



@mothersinvent  

Maeve: Thimali! Hi!

Thimali: Hi!

Maeve: Can you see me? Look I'm waving through the bushes? What is this?

Thimali: *(Laughs)*. Did you get my gift?

Maeve: I got you a gift it seems to be a very scrawny - I'm smelling it - And it's a tomato plant. I think. It's got that strong, almost unpleasant but almost pleasant smell, almost like... I wanna say *(Laughing)* Cat pee, just a tiny bit! *(Both Laughing)*.

Thimali: WHAT? NO!

[Music Transition]

Maeve: Anyway, why did you send me this?

Thimali: Yeah I sent you a tomato plant as part of a brilliant plan I have for us both, which I will get to in a minute. But I did send it because I heard you feeling bit down about your tree.

Maeve: Oh my tree. You heard about that?

Thimali: Yes.

Maeve: So, I mean, I love all of the trees that I see on the city streets. I've written about this before, and I am glad to call myself a tree hugger *(Laughs)*. I don't do it a lot but I've been known to embrace an Oak here and there.

Maeve: I really wanted to plant my own tree, you know, to just make the air better and to rewild the city. I thought it was this brilliant idea.

Thimali: It is a great idea.

Maeve: And it's also partly because I've been learning about parks in the states in particular here in New York City

and basically the more money in a neighbourhood, the more green space you have.

Maeve: In fact, I've got a statistic for you. The average park size is 7.9 acres in predominantly black neighborhoods compared with 29.8 acres in predominantly white neighborhoods. So it's

Thimali: Urgh no.

Maeve: - you know - climate justice is racial justice.

Thimali: Yes. Racial justice, ladies and gentlemen.

Maeve: I think that's why I wanted to get like a tree because people love them. People need them. And it's more than just a kind of, their carbon storage facilities or whatever, it's like a mental health thing too.

Thimali: Yep.

Maeve: So I loved the idea of having like the "Maeve Oak".

Thimali: *(Laughs).*

Maeve: I mean the city of New York has come up with this scheme, the 1 Million Tree scheme that did really well a couple of years ago and there's tons of charities and organizations who dig and who plant trees.

Thimali: Okay. So what happened to your tree?

Maeve: Well, there isn't one. I mean, I did make some calls..

[Phone Rings]

Automated voice: Briefly tell me what I can help you with this morning?
You can say things -

Maeve: *(Interrupting).* Oh. Sorry. I wanted to plant a tree.

Maeve: So first of all, I called '311' you know, that's the number that New Yorkers call when really anything to do with the city comes up,

Thimali: Yep. Yep love it.

[Automated voice]

Maeve: Speak to a TREE - one - one representative. Little joke.

Thimali: *(Laughs).*

Maeve: So I wanted to know like - basically my thought was there's a gap in this street, like an empty space where a tree used to be.

Thimali: Yep.

[Phone call in the background]

Automated Voice: Please hold while I connect you.

[Phone rings]

[Maeve connects on the phone]

Maeve: So I was thinking I can go and pick up a tree. I can take care of it.

Operator: Okay.

Maeve: I kind of had this whole plan.

Operator: I can assist you with that

Maeve: But it turns out you can't just go and buy a tree and plant it yourself.

Operator: You would have to ask the department of Parks and Recreation to plant a tree, free of charge.

Maeve: Oh so I don't buy it - I don't get the tree myself. They will decide which type of tree?

Operator: Mmm hmm.

Maeve: Okay.

Operator: The Department of Parks and Recreation will review your request within one year. It may take up to 24 months to inspect the location for planting.

[Thimali and Maeve]

Thimali: Two years? That's insane!

Maeve: To review it. Yeah, just to look at it.

Thimali: But still... Come on, man.

Maeve: I know.

[Maeve on Phone]

Maeve: I wonder if there's a faster way, where I could plant it myself actually. If there's a gap in the trees...

Operator: Ummm...

