

Up from Woolridge Cross – September

For the first year anyone can remember, the Discovery tree is dangling with fruit. The flattish rosy apples hang from the tips of the branches, bowing them down to meet the grass and weeds that have sprung up through 3 weeks without mowing. The wasps have already started mining them.

Another surprise is the rediscovery of the little cyclamen that my mother (and her mother) loved. The corms survive for decades. These ones were planted thirty years ago, beneath the nameless cider-apple tree on the grass ledge behind the house. The apples were mostly too small to bother to peel and cook, but their red-tinged flesh had a nice fluffy texture if one took the trouble. In September the ground beneath the tree was a mix of crimson windfalls and the slightly violet-pink of the cyclamen.

This tree died long ago, but Mum left its trunk standing for the sake of the washing line, slung between it and the hedge. However, in recent years the grass ledge became so overgrown, with hazel and hawthorn reaching low across it, that we ceased even to mow it. So I had forgotten the cyclamen till now.

With the hedge cut back last winter, the mower has been along a couple of times, - and now suddenly there's a fleet of delicate flower-heads, each perched on its stem as if ready to spring into flight. And by wrenching out the big periwinkle that had rooted around the stump, I have found a small legion more, including a group of pure white ones. They presumably continued to flower each Sept., in secret beneath the periwinkle canopy.

I have an idea that these cyclamen may be the very ones that were my grandmother's pride and joy. I remember seeing the corms lifted once – they seemed as large as plates – and I believe my uncle Pat gave some to Mum when she moved here, some years after Granny's death. In my childhood they surrounded the immense elm-tree that towered over my grandparents' house.

I can just remember seeing the elm felled. I must have been no more than four or five years old, staying alone with my grandparents when my parents were away. It was spring, and the tree had been discovered to be riddled with disease (this was long before the Dutch Elm Disease altered our countryside for good). It was pronounced too dangerous to leave standing, so near the house. So they came and sawed it through, and Granny and I stood on the balcony and watched.

They felled in one go – not as we would probably do it now, with men up the tree dropping it limb by limb. Perhaps that was simply thought too risky. I think I remember some kind of steam driven engine, parked away on the grass, and I wonder now whether they had roped the tree so as to pull it over, once it was cut part-way through. I can't imagine how they got a saw through the trunk, which was a good four foot across. What I do recall was the great elm toppling, and the way the lower branches snapped off as they hit the grass and seemed to bound up through the falling tree. Afterwards we went down, as the men started to dismember it, and I saw the great limbs pouring and pouring clear sap. It seemed as if the cuts wept.

My grandparents grieved at losing the tree, and my grandfather arranged to have some of it seasoned, and elm boards put aside for his coffin. (Incongruously, perhaps, I have an offcut of one of them in use as a breadboard.) Elm was often used for coffins, it's said, because it doesn't easily rot. For years and years afterwards the elm's roots sent up new saplings for and wide – even through the cobbled floor of one of the outhouses – in a desperate attempt to perpetuate the tree. As for the cyclamen – that autumn they flowered as never before. *Frances*
