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Death on Display

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Author Bio

Kenzie Smith is a junior at Gettysburg College. She is studying Environmental Science and Public Policy with a minor in writing. Kenzie serves as the managing editor for Gettysburg's literary magazine entitled The Mercury, she is a writer for HerCampus, and holds three part time jobs on campus. Kenzie's favorite authors include Jodi Picoult, Sarah Dessen, and Emily Dickinson. In her spare time, you can find Kenzie baking extravagant cakes, watching endless hour of "Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives," falling out of trees she has tried to climb, or participating in various other forms of tomfoolery!

Death on Display

KENZIE SMITH

I'm currently attempting to raise eight small plants; seven are varieties of succulents and one is a tree. Each one is unique, separated into a few different pots and glasses based on size and aesthetics. They reside on my desk, adding a vibrant pop of green and earthy brown to my day as I sit for hours and do my work. I water them when they look thirsty.

The first of my plants was purchased at Home Depot. I was running errands for my family, picking up blue paint for the room I was redecorating as a present for my father, and became distracted by the intricacy of the succulent display. It struck me as odd that the potted plants were so diverse, and yet they were all classified as "succulents" (the latin root *sucus* means juice or sap, which describes the fleshy, water-filled leaves of the arid-climate plant). Some were round and wide with tiered leaves like flattened pompoms. Others were tall and lanky with bubble-like protruding stems. Some were vibrant green, others yellow or pink with tiny red hats on the tips of their leaves. It was mesmerizing to see them all lined up in orderly rows; like a cute little army of plants, armed with weapons of beauty, waging war on the drabness of the hardware store. I picked out the nicest one- a squat fellow named *Sempervivum arachnoideum*. (*Sempervivum arachnoideum* are unique for their "cob-web" like filaments. I admit, I brushed these off the plant, not knowing they were both a defining feature and a survival tactic.) I then searched eleven grocery, craft, and dollar stores for the perfect glass in which to plant him. A week later, I transplanted my *Sempervivum arachnoideum* into a different glass that I felt suited his personality better. I replanted him again when I purchased the next six succulents. And then I moved him again. He has lost a large number of petals from the stress of the transitions.

My favorite of the succulents is a *Sedum adolphii*, and she sits alone in a shot glass full of topsoil (and gravel for proper drainage). I bought her because she reminded me of a sunflower reaching its head toward the sky; strong in its stature, held up by a thick stem. Still, with plump leaves, her face is much heavier than the stem itself. Perhaps that is why, like a drooping sunflower, the stem eventually bent with the weight of it. The rot started below the soil, unseen, using the stem as a pathway for death.

My tree is a maple sapling tucked neatly into a stout jar that used to hold maple syrup. I thought it would be an ironic form of poetic justice. (I didn't have an *Acer saccharum* sapling, the kind of maple that makes maple

sugar and syrup, as those are found north of where I live in New Jersey. Instead, I used an *Acer rubrum*, or “Red Maple,” which in reality is very different, but I think still holds symbolic weight.) I found the stunted leafy stem in my garden, right next to the side of my house. I knew the shadow of the house would have severely limited the sunlight he received, and maple trees need partial to full sun exposure. The lining of the flower bed also would have prevented root growth. He would have died there over the winter without a properly established root system and enough photosynthesized food stored away. I thought I was saving him by moving him into my little jar. But now he throws down leaves in protest of his new home.

I’m currently attempting to raise five small plants.

I used to have a hermit crab on my desk instead of plants. My family and I were in North Carolina in January 2018, and my sister and I were sent out to pick up groceries. We spotted a surf shop that was having a sale on commemorative t-shirts and trinkets and couldn’t resist, so we paused our mission to explore. I found a display of hermit crab tanks, shells, sand, and food. The sign boasted a sale of one dollar for each item. My sister and I were excited because, at 21 and 19 years old, we’d missed out on the classic hermit crab experience as children. We bought the tanks and called seven different pet stores along the coast until we found one that still sold hermit crabs in the middle of winter. She named hers Shelly, for obvious reasons, and I named mine Bum, because he didn’t move much. We bought heat-pads to keep their crustacean bodies warm, but soon realized that the coils in the pads were too strong and would melt their tanks (and probably fry them) if we used them. I lost the receipt, so we couldn’t return them.

At the end of the week, my family and I returned home, and then my sister and I to our respective colleges in their respective states. My sister’s hermit crab died within the first three weeks of her adoption. When hermit crabs know they’re dying, they vacate their shells so another crab can use it and bury themselves in a small grave in the sand. My sister watched all this with disgusted curiosity, thinking her pet was changing shells. She only knew Shelly had died when I told her to keep a nose out for the fishy smell of rotting crab.

Bum lived a bit longer. I left him with a friend over spring break because I was going on a school trip. I had limited cell service on my trip, so when I finally came back in range, I received a flood of panicked messages from my friend asking me what to do if Bum wasn’t in his shell, then asking how hermit crabs die, and a final devastating one informing me of his death. When I returned to retrieve Bum’s corpse for a proper hermit crab funeral (flush), I discovered that the crab was in fact very much alive and my friend had been looking in the wrong shell. But he hadn’t been feeding him or

giving him water. After that, Bum was lethargic for a few days as he tried to regain his strength from a week of neglect, but he persevered.

Over summer break, I took another trip. I asked my sister to care for my hermit crab. I knew hers had died within only a few short weeks of her care, but I remained hopeful. When I returned two weeks later, my sister told me she didn't remember me asking her to look after the ugly little crab. Maybe I didn't. (If anyone needs a hermit crab habitat, I no longer have use for mine).

