

VOODOO GARDEN

"It's breathtaking. You must just love this garden."

Mary regarded the perky young woman with the notebook and didn't smile. "It's everything to me."

Ellen Shavitz patted the arm of her photographer. "We're thrilled that your husband is allowing us to photograph and do an article. It's very kind of you to show us around personally. You're the principal designer of all this, right?"

"Yes. I oversee all the landscaping. Ray insists on perfection. We have 590 acres, mostly woodlands, but the 50 acres around the house is maintained. The formal gardens you're seeing take up about 12 acres and around back are the pool, tennis courts, Ray's driving range, the horse pasture and so on. All that requires intensive upkeep. We have a large staff."

"Sounds like a lot of responsibility."

"It's all I do now. We've had it since Ray sold his first company."

"I see the name Quiller in the news all the time now. Statyuo-esque is the hot new thing on Wall Street. And you worked in theatre once?"

"And sang. That's old history, from before I married Ray. Ray's done well for himself. Loves to wheel and deal. Last week we had Elon Musk here talking about making parts for his space project. Ray charmed him. I guess." Ellen caught a bitter tone in the remark and exchanged a glance with John. This article for *Southern Gardens* was supposed to be a fluffy piece about flowers. Their readership wanted to believe that the sun shines more brightly on the rich and she had to dance along a line that balanced envy and admiration. Nothing dark. Nothing complicated.

Mary smiled. "Well let's move along while the light's good. I suppose you're mainly interested in the formal gardens? I've given most of the staff the day off so you won't have the visual clutter of workmen and garden tools."

"Thanks for that. These terraces will be the central focus although we'd like to get a shot of everything and then sort it out. Have to humor John here and his mania for thirteen views of every daisy. I suppose your azaleas are all done. Below I'm seeing big

banks of iris spears and your gladiolus beds seem to be at their peak. Can we begin there? And then maybe your famous pollinator garden?"

Mary gave her a shrewd smile. "I hope you're comfortable with bees. I have seventeen hives scattered among the plantings. Not so good for some other things in the garden. As soon as some flowers are pollinated the petals start to drop. Let's go on down."

They wandered along straight gravel paths, winding stone walks, up and down steps of brick, slate, and wood. John's camera was in constant motion: closeups of specimen plants and the abundant statuary, long shots of the terraces with the big house hovering above them. Ellen asked question after question, jotting notes and discretely recording the conversation on the hidden mike she'd failed to mention.

Mary felt better and warmed up as they progressed among the beds. Ellen quickly discovered that this classic blonde trophy wife possessed a huge body of knowledge about plants and their care. As they descended a complex of terraces, unusual trees and quirky statuary appeared on small side paths. They crossed a small stream and passed through a dense grove of towering bamboo that killed ambient sound. Then to the side of the main gravel path Ellen glimpsed an odd red shape almost hidden around the bend of a narrow side trail.

She pointed. "What's that?"

"I call it my voodoo garden. Mostly South African plants, *Welwitschia* and other weird looking things. Even an *Amorphophallus*, the voodoo lily from Sumatra, the largest flower in the plant kingdom. I have to drive a specially built forklift in there to carry the corm up to the greenhouse for the winter. I can't let you photograph in there. Some of my imports may be illegal. I do all the work in this section myself."

"Voodoo garden? Seems like an odd fit in the middle of all this."

"It's my special place. I go there when I want peace. I got the idea from an old Charlie Musselwhite song, know his music? Harmonica blues, mostly."

"No, not familiar with him."

Mary began to sing in a husky contralto:

*In my voodoo garden there's a one-eyed cat.
There's a plastic cowboy with a concrete hat.*

*Mask of the devil by the first born son
You can tell he's on the level by the way he drinks his rum
Relaxing in the shade, feeling mooost at eeeze.
In a voo - doo garden you can dooo just like you pleeeeeze.*

Ellen and John exchanged an alarmed look. Not the sort of thing for ladies' flower clubs. Ellen walked over for a closer look. The plastic cowboy was shiny red and looked like a discarded flea market item. A concrete bowler hat was balanced on its head. On the other side of the opening into the grotto was a stone cat seated in an upright pose. The eye had been crudely chiseled off the head. Farther in she could make out a heavily laquered wooden mask, probably African, propped against a tree. Her expression suggested a rapid re-evaluation of Mary's psychological stability. She fumbled for something to say.

"Mmm. Does the big voodoo lily bloom often?"

Mary chuckled. "No, thank God. It's only bloomed once in the five years I've had it. It's a carrion flower, that is it has a powerful smell of rotten meat and attracts flies for pollinators. Putrescine. Cadaverine. A phallus six feet tall that blooms rarely. I thought Ray'd love it. He hates it."

Ellen said, "Well. I think we've done enough down here. Let's go back up and let John get some long shots. Then maybe a look at your landscaping around the pool and the beds at the rear of the house." Mary followed the pair back up the path with an amused smile.

