

## Poisoned Gardens

Mae Rae Jennings starved her husband to death.

The whole town was talking about it, and all because of one college-educated, too-long-gone, too-big-for-her-britches granddaughter who claimed she could read a coroner's report; claimed she knew what electrolytes were.

"Damned if I can figure, though, how a man starves just for lack of 'lectric lighting," Earl Thomas said about it, while coughing up his tobacco-stained morning phlegm.

His wife, Sheeny, rolled over in bed and said nothing. It was only four in the morning, and the neighbor's roosters were half-crowing, anticipating the engine of Earl's old bob-tail roaring awake. Sheeny watched him gathering up his driving gear. She'd seen the same act every morning -- or nearly every morning -- for the past five years. Six days on the road, three days at home. She'd noticed in the first years of their marriage that her menstrual cycles no longer obeyed the moon. They'd begun to follow Red Truck corporate scheduling.

"Unless maybe he couldn't see to eat," Earl continued. "But you know how John Jennings could do anything in the world stone blind drunk. He damn sure could. I'm down right certain he could 'a done it in the dark, too."

Sheeny sat up then and reached impatiently for her bedroom slippers. It was a warm dawn, and the smell of the hot pink oleander outside their bedroom was stifling already.

"Earl, you know as well as anyone else that John Jennings would 'a cursed the Bible before he let 'em turn the lights off, over there. He might have had to hold a gun to the man down at Georgia Power, but he'd 'a done it. John Jennings could be a real good man, most times."

About Mae Rae starving her own husband, Sheeny didn't say anything. She didn't really think there was anything to say.

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All the trouble started at the Jennings-McMahon-Porter family reunion. Virginia McMahon, the Great and Eternal Hostess, had been busy finding a different serving knife for each of the seven flavors of Kool-Aid pie. Sheila Porter -- Virginia's second in command -- was hosing down a dozen muddy, scab-kneed, worm-spotted kids, and Barby Porter-Carlyle was hunting down her husband, Freddie, who as usual wanted nothing to do with the McMahons, the Jennings, *or* the Porters.

So no-one saw the stranger arrive.

She drove an ash-of-roses coloured Chevy Luv, and parked it half in the yard and half out like a freshly broken tooth, waiting to fall. In the general mess of clay-spattered pick-ups and Sunday-shined sedans the truck went unnoticed. But when the stranger swung down in her high-heeled boots, black leather jacket, and her funny hat with the flower, people began to notice one by one.

She stomped straight across the lawn, like a woman possessed -- trampling dandelions and turning the verbena to purple mush beneath her heels -- straight up to the dessert table, casting a shadow like a pointing finger as she came. It swept the yard, looking a mile long like the shadow of the Mysterious Stranger in all the best westerns, and settled obtusely over two jello molds, a plate of blondies and the purple Kool-Aid pie.

Virginia McMahon raised her head long enough to verify that the stranger was neither bleeding to death nor carrying a casserole, and went right back to her organizing.

"Well," she asked brusquely, "are you Porter, McMahon, or Jennings?"

"I'm Lucy," the strange woman answered. "Lucy Barlow, daughter of Ruth Barlow, who used to be Ruth Jennings... I'm looking for Mae Rae."

At that very moment, Mae Rae Jennings was hobbling her considerable bulk sideways down the rickety steps from Virginia's trailer, using two stained dish towels to hold on to a smoking Veg-all casserole. She heard her name called from across the lawn with almost uncanny clarity, and looked up, squinting against the sun and the storm of glints off a dozen fake crystal serving bowls. Her eyes locked with those of the stranger.

Then, slowly and with great, stately elegance, the girl pointed her finger dead at the center of Mae Rae's forehead.

"That women killed her husband," she said.

Everyone in the yard missed a beat, and then conversations carried on falteringly, everyone turning a cautious ear towards the dessert table. Even the flat white sky seemed to move in a step closer, leaning down to hear better. Mae Rae froze on the last step from the trailer's front door. Her mouth fell open in shock, but she was too well bred to drop the casserole.

Virginia ran up to take it from her, though, just in case.

"Excuse me?" Mae Rae stammered. She was painfully aware of the shift in the crowd's attention, and wished suddenly she'd worn her turquoise house-dress instead of the magenta one.

"That woman," Lucy repeated levelly. "That woman up there, Mae Rae Jennings, starved her husband to death."