Before Bum, I kept fish. I had a beautiful one gallon fish bowl with blue and clear rocks lining the bottom and a live plant to provide shelter for my shy, scaly friends. My first two fish were named Tiny and Bit; I intentionally picked out the runts of the school. They were of the same breed of goldfish, Ryukin (the ones with the rounded bellies). I enjoyed watching their shiny golden bodies reflect the colors of the blue gravel as they swam about in their small tank. But Bit died within the first two days. I brought him back to Walmart and asked for a refund, because they had clearly sold me a defective fish. The woman working the customer service desk had to ask her manager for help because they'd never had someone return a dead fish to their store. I knew they would administer the refund, though, because this happened to me twice as a kid. Tiny lived for another few months, until one day his gold faded and he became very pale. His fins fluttered less often, and his gills seemed labored. (As it turns out, goldfish produce more ammonia, a toxic excretory chemical, than most other domestic fish. As such, they need lots of space and proper filtration to ensure they don't suffocate. Much more than a one gallon tank).

I decided to try something smaller for my tank, so I ventured to PetSmart and purchased three guppies. (Many people think that "guppy" is a name for baby fish, but it is in fact its own species, *Poecilia reticulata*). I named them Blub, Chub, and Glub; Blub made lots of bubbles, Chub was larger than his two adoptive brothers, and Glub simply fit the naming convention. I'd sit at my desk with an open neglected textbook and watch them dart back and forth, opening their petite mouths to collect the food I gave them, blowing bubbles, flicking their colored snub tails back and forth. I came home one morning from biology class and found Blub floating like one of his bubbles. I determined the brothers died of broken hearts, since Chub followed a week later, and Glub a day or two after that.

I put my fish tank away.

When I first entered college, before the fish and the hermit crab and the plants, I had decorated my desk with cut flowers. I would drive or walk to the grocery store every other week, and along with my assortment of fruit snacks, chips, cheeses, and iced-tea, I'd purchase a bouquet or two of flowers.

Spray mums usually acted as my base, with accents of daisies or baby's breath. Occasionally, when I wanted something a little more elegant, I'd spring for calla lilies. My Grandma hated calla lilies; she said they always reminded her of death. But I loved the way the strong, tall stems reached out of my dollar store vases and the delicate petals gently hugged their middles, protecting their hearts from the world.

I'd bring my flowers back to my dorm, arrange them, and watch them as they'd slowly wilt over the next week or two. The petals would fall, the stem would droop, and dark spots would appear on the leaves. But they were gorgeous as they died.

Perhaps I shouldn't say I'd watch them die, because cut flowers are already dead. They've been pulled from their roots, stripped of their nutrients, drowned in a vase of water and placed on a table for all to witness. I wonder if they were aware of their inevitable tragedy.

On January 19, 2017, I sat in a room full of death; each of the four beige walls were lined with tables and pedestals that spilled over with bouquets of cut flowers. There were red roses and snapdragons, pink tulips, orange tropical lilies, yellow mini-roses, green ferns and baby blue eucalyptus for filler, indigo carnations and stacies, and white calla lilies. The only color missing from the flowers was black, but the attire in the room more than made up for it.

It's interesting how many people send bouquets to funerals. It seems like a nice gesture, a sympathetic attempt to provide beauty in a time of grief. But they don't understand that they are only sending more death. And people send too many flowers. It's almost as if they think the number of petals indicates their level of love and the extent of their grief, or in some cases, that the large bouquets excuse them from showing up in person. As if any of us want to be there at all.

Most Catholic funeral services take two days maximum: one for the wake and one for the mass and burial. Other religions take more time to publicly grieve and honor. Those who practice Hinduism observe thirteen days of formal mourning, and perform a remembrance service known as Sradha one year after the death. Islam dictates a mourning period of forty days. In the Jewish custom, the mourning period lasts thirty days; one week for Shiva and three for Shloshim. Buddhists hold memorial services up to one-hundred days after the loved one's passing.

But Catholics are only allotted two days during which we must perform all of our mourning (even though Jesus received three). And when these two days are over, and the mourners have returned to their lives, what happens to the remnants of the service? Where do all the flowers go? They are relegated the family members, who have to watch them slowly die on their

table until they can no longer stand to watch another living thing wilt away to nothing.

I didn't enjoy my grandmother's funeral service. There were too many tears, we ran out of cream cheese for the bagels, and there were far too many calla lilies. I hate calla lilies. They remind me of death.

I gave up on cut flowers in February of 2017. I had watched too much death that year, and found it far too ugly. I wanted to care for something and see it grow stronger, not wither in my hands. I wanted to see life flow from the ground, as opposed to seeing a life put into it. I wanted to love something and refuse to let it be taken from me.

But after five floating fish, a crustacean corpse, and eight plants returning to soil, I fear I am no longer the witness but the executioner.

My friends were always concerned when I adopted a new living thing. They claimed it'd be dead in a few weeks, if not days, but I waved off their (incredibly valid) concerns. I was naively hopeful. Maybe this time, I would finally cheat death. I never meant for them to die. But everything does.

I went to the store today. I walked right through the flower section with my head down, knowing that after a year and a half, a bouquet of calla lilies still has the potential to break my heart. But just beyond the cut flowers was a display of air plants. I stopped. They were cheap and seemed easy to care for. They're like Betty Crocker recipes, but instead of "just add water," I'd just add sunlight.

I continued on and tried to forget about them as I kept shopping, but I returned to the display before I checked out. I stood there for a long while, examining each plant for pre-existing flaws that might lead to an early death, calculating the worth of the purchase, contemplating the value of the life. What if I kill this one, too?

I bought it. We'll see.