expanding right before his eyes. Connor stood up and took a step backwards. He felt the first drops of rain trickle down the back of his neck. What was this thing? It was four feet across now and looked like a titanic crimson dog breathing deeply and ever more severely. Connor ran indoors under the pretext of getting his camera so he was turned away from the window when he saw the flare from a crack of thunder behind him light up the room and started to hear the inevitable downpour. Creeping back outside with the camera revealed nothing. No fruit. No odd looking plant. The garden looking as it always had. The rain was cascading down the roof of the greenhouse and hammering on the lawn. Connor pulled the camera under his sweater to prevent it from getting damaged, kneeled back down at the bed and noticed a ring getting pounded by the hefty raindrops. It was a simple gold ring with a single small round green stone. He stood up and looked around. No one could have got in and out of the garden in such short a time. Connor plucked the ring from the soil and brought it back inside out of the torrent. Turning on the kitchen light, he turned it over several times, holding it gently in his wet hands like an injured bird. There was a knotted pattern and some detail around the clasp. Running his dirty fingernail over the clasp, the emerald lifted to reveal a tiny cavity and a petite engraving which read in four clear letters: SOIL. How odd. "Where the bloody hell did this thing come from?" Connor exclaimed out loud. There was no answer so he took the ring outside, took a grain of damp mud from one of the raised beds and carefully placed it into the miniscule cavity beneath the stone. Slipping the ring on his finger, Connor went back inside, muttering to himself and turning the puzzle over in his mind.

Connor felt a little stiff the next morning when he looked at the clock and saw he had twenty minutes to be at the station. He needed to run for the train but thankfully made it with a few minutes to spare. He had to stand again but didn't feel tired. He felt good as he got to work and had done more by eleven than he normally did by lunchtime. He glanced up from the computer screen to catch Debbie looking at him with an intense, guilty look. She quickly looked down and fussed with her desk tidy. Glowing inside, Connor acted casual and turned back to his screen. Connor and Darren always had lunch together to discuss football, politics or Darren's kids. On this particular afternoon, Connor had three helpings of the cottage pie and two of the crumble and custard.

"What's wrong with you, Man?" Darren asked.

"What d'you mean?"

"Why you scoffing so much grub?"

"Dunno, just feel hungry." replied Connor, hiding the ring.

"You don't look so well, mate. You sure you're not coming down with something? You look a bit green about the gills."

"Never felt better!" and it was true. Connor hadn't felt so fit for years. It only took him ten minutes from Didcot station up to his house. The weather had really cleared up and the fresh spring sunshine smelled fine. He put the kettle on, took four biscuits from the tin, made tea, took another two biscuits and stepped out of the back door.

Connor dropped his tea, scattered his biscuits and sat down on the decking. This was definitely his garden. There was the greenhouse and there was the clematis and the raised bed and the fruit trees. There was the bird box and the vegetable patch. There were the fuchsias and lilies and ivy. There it all was but... it was as if an angel had kissed it. Eden's garden could not have looked so fine. The scent of early roses filled Connor's nostrils. His eyes were bombarded by colour: rich reds, yellows, violets, oranges and pinks. There were fifty shades of green from pale yellowy green to lush deep dark dank green. His ears were filled with the birdsong of the sparrows, starlings, robins, blackbirds and finches in the trees. The lawn was a golden green carpet surrounded by faultless abundant beds of luxuriant shades.

Connor remembered to breathe at this point and grabbed his camera to photograph the perfection around him. He snapped the vegetables, the beds, the lawn, and the birds. He did close ups and panoramic shots. In both the upper and the

secluded part of the garden he photographed the ultimate display of man and nature in harmony. After twenty minutes or so, he sat on the lawn and breathed the thick air in deeply. He looked down at the ring he was still wearing and the stone appeared to glisten and wink at him. Running his fingernail beside the clasp, he opened the cavity to find that the soil had disappeared like smoke in the wind.

