



QUARANTINED

Phil Parker

Sunday afternoon on Myrtle Avenue was no different to any other. The sun shone, the bees buzzed and the birds sang. All was well with the world.

Ed at number 26 polished his gleaming new BMW while casting sidelong smirks across the road to Bill at number 23, whose attention remained firmly focused on washing his last year's model of the Mercedes C Class. Gerry at number 18 applied a spirit level to



the trimming of his privet hedge and beamed with satisfaction that he'd got it perfectly horizontal, and so much better than Arthur's apology at number 9. If the intention had been to create something to mimic the ocean, he'd managed it beautifully. A person could get seasick just looking at it.

Shirley at number 27 hummed the title song from Oklahoma! as she wiped down the gleaming white PVC of her window frames. She made sure her good mood was heard by Eileen at number 25, who was outside repainting the garage door. Eileen had failed to be cast in the amateur operatic production of the Rogers and Hammerstein classic and had been relegated to the chorus. Again. The poor woman couldn't acknowledge that she didn't have the necessary vocal range. Nor the acting prowess to carry off a role as demanding as Aunt Eller. Neither had she contributed enough to the production's fundraising. Not that it had anything to do with the casting decisions.

Yes, Sunday afternoon on Myrtle Avenue was no different to any other.

Except the alien observers who monitored these activities were on the final day of their research mission. The batteries on their suits were almost depleted, a few more hours and battery failure would compromise their invisibility. They couldn't afford such a calamity a second time. Their hasty departure from planet CX-348-977-A had been a complete debacle and led to a tightening of schedules and budgets, as well as some management restructuring.

No, batteries aside, the research mission's findings were complete. Data recorded, conclusions reached, theories shared. Job done. Time to go home.

Mik couldn't wait. Their time on this blue-green little blob at the end of a spiral arm on the Milky Way couldn't end fast enough. Exhausting didn't come into the defining the

research project. Not unless you considered exhaustion to be something you could experience physically, mentally, emotionally and socially all at the same time. He pointed to Subject #45/A as he sought an illustration of the cause of his fatigue. The one who called himself Ed. Or, if you listened in to his neighbours, the one they called Wanker.

‘He’s going to provoke an argument, look. Have you noticed the hostile body language? That swagger? He’s moving into goading mode.’

Pyk nodded a little distractedly. Subject #74/T had summoned his wife to come and admire the precision of his hedge maintenance. That usually led to more light-hearted relief. Pyk had had enough too. But Mik’s nudge drew his attention to the imminent conflict in front of number 23. Wanker swaggered across the street.

‘Got her up to 122 miles an hour on the M1 on Friday. Had a race with an Audi RS6. Left it in my dust.’

Ed’s boast drew no reaction, other than a grunt, as Bill polished the windscreen with energy borne from unresolved resentment. His reflection in the glass highlighted his clenched jaw as the goading continued.



‘What does this one do? 110?’

Bill tried to change the topic. Mik knew it wouldn’t be enough. Subject #45/A was single-minded in his goals. He felt a trace of sympathy for the individual who called himself Bill, inasmuch as he could empathise with any such alien behaviour.

‘My daughter wants me to get an electric car. Or a hybrid. To reduce the pollution.’

The laughter from #45/A echoed up and down the road, distracting neighbours from their gainful employment of gardening, cleaning, sweeping and general maintenance.

‘You’re not serious? A bloody electric car? You’re having me on. Better get yourself a bike instead then, it’ll go faster!’

Bill’s clenched jaw had to be aching, given the look of pain Pyk could see on the man’s face.

‘Well, we can’t all pollute the planet. Some of us have to think about the next generation.’ Then the grin. The sudden inspiration that rescued the situation at the last minute. ‘Well, those of us who have kids. When you grow up, you have to consider these things.’

Pyk’s attention drifted to the couple in the garden further down the road, he nudged his colleague and pointed to where Gerry’s wife had joined him. They drifted over to listen: man and wife consistently provided valuable evidence. The frown on Pauline’s face hinted at this one being no different.

‘You’ll never guess what Mrs Smith from number 47 has just told me.’

‘What were you talking to that harridan for? She complained to the council about me shooting that bloody squirrel two years ago, bitch.’

His wife shook her head, eager to disclose the latest gossip and unwilling to listen to her husband’s perpetual complaining.

‘We weren’t talking. We were on the Neighbourhood Watch group on Facebook. Anyway, do you know who’s bought the house next door but one?’

Alarm etched itself indelibly on her husband’s face. Mik and Pyk leaned forward, eager for the reveal. The woman shook her head, in the way she prefaced all bad news.

‘Foreigners.’

The word was said loud enough and with sufficient venom to catch the attention of Shirley and Eileen. They hurried over. Pauline preened at the prospect of a wider audience.

‘You need to record this,’ Pyk said to his colleague, who took out a silver wand-like instrument and pointed it at the agitated foursome.

‘Foreigners, did you say?’ Shirley shrilled, with all the horror of what it implied.

‘Yes. Foreigners. I don’t know where they’re from but it hardly matters, does it? They won’t be like us.’

