

The Saguaro Apocalypse

The night of the Waldendorfhouse Meteor Shower, my idiot boyfriend forgot to meet me at the Star Tower. Nine PM. I told him: “Nine PM, because the meteor shower will only be visible from 8:30 to 9:30 and then it’s gone forever.”

I called him, “Tommmmm,” because he hates when I call him Tom, which, in hindsight, may have pissed him off to the point of ignoring our date at the Star Tower, where crowds were out in throngs to watch little lights fly across the sky. I didn’t stay long, just long enough to “Ooo” and “Aww” with a bunch of strangers, surrounded by the spiny saguaro cacti that grew in the deserts of Arizona.

I went home and found Thomas on our front patio in the dark because we kept forgetting to replace the porch light. I avoided tripping over him because of the small, orange glow from his pipe. The night smelled of burning pine.

“Where have you been? I forgot my keys and have been sitting out here for half an hour.” He choked on a heavy hit and handed me the bowl.

“You were supposed to meet me at nine. Remember? Meteor shower? Now, it’s almost over. Congratulations.”

“Oh, shit.” He stood and brushed his hands against his jeans. He wasn’t that tall, but people assumed we were tall: Thomas because he had the thin, stretchiness of Gumby and me because I always wore heels. “I’m sorry, Kylie.”

I hit the bowl hard until my throat burned but held in the dingy smoke, the flavor of which reminded me we needed to clean our pipe. “Save it for your mother,” I exhaled, which was a low blow, since Thomas was always apologizing to his Christian mum who once told me my work as a sex columnist would probably land me in Hell.

She just *loved me*.

“Don’t be a bitch. I forgot.”

“You always forget.” I shoved the pipe at him and unlocked our front door. The foyer was its usual disaster of kicked-off shoes, dust, and unopened mail.

Thomas slumped inside. “I do not *always* forget things. You just do too much.”

“And you do nothing but smoke weed and play video games.” I threw my purse on the second-hand sofa we bought at Goodwill. If you stuck your nose in it, you could still smell senior citizen.

I heard him kick off his black high tops. “It’s my job, Kylie.”

To be clear: not the smoking weed part, the video game part. He was a video game designer, which meant whenever he talked about his job, I visited a la-la land where Colin Farrell sang me Irish lullabies.

I went for the fridge, which was ... yeah, empty except for pickles. I bit a pickle. Thomas came up behind me and stole the half-eaten pickle from my hand. “Dude!”

He slumped into one of the three chairs that surrounded a kitchen table we never used because we always ate dinner on the couch to get a better view of *Jeopardy*.

“You need a haircut,” I said. “Your head looks like a mushroom.”

“You’re always picking at me.” He finished my pickle with a delighted hum.

I headed to the bedroom to put on PJs when I heard a thumping *knock-knock* against our front door. “If that’s one of your good for nothing gamer friends, no.”

Thomas didn’t stand up. “Tell ‘em yourself.”

I sort of hoped it was some late night Jehovah’s Witness to tell me the Waldendorfhause Meteor Shower meant the end of the world. I liked to tell them I was a stripper who worshipped Lord Voldemort.

I looked out the peephole, but since our porch light didn’t work, I saw nothing. Thomas and I lived in a safe neighborhood in southwest Phoenix, so I doubted it would be a robber. Plus, robbers don’t knock. I opened the door. At first I thought it was some really tall, skinny dude with short arms.

Then, I realized it was a saguaro cactus. Must have been a young one, since its limbs were only about two feet long and pin wheeling in my face. I had the momentary thought: *What the hell was in that weed?* The cactus kept brandishing its little T-Rex arms at me.

“Thomas?”

“What now?” I heard the shuffling of his sock-clad feet.

By the time Thomas reached me, the cactus was banging its rounded top against the doorframe; guess it couldn’t figure how to duck. I glanced down in the darkness. Roots spread like a floor-length ball gown, which I assumed was how it walked to my house.

The measly T-Rex arms kept spinning.

“Is that a cactus?” Thomas asked.

I turned on the inside foyer light, which illuminated what was, indeed, a cactus trying to get into our home.