Connor didn't panic at first when he found he couldn't get up. It took a while to realise what was happening but his stomach turned when he found he was stuck to the lawn. It was like someone had super glued his bum to the ground. Horrified, he struggled forwards and back and eventually found he could wrench himself free by rolling on the ground revealing a muddy patch where the turf had been lifted and was now stuck to the seat of his trousers. Connor jumped up and ran inside. He felt a desperate need for a shower and stripped as he continued running breathless up the stairs. Connor had a large mirror in his bathroom that he turned to face with some dread. From around the shower cubicle he could clearly see that his skin had turned a pale shade of green. His mouth dropped open when he saw there were leaves growing out of his dark hair. These weren't, you understand, leaves that had dropped into his hair and were sticking out. These leaves were attached by the stalk, directly to Connor's scalp. With a gurgle of shock, Connor ripped off the emerald ring and threw it onto the floor. It flashed, smiled and twinkled up at him. Connor jumped into the shower and desperately scrubbed his whole body hard with soap and a flannel. He delicately plucked the leaves from his head and gingerly stepped out. There appeared to be an improvement. He certainly didn't seem so green. Contented that he was on the mend, Connor hurriedly grabbed the ring and stuffed it into the cupboard above the toilet, out of sight. He looked again out of the window and the garden was still there in all its glory.

Connor had an expensive digital camera that connects to the computer so you can see your photographs up on the screen. After pouring himself a generous whiskey, Connor plugged in the USB cable and, before long, was scrolling through the marvellous sights he had seen through the lens. These images soothed his mind and, with the help of the smooth drink, the immediate terror of a few minutes before gradually melted. He e-mailed the photographs off to his friend, Jeremy, who worked at the local garden centre and he hadn't seen in a couple of years. He attached the following message:

“Hi Jeremy. Long time no see. Hope the missus is well. What do you make of these pictures of my garden? See you. Connor McMullen.”

It was an agitated night’s sleep dreaming of a conversation with an impolite marigold.

“Have you been going to the gym?” Darren asked the following day. “You’re looking... I don’t know... fitter.”

“Cheers mate.” Connor replied somewhat suspiciously. “I guess it’s the gardening. I’ll have to show you some photos.”

“Not your bloody garden, mate. You waste too much time on that stupid patch of earth.” A flicker in Connor’s eyes told Darren there was something up. “Go on then. Let’s see them.” Connor led Darren back to his computer and opened the photo folder. “Bloody hell mate. You have been a busy bee. Have you shown anyone else these?”

“Only Jeremy from the Jenkins Garden Centre.” Connor replied trying to hide his satisfaction at having impressed Darren. “I haven’t checked my e mails to see if he’s replied yet.”

“Check them now, son. Check them now.”

Sure enough, there was an e-mail sent at 9:13am from Jeremy Wheeler. Connor double-clicked:

“Dear Connor,

What have you done to your garden!? I see pictures of gardens every day of my working life. I see customer gardens, exhibition gardens, gardens that have an army of professionals working on them and I have not seen a garden as perfect as yours! It’s magical, Connor! You are a green-fingered individual indeed! Listen, I know this is sudden but I showed your pictures to the boss here, Mr Jenkins, and he’d like to bring a small select group of our most valued customers around to view your garden and to give them ideas about what to buy in our centre. It’ll involve you just putting up a little sign with our ‘Jenkins’ logo. He has, of course, offered a financial incentive. He has asked me to propose £1000 up front plus 10% of any profits we make on the evening? Not much money compared to how much work you’ve put in I suppose! You really have done an extraordinary job and I can’t wait

to see it in the flesh so to speak. Give us a ring here at the centre and we'll arrange a meeting to see your masterpiece!

Kind regards, Jeremy.

P.S. Good to hear from you. I've been meaning to drop you a line for a while. Liz is fine thanks. Working hard as usual."

"You've obviously impressed old Mr. Jenkins." Darren added.

