

David King

MARGE

Marge's lips are pursed so that her gold front tooth is not visible as she marches down the garden path, intending to pull up her son Neil and his rough companions for playing in the herb garden. It exasperates her that sage and thyme and spring onions should be stamped on. It exasperates her even more that all her threats of hidings are always misconstrued as invitations to play hide and seek. The children are hiding now, she reflects. Perhaps they aren't in the herb garden at all: perhaps they are in the wardrobe that so draws them, the one that forms a type of door between the two bedrooms. She tries to decide whether this possibility breaks her rules. The neighbours say that she depends too much on rules, but they forget that she has to live by them too. Even her husband Bert's easy-going outlook is a kind of rejection of responsibility, forcing her to lay down the law and thus tying her to rules. She recalls many times snapping at him, many times stamping her foot at him in pique.

Absently, she stares up at the cape lilacs. Their flowers are like mauve asterisks. Neil spends nearly all his time climbing among their scented obscurity.

"See-saw, Marjorie Daw! We're in the trees, right above you!"

Marge does not respond to these words. As she crosses from the margins of the herb garden and into its centre she sighs at the ring of white sand on her worn purple slippers. She has never been overly concerned with her appearance, but sand is uncomfortable. Her life is characterised by discomfort rather than pain, she muses. She brushes at her parting so that the tea-coloured hair does not hang like a folded towel.

Catching sight of a golden shock of hair among some sage, she starts forward triumphantly. "All right, sport — inside! You're lucky I don't give you a hiding." She marches Neil back in the direction of the house. The overhang of the roof, together with the steps of the large red concrete patio, resembles an open mouth.

"We've got to come up with something." Neil snaps a block on to the Lego foundation board, and then gnaws at his licorice strap. "It was fantastic being invisible in the trees, and then she goes and pulls me up in the herb garden."

He shakes his head; grains of sand sprinkle down. "Grownups don't seem real."

Pete throws a marshmallow on to the ground. "Didn't you say your father is going to saw some of the trees down soon?"

"But that'll be ages. Like when they construct the Wells Walk Bridge."

"Then why don't we persuade your mother to climb the trees and then pull her up in the herb garden, and see how she likes it?"

"No point. She loves the herb garden. She's always putting herbs in her recipes. And mushrooms. It's like eating lawn clippings."

"It'll be boring if we can't come up with something." He folds his arms. "That's what grownups do all the time, throwing in the towel."

Marge starts to sing as she hangs the washing on the line. The neighbours on the left are always taking the rise out of her loud singing voice, but she has little time for the neighbours on the left. They're always lopping their trees, just when she wants to admire their green lushness. And the catty young thing on the right is anything but inviting, clipping her little boy's ears all the time in the belief that it's "character-building." She had almost been relieved when Neil threw a date pit into garden.

Where is Neil today? It's peculiar the way the licorice-chewing imp seems to spring up at different parts of the house and garden. It's as though children, having not yet experienced the boredom of time and space, have a certain freedom with respect to it. But at what point does the childhood space and time merge with the adult? They must eventually, she muses, because obviously children grow into adults. Like the eye disease anis-something. The merging must be gradual, though, as when the fire of love becomes little more than a crush. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she murmurs, contemplating her reflection in the surface of the linen basket. She feels relieved. The laundry basket is nice to her today, because it doesn't reveal her jowls. Or maybe her foundation cream is responsible. Whatever, she thinks, today she is young. When she can't do what she wants, she'll be old. She had once heard an eighty year old tell her seventy year old companion that she was young, and she had felt a profound pity for the women. She won't fall into their trap! Determined, she starts to peg out, next to her husband's tie, the old blanket that Neil wears as a cape on his "flying saucer." To children, naturally, old age begins as soon as climbing trees loses its appeal.

Noticing a motion in the brush surrounding the herb garden, she puts down the laundry basket in exasperation. They've completely disregarded her — they're playing in the herb garden again! Incensed, she stalks down the path, oblivious to the sand-grains in her slippers.

"All right — I don't want any excuses. What are you up to in the herb garden, in flagrant disregard of my wishes?"

Neil bobs up of his own accord. "There's a cat trapped in the tree!"

Marge narrows her eyes, wondering whether he is lying. "In the cape lilacs?"

"The one just by the fence. It won't come down, and we've tried a saucer of cream. If you concentrate you can hear it rustling."

Marge concentrates, and indeed hears among the whish of leaves a rustling. It must, she reflects, belong to the neighbours. She finds herself imagining the satisfaction of presenting, with just a faint world-weariness, the cat to them. That would teach them to sniff at her for driving an old mushroom-pink Ford with unreliable brakes!

She nods. "We must coax it down." For some reason feeling slightly peculiar at talking to her son in such a fashion, she points to a mass of anise. "Snap me off a piece of that. It's well known that cats love aniseed. Pet shops reek of it."

Neil pulls up a stalk, and then sniffs it. "Is this where they get licorice?"

"I can't imagine."

"If you used that instead of the stuff like lawn clippings I'd really like it."

Marge tries to keep a defensive tone from her voice. "We'll see. Now I suppose I'll have to recover the cat. I'm just praying it doesn't scratch me to pieces."

"The trees can be dangerous. If someone's in the herb garden they can pull you through a higher dimension."

"I draw the line at such claptrap." Determined, Marge starts to ascend. The cat peers down, tabby and apprehensive.

"But they really can!" Concerned, Neil runs in the direction of a rambling cushion of thyme.

"I slipped, didn't I"? Marge opens her eyes and gingerly rubs her hip. "What about the cat? I feel unwell."

"It ran next door. But you didn't slip, I pulled you up in the herb garden."

"Now look here, sport" — Marge closes her eyes, suddenly wondering whether there is any point. She can smell crushed anise and sage around her; what happened, she tells herself, is immaterial. She hasn't the time to dwell on it.

Grasping a sprinkler, she stands gingerly and makes a vague gesture. "I'm no longer going to hare after you all the time; I'm too old. Climb trees or stamp on the herb garden as you please. It's neither here nor there. I'm going up to my room for a piece of bread and a cup of tea, with lots of sugar." Unenthusiastically pushing aside the laundry basket, she hobbles indoors. After a short pause, Neil quietly follows her.

