

Phoenix

In 1962 the City Council of New York passed a law forbidding the sale of voodoo drugs, mentioning specifically bat's blood, grave dust, lover's oil and candles with prayers written on them. The police began to torment the Botanicas of the South Bronx and Botanical Gardens of Harlem. Mother Floyd's shop was shut down three times that year because of police raids and police negligence. Each time the store re-opened as quietly as it had folded its doors. Though the shop enjoyed healthy traffic, Mother recognized the new law as an omen of bad things to come.

Mother Floyd's Botanical Gardens blossomed at 1213 Lenox Avenue. From the outside it resembled a small greenery shop as might have migrated from New York's East Village. The large windows were blacked out by greenery of every imaginable shape and shade. And even those who hid no disgust for the shop's real merchandising would stop to gaze at the plant life. They would scan the window in cool admiration and end their viewing with the release of an all too noticeable shutter upon focusing on the print on the lower left of the window: "Charms and Religious Articles."

Mother's Gardens had a reputation which reached the lower South where Mother's roots were. It was said she took summer sojourns to her home (although exactly where this was could not be determined) to pick herbs for her store and to administer to business connections who would ship her oddly-wrapped packages for the rest of the year.

Her store had a reputation for purity and cleanliness. Unlike similar stores, it did not participate in numbers collection, nor narcotics (other than certain love potions). Prices were said to be fair. Services rendered began and ended with supply and instruction. Mother Floyd dealt in hoodoo, a Southern herbalist art as juxtaposed with voodoo and its religious significance, although the two movements sometimes crossed paths and some of Mother's West Indian patrons referred to her as "Mambo Floyd" instead of "Mother."

All that has been stated was all that was known by Shirley Jean Lynn when she entered Mother's shop in 1964. A little chime resounded softly as Shirley Jean closed the door behind her. She had never thought to find herself in such a place and felt quite ashamed, both for coming and for having come with a problem so personal as she carried. She was also self-conscious of Harlem and New York, and could not wait to return down home with her husband.

The shop was a reflection of the window's colors, greens lightened and darkened by what little sunlight entered the room. What light there was was sufficient, for there was no hint of electric light nor need for any. The walls were arrayed with religious figurines, hoodoo dolls (black colored cloth dolls arrayed in slave attire), candle which seemed to supply the only variance of color in the room, and jars which had she been unable to read, Shirley Jean would have suspected filled with candy. Most of the labeling on the jars wasn't written in English, and as a result did not distract Shirley Jean from her original feelings of uneasiness.

Two tables filled the center of the room, holding metal cartons filled with sachets, bits of cloth, plants, and sale items. To her left was a counter containing a cash register and some small selection of outdated dream books.

At the end of the long moment spent in observation, Shirley Jean noticed a doorway in the far wall, covered by a hanging curtain, once yellow, now green in cooperation with the rest of its surroundings. As her eyes rested here, the curtain was pushed back by a large, fat, light-skinned hand, revealing the proprietor.

Mother Floyd appeared to Shirley Jean as a one-time tall woman whose body had contracted. She was short and heavy, but her shape held a homey quality that eased Shirley Jean's existence momentarily. She had a round face with jowls like baby's cheeks, small, alert brown eyes, wrinkled by a resurgence in police harassment and in conjunction with a drop in business. Business was also

dampened by a noticeable change in attitudes towards tradition by the younger Blacks in the neighborhood. The Botanical Gardens was seen as a useless artifact of a no longer forceful regime.

Mother was fair-complected, with few noticeable wrinkles other than those about her eyes. Her hair was silky grey and banded in wisps, due to a relaxed sparseness which replaced the more active tresses of her youth. Her smile was the final relaxer necessary to encourage Shirley Jean's active participation in the experience the two women shared.

The ritual began with Mother asking if she could help. The younger woman responding with a short summary of her life, which revealed to Mother her origins, faith, and problem. Shirley Jean was 26 and barren. She had never conceived, although married and versed in life since her late teens. For a southern Black woman, such a situation bred suspicion and ill feeling on the parts of husband and family. Friends would wonder I whispers, but never openly approach the subject. Young women of age would openly avoid her, out of either disdain or fear of infection.

So, she came before Mother Floyd with her problem, and the old woman listened, with smiles of varying intensity as the conversation warranted. When the problem was clearly stated and an admission of faith substantiated in the statement, Mother Floyd moved decisively to a shelf, stopping momentarily to pick up a paper bag, which she filled with crushed green leaves, then moved to another jar which contained crushed brown leaves. From this jar she filled her palm, dropping the weight into the bag as she did.

Instructions for brewing a tea followed. Money exchanged hands. The ritual closed with the customary display of gratitude and whispered blessings. Shirley Jean closed the door with heightened hopes for the future and an adventuresome afternoon behind her that had left her quite giddy. She felt quite the child again, and forgetting former fears, decided that the afternoon had ended short.

Mother Floyd's Botanical Gardens burned down during the riots of 1964's summer heat. The store and the studio behind it became just so much rubble and ash. The police theorized that whatever

had happened to stimulate such flame must have been caused by various herbals and sundry mixtures as the old woman maintained. It was further assumed that Mother had been out, for no human remains were to be found. Yet she never appeared at the precinct to make any claim, and inquiry suggested that she was no longer a part of the community.

Shirley Jean gave birth to a baby girl in October of 1964, eight months after her visit to New York. The newborn weighed five pounds, some ounces, was fair-complected as most babies tend to be, had large hands (which the doctors attributed to the premature birth), a round face accented by equally round cheeks, alert brown eyes enhanced by baby crinkles on either side of her face, and wisps of reddish-brown hair (which the doctors said would soon become black). She smiled often, and loved to laugh.