Things progressed quickly. Jeremy Wheeler and Mr. Jenkins came by Connor's house the following evening and gushed all over place. Connor was finding it hard not to appear smug but accepted their congratulations, their praise and Mr Jenkins's £1000 cheque up front. The open garden evening was a roaring success. The garden centre spared no expense with champagne on the lawn, a string quartet on the decking and twenty or so of Didcot's most high-priced garden-loving couples. They oozed enthusiasm as they examined every nook and cranny, every campanula and hebe, every water feature and wisteria. At every turn there were people eager to shake Connor's hand, to ask him questions and to offer their wholehearted congratulations on his hard work and brilliant skill. After three hours they had ordered thousands of pounds worth of goods from Jeremy and were making their way happily home.

It was towards the end of the evening that a elderly gentleman with an impressive white moustache, a tweed jacket and a rakish twinkle in his deep eyes approached Connor, put down his champagne, and made the offer that Connor couldn't refuse.

"I say, old boy. I know talent when I see it and your fingers are greener than an eighteen-year-old officer. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rupert Manning. Have you ever been to the Chelsea Flower Show?"

Now, for those of you who haven't a background in gardening, The Chelsea Flower Show is the Mecca for gardeners. It is where the planet's finest horticultural minds convene on West London for the greatest display of gardens in the world. Visitors arrive from America, the Middle East, Australia, Japan, and South East Asia. There are traditional English displays, Japanese displays, Mediterranean, contemporary, romantic, new age and post-modern displays. Gardens are judged on impact, originality, balance, scale, innovation, invention and creativity. The judges look for outstanding design, colour, texture, quality and finish. After more than a hundred judges poke around looking for flaws in your efforts, a garden designer may win the ultimate accolade: The gold medal. As well as this there is the Best Show

Garden Award for what has to be the outstanding garden of the show. The top professional gardeners prepare for up to a year previous to the event and have astronomical budgets.

“I know it’s short notice, old chap, but I happen to have a modest plot at this year’s show. It’s next week you know. The old boy I’ve put in charge to manage the damn display is making a total balls up of the thing. He’s not going to win a sausage! I know it’ll put a few noses out of joint but how would you feel about taking a week holiday to manage my display at Chelsea. I’d pay you £5000 up front and we’ll discuss a bonus when you win us a medal. What do you say?”

Whether it was Rupert’s money or the fact the Connor was drunk on the admiration of the past three hours I don’t know. You see Connor had never been remarkable at anything before. He had resigned himself to his unremarkable life, his unremarkable job and his unremarkable, although precious, garden. He had never experienced before the respect and adulation he was receiving now. Perhaps he believed he could really do it. Whatever the reason, Connor sent an e-mail immediately requesting a week holiday and booked a train to London. He wrapped the ring in three sweaters at the bottom of the bag like an alluring green hibernating animal.

It wasn’t a good start when he met his team. They didn’t like a change in management so late in the preparations and they liked it even less when they realised that Connor was so far out of his depth. The four of them undermined, destabilised and bitched about Connor’s leadership until the display had suffered so badly that when Rupert Manning visited two days before the main event, he couldn’t look Connor in the eye and simply turned on his heels and left. Connor had barely slept since moving to Chelsea. He was at the showground before six every day moving pots, watering and planting. He had a vision of what he wanted to do but after a day or two his confidence had plummeted so low that he’d have been happy just displaying some pansies in a pot. He left the ground at eight every evening and would collapse into a restless agitated sleep where he would dream firstly about being one with the garden and weaving it to obey his every whim and then about having Rupert Manning looking at his pathetic display and willing that garden to open up and swallow him. It was the day before the grand opening that he conceded that he needed help. He slowly unwrapped the three sweaters and slipped the ring onto his left hand.

He found his team smoking cigarettes, sitting on the planted pots and flicking ash into the water feature. Connor felt strong and in control. He slowly walked over and stood above the nearest team member. This was a well-built lad in his early twenties with short-cropped hair and wearing a dirty white vest that displayed his rippling shoulders and biceps. He turned his pierced face up to Connor and exhaled smoke.

