

WALLED GARDENS

AY Dorsey

They left the child in the garden for an hour the first time. She wandered among the plants unaware of where she was, or so the hover-cam and brain monitor indicated. The daffodils were in bloom, but she wasn't drawn to their bright hues. She became trapped among the roses, thick, thorned sticks with leaves just emerging. They ripped long gashes in her shins before she found her way to the apothecary's structured beds.

On her second visit to the garden, the zombie stretched her rotting lips at a blue windflower. Her eyes, for a split-second, seemed conscious. Giselle was about to call Simon, who had turned to the coffee maker for a refill, but before she could open her mouth the expression vanished.

It wasn't until the fifth morning that they noticed an obvious, recordable change. When the zombie child was left in the temporary holding pen outside the garden gate, her eyes crinkled at the corners, narrowing around milk-white irises. She clutched at the wrought iron with claw-like hands.

"Do you think she's afraid the gate won't open?" asked Giselle, her voice hushed.

Simon shrugged and pushed the button. The child's distress vanished. She lurched through the opening and staggered straight to the orchard. The cherry trees were blooming and she walked toward them with one hand out, clutching at nothing, her face raised to the white profusion. When she reached the first tree, she stopped and watched the pink and white petals spin down. One of the many fell upon the back of her hand and became caught in some torn flesh. She stared at it as it quivered in the breeze, then brought her hand to the bars covering her mouth and reached for the petal with a blackened tongue.

In the observation room, Simon and Giselle high-fived each other.

That night, after the zombie was returned to the high security cell that held the other infected children, the new observer didn't notice that instead of the usual haphazard staggerings, this child walked purposefully to the corner furthest from her cellmates. However, he did notice that as the hours

passed, the other zombie children gravitated to her corner, like moths to an unseen light, their jaws twitching behind their mouth guards.

During the next session in the garden, Giselle and Simon knew they'd made a breakthrough. The child kept to the paths. She smiled at new blooms – if her ghastly lip stretches could be called smiles. She touched petals as if they were gossamer.

The brain monitor was jumping.

“Doctor Kirr, we have some data we think you should see,” Giselle said into the receiver, while Simon continued to stare at the read outs, a ridiculous grin smeared across his face.

Giselle ended the call with a frown. “He’s too busy to come.”

Simon’s grin vanished. “But this is important.”

“He says to send an interim report to his office and continue with the experiment.”

Simon chewed his lip for a moment, then whispered, even though there was no one to hear but Giselle, “What do you think about, uh, not telling him. About the brain monitor results, I mean.” He cleared his throat. “We can...” He looked at the wall. “...complete the experiment ourselves.”

Giselle felt heat in her face. Dare they?

“Or at least wait a few more sessions,” he amended when she didn’t immediately answer.

She turned to the screen. The zombie child had her back to the hover-cam and her hands on the wall. Dust trickled down the stones. Giselle pushed a couple of keys to direct the hover-cam and it zoomed in. The child turned and her face filled the screen.

“My god,” said Simon beside her. “It’s so ugly.”

The child spun abruptly, almost fell, then stumbled toward the Japanese garden.

“So what do you think?” Simon asked. “Should we wait to tell him about the brain activity?”

Giselle nodded, not willing to trust her voice. After all, what could it hurt? Just a few days to make sure they had something worth disturbing the Doc about, that’s all.

When the hour was over and they went to retrieve the child, they couldn’t find her at first. Starting their second lap of the garden, they passed

by the massive honeysuckle and heard a low growl. Milky eyes glowed out from behind the tangled branches like twin moons. They tried to lure her out by offering her Simon's forearm – after checking with a flashlight that her mouth guard was still in place – but she wouldn't budge. Finally, Giselle, the smaller of the two research assistants, went in after her.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Giselle murmured as she grabbed the decaying arm with a gloved hand and forced the child from her hiding place. She glanced at Simon. He didn't seem to have heard her spontaneous apology, thank goodness. Even if they were cohorts in the experiment and now in delaying information, she didn't completely trust him. He might even hint to Dr. Kirr she was going soft on the zombie, thinking to make points.

“Maybe it got tired of the heat,” said Simon when they stepped back into the sun's glare.

“Maybe,” said Giselle, though the idea made no sense. Since when did zombies feel pain or discomfort? However, she too was guilty of attributing human qualities to this creature. She needed to remember that it wasn't a person anymore. It was merely a remnant of a long finished war where the victors didn't have the heart to remove the heads of their young enemies. However, they certainly didn't mind selling them as research subjects to whoever could pay the price.

