

*Sam:  
My Gardening Partner*

The little houseplant on my piano has died. Its leaves are horrid shades of brown and orange swirls now, and the frayed roots are starting to poke out of the soil. I know I need to throw it out, but I inherited this houseplant from a friend in grad school, a friend who promptly left town for a job after graduation, and I'm just so ashamed and I miss him so much that it's all just very hard to do. This plant did so well for so many years in this very spot. I just don't get what happened. I promise I didn't change its routine. And I hope it's not off-putting to Sam, who is rather classy to come home to a dead plant, and who has wide horticultural interests.

I've been avoiding playing my piano, not wanting to create attention to the scene around me as I press the keys, to have Sam with folded couch-legs gaze about as I play my melodies, her eyes quickly locking on to the dead plant like it's dead music. "I think you forgot to water it?" she might say dryly. And I will shrug casually and carry the plant away from her with a sour face, making like I'm just going to toss it but secretly placing it in a low cupboard among the pots and pans until I can process how I killed something that I really cared for.

But today Sam and I are just stirring our noodles in the dining room, walls and paintings away from the dead plant. It's been such a comfortable Saturday, with a lazy brunch near the boardwalk, a few fruit selections from the farmer's market with our canvas bags, and an afternoon in our sun chairs in my greenhouse while listening to NPR. We are perfect little love yuppies, content on the go or nestled up at home, but the plant, it's consuming me like a giant Venus.

I will bury it in the back garden.

Sam gets up from her empty plate, softly clattering to the kitchen. Some time ago we switched chores; I took over laundry, and she took on the dishes because she hated folding whites and always had to re-fluff and really, that's a waste for us both. As for me, I've been marking time with our division of labor. It's been awhile since a girl has lived here long enough to fill-out 24-hour cycles and full week rotations, and the stability feels good. Not quite like we're married, but like we're more than temporary lovers.

"I'll put away the plates," I say, patting her aproned bottom. And she thinks I'm so perfect, so gentlemanly, when really I just want to see which cupboard has the most room to host a dead houseplant until I can find a proper spot outside and get out a shovel without too much racket. The cupboard approach is basically post-Hospice Greenery Care at this point, but I think the transition out of sight may do me good.

There's this weird half-cupboard near the pantry that'll probably do. It was a sticking point when I bought this house. "If there wasn't room for a full cupboard, why not just add more room to the pantry? What kind of planning is this?" I asked my real estate agent, who had frizzy cinnamon hair and chain-smoked cigars.

"Not my area of expertise," she said, tossing a brown stub over her shoulder and nearly taking out the neighborhood. My future lawn sizzled under the heat. "But there was probably a renovation or a flip along the way. It happens. Come see a property on the east side with me. We're marketing it as *vintage*," she concluded with a hoarse chuckle.

She panted exhaust fumes from her mouth and I signed the deed a few days later. And now here we are, so much kitchen work and so many girls at home later.

I move the dead plant toward the half-cupboard in the gloaming, while Sam has her limbs thrown over my well-loved chair in the den, a book of essays resting on her lap. Just holding the ceramic pot makes me awash with somberness and an odd humility, knowing that even though I did everything right, life and death was still out of my hands. As I carry it along, I throw a glance back over my shoulder to see how my Christmas Cactus, my *Schlumbergera*, is faring. Years ago my Michigan grandmother trimmed off a little piece for me at Thanksgiving dinner and sent me home with it in a tin can. "It'll keep," she assured me. "And it'll grow bigger and bigger, and it'll bloom for you around the holidays, just as it's done for me for 90 years. What a comfort," she said, wagging her head back and forth. "Just drop some egg shells in the soil once in awhile. It's like a little miracle."

Thus far, she's been right. And next week marks what I believe is the 100th birthday of the cactus, and you can bet we're having a goddamned party.

