

The Mothership

Al couldn't spot one free seat in the whole pub garden. It was Friday afternoon on a lovely July day. With the bank holiday weekend, it felt like Christmas but with better weather and less stress.

'So, it's going to be like Meet the Parents?' Kevin asked.

Al thought for a moment. 'More like Meet the Parents One at a Time, with the divorce,' he said. 'Ana's going to stay with me and Dad. Then, I'll take her to see Mum and Bob on Sunday.'

'A fun weekend for you then?'

'No reason why not – I think,' said Al. 'Dad's finishing work early to get the house presentable. And they should get on all right – except Mum and Dad, of course. It would be good if it went well. It really would.' Al nodded to himself and remembered his drink.

'How's your dad doing?' asked Kevin.

'All right. Still working too much. And there's lots to do with the new house. He's still into the garden. Sorry, Kev, I've got to take this – it's him.'

Al jumped up and headed towards the road to get away from the crowd, but just hit more noise from the traffic. So, it was one of those shouty calls.

'That was quick,' said Kevin.

'He sounds panicky. I'd better go back. Do want to come?'

The pub was on a corner of a junction, where the commercial

part of town turned residential and then continued to the suburbs. That's where Al's dad had his new place; a 1950s two-bedroom semi. A downsize from the old family home, but all he could afford after the split. As they walked and talked, the streets were starting to fill up with rush-hour traffic.

'What's up with him?' asked Kevin.

'My mum calls it "weed psychosis".'

'I thought he was more a couple-of-pints-after-work man.'

'No, it's his new lawn - the weeds - they're driving him mad. It comes and goes, but he sounded bad on the phone. He dreams about them - or rather he dreams about "it".'

'It?' asked Kevin.

'Yes, the "Mothership", he calls it. He thinks there's one weed spawning all the others and he just needs to find it. Like on Alien, he says.'

'Yes, but the monster in Alien is the mother, not the mothership.'

'You're right. He does like that film, but yeah, he got that wrong.'

'It might be part of the psychosis.'

'Quite possibly.'

As Al and Kevin went through the side gate to get to the back garden, they heard a loud 'Bloody Hell'.

The gate creaked open and slammed shut, but Al's dad didn't turn around. He was kneeling, crouched over, with his back to them, stabbing at the ground with a garden hand fork.

'Bloody Hell!'

'I'm not sure that's how you're supposed to use one of those, Dad,' Al shouted over.

'They wouldn't let him on Gardener's Question Time,' whispered Kev.

'Can we come over, Dad?' Al shouted.

'Yes, just don't go near the mole-hill bits.'

The lawn was small, square and mostly green, although it didn't have much grass. Weeds covered most of it. Dotted all over, were little holes with piles of dark soil next to them. The largest version was almost dead centre. The garden looked like a model of the pyramids at Giza.

'Oh, hello there, Kevin. Do you know anything about weeds, lad? This one's not much help.'

'Not really, Mr P. No. Have you tried Google?'

'Sod Google - it's a JCB I need.' He scanned the four points of the garden. 'To find the source,' he muttered.

'Can't you use weed-killer?' Kevin asked.

'I never have, and I probably never will,' he said, lowering his head. 'That's due to twenty-eight years of living with Al's mum. She's a hippy. No toxins on any living thing.' He held out a handful of what looked like rocket or dandelion. 'She'd probably want these little bastards buried at sea on a burning raft.'

'Are you sure those are weeds, Mr P?' asked Kevin.

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After dinner Ana and Al went down the pub. When Kevin arrived, Ana had her head down, a finger in one ear and purple hair falling about her face.

'She likes phoning a friend to ask about stuff,' Al explained. 'This one's a marriage counsellor.'

After introductions and drinks-buying, Ana delivered the report.

'Beatriz says it sounds like transference. Your dad's transferring his anger with your mum onto the weeds in the garden. That's the mothership thing. You need to sort out the problem in the garden before he can move on.'

'So, you just need to dig up the garden,' said Kevin. 'Like your dad said, get a JCB.'

'Yes, but there's going to be nothing down there,' said Al.

'I don't think that matters too much,' said Ana. 'Beatriz said it's just about getting the rock off his back.'

'Or getting the Mothership out from under the garden,' said Kevin.

Al looked at Ana. 'We're going to need some help.'

'I could make some calls,' said Ana, smiling sweetly.

When Al and Ana got back after their drinking and planning, Mr P. was still up. They tried their pitch.

'I don't like it,' Mr P said. 'I don't want people round here with metal detectors or scanners or diggers. I can do it. Or me and you, Al. And Kevin. And Ana, too, if she wants to join in.' He smiled at Ana.

There was an enormous cracking sound and the windows lit up in two white flashes, like car headlamps going on and off. Then came loud booms of thunder. Raindrops started battering the window, sounding more like hail. The perfect July day had turned into a perfect summer storm.

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Al woke mid-morning. He pulled back a curtain. The windows were all steamed up. Ana stirred as he rubbed a hole to see out. The storm had blown through, leaving a sky of half-cloud, half-blue. Something below caught Al's eye.

