

A romantic weekend in the country turns out to be anything but when aliens appear.

Meteors and Dandelions

By Ian C Douglas

The car pulled over the brow of the valley and the cottage appeared in the cusp below.

“Yonder lies Shangri La,” Timothy said with his best theatrical voice.

Ellen scowled at him, her big bright eyes as dazzling as headlights.

“About time.”

After the long, traffic-choked drive from the city, she was clearly in need of a bath and a chilled Pinot. She wrinkled her tiny nose.

“Doesn’t look as pretty as it did on the web.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Timothy replied. “Drystone walls, wildflower meadows, a view of Dovedale to kill for. A weekend in the sticks could be just what the doctor ordered.”

“The fertility consultant you mean?”

Timothy pushed out his bottom lip.

“Her as well.”

It pained him that Ellen was seeking professional help with their baby plans.

They parked outside the cottage and beeped the horn. A middle aged, rosy-cheeked woman, every inch the farmer’s wife, appeared from inside.

“You get the keys from Mrs Country Bumpkin and settle the account,” Timothy suggested. “I’ll tackle the luggage.”

Forcing a smile on her lips, Ellen climbed out and greeted the landlady. For a moment, he watched her striding purposefully away. Ellen was taller than him, dark-haired, and stubborn-faced. Timothy, in contrast, was small and blond with a weak chin. Ellen sometimes called him Dough Face, particularly when she wanted to tease him. Recently, she had been teasing him a lot.

He sighed, clamoured out of the car and walked to the trunk.

#

Timothy looked out of the kitchen window. A small patio lay at the back of the house, with rolling pastures and craggy peaks beyond. The golden sun threw long shadows across the valley.

“Well, this is picture perfect. She can’t deny that,” he said to himself.

Ellen was upstairs playing with her ovulation kit, while Timothy irradiated dinner in the microwave. On a sudden whim, he decided to shift the plates from the kitchen to the picnic table outside. A candlelit dinner al fresco, that was sure to get her in the mood. That, and a couple of bottles of plonk.

He began ferrying out the cutlery and crockery.

“Hello?”

Something high above the purple-red clouds caught his eye. Something glinting.

He peered harder. An airplane?

At that moment, the sound of Ellen's dainty feet skipping downstairs distracted him. He stepped inside to greet her. She stood at the foot of the stairs in her bathrobe. Her short dark curls were still wet from the bath.

"I'm surging!" She said with one of her big enthusiastic grins.

"So, I see."

"My L.H. levels, I mean. The Luteinising hormone, it's on the up and up!"

Timothy gave her a blank stare.

"It means I'm ovulating, Dough Face, I'm fertile, fruitful, I'm fecund with a capital F!" She explained and flushed even deeper.

Timothy chuckled. The weekend was on the up and up too.

The microwave pinged.

"Go outside, dear. Pour yourself some vino and let me dish you up something yummy."

Her large Bette-Davis-eyes filled with delight.

"Ah, my domestic deity," she cooed.

By the time Timothy defrosted the cheesecake, the sun was vanishing into the Dovedale peaks. A fiery halo of colour blazed across the western horizon. In the east, indigo clouds ushered in the night.

The atmosphere is working a charm, he thought. The country air, the sweeping views, Mr Sainsbury's best vintage, all promised a spectacular night. Surely this time they were going to be lucky? They would finally be on their way to the baby Ellen so desired. No more late periods that just turned out to be late. No more tension between them. Ellen would love him again. He just needed that bit of luck.

Ellen gazed at the sunset. Then, with unease in her voice, she said,

"Timothy, please tell me that's the Evening Star."

He followed her gaze. There was something in the sky.

He could see immediately it was no normal heavenly body, Venus or otherwise. Not only did it shine far brighter than any self-respecting star, it was the wrong shape, more an umbrella than a twinkling spark. The object was drifting gradually to earth. For a moment, he wondered if it might be a parachutist.

He slipped on his glasses and scrutinised it closer.

A tuft of strands sprouted from a small dangling bulb. Rather like an overgrown dandelion seed. Apart from the glow, that was. Each strand pulsated with a strange luminescence.

"What an odd-looking weather balloon," he said at last.

Ellen pulled a face of disgust.

"Timothy, you dunderhead. How can it be a weather balloon?"

"Well, why not? They come in all weird and wonderful shapes."

"Look, there. Weather balloons don't come in formations, do they?"

Ellen was right. Three more of the things had appeared out of the twilight. Then another, and two from the north, and three in the south, and more and yet more.

Ellen let out one of her loud whistles, fit for a building site. Timothy found it her most irritating habit.

"There must be hundreds of them Timmy. How far up are they, do you think? I can't work out their size."

He frowned.

