

Guerrilla Gardening

Since Barry retired from the army the garden has become a full-time job. His lawn is golfing green perfection, carefully mown into stripes that align with vigilantly maintained borders. It has become an obsession, edges are neat and trimmed, and it is regularly fed, watered and raked. Barry is at war with nature. Weeds are the enemy and he is battle ready. He zealously hunts them down and annihilates them, choosing from his arsenal of weeding implements and wide selection of weedkillers. His borders are immaculate, flowers stand in regiments, ready for their daily inspection - tall ones at the back and short ones at the front. His planting scheme is colour coordinated - whites, pinks and purples, with a thick layer of bark chippings to suppress those enemy weeds.

In the centre of the lawn is a neat rectangular pool, edged with paving slabs. His wife, Betty, rarely ventures into the garden, but likes to look out at the pool while she washes the dishes or dusts in the conservatory. Barry has cemented a concrete statue of Buddha onto the slabs at one end of the pool. He is not a man who goes in for all this alternative religion nonsense, and explains to Betty that the statue has nothing to do with religion. It is just a tasteful ornament which is fashionable in modern garden design. Betty suggests that Buddha might be offset by half a dozen goldfish whose bodies could glimmer in the sun. The goldfish are purchased and released into the pond, but this design idea is thwarted within a day by a family of Herring gulls who feast on the goldfish and marvel at such a delicious aperitif. Buddha now gazes serenely over crystal-clear water which is regularly dosed with chlorine to discourage wildlife and weeds. Betty is no longer allowed to make

garden design suggestions and has been decommissioned. Her domain is the house and there is plenty for her to do in there. She continues in her civilian role, assisting his gardening manoeuvres by washing and ironing his outdoor clothes. She embraces her role with zeal and he gardens in a freshly pressed, pastel shirts, pristine beige trousers, a white sunhat and clean blue gardening gloves.

Next door to Barry's perfect patch lies a jungle where plants clamber and tumble. His neighbour Yvonne is also a keen gardener but her approach is light touch and experimental. There is no overall plan and she accepts plants from friends and family, irrespective of their colour and shape. As she gardens, she asks herself 'What does nature suggest? What works in this soil? Which plants might thrive in this dry Essex climate? How can I attract more bees?' In her garden, narrow gravel paths meander through beds where flowers and vegetables grow together. Her garden is organic, full of variety, some areas are cultivated and others full of wildflowers (or weeds, as Barry regularly reminds her). Her large woodpile is home to insects and toads, her pond teems with life. Abundant with pond-skaters and beetles, water snails, and water boatmen, dragonflies and mayflies. In spring she loves to sit by the pond with a cup of tea, just listening to the mass of croaking frogs. Each year, she marvels at the growing bundles of frogspawn, which quickly turn into tadpoles, some of which survive and others which feed the garden birds. Her garden is a place that embraces nature's lifecycles – birth, growth, maturity, decline and demise.

Barry and Yvonne are not friends, but they talk over the garden fence while they tend to their plants. Their conversations are usually polite, but they have little in common

apart from their love of gardens. So, while they speak often, it is as though they speak a different language, rarely understanding the gardening concerns and interests of the other. Yvonne thinks her neighbour is locked into his military past which explains his constant engagement in a futile battle with nature and wildlife. She inwardly condemns his extravagant use of pesticides but says nothing. She watches him strut around and winces as she hears him bark orders at his wife.

Barry finds his neighbour unsettling in all respects, from her funny ideas about gardens to her slovenly appearance. Yvonne gardens in her oldest clothes, a faded t-shirt and oversized shorts in the summer, topped by a well-worn gardening coat in the winter. Barry is not surprised that Yvonne has been unable to find herself a husband - what with her sun-baked skin, messy hair and those masculine, mud encrusted hands. He supposes that she has given up all hope in the looks department. That's what happens to some middle-aged women - they just stop caring what other people think.

Barry is at war and his ongoing battles with nature are apparent to all. He is annoyed about birds pecking around and disturbing his bark chippings, and about influxes of blackfly sully the perfection he has created. He worries about his lawn and has sleepless nights on account of the weeds. Every day is marked by a series of skirmishes. Today he huffs and puffs, red faced and exasperated as he scrubs off the trickles of seagull shit on Buddha's shoulder and hand. Then he grumbles about worm casts and brushes them away angrily.

