

## The Plant

I'd like to say that I got the packet of seeds as a trade for my old car. That would make sense, in a fairy-tale sort of way. But that's not how it happened.

I'd found the package in the bottom of an old wooden box that had come home with the usual other junk from my wife's latest Saturday morning garage sale expedition. I'd almost thrown the box away, after removing various broken garden implements and empty cans of bug spray, and discovering nothing of value. But I'd spotted the packet of seeds tucked into the bottom corner, and I'd lifted it out gingerly. The paper was old and yellowed.

There was no picture on the package, but I knew it contained seeds because the label made that clear. 'Seeds For Your Garden' was written in nearly illegible handwriting near the top edge. Below that was some faded printing that I couldn't make out, and then the cryptic warning: "Danger". What was written below that had long ago faded into obscurity.

With no idea about what kind of seeds were contained in the package, I was about to consign it to the same trash barrel where I'd deposited the rest of the stuff from the box. But some irrational impulse made me stuff the package into my pocket instead. Maybe it was the incongruous warning. How could seeds be dangerous?

Life would have been a lot simpler if I'd just thrown them away.

The next day my wife and I were outside planting her garden. We live on a small acreage in the country, and there's lots of room. In addition to the vegetables in the small plot behind the house, she told me that she wanted to plant some flowers along the front near the door. She pulled some flats of pansies, petunias and marigolds from the trunk of the car and handed me a trowel.

"Bob, would you plant these please?"

I'm not much of a gardener, and my wife Mary knows that, but I guess she figured I could handle digging a few holes. And the flowers she had selected were beautiful. I decided I'd do my best to arrange them in a pleasing pattern for her.

As I dropped the last petunia into the small hole I had prepared for it, I remembered the packet of seeds in my pocket. More out of curiosity than anything else, I pulled it out and emptied the package into my hand. There were three seeds.

"Honey, I found these seeds in one of the boxes of treasures you brought home yesterday." After you've been married as long as I have, you learn how to be diplomatic. "Should I plant them?"

She came over to look at the seeds. "They don't look like much. What are they?"

"The package didn't say." I didn't mention the warning. I thought it was silly. "Let's plant them for fun and see what we get!"

So we did.

During the next few weeks my wife watered the flowers every day. She wouldn't let me do it. She claimed that I had no talent for gardening, and tended to kill things. She may have been right. In any case, I was more than happy to let her handle it.

I did notice that there was some sort of plant growing near the doorway where I'd buried the seeds. Apparently only one of them had germinated. The plant wasn't very tall yet; in fact, it was quite a bit shorter than the marigolds next to it. But it had a funny shape, not like a flowering plant at all. There were one or two bulb-shaped growths near the top of the stem.

I pointed it out to Mary. "Look at what's growing from those seeds I found. Any idea what it is?"

She examined it closely. "No idea, dear. Should we pull it out?"

"No, leave it, I guess. At least until it blooms. Maybe it's some sort of rare orchid or something!" I was joking.

"I doubt it. Anyway, if it is, it won't survive. Not moist or hot enough."

A week later we started to notice that many of the flowers near the doorway were wilting; it looked like they were going to die. When Mary saw them, naturally she blamed me. "You didn't make the holes deep enough. And you probably mangled the roots when you pulled them apart!"

I couldn't argue with her. I *had* been in sort of a hurry when I'd been trying to finish off planting the last few flowers.

But we both noticed that the mystery plant near the door seemed quite healthy. It was now almost two feet tall, and the bulbs near the top seemed to have coalesced into a single large pod. The entire plant was covered in thorns.

"That thing is growing fast!" I exclaimed. "It's weird. What on earth is it?"

Mary bent over to have a closer look. Leaves were now starting to appear up and down the stem. "I've never seen anything like it" she offered, "but you may have been right about it being an orchid. I'm surprised it's growing so well out here!" She touched one of the thorns. "These are sharp! Maybe we should just pull it out ..."

“No, let’s leave it. I’m really curious to see what kind of flower it will produce.”

So we left it.

We were gone for about a week visiting Mary’s mother. On our return, as we pulled into the driveway, we immediately noticed the change. We couldn’t help but notice.

