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## In the Garden

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## In the Garden

by Anna Badger

**T**he pavement rushes up to embrace me, knocks some sense into my tired, broken bones. I smell iron, can taste it too and the night air freezes the tip of my nose. I get up slowly, move my arms out in front and then get my feet untangled to push myself up.

I'm in my small, suburban neighborhood and I take a step forward, moving unsteadily along the sidewalk, back to my home through the night. It is almost completely dark out now, the only light source coming from the yellow-orange glow of the street lamps. The homes, which during the day are reliably dull and cookie-cutter, have morphed overnight into hunched gargoyles preying on passersby with bright, unyielding eyes and sharp wrought iron teeth. The wind blows, shaking the leaves of the palm trees that line the streets, and biting down through the cloth of my thin polo shirt.

With arms already crossed, I rub my hands along my upper arms, willing myself warmer, but I forgot to bring a sweater. The entirety of my face is slick with perspiration and I have a splitting headache. My knee bleeds profusely from my earlier tumble onto the cement, and I clench my jaw tighter to prevent my teeth from chattering.

I see my neighbor, Mr. Lapin, in the distance, a meddling old man in his eighties. He's out in his garden as he always is at this time of night. My wife, a botanist and gardener, always had something to say about his lack of knowledge: "If he knew what plants worked well with this ecosystem and how to landscape, he might not have to work on his garden 24/7," she would always tease, looking out the window and stopping her nightly perusal of a magazine. She and Mr. Lapin shared a mutual understanding of loathing and suspicion.

I'm a patrol officer, and I typically work the late shift, so my neighbor and I are always having a late night chat. People like me. Just knowing that I'm out there watching over everyone makes my neighbors feel safe.

Mr. Lapin stands up to wave to me, and he smiles a wide toothy grin, but I see his eyes flash with something—was his look accusatory? And his eyes gleam red, reflecting the swell of the full moon. Startled, I look away, walking quickly across the street to my home.

When I look up to my home I see the tree in our front yard has completely consumed the entirety of the house. Gnarled branches fall heavily onto the top of the roof and into shattered windows. The beautiful garden that Alice has so loving cared for is completely overrun, weeds growing wildly amongst the sage, lilac, snapdragons and petunias. The paint around the door and windows has been heavily stained and chipped. I had hardly been gone at all—maybe one or two hours?

I turn back to my neighbor, but he has gone inside. I go to take my phone out, but discover that I don't have one on me. I must have left it in my car, but I can't remember where I parked it. I don't know where I've been and the harder I try to remember the more my head throbs.

I begin walking toward the open sore that used to be a front door, stepping over roots and crouching down below branches that droop to the ground with the weight of gravity. The shrubs and flowers crunch beneath my feet as I walk by. Suddenly I hear something above me in the tree, a sound reminiscent of a cackle.

I stop, looking up into the tree and a black blur comes hurtling down at me. The blur—which I discover with relief is our cat—has catapulted herself down at me from a branch above. Landing gracefully on my shoulder, she digs her nails deep into my skin before leaping off me and running inside.

"Damn," I swear, rubbing my shoulder. I step inside our home, carefully setting down one foot at a time so that I don't make too much noise. All of our eclectic furniture is here, but moss and branches have covered the light switch by the door. The only light comes from the tv, on which a recording I made of Alice a couple of months ago plays. She beams at me from the screen as she prepares food in the kitchen.

"Alice!" I call out for her, worried that she has been hurt.

I open our shared bedroom door where our cat has disappeared. Our bed is as I left it, with my taser gun on the edge. The floor and ceiling crawl with dark red shadows everywhere, they move across the bedroom floor to me ebbing and flowing like the tide, pouring in from the open windows off the branches and leaves.

"Alice!" I call again, but my head starts throbbing when I open my mouth too wide, and when I reach out to massage my temples, there is a pain so sharp that I recoil my hand at once. I stumble and trip over my own feet, falling to the floor. I bring my hands out to catch myself, but somehow I am too slow and my hands only just make it in time to shield my head from the impact.

The world is slower down here on the floor and for a while the red shadows comfort me as they swirl about like pinwheels, soothing and relaxing my throbbing head. Then I catch sight of the cat under the bed, her eyes glowing like my neighbor's. She knows.

It comes back to me in flashes: Alice with a woman in her garden, the two of them running back into my bedroom and trying to lock themselves in, my boiling hot anger, tasing the bitch and then coming back in with a knife, Alice threatening me with her gardening spade, and then her slamming it down into my head.

I call out for help, scrambling up to my feet as quickly as my heavy limbs allow, but I've been ensnared by the shadows and they reach out to me with crimson, sinewy hands to pull me under the bed where my cat begins to

smile a wider and wider grin with human teeth and one chipped front tooth. They're Alice's teeth—and the one I broke.

The cat cackles at me like a woman and I strike at it hard, releasing the inky red clouds back to the ground, where they rematerialize as blood. I manage to get up and move away from the bed when the damn cat bolts out of the bedroom door, hissing and spitting at me.

I make my way through the blood that flows about the ground. It cannot touch me in its liquid form. I go to my bedside, where underneath the stand I keep a flashlight, handy for stormy nights when the power would go out.

I reach in, and take it out, switching it on. I reach the bathroom door, turn the knob and walk in.

The tiles are streaked with dirt and mud and there are lilies growing in the corner where Alice had been planting them. Mold grows thickly around every corner, but especially on the walls. The more I look the more there is, the more mushrooms sprout, flowers grow, and ivy creeps up the walls. Carnations, daffodils, tulips, roses, sunflowers, marigolds, all begin surrounding the lilies.

I move toward the tub, and see her floating there, spade in hand, with a deep gash in her chest, surrounded and ensnared completely by murky water and roots, most of her body hidden by lotus flowers.

Then I turn and catch sight of my reflection in the mirror. I see the place where she hit me—there's a deep root growing out of the place that's been hurting so much. A flower has started to bloom and I claw at it desperately, to get the roots out of my head. It can't start spreading out to my brain or I'll forget that I need to bury Alice with her lover.

I knew in the back of my head that something had been blossoming between the two of them, but it wasn't until tonight that I'd witnessed it. I can do a lot of damage with just a stun gun and a knife. I was never going to hurt her though. She hurt me, jamming her spade right into my head, but I never did anything to her. And now she's going to make me bury her.

I bend down and reach underneath her neck and thighs with my arms to try and lift her from the water, but when I attempt to pull her up from the pond, the lotus flowers grow taller and wrap more strongly around her. I readjust my position so that I can brace myself against the side of the pond while I pull at her body. This time the flowers give way and I hear the roots snap as her body collapses into mine and suddenly there is so much blood flowing out of her wound, soaking my shirt and flowing down to the soil where the plants greedily consume it.

Reinvigorated by Alice's life, the plants begin to grow faster and with more force than before, shooting out from the soil violently. Their stems and leaves reach out for me, refusing to let me go, as their thorns prick at my skin, threatening to impale me.

Alice's body is wrestled from my arms and disappears as the garden overtakes her body and they become the same; they were the same all along. I struggle frantically against the snares but my struggles seem to entice them to crush my body with greater vehemence until I can feel a vine wrap around my throat.

But there is nothing I can do; Alice is too strong for me.

Before my vision begins to fade I think I hear Mr. Lapin shouting and banging on the bathroom door. He's saying something about calling the police, about Alice being dangerous. My vision turns splotchy as I hear sirens go off somewhere in the distance.