

# Just whose garden party is this?



IRENE VIRAG

It was a dark and stormy — well, it was dark. It was the middle of the night, and I couldn't sleep. The marauder might be out there right now committing his dastardly deeds. My poor darlings, I thought. I switched off the house alarm, turned on a lamp and grabbed a robe.

"Wha," my husband said. "Who . . ."

"I'm going to the garden," I said. He fumbled for a flashlight and staggered after me. I didn't know if the solution was at hand or the killer was about to be revealed, but I knew one thing for sure — the game was afoot.

And as I stumbled out the front door, so was I.

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It had all started innocently enough with my stepson's betrothal to a young woman of good family and considerable beauty. Caught up in their joy, we offered to give them an engagement party. We'd hold it outdoors in July amid the sunny confines of our garden in Fort Salonga. And a few days later when the Northport Historical Society asked if we'd open our garden for a tour, we agreed happily. We'd host that the following weekend.

Alas, we had not foreseen how much work was required to restore our garden to its usual beauty. A cold and soggy winter had ravaged many of our perennial favorites — our beloved lace-cap hydrangeas, our baby's breath, our less hardy roses. Our rosemary had departed the earth after growing heartily through the mild winters of seasons past. Demure hollyhocks and bold cosmos failed to reseed. And the winter felled two of the trees in our shade garden — changing that gentle bower's very persona.

With summer fast approaching, we worked diligently — composting the soil, planting and weeding, edging and mulching and filling in empty spaces with annuals such as blue salvia and gomphrena and portulaca and coleus. And we replanted perennials such as Russian sage and coreopsis and yarrow. Our phlox returned in even greater numbers, and our daylilies sprang forth in colorful yet harmonious profusion.

All the while, we tried to ignore the danger signs. The not-so-meek were inheriting our earth. We were beset by creatures. Mole holes riddled the lawn and the resultant root



NEWSDAY FILE PHOTOS / DEER, MICHAEL E. ACH; ABOVE, KEN SPENCER



damage made evergreens turn brown. We pruned dead wood from an Alberta spruce only to watch it practically sink into a mole tunnel. Squirrels paraded about waving desiccated bulbs as if they were battle trophies.

It was as if something sinister had been watching our home and now it struck. In beds and borders everywhere, my Asiatic lilies were losing their heads. Some were, I blush to say, deflowered. Others didn't even get that far. They were de-budded.

Guilt seemed easy to assign. The animals appropriating my property included a great host of rabbits. They hopped around the lawn, scurried

under the garden gate, and sneered at me with disdain. One — a baby bunny — jumped into my bathing pool and tried to swim along with me.

It had to be rabbits. All the beheaded lilies were little more than a foot tall, easily within rabbit range. And their buds and/or flowers had been severed neatly as if by a sharp set of teeth.

Then, on a fateful morning sweetened by sunshine and tender with dew, I looked up and faced the very gates of horror. My Casa Blanca lilies — the stars of my summer garden — had fallen victim to the marauder. It couldn't be rabbits. My Casa Blanca lilies

Someone or something is making a snack of the Casa Blanca lilies, above. Could the culprit be a deer stopping by the garden for a midnight snack?

have been in residence for the last eight years. They produce large, white uncommonly lovely flowers. And their scent — ah, their scent is a strong and heady perfume that transforms the world. And they grow 3½ to 5½ feet tall.

I've seen rabbits jump unusual heights straight up and down. But no rabbit of my experience could jump that high and munch at the same time.

In need of help, I sought counsel from Alan Horne, a sagacious plantsman who helps maintain my garden. "I've seen this a lot on the East End," he said. And he uttered the dread word. "Deer," he said. "They love lilies."

"But there are no deer in Fort Salonga," I said. The only deer I had ever spotted in the surrounding countryside was a lawn ornament someone had discarded alongside the Sagtikos Parkway. Besides, we could find no droppings, no signs of trampled plants.

Alan shook his head. "Deer." Matthew Stanco, a horticulturist at Paul's Nursery in Greenlawn, told me he'd heard reports of deer sightings in nearby Northport and Centerport. "They swim, you know," he said.

He wondered if the guilt lay with an insect or disease. But I told him there were no such signs — no blackened areas on the plants, no buds on the ground.

"Deer," Matthew said.

On a visit to the New York Botanical Garden, I ran into Becky and Brent Heath, bulb growers of national renown from Virginia. I couldn't resist telling them about the mystery in my garden.

"Deer," Becky and Brent said in unison.

Bill Miller, a Cornell University plant expert, was admiring the perennials at the Botanical Garden. He said deer have a wide range. Bucks could have come through my garden one evening, eaten their fill and moved on.

"Deer," he said. "They come and go quickly. Fifteen miles for a deer is nothing. You don't always see tracks."

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Clouds rode across a half moon as we entered the garden. Our flashlight cut a wide swath across the borders. The Casa Blanca lilies stood straight and tall — their tops all neatly severed. Their foliage was untouched — they just didn't have any buds.

There was no sign of anything foraging in the garden. We moved about the yard — back and front. Nothing.

The engagement party is a few days off. I am sure it will be a time of joy. But the perfume of the lilies will be missing. Perhaps someone out there has an answer. If you do, please write. In the meantime, the mystery remains. And the word reverberates in my head. "Deer. Deer. Deer."