The shoot and interview continued into the mid afternoon and they ended on one of the patios with drinks.

Ellen said, "Well, I'm impressed. This is going to be a big hit with my editor. Thank you so much for going to all this trouble for us."

Mary lifted her glass in a silent gesture and leaned back with closed eyes. "Ray likes to be known."

The patio doors slid open and a carefully dressed young woman with sleek brown hair approached. "Madame Mary, the children are home. There's been a little . . ." she made a motion with her hand, "incident. Perhaps I should keep them in until later?" Her accent was strong and French.

Mary said, "Oh bring them on out. I'd like to see them." The girl nodded and went back inside.

Mary said, "That's the new *au pair* Ray found. Marie. Pretty, isn't she." Mary raised the bottle of scotch and waved it with a questioning look to the others, then poured another for herself.

Marie ushered out the eight year old twins. Ray Jr. avoided everyone's eyes as the group noted his torn shirt and the bruise spreading on his cheek. His sister, Hillary had the superior air of a society matron who had just won at cards.

Mary asked, "Raymond, what happened?"

Raymond shrugged. "Nothing. Got in a little fight."

"He called José names and José got mad and they got in a BIG fight." Hillary was obviously delighted with this moment of superiority in the endless competition with her brother.

Mary's eyes narrowed. "Exactly what kind of names?"

Hillary couldn't contain herself. "He called José an ugly moron. You probably don't think that's so bad since Raymond's a moron himself."

With downcast eyes Raymond muttered, "He *is* an ugly moron. He stole the sandwich out of my backpack."

Mary groaned. "Hillary, wipe that smug look off your face. You did not just win the Nobel Prize. Raymond, go in and clean up for dinner. I think the lesson about calling other people names is self-evident and I'm absolutely sure you both have homework." Mary looked up and caught John raising his camera to photograph Raymond. Her hand shot out. "No picture of that. We wouldn't want to be turning into paparazzi, would we?" Ellen put her hand on John's arm. "No we wouldn't, would we?"

Mary said, "We would all be in real trouble if Ray ever saw an image of his children looking less than perfect."

John said, "Sorry. I just have the habit of shooting anything around me that looks interesting. No worries, I didn't take that shot. You have beautiful children."

A little later, Mary followed the pair to their car. They thanked her repeatedly and drove down the pebbled drive to the guard's station. Ellen took out the recorder and began to play back the day's conversations.

She said, "She certainly knows her stuff - banks of flowers that bloom in perfect sequence, stone from all over the world - but something's a little off with her, that voodoo garden and all. I'm going to keep this recording. Some day there may be another story."

At the gate they passed a van with the Statyoesque logo on the door. It went up to the front of the house. A uniformed driver hopped out, saluted Mary and disappeared into the back of the van. He emerged carrying an object wrapped in a mover's quilt and carried it up to the door.

"Hello, Mrs. Quiller. Your husband sent you this little statue. He said he wants you to put it in some prominent place in the garden." Mary nodded absently and motioned him to carry the thing in. When the van pulled away, a young woman appeared from behind it. She approached Mary at the door.

Mary said, "Where did you come from?"

"I hiked up through the woods." Mary stared at her.

Mrs. Quiller?"

"Yes?"

"I need to speak with you. About your husband."

Mary licked a finger and held it up. "I think I detect an ill wind blowing my way. But do come in." They went into the vestibule. Mary offered no chair.

The girl clenched her purse nervously. "Mrs. Quiller, I'm Jessica Adams and I've been working for your husband's company as a programmer. It was all going so well, and then . . . Mrs. Quiller, I'm pregnant."

"Ray's? These things can be proven now, you know."

"Yes. I'm sure. I told him and he told me to get rid of it, but I just can't do that." She looked imploringly into Mary's stony face.

"And what did my husband say?"

"He fired me. Had my office packed up in boxes and carried to my apartment."

"Somehow I think the subject of money is about to appear in this conversation."

"Mrs. Quiller, I'm not some easy girl, whatever you might think. I always just wanted to meet a nice man and have a family and . . .all of it. Now it'll be hard."

“My husband is a handsome, persuasive man and there is all that about power and male authority. Still, Ms. Adams, what was the strong, modern woman of tomorrow thinking when her boss said ‘Let’s fuck, honey?’”

Tears began to stream down Jessica’s cheeks and she said in a choked broken voice, “Probably exactly the same brainless, dumb shit you were thinking when he said, ‘Will you marry me honey?’” Mary stiffened, then walked to the window and looked out over the beautiful garden she had created, the broad verdant terraces descending like the colorful treads of a giant’s staircase to the bamboo and water features below. She stood for a long while. Jessica was silently crying.

Finally she turned and said, “What I feel like doing is finding a heavy object and crushing your skull and claiming you fell down the stairs which Ray and Ray’s money would completely support. But I’m not going to do that. I have some money of my own and I’m going to give you my lawyer’s card and tell him to make a fair settlement with you.”