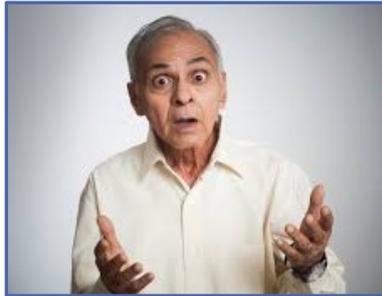
Eileen trembled at the possibility and dabbed her nose as she sniffed. Rejected from Oklahoma! and now this. Life couldn’t get any worse. Still, she tried to find some positives.

‘Perhaps they’ll be respectable. Professional people. They can be, you know.’

Three pairs of eyes administered the ferocious glare to meet such inane optimism.

‘You know the house on Linden Avenue that sold last month?’ Pauline hissed.
‘Foreigners. Seven of them live in that house! Seven! Children and grandparents. Can you imagine how cramped they must be?’

Gerry chimed in. He’d walked past the house quite deliberately a week earlier, to assess the state of their front garden.



‘The hedge hasn’t been touched. Grass needs trimming and there isn’t a single flower anywhere to be seen. Not one.’

It was an assessment which prompted a shaking of heads in a collective gesture of disgust. Shirley voiced the thought they were all thinking. She had that ability.

‘They’re invading. Soon, there’ll be more of them. Mark my words. You won’t be able to walk down this road without strange smells wafting from their kitchen windows.’

‘The lack of care given to their gardens.’

‘And their paintwork.’

‘And they never socialise. Not like we do. They keep to themselves. Not natural.’

The collective despair drew the attention of others and soon a parliament of outrage had gathered to air their concerns and decide what might be done to combat such incursions to their way of life. The consensus was readily agreed. These invaders lacked one critical feature. It was summed up by Shirley, whose observation brought yet more head nodding.

‘They’re just not us!’

Mik replaced his sound equipment back into his backpack.

‘We need to get going. There’s nothing new here. We’re getting close to...’

His colleague gasped, a look of alarm spread across his bronze facial features.

‘You’re... visible!’

Like a heat haze on a hot road surface, Mik shimmered into existence a short distance away from the flock of outrage. Panic made him gasp loud enough to gain their attention. As one, they turned to stare at him. Details of the events on planet CX-348-977-A swamped his mind, leaving no room for coherent thought. Those poor, unfortunate researchers had suffered such ignominy, not to mention imprisonment for those unlucky enough to be caught. Who knew what pain and torture they might be experiencing even now? Because no one was going back to rescue them. What if that happened here? That possibility only stifled any further rational thought and left Mik frozen to the spot. His only hope was his colleague would escape and return with a rescue party. Pyk would do that. He was a friend. He wouldn't desert him.

He glanced over at his fellow researcher just as he shimmered into existence too.

'Our batteries..!' Pyk gasped as he stared in fear at the assembled astonishment in front of them.

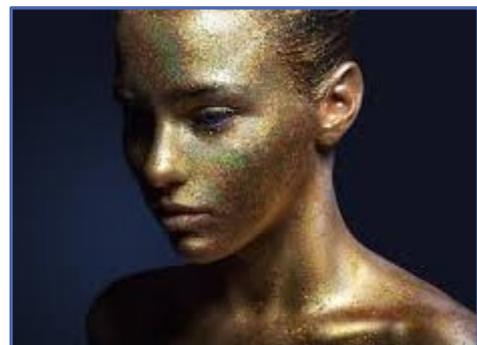
'Who are you?' Shirley took a hesitant step forward. Pauline joined her. Neighbourhood Watch had just turned serious.

Gerry stepped in front of both women. He'd been in the Scouts as a boy. He knew how to handle emergencies.

'More bloody foreigners!' he pointed a finger to punctuate his accusation. 'We don't want your type here. Do you understand?'

They probably didn't speak English - which was why he shouted it.

Behind him a line of belligerent hostility formed. Each pair of eyes fastened on the bizarre bronze complexions and the silver outfits the strangers wore. This was the kind of alternate culture that had no place on Myrtle Avenue. Whatever they wore probably carried some religious significance. Though Ed whispered that they had to be eco-warriors on their way to a demonstration that involved blocking traffic. The bastards.



Finally, as his training kicked in and chemicals flooded his body, enabling him to cope with the stress, his brain found the solution. He turned to his colleague who'd simultaneously reached the same conclusion; the technology that had been introduced after the debacle on planet CX-348-977-A. They each placed a bronzed finger on the control panel on their chest-plates and pressed the red button. Light enveloped them, it shimmered briefly and they were gone.

Their departure triggered enthusiastic applause, Ed patted Gerry on the back and praised his courage and straight-speaking. They'd proved they wouldn't tolerate any invasion from foreigners.

*

A short while later, the research ship at the head of the flotilla left the blue-green planet's orbit. On the bridge, in front of the large screen that showed the world shrinking into the blackness of space, Mik and Pyk saluted their leader and heaved a sigh of relief. The manufacturer of the battery packs would be sued on their return, for failing to comply with the new specifications. Their report on planet GC-441-082-A had already been transmitted and actions agreed by the Galactic Council.



That was why, as the spacecraft reached the point of departure for that particular solar system, it ejected warning beacons that would remain in place for a long time to come. Passing travellers would know to avoid the blue-green planet with its belligerent, selfish and narrow-minded population. The galaxy would do without them.