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The Red Book

by Lawrence Howard

Although my parents enjoyed walking around country houses, when we were children my sister and I weren't so keen. I remember how dull it was being shown round by an elderly volunteer at a National Trust site to hear things that to a child held no interest. As a young boy I wanted to be with my friends, riding our bikes through muddy woods and causing general mayhem. Because of this, when they had the annual 'open garden' week in my road to raise money for the Neighbourhood Watch, I felt I was reliving the 'National Trust' scenario.

It was on one of these occasions that I was stuck on a warm day looking at neighbours boring gardens when something happened that changed my life. This particular garden belonged to the Curtis's at number 26. He was a retired headmaster from a private school and enjoyed the sound of his own voice a bit too much. He probably loved doing the school assembly and clearly missed his daily ritual.

Having been ushered around his large garden with many other people, we then went into his old, generously proportioned detached house where he wanted to relive the school assembly days and bore us with more information. On this occasion he'd put together a slide show with a projector to show us before and after photos of the work he'd done.

It was a summers day and the thought of being stuck inside for eternity while he relived the transformation of his garden seemed too much, so I left them to it, while I explored a highly cultivated garden not really designed for children.

Outside, the garden was deserted except for a red book, which lay sunning itself upon the gravel path. It was quite an old book, a bit worn around the edges, but I decided to pick it up and have a look.

Inside everything was hand written in block capitals. It was difficult to read because it seemed to be in a strange language. The starting sentence was as follows:

IBWF ZPV XPSLFE PVU VIF TFDSFU?

I couldn't work out the language and therefore assumed it was in code. Having played with a few ideas I suddenly worked it out. The correct letter was the previous one in the alphabet. It actually said:

HI AB VW EF YZ OP UV WX OP RS KL EF DE OP UV TU TV HI EF
ST EF CD RS EF TU?

I was mesmerised trying decode what this book was all about. Why would someone go to such length to conceal what was written?

Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder and a stern mans voice said “Can you give me that book please?”. I looked around and saw a man looking very angry. For some reason my immediate reaction was to run with the book. “Come here – NOW!” shouted the man. Clearly he desperately wanted it back, but I was determined to uncover, what I later discovered, was its shocking secret.