

\*Content warning- some violence and gore\* Something is eating the hostas. It's a tricky section of the garden- shaded and north-facing- but the foliage thrives under my watchful eye. I ensure it grows lush and verdant, and only I can coax it from sulking in this hot, dry weather. I'm pleased to see the blue-green tones of sieboldiana flourishing beside the golden variegated undulates leaves. I'm outraged by the pock-marked damage I've discovered, and search for the culprit amongst the ovate leaves. There! A snail clings to the underside of a leaf, sucked close in a non-consensual and greedy kiss. I prise it off and the shell implodes in my pincer grip, crushed mush oozing between my fingertips. I discard the muck onto the soil with disdain, satisfied that feeder has now become food. A gardener must be brutal, constantly battling soft bodied grubs, mandible-fanged pests, plagues of aphids and creeping insidious blight, all in order to protect the precious shoots and trembling new leaves. She must also have a hard, calculating heart to destroy what was previously nurtured, cutting back and curbing life when the time comes, sacrificing what was once so carefully created. I, the gardener, am like God; through me nature flows, giving vigour to the strong and enabling the weak and damaged to pass. Inside the house the landline telephone clamours, taking seven rings for Mrs Nolan to stir from her armchair doze and mobilise her arthritic joints to answer it. Crouched here beneath the open kitchen window I am perfectly placed to eavesdrop what she says. "Hello, this is Miriam..." "Oh, I'm as well as can be expected. And you?" "Yes, a very hot spell. The garden's very thirsty..." "Oh...really? You're too kind! Honestly, it's too much..." "It's an absolute honour. I can't quite take it all in. Trevor would have been so pleased. So very, very pleased..." "Thank you ever so much. It's all such a surprise!" "I certainly will, and you too. Cheerio." The telephone pings as it's replaced in its cradle, and I sense Mrs Nolan shuffling along to the back door to find me. I muse over the emotional wobble I overheard in her voice. She's been prone to tears since Mr Nolan's unfortunate accident and numerous well meaning villagers have phoned to offer comfort, but this call was a curious one and I'm keen to be enlightened. "Mercy, are you there?" "Right over here, Mrs Nolan." I sound as sweet as maple syrup. Mrs Nolan emerges from the side of the house, blinking in the bright sunshine, taking a moment to locate me by the shadowy border. "I've had the most remarkable news, Mercy. The Village Committee have nominated me for the Best Blooming Garden award. How kind of them! I'm sure it's Trevor's dahlias that persuaded the judges; he took such meticulous care of them. Trevor deserved the nomination, not me- he'd have been so proud- but it's too late..." Both Mrs Nolan and I glance involuntarily to the place on the lawn where Mr Nolan was found. I am pleasantly surprised to notice how prolifically the daisies are growing. They're clearly thriving from minerals in Mr Nolan's blood. Here we go. Mrs Nolan's eyes are welling up and her chin is wobbling. I stand, knit my eyebrows together with a show of concern and gently usher her back indoors to put the kettle on. That's when I know there is no hope left for Mrs Nolan. A well-meaning nomination- probably from sympathy votes- has exacerbated her misery and reduced her to convulsive weeping, proving any pleasure in life is now well beyond her grasp. What particularly irks me is that the dahlias were mostly attended to by myself, at least ever since Mr Nolan's stroke last year, and I've exclusively cared for them since his recent demise. The dahlias, the roses, those blousy, vulgar petunias that Mrs Nolan chose and I obediently bedded in- the nomination is all thanks to me. The world has no place for the old and feeble. In this very garden, right under our noses, nature uses all manner of macabre means to ensure order is kept; pincers, stingers, poisons, parasites that eat their host slowly from within. Although violent, these acts are essentially a great kindness. A kindness Mrs Nolan now deserves. \* I ponder my options. Whilst some impulsivity was involved with Mr Nolan, this time I'll carefully consider my plan. Not to say last time wasn't efficient and effective. I'd taken great care that afternoon to prune the privet hedge to perfection. I was clearing away the cuttings- gloved, as the sap can sting- whilst Mr Nolan limped up and down, pedantically questioning some cross branch irregularities he perceived in the shrubs. I pitied him, unable as he was to appreciate my work and no longer able to manage the shears himself with one useless arm. It was the least I could