Our strange plant was now a good six feet tall. Its stem had thickened; the plant now resembled a small tree more than anything else. Large dark leaves hid most of the thorns. The pod at the top had grown as well, and was now roughly the size of a football. A rather large football.

“What on earth ...” Mary was dumbfounded. “That thing isn’t like any plant I’ve ever seen before, Bob. And it grows so quickly ... it’s almost ... unnatural.”

The plant seemed to hover menacingly over us as we approached the door. “It certainly is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen!” As if sensing our presence, it seemed to quiver as we pushed past it into the house I resolved to pull it out by the roots the next morning.

But that didn’t happen.

Mary woke me up early. “Bob, have you seen Mr. Whiskers? I can’t find him anywhere. He didn’t come in last night.”

Mr. Whiskers was our cat. He liked to sleep on our bed at night, but he had his own tiny cat door in the porch and could venture outside whenever he felt the need. He liked to chase birds, but he wasn’t very good at it. Probably because we fed him too much.

“He wasn’t on the bed last night. Maybe he’s still outside, hoping to sneak up on that robin he’s been keeping his eye on!”

I ventured outside to look for Mr. Whiskers. I couldn’t find him anywhere. That was a little unusual ... he would usually stay pretty close to home. This was where the food was.

As I turned to re-enter the house, I noticed the tufts of fur on the step. Fearing the worst, I looked for signs of blood, but couldn’t see any.

Inside, I took Mary in my arms. “Honey ... I think the coyotes may have ...” I couldn’t finish.

We’d been having a recurrent coyote problem. Packs of them could often be heard in the fields around our property, and occasionally they would come into our yard during the night.

“Oh, no! Not Mr. Whiskers!” Mary was especially fond of our little cat, despite the fact that he regularly coughed up hairballs onto her pillow at three in the morning.

We went outside to look around some more. Mary examined the fur that was still on the step. Several tufts of it were also caught in the leaves of the mystery plant. In fact, there were tufts of hair around the edges of the pod, which seemed to be considerably fatter than the last time I’d looked at it.

“Mary ...” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. So I just pointed.

She looked at the plant. Then she looked at me. “Bob, you don’t think ...”

But I did. As irrational as it sounded, I was beginning to suspect that the plant towering over our doorway had eaten our cat!

The look on Mary’s face as we both realized what had happened frightened me. “Bob. Bring me the axe.” Her voice was cold and determined.

“Uh, Mary ...” I remembered the last time she had tried to use the axe. She still had the scar on her foot.”

“All right. You do it. But do it now. That ... that *monstrosity* ... ate Mr. Whiskers!”

I grabbed the axe from the woodpile and returned. As I approached the plant, its leaves seemed to curl inward around the stem. And the pod opened.

It coughed. Something unpleasant was ejected onto the deck. Several somethings.

Sure enough, there was Mr. Whiskers, reduced now to nothing more than a skeleton. I also thought I could recognize the bones of what appeared to be several small birds. And, yes, the remains of a small dog. It must be the neighbours’ Jack Russell terrier ... the one that came over to our house every morning at six and barked outside our window. I’d always hated that dog.

I was furious. This plant could not be allowed to live. I wielded the axe.

And the pod swivelled toward me. The inside was lined with more of those deadly-looking thorns. Quite big thorns, actually. A viscous liquid was dripping from its maw onto the deck.

I reconsidered. “Mary, I’m not sure I want to get near that thing!”

Mary had taken several steps backward when she’d seen what had fallen out of its ... mouth. “Bob, we have to do something! Dave, Sandra and the grandkids will be over in a few days. Who knows what that thing is capable of!”

“Maybe we should get some help. I’ll call someone.”

So I called an expert.

The girl who cuts our grass for us in the summer was attending college as an agriculture student. I explained our problem.

I think she may have wondered about my sanity. Or perhaps she was thinking that we’d been consuming alcohol, possibly in large quantities. But whatever she believed, I eventually convinced her to come over and to bring some industrial strength weed killer with her.

When Shelley showed up, I helped her remove a large can from the back of her truck. It was orange, and had hazard symbols printed all over it.

“Shelley, what is this stuff? It looks dangerous. Are you supposed to be carrying it around like this?”

I had visions of her being run off the road by a deer and wiping out half the vegetation in the region.