Over the next week, the garden visits fell into a familiar routine. First, the child went to the far wall where she picked at the mortar for fifteen minutes or so, wearing away what little was left of her fingernails. Then she toured the rest of the garden, stopping to focus on whatever was blooming at the time. When her time was almost over, she would hide, though Simon still didn't recognize it as such.

Each day, the brain monitor became more active.

The day that the first rose, species *Rosa Glauca*, unfurled its blushing petals, the child didn't bother continuing the tour. Instead, she knelt beside the rose and inhaled its scent, stroked its petals – and avoided the thorns. Giselle wasn't sure if Simon noticed and left the details out of the log on purpose to see if he would enter it. He didn't.

It was June when Giselle first noticed the change in the child's eyes. This time, Simon noticed it too.

“They’re turning blue,” Simon stuttered when the child turned away from her daily mortar picking to stare into the hover-cam. He took his phone from his pocket.

“Don’t,” Giselle said.

Simon scowled. “We have to tell the Doc. This is too much. What if we get caught?”

The zombie child leaned over some late blooming violets.

Giselle turned away from the screen to give Simon her full attention. “We’ve got something amazing here, something research assistants only dream about. What if we find a way to cure the zombie children? What if we discover what’s doing this? We’d be set for life.”

And they’ll just dissect her brain if we tell them, she thought, looking back at the screen. The child glanced away from the flowers she’d been studying and up at the hover-cam, her pale eyes a reflection of the violet.

Giselle swallowed. “Our careers could take off. And it probably wouldn’t hurt our financial situations either,” she added, though the words didn’t come easily.

Simon put the phone down. “But what about the night observer? Even he’ll eventually notice this change.”

“What if we trick them into thinking we’ve brought her back? We could sign a similar looking zombie in and out and then keep it in the transport van all day. It won’t even notice.”

“And our zombie?”

“We’ll leave her in the garden. The gardener’s away for the next two weeks. A new baby, I think.”

Simon tightened his lips for a moment. “So how do we get out of returning her tonight?”

The hover-cam was focusing on the honeysuckle – the child was hiding early today. But there was no more need to hide; Simon was going to cooperate. “We’ll pretend to take her back a bit early tonight, just before the shift change. You can chat with the day observer and tell him I’m coming along with her soon, then when the new guy comes on, tell him you’ve already put her in.”

Later, when Simon was gone, Giselle turned off the equipment and lights, and walked down to the walled garden. She stood beside the

honeysuckle and told the child that she didn't have to go back to her cell, adding "ever again" before she could stop herself. When there was no response, she was ridiculously relieved. The child didn't understand her, so there was no promise.

When she left, she was careful to lock the gate behind her. She hung a sign on the gate which read, *Absolutely No Entry. Experiment in Progress*, to discourage others who possessed keys from entering.

The next morning, the girl's eyes were bluer and her skin less gray. By the end of the week, the skin snags and tears were healing. After Giselle left some clothes at the gate, she and Simon watched through the monitor as the girl put them on over her rags.

At dusk, after Simon had long since left, Giselle went into the garden. For the first time, the girl didn't hide. Instead, she stood and stared at Giselle, her eyes alive in her sallow face. New chestnut hair sprouted from her head. Only her fingernails were still stubby and worn. As Giselle watched, the child tried to wrench the mouth-guard from her face.

"What's doing this to you?" Giselle whispered. "The growing things? The beauty? One of the plants?"

A guttural noise burst from the zombie and she spun away. A chill jittered down Giselle's spine as she watched the creature run far too swiftly across the lawn and disappear in the apothecary's garden. She double-checked the lock on the garden gate when she left.

That night, she looked through the zombie's scanty records but no one had thought to record her human name. Giselle decided to call her Violet.

The next morning, the garden seemed deserted. At first they assumed their subject was hiding again, but as the morning wore on, they became worried. Together, they went to the garden and let themselves in. They split up to search.

Giselle found the hole in the wall, hidden by the honeysuckle, and called Simon in a panic. A rock had been removed. Blood – *blood* – marred the gray stone surrounding the small hole. The zombie had clawed her way through and escaped.

Desperation made them regroup quickly. Neither wanted to touch the blood in case it was contagious, so Giselle used a leaf to smear it. It was fresh. Violet couldn't have gotten far.

They grabbed a ladder from the garden shed outside the gate and climbed over the wall beside the honeysuckle. The garden backed onto an alley, lined with garbage cans and carports.

Simon wrung his hands, his face pale. “What have we done? We should have reported her.”

