

## **Weird Dirt**

I don't love plants. I'm not that interested in flowers. My thumb isn't green, it isn't brown, it's not even black. It's curious. So I grow plants. All kinds, the weirder the better. It's not a hobby, it's more like an experiment: I'm not growing them, I'm daring them to live. I stick them in fresh dirt, sometimes not, I water them when I remember (and I do try to remember). I watch what happens. It's like holding a mirror under a man's nose to see if he's still breathing. If they die, they go on the compost pile and sometimes I don't even take them out of their pots. If they live, I'm simply impressed and leave them to it.

The only plant I've ever mourned with any honesty was a desert rose. Already 15 years old when it welcomed us through the doorway of our first new home in Tucson, it almost died in the U-Haul as we drove through New Mexico a year later. Jammed in the back of the truck next to a dresser and an unwrapped mirror, it went to sleep on us in a Super 8 parking lot when the temperature dropped below freezing overnight. It was dead when we reached Baltimore, but we stuck it in a dark corner of our row house as a reminder of what we'd left behind. It looked like an upright cigar in a bowl of sand. Then, for reasons known only to the rose, it came to and made up for lost time.

Like a rapidly-inflating basketball crawling with wooden arteries and sprouting antlers, the rose cracked its pot and threw pink blooms on the floor until we couldn't

ignore it any longer. We shooed the cats out of the only sunny spot in the house and rearranged the furniture to accommodate a new pot. When summer rolled around it earned a place of honor on our porch steps and I surprised myself with an impromptu trip to a garden center, my first. I surrounded the rose with a pretty maze of elephant ears, striped caladium, salvia spikes, hot pink coleus, and nuclear green sweet potato vines. Watering the rose was like playing twister between the pots.

It had no business being alive and being alive in Baltimore. It was dead when we arrived and my prior attention to its needs had been generously negligent. The rose was several planting zones out of its league, needed weird dirt and barely drank water. We never knew when it would decide to bloom. Parked on the marble steps behind a wall of terracotta and the most shocking plants I could find, the rose still looked as out of place as a bird of paradise next to a dandelion: it was obnoxious bordering on obscene. Which is why people started taking pictures of it. Lots of people. The weekend stream of neighbors, hungover millennials, post-church brunch seekers, city kids, and familiar strangers wandered past our porch steps and paused, often with cameras. "What *is* it?" A wedding present. "What do you call that color?" Grandma's lipstick. "Where did you get it?" Mars.

The rose kept growing. The root ball was threatening to crack another pot before the first frost. I started reading about fertilizer and growing mediums. I began filtering the water before it went into the pot. I Googled Southwestern ceramic traditions. I bookmarked sites focused on grow lights, desert rose varieties, and frost protection. I studied regional substrates and soil amendments, microclimates and wind patterns. I

wished it good morning on my way out and good evening on my way in. I plucked dead blooms from its branches, removed burned leaves and turned it toward the sun. I imagined it was happy. One morning I opened the door and it was gone.

I looked down and blinked. Twice. I looked left, then right. I even looked up, as if the roof across the street held an answer. No rose. No pot. No pot without a rose, no rose without a pot, no trail of dirt, nothing shattered on the sidewalk or thrown into the street. Just a hole. Every other pot was in its place on the steps, every plant in its pot, nothing moved, nothing broken. There was a faint ring of weird dirt where the rose had been sitting, the only evidence it had ever existed. I backed into the house and the door shut in my face.

I turned and started searching. I scanned the floors and shelves. I ducked under the dining table, searched the kitchen counters, and started opening cabinets. I pulled the curtains and peered into the shower. I emptied the closets from top to bottom. I yanked open the basement hatch and searched the puddles on the brick floor with a flashlight. I climbed on the roof and scanned the surrounding patios, gardens, and back-of-the-bar garbage piles. I trekked from one end of the street to the other, lifted the greasy dumpster lids behind the sub shop on the corner, scooted sideways down the stray cat alley behind our house, and crawled under the cars parked on the surrounding streets. I explored every dark corner. Not a hint of dirt, pot shards or petals. The rose disappeared from the steps and my life.

The stolen rose was not the work of seasoned pumpkin smashers, the kids without curfews who prowled our side of the harbor and occasionally raised a small amount of

hell in the form of broken bottles in the street and garbage stuffed into mail slots. It took effort to reach the rose when it needed water, it was a chore to turn the pot when it needed sun. Lifting the pot was a two-person job, it hadn't been picked up in months. Yet it had been thoughtfully, carefully and purposely removed from the rear flank of a plant army by someone who recognized its odd beauty and decided I wasn't fit to care for it.

As I stood in the street and stared at the bald spot of marble on the top step, my eyes glazed and I thought "My rose. Shanghaied. Ha. Whatever happened to the one in Tokyo?" and I wanted to laugh and then I started to cry. It felt like the first honest cry I'd had in 20 years and I couldn't shut it down. It was 10:30 on a Saturday morning and I bee-lined to the wine rack. A glass of cabernet in my hand while the morning shows wrapped up had ceased to startle me. A warm up bottle or two by lunch, chased all afternoon by a six pack, then followed by a marriage buster battle and a wobbly flight down the street to a bar was as normal and regular as a heartbeat and I'd stopped worrying about it after two or three years.

I decided the rose had tried too hard and so had I. I'd made a universe out of a plant. It responded by defying laws of nature and climate. I'd overinvested in the experiment and the loss of rigorous objectivity was a horrible mistake for both of us. My worth as a human had hinged on the size of the root ball, the length of its branches, the number of blooms it produced, how many pots it threatened to crack, and the type of people who stopped to take pictures and ask questions. When it curled up and went dormant each winter, it was proof that I was incapable of giving or receiving affection, ill-equipped to care and undeserving of life. Every unopened flower felt personal. When

the rose shut down it was a statement about my fragile marriage, my failure to connect with life, and my reluctance to love and be loved. When it sprang back each May I briefly believed something larger than me was at work and applauding me for hanging in there for another year.

I was embarrassed and frightened by how much the plant had mattered. I'd rarely connected with anything longer than a year or two before I cut bait and it ended up at Goodwill, by the curb, on a list of blocked emails or lost in a trail of address changes. Everything I'd ever cared about had been mine on borrowed time. I'd leave them before they left me. Perhaps the rose had been spared my lesson in abandonment when someone with an experienced and less theoretical interest in its growth had saved it. Maybe a neighbor, sick of being jerked awake by the sound of our recycling bin hitting the back of the truck like a glass factory explosion, seeing me trip up the steps at 9pm, my backside streaked with bar floor beer, decided I didn't deserve beauty. Maybe the rose was never as happy or beautiful as I'd imagined.

A few weeks after the first frost I dragged the remaining porch plants, crisped over and more than three-fourths dead, to the corner of our postage-stamp patio and left them there in their pots. When we moved again in May, the thought occurred that I'd left them behind and I reminded myself they'd make it on their own if they were meant to live.

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