Thomas stood next to me with his mouth half-open, brown eyes bloodshot, and shaggy hair in the shape of a mushroom.

We watched as the cactus apparently got frustrated with his T-Rex routine. Its little green limbs stopped spinning. It stopped moving altogether, which should have been a red flag, since don't animals freeze before they pounce?

I thought we'd be okay when the middle of the cactus started cracking open, like maybe his cactus top would fall off and we'd have to somehow explain to the nosey neighbors why there was a dead saguaro in pieces on our porch.

Instead, the crack opened wide. The cactus had shark teeth, which started maw-mawing at us—the sound of a ventriloquist dummy's mouth popping open and shut. Thomas screamed like a little girl, slammed the door, and went running for the TV.

I sat on the stinky couch and watched him flip through channels. We only got a few, since we were too cheap to pay for cable. Thomas had rigged some kind of tinfoil antennae, which was enough to get us a news station and confirm that, no, we weren't high on acid-laced weed. All over the Valley of the Sun, saguaro cacti were up and walking around eating people. The one outside our place kept ramming its head against the door. A consistent *thud-thud* echoed through the front hall.

I ate a potato chip and watched my boyfriend.

With Thomas and me, things had started so well. He was cute in that hippie-hobbit sort of way, not that he had hairy feet, because he didn't, but more like he would have made a really good Christmas elf. He was funny, or he used to be, before he started annoying me all the time.

That's what happens when you move in with someone: all their weird idiosyncrasies build until you seriously consider how you might dispose of the body after batting him on the head with a tack hammer.

Like he always leaves his clothes in piles on the bedroom floor, and I would clean them up, but I don't know which ones are clean and which are dirty—and I will not do the smell test. He never closes kitchen cupboards, so half the time, our house looks like the set of *Poltergeist*. Oh, and he doesn't put dirty dishes in the dishwasher, which is something his overprotective mother should have taught him if she didn't treat him like the Crowned Prince of Arizona and me like the writer slut who probably covered him in hot wax every night.

“Are you seeing this?”

I watched the TV screen: some cameraman running away from another saguaro with T-Rex appendages. See, something people don't know about saguaros: they don't grow “arms” until they're at least seventy-five years old. The young ones are like green desert pencils. As they mature, they develop arms. The ones over a hundred years old can have several arms up to six or seven feet long.

I ate another potato chip.

“Kylie!”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“Pack me a bowl.”

“What am I, your bowl bitch? I'm pissed at you.”

He sighed so much his shoulders dropped a couple inches. “I'm sorry I forgot about the meteor shower. Can you please pack me a bowl? It tastes better when you do it.”

Outside, T-Rex arms kept up the *thud-thud*. I pictured the thing on our porch wheeling its wee arms in hungry desperation.

I chose from our copious kitchen drawer weed collection: weed for any and all occasions, except perhaps for an unexpected saguaro attack. I handed the fully loaded bowl to my stupid boyfriend who was really very handsome if you looked beyond the overdue haircut. I was a pansy for dark brown eyes and that permanent five o'clock shadow. Didn't mean I didn't want to break up with Thomas. He had it coming. The more comfortable we'd gotten with each other, the more he farted in front of me, and as a sex columnist, I knew he'd gotten lazy in the sack, barely preheating the oven before sticking the turkey in.

He exhaled pine and stale resin into the living room over the sounds of people screaming on TV: fat old ladies from a charity function running from what closely resembled seven-foot-tall green penises.

"Do we have an ax?"

Thomas looked at me like I'd said *Dazed and Confused* was the worst movie ever. "How should I know?"

"You're a man," I said. "Sort of."

"What do you mean 'sort of?'"

I headed for the garage, but not before I heard Thomas dig his hand into my bag of chips.

Our garage was too full of shit to fit either of our cars. Inside were boxes of my old college papers, books I might read someday, and the creepy collection of antique dolls a distant relative left me, apparently to haunt my dreams. Oh, and Thomas's motorcycle, minus one wheel. He'd blown the tire six months earlier and had yet to get it fixed, which was basically a metaphor for everything about him.

