THE GARDENER & THE GARDEN PARTY

The sky was exceptionally blue. Not a cloud in sight, just a single vapour trail crawling the horizon. The roads were mostly empty, though getting busier. In the early days of lockdown, the gardener had noted on more than one occasion to family that his life was ticking along as it always had, albeit with better traffic. He rose in the morning, worked until the day was done, six, sometimes seven, days a week. While others were losing work, he was still as busy as ever. To begin with, he had even cancelled jobs. No way would that nice old lady in Houghton Regis with the perfectly pruned patch of roses and hydrangea remember to keep two metres’ distance, and he’d rather not have to explain to her why he couldn’t accept her obligatory cups of tea.

He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if he had unwittingly spread the virus to her or anyone else at risk. Then there was the added matter of his daughter. She was two and a half and had cystic fibrosis. For that reason, he had been extra careful. He only left the house for work and for essentials. He washed his hands for the full twenty seconds as recommended after returning home, even after walking the dog. He sprayed and wiped down everything he bought from the shops.

The house came into view. It was a sprawling Georgian farmhouse practically in the middle of nowhere, with acres of land surrounding it, enclosed within a fortress of holly. Fortunately, he only had to concern himself with the gardens. He pulled up at the gates and hopped out. The code for the gates was saved on his phone. He dialled in the code and squeezed himself back in the van as the gates wobbled open. Then he drove in.

There were more cars than usual parked in the drive. The Range Rover and the prehistoric Volvo Estate, as usual, plus the vintage Jaguar under half-peeled cover poking out of the garage. But also an Abarth 595, a Mercedes Benz and a racing-green Mini Cooper. The gardener drummed his fingers against the wheel before flicking off the radio. Then he spun the wheel and reversed into the far-left corner of the drive, feeling the roof of the van scratch against an overhanging branch, before stepping out into the April heat and slamming the door.

It had been winter when he was here last. Since then, the deciduous trees had burst back to life with a vengeance, sprouting new growths along verdant boughs, and the bushes had grown wild and greedy. Weeds were pushing through the cracks between the paving slabs, and bees were drunk on nectar among the lavender. There were no more mulchy autumn leaves making a mess on the path – his personal bugbear; he always recommended clients plant evergreens – and he could hear the goats round the back.

He was emptying his tools from the van when he heard the front door open, and turned to see Alan, his client, in Wellington boots and Barbour, overdressed for the weather, stomping over to him. Alan had been one of his first clients. He was a quiet, unassuming man, who had retired several years ago but was still, he said, ‘married to his work’. In truth, the gardener had never been too sure exactly what Alan’s work involved – something to do with architecture – but now Alan spent his days either collecting awards for his achievements or jetting off around the world. In spite of this, most days when the gardener arrived for work, Alan was about, usually in the garden, or sipping coffee in his extravagant kitchen, which the gardener knew had a boiling water tap and a fridge with an ice dispenser. The thought of entering Alan’s kitchen now seemed insane. They shared little in common, but could make small talk, for example, about the weather or music or football. The gardener could remember vividly a conversation with Alan here in this same spot several years back, during the World Cup that never was, when England made it to the semi-finals. Sometimes they even discussed politics, but only when they found they shared something to complain about.

Alan stepped a little too close and held out his hand, as was custom, but then remembered himself and pranced back apologetically. Whoops, he said. Old habits die hard. Good to see you. Coping all right in these strange times, are you?

Yeah, good thanks. Bit weird. But got to keep on, you know.

Listen, I put an extra three-hundred quid in your bank account. I know, I know. Before you say anything, I knew you wouldn’t accept it otherwise, but hopefully that will help out a little. I appreciate it must be hard right now.

I don’t know what to say, Alan. Thanks.

Don’t mention it. Least I could do. How’s your little girl doing?

Yeah, loud as ever. To be fair, she just watches TV all day, so it’s not too bad.

Alan grinned. Glad to hear it. There was an awkward silence as the two men stood there, two metres apart. Well, I’ll leave you to it, shall I? Alan patted his trousers and made to head back, but then clicked his fingers and said: By the way, we’re throwing a little party for my grandson. He’s three today. You don’t mind, do you?

The gardener raised his eyebrows. No. That’s OK.