“Get the fuck off my display.” Connor gently yet firmly articulated, ignoring the smoke.

The lad slowly raised himself from his perch and stood a foot above Connor. His stonewashed ripped jeans were standing shoulder width apart as he looked down at the forty-year-old office worker below him. Connor met his gaze and felt powerful and dominant.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me.” He said a little louder. “You get the fuck off my display.”

“What if I don’t?” The lad leered back.

With that, Connor stepped forward and with a swift bend of his legs, hoisted the lad up by his belt so that he was holding his full weight at arm’s length above his head. The shock of being heaved up above the ground was so great that the poor lad could only manage a high-pitched babble and an intake of breath before he was unceremoniously dumped onto the tarmac outside the display area.

“Now piss off!” yelled Connor to the retreating gang as they scuttled away.

Connor sat down and looked at his trembling hands and arms. He felt good. He felt incredible. Connor was an unnoticed man and had been an unnoticed boy at school. He’d never had a fight in all his years before today. He could feel his heart pump his life force through his veins as he felt for the clasp of the ring, opened the cavity and inserted an infinitesimal grain of soil from the nearest bed. He shifted a few things around for the rest of the day, drew a few sympathetic looks from his fellow busy competitors, and left at four to sleep like a log.

Connor’s eyes opened at seven. He sat up and looked into the full-length mirror of the hotel room. He had been expecting some sort of a change after what had happened last time so the fear that tingled down his spine as he looked at his reflected image surprised Connor. He was still dressed in short length blue pyjama shorts and a T-shirt top. From underneath the shorts were protruding two thick trunks that each ended with five spindly rootlets. Woody branches had replaced his arms with twigs

for his fingers and his head was coated in a thick mane of leaves. Around one of the left branches, the ring was twinkling amongst the foliage. Connor could see the bark around each of his knees. He could make out a scar he had on his right thigh scratched into the wood. He had grown by four or five inches in the night and it was only when he squatted down that Connor could see, in the full length mirror, a further branch sticking out of the top of his skull with fresh buds. His face was relatively unaffected and Connor found that he could move as freely as ever. The sinewy bark rippled as he flexed his arms and shoulder joints. The luxuriant leaves rustled as he turned to view his behind and saw that there were more pushing their way out of his pyjamas in every direction. There was a knot in the bark on the top of each thigh and he appeared to be depositing pieces of himself all around the hotel room. There were dead leaves on the pillow and pieces of old bark in the sheets. There was even a woodlouse scurrying around the debris looking for a place to hide. Connor prayed the symptoms would go away. How long would it take to get rid of all this? Would it be the same as before? How could he go to the flower show looking like a tree?

The phone rang and it was Rupert Manning. “My boy! So glad you’re up and around. You’re a genius my lad. A bloody genius! Who would have thought anyone could have turned a garden round so quickly and single-handed. You’re the talk of the show my lad. The talk of the bloody show! The woodland theme was a stroke of masterpiece and your choice of Japanese grasses just perfectly offsets the blues, creams and lilacs of the geraniums, *Tellima grandiflora* and foxgloves! The foxgloves!” He gasps for breath at this point. “I’ll never know how you got the *Cornus kousa* to flower so bloody early in this god-awful weather we’ve been having. The slate finish to the water feature is an astonishing contrast between the orderly, industrial edges and the soft organic textures. It’s simply a bloody masterpiece of design! Everyone is discussing it and I dare say there’s one or two here who might have had an attack of the green eyed monster if you know what I mean!”

“That’s very kind sir.” Connor interrupted. “I’m just feeling a little peaky this morning though, sir. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to ...”

“Now you listen here.” The former sergeant major snapped. “I understand you’ve been busy and you must be tired but this is the greatest moment of your life down here. The queen will be here in a few hours and I will accept no excuses. You heave your sorry excuse for a backside down here this instant or I will personally drag you down here myself. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir.”