“They look as high as the clouds, don’t they? But if that’s right they must be humongous.”

“Oh golly, how exciting!” she exclaimed. “We’re witnessing a UFO invasion.”

Trust Ellen to over-dramatize the situation, Timothy muttered under his breath.

“Obviously an illusion, dear,” he said.

“A David Blaine kind of illusion?”

“No, a weather-phenomenon kind of illusion. During the day hot air rises from the ground, doesn’t it, and gets trapped in the stratosphere, making a giant magnifying glass. Read it somewhere. Those may very well be common or garden seeds, dandelion most probably. They’re just distorted by layers of warm air.”

Ellen fixed him with her laser-sharp glare.

“For a lawyer, you’re pretty dense, aren’t you, Mr. Dough Face?”

Timothy ignored her, engrossed by the celestial display. By now the entire sky was full of incandescent, feathery, floating things. Each seed throbbled with its silver gleam, beautiful and eerie at the same time. They continued drifting and sinking. The lowest now appeared to be the size of a man.

“See!” Ellen wailed.

Several more of the objects were gliding over the treetops in the next meadow, tripping and snaring in the upper branches. Definitely as big as people.

BANG!

Timothy and Ellen jumped and glanced over their shoulders. One of the things had collided with the cottage roof and was sliding gracefully down in their direction. Ellen shrieked. Timothy grabbed her hand and yanked her to her feet.

“Come on!”

He pulled her through the patio doors.

“The Pinot!” Ellen cried, and darted back. She snatched the wine bottle and dived inside, just as the huge seed-like shape wafted across the picnic table. Plates and glasses smashed onto the concrete overlay.

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“The Pinot’s gone,” Ellen said in the darkness. They were squeezed into the alcove of the gable window, in the major bedroom, observing the luminous scene outside. The electricity supply failed within moments of the first few landings. Their mobiles also packed up, as did the landline.

Timothy summoned his manliest smile.

“Africa. That’s where these are from. They’re the kind of peculiar jungle plant you see on those National Geographic documentaries. A storm blew them up into the jet stream and carried them all the way to sunny Derbyshire.”

“Don’t talk rot, Dough Face.”

Ellen’s sarcasm cut through him like a knife.

“They’re obviously extra-terrestrial,” she said. “Six-foot tall seeds glowing like Christmas trees, in their hundreds. It’s the only believable explanation. Just my luck really. My once-in-a-month chance to conceive ruined by an alien invasion.”

They fell quiet, half-hypnotised by the shimmering landscape. The meadows

were crowded with gigantic seeds. Some had tumbled over into the long grass, but most remained upright. The bulb-like base anchored them to the ground while long fluffy fibres swayed on the night air. Pulses of light cascaded from root to tip and back again. This soft, shifting glimmer lit up the black hillsides, as though the Northern Lights had fallen from the sky.

Ellen stirred from her trance.

“I don’t know if this is relevant, but I read a book of Derbyshire folk tales once. There’s one about a giantess who blows dandelion seeds away on the wind. And every plant and animal in the world grows from those seeds.”

Timothy scratched his bald spot.

“A creation myth?”

“Fertility myth would be a better term. Either way, they’re all just metaphors for a women’s ability to create life.”

Timothy suppressed a smile.

“Oh, women make babies on their own, do they?”

“Mostly,” Ellen replied, rubbing her empty abdomen.

“So, that’s all we need,” he went on, changing the subject, “a bloody great giant stomping over Dovedale.”

They both laughed, a little too loudly. More silence.

“Ellen, I think we should get out of here.”

“If only to get more Pinot.”

“Seriously. If they are seeds, what do they grow into?”

Ellen thought for a moment.

“I’m demanding our deposit back. The brochure said nothing about aliens landing.”

More forced laughter. Then Timothy said.

“I was thinking in the car. Drive back to Hartington and alert the authorities.”

He helped Ellen to her feet and they felt their way through the shadows of the old cottage, down the stairs to the huge and ancient wooden door. They unbolted it and peered out. The Nissan stood the ten yards up the track, where they had left it. Not a single seed had fallen on this side of the house.

“Ellen, stay here while I start it up. Just to make sure everything’s okay.”

“Good idea,” she replied, her cheeks as pale as flour.

Timothy drew a deep breath and plunged into the evening chill. So far, the seeds had done nothing to suggest they posed a threat. Nevertheless, they sparked a sense of foreboding he couldn’t shake off. As he reached the car, he pressed the key fob. The doors unlocked with a welcoming clunk.

Then, the world ended.

The ground exploded in a volley of mud. Shockwaves threw Timothy flat on his back. Next, came the screeching sound of something hurtling from the heavens. Something travelling so fast, it crash-landed before he heard it coming. A cloud of dirt and smoke engulfed him. A second blast resonated further away. And more. It was raining bombs.