“Oh, it’s pretty safe” Shelley responded. “As long as you know what you’re doing. The college uses it to kill dandelions in the parking lot.”

I guess anything that could kill dandelions probably would be strong enough to deal with our plant from Hell.

Shelley took a look at the plant. It wasn’t moving. She didn’t say anything, but from the way her eyebrows twisted up, I was pretty sure she was impressed. “Wow, Mr. Wilson! What is it?”

“We have no idea. But it ate our cat. And several other small animals. And we want it dead. Can you help?”

“It ate your cat?!” She was having trouble keeping a straight face.

“Just kill it, will you? Will that stuff in the can do the trick?”

“Well ... it’s not really a weed. But this stuff will kill anything. Better stand back!”

Shelley proceeded to hook up a sprayer to the can. She put on a mask, and moved toward the plant, which immediately rose to its full height. How did it do that?

She sprayed the plant thoroughly. Then she sprayed the ground around the plant. The pod at the top opened, exposing its thorny teeth, and she sprayed inside that. Then she did it all again.

“That should do it!” Shelley seemed confident. Indeed, the grass around the plant was shrivelling and dying as we watched. The paint was peeling off the wall of the house behind the plant. And the plant itself was slowly turning yellow. And shivering.

Shelley packed up her equipment and drove off with a wave. Such a nice girl, even if she did pack an arsenal of deadly chemicals around with her.

Mary and I went around to the back door and went inside for lunch. We’d come back out later to remove the carcass.

But when we came out to look at the plant about an hour later, we were astounded. The ground around the base of its stem was black and smoking, but the plant itself was back to its normal green colour, and it seemed to be .... taller! As we watched, a small bird landed on the lip of its open maw, which immediately snapped shut. We could hear fluttering sounds from inside the pod. And then nothing.

“Well, so much for poison. Let’s get a flamethrower!” Mary was joking. At least, I thought she was joking. Besides, we didn’t have a flamethrower. And the plant was too close to the house anyway.

“Maybe I can drown it!” I was grasping at straws. But at this point, I was desperate.

I unrolled the hose, turned on the water and aimed it at the plant. I soaked it thoroughly, and flooded the ground around it. It didn’t seem to be having any effect. In fact ...

“It likes it!” That was Mary. And in fact, the plant was holding its leaves out and twisting around in both directions as the water ran down its stem. It seemed to be enjoying the bath.

While I was putting away the hose, I was thinking furiously.

“I have an idea, Mary. Let’s go into the house.”

I didn’t want the plant to know what I was going to do. Paranoia will do that to you.

We raided the freezer. I took out three or four frozen chickens, five pounds of hamburger, two steaks, and a meatball pizza for good measure.

“Bob, what ...?”

“You know how your mother had that little dog that died? The one the vet said she killed by overfeeding it?”

Mary's mother had had a small dog that must have weighed fifty pounds. It was round like a soccer ball. Her mother was always sneaking it scraps from the dinner table, and she regularly bought it ice cream sandwiches as treats.

"She didn't kill it! It died of heart failure!"

"Mary, three year old dogs don't die of heart failure. Anyway, that's how I'm going to kill our monster plant. I'm going to feed it to death!"

It seemed like a good idea. Maybe I could at least give it severe indigestion, and then we could sneak up on it with the axe, or something. Maybe a chain saw. A large chain saw.

So after all the meat had thawed, we packed it out onto the lawn in a box. We set out lawn chairs and began feeding the plant. Mary tossed it a pound of lean hamburger. The plant closed its pod around the lump of meat and quivered. Apparently it was hungry. Twenty minutes later it opened up and there was no sign of the hamburger.

Whatever this plant used to dissolve its dinner, it was pretty powerful stuff.

All afternoon we continued feeding the plant. Everything went in, even the cardboard pizza box.

We went into the house for supper, and to discuss our strategy. Afterwards we went outside to see if the plant's feeding frenzy had slowed it down any.

It was now taller than the porch. The pod was the size of a refrigerator.

"Well, that didn't work out so well!"

"This thing grows so fast! What are we going to do?"

It was a good question. The plant was clearly now capable of eating a full-grown person. While there were a few people I wouldn't mind feeding to it, that probably wasn't an option. And the grandkids would be here tomorrow.