There was a small crowd around the previously deserted display area. Connor approached cautiously. He was wearing long trousers, trainers, a long sleeved shirt, gloves and a hat despite the weather being very warm. He'd had to stuff the leaves under the hat and his woody toes felt as if they were going to snap off when he heaved on the trainers. Much to Connor's relief, he appeared to have reverted back to near ordinary height and was starting to shed a few leaves already. The ring was wrapped up back in the hotel room.

“Here he is!” Rupert Manning yelled. “Make way!”

The crowd parted to reveal the most incredible display Connor had ever seen. It was beyond even his wildest imagination. It was neither contemporary nor traditional but seemed to borrow the best bits of both. The creamy shades were delicious and the curves of the beds drew the eye towards the magnificent shimmering pool, dotted with lilies. It was imposing and perfect enough to have been created by a god and yet subtle enough to imagine yourself living and working in this as your own garden. Wherever one looked there was more to feast the eye.

Connor tentatively approached the front of the display and into the beaming embrace of an already somewhat tipsy Rupert Manning. “Tip top show, old chap.” He slurred into Connor's ear.

The rest of the day was spent accepting the adoration of the upper echelons of horticultural society. Even the queen's eye appeared to linger on this quite astounding display. There were presentations and conversations. There were people to meet and drink with and a delightful lunch. By late afternoon, Connor was able to remove his hat in a bathroom and pick the last leaf or two out of his hair. No one had noticed his... differences. The gloves hadn't aroused suspicion and the long sleeves might have been to prevent sunburn. Perhaps everyone just saw him as a peculiar eccentric genius. His photograph was officially taken and he was finally presented with a gold medal and the Best Show Garden Award. There were dozens of people to clap him on the back and congratulate this prodigious new gardening talent. The time went by so quickly that Connor barely had a moment to look around his own creation.

It was an hour before closing when a familiar face appeared in the crowd. Debbie seemed smaller than Connor remembered although just as beautiful.

“Hello Connor McMullen.” Debbie looked at him with her big blue eyes. “You’re quite the celebrity in these parts. My mum has been watching you on the telly and can’t believe I work with you. I love your garden.”

“Thanks.”

I’m not sure if Connor felt that powerful life force in his veins at this point, whether his confidence had found a new level through the steady praise and unyielding positive attention throughout the day or whether he just fancied Debbie more than he’d fancied anyone else before. Whatever the reason, he did something he’d never done before.

“Would you like to come round my place sometime to see my garden?”

“That would be nice.” She replied.

It would have been a beautiful moment if an inebriated Rupert Manning hadn’t stumbled into the scene.

“My jolly chap.” He garbled. “The queen is a fine woman. She recognises quality when she sees it. She’s commissioning a new garden in the grounds of Windsor Castle and only wants you to sort the whole jolly business out for her. How’s that for a top job? Jolly well done old boy! This is an old mucker of mine who runs these sorts of things over at the castle now: Major Ingham-Jones. He simply adores your work and can’t wait to start.”

Connor looked at the drunken old man, shook the Major’s hand and turned to see Debbie looking admiringly at him. “Oh Connor, you must be so pleased! Imagine going out with someone who works for the queen!” She flutters.

If you every visit Windsor Castle, be sure to visit the beautiful jubilee garden between St George's Gate and the main gates of the public entrance. It is immediately between the castle walls and the town. In the centre of this garden is a bandstand and to one side is an unimpressive shrub about seven feet tall. It never flowers but is covered in a thick bushy mane of leaves. It’s an unusual shrub in that it has two main trunks coming up from the ground and two long boughs sticking out of the side. It has pale green coloured leaves with a small cut in one of the trunks. If you push back some of the upper leaves, you’ll find that a stubby top branch has, what appear to be, two clear indentations side by side. Within those two notches you will, particularly on a sunny day, see two small bright emeralds shining like eyes looking out onto a handsome new garden.