Piercing banshee shrieks filled the air, interspersed with the boom of repeated impacts. Ellen was screaming her head off. The cottage roof erupted in a shower of slate fragments. Timothy struggled to his feet as the ground shuddered like jelly. The only thing louder than the roar of this blitz was the voice shouting in his head. RUN!

In a slow-motion storm of pebbles and glass and tiles, Timothy bolted towards the safety of the house.

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Even in the glow of the candle, Ellen looked awful. Timothy held himself responsible. After all, a weekend in the Peaks was his idea. An idyllic getaway to conceive the long hoped-for baby. Only he could mess up on such a grand scale.

“Ouch!” he winced as she dabbed antiseptic on his chest.

They were in the bathroom. Timothy was shirtless and Ellen was fussing over the cuts and scratches that now decorated his skinny torso. After the apocalyptic roar of the meteor storm, silence now suffocated the outside world.

“Are you sure?” he said at last.

“Go check for yourself, the car sustained a direct hit. One of whatever they were went straight through the engine. The only way out of here now is legging it.”

She took a step back to examine her handiwork.

“There, all done. Luckily they’re just superficial wounds.”

She hesitated, the cotton wool and bottle still in her hands. Their eyes met.

“You’d make a great nurse,” he said and blushed.

She made him feel strangely vulnerable, what with his half-nakedness and her closeness. Timothy once read that danger is a great aphrodisiac. As he now knew, this was true.

Ellen put the antiseptic down on the windowsill.

“Timothy, I’m scared.”

She burst into tears. For a second, Timothy was speechless, he had never seen her cry before. He opened his mouth to say ‘so am I’ when he realised that wouldn’t help. He took her in his arms.

“It’s okay, love. We’re going to be okay. I promise.”

“Oh, Timmy,” she cried, and hugged him more tightly. “You’re too good to me, you know that?”

“There’s nothing good about it. It’s love.”

She stifled her sobs.

“I wanted to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t be mad.”

“Me? Highly unlikely.”

“If this weekend didn’t work out. If we didn’t, you know, conceive. I was going to call it a day.”

“Oh?”

He pulled back from the embrace.

“But Timmy, when you were out there into that...that maelstrom, I could only think of one thing. I couldn’t bear to be without you.”

“Oh, so you do...?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

He squeezed her again.

“And Tim,” she began. “I don’t even care about having a baby now. All that matters, is

that I'm with you."

Tim felt an involuntary smile edge across his face. She really did love him as much as he loved her. She'd just needed an apocalypse to bring it out. And now he had to avert that same apocalypse. With effort he focused his mind on the urgency of their situation.

"They seem to have stopped," he remarked, after a while.

"The meteors?"

"Yup. Let's escape while we can."

Ellen chewed on her already-well-bitten fingernails.

"But supposing there's another meteor storm? Half way to Hartington and we could be pulverised to kingdom come. Far safer to stay indoors here, until the authorities come to rescue us. Can't be long now."

Timothy frowned.

"Ellen, there's a crater in the kitchen."

"So, we camp out here. First dibs on sleeping in the bathtub."

"And meanwhile something crawls out of that crater and bites our heads off?"

"Timothy, we're not in a horror movie."

"No harm checking out the kitchen, though," he said, stroking his chin. "Just to be sure."

Ellen started to say something but bit back her tongue. Timothy slipped on his ripped, bloodstained shirt.

"Okay, let's go and take a look," he said.

"I think I preferred the shirt off," Ellen muttered and followed him out of the bathroom.

The hefty kitchen door creaked open. Timothy and then Ellen peered around it and into the gloom. The giant seeds outside the window painted the room in a faint, sepulchral light. A reek of burning metal lingered in the air. The meteor had shot through the roof, upper bedroom and kitchen ceiling like a bullet. The resulting crater was only a few inches wide but looked deep. The floor was splattered with plaster and fractured kitchen tiles.

"What a waste of good terracotta," Ellen said in a sad voice.

Timothy lifted the candle higher.

"Good God!" they both gasped.

A thick deposit of slime emerged from the crater and trailed all the way to the backdoor. There was a small hole in the door, as if something had gnawed its way out.

"Some creature came and went," Timothy said.

"Look!" Ellen shrieked and grabbed Timothy's hand so tightly he had to hide the pain.

Even as they watched, one, two and then a whole string of mushrooms emerged from the slime. It was as if they were watching a time-lapse camera. The thin dainty mushrooms wiggled upwards, coming to rest at a height of around three inches. Within seconds the trail to the door was choked with fungi.

Their brains struggled for an explanation. Ellen got there first.

