

## **The Aloe Plant**

~ Robert Thomas ~

“Thanks for calling, Mom.”

“Of course, Dear. How is everything?”

“Great. I still have a few boxes to unpack, but it’s getting there.”

“How’s the furniture fitting in?”

“It’s OK. It’s a good fit.”

“What are you doing now.”

“I was just unpacking some of my books. I hope I have enough shelf space.”

“Just unpack the ones you need this year and leave the rest in boxes if you need to.”

“It should be OK.”

“Whatever you don’t have room for just let me know and I’ll bring it back here and store it for you.”

“Thanks. I guess I can store some stuff in the closet.”

“Did you ask the landlord if he has any extra storage space for you?”

“No, I didn’t get around to that.”

“If it costs a little more, that’s not a problem. I can help.”

“Thanks but I should be OK.”

“And how is Pudding?”

“He seems fine. He’s been exploring a lot. I even let him outside.”

“It’s a good thing you have a ground floor apartment in a house.”

“Oh yeah, he’s certainly outdoorsy. He wouldn’t have liked a high rise situation.”

“No. And no one else minds that you have a cat?”

“No. The landlord’s main concern was that he might get hit by a car. I told him Pudding’s very street smart.”

“Are there any gardens that he might trample around in?”

“No, not here. It’s all bushes and shrubs. Speaking of which, thanks again for the plant.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome. And did you hang the picture?”

“Not yet but it looks nice. I think I know where I’m going to put it.”

“Great, let me know if you need any help.”

“No problem. It’s a nice picture, thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome... Are you eating well.”

“Oh yeah. I have to do some shopping today or tomorrow though.”

“Don’t skimp on food, and make sure you get a balanced diet, especially during school.”

“I will, thanks.”

“I’m always here if you need any money or if you need to talk about anything.”

“I should be fine, but I’ll let you know, definitely.”

“Well, I shouldn’t keep you from your book unpacking any longer.”

“That’s OK. Can’t wait for class to start.”

“When is it, a week or so.”

“Yup.”

“I know you’ll keep up the good work.”

“I’ll try.”

“Keep in touch, Dear. I’ll get back to you soon.”

“Thanks a lot Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too, Katie.”

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“So the last time you spoke to Katie was three days ago, Mrs. Wilson?”

Constable Anderson sat with his colleague, Constable Jennings, in Mrs. Wilson’s living room. The house was large and immaculate, expensively furnished, the grounds spacious and well-kept, and Mrs. Wilson had an obvious interest in gardening.

“That’s right, officer. Today is Thursday and we spoke on Monday morning. I’ve called her a number of times, and I checked on her apartment yesterday.”

“Did she say she would be going anywhere?” inquired Constable Jennings.

“No, and I think she would have. She just started school anyway. She loved university.”

“I’m a mother myself, Ma’am, and I know this must be very nerve-wracking. You kept in touch a lot?”

Mrs. Wilson was visibly distraught. Her face was red and puffy. She

kept sniffing and dabbing her eyes with tissue.

“Yes, all the time. We spoke every day. We’d just moved her in to her new place. We always kept in touch. Katie’s my only child. We’re very close. That’s why I don’t understand this. She would never have gone anywhere without telling me.”

Constable Anderson leaned forward slightly.

“Mrs. Wilson, does Katie have a boyfriend?”

“Not any more. She broke up with Andy in July. She hadn’t spoken to him since.”

“Do you have his full name and address?”

“Yes I have it somewhere. They went out for about six months. It wasn’t the most healthy relationship.”

“In what sense?” Constable Anderson persisted, scribbling furiously.

“It just wasn’t a good match. Nothing major. Bit of an emotional roller-coaster for Katie.”

“Now you don’t mind if we get in touch with this fellow, just to cover the bases?”

“Not at all. I left him a message but he never returned my call. There’s another thing. Katie’s cat ran away and she was really upset last time we spoke.”

“Her cat ran away?”

“Yes, Pudding. She loved her cat. He was a big, friendly, dark black cat. Very nice pet. Very fond of Katie. He liked going outside a lot and he probably wandered too far and got lost.”

“Pudding, that’s a cute name,” smiled Jennings.

“Do you think she may have gone out looking for him?” asked Anderson.

“Yes.” Mrs. Wilson dabbing her eyes vigorously and looking down to conceal her tears.

“She may have gone looking for him after we talked, and something happened to her. She thought she hadn’t let him out but I’m sure she had.”

“It’s OK to be upset, Ma’am,” said Jennings, softly, “we’re going to find Katie.”

“Would she have gone out at night looking for the cat?” continued Anderson.