Giselle looked up and down the quiet alley. To their left, a busy street, and on their right, just beyond the houses, a small copse of trees waved their branches.

Simon started left.

“I’ll go to the right,” said Giselle.

Simon turned around, his face incredulous. “It’s going to try to feed. It’ll go to where it senses the most life.”

“I think she went to the trees.”

He strode back to Giselle, and despite her best efforts, she took a quick step back.

“You’re planning to ditch me, aren’t you?” He grabbed her shoulder, his fingers spearing her flesh. “You’re going to tell them this is my fault because I’m the senior assistant!”

“You’re crazy. I’d never do that.” Giselle tried to twist away, but Simon was too strong.

“You better not, because if you even try, I’ll make sure you pay.”

“Simon, really, I just think she went right,” Giselle said, feeling infinitely tired.

“If she likes trees so much, why’d she leave the garden?”

“Even zoo animals, given every luxury, try to escape.”

He glared at her for a moment, then dropped his hand. “Okay, okay. We’ll split up.”

Giselle rubbed her shoulder.

“Phone me as soon as you check the trees and we’ll decide where you look next.”

“She’ll be there. And I don’t need you to tell me where to search.” She took a step back.

“Just call me, okay?” he repeated. “We need to make a planned search.”

Giselle nodded dumbly. Of course, he was right. They needed to coordinate their efforts.

Simon spun away and loped down the alley, pausing only to peer behind garbage cans or glance into open garages.

Giselle watched him go, still rubbing her throbbing shoulder. She'd never thought of Simon as violent – but then, maybe he wasn't so much violent as desperate. Their careers, everything they'd worked for, were in jeopardy. She should feel as scared; she was in the same situation.

She ran down the alley, not bothering to search as she went. Within five minutes, she entered the shady depths of the small forest, a mere hundred trees or so, of all types and sizes. Trails cut through the wood, crisscrossing one other at random. Giselle followed them one by one, looking behind bushes and tree trunks.

She found Violet peering out from a thicket of leafy branches, captivated by children romping in a bordering playground. Her zombie eyes were alight.

“Do you remember?” Giselle asked gently, noticing the dried blood on the small fingers. Her wounds were healing already. Remarkable.

The child tracked a young boy as he raced from the climbing wall to the slide.

Giselle knelt beside her and put her hand on the cold thin arm. “You have to come with me, Violet.”

The zombie gave no sign she'd heard.

“You have to come with me.”

“Nooo.”

Giselle inhaled sharply. The child could speak, and more. She'd not only understood Giselle, but had responded with an independent mind.

Violet looked at her with wide blue eyes and opened her mouth. Another raw sound spilled forth – and yet, the sound had form.

“Play?” asked Giselle. “You want to play?” Tears stung her eyes. “Oh, sweetie. You can't play.”

Deflated, Violet turned back to watching the children. She tried pulling her arm from Giselle's grip, but wasn't strong enough.

Remembering her own sore shoulder, Giselle released her and stood. How was she going to force the poor thing back to the garden? She pulled

her cell phone from her pocket and stared at it. Simon was only a call away – and yet she couldn't punch in his number. Not when he'd surely pull the pin on their secret after today.

The child was looking at her again and for the first time, Giselle shrank before her gaze. Ugliness she'd been able to take. Blankness too. But accusing awareness?

Yet Violet's plight wasn't her fault. She hadn't done this to the poor thing. Not really. Had she?

Not unless the zombie was better off remaining unaware and unfeeling.

Violet moved her mouth carefully and with great concentration. "Hoh. Mmm."

"Hoh-mmm," whispered Giselle, not recognizing what Violet had said until she copied her. "Home? You want to go home?" She held out her hand. "Okay, come with me." The child stood and together they walked the sun-speared path. They reached the edge of the wood and Giselle noted the deserted length of road with relief. She hurried in the direction of the garden.

Violet pulled back so violently that her hand slipped from Giselle's grip and she sprawled across the ground. She looked up at Giselle reproachfully. "Hoh. Mmm."

"I am taking you home," said Giselle. "To the garden."

"Nooo." Violet looked the opposite direction.

"The home you had with your family? Your home before you were infected," said Giselle, finally understanding. "Sweetheart, I can't do that. I—"

A woman's voice sounded from the woods, and then a man laughed. Someone was coming along the trail behind them.

Giselle bent to help Violet to her feet. "Come on, sweetie," she said, trying to keep the panic from her voice. If anyone saw Violet, she'd never be able to save her. The child would never see a garden again, let alone go home. "We have to hide, okay?"

Violet refused to move.

