Karolina Wolniak

Hortus Meus

There is no place in the world that I love better than my garden. My life's work. I am so proud of it. When I first got my hands on this property, when I first saw this garden, I knew that was it — this was my calling. Back then, it wasn't so beautiful. Actually, it was in a deplorable state. But I had my vision. I planted the first plant — the perfect way of honouring my late aunt Angie who bequeathed this estate to me in her will. The poor soul left this world way too early. But my garden? It started to look magnificent. So… thanks, auntie?

I spent every free moment there. I admired my plants — their pods and veins, their greenish, bluish colours. I loved watching how they writhed and wiggled and grew bigger and bigger with time. I even created my own method of fertilisation. This is my life, my child, so I never let anyone else see it. I am a jealous mother, and my garden has all the love it needs from me alone. Tall coniferous trees surround it, so the only way in is from my house. My treasure is safe. Nobody else has ever seen it… at least until that cursed Wednesday.

My gardening is not really a profitable hobby, so I give piano lessons to kids from my town. Last Wednesday I had Mario over for a class. Sweet little boy — pale, but the summer sun turns his face slightly pink — with almost white hair and incredible ocean-blue eyes. I really liked him, even if he messed up all the *Nocturnes* he played. We started with Chopin; he was his favourite composer, and while he was trying to play I realized I had left my glasses in the garden. I told him to keep playing and quickly went to collect them. I didn't want him to see my majestic garden, so I was trying to be quick; I didn't even stop by Angie's plant, and I always gave her my respect. I was looking for those glasses when I heard: "Miss Oakley, your glasses were actually next to— Oh my God!" The poor boy had stepped into my garden; it wasn't his fault… but there was no other way.

The first one ever to see my garden. And last, I was sure about it. My garden was not for their eyes. I glanced softly at my new plant. I had just fertilised it and I was so proud of how it was growing. I had never actually planned on getting this one. I prefer older seedlings, but maybe this was destiny. My newest baby. It had pink stems; they were not yet turning green. Soft white leaves were blowing in the wind. And those flowers — beautiful ocean-blue flowers. I hoped it would grow nicely. That night I planned to play some Chopin for my plants. The new ones always liked it.

My garden time was disturbed because I heard knocking on my door. I cursed all humanity; I really didn't want to talk to anyone that evening. However, I had to keep my sweet neighbourhood music teacher's reputation, so I went and opened the door. There were Mario's parents. I should've expected that. They looked troubled, and the poor mother was even shaking. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Shrub, how can I help you?" I asked. They scanned me with their eyes, almost suspiciously, then Mr. Shrub

answered, “We’re looking for Mario. He should be home by now. Have you decided on a longer lesson today?” Oh, parents’ troubles… I had to break their hopes. “No, actually, we ended earlier than usual. We only made it through one Chopin piece.” The mother started to shake even more. “But he is not home! Where is he?” I gave them a polite smile. I hoped it passed for sadness. “I’m afraid I cannot help you.” They nodded and went away.

The next few days were a nightmare. All the neighbourhood was involved in searching for Mario. The posters were everywhere, even at my front door. The community decided on patrols and search teams that were looking for the boy. It made me anxious, because more people wandering around was increasing the possibility of some dumbass wandering into my garden. I hated the idea. I went out for the search once. I found a nice new Gardener’s shop, a few scrubs on the streets, and no white-hair boys. How sad. I honestly hoped that the parents would keep it low, but they were really scared and overly dramatic. Finally, the police got involved. They questioned me; I simply said that after the lesson Mario was gone. They made me sign some paper and left. However, I felt that parents started losing their trust in me. Few children withdrew from my music lessons immediately. All because of that stupid little kid that couldn’t stay near the piano when I asked him.

Everything started to go downhill one week later. The police finally checked the surveillance cameras. They are not really fast, to be honest, but they finally did it. Because of that, I received another visit. The nice police officers told me they haven’t found footage of Mario leaving my property. There wasn’t a clear view of my front door, but they examined every other corner of my street. Mario came to my house and never ever left. At least, that is what they told me. And I told them to come back with a search warrant if they ever want to enter my house.

The police obtained the search warrant and came back the next day. I cleaned my house for them. I don’t want any of my guests to feel uncomfortable because I left a bra on a counter. And I had to hide some meds because I didn’t exactly have a prescription for them, and I do not need any trouble. I sat there while they were looking through my stuff. They searched the bedrooms, bathrooms, even the attic. Just as I told them, the boy was not in my house, but they kept searching. Finally, one of the policemen, the young one, asked me if I had a backyard. “Yes, that’s my garden, but I would prefer you to leave it alone. I do not want you to damage my plants.” He smiled softly at me. “Sorry ma’am, we have to, but we’ll be quick.”. So I took the keys to my garden and handed them to the officer. He accepted them, stepped inside my garden, and once again I heard “Oh my God!”

Oh. My. God. Oh, I hate that. First of all, I am a raging atheist, and saying the name of your great lord in my house is basically a hate crime. But most importantly, it is not an appropriate reaction to my majestic garden. I spent so many hours caring for that garden, preparing seedlings, and planting them. It is not easy; some of them were really heavy. I perfected my technique. After auntie’s plant, I wasn’t so messy anymore.

All of my effort, only for people to scream a horrified “Oh my God!” Thanks a lot, I appreciate it. And that is sarcasm, in case you needed it explained.

After that, things went quite quickly. I don’t even remember most of it. One moment I was screaming at those officers not to touch my plants; the next, I was handcuffed in an interrogation room. It was dark and cold, and I didn’t like it one bit. I waited there for a few hours. They had to call some specific person to interrogate me because the local cops weren’t qualified. So I waited, trying not to think about what they had done to my babies. They ruined my whole garden. Monsters.

Finally, a man came in to talk to me. “Maybe we should start with you telling me about the contents of your backyard.” I looked him up and down. Middle-aged, slightly overweight, and apparently he would be the one to end me. I didn’t like that at all. “Okay, officer, I have— I had a garden in my backyard. I had been taking care of it for years. It is my greatest passion, really. I don’t know why you’re so upset about this,” I began slowly. “My first plant was from my auntie Angie, and it…”

The man suddenly stopped me. “Oh no, Miss Oakley. I want the true story.”

I blinked, confused. “It *is* a true story. My first plant was from my aunt… What do you mean?”

He looked sad now. “Miss Oakley, your first plant was not from your aunt. Your first plant *was* your aunt. We found thirteen bodies in your backyard in different states of decomposition. You will be charged with serial murder.”

Silence. My whole world went silent. My vision went blurry. Murders? Bodies? My plants are not bodies. What are they talking about? I think I started laughing, and then it hit me. Images of hands coming out of the ground. My peonies. A spine on the frame. Ivy, the second plant I had. Is it real? Was I? No. It’s not possible. So why are they saying this? Why is this man accusing me of that?

When my vision returned to normal, I saw a troubled look on the officer’s face. “Miss Oakley, you will be given psychiatric help, but you still murdered thirteen people.” And I realized—oh yes, I killed them. That part was true. And it was exciting. I looked the officer straight in the eyes. “Okay. I understand.” Thirteen victims… only my plants. So they didn’t find what—pardon me, *who* I was using as fertilizer.



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