“I don’t know. I hope not.”

“Did she know the neighbourhood well?”

“She seemed to. She explored the area after we first saw the place. I hope she didn’t go out at night looking for that damned cat.”

There was a pause as both constables scribbled their notes.

“Mrs. Wilson, can I inquire as to your marital status?” asked Constable Jennings.

“Sure. I’m recently divorced.”

“And have you spoken to your ex-husband about this?”

“No. We don’t really talk.”

“But is it possible that Katie may have gone to visit him?”

“No way, she despised Tim. He’d been unfaithful to me and she never really forgave him. And it dragged out for a while.”

“It was hard for both of you.”

“You bet. Katie was really affected. I wanted her to get her own place this year. Get out of this house. Start being independent. I agreed to

pay for her apartment, using some of the money from the divorce.”

“Well that’s the thing, Ma’am,” continued Jennings, “An independent young lady could be anywhere, on a road trip, staying with friends, it’s difficult to say.”

“Not at the beginning of term and not without telling me first...I know what you mean but she wasn’t like that.”

“We understand,” Anderson looked up from his pad. “Could she have met another boy?”

“Yes but she would have told me. And she wouldn’t have taken off with anyone. Anyway she wasn’t looking right now. After Andy she told me she wasn’t going to date for a while. She wanted to concentrate on school.”

“Mrs. Wilson, you told us you went around to Katie’s apartment yesterday. Did you notice anything unusual?”

“No. The place was untidy, but no, nothing unusual. I didn’t examine everything. I just wanted to see if she was home. Nothing jumped out at me.”

“How did you get in?”

“I have a spare key.”

“Do you mind if we go around ourselves at some point?”

“Not at all. I’ll give you the key.”

“And we may have to speak to your ex-husband.”

“Of course, officer, speak to anyone you have to. I really hope I’m just wasting your time. I know that doesn’t sound too good.”

“We understand completely, Ma’am,” replied Anderson, soothingly, “we hope you are too.”

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“Hello, Mom.”

“Hello, Katie Dear. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I just wanted to call and tell you that the aloe plant is doing very well.”

“Good to hear it.”

“Yeah, it’s the biggest aloe plant I’ve ever seen.”

“Those are big ones. You’ll do well with it.”

“It takes up a lot of space, though.”

“They’re big plants.”

“Do you think I could transplant it into a smaller pot?”

“Maybe. It might need the larger vessel. We can have a look at it.”

“It’s very large and healthy, Mom. The leaves are wide and really fleshy. And it’s spiny.”

“Oh it’s a spiny plant, dear. Do you know about the healing benefits of aloe?”

“Yeah, you told me before.”

“It’s very good for the skin. It can even be taken internally if you want. Some people put chunks of aloe in their tea, especially in Asia.”

“So you can cut off a section of a leaf and rub it on your skin?”

“Absolutely. Any home first-aid remedies for skin will include aloe, for burns and stuff.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Sure. Even sunburns, or if you have dry skin. I don’t keep aloe because I actually don’t think they’re very attractive plants, but remember when I bought the aloe skin cream from the drugstore?”

“Yes I do. Well, I think it’s a lovely plant and I’ll be sure to use the real thing if I get any burns.”

“Yeah just try it. Cut off the end of one of the leaves as you said, with some sharp scissors, at an angle, and just try rubbing some of the gel on your face and hands. You just need a small piece. It contains lots of essential oils and vitamins. It’s actually an amazing plant.”

“Will do. Thanks again, Mom. I’m glad you got it for me.”

“You take care, Darling. Hope to see you soon.”

“Hope to see you soon too, Mom.”

“How’s school.”

“Great. Some really good courses and good profs. I’m really liking political theory.”

“Marvellous. When are you coming over for some home cooking.”

“Soon I hope.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. Bye.”

“Bye, Katie.”

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The two constables returned to Mrs. Wilson’s house. It was Friday. Mrs. Wilson seemed anxious and hopeful, as if expecting some kind of good news. She escorted the constables into her living room.

“So what’s the situation?”

“We called Katie’s professors,” began constable Anderson, “no-one’s seen Katie since last week. They offered to ask Katie’s classmates if she has been seen or if anyone knows anything.”

“Damn.”

“Mrs. Wilson”, continued Jennings, “we also got hold of Katie’s old boyfriend, Andy.”

“Yes.”

“He says he hasn’t spoken to Katie since about mid-July, when they broke up. He was very concerned, though.”

“That’s good to hear. He’s actually not a bad guy.”

“Mrs. Wilson, was Katie on any kind of medication?”

Mrs. Wilson looked at Jennings, slightly surprised, then at Constable Anderson.

