

Sapling

by Michael Olsen

Characters: MAX, 30's, a gardener
 ARLO, 30's, a gardener
 SHAYLA, 30's, a manager

Lights come up on the Cassie Gardens. Harsh light hammers down on the ground. SR are a couple of old plastic chairs and a shovel.

MAX enters SL. He wears dirty overalls and a face mask and a work bag over his shoulder. He carries a bell jar with a tiny sapling in it. He puts the bell jar down on the ground centrestage and steps back. He takes off the face mask and considers the sapling. He then picks it up and moves it somewhere else. Again, he steps back to consider its position, the angle of the sun, the wind etc. He then moves it back to its original position.

ARLO enters SR. He too wears dirty overalls and a face mask. He takes off his face mask and falls, exhausted, into one of the chairs. MAX taps his watch.

MAX: Arlo! You should have been here two hours ago!

ARLO: I had to queue.

ARLO takes out a pen, waves it around.

MAX: You had to queue for a pen?

ARLO: No I queued for chicken and giblets, but they'd run out by the time I got to the counter, so I settled for a pen.

MAX: Arlo! You've forgotten that today is an auspicious day for the Cassie Gardens!

ARLO: Is it? I thought it was Wednesday. Well, whatever day it is, it's definitely still morning tea-time.

ARLO takes out a small biscuit and starts eating. There is something totally unedifying about the biscuit. ARLO stares at it for a disgusted moment, then continues eating it.

MAX can't believe ARLO is so nonchalant.

MAX: *(gesturing to the sapling)* Look!

ARLO: Oh yeah. *(to the sapling, waving.)* Hello little tree. Max and I we're going to plant you today.

MAX: That's right. Sheesh!

Pause. ARLO frowns.

ARLO: It looks a bit sick, Max.

MAX: *Sick?* You'd look sick if you were housed in a bell jar like that. The curved glass increases the heat inside.

ARLO: So now you're a glass engineer?

MAX: Makes sense, doesn't it? Like a magnifying glass.

ARLO: You've just gone all scientific on me, Max. I never saw this coming.

Pause

MAX: Arlo.

ARLO: Hmmm?

MAX: Can you keep a secret?

ARLO: Probably not.

Pause

MAX: OK. I won't tell you then.

ARLO: You can trust me. Sure you can. *(Pause)* As long as it's not *too* secret.

MAX: OK. *(Pause)* I took him home.

ARLO: Oh. Who'd you take home? *(grinning)* Do I know him? It wasn't that guy from Central Services?

MAX gestures to the sapling.

MAX: Last night. I smuggled him home in my work bag.

ARLO looks at the sapling, then at MAX, then at the sapling.

ARLO: *(in a loud whisper.)* You took a Restricted Plant home?

MAX: Shhh.

ARLO: *(quieter)* Did you look after it?

MAX: I gave him some of my water ration. Trees need water, you know.

ARLO: I know that. Have you forgotten I'm more qualified than you? I've done my online Certificate in Post-Structural Gardening, as well as a Post-Doctoral study into Grafting Mushrooms And Pine Trees by very distant learning.

MAX: Alright alright.

ARLO: How much did you give it?

MAX: About 20mls.

ARLO gets up, walks around the sapling, gets down on hands and knees, even puts his face to the ground, studying it intently.

ARLO: Hmm. Doesn't sound a lot. How did it respond?

MAX: He's still alive, isn't he?

ARLO: How can you tell? Remember those trees in the Bot Gardens? They looked perfectly OK till—

MAX: Yes yes well we won't go there, alright? Alright?

ARLO and MAX look at each other for a moment, then both take a deep breath.

ARLO: You have to be incredibly careful these days, Max. If the Higher Ups find out you've taken it home—without signing a 27B slash 6!—and even if nothing happens!—you could be in so much hurt I'd have to say I didn't know you.

MAX: I know, I know. But it was so great having Bill there.

ARLO: Bill? Who the hell is Bill? Goddamnit you're confusing me!

Again, MAX gestures to the sapling.

ARLO: You're giving it a *name* now?

MAX: Why not?

ARLO: How do you know it's a *fella*?

MAX: I can tell just by looking at it.

ARLO: No *way*. Sometimes you can't tell what sex a tree is till it grows *up*, and sometimes they're both sexes at the same *time*, and sometimes they even *change* sex. Besides, I don't think we should be talking about all this. (*drawing MAX away, conspiratorially, whispering.*) Not in front of it—him. He's *underage*.

MAX: Don't be ridiculous! He can't hear us!

ARLO: (*whispering*) A tree can feel the wind, turn its leaves to the sun, even communicate with other trees. Why not hear what we're saying?