We're in the back of the house, in the glassy, steamy greenhouse I added on last year. I took the construction process so seriously, arguing with the builders over their choice of sealants and the length of their bolts, but look: a warm, insanely insulated, elegantly curved and snug greenhouse shaking seedlings to life at the edge of winter. I don't regret my aggression. Sometimes you only have one chance to get it right from the beginning, and now those same builders brag to prospective clients about my gardening bliss and their immaculate work. A home improvement magazine arrived in my mailbox this summer with *my* greenhouse on the cover. See how we all benefit from perfection?

Lovely Sam has rows of Dixie cups lined up on her side of the planting table. I watch as she adds two tablespoons of dirt, two tomato seeds, a dash of condensed fertilizer and a sprinkle of water. I can nearly feel the plant sprouting roots under her care, so trusting of her method and carefulness. I'll be honest: last year was not a good year for tomatoes. About every other heirloom plant birthed one hard, marble-sized circle of green, never turning red before hitting the ground. I was so disappointed. But Sam doesn't have to know, I tell myself, because next year will be a good year for tomatoes.

Sam stops, looking up at the last bits of sunlight hitting the pine trees at the far reaches of my yard. "I guess the first frost will come really late this year," she tells me.

I follow her gaze, considering this. Will it be a long winter or just a late winter? I have to get that dead plant buried before the ground freezes.

I'm studying the sloping lines of the greenhouse when Sam suggests I get some pepper plants going. And so I take a stack of Dixie cups and begin, using my tiny rake and tiny trowel that have brought me so much happiness back here. They look like they came from a dollhouse, and in a way, with Sam beside me, they kind of did.

\*

Sam spends the morning carefully arranging cute flower-themed elements for the big party. For the past three days we've sat at our adjoining desks before bedtime, the guest of honor cactus potted between us with its little buds just starting to open. Looking at this early winter show about to take the stage eases the sting from the upcoming holiday funk I know we'll fall into. Tiring work parties, meaningless gift shopping, long relative visits, and cold, cold, coldness. I lean over and caress a long trail of Christmas

Cactus leaves between my fingers, stitched together by little flower veins. It's so perfectly waxy and secure despite its obvious delicateness.

When my grandmother died, almost a year to the day after that Thanksgiving tin can hand-off, we fashioned a corsage out of one of the blooms and pinned it to her funeral dress. It was a radiant burst of hope that afternoon in small town Michigan.

I've taken to researching my greenery, as this little gem is longer-lived than its human caretakers and I feel so responsible, now more than ever with yesterday's sneaky plant burial. But what I've enjoyed most about my research is the rich online community of Christmas Cactus fanatics. Go ahead, search for yourself: read the family histories of people handing over their massive plants right down the family branches. There are photos of these suckers being wheeled away down ramps at Estate Sales. There are endless, passionate, overly intense, nearly comical (if it weren't all so important to someone) debates about how to save one of these worldly treasures when it starts to wither. "You've got to be mad; that's much too high of a soil pH, and you bloody know it. Enlist help if you can't deal with this correctly, you murderer! I am so upset right now. I'm taking a walk, bye."

As Sam makes adorable gift bags tied with green ribbons for our cactus guests (and at last count, we're having close to fifty folks, only underscoring that everyone truly does line up for free booze), I become overwhelmed with the need to visit the gravesite of my piano plant. I really don't miss the plant; I miss the relationship with the previous owner, though this is probably readily apparent to any low-grade psychologist. And so I leave my darling Sam, glowing a soft orange under her craft light.

It's alarmingly temperate for mid-November. I'm wearing a light jacket as I clip along through the swinging garden gates, but I can't see my breath, and that's a strange thing to notice for this time in the Midwest. I've owned this house for six years. I went all-out the first year on planting showy perennials, and hacked up the grass to create little paths and faux ponds and assorted points of interest, and only now do I see real progress in the coming-of-age landscaping. I wish it didn't take so long to establish new growth; it makes it all the harder when things die prematurely under your watch.