'Oh God, Ana. You've got to see this.' He helped her up.

They knelt on the bed, with their elbows resting on the windowsill. Al opened the window to get a better look.

'Madre m'a,' said Ana.

They got dressed and ran downstairs. The French windows in the dining room were wide open. Al's dad was sitting on a chair facing the garden, not moving. The sunlight was streaming in. Al sat next to his dad and Ana stood behind them.

Maybe it was a trick of the light; a northern European version of a morning heat haze. A warmish vapour - if not quite tropical steaminess - clouded what should have been a clear view onto the garden. Perhaps there was something about the angle of the sun or the way the rays fell through the tree canopy bordering the garden that lit the whole place up in that strange way. Or maybe it was the reflections glimmering in the rainwater-filled holes that seemed to double the number and size of the weeds. Or perhaps it was too much booze the night before. But the lawn seemed to have been transformed into a tropical jungle.

There were more and bigger weeds, and also some were either floating or growing in the puddles. It was still mostly green, but there seemed to be other richer tinges of colour; orange, red and yellow.

'What's that smell?' asked Al.

'Mango?' suggested Ana.

'I had mango chutney with the curry last night,' said Mr P. He sounded tired. He folded his arms. 'You can get your people round. Whatever.'

Al nodded to Ana, and she went upstairs for her phone.

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By mid-afternoon Kevin's pal was splashing back and forth over the lawn with his metal detector, like he was trying to cut the weeds with a strimmer. There were questions about why a metal detector was a good idea, but it seemed to be moving things in the right direction at least.

'Why the headphones?' asked Mr P.

'He's listening for the seven sounds,' said Kevin. 'The seven sounds of Hell.' Nobody laughed.

'Who's next if the sappers don't find anything?' asked Mr P.

'It's my friends, the archaeologists,' Ana said as enthusiastically as possible. 'They're quite keen to have a go since we're so near to the ancient stuff.'

Kevin's pal took his headphones off and shook his head. 'All that rainwater helps the signal, but no, nothing much.'

Ana's archaeologists arrived with their Ground Penetrating Radar scanner. It looked like a trundly old lawnmower and kept getting stuck in the potholes.

'You're going to need bigger wheels,' shouted Kevin.

They went in decreasing circles towards the centre, navigating the terrain as best they could. Two people were pushing it while watching the readout on a little screen. The third guy, the Professor, shook his head. No one felt like asking why. When they finally got to the centre, where the biggest hole full of water was, they went around a few times. They had a brief inaudible chat. The Professor smiled approvingly. The tension was mounting. Everyone came out to hear the news.

'Yes, we think there could be something down there. It's a bit blurry but it looks like an octopus, if that helps.'

'Yes! I knew it.' Mr P. punched the air.

The archaeologists took off their muddy shoes and went in to join Kevin's pal for takeaway pizza.

'What's next?' asked Mr P, rubbing his hands.

'We're waiting to hear from the botanists. Ana sent out some photos.'

After beer, pizza, coffee and much playing with phones all round, Ana finally said,

'I've got some news from my friend in Cardiff – they think it's a ... I can't pronounce that. They think it's from Borneo.' She continued reading from her phone, translating from Spanish. 'They say it probably escaped from someone's collection.'

'Can plants escape?' asked Kevin.

'They say, kill the roots. Dig it up. Get the roots and it should go.'

'Kill the octopus,' said Kevin.

Al put his hands on his hips. 'To the final stage, then. The digger.' Ana, Al and Kevin looked at each other.

'What's the problem?' asked Mr P. 'We've got a digger, right?'

'Yes, we can get one round here tomorrow,' said Al. 'The bad news is, Dad, our person with the mini digger is Bob.'

'Which Bob?' asked Mr P. 'Oh, no.'

On Sunday afternoon, Bob sent round his digger and two of his workers. Mr P. left loads of food and drink on the dining room table, then went out 'for a walk'. Everyone from the day before turned up. The digger hammered away until it didn't look like a garden anymore. It was noisy and not much fun to watch. An hour later there was a massive hole in the garden. The digger had scooped up a pale-brown root that did actually look like an octopus; especially as it had fallen upside-down out of the digger bucket. Bob's employees looked like game hunters as they stood either side of it. Al phoned and described the scene to his dad, who didn't say much.

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'I hope the turkey's all right, Ana,' said Mr P. 'I'll have to get a bigger one next year.'

'I think the baby'll still be on milk then, Dad,' said Al.

'You've been doing your research, son. Very good.'

In the corner of dining room, sitting on an unusual eight-legged table, amongst a group of Christmas cards and family photos, stood Ana's framed photo of the garden. With the light that July morning, the scene looked more like something from a hundred years ago, rather than a few months. And it didn't look like your typical suburban back garden.

Outside, the lawn was covered in snow. A few sparrows pecked at the feeder and a pigeon hoovered up what they spilt. Below the birds, the garden slept. All the seeds, spores and roots hibernated, waiting for the promise of spring and new growth.