

The Allotment

by

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Dr Miriam Bilman pulled on her tweed jacket, placed her cycle helmet on her head and did up the clip. She adjusted the strap, picked up her cloth bag for life, and retrieved her keys from the bowl under the mirror in the hall. She walked to the front door, to the right of which was a panel on the wall, not unlike a tablet. She touched it and lights sprang to life. She pressed the blue one and there was a buzz.

“Yes?” came the peremptory answer.

“Really, Richard. There’s no need to be quite so brusque. I’m only letting you know that I’m off to the allotment.”

“Right.”

“So, I will see you later tonight. Aubergine tart for dinner. Would Eric like to join us, do you think?”

“No thank you Miriam,” came a rather more friendly voice on the line. “I have a date tonight.”

“How exciting. I do hope it goes well Eric. It would be so nice to have a Mrs Gore to get to know. Are you taking her anywhere nice?”

“Just for dinner at the Anne of Cleves, and it’s only a date, Dr Bilman.”

“I know, Eric. But I still hold out hope. We all do. You’re far too good a catch to be left on the shelf... if you will excuse the mixture of metaphors. Anyway, Richard? Are you still there?”

“Yes,” came the response.

“I will see you later. And please, would you take a look at the matter transmuter in the kitchen? It really is making a terrible noise, you know.”

“Uh huh.”

“Thank you. And have a nice day, gentlemen. I will see you later.”

Miriam locked the door carefully behind her and put the key into her Disney fanny pack, a present from one of her nieces. Her bicycle was kept in a small metal container, like the ones used in city courtyard, and she pulled it out. It was a traditional looking bike, like the one she had ridden every day to the labs in Cambridge, where she had studied for her PhD. She popped her bag into the basket on the front, climbed on, and set off for her allotment, a vision in tweed.

The next door neighbour, Mrs Smith, waved in a half-hearted way from her window, and Miriam waved back enthusiastically. Poor woman, she thought. She'd never been the same, since her son had run away from home. Miriam tried to be as thoughtful and supportive as a good neighbour should, but there was always an unspoken accusation between them. Especially with the rumours that her husband, Professor Bilman, had somehow been responsible for John's disappearance all those months ago.

It wasn't far to the allotments, just a few roads, but Miriam liked to cycle. It gave her an opportunity to get some exercise, which she knew she needed, and she liked the feeling of the wind in her face. The allotments were next to what had once been the Bickering on Sea trainline, until Dr Beaching had made his cuts. They straddled the old track, which was now a footpath called 'The Badger Trail', which led through the centre, allowing walkers to peer at the multitude of produce growing in the well-tended plots.

She pushed her bicycle through the old green gate and followed the path between the different plots. Old Mr Penn was hoeing his carrots in one of them, and he smiled at her and said good morning. "Good morning, Mr Penn," she replied. "I do hope Mrs Penn is feeling better now. It's good to see you out and about too, and look at the size of your marrows."

"They ain't bad, eh Mrs Bilman?" he replied, leaning on his hoe.

"It's Dr Bilman," she answered more sharply than she intended. "But, as I've said before, you're quite welcome to call me Miriam."

"Don't seem right to me. My old dad always said to treat people with respect, so's I'll call you Mrs... if that's ok?"

"But, I am not a Mrs, Mr Penn. I am a Doctor of Botany, so the respectful term is Dr Bilman."

"Ah, well... as you say," he said dismissively as he returned to his task.

Dr Bilman continued on her way, stamping much harder than she needed to as she walked, her Le Chateau Wellingtons leaving deep tracks in the mud. Stupid old man, she thought. Then she took a deep breath, calming herself and finding her happy place once more, which was always quite easy. She could never stay angry for long, especially when she was about her work. She'd hardly have lasted this long married to Professor Richard Bilman if she held onto grudges.

Dr Miriam Bilman's own section of allotment was rather different to the others, and not just because she had three plots to herself. All of the allotments featured handmade sheds, improvised fencing and a sense of organised chaos, but hers was more impressive than it might have looked on first view. The fencing had tiny motion sensors on it and was stronger than it looked. The tumbledown shed was rather more complex than it looked too, and next to it was a tall pole, upon which were several CCTV cameras disguised as a cockerel weathervane.

If one were to take a few moments to pause and look properly at her plot, it would become evident that, while her rows of vegetables and plants looked similar to those around them, the produce they contained was, in fact, considerably bigger than that on neighbouring plots. The most obvious example of this was in the section of her plot which housed squashes, where four large pumpkins sat in orange splendour, nestled in their tendrils and leaves, as if waiting for the formality of the local horticultural society award for largest vegetable.

Miriam locked her bicycle to the fence, removed her bag from the basket, and walked slowly towards the shed. She stopped suddenly, noticing something, and hurried towards the pumpkins. When she reached them, Dr Miriam Bilman tutted. A tut didn't seem sufficient, so she swore too, which was very unusual. What had first appeared to be four large, perfectly formed pumpkins were, in fact, three large, perfectly formed pumpkins, and another one which would have been the same except it had been stamped on. Perhaps more surprisingly, next to the damaged pumpkin was a shoe. A fashionable training shoe, which might be worn by a young person who cared more about their appearance than the furtherance of science.