“I’d thought you’d speak to your husband, and he’d . . .”

“Oh yes. There’s a lot more money there. Then you’ll be speaking to my husband’s lawyers. I can assure you, your unborn will be a college graduate before you get that pack of jackals off your back. Take this card, don’t ever come back here, don’t ever try to communicate with me, just go out that door into the world. Believe me, that’s the best offer you’ll get.”

Jessica took the card. “You’re not what I expected.”

“No? The problem is that I’m exactly what Ray expected. Get out.”

Mary watched the girl plodding down the drive with her head bowed. She tried to feel sympathy but could not. She turned absently to the small wrapped figure that had been witness to the scene and slowly pulled away the heavy blanket covering it. It fell from her hand. She was staring at herself.

The three foot tall statuette had been fabricated from a plastic that simulated stone. She was aware of the 3-D printing work that was the heart of her husband’s company - the fabrication of industrial parts, decorative objects, really anything one could imagine and get into a computer. But THIS example . . .

It was made from a photograph of her face fitted into a distorted, dwarfish gnome. The photo captured a particular expression of openness and vulnerability. Her even, symmetrical features and alert, curious eyes were perfectly reproduced. Set into the twisted form of the gnome the incongruity was deeply disturbing.

“What’s THAT?” Hillary’s voice set up an echo in the room. Mary had no answer.

“Jeez, Mom, that’s creepy. Did you order it?” Raymond’s voice had the same twinned tone of disapproval. Mary looked at her children whose eyes were locked on the little statue.

Mary’s voice was flat and wooden. “No. Your father had it made.”

“It’s horrible!” Hillary fled from the room.

Raymond looked straight into his mother’s eyes. “Mom? Do you think dad would get real mad if I, like, carried it off and put it in a dumpster?”

Mary dropped down and embraced her son. “Yes, honey. Dad would get real, real mad. Don’t you think about this anymore. I’ll take care of it.”

Raymond trailed out of the room after his sister, looking back. “OK, but . . .”

Mary spent a long while looking at the gnome, it looking back. Then she abruptly bent down and heaved it up on her shoulder. It was surprisingly light and she had no trouble going down the path. Did she imagine that both the cowboy and the cat were giving her a questioning stare? That the mask had a quizzical look? She went through to the small pond in the center of the Voodoo Garden where she always came to sit when she was troubled. She set the gnome on a flat stone that looked as though it had always been waiting for it. She knelt down and looked intently into the face. Her face. Then she began to cry. The sobs became stronger and stronger and she collapsed onto the gnome, embracing it tightly, both of them shaking.

She would wonder later if she’d imagined the gnome’s tiny, gnarled hands stroking her hair, but she would not doubt the Experience, the flowing out of her all her anger, pain, and frustration into the tiny figure with the open, accepting expression. Every angry thought she’d ever had, all her suppressed rage surged into the gnome. After a time, she pulled back and looked again into her own face. The features had undergone a subtle change. Now they were those of the madame of a brothel: pitiless,

calculating. Exhausted, she left the garden and would afterwards wonder: did the cat, the cowboy, and the mask always have those cheeky grins?

Ray came in at 5:30 with a laptop under each arm. "Hi honey. I'm HOME!" Mary reflected placidly that Ray loved cliches and epigrams. A world under control. His control.

"Did they drop off the gnome?"

"Oh yes."

"Did you put it out?"

"Oh yes."

"Where?"

"Down in my voodoo garden."

"Down there? But I wanted it someplace really visible. Like near the pool. Or beside the main path."

"Dear, I think you should go down and get it and put it exactly where you want it. Yourself."

Ray stopped in surprise. This was almost resistance. Or not, depending how he wanted to see it. "Oh Kay. I'll do just that." He burst out the door and headed down through the garden. He took the stone stairs two at a time. Ray always kept himself in shape.

Mary watched as he grew smaller and smaller, diminishing as he descended this vast, ridiculous, too large garden. He disappeared into the bamboo and she stood by the window, calmly waiting, no thoughts disturbing her peace. Time passed. Then she saw a figure struggling out of the bamboo, crawling painfully up the white gravel path. It's progress was slow and she saw a red streak behind. Blood? And that could be viscera trailing in the gravel. Mary liked the red and it brought to mind that a long, narrow bed of flaming *Crocoshmia* would look marvelous against the dark bamboo. The figure stopped moving. Mary began to sing very softly:

*I beat the devil at his evil game
He had a lien on my soul but I run him off his claim
You can pray to Jesus, faaall down on your knees
In a voodoo garden, you can dooo just like you please.*

Mary raised her eyes above the tree line and studied the clouds in the dimming light. It would be a marvelous sunset. She went to tell the cook that she'd be eating with the children out on the west patio.