MAX: You are so paranoid.

ARLO: Paranoid is what keeps you safe these days. (*Pause*) Boy, you need so much paperwork these days just to fart I don't think anyone imagined you could ever drown in dry paper.

MAX: Do you have your 77slash C?

ARLO: Never leave home without it.

ARLO goes to pull it out of his overalls, but the form isn't there. ARLO slaps and slips his hands into all his pockets—but the form still isn't there.

ARLO: I haven't got it! I must have forgotten it!

MAX: Don't worry. Just backdate this one.

MAX pulls out a blank form.

ARLO: You sure this is OK? It's an Official Form.

MAX: Do you want to be Officially Reprimanded?

ARLO takes out his pen, puts the form on the ground and signs it.

ARLO: I knew there was a reason I got this pen this morning.

ARLO folds up the 77 slash C and puts it safely in a pocket, patting his heart.

ARLO: There there little heart. Crisis over. (*Pause*) So tell me: what was it like having "Bill" in the apartment?

MAX: He brightened up the place—and it really didn't matter where I put him. If I put him in the kitchen, the kitchen looked fresh, more alive. If I put him in the lounge room, there seemed to be more light in the lounge, and so on.

- ARLO:** You didn't—you know...
- MAX:** What?
- ARLO:** (*whispering*) You didn't—you didn't put him in the bedroom?
- MAX:** What do you think I am? A pervert?
- ARLO:** Just asking!
- MAX shakes his head.*
- MAX:** Makes me wonder why on earth you wanted to be a gardener in the first place.
- ARLO:** I wanted to work outside! In the fresh air!
- MAX:** (*sniffing the air*) Fresh air. That's a joke.
- ARLO:** (*mumbling*) I was misinformed. (*Pause*) Did you take it—him—out of the bell jar?
- MAX:** Well I had to water him, didn't I?
- Pause*
- ARLO:** Hmmm. So you...touched him.
- MAX:** Yes.
- ARLO:** What was it like? Touching him?
- MAX:** Smooth. Cool.
- ARLO:** (*shuddering*) When we plant him today, you can do the honours.
- MAX:** Whatever you say.
- Pause*
- ARLO:** It's very possible there might be germs on him. A virus or something.
- MAX:** He's a plant, not a disease! (*Pause*) Someone told me once that people used to keep all sorts of plants in their homes. Permanently.
- ARLO:** Have another species living in your apartment? Nup. Not me. No way. (*Pause*) You sure you feel OK?

MAX: I feel fine! There's a lot of misinformation out there about plants. Look at us! We're gardeners! We're *supposed* to be into planting things!

ARLO: I know I know but it still sounds very weird to me.

MAX: So what are we actually *doing* every day?

ARLO: We make sure no-one comes in to wreck the garden.

MAX: But there's nothing here to wreck! Nothing grows here! Why are we gardeners in a public garden where there are no plants?

ARLO: Well there soon will be.

MAX: That's true.

ARLO: (*proudly*) I think we've been a not insignificant part of a revolution in gardening, myself. To have a public garden this big without any plants whatsoever. Who would have thought it?

MAX: Bill will wind up being the centrepiece of the whole garden.

ARLO: He'll be the *only* thing in the garden.

Pause

MAX: My great grandfather told me years ago he was told by *his* great grandfather that there used to be fully grown trees all around here—like at the Bot Gardens. Apparently these trees would stand in the ground, just...just...just *growing*. People could even go up and touch them. If they wanted to.

ARLO: Oooh. I don't know about that.

MAX: I keep telling you: trees can't hurt you! OK?

ARLO: What about triffids? And Pluto fly traps? And don't forget the Krynoid.

MAX: The *what*?

ARLO: You heard me. The Krynoid. I based my 3rd Year Honours Thesis on it. All my research came from an old Doctor Who documentary called *The Seeds of Doom*. Apparently its vines drag you into its chemical chamber and it dissolves you over three weeks.

MAX: That is such royal tosh. You'll believe anything the vid progs say.

ARLO: The vid progs *always* tell the truth. Everybody knows that.

