



IN PRAISE *of* UNDERGROWTH

One summer I sat under a tree on a rundown pavement just outside the old city of Dubrovnik and cried. I was sitting on the kerb of the road, resting my chin on my knees, waiting for somebody outside a small car rental agency. The road wound up a steep hillside full of double-parked cars and large swathes of lazily hanging pink bougainvillea. My eyes idly surveyed my surroundings, scanning without seeing. They came to rest on a strange object at the foot of the tree next to me. A full minute passed before I registered what it was: a mushroom.

Slowly, as if waking from a dream, my vision became clearer, my eyes and thoughts focused: what had been a blob of background suddenly rendered itself sharply into individual parts. I realised the grass was not a green carpet, but was in fact made up of individual stalks of different sizes, some light, soft and delicate, others strong with large, dark, tough blades. The earth was a graveyard of twigs and skeletal rattling brown leaves, exposed roots and small wildflowers. The lenses of my eyes focused for detail, drinking everything in. Cicadas whirred in the background, and my eyes found themselves following a silvery snail trail at my feet: something so ordinary, yet, to me, somehow miraculous.

At the time, you see, I lived in Dubai. My beloved UAE, a country of towering skyscrapers and gleaming shopping malls. Bigger, better, newer, stronger. Six-lane highways spear their way through the city as cars hurtle down them, shiny blurs of polished metal glinting in the desert sun like futuristic racers, *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element* all rolled into one. Landscaped gardens line the roads, messages like 'Welcome to Dubai' and 'Smile, You're in Sharjah' spelt out in fluffy white and pink blooms while date palms and acacia trees line squares of carefully manicured grass and hedges comprising small pink and red flowers.

In Summer the night sky is heavy with water and the scent of frangipani. Well, sometimes it is. More often, it is laced with an almost indescribable semi-rotten smell of over-ripe fruit, of the organic smells and processes of a hot summer night. In date season the palms shed their heavy loads, giant bunches of fruit rotting slowly in the sun, a feast for passing birds and the ubiquitous ant as they turn from yellow to red and, finally, brown. The sound in the air is breathless, heavy, pregnant, a sound just beyond the edges of hearing, as though all the world were waiting for something – a breeze, a gust of wind, relief from the stifling heaviness of condensation and humidity. For a desert, it feels like a restless, looming jungle at these times.

And yet, all of this carefully fostered vegetation, constantly tended and watered in the middle of this vast desert, amongst the towers of glass and steel and expensive muscle cars, lacks one thing: undergrowth. Dubai is a city flayed bare, the earth beneath each tree plucked of the smallest weed, epilated. An entire army of gardeners is employed; hundreds of thousands of South Asian men earn a living thanks to the UAE's aversion to natural vegetation. Is there a leaf lying on the sand? Rake it. Are the flowers drooping? Replace them. Is the hedge leaning over too much? Cut it back, cut it till the roots show and the branches are bare. Is there a blade of grass in the area designated for flowers? Pull it. In fact, never do tree root and grass meet; trunks and stems grow out of bare, yellow sand. It is plant apartheid.

Fortunes are spent on fertiliser, yet errant flowers are swept out of sight and eager gardening hands ensure that the arid yellow sandy bed is never hidden from view by unsightly leaves growing too low or a bush daring to sprawl out of shape. While animal

menageries have not quite caught on there, rest assured that every row of hedges is trimmed into geometrical shapes, with large holes in the foliage often providing a view of the bare branches beneath, befuddled birds peering out of the gaps, entire rows of hedges resembling bald sheep.

The strange thing about this phenomenon is how hard it is to notice: it surrounds you, yet is not immediately evident. You live and work in Dubai, your brain tells you that it is green, that there are plants, but on some primitive level, something bypasses the eyes and goes straight to the brain, a blinking warning light telling you something is not right. It can take years to put your finger on it, for those more in tune with nature, it only takes days, but the end result is the same: why does all the greenery look artificial? Then it hits you and it all clicks into place: there is no undergrowth! You live in a Lego city amongst plants that might as well be plastic, an entire ecosystem struggling against the laws of the desert, a land of Radiohead's *Fake Plastic Trees*.

One can only ponder as to why a natural vegetative layer isn't allowed to grow, or organic humus allowed to develop on flowerbeds. Why, after 30 years, flower beds still look as though they had been planted yesterday. For the average gardener, if a plant looks sick, the solution is to replace it with a new one as fast as possible. I guess appearances are important, and a neat flower display goes with the neat new cars and the shiny new buildings. Which is a shame, because there is plenty of old, atmospheric Dubai around too. You want to scream out: "Whoa, slow down, breathe, nurture, caress!"

But no. Plants, like mobile phones and the latest fad, are interchangeable, passing and subject to fashion. Vegetation is not an organic living thing, to be coaxed and nourished, but an accessory to be kept neat and clean. Gardeners are under orders to keep flowerbeds that way, and most gardeners are not gardeners, either, but potters, metal-workers or even hairdressers back in their native countries – they are here trying to make a living. Cutting down a tree to save on raking leaves seems the most common approach to urban maintenance.

This rather unique characteristic of Dubai has led to some strange behaviour from expatriate residents travelling home to pastures greener. Heads turn upwards to marvel at the leaves in trees (So dark! So full! So numerous!). The way in which branches gently bend in the breeze becomes an almost endless source of fascination. Families and friends become concerned as the plant-hell-escapee closes his eyes in rapture to take in the soft hissing of rustling foliage in the wind. A gust of wind whipping through a thick copse of trees, shaking them like daisies, sends him into ecstasy. Green, and the many shades of green, so immensely abundant, become soothing sights for sore, desert-blasted eyes. It is no coincidence that the favourite destination of the UAE resident – both local and expatriate alike – is Switzerland. In locations like this, the concept of cicadas or grasshoppers seems incomprehensibly miraculous. Deep shades of green replace desiccated palm trees; oaks, firs, and cypresses stand in place of those never-ending highways and their speeding, sun-heated cars, like so many beetles in the sun. Life feels like it is slower, as you can (so very literally) stop and smell the flowers.

And so one summer in Croatia, my eyes lazily followed a winding snail trail of silvery threads on the pavement at my feet. They alighted upon a tuft of rebel grass, hopped up towards the lazy embracing arms of the tree above me, and let me close them as I leaned back and listened to the sound of the wind in the leaves. I sat there on the kerb, smiled a smile of sweet relief, and I cried.