

LVW Flash Fiction Contest 2017

HONORABLE MENTION

Creeping Vines

by Alicia Stankay

My girlfriend insisted I needed a plant in my apartment to spruce up the place. Something about how plants return oxygen to the air because I breathed out carbon dioxide, a real killer. I hustled off to the closest nursery, and the lady there surprised me by saying I was in luck. She had something called a creeping philodendron with beautiful heart-shaped leaves in a big pot, and since I was the twenty-fifth customer of the day, it was free. I was excited to win the biggest plant they had that needed the least amount of care and hoped it would please Lizzie. As I lugged my giant plant to the car, I noticed vines hanging out a large trash container in back.

I nicknamed my plant Phil and stuck it on my bookshelf in the den near the window and watered it occasionally. Lizzie was happy, I was happy, and the plant seemed--well, actually, really happy. Two days later when I went to find a book of short stories, the vines had covered most of the shelves. Hmm! Nobody said it grew that fast! Afraid to hurt the plant, I rearranged the vines instead of cutting them off.

The next day when Lizzie came over for pizza and a movie, she hurried into the den to make sure Phil was still alive.

“Jack, what the heck are you feeding this plant?” she called. “It’s crawling across the floor.”

“Okay, that’s it,” I said, surveying several vines lying on the floor that had managed to grow five feet overnight. “I guess it’s time to prune Phil. The lady at the nursery said philodendron adapt to house conditions easily and will thrive year round, but she didn’t say they grew by leaps and bounds.” I grabbed the scissors from my desk drawer and snipped the vines off at the bottom of the planter. The vines twisted and curled around my arms as I wrestled them into the kitchen and stuffed them into the garbage can. “Now it’s time for pizza!”

The next morning when I entered the kitchen, the garbage can lay on the floor with vines crawling up the counters, into the sink, and across the floor. I whirled around to the den. Phil had invaded all the bookshelves and wrapped around my desk so tightly that I couldn’t open the drawers.

“Enough is enough!” I shouted. I grabbed Phil and tugged and yanked, but I couldn’t get the vines to loosen enough to throw the whole plant outside. I grabbed the scissors off my desk and started hacking every vine I could find and throwing them outside. Before I finished clearing the shelves and my desk, the room had darkened like twilight, and I saw with horror that the vines had almost completely covered the windows. I was only making everything worse.

I looked at Phil, really looked at the plant and got a strange feeling. I noticed the leaves were coated by what looked like drops of rain, only that didn’t make sense. I hadn’t even watered the plant in days because I was trying to get rid of it. When I reached up to touch the wetness, the leaf curled gently around my fingers. I pulled my hand back just as I heard a knock on the door.

I whipped open the door to find Lizzie standing on the step.

“I thought you were going to pick me up to go to the movies,” she said.

“Oh, Lizzie, I’m sorry. I guess I got sidetracked with Phil.” I hugged her closely, and whispered, “Something weird is going on.”

I led her into the den and she exclaimed, “I’ll say! The vines have covered all your windows. What happened?”

“Forget that for a minute. Come and look at Phil.” I showed her the dewy moisture and then touched a leaf, which immediately curled around my fingers.

“Isn’t that sweet?” she exclaimed. “It’s hugging you!” She reached up and petted a leaf, and it reacted the same way. “All it wanted was a little attention!” The moisture kept seeping out, though, and Lizzie got a strange look on her face. “I think it’s crying.”

“Don’t be ridiculous--” I began, but she cut me off. “We have to take it back to the nursery.”

I agreed, but couldn’t imagine how I’d get Phil and all the vines into the car. I gingerly tried to pick the plant up, and it somehow released all the long vines and nearly fell into my arms. We hurried out to my car and rushed to the nursery. When the lady saw us coming, she started shaking her head.

“Sorry, but no returns,” she stated when we stood before her.

I frowned at her, but Lizzie demanded, “Where did you get this plant from?”

“What does it matter?”

“Look, lady, I saw those vines in your trash can when I was here,” I said. “Now I have vines all over my house. This plant needs to go home!”

“Okay, fine. A friend of mine sometimes brings me flowers from the funeral home. There’s no law against it,” she said defiantly.

“Whose funeral?” Lizzie demanded.

The lady hemmed and hawed but finally gave us a name. We hurried to the funeral home she mentioned and acted like out-of-town relatives who wanted to visit the grave. In half an hour, we stood with Phil beside the gravestone of Hilda Muller. I carefully set Phil beside the grave and we watched as the moisture on the leaves evaporated. We walked away quickly but glanced back once to see the tendrils of vine wrap lovingly around the gravestone. Lizzie sighed in contentment, but I felt trepidation about returning home to all those vines. I needn’t have worried. They had disappeared as if they had never existed.

Still, I’ll never buy another plant again!

THE END

Alicia Stankay is a local fiction writer and photographer. She has written short stories and novels, along with an occasional poem when the poetry muse guides her fingers. Visits to local state parks allow her to enjoy hiking, taking nature photos, and setting some of her stories in those surroundings. She is thrilled that many of her photos and stories have appeared in the Loyalhanna Review over the years. Her photography also graces the covers of her books, including her latest novel, Summer of Secrets: A Stonecliff Mystery. It tells the story of a young woman who discovers a family secret as frightening incidents begin to spiral out of control. Alicia has a photo exhibition this October at the Merrick Art Gallery in New Brighton, PA. She may be reached at aliciastankay@gmail.com.