“Yes she was, actually. She’d been taking antidepressants. As I said the divorce was very hard on her.”

“Perhaps you should have told us this before, Ma’am.”

“I didn’t think of it, really. I can’t even be sure she was still taking them...Do you think it may be a factor.”

“We’re not sure. Was Katie seeing a psychiatrist?”

“She had been. At least for a few months. I’m not sure what the situation was recently. It was something she didn’t really like to discuss with me a lot. I thought that was OK as long as she was getting professional advice. She seemed to be coming along well and I thought her decision to get into an apartment was very healthy and positive.”

Pause.

“I’m sure it was, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Ma’am,” Constable Anderson shuffled and leaned forward, “Andy told us that Katie was prone to major mood swings. He said that’s one of the reasons why he broke up with her. Is this true?”

“I guess. She always was somewhat moody. Maybe the divorce made it worse. But I don’t think that’s why she went missing.”

“Probably not. Incidentally, it was Andy who told us she’d been seeing a psychiatrist, a Dr.,” Anderson flipped through his note pad, “Dr. Emily Peters.”

“Yes, that’s the name.”

“So we contacted the doctor and she hadn’t seen Katie since June. Did you know this?”

“As I said, I didn’t pry too much. Katie knew I was very supportive of her. I didn’t want to intrude unless she wanted my advice. I told her many times I was here for her if she ever wanted to talk.”

“We understand. These things are difficult and it’s hard to know what to do,” said Jennings, soothingly.

Pause.

Mrs. Wilson seemed to be hesitating about something.

“Now Mrs. Wilson,” continued Anderson, “is there anything else we should know?”

“There was that business about the aloe plant.”

“What about it?”

“She seemed increasingly obsessed by it.”

“Obsessed by an aloe plant?”

“Apparently. I bought her this big aloe plant when she moved in.”

“And she didn’t like it?”

“No she loved it at first. She called me and told me how nice it was.”

“And?” both detectives were scribbling furiously.

“Over time she stopped liking it. I think she was spooked by it. As I said it was really big. Young girl in an apartment all by herself. They can get spooked by the smallest things. Personally I don’t think aloe plants are very attractive. I do a lot of gardening but I’ve never had one.”

“Mrs. Wilson,” inquired Jennings, “did this dislike of the aloe plant occur at around the same time as Katie’s disappearance?”

“At about the same time, yes. She even said she didn’t like the gel... You know, it’s good for your skin.”

“Yes,” said Jennings, “I have an aloe plant and I’ve used the gel on my skin.”

“Well, she tried it and said she was allergic to it or something. Said it actually caused a rash.”

“That’s strange,” continued Jennings, “aloe’s not supposed to do that.”

Constable Anderson seemed a bit confused.

“Ma’am, could she have been going through a mood swing at this time?”

“I’m not sure, she just seemed agitated. I managed to calm her down a bit. Then the cat disappeared a couple of days later.”

“Did she talk about the aloe plant any more?”

“She was upset about the cat and the aloe plant issue seemed to

compound the situation. I just told her to trim it down if it was too big for her taste, and that it didn't matter, that she had Pudding to worry about."

Pause.

"Mrs. Wilson," this was Jennings, "we're going to have to tell you that we're coming to the point where we have to consider this very serious. We'll have to go public soon."

Mrs. Wilson's eyes became watery. She cupped her head into her hands.

"Today we're going to see your ex-husband. Do you have any friends or relatives who might come over?"

"I...I've spoken to my sister. She'll be over some time today."

"That's good. You probably shouldn't be alone."

"I can't stand this. I just want my Katie back." Mrs. Wilson was crying now, unreserved.

Jennings went over and sat beside Mrs. Wilson, and put her hand on Mrs. Wilson's back.

"It's OK to cry, Mrs. Wilson. We're going to do everything we can to find Katie. Everything we can. That's what we're here for."

Anderson sat, silently. He was strangely fixated by the large plants in Mrs. Wilson's front window.

\* \* \*

"Mom, did you get my message earlier today?"

"Yes Dear. That was funny."

"Yeah, Pudding sure likes that aloe plant."

"So he keeps rubbing his backside against the leaves?"

“Oh yeah. Some of the leaves are close to the ground and he just loves them.”

“Well cats love to rub up against things. He might like the spiny leaves because it would be like being scratched.”

“I guess so, his own personal scratching post.”

“Only he’s being scratched instead of scratching.”

“I guess that’s a good thing.”

“Well you don’t want him scratching your new furniture.”

“No he’s pretty good that way. It’s weird because some of the leaves seemed to have shifted over to the side where he likes to nudge.”