Maeve: So she said that like, yes, you can make a request and then the parks departments will come and assess the area and they'll tell you the right type of tree.

Operator: It needs to be inspected because it has to follow certain, you know laws and zoning requirements.

Maeve: Ok. Like if you planted the wrong type of tree it could mess up the other trees or something maybe?

Operator: Yeah. Something like that.

Maeve: Okay.

[Maeve and Thimali in discussion]

Maeve: And afterwards I got a text message and it was from 311, and it was like, you know, you have submitted your request. The next update will be within 720 days.

Thimali: *(Laughs)*. 720... Oh my god!!

Thimali: Oh, well, okay. Your waiting days are over. That is what the tomato plant is for.

Maeve: Well, I appreciate it, but it's certainly a bit smaller than a tree.

Thimali: You're so fussy!

Maeve: Huh, I know.

[Music Transition]

Thimali: I do think this is all a great idea, Maeve, and I've been thinking very much along the same lines recently because I didn't have any green space to get me through lockdown... But one day recently my friend and I went and had a boozy cocktail on her stoop.

Thimali: And we were just sort of hazily looking out at one of those of the ugly patches of green on the sidewalk and, you know, it was totally overgrown. I suppose a tree was in there at some point, but now it's just generally a place for dogs to poop. But there was a tomato plant growing out of it. And we were like wait, what?!

Thimali: So she, my friend and I, we just dug it up and replanted some new plants. I was like, surely we should be doing this all over the city.

Maeve: Yeah, I tend to just like when there's a little empty space and there's weeds, I don't think about it too much. I think I've been conditioned from living in a city to think of like parks are nature.

[Music transition]

Thimali: The thing is, getting more green into a city or where you live, that could mean anything

Thimali: So, you know, as I was thinking about hanging out with my friends and digging up patches of green on the sidewalk, I was actually thinking about a woman I met who I think you're really going to love.

Maeve: Oh really?

Ena: So this is the year of the pumpkin... we got three types of pumpkin growing here. This is a hybrid of jamaican and butternut.

Thimali: She's called Ena McPherson. And she's just about to turn 70.

Thimali: And Ena has taken run-down, forgotten corners of New York City and nurtured them back to life as community gardens.

Ena: Ha! There's a butternut squash!

Thimali: Oh my god it looks like it was just thrown in there but it's actually grown out of the ground!

Ena: It's going to be ready in the Fall.

Thimali: New York City community gardens have their roots in 'guerrilla gardening'. Back in the 1960's and 1970's when the city was dealing with an incapacitating fiscal crisis, buildings were being demolished leaving these empty

run-down lots in their place. But against the odds and led by women, local communities reclaimed that land and they made green space and healthy food more accessible to their neighborhoods. And this is something that we can all do.

Thimali: Hi Ena!

Ena: Good morning, good morning!

Thimali: Oh, you're just hanging out in paradise.

Ena: Yeah!

Thimali: So I went to one of her gardens called T&T Vernon in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, which although is being rapidly gentrified, is a historically-black neighborhood.

Ena: A patch of land city owned land that we have been stewarding. I personally have been here for 20 years,

Ena: They're regular people are normal, regular people day to day, people that live on the block create these spaces and the agencies will come in and offer support, but it was started and mostly run by neighborhood people.

Ena: All our gardens here, this was 1984. The one that the corner was created by Ms. Minnie Fierce, 'Minnie OG' an original gangster, original gardener, but she actually carried a weapon and she was fierce. She developed the space next door and that's our really oldest garden, 1982.

Thimali: Oh lets do a tour then, and then we can get into it.

Thimali: So it's a totally organic garden?

Ena: Totally organic. We compost and rainwater. We harvest rainwater.

Ena: So a wall of raspberry here and we planted specifically on the street so when people are passing by, they can have berries.

Ena: I'm a food justice advocate. And I want to show that we can grow edible food in these urban settings.