Giselle took the thin wrists in her hand and pulled her up, then lifted her into her arms. The girl was surprisingly light, just skin and bones. Giselle hurried down the alley, Violet looking back over her shoulder.

“Hoh. Mmm.”

“I’m taking you home, Violet.”

“Noo. Hoh. Mmm.” The girl pointed back the way they’d come.

“HOH! MMM! HOH! MMM!”

“Hey, what are you doing to that child?” The woman’s shout came from behind them.

“Hey, lady, stop! Is that your kid?”

Giselle almost cried when she heard the sounds of pursuit behind her. There was only one thing she could do. She stopped abruptly, put Violet on the ground – the girl stood shakily – and while her body blocked their pursuers’ view, she removed Violet’s mouth guard.

She turned toward the man and woman running toward them. “Yes, she’s mine. Or rather, she’s my niece.” She felt Violet press against the back of her legs. The girl was afraid. “She was just stung by a bee and I was rushing her home.”

“Hoh. Mmm.”

“Can we see?” the woman asked.

“I don’t think she’ll let you,” said Giselle. She felt Violet’s fingers trace along her wrist and down to the hand holding her mouth guard. “She’s very shy.” Sniffling sounds came from behind Giselle. “You’re making her even more upset,” Giselle added, pressing her advantage.

“I’m sure everything’s fine, Marion,” the man said and took the woman’s arm.

The woman didn’t acknowledge him. “May I have your name, please?”

“Giselle,” Giselle said without thinking.

“Your last name too.”

“Violet.” It was the only name that popped into her head.

“Where do you work?”

Giselle felt her first flash of irritation. “Maybe you should ask for my driver’s license while you’re at it. And what about my social insurance number?”

“I’m just trying to protect a child who is in potential danger.”

“If you’re so interested in protecting her, why don’t you let me take her home and calm her down?” A sharp pain sliced Giselle’s thumb and she gasped.

“Are you alright?” asked the man.

“Yes, yes. I was just stung too. That’s all.”

“Marion, let’s go.”

The woman tried to peer around Giselle. “Are you okay, cutie?”

Violet pushed her face deeper into Giselle’s hands, chewed harder on her thumb.

“The kid’s obviously afraid of us, not her aunt,” the man added.

“Let’s go.”

Reluctantly, the woman agreed. Giselle squeezed her injured thumb in her hand as the two walked away, the man almost dragging the woman after him. When they’d gone a few yards, she turned to examine her wound. The skin was broken in only two places and they were small cuts. Violet’s jaws were not strong, thank goodness.

And she might not even be contagious anymore. Didn’t even non-zombie children bite? She remembered biting her cousin when she was five or six, close to Violet’s age before the girl became infected.

She glanced back. The man and woman were almost out of sight now, but someone else was walking along the alley toward them. “Come on, Violet.” She held out her hand and Violet took it, then she hurried the child back to the woods. There was no point in returning her to the garden now. That would be the same as turning herself in if she was infected with the zombie virus.

They found a safe place in the woods among some bushes and sat down to wait. As the day crawled by, Giselle heard people pass on the trails near them. One tread she was sure was Simon’s. Even his footsteps sounded betrayed.

The children in the playground laughed and shrieked, and Violet crept to the edge of their sanctuary to stare through the leafy cover. She didn’t try to join them. When she tired of watching, she lay down beside Giselle and gazed at a bed of twinflowers. Giselle thought she heard the child humming a time or two, but wasn’t sure. The sound was too faint.

By evening, Giselle was sure she was infected. Not only did her thumb throb but she could feel the poison travelling up her arm in a tingling mass. She knew from her readings that when it hit her brain, she would die and the virus would take over. Everything that was *her* would be replaced by a life-ingesting machine, a horrible flesh-eating creature, a monstrosity. The idea was too unbearable to seem real.

They stayed in the woods as night came on, unafraid of the woodland noises, and Giselle considered her options. The playground fell silent. Raucous teenagers tramped through the woods and Violet was almost struck by a flung beer can.

Finally, Giselle stood and held out her hand. “Violet, let’s go to *my* home.” This time the child followed willingly.

