

THE MICROCOSM

At the age of seventy-eight Tom reluctantly handed his farm over to his son and moved into town. Arthritis had won the battle with his body, but his feisty spirit continued to rule in his thoughts. He was happy enough with the low set brick house he purchased because it came complete with ramps, handrails, and other useful accessories. Six months later his fragile happiness took a hit when the local council granted a small group of enthusiasts the right to use the allotment beside Tom's house as a community garden. Gone went the quietness and solitude of his place.

Tom railed against the decision, even wangling an invitation to address the council meeting on his personal displeasure. They listened to his rant, nodding slowly as he spoke but once he'd left the building, they laughed.

'Silly old fool,' the chairman said dismissively.

Ida, sprightly and energetic at sixty-five, led the group to commence the garden. Afternoons and weekends saw up to eight or ten men and women arrive with spades and rakes, gardening gloves, and bags to cart away rubbish. They chattered amiably as they worked. Garden beds took shape and paths were laid between them.

All the while, Tom glared at the group from behind thin curtains at his kitchen window.

'It's utter nonsense,' he told his son, thumping his weather worn fists on the table.

'What good is a garden that size? A bit o' this and a bit o' that. They'll grow nought that's worth the planting. Can't see any sense in it at all.'

Tom's son wisely said nothing.

Ida marshalled her troops, inviting them to share their knowledge as well as their muscle power. They gathered around her, within earshot of Tom behind the curtains.

'What shall we grow?' she asked.

'Let's start with vegetables that grow quickly,' Fred suggested. 'Both carrots and radishes are ready to eat in not much more than a month after planting.'

'Lettuce grow quickly too,' Mary said.

Ida smiled at the group. 'Perhaps we should test the soil first so that we know what we are doing.'

Tom harumphed audibly as the group prepared to leave for the day. They planned to begin planting at the next get together. Tom thought about sabotage but a lifetime of wrestling with the weather to coax crops to grow made him unwilling to take such drastic action.

Instead, he reasoned, he would confront the group in person to express his displeasure.

The happy gardeners piled from their cars a few days later, carrying punnets of seedlings, tubs of fertiliser, and a garden hose.

Before they had time to organise themselves, Tom stormed out of his front door, anger written clearly on his face.

Ida turned and greeted him.

'Hello, would you be interested in joining our group?' Tom was momentarily thrown off guard by her warmth.

'It's madness,' he said. 'Little gardens like these won't solve world hunger AND you are all too noisy. You disturb my peace and quiet every time you come.'

The Microcosm

Ida was thinking fast. How could she shift his anger? 'I know you,' she said, 'You're Tom from Bingawarree, aren't you?' She named his farm. 'We could use a farmer's knowledge here, Tom. Won't you consider it?'

Before he could answer, Fred had something to say. 'Our garden won't feed the world, but do you remember the story about the fellow picking up starfish? Someone said it wouldn't make a difference, and the fellow said that it made a difference to the one he had just picked up. Well, our little vegie garden might make a difference to one of our pensioners, sustaining someone who's on a tight budget. It will be a development for good of our community.'

Mary added her voice. 'Plus,' she said quietly, 'none of us are lonely anymore. We're becoming good friends.'

Tom shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking rather crestfallen. His anger and bravado had vanished. A few minutes ago, he had felt as angry as Putin staring at Ukraine. Now he felt unfamiliar stirrings of wistfulness. It was true that he felt lonely. He knew that being so upset wasn't good for his blood pressure or his digestion. It was true he did know a wealth about the environment, soil and plants and growing things.

Ida's eyes twinkled at him.

'How about it, Tom? We're a peaceful lot, here. Make love, not war as they say. We really could use you.'

Tom bent over and picked up a handful of dirt. He ran it through his fingers.

'Good thing it's loam,' he said, a hint of a smile appearing. 'Guess I could join you.'

(780 words.)