

Plant

The plant leaf stuck out of the soil like a tongue, fleshy and curved, in the white ceramic pot. Just one leaf plopped in the dirt, a bit brown at the edges. It was the kind of plant you buy at a grocery store when you've forgotten to get someone a real gift, a plant raised on fluorescent light instead of sun. Ryan brought it home after work, a peace offering: the night before, he walked out of the kitchen in the middle of her story about the woman who fell asleep in her yoga class. He had never been a good listener.

Ashley put the plant in the living room in front of the south-facing window with her other succulents. The new plant smelled like cloves. She liked succulents. At least he got that part right.

They ate vegetable curry and green salad at the small kitchen table, not talking, eyes on their carrots and broccoli. Ryan looked up when his plate was almost empty. "How about I open some wine?"

"Really?" Ashley answered. It was Wednesday night. They went to bed by 9:00 during the week, but now, Ryan was grabbing two crystal wine glasses from the sideboard and rinsing the dust off them in the sink. He poured large glugs of red wine into both.

"To us!" he said. Ashley felt that she was making it too easy for him. She was hurt, he had hurt her, but he looked so proud of himself, like a child handing someone a gift.

"Yes, OK," she said, picking up her glass. "To us."

She had no yoga classes to teach the next day. The plant looked a little better than it had the day before. She could see a new small shoot springing from the soil to keep the large leaf company, and she poured two careful drops of water on the rocks around them.

On her days off, Ashley still practiced yoga, spreading her mat between the two windows facing the park. The buildings on 4th blocked the view, but she knew it was there. She could hear the start and stop of a bulldozer engine clearing a field down the street, probably to build another coffee shop.

She rested on her knees in child's pose and then moved through her flow: cat and cow, down dog, the various animals and warriors. Warmed up, she moved on to one-handed tree pose, which was a handstand on one hand and with feet spread apart in the air like tree branches reaching for the sky. It was one of the most challenging yoga poses. Today, she was able to pick her left arm up off the ground for several seconds, a first.

A smell drifted toward her mat from the new plant, cinnamon and spice. Lying spread-eagle on the mat in savasana, Ashley felt calm and relaxed, like she'd eaten a piece of her Aunt Jody's rum cake.

Afterward, she opened the door to the second bedroom. It looked the same as always: crib, diaper genie, mobile, dresser filled with tiny clothes. They bought every item they could think of for the baby before they lost it. This is what she and Ryan said to people afterward - *we lost the baby* - which made them sound careless and irresponsible, like the kind of people who probably should not have a baby at all.

When Ryan came home, he brought sushi, her favorite. This was a surprise. *Thoughtful* was not an adjective Ashley would ever use to describe her husband. Two gifts in two days. Maybe he was having an affair.

“Let’s eat in the dining room,” Ryan said, pulling another bottle of wine out of a brown paper bag. He really was very handsome in the suit he wore to the bank, with his short cropped hair, like a young Tom Cruise. Her boyfriends before Ryan had dreadlocks and no plans.

Ashley scooped large mounds of broccoli and tomatoes onto their plates. “Is there another dish?” Ryan asked her, that crease she liked appearing between his eyebrows.

Ashley shook her head. “Huh. I must have forgotten.”

Ryan sat down and put his napkin on his lap. “No worries, Ash, this looks great.”

Ryan told her he was creating a pitchbook to generate new clients for the bank. It sounded incredibly boring to Ashley. “Why do you need *more* clients?” she asked. She felt argumentative after two glasses of wine. “To make the bank *more* money? How does that help anything?”

“It makes us more money, too,” Ryan said, lifting his wine glass in a salute. “You and me, if I get promoted.”

“Money, money, money,” Ashley said. She stood up and walked towards Ryan, waving her arms back and forth over her head like tall grass in the wind. She leaned over his shoulder, massaging his neck, pressing her breasts into his shoulder blades. “Is that all you think about?”

“Well, I am a banker,” he said. He turned to face her and pulled her onto his lap. “But no, it’s not.” From the corner of his eye, he could see the plant on the table in the next room, taller now, swaying in an invisible breeze.

“Where did you get this plant?” Ashley asked Ryan, bending over the plant table. It was Saturday, and Ryan sat on the couch, feet propped up on the coffee table, staring at his phone.

“Hmm?” he said, not looking up. “Why?”

“It’s making little plant babies like crazy,” Ashley said. “I think I need to divide it into more pots.”

“OK,” Ryan said. He looked up, then. “Do you think you should? That smell is pretty strong. We could just throw the babies away.”

“What?” Ashley sounded horrified. “They’re babies! What kind of monster are you?”

“OK, OK.” He went back to scrolling on his phone. Ashley took the plant onto the balcony where they kept a plastic box filled with plant soil, spades, and some terracotta pots. She returned with two pots, each with one leafy tongue in the center, and set them on the plant table, and then again with the original plant, which now had tendrils and multiple leaves clinging to a thick vine. “It really is growing fast, isn’t it?” Ryan said, getting up to take the pot. He placed it on the plant table center stage between the smaller two. They stood back to look.

“It’s like a family,” Ashley said. Tears appeared in her eyes, which she wiped away.

“It is,” Ryan agreed. He took her hand. A smell redolent of coriander and cumin radiated from the table.

On Sunday, all three plants had new tendrils. They cascaded from the table in the direction of the window.

“Do you think they want to go outside?” Ryan asked, and then he laughed. “I mean, do they need more light?”

“Maybe,” Ashley said. She and Ryan picked up the ends of the plant table and took it out onto the balcony. From there, they could see the bulldozer on the next block, quiet today. The field was almost cleared.