His most recent mission is hush-hush - a covert operation. He has not said a word to anyone ... not even Betty, and aims to catch the enemy by surprise. The garden shed has become his military HQ. Tucked out of sight at the side of the house, it is perfect for strategising, surveillance, and safe storage for his garden armoury. He plots and he plans, mapping out lines of attack as he embarks on *Mission Yvonne*. For some time now he has suspected that the weeds are blowing over from her garden. Initially he went down the diplomatic route and offered to source some weedkiller that really does the job. He tells her that its now illegal in the UK, but he has found a place where you can buy it online. However, the irritating woman declines his generosity and counter attacks with a long and wordy explanation that the 'weeds' are in fact wildflowers that she has planted to attract the bees. He grumbles he will have to put down astro-turf, but she ignores him and just wanders away while he is still talking.

Barry surveys enemy territory from his HQ. He dislikes everything about her shanty-town of a garden. Her dilapidated shed is a disgrace and probably full of vermin. The row of green plastic compost bins at the end of her garden is unsightly, dirty and smelly. He is horrified by her ever-growing collection of water-butts. Collecting rainwater has become a bit of an obsession for her, particularly this year as the drought has set in. She tells him that she waters the vegetables with bathwater which she syphons through the hose that hangs from an upstairs window. He considers this practice is insanitary as he suspects that she does not bathe that often. She makes a peace offering and proffers an armful of courgettes ... a glut apparently. 'A glut of what?' he wonders. The thought of courgettes sustained on

the scrapings from her atrophying, grimy body makes him feel queasy. He snips angrily with his secateurs as he scowls and snaps a brusque 'No thank you'.

He is stealthy and continues to engage in over the fence conversations as he plans his incursions into the jungle next door. He half-listens to her eccentric prattling and wonders whether that devious woman has a battle plan of her own. She appears to be engaging in guerrilla warfare, sharing her obscene ideas and revelling in his discomfort about the most disgusting aspects of gardening. Most recently she has been rambling on in the most obnoxious way about the joys of composting. A fortnight ago, she proffered a handful of the repulsive brown muck at him and jabbered on about 'nature's alchemy, decomposition and rich black loveliness'. She has also started blathering on about worms ... her worms! Every day she has a new sordid word for their wormy activities 'clustering, knotting, squirming, wriggling, writhing', and last week she claimed that they were 'coiling in an orgy of eating and excreting' and laughed when he shuddered.

Yvonne is getting weary of Barry's hostilities and is irritated by his decision to chop down a large section of her apple tree one weekend when she was away. Quite clearly the tree was cut from her garden, the chainsaw marks are close to the its trunk and well away from his fence. She is tired of his constant explanations of what she should do to make her garden just a little more like his. She enjoys her garden provocations ... the way his lips tense, the weak smile to disguise his obvious distaste for all things she says and does. She regularly waves at Betty who is incarcerated in the kitchen, locked into a routine of ceaseless cleaning, but Betty always looks away.

Barry decides it is time to launch operation weeds and seeds. He creeps over the lawn at midnight, ready for combat, night-vision goggles, dark clothing, and a cylinder of his special weedkiller. He sprays copiously over the garden fence at her 'meadow'. He spends the next few days watching carefully from his HQ and feels a sense of satisfaction as the weeds start to wither.

Yvonne notices the change in her wildflower area, the shrivelling of plants and the death of the wildlife. At first, she is perplexed but then one morning she notices him standing and gloating at the destruction. She is no-one's fool... guesses straight away. 'Bloody cheek... him and his miracle weed killer. This is the last straw'. She plans her revenge, buys a plastic dog poo from the joke shop and launches a counter attack before dawn. She clammers over the fence and places the poo on the grass, close to the edge of the pool. Then back to her shed, to sit wrapped in a blanket with a thermos of tea. She wants to see his reaction, to watch his body tense and to hear him huff and puff. Sure enough, he is out at dawn ... ready for the morning inspection, she stifles a giggle as he sees the poo. His initial reaction is just as expected. She whispers, 'Silly old sod.... Serves him right'.

She opens the door of the shed, ready to confront him about her meadow and to suggest a truce. She is alarmed to see he is grimacing, his eyes wide, as he clutches his heart. She hears him gasp and watches him fall heavily onto the pristine grass. Yvonne collects her thoughts, looks up towards the dark windows of his house. Betty is still asleep. Birds sing in the trees and the breeze feels cool on her skin. She slips over the fence to retrieve the plastic poo, drops it into one of the

compost bins and apologises to the worms. Then she goes inside and rings for an ambulance.