"Fungal spores are everywhere, in the air. That slime must be super-fertile. The spores settled on the slime and hey presto, an instant mushroom farm."

Timothy glowered like an old bulldog.

“That’s impossible,”

“Like I said earlier, Dear. For a legal-eagle, you’re not very deductive. The proof is right in front of our eyes. Mushrooms. Or are they toadstools.”

“No, those are the red and spotty-white ones, I think.”

“I’ve changed my mind. We’ve got to get out of here” Ellen replied and trod warily across the floor, taking care to avoid the crater. She unbolted the damaged door and stepped outside.

“Ellen!” Timothy hissed. No telling what danger lurked out there. She didn’t answer. Half-annoyed and half-terrified, Timothy hurried over.

Ellen was standing dumbstruck. The trail of mushrooms picked its way through the landscape of giant seeds, across to the neighbouring meadow. But they had sprouted outwards and upwards, reaching an unimaginable scale. Grey caps the size of beach parasols perched on seven-foot stems.

Timothy rubbed his eyes with his fists.

“It’s like a bloody Enid Blyton fairy tale,” he whispered.

The oversized mushrooms paled in comparison to the meadow, which was now swamped with shapes and colours. A jungle of wildflowers, each seven or eight feet high, stretched to the hillsides.

“End Blyton on acid,” Ellen replied, trembling.

Timothy recognised the obvious, dandelions, buttercups, bluebells, daisies, and a sprinkling of purple clover heads, but there were many more flowers he couldn’t identify. Frozen explosions of yellow, blue and pink, all nodding on the gentle breeze.

Ellen breathed in slowly. For some reason, Timothy lowered his eyes from the monstrous flowers to her breasts. They seemed, well, radiant.

“That aroma, it’s...so sweet,” she said.

She was right. His lungs sucked down the cloying air and a reek of ripe fruit filled his head. A dizziness came and went.

Timothy took Ellen's hand.

“Come on. Let's investigate.”

“A moment ago, you wanted us to do a runner.”

“That was a moment ago.”

They pushed their way into the heart of the jungle, clambering over spade-sized leaves and vines as thick as pythons. Slime dripped everywhere. The celestial seeds, as Ellen now called them, glowed deep in the riotous foliage. Timothy pulled back the undergrowth for a closer look.

“Well, I never,” he remarked.

The seed was caked in slime. Its bulb-shaped base was swollen and writhing. Something inside was stirring.

He thought for a moment and then said, “Whatever landed in the kitchen, and all the others, that’s it right there. Inside the bulb.”

Ellen nodded. “They’ve fertilized the bulbs. Like seeds or spores. That’s what they do!”

“And even their slime is super fertile!” Timothy added.

Ellen squeezed his hand again.

“Super-duper fertile, Tim. They’ve fallen from a bountiful moon.”

They exchanged looks. Ellen’s irises were gleaming sapphires in the half-light.

“I know what to do now,” Timothy said.

He started undressing. Ellen glanced away, glanced back, then followed suit. Tim pushed through the thick greenery to another celestial seed. He scooped up a handful of the ooze and wiped it methodically into his chest. The skin tingled. A primeval energy bubbled inside his lungs.

“You do me,” Ellen said, turning her gaze to the ground. A ladybird as big as a kettle scuttled by, but they no longer cared.

Timothy rubbed ooze into Ellen’s shoulders, breasts and stomach. Then more and more still. Blood charged through his veins like a locomotive.

The stars erupted into great fireballs. The moon emerged from fluorescent clouds and glittered like a disco ball. Timothy felt himself shrinking and falling into Ellen’s embrace. Lips collided like crashing planets. The wildflowers enveloped them.

He was flying across the blinding-bright lightshow of the Milky Way. Creatures were all around, riding solar winds, their atom-thin tentacles trailing behind for miles. He understood now. They circled the galaxy but always returned to Earth, once every few million years. Like salmon, they always came to the same spot to reproduce, scattering their eggs and spores from high above the planet. Then they were off again, cruising eternity.

His eyes opened. He and Ellen were lying in the cold grass. The forest of wildflowers had wilted as suddenly as it blossomed. The celestial seeds were crumbling into dust, but each one, before it died, spat a small silvery embryo into the night sky. Meteors in reverse, fading up into the heavens.

“I can’t put it into words,” Ellen mumbled.

“There’s a first.”

“Tim, I just know. I’m—, I’m—.”

She couldn’t bring herself to say it. Timothy grinned slowly.

“Pregnant?”

She placed his hand on her cheek.

“But, it’s impossible, Tim!”

“True. I know. Come on, let’s go.”

They picked up their clothes and made their way back over the carpet of dead, crackly leaves.

The End



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