Now her words caught one of those rolling moments of silence; the whole crowd in Virginia McMahon's yard gave way to them and stood listening. Mae Rae and Virginia both exchanged a glance and then squinted warily at the families gathered in little clusters about the yard.

"Who are you?" Mae Rae asked the girl, her voice dropping to a hiss.

"Says she's your granddaughter," Virginia answered.

The girl had finally dropped her arm and stood staring at Mae Rae, her jaw clenched and her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. Mae Rae stared back suspiciously.

"You're not Liza's little girl...?" she half-asked.

"Ruthie's," Virginia said, shifting the weight of the casserole in her hands. "I didn't even know Ruthie'd had a girl. Well, don't be a stranger, lady, ya'll get on in the kitchen, if you're gonna stand there mooning at each other, and let the rest of us here get on back to reuniting."

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The fete was gathering speed on the lawn, with the Porters from across the county line finally making it in with their hoard. The accumulated gentry all indulged in a collective sigh when their van screeched to a gear-grinding halt in the road, before pouring out a dozen muddy red-headed children in overalls. While Virginia and Sheila and Barby tried to convince Liza Porter that her seven-layer salad was certainly special -- just not enough so to warrant its very own draped card table on the lawn -- Mae Rae and her granddaughter continued their stand off over one corner of Virginia's crowded kitchen table.

Two drippy, syrupy wedges of pecan pie sat between them, and two forks, but none of it had been touched. The center of the table had been taken over by a tall glass jar, stuffed full of azaleas from Mae Rae's own garden. They'd done fantastically well, that year, her azaleas.

Mae Rae lit herself a Misty 100 and let her eyes trace the patterns in the knotty-pine paneling on the wall.

She remembered her daughter, Ruthie, the way she'd looked as she packed all she owned into the back of a station wagon, something near to twenty years ago. They'd all been younger then, of course, and Ruthie's slim, denim-wrapped legs hadn't been quite so scandalous when Mae Rae's own waist was a few hand-breadths thinner. But as Mae Rae got rounder, softer -- like a potato going bad, she thought

ruefully -- Ruthie had just gone on getting taller and thinner, her red hair glowing brighter with every year as her mother's hair began falling out. And then of course there had been that boy, and that damned god-forsaken pet snake, and then the tattoos... It was no wonder something had happened to Ruthie, finally. There had only ever been trouble ahead, for that one.

But to begin with, Mae Rae had really liked the girl. She'd thought up so many pretty names for her, the youngest of her four daughters. Mae Rae had even almost enjoyed being pregnant with her; there hadn't been much sickness, and the tightness and ballooning in her body had felt warm and solid, like a promise of great beauty about to unfurl on the world. Whereas the first time she had been frightened, and the second and third had been unexpected mouths to feed in a tiny two-room cabin out in the Carlyle's pecan orchard, Mae Rae's fourth pregnancy had felt so hopeful and soft and optimistic. She'd almost settled on 'Indigo', or maybe 'Ivy', before the preacher had put in his two cents.

"Well," she began slowly. "So, you're Ruthie's girl. What'd she do, run out on you? I wouldn't be surprised, she sure as hell ran out on me."

"My mother is no concern of yours, anymore," Lucy said.

"What do you mean? She's my daughter, after all."

"If that was still true, then you'd have known about me, wouldn't you?"

Mae Rae squinted at the girl through her cigarette smoke. "If she's run out on you, or got herself incriminated or something, and you're here looking for some kind of help, well you can just--"

"I'm here because of what you did to your husband, all those years ago."

Mae Rae's squint screwed down even tighter. "You ain't even old enough to remember my Johnny, girl-child."

The stranger, this alien member of Mae Rae's own family, sat unnervingly still across the table. Mae Rae found herself counting the long seconds between the girl's eye-blinks. There was too much calm behind the girl's gaze, too much certainty in herself. That had to be something the city did to young people, Mae Rae thought. Made them too sure of themselves.

Her hair was red, too. Tiny curls of it, cut short as a boy's, peeked from beneath the curled lip of her hat.

"You can't be old enough to remember anything about my Johnny."

"But I still know what you did."