We went to bed.

In the middle of the night we were awakened by some yips and howls from the front yard. Apparently the plant was dealing with our coyote problem in its own fashion. It was eating them.

We were awakened early the next morning by a vehicle sounding its horn in the front driveway. Mary peeked out the window.

"Oh, no! Bob ... it's Dave and Sandra and the kids. They're here early!"

The kids were Billy and Amy. Our grandchildren. At seven and nine years old, they were a handful under the best of circumstances.

“Quick ... make sure they come in the side door!”

When I got outside, my daughter and her husband and their two kids were standing in the front yard staring at our mystery plant, which now looked to be about ten feet tall. Its stem was as thick as a tree trunk, and the pod was opening and closing as if it were anticipating breakfast. It seemed to be eyeing up Billy and Amy. Or it would be, if it had any eyes.

“Bob, what *is* that thing?” Dave was staring at the plant in fascination.

“Uh ... it’s an early Hallowe’en decoration ...” I was floundering.

“It’s really impressive! And it moves and everything! And look ... are those bones stuck between its teeth? Bob, you’ve really outdone yourself this year!”

I’d been known to create a few imaginative Hallowe’en displays in the past. “Uh, ...yeah. Thanks. Let’s go in the house, OK? Around the side ...”

We all went in. Mary made breakfast. Dave and I talked.

“Dave, you were in the military. How did you ... uh ... blow things up?”

I was getting desperate.

“I didn’t blow things up, Bob. I was a cook.”

“Oh ... OK.”

Mary and Sandra were talking about the children. Sandra was explaining once again how their behaviour was still atrocious. “They’re into everything! They’re causing problems in school. We can’t keep a babysitter ... they tied the last one up!”

Our two grandkids were definitely exuberant. They’d once convinced their teacher that it wasn’t really their fault that the littlest kid in their school had gotten a bloody nose. They’d talked him into parachuting off the playground monkey bars ... with a paper bag for a parachute.

Sandra continued. “We’re at our wits’ end. We’re seriously thinking about military school.”



Dave and I stayed out of that conversation. Besides, the kids were usually pretty good when they were visiting us. Except for that time they'd knocked down the wall of the garage ...

"Bob, why were you asking me about blowing things up?" That was Dave. "Is it that neighbour of yours again?"

I was about enlighten Dave about the plant in our front yard that liked to eat little animals. Or maybe whole cows by now. It had been almost an hour. But I wasn't sure how I was going to explain it.

Sandra saved me. "Dave, have you seen Billy and Amy recently?"

"They're awfully quiet, aren't they! That can only mean trouble." Dave was sort of a down-to-earth guy. There wasn't much that would get him excited. Although that time the kids had decided to go camping in the attic and had almost burned their house down roasting marshmallows *had* made him sit up and take notice ...

"I hope they didn't go outside! You *told* them not to go outside, didn't you?" I was more than a little worried. Exuberant or not, I didn't want my two grandchildren ending up as lunch for that ... thing ... in the front yard.

The sound of the front door slamming and small feet clumping their way through the living room made us all relax.

Billy and Amy entered the kitchen. They looked contrite.

"Grandpa ... I think Billy broke your Hallowe'en decoration!"

"It was *not* me. It was *you!* It was your stupid idea in the first place!"

"Whoa, hang on. What do you mean you broke it!" I didn't understand. "What did you ..."

"Billy was up on the roof trying to figure out how you made it move, and ..."

"What!? You were on the roof??"

"And he used that old rope you had in the back yard, and tossed it down to me, and we both pulled on it, and Billy was riding on that big bathtub-shaped thing on top, and ..."

"What? You did what? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Grandpa. But we sort of broke your decoration".

We all went outside to look. The plant was broken off at the ground; the pod was lying open in the middle of the yard, wrapped in rope and not moving.

Our mystery plant was dead.

“Bob, I’m sorry. The kids were just having fun”. Sandra was trying to make amends.  
“We’ll buy you a new Hallowe’en thingee, won’t we, Dave?”

Mary and I looked at each other. We smiled.

“Oh, that’s all right, Sandra. We never liked it that much anyway.”