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The back of the gardener’s neck itched in the sun, burnt skin baking twice-over. He had finished cutting the grass and was now strimming around the apple trees dotted along the lawn, and the air was heavy with pollen. It had been a mission working around the children. There were easily a dozen of them, spreading themselves out along the garden, blowing bubbles to the sky, crawling through the rhododendrons. The gardener had his routine for each garden, the best way to get from A to B in order of priority and making the most efficient use of his tools, so he wasn’t going back and forth, and to minimise his time walking to each spot. He mowed the lawn in a particular way, starting at one end and finishing at the other, like a race track. But this had all been thrown out of the window thanks to the children. Ten years a gardener and never had this happened.

A ripple of unrestrained laughter erupted behind him. There must have been four generations of them in all, lounging around in the sun, sipping cocktails and bottles of lager. The swimming pool was uncovered, rippling golden light, and some of the teenagers were splashing about, vexing the sunbathers lined up along the water’s edge. The gardener swatted the air to dislodge a wasp from his head space, which had been buzzing too close for comfort. He scratched his neck. Set down the strimmer and crouched down to pull out the lamb’s quarters growing near the trunk. Broke the stem. Crumpled it in his hands.

He carried the strimmer back to his van to be swapped for the hedge trimmer, making a mental note as he ducked to avoid a wayward bramble to set aside an extra day for the side passage, which had become particularly unruly. The ivy would be a pain to cut back. As he walked, he collected an empty crisp packet and squashed pouch of Capri-Sun from the pavement and binned both. More cars parked in the driveway. He found his baseball cap squashed up in the glove compartment and screwed it to his head. Shut the door. Head back to the garden with the hedge trimmer.

The holly needed levelling. The gardener started the trimmer, letting out a plume of noxious gas. There was nothing like the smell of petrol and freshly cut grass. Keeping the blade vertical, chuntering dolefully, he moved it steadily up and down, scattering fragments of dark holly in the air. He had misplaced his goggles in the van and so worked without protection, squinting in the sun, the sound of the blade roaring in his ears.

Alien gargling undercut the noise of the hedge trimmer and the gardener looked down.

There was a toddler crawling along the grass, giggling at him.

The gardener lowered the hedge trimmer and held out his hand to signal to the child to keep back, but the toddler stood up and ran over, falling onto the gardener’s steel-toecap boots.

He looked in the direction of the house. How had they let this kid wander all the way over to him? He set the trimmer down on the grass, ears burning. The sunlight was blistering. Traipsing over to the garden party, he could see they were starting up a barbecue. Smoke was beginning to slither over the patio, where a group of forty-somethings were sitting under a spreading parasol and discussing what they would like to do after the lifting of lockdown. They were drunk. One of the men was encouraging the children present to play football with him, bouncing an inflatable ball off his luminous flip-flops, but none were interested. There was a teenager, eighteen or nineteen, explaining to an elderly woman in a straw sun hat that he had just returned home from London, where he was studying. Everyone’s dying, said the boy. It was just a bit depressing.

The gardener cleared his throat. Um, excuse me, sorry. Does anyone know whose kid that is? He pointed to the holly bush, where the toddler was now sitting cross-legged on the grass, picking daisies.

Only one of the adults appeared to have heard him, and she raised her martini glass, reclining in her deck chair by the pool. She looked around the same age as the gardener, wearing a bikini, oversized sunglasses and a wide-brimmed, floppy hat. Her martini had been made with enough precision to actually contain a green olive.

What is it?

Is that your kid?

She lowered her sunglasses to look over at the toddler. No.

Do you know where Alan is?

Alan? Inside with Spencer, I believe, getting the Pimm’s.

Right. Do you know how long he’ll be?

Not long. She sipped her martini. So you’re the gardener. Gorgeous day for it.

The gardener smiled, shielding his eyes. Yeah.

We’re so lucky with this weather. And you’re still working? That’s so good. I’ve been furloughed. But I’m treating it as an extended holiday, you know?

The gardener rubbed his hands together. Yeah. I can’t really do that. He shuffled back a little, keeping his distance. Crazy though, isn’t it? Twenty-five thousand dead. They reckon it might be more than that even.

The woman lowered her martini. Really? I had no idea it was that many. She shook her head. I try not to watch the news. Better to enjoy the weather while it lasts. The sun kills off the virus anyway.