“Well plants do adjust over time. It depends where the sunlight is falling. If you want to keep the plant growing more or less straight, instead of going over to the side where there’s the most light, you should rotate it every week or so.”

“Sure it’s kind of heavy though.”

“As long as Pudding doesn’t mind your interfering with his scratching post.”

“Yeah you should see him, purring away and rubbing his head and neck up against it. He even sits beside it for a long time. He’s sitting there now”

“That’s great. So it means he’s fully adjusted to his new environment and he’s even made a friend.”

“I guess so. Well I just wanted to share that with you. Got supper on.”

“What are you making?”

“Just some spaghetti with instant sauce.”

“Well eat healthy, and let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.”

“And did you try some of the aloe on your skin?”

“No but I will. Maybe I’ll burn myself with the pasta water tonight.”

“Don’t do that. Bon appetite, Darling.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“You bet.”

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The two constables were sitting in their squad car just in front of Tim Wilson’s condominium building. They were comparing notes.

“Well, Jennings, what did you think of him?”

“Nice enough guy. Seemed concerned.”

“I guess. But he wasn’t surprised by all this. He said so.”

“I know.” concurred Jennings. “What did he call his ex-wife, ‘totally neurotic’?”

“Yes. And he said it was rubbing off on Katie. He knew she was seeing a doctor... It was certainly a messy divorce.”

“And he liked Andy, said he was a great guy, that Katie was probably more than any man could take.”

Pause.

“Anderson, do you think Katie just took off. Is it possible she didn’t like living on her own, and the cat going missing and the spooky aloe plant just set her off?”

“I know where you’re going. Seems the ex-husband maybe thinks so.”

He certainly didn't think Katie should be on her own."

"And I tend to agree. Especially so soon after her parents broke up. I think she was in a delicate state. Maybe all it needed was a trigger."

"Well, who knows. If she was thinking of moving out she probably had to before classes started."

"But that's my point," continued Jennings. "Parents just get divorced. It's messy. School's about to start. It's too much all at once. University can be very stressful on its own. She should have waited until summer."

"Maybe so. She may also have found a guy quickly, gotten involved and have moved in, and be too embarrassed to tell mommy."

"That's possible too. I think we'll find out quickly when we go public. What about this guy?"

"The ex-husband?" Anderson pondered. "Nothing right now, I don't think. No motive for foul play, no indications in his condo of anything amiss. He seemed genuinely surprised to see us and said he'd make some calls. Could tell us where he'd been every night the last week."

"I agree. And the old boyfriend?"

"Again, nothing really to cause me to think twice at this time. I just think we're dealing with a disturbed young lady amid some serious family dysfunction. The most likely scenario at this point is that she was beside herself with everything that was going on, went searching for her cat, stayed at it until nightfall, maybe got lost, and then..."

"And then..."

They started the car and drove off.

\* \* \*

"Mom?"

“Yes dear, how are you.”

“Not too good, actually.”

“What’s wrong, you sound upset.”

“I put some of that aloe stuff on my hands and it gave me a rash.”

“No!”

“I thought the goddamn pulp was supposed to have healing properties?”

“Gel, dear. It does. ”

“No it doesn’t, it gave me a goddamn rash. My hands are covered in pink spots and their itchy and tender!”

“Well did you wash it off?”

“Of course I washed it off, but it didn’t make any difference!”

“Darling, did you put anything on your hands before using...”

“No of course not. Why would I do that. My hands were clean and I put some aloe on them just like you said, and now I’ve got this goddamn rash all over.”

“Calm down, darling. Maybe you’re just allergic.”

“How can I be allergic to an aloe plant if it’s supposed to be so good for you! I don’t have any allergies, remember?”

Katie Dear, just calm down. I’m really sorry about this. I had no idea anyone could be allergic to an aloe plant. I’ve never heard of that before, but I guess it’s possible.”

“It’s possible alright, Mother. Goddamn it, how am I going to study?”

“Maybe I should come over?”

“And the goddamn thing is ugly, Mom. It keeps growing and the spines are prickly. I can hardly move the goddamn thing so it gets the light. The leaves are changing colour...”

“Changing colour?”

“Yeah, it’s getting...mottled...greyish and mottled. And that cat just won’t leave it alone.”

“Well I’m sorry, dear. I guess it wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Those big fleshy leaves just seem to stretch out. It’s spooky.”

“Darling don’t fret.”

“And maybe the ground here is uneven because I could swear it’s moved around a bit.”

“But you just told me you moved it to help it get even light.”

"I guess. What am I going to do about my hands, Mom?"