I dug through a bunch of tools on the floor, left there from Thomas's motorcycle tinkering. I found a screwdriver and a wrench. Not good enough. There was a metal baseball bat Thomas and his buddies used to crush pumpkins last Halloween. I paused to consider what kind of adult male went around crushing pumpkins on Halloween anyway.

God, why did I ask him to move into my place?

Sure, at the time, everything had been peachy. The sex had been great, and a year ago, Thomas still made me laugh all the time—the laugh that was now a smirk for his benefit because *I'm a nice person*. Things could have been fine before I learned about the laundry and the kitchen cupboards and the farting.

I almost jumped out of my pants when a loud, metallic bang rattled my eardrums.

Bang-bang.

Bang-bang-bang!

Bang-bang-bangbang-BANGBANGBANG!!!!!!!!!!

There were more of them out there.

“Well, lobotomize me and call me Larry.” I shook my head and picked up the heavy metal pumpkin killer. I gave it a couple good swings. I used to play softball in high school. Then, I kicked a few boxes until I saw it: the telltale glint of metal. I leaned over and picked up the ax, wondering why we even owned one in the first place. Then, I went back to the living room, where Thomas was glued to the television and his bowl.

“Here.” I handed him the baseball bat.

“What's this for?”

“They're surrounding the house.”

Thomas took a long look at the ax in my hand and possibly wondered if I was going to sacrifice him to the saguaros. I didn't blame him. I'd been a hell of a bitch lately. The meteor shower was supposed to be a romantic gesture to rekindle the passion between us and soothe the waters, and look how that worked.

"I think we should break up," I said.

"What?"

I half-eyed the TV screen, where a news team moved at a run past one of my favorite restaurants in Phoenix. The place served the best grilled cheese.

"It's not working out between us anymore. We want different things."

"You're doing this now?" He gestured to the TV. "Cactuses are eating people."

"I think it's cacti. Isn't that the plural for cactus?"

He stood up, and I was momentarily reminded that he had a nice, skinny-guy body that felt good naked. Still, I was old enough to know that sex does not a fulfilling relationship make.

I picked at the handle of the ax. "This isn't fun anymore, Thomas. You don't pay attention to my needs. It's all about gaming and weed, and you don't even preheat the oven anymore."

He lowered his dark eyebrows. "I never cook."

I shook my head. "It's not up for discussion."

With the bat in hand, he pursed his lips together and spewed: "You're an anal retentive workaholic. Talk about not fun! You used to be fun, Kylie. Now, it's all about your job and the laundry. And I hate that you open my mail!"

"If I didn't open your mail, it would sit in piles on the counter so long it would grow mold! And you never close the fucking kitchen cabinets!"

“Well, sometimes, you don’t close the dresser drawers in the bedroom, and I hit my shins, and it hurts.”

The sound of a scream from the TV interrupted us, and we both turned to watch a reporter being eaten alive by an elder cactus with eight-foot arms and a mouth the size of a Great White. The camera quickly went dead, and a rather shocked-looking anchorman stared out at us. His skin was the color of year-old bread.

“The government,” he squeaked. He cleared his throat. “The government is suggesting all Arizona residents stay inside their homes.”

I looked at Thomas. “Great, now I’m stuck here with you.”

“No, I’m stuck here with you. And what’s with the ax?”

“Thought I might have to chop off some limbs. Told you we should have bought a gun.”

“I don’t believe in guns.”

I brandished my ax at him like a pointer finger. “Say that when you’re being chomped to death by a tree.”

“Are cactuses trees?”

“Cacti.”

Then, the front window shattered. A multi-armed saguaro stuck its head through and banged against the top of the guest futon in the front room. Since I’ve seen a lot of horror movies, I sort of expected the cactus to, like, leap or something, but it just kind of wiggled and butted its head and fell head over roots onto our living room floor.

I looked at Thomas; Thomas looked at me.

The cactus rolled around until it remembered to use two of its three arms to push itself to a seated position. It sat there on our living room floor, surrounded by shards of glass. It sniffed, twice.

Thomas whispered, "Do cacti have noses?"