Thimali: Okay, so we're also in this very urban environment, like there's tons of construction outside, like Bed-Stuy as a neighborhood is kind of, yeah - we know that there's

been a lot of development in recent years. So this kind of feels like an Oasis.

Ena: The noise you're listening to,, they're building a high rise. It's going to be 120 apartments that used to be our supermarket. So they tore down our supermarket... So where can we shop? We have to walk further and to go, maybe go into a more expensive neighborhood. You know, it's discrimination.

[Music transition]

Ena: We've got three types of Basil..... This is purple, that's Thai Basil. And this is Genovese basil. This is Greek oregano.

Thimali: I mean, you have a very multicultural garden.

Ena: That's what a garden should be, it should reflect the people that are living in the community.

Ena: You know, wherever you come from you want to plant, you know? Personally I'm Jamaican, but I'm not a big Callaloo but I will eat it. I like collards!

Ena: I am a city girl. I was born and raised in Kingston, which is the capital and the ghetto. But my mother was able to raise us in an urban setting with rural sensibilities.

Thimali: How come, where did she get that from?

Ena: Because at heart she's a country girl. She kept taking us back and all our sensibilities are formed around country living. 'Cause mama was really country.

Thimali: How did you get to Bed-Stuy?

Thimali: OK. I immigrated here, in the early seventies, I was a young, young woman. I was 21 years old and left my mother's home, and I came to New York City.

Ena: I mean, when I started out our project was entirely propelled by feminine energy. It was four of us. Middle-aged, African-American propertied women. And we went to work - all our gardens.

Thimali: So why did the community garden get established in the first place for this neighborhood?

Ena: Well, because of the fact that this vacant land and, you know, people saw it became a dumping site and it was, you know, encouraging crime...

Ena: I think, to improve any community.

Ena: It brings out the best in everyone. It softens you or the culture softens you. I see men, young men come in here and they will see an insect and they go down to the ground and they're, you know, they're curious, you see a snail on a tree.

Thimali: I mean I'm kind of getting a sense of the importance of food justice in Bed-Stuy but why do you think it's so important that community gardens sort of help bridge that gap?

Ena: Because I think if it addresses the need of people in the community, we grow stuff in here and we give it to the neighbors.

Ena: Access to food and healthy, affordable food is not a privilege. It's a right. It's an inherent right of all human beings.

Thimali: Yep.

Ena: So we think that the garden, um, addresses the issue. It brings people together, it builds community. It promotes healthy eating habits for the people. It addresses the issue of climate justice, because we are... everything in here is a lesson to show people that, you know, we're at risk and what we do out there directly affects, and every one of us.

Ena: I mean REALLY! Why do they think we have COVID? Because of how we've destroyed the community and they don't, they don't make the connection.

Thimali: Like, do you consider yourself a guerilla gardener?

Ena: Absolutely. Absolutely. Most of these spaces were developed through guerrilla tactics. We took the land over, we started to take care of it and then the city see us.

Ena: And then when they see us and they want to come in, then we stand up, we push back. Tranquility farm which is 5200ft, we found the space. It was, you know, it was vacant for 30 years, it was owned by the city and we

asked permission and they gave us a temporary license. But I knew that I wasn't going to be gardening temporarily.

Thimali: Wow.

Ena: The first thing I did was put a gazebo there that was built by children. So if they had to move us, that would be a political action.

Thimali: *(Laughs)*. Clever!

Ena: Yes. And so, yeah. And so four years later, they wanted the land back.

Thimali: So what did you do?

Ena: They put us up for auction... 34 gardens. They put on auction. And so we resisted, we demonstrated, we wrote letters.

Ena: And so we fought, and a year later they conveyed us the parks. And so all of these gardens were developed by guerrilla tactics.

Ena: It's right. You know? You don't need government to tell you, you could plant anywhere.

Ena: You saw that little patch of land?

Thimali: Yeah.