Traversing the streets with Violet was easy at night. No one paid them any attention and within an hour they were inside Giselle’s apartment. The first thing Giselle did was move her numerous houseplants into her bedroom, trip after trip with African violets, ivy, miniature roses, and jasmine, as Violet trailed behind her. Somehow she even found the strength to push her big potted palm into the room. Then she gave the little girl a bath. For the first time, she saw Violet naked and marveled at the extent of the cure, whatever had caused it. Her flesh was almost perfect. And she definitely was humming – *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

Afterward, Giselle slipped one of her t-shirts over Violet’s head for the little girl to wear as a nightgown, then tucked her into her own bed. The child relaxed immediately in the bower of greenery and though Giselle knew she probably wouldn’t sleep – surely, she was still too much zombie for that – Violet seemed perfectly content to lie beneath the covers and soak in the lush atmosphere.

Tears prickled Giselle’s eyes as she shut the door to the bedroom. She’d probably never see Violet again. The poison was working quickly; it was already to her neck. But at least, the child was safe. As a zombie, Giselle wouldn’t have the intelligence to open either the door to the girl’s room or to the outside world.

She settled on the couch to wait. Coming back to her apartment had been the only solution she could think of, other than turning herself in and becoming a scientific experiment herself. However, she knew her body

would still get run through the mill. There had been a number of scientists upset at the policy to behead all adult zombies, so she'd probably be considered hot property for the first time in her life. She almost laughed at the irony of it.

Of course, she could blow her own brains out. Removing the head or destroying the brains were the only known ways to stop the transformation from living to undead. But even if she had a gun, she knew she wouldn't. She had a responsibility to Violet.

She glanced at her watch. She should call Simon now. She still had to get a commitment from him for Violet's continued treatment, in return for discovering the only adult zombie in existence. Not that she could completely trust him to carry through with any promise he might make, only more than anyone else she knew in their competitive field.

"Simon?"

"What the hell, Giselle. Where have you been? Where is she?"

"She's here, at my place. And we need to talk. Tonight."

"I'll be right over. What's your address?"

For a moment, Giselle couldn't remember. Was the poison moving faster? Did she have enough time? "Uh, just a sec." She moved clumsily off the couch to her desk and rifled through a pile of bills, then read off her address.

Simon hung up.

Half an hour. At the most. That's all she had left of her own life. She looked at the phone in her hand and wondered if she should call anyone else. She had no real friends and her parents were long gone. She had one brother, but they hadn't spoken in years and didn't know each other anymore.

So, no goodbyes.

Instead, she turned on Pavarotti, upped the volume, and leaned back on the couch. She'd seen him in *Tosca* one magical night, years ago. She'd taken time away from work when she couldn't afford it and flown to New York to see his last performance. She wore a wine red dress and did her hair up, even though there was no one special to impress, and stayed one night in a nice hotel. After the opera, she ordered champagne at the hotel lounge and gloried in being an adventurous, spontaneous woman.

Why hadn't she done more things like that? Why—

The song ended, but it was the small sound behind her that interrupted her fuzzy thoughts. Violet. The music must have disturbed her. The girl looked small, tired, and timid. On leaden legs, Giselle took Violet back to bed.

“You stay here now, sweetie,” she said, tucking the girl in again. “Don’t come out for anything, okay?” Dizziness washed over her and she leaned on the bed to stop herself from falling.

“Where’s Mommy?” Violet’s words were clear.

Giselle closed her eyes for a moment to compose herself. “You stay in this room. You stay in here until the nice man comes to take you to Mommy. If you come out sooner, you may never see Mommy again. You understand?”

Violet nodded, her eyes huge. Giselle staggered to the door and leaned against the doorjamb. “Goodnight, Violet.”

“Sophie.”

Tears blinded Giselle. “Goodnight, Sophie.”

“Goodnight, G’selle.”

Giselle shut the door and lurched to the couch. Sophie remembered her own name. She remembered her mother. Now hopefully her mother was still alive. Hopefully she wasn’t one of the thousands of slaughtered zombies. If she had survived, she’d be a lot older than Sophie remembered, but that wouldn’t matter. She’d still be her mother.

What was taking Simon so long? Giselle rubbed the tears from her eyes but her vision didn’t clear. The poison was tingling just below her skull.

A knock on the door. Finally! She had to get to him, explain to him about Sophie. Why hadn’t she written it down?

Somehow she got to her feet. She swayed to the wall and slid along it. The door came closer.

“Open up, Giselle!” Pounding.

She moved a step closer.

Another.

She was blind now.

Another step.

The doorknob must be within reach. Fumbling...



The scent of life.

Later... Greenness. Vivacity.

Then a flower, glowing with energy. She was sure that's what it was – and because she was sure of that one thing when all else was darkness, she clung to the feeling and impression of *flower*.

“Oh, Simon. She really sees it.” That noise, it was somehow familiar.

Then another sound, deeper, rough. “She does, Sophie. She does.”