Mae Rae suddenly stubbed out her cigarette on the edge of her pie plate. "I don't have to listen to --"

"Yes you do!" The girl moved before Mae Rae could stand up, and her fist quivered on the switchblade suddenly standing at attention, having appeared from thin air, its tip biting into Virginia

McMahon's table top. "You *do* have to listen to what I have to say to you, Mae Rae. What you do with my words after that is up to you, but the truth will be spoken... You killed your husband, Mae Rae Jennings."

"My husband drank himself to death," the older woman snapped back, her face flushing crimson. She hated knowing that the redness would creep up and show through the thinning, mousy hair at her temples.

"Your husband drank a lot," Lucy said. "He drank more than he should have. But when he was lying there, in your bed, too weak to get up, or to call out, or even to lift his head up... did you forget about him? Or was the sight of him just too much for you?"

The girl cocked her head to one side, twisting the knife's tip into the table top. "Or, Mae Rae, did you just not *think* to feed him?"

For the first time, Mae Rae's eyes showed fear, glued to the sight of that blade, digging and gouging.

"You never worked a day in your life, did you, Mae Rae? Your daddy took good care of you -- oh, he took *good* care of you, didn't he? And that first girl of yours, the one you gave up to the church... Sure you were young, but that wasn't the only reason, was it? Oh, daddy took good care of his little Mae Rae. And you never forgot it, did you? Then, you found yourself a good man, who only wanted to take care of you. And you never left the house, never had a job, never knew how much the world took out of that man for your sake."

Lucy took the knife out of the table, sliced the tip off her piece of pie, and stabbed it up.

"You wouldn't even take him to the hospital, at the end. You knew that would be it, he would die there, and you'd be left all alone. So, you laid him in bed, and shut the door on him... You looked away and let him die... You know, most kids just leave a kitten in the closet, or something, when they want to learn about death. But not you, Mae Rae, you had to see something really pure, something really good, waste away."

She raised the pie to her lips, but her eyes never let Mae Rae's face. It was pale, now, full of fear.

"How do you know all this? Who told you these things, girl?"

"No-one told me. The truth doesn't have to be spoken to spread. It's always there for the taking, and I took it. I brought it here."

"The devil," Mae Rae whispered. She was shaking now, her hands clenched white on the table's edge. "You're the devil, or else he's in you good, for sure... What are you here for? What is it you think I can do?"

Again, the knife came down and dug deep into the table. "Nothing. I brought the truth, the truth

will always make itself known, it must be heard. It's yours, now. What you do with it, is none of my concern."

The girl leaned back, looking out the window at the back of the trailer, out over the swampy lawn, trailing off into the darkness of the pines and eventually into the Everglades.

"This place was built for secrets, wasn't it? There's so much that's poisonous, here. Whole gardens growing nothing but poison. And they're all so pretty, they smell so nice, all the boxwood and butterfly bush and devil's potato... Secrets flourish here, but when things start dying..."

She stood up then, wiping the blade of her knife on Virginia's harvest-themed linen napkin, printed with brown leaves and grinning pumpkins. Mae Rae's eyes followed the shine on that blade until it was folded away again, and just as quickly as she'd appeared, the girl -- Mae Rae's own granddaughter -- was gone.

Everyone on the lawn watched her go, the sun glinting hot off the shoulders of her jacket.

Earl Thomas swore to all the regulars down at Chucky's Sports, an hour later on, that he'd seen her truck crossing the Ware County border, headed down towards the swamp.

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"Course there ain't a word of truth in it," he had told Sheeny, climbing into bed that night. "Everyone knows John Jennings plumb killed himself on Schlitz, and that's that... Poor old Mae Rae, having to hear that. Well, there's always been a streak of crazy in that family."

Sheeny didn't answer, as he turned off the light, slid into bed, and they lay folded together like clean linen in the pitchy blackness. She didn't need Earl to tell her. She'd been there, setting chairs out on the lawn, digging through the linen closet for every beach towel and blanket Virginia owned. After all, she'd been Sheeny McMahon, before Earl came in and transplanted her.

She'd seen the girl.

And she knew Mae Rae too well to say anything on the matter.

The whole town would talk, and whether or not it was ever said out loud, they all knew. Earl would wake up later and get his gear and drive off, and when he came back in six days the town would still be talking. The place lived and breathed secrets. It was a place that would up and starve if you opened it up to too much hot, bright truth.

Sheeny lay awake in bed for a long time, watching her husband's cigarette cherry glow a dull red in the dark, rising and falling with the oleander drifting in on the breeze.