I turn the corner where the rabbits like to nibble at my herb garden and see the cross silhouette in the moonlight. I thought it'd be nice to mark the spot. It's supposed to be healing to leave a little place for descendants to visit the dead; that's the only hesitation about cremation, right? No place for everyone to visit at the turning of the seasons and on birthdays and times of aching. Because cremation sounds a lot better than withering under the heaviness of dirt.

I stand on the little mound of soil. I buried the ceramic pot, too. I couldn't imagine myself reusing it, so I just kept it all together, like a casket.

Grad school was the start of my shift. That's when I recognized something was changing. The owner of this plant never knew the person I'd become. The owner and I would sneak lattes into the music library basement on Sundays, sitting among the dusty scores and gossiping or shooting the shit about anything. We lived a block apart on an isthmus that exploded into oranges and reds in the fall, and we considered ourselves pretty lucky for our simple pleasures. We'd take the #81 bus home, which took us right to our doors and didn't cost a dime for students, and we always made plans to meet up

again. He was great. He was the kind of friend you never really find again when you become a professional with an organized schedule and obligations.

My house looks beautiful and stately from afar, nestled between two other properties that are also well-appointed. I like seeing the windows lit up. I like knowing that I did alright for myself. Feeling a little less nostalgic, I retrace my steps back, eager for Sam.

\*

“You know, I thought it was pretty cool when I was invited to a baby shower as a man, but a birthday party for a 100-year-old plant, this can’t be topped,” shouts Jeremy, who works in the office adjacent to mine downtown. Other guests laugh in agreement and raise their glasses. My lovely Christmas Cactus is enjoying her festivities, looking glossy on the table of honor with her first seasonal blossoms. Sam tied a checkered bow around her pot, which reminds me of the scarves that my Michigan grandmother used to wear.

A small collection of wrapped gifts grew next to my cactus. I can’t imagine what I’ll unwrap. Miracle-Gro? Gardening gloves? I’m sure people just want to add to the lunacy I’ve started, and that’s fine by me.

Some guests stay stationed next to our buffet table. We set up a 3-tier chocolate fountain with fresh berries and marshmallows that’s getting a lot of attention. Other guests are seated around my house, talking about sports and local politics with birthday cake in their mouths. And quite a large number of people are milling around my back gardens, plastic wine glasses in their hands as they look over my fading greenery presentations. It’s terribly off-season now and nothing is in bloom, but none of the little

ponds are frozen over yet and all of the stone paths are clear, plus my ground and tree lighting looks pretty good, so I guess that's ambiance enough.

I slip out the back door to mingle with those on their self-tours. "What a place," Kenna says, wearing a trench coat and riding boots. "Must look stunning in the summer." I thank her and move along to Russell and Carrie, who are huddled close in the crispness. "You could have a wedding out here!" Carrie remarks, standing next to floppy hydrangea bushes. "May I please return with my camera in the spring?"

Humbled, I move further into the darkness to Jim, who has his back turned to me. He's standing over my cross which is picking up a little light from my neighbor's porch. I bet it'll always attract a little light. "Pet cemetery?" Jim asks as I pause beside him.

"Something like that," I say, and we both fall silent as the party buzzes beyond us, laughter and cheers.

\*

Sam and I carried on to New Year's Eve. We made a last minute decision to hit Vegas to close out the year and somewhere between the poker room and the showgirls I decided things were getting too serious again and I couldn't let her cross over into a new calendar month, much less a new year. I couldn't transplant the tomatoes with her in the spring.

We took separate planes home, and though I'm sure it all really sucked for her, I felt quite relaxed as I looked over my in-flight magazine. We made a nice golden turkey for Thanksgiving. We took a long weekend trip in December to visit family. I gave her ruby earrings for Christmas. But my favorite part of our end was unwrapping those Christmas Cactus party presents. Man was she sweet for putting so much work into a



plant's party. Together we opened four presents for my 100-year-old showstopper: a tiny gnome to play in the soil; a solar light for the outdoor growing season; a pretty rock coaster to go underneath the pot; and a personalized photo frame with the date of the party. I've already inserted a photo of the cactus wearing Sam's custom checkered bow.