I chuckled.

The saguaro opened its shark mouth and made a slow, guttural vowel sound:

"Eeeawnnaaaaaaa..." It chomp-chomped its jaws. Its dirt-covered roots twitched.

"What do we do?" Thomas asked.

"Offer it some weed." I shrugged.

"I think that would be cannibalism."

Using its three arms, the cactus bent at its ... uh ... waist? It leaned forward and used its spiny paws to stand up. Its head hit the ceiling; the thing had to be about twelve feet tall, well over a hundred years old. I missed T-Rex.

It chomped blindly.

"I don't think it can see us," I said.

"Does it have eyes?"

"Why are you asking me these questions like I know the protocol?"

"I'm sorry."

I looked up at him. Maybe the haircut wasn't a total mushroom. "It's okay," I said just in time for the cactus to charge.

When I say "charge," I mean it slunk slowly across the living room floor and waved its arms like one of those inflatable wind dancers you see in front of car dealerships. Thomas and I watched it coming, realizing it might be awhile before we had to take any form of action.

“I think he’s, like, really old,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s kind of sad really.” Thomas chortled. “I think he needs a walker.”

I laughed, too.

The saguaro said, “Mmmaaawwwweeeeeeeaaaaahhhh.”

“Come on, dude,” Thomas beckoned. “You can do it.”

I laughed harder.

It opened its shark jaws at us again and smacked its lips together.

“I think it wants to kiss you,” Thomas said.

“Shut up.”

“I mean, you are pretty hot.”

“I didn’t think you felt that way anymore.”

“Of course I do.”

Thomas and I stared at each other long enough for the Mr. Burns of cacti to get close and give Thomas a good wallop up side the head. My boyfriend went flying into the television, which fizzled and went dead under the weight of his body.

“Shit,” I muttered.

I ducked under a second swinging cactus arm and then a third before I had to take a step back to avoid a spiny cactus head butt.

The saguaro continued the conversation with an affirmative, “Mawmawmaw.”

I had never swung an ax before. Sex columnists have little use for the skill, although I’d used a whip once for an exploratory story. Also, the ax felt like a bat, and I was good with bats. I drew back and went for it.

The metal end lodged in the saguaro's trunk, which made it say, "Ohhhhwaaaaa." Assumed translation: "Bitch, that hurt."

It turned to the weaker human, the one semi-conscious on the broken television, but I said, "Hell, no, that's my man." I took another swing, and this time, lobbed off a cactus arm.

The cactus didn't like that, because he smacked me good, right in the stomach. I coughed up a half-digested potato chip and sat down on the couch that smelled of old people.

Chomp-chomp went the cactus mouth, but Thomas started swinging like Babe Ruth. I had no idea he knew how to use a baseball bat. The most athletic thing I'd seen Thomas do was jump a fence to run from the cops one time after doing an ill-advised line of cocaine.

Thomas hacked away at one side; I got up and chopped the other. Pretty soon, old man shark-cactus was nothing more than twitching green appendages. I was covered in green plant slime, as was my boyfriend, who smiled at me above the carnage.

"What a world, what a world," he said. Together, we drank whiskey right from the bottle.

The saguaro massacre ended promptly at 9:30 PM, just as the Waldendorfhause Meteor Shower passed. We used my computer to listen to news reports, and from what I could tell, mostly only fat and stupid people ended up dead. Thomas and I agreed it was Natural Selection.

Somewhat creeped out by the dead thing in our living room, Thomas and I had sex in the backyard on a blanket under the stars. Foreplay was long and slow, which was when he finally understood my earlier comment. "Oh, preheat the oven!" he said with his fingers down my pants.

Later, with my head on his chest, he said, "I'm sorry I didn't meet you at the Star Tower."

"I'm sorry I tried breaking up with you during the Cacti Apocalypse."

"Wouldn't it be 'cactus?'"

“Oh. Yeah.”

“I do love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

“So we’re not breaking up?”

I shrugged. After you’ve worked together to kill a man-eating cactus with Jaws teeth, I guessed open cabinets and dirty laundry weren’t that big of a deal.