They put their feet up on the railing and drank coffee, not talking. The sun warmed their bare arms and faces. When they stood up to take the plant table back inside, the vines of the largest plant had wrapped around the bottom rail.

“Ha!” Ashley said. “It doesn’t want to go in!” She had to unwind the vine carefully from the wooden baluster.

That night, she and Ryan drank wine with dinner and reached for each other in bed, twisting themselves around and around like kudzu until they were exhausted, a perfumed cloud of sweat and curry hovering over them.

Monday, after teaching, Ashley came home to find more vines and leaves bursting from all three plants.

“This is getting ridiculous,” she thought. She drove to Home Depot and bought three large pots, the biggest ones they had, and an enormous bag of dusty potting soil. On the apartment balcony, she repotted the plants into the bigger pots, which she spread around the apartment: one in the bedroom, one in the dining nook, and one in the small living room that faced the street.

“There,” she said, to no one. She sat down to rest with a large glass of red wine, even though it was early afternoon. “Let’s take a little nap,” she said to the plant next to the couch, and she set her empty glass on the table.

She woke to Ryan opening the door. He carried flowers in a clear vase and three bottles of wine. She felt a flash of annoyance. They had enough plants to take care of, but he set the flowers on the table where the plants had once been, and the problem was solved.

They ate takeout pizza from the Italian place straight from the box, standing at the counter, then fell into bed, where they wove their legs and arms and tongues together for hours before they slept.

In the morning, the plant in the bedroom looked dead. “Oh, no!” Ashley said. She raced to check the other two. The dining room plant was also brown and wilted, but the plant in the living room had sprouted two new tendrils. The original tongue had grown long and hairy, bending over in

an arc from the top of the plant, while the gangly vines growing from its base flowed over the rim to the floor.

“Help me move these,” she told Ryan, “Hurry!” and they placed the two ailing plants on the floor next to the healthy mother. Ashley lay two ice cubes on the soil of each like medicine, a trick she found online.

An hour later, while they watched *The Martian* with their bottle of wine, Ashley noticed the sickly plants were greener, more robust. By bedtime, they seemed to have recovered. The flowers Ryan had bought the day before were brown and bent on the little table.

She felt tired after nights of little sleep, but she and Ryan moved towards each other wordlessly, understanding that this night would pass as other recent nights had, with the two of them clinging to each other like burrs until they dropped onto their pillows near dawn.

She missed her period. She knew, she could tell, that there was a baby now nestled inside her, a bundle of cells burrowed into her uterine wall, a placental and amniotic sac developing to support new life. She skipped her yoga class, calling to say she felt sick though she felt better than she had in months, virile and flourishing, and then sat on the couch, legs splayed, holding her belly and humming. Tendrils reached from the plant beside her to wrap around her hand, and she stroked them with her other.

Ryan found her there when he came home from work, carrying Chinese takeout and red wine. From her position on the couch, the universal hand to the bottom of the womb body language,

he knew. He dropped the takeout bag and hurried to kneel in front of her, pushing the coffee table and plant vines out of the way, to place his head against her belly.

“I don’t want to go to work,” Ryan told her the next morning from his pillow next to hers. He rubbed his hand in circles over the small mound at Ashley’s waist. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Then stay,” Ashley said. She put her hand on his, letting it travel the same slow circles. “Let someone else make the money. I’m staying home, too.”

“Well of course, *you* need to.” Ryan said. His hand stopped circling. “Wait! Did you feel that? I think I felt a kick.”

“It’s too soon, goofball,” Ashley said, but she put her hand next to his and waited, then smiled.

“Precocious!” she said. Ryan nodded and put his head on her stomach. They could smell the sweet spice of the plants from the living room.

He went to get them juice and fruit from the kitchen, which he brought back on a tray. “The plants have grown,” he told her. “They’ve filled the window.”

When she went to the bathroom, Ashley saw that he was right: the plants were climbing from their pots and up the street-facing window, weaving over and under each other into a lattice.

She took a pitcher of water from the kitchen to water them and then climbed back into bed next to Ryan.

They slept and ate and had sex and slept more. When Ryan woke in the late afternoon, he found Ashley standing naked in front of the living room window. The plants had formed themselves into a verdant wall of thatch, blocking the light.

“They want to leave,” Ashley told him. Her face looked flushed. Her hand cupped her belly, the size of a large ripe pumpkin.

“What?” Ryan asked her. “How do you know?” But Ashley ignored him, reaching through the thicket of vines to search for the window latch.

“Help me!” she snapped, and he hurried over to push his hand through the greenery, rotating the latch. Together, they lifted the window as carefully as they could so as not to rip the vines, which shifted out of the way. Ryan punched the screen out of the window casing, and they paused to listen for its contact with the sidewalk below.

Ashley took Ryan’s hand and a wine bottle from the coffee table, and they went back to bed.

When he woke in the morning, the bedroom was cold. Ryan turned to look at the clock on the dresser. “Shit, I’m late,” he said, sitting up. Ashley was gone from her spot beside him, and a dark brown stain Rorschacked its way over her side of the sheet. He could hear crying from the bathroom in the hall.

“Ash?” he called. He went to the bathroom door, rapping the back of his hand against it. “Ash. I’m here. I’m here.” He rested his forehead and palms against the door.

“I know,” he heard her say. “I know you are.”

In the living room, cool air blew in from the open window. He remembered, then, the plants, the thatch of green, the screen. *God, the screen!* They could have killed someone, dropping it like that. He hurried to the window and looked down, but someone had picked the screen up from the sidewalk and leaned it against the trash cans. Ryan pulled the window down and latched it. He crouched to stack the empty terra cotta pots in front of it, one inside the next like disposable plastic cups, and put them on the kitchen floor next to the trash.