do to relieve him of his agitation once and for all. Stepping close, I plunged the points of the shears into his fleshy, cotton-shirted paunch, which gave little more resistance than a fish belly, and slid the blades upwards under his ribs. It was remarkably easy. This single moment of pain was all it took to free him from his frustrated, failing body. A poppy-crimson stain blossomed under his spread fingers as he clutched his gut in a futile attempt to hold back the seeping blood. Before my eyes his pallid face became slack-jawed with disbelief. He gurgled and spluttered, eyes bulging pleadingly, but there was nothing left to be said. As he staggered, I gently grasped him by the shoulders and guided him down to the ground face first, so the blade tips emerged through his back like fresh new shoots. It looked every bit the tragic accident; the clumsy fall of a foolish man carrying tools he couldn't handle, when he should have left the work for the gardener. I removed the remaining cuttings under the pretence I'd left much earlier, and left him for Mrs Nolan to find after she returned from the Parish cake sale. Perhaps a similarly violent end for Mrs Nolan would be fitting. I'm briefly excited by the thought of her pale wrists cut to scarlet ribbons by secateurs- driven to suicide by grief, of course. I suspect the bleeding out could take some time and given the neighbours' windows will be wide open in the summer heat, enabling them to hear her screams, maybe this is an unwise option. A fall on the patio? I think of Mrs Nolan's head as the snail shell crushed between my fingers and wonder if one blow would be enough. Multiple blows would be inconsistent with a fall, raising suspicions that could compromise the innocent image I'm associated with throughout the village. I'm reluctant to take such risk. My eyes narrow thoughtfully as I scan the tapestry of summer petalled foliage in the garden borders. \* Mrs Nolan's made a Victoria Sponge. She tells me it's to celebrate the Best Blooming Garden nomination, but I can see her tired old heart's not in it. Nevertheless we're both playing along with her pointless charade, while it lasts. "Do have a slice before you go," she urges me. "I'll wrap up an extra slice for you to take home." We're sat at her little kitchen table. I've taken Mr Nolan's chair as I'm curious to see her reaction, but she doesn't comment. She's adored my company since he's been gone- evidence of her lonely, pitiful existence. My heart swells to think that soon I'll have released her from her misery. "Won't you have any tea, Mercy?" She looks quizzically over the top of her cup at my untouched one. "I'm enjoying the delicious cake, Mrs Nolan." I'm certainly glowing with anticipation; not at the sickly slice on my plate, but to see beads of sweat break out on her forehead. Mrs Nolan raises a hand to her heart, probably feeling some palpitations. "Mercy, you've been a rock over these last few weeks. I don't know how I would have coped without you," she tells me earnestly. A curious sensation passes through me; a brief flicker of guilt, possibly even doubt. After all, it's not too late, is it? I push the inconvenient emotions away, remembering my role as gardener requires ruthless management of the weak and sickly, and I wait. It's all happening fast now. Panic creeps into Mrs Nolan's face as her heart begins to gallop like wild horses. She gasps, reaches out a hand towards me but knocks my plate of cake onto the floor. Both smash into pieces on the tiles. *Digitalis Perurea*, a cottage garden favourite commonly known as the foxglove, is an excellent pollinator adding height and structure to summer borders. It's also highly toxic. The foxgloves I propagated have been glorious this year, in my opinion outshining the dahlias by far. From the unripe green seeds I've ground a paste and steeped it in the tea that Mrs Nolan's poured from the pot. Her cup stands empty on the table, white and fluted like the trumpet of a foxglove flower. I watch closely and am certain Mrs Nolan experiences minimal pain as her racing heart outruns itself, my face disappearing from her view as her vision blurs and darkens. At her age, no one will suspect a thing. \* The village shop door tinkles as I enter, and I wait patiently while Janet serves a child buying sweets from one of the large jars on the shelf. I smile indulgently at the youngster who glances uneasily at me and takes a wary, wide sidestep around me as he leaves- so strange that children often sense their vulnerability better than their adult counterparts. "Mercy! How are you bearing up?" Janet is the picture of kind concern. "Such a blow to hear about Miriam. I heard you were there when she took poorly?" "It was terrible" I murmur, eyes downcast. "She'd never truly

recovered from finding Mr Nolan in such a state.” “It was the shock, wasn’t it? And a broken heart. Maybe it’s all for the best.” Janet shudders before her bright demeanour returns. “What can I help you with?” “Could I pop a note in the window, please? To let people know I’m available for work.” With Janet’s permission I take out from my bag the card I’ve carefully written my number on and slide it into one of the plastic sleeves hanging in the shop window. It’s placed alongside local business cards and adverts for piano tuition and babysitting. In my neat, orderly cursive I’ve written my number and a friendly message. I’m confident there will be a good response, especially as the Best Blooming Garden award is still up for grabs. Does your garden need some love and care? Call now for experienced help. Just ask for Mercy.