Ena: Speak to your neighbor said, 'you know, I want to do this. I want to do that'. You create a day that you go out there and clean up and you start planting stuff. And then when they come at you, you resist.

Thimali: Yeah.

Ena: Just do it!

Thimali: Okay!

Thimali: This space is absolutely gorgeous. So much green. I mean so much green. It's like the floor is covered in grass and weeds.

Ena: We have to develop a love for weeds because that's where everything begins. Because the resiliency of a weed is that you try to stamp it out and it goes, it walks underground and appears somewhere else. I mean, how

could you not you know, appreciate and have respect for that kind of resiliency.

Thimali: I mean, it sounds like you're talking about social justice movements right now too...

Ena: Yeah. Yeah! I consider myself a weed, you know? I'm resilient, I'm stubborn, you know, not daunting.

Thimali: Yes! I feel like I have a kinship with weeds right now *(Laughs)*.

Ena: Yes! Appreciate weeds.

Thimali: Thank you so much, Miss Ena - I'm coming to hang out with you in paradise.

Ena: Yeah? *(Laughs)*.

Thimali: Like get used to my face!

Ena: It is my pleasure and the fact that you're interested in guerilla gardening,

Thimali: Oh yeah.

Ena: That's how it starts, you know? And you were attracted to this tomato plant and that's the beginning of the end for you my dear.

Thimali: *(Laughs)*.

Ena: So you're going to take it further.

Thimali: *(Laughs)*. I think you might have called it right there. I think you might've called it. I'm in, I'm hooked.

Ena: Yeah.

[Fade out]

Maeve: Amazing thimali, that's so cool.

Thimali: It's amazing.

Maeve: Imagine if we could walk the streets of New York picking berries and tomatoes from sidewalk plots? I mean, how about that for a regenerative future?

Thimali: Right?! But not for the short term. Here to stay, so we can build community, just like Miss Ena said.

Maeve: Yeah.

Thimali: I'm not even joking. This weekend, I went back to the little tomato plant that my friend and I worked on.

Maeve: Mhmm.

Thimali: And it was lit up with tomatoes like a Xmas tree! But while we were on the stoop, a homeless person rolled up and joyfully swiped all the ripe ones and left with this massive grin on his face and we were like 'YES!'

Maeve: Brilliant!

[Theme Music]

And the thing is that like all over the world, there are other people like Ena who are trying to make spaces greener and reclaim bits of towns and cities.

Maeve: Right, it's like a human instinct.

Thimali: Sure, exactly. And then not all community gardens either. Like some of them are just patches of land or corners of motorways.

Maeve: Mhmm.

Thimali: And Maeve, you have a doorstep?

Maeve: I do.

Thimali: And I've been eyeing up another patch of land near me also.

Maeve: So we're going to start close to home?

Thimali: Yep. But then who knows where...

Thimali: Listeners, there's more from Ena and more info on greening up cities and your spaces on [@mothersinvent](#) on Instagram as always.

Maeve: Yeah. And I'm going to send some tomato updates over there too.

Thimali: Nice.

There are all sorts of websites flagging up vacant spots. So people could apply to garden, legally! *(Laughs)*. And I

should say, you do need to check the law wherever you are in the world, please. We don't want anyone getting arrested digging around on land, you really can't!

Maeve:

Of course!

And if you don't feel up for your own planting or digging or growing, you can support others, like find your local garden.

Thimali:

And also really importantly check you're not planting something that's not native to the area and therefore really invasive.

[Music Transition]

Maeve:

Thank you by the way.

Maeve:

I'm delighted about My tomato plant and next time Thimali, maybe you can send me a chicken, or a cow.

Thimali:

Are you going to grow a whole farm on your doorstep?

Thimali:

You can take the girl out of Cobh but you can't take Cobh out of the girl!

Maeve:

They call her 'Muddyhands Higgins'!

Thimali:

(Laughs).

Maeve:

Now I know why I've been wearing these dungarees all this time!

[Theme Music]