- MAX:** Well more importantly for us, what does Shayla say?
- Pause. A shudder passes through both of them.*
- ARLO:** *(swallowing)* She'll be here soon, won't she?
- MAX:** Of course.
- ARLO:** She needs to sign off on *everything*. Remember what happened last time when you thought we didn't need a 38C slash 4?
- MAX:** Yes yes.
- ARLO:** If I remember rightly *you're* the one who thought it was only a formality and didn't really matter.
- MAX:** I know I know. And then everything went sideways.
- ARLO:** Sideways would have been OK. We got—
- MAX:** Have you finished yet?
- ARLO:** Just saying.
- MAX:** OK. I know. We can't just go ahead and plant him anywhere, can we?
- ARLO:** There are protocols to follow.
- MAX:** Directions.
- ARLO:** Proper forms to fill out.
- MAX:** We can't just go off on a frolic of our own now, can we?
- ARLO:** Absolutely not. *(Pause)* So when is she getting here?
- MAX:** All in good time. She's never late.
- ARLO:** What time is it?
- MAX:** *(checking his watch)* She should be here by—
- SHAYLA enters. She wears a business suit and carries a number of fat forms attached to a clipboard, and a rolled-up plastic map with lines drawn all over it.*
- SHAYLA:** *(to MAX, flatly)* Morning.
- MAX:** *(to SHAYLA)* Morning.

SHAYLA: *(to ARLO, flatly)* Morning.

ARLO: *(to SHAYLA)* Morning.

SHAYLA: *(indicating the sapling)* So this is it?

SHAYLA walks around the sapling, inspecting it. She doesn't get too close to it.

ARLO: Yep.

Pause

MAX: Do you—um—have the Forms?

SHAYLA: Of course. Here's the 120B slash 42 receipt for said tree—

MAX: Right.

SHAYLA: —plus the 16 dash B7A that acknowledges our receipt for your receipt to guarantee the successful planting of said tree for the immediate duration of the said tree-planting ceremony, and for the next 50 years, and the 57 slash 2 that devolves total, immediate and ongoing requisite feeding, cleaning, pruning, staking, care, love and attention lavished on said tree etc. etc. etc. All clear?

SHAYLA hands over the clipboard of documents.

MAX: Absolutely.

MAX and ARLO flick through the forms to the final pages and sign—using ARLO's pen. SHAYLA then signs the forms as well, pocketing ARLO's pen. ARLO is about to say something about his pen, then thinks better of it.

SHAYLA walks around the sapling, again, keeping her distance.

SHAYLA: Is it—is it safe?

MAX: Safe?

SHAYLA: In that container?

MAX: Perfectly. Won't hurt a fly.

SHAYLA: You haven't handled it have you? Outside that container?

MAX: Absolutely not.

- ARLO:** No way.
- SHAYLA:** Good. *(Pause)* It does look so small in there, doesn't it?
- MAX:** All trees start this small. In fact, even smaller. They start from a seed, as small as your thumbnail—maybe even smaller—and grow and grow into a big tree.
- SHAYLA:** The Higher Ups want to see that happen here.
- MAX:** Yes of course.
- ARLO:** That's what we're here for: to help it grow up big and strong.
- SHAYLA:** Yes. I understand the part you two play in the scheme of things. *(Pause)* Is that where you're going to plant it?
- MAX:** It's not covered in any of the Forms.
- ARLO:** Is that something that we *need* to cover?
- SHAYLA:** Maybe not. *(looking around)* We should be able to deal with it right now. This morning.
- MAX:** That's great. Isn't it Arlo?
- ARLO:** I like it. A lot.
- MAX:** You don't like it where it is right now?
- SHAYLA:** *(pointing)* How about over there?
- MAX:** Right.
- MAX moves the sapling two feet to the left.*
- ARLO:** That looks better.
- SHAYLA:** Do you think?
- MAX:** Absolutely. That's why you're in Regional Headquarters. You know where things are supposed to go.
- ARLO:** Without a doubt.
- SHAYLA:** Hmmm. Maybe . . . ?
- MAX:** Yes?
- SHAYLA:** *(pointing)* On the other side. There. Let me see it there.

MAX moves the sapling to the opposite side of the stage.

MAX: Very good position.

ARLO: Yes very good. It'll get the afternoon shade from that building over there.

SHAYLA: Still, it does seem to be on its own over there...

MAX: It does, doesn't it? Maybe...maybe here would be suitable?

MAX moves the sapling back to its original position.

ARLO: Yes. That *is* the best position—as far as I can tell.

SHAYLA: Yes. You may be right. Now I just have to check...

SHAYLA unrolls the map. MAX and ARLO crane their necks over SHAYLA's shoulder to inspect the map. She walks around: MAX and ARLO follow her.

MAX: Oh. (*looking around*) This could be exactly the *wrong* spot.

ARLO: Yes. There's that gas pipe right there.

SHAYLA: Yes.

SHAYLA rolls up the map and walks around, considering.

MAX: That kind of puts a dampener on things, doesn't it?

ARLO: Indeed it does.