Dr Bilman reached down and picked up the shoe, nodding with satisfaction. It wasn't just a shoe, she was pleased to note, it also had a severed foot in it. It was clearly a part of something much bigger, like a person.

There were also, she noticed, several splashes of dried blood on the floor, and splattered over the other pumpkins.

Tucking the shoe under one arm, Miriam walked quickly to the shed. She typed in a code, with her free hand, using the unexpected keypad to one side of the door, and went inside. A moment later, she emerged again with a small bucket of water and a cloth, which she took over to the pumpkin patch and, with which, she cleaned the blood spatters off of the remaining pumpkins, all the time, she was talking to the pumpkins, as if calming angry children. “It’s alright, my loves. Mummy’s here. It’s all ok now...”

“Morning. What are you up to then, Dr Bilman?” called an old sounding voice from the pathway.

She looked up from her work and smiled. “Why, Good morning Alf. I’m afraid I’ve had vandals in here last night. I’m just tidying up. They stamped on one of my pumpkins.”

“What? That’s terrible. And such lovely ones too. Shall I let the committee know? They’ll track the buggers down”

“No, Alf, that’s alright. I’ll let them know.”

“I been telling ‘em for bloody years that we need CCTV. The buggers nicked my beans the other week, so they did. Lovely ones too. Bloody yobbos. I tell, you, I don’t know what the world’s coming to; no I don’t.”

Alf tottered off towards his own allotment plot, muttering under his breath about immigration and the end of the rule of law and leaving Dr Bilman wiping her pumpkins, leaving three of them pristine and orange and most of the fourth one in the same way. When she had finished, she stood up and walked back to her shed.

The other allotment owners would have been surprised by the contents of Dr Miriam Bilman’s shed, had they been invited inside. It was a larger shed than many others and, while not as advanced as her husband’s shed at the back of their garden, nonetheless it was full of surprises. On one wall was a complete collection of tools, arrayed meticulously. There were benches on three walls which had a computer, a high-tech microscope, test tubes, and lots more. It looked more like a lab than a shed. On the final wall, there was a bank of monitors, showing eight different camera feeds of her allotment plot; and a kettle, mugs and small fridge.

Closing the door behind her, Miriam made herself a cup of tea and settled behind the monitors. The trainer, she placed on the desk next to her. She typed a few things into the keyboard, and the central monitor was filled with a view of the pumpkin patch. Using a tracking ball, she skipped the recording back and the image rapidly raced to night time, rewinding the feed until she saw a person flash by in reverse. Dr Bilman took a sip of tea and carefully found the right moment.

On one of the screens, a teenage girl in a tracksuit jumped over the fence and walked towards the pumpkin patch. She came into view on the main screen, looking down at the pumpkins. She said something, but no sound. There were tears in her eyes and she said something else, lifting her foot and stamping down hard on the pumpkin which was damaged. Her foot slammed into the middle of the pumpkin and pieces flew in several directions. The girl then ground her foot into the wreckage and moved, as if to turn away. Her foot, however, seemed planted and she stumbled, unable to lift it.

On the screen, Dr Miriam Bilman watched as the young woman tried to free herself, but the more she struggled the deeper her foot seemed to go. Then, the tendrils of the pumpkin seemed to slither over her leg and over her body, twisting rapidly around her neck and over her face. The end of a tendril probed for a moment and then slithered down her throat. Over the next minutes, the girl was absorbed into the pumpkin which, as it seemingly soaked up the body, rebuilt itself from the inside out, growing back into an almost perfect pumpkin. The only fault in it was the dent she had seen a few minutes before and, next to the squash, a trainer was all that remained of the girl.

Long after the action had ended, Miriam stared at the screen, a look of surprise on her face. Then she pulled a notebook towards her and spent several minutes making notes. She turned and typed some things into the computer behind her, walked out of the shed, gathered some samples and ran tests.

For the rest of the day, Dr Miriam Bilman worked in her shed, using the computers and the lab equipment. Making notes, running programs, reviewing the footage. Until, as the sunlight outside began to fade, she washed her hands for the umpteenth time, gathered her things, put her cycle helmet on, and left to go home.

As an afterthought, she picked up the trainer, which was still sitting on the desk where she had left it. She locked the door and walked towards the pumpkin patch. The damaged pumpkin looked the same, and Miriam looked at the trainer

before dropping it next to the plant and pushing it in close to the squash itself. She took a few steps backwards and, in the light of dusk, watched as the tendrils of the plant slowly wrapped themselves around the shoe and pulled the foot into the pumpkin. Even as she watched, the damage on the pumpkin repaired itself so that, in only a few moments, there were once more four perfect pumpkins on the patch. She wondered how she might explain it all to Alf, but realised he'd probably have forgotten by tea time.

Dr Miriam Bilman cycled home. She cooked supper, called her husband in from his work, and spoke about her day while he sat in customary silence. He was used to being unable to get a word in edgeways, and he didn't show much more than passing interest in her revelation about the pumpkin.

“So, how was your day, Richard?” she asked at last.

“Fine,” he replied.