The wind changed and smoke started drifting towards the gardener and the swimming pool. I’m being extra careful, said the gardener, because my daughter –

Oh, there’s Alan.

The doors opened to the conservatory and Alan came out, now wearing something more suitable. A Hawaiian shirt and shorts. Another man was with him who looked like his son: they shared the same jawline and bright blue eyes.

The younger man said something to Alan and Alan looked out to the distance. Jesus Christ, he said. He placed the jug of Pimm’s he was carrying down on the ceramic table under the shade of the parasol and looked angrily at the gardener. Either forgetting or disregarding any remaining rules of social distancing that had not yet been broken, he stormed over. What the hell are you doing?

What?

Look at my grandson.

The gardener looked back at the holly bush. The toddler was now prodding the hedge trimmer, which had been left unsupervised on the grass. A lump formed in his throat. Had he left the motor running? It appeared to be vibrating, but perhaps it was only the heat over the ground forming a mirage. He started to protest.

Yeah, that’s what I came here to say. It’s not safe for that kid to be left loose to wander around the garden while I’m here working.

Well why the hell would you leave him there with a hedge cutter? Are you an idiot?

He’s not my responsibility. As they spoke, the younger man had ran over to the holly bush to retrieve the toddler. I can’t touch him, can I? He shouldn’t be coming near me.

Oh for goodness’ sake. Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little?

I’m overreacting? The gardener gestured around him. Is this normal?

The younger man returned with the toddler and shook his head at the gardener like a disappointed schoolteacher. Alan clapped his hand around the younger man’s shoulder. My son, he said, is a GP. I think he knows what’s best.

The gardener clenched his fists. I’ll just leave the hedges for now.

I think you owe my son and grandson an apology.

I’ll need to wipe down the trimmer, the gardener went on. He breathed heavily through his nostrils. Probably my other tools too, for good measure.

The gardener walked back across the garden and collected the hedge trimmer, leaving chopped-up debris scattered along the lawn. He returned to the driveway. The van was hot and stuffy. Squirted the remains of a rare rube of hand sanitiser into his muddy palm and scrubbed his hands together. He unwrapped a cheese and cucumber sandwich and sat with his legs hanging out, his weathered face sheltered under the roof. Sweat had collected around the collar of his t-shirt. He finished the sandwich. Undid the cap of his flask of tea and swirled its contents around his mouth. Breathed in the warm air.

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When his daughter was born, the gardener had compared her to the size of a marrow from his garden, which he had reared from seed over half the period it had taken for his daughter to grow in his wife’s womb. The marrow was harvested in October, the day before his daughter was born, and when he and his wife returned from hospital he lay his daughter and the marrow side by side on the carpet and took a picture, posted with the caption Baby 1 and Baby 2. The marrow was the gardener’s pride and joy: he had kept it safe from slugs and other pests, fed it with water and high-potassium liquid fertiliser, sheltered it through cold snaps and had taken pictures of its progress on his phone every week. In contrast, the work that had gone into keeping his daughter healthy had been mostly invisible until the day she was born, when it suddenly became very visible.

The gardener knew he carried the gene. He and his wife were offered antenatal testing but had refused, preferring to let nature run its course.

The first time he held his daughter he kissed her face and she tasted of salt. Thalassic tears, fighter’s sweat. Long ago, it was thought that children born with salty skin were bewitched. He had read it once. *The child will soon die whose brow tastes salty when kissed.*

Every day since he had wondered whether he and his wife had been irresponsible. Whether they should have aborted their daughter and tried again, in hope that their efforts would produce a healthy child and help wipe out the disease. But then he would hold his daughter in his arms and look into her playful eyes and think, There is nothing wrong with you.

He took out his phone and opened a new message. Started typing.

I’m not comfortab –

Delete.

I don’t think it –

Delete.

Sorry for what happened earl –

Delete.

He closed the draft message. Checked his bank balance. Up £300.00.

Hush money. A cheque against his cracked lips, a stark reminder of where power lies.

That’s just the way it is.

He sat in his van for a while, half hanging out, watching another vapour trail crawl the empty sky. Then he stepped out, dusted himself off, and began pulling weeds.

*Words: 2,700*