“I’m coming over.”

“No that’s OK, I’m just allergic obviously. I’ll just keep washing them and put on some ordinary hand cream. It’s OK, nothing you can do.”

“Are you sure, Katie. I don’t mind coming over.”

“No, I’ve got to study. Anyway I’m fine. Most of the itching’s gone away. So I’m allergic to it. I just won’t do it again. I’ll have to make due with non-natural skin remedies, I guess.”

“It’s pretty strange, though. Tell you what, I’ll look it up in one of my plant books. Who knows, you may be the first case of a person who’s allergic to aloe gel.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll be famous.”

“Now don’t forget, dear, the body does all kinds of funny things

when it's under a lot of stress. Are you eating right and getting enough sleep."

"Yeah I think so. Careful not to overdo it. Thanks for asking."

"I'll look it up in my books and get back to you. And please let me know if the rash gets any worse."

"It doesn't seem to be getting any worse. Should be OK. Thanks."

"I'm always here for you, dear."

"I know, Mom, thanks."

"Don't stay up too late. And make yourself some tea. It'll help with your nerves."

"I will. Thanks."

"No problem, dear. By now."

"Bye."

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"Dr. Greyson, thanks for seeing us today on such short notice." Anderson greeted the professor as the two constables took a seat in his office.

"Of course. How can I be of assistance to you, officer?"

"Well, we're investigating a missing person's case, and we thought you may be able to help us with one aspect."

"I'll help in any way I can," said the professor, looking somewhat perplexed.

"Now you're a doctor of botanical science?" inquired Jennings for confirmation, as both officers extracted their note pads.

"That's right, officer. How can I be of assistance in your case."

The two constables looked at each other briefly, almost unsure how to proceed.

“Well, professor, you know about the aloe plant?” began Anderson.

“Of course. Why, did an aloe plant go missing?” he said with a smirk.

“Not quite, professor. It’s actually a person, a young lady, who attends this university.”

“Oh no. I didn’t mean to make light of it.”

“Of course not. The case is somewhat unusual.”

“Go on.”

“Basically, professor,” this was Jennings, “Can gel from an aloe plant cause a skin rash?”

The professor seemed taken aback.

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never heard of it. I’d be happy to look into it further. But no, it seems impossible. Aloe is quite healthy.”

Anderson persisted. “Maybe someone with a certain blood type, genetic predisposition, other medical problems?”

“Well no. Not that I know of. The aloe’s curative ability is controversial. It’s indicated as a natural treatment for minor cuts and burns, and as a skin moisturiser. It’s also been marketed for internal use for various complaints, including I believe headaches and arthritis, but this remains unproven, except perhaps as a laxative.”

“But no evidence that external use can have a harmful effect.”

“Not at all. Aloe doesn’t contain anything harmful or allergenic. It’s

over 90% water. The gel contains minerals and nutrients and amino acids and vitamins, including vitamins B and C. No, I have never seen an allergenic property anywhere in the literature. At least that I know of.”

“That’s pretty definitive.” said Anderson. “Thanks for your help.”

“May I ask why you are looking into this?”

“Before going missing, the individual claims to have contracted a rash from her aloe plant. But we think this may have been psychological.”

“Really?”

“Yes. There’s a history of depression and family dysfunction.”

“I would definitely concur. Did anyone see this rash.”

“No, actually. She described it to her mother over the phone.”

“That's bizarre. But yes, I would definitely concur that if there was a history of psychosis, that would seem to be a good explanation or at least an appropriate line of enquiry. It may have been a hysterical thing.”

“Well, thank you doctor.”

The constables got up to leave.

“You’re very welcome. I’d be happy to do some further research if you need it.”

“Thank you. We’ll keep that in mind. Please keep this confidential.”

“Of course.”

\* \* \*

“Hello.”

“Mom, Pudding’s missing.”

“Oh Dear.”

“I saw him yesterday morning before I left for class. When I got home he wasn’t here. I looked everywhere. I went to bed thinking he must be hiding somewhere but he’s still not here.”

“Well he must be outside.”

“No, Mom, I never let him outside. When I left for class he was here, I’m sure of it.”

“Well then he must be inside somewhere.”

“He’s not, Mom. I looked everywhere!”

“How about your boxes. Cats love boxes. Did you leave any empty boxes anywhere after unpacking?”

“No, I broke up all the boxes, and the only ones in storage are full of stuff. And they’re stacked in the closet.”

“Did you leave a window open?”

“No! Why would I leave my ground-floor apartment and leave the window open?”

“I don’t know, Katie, maybe you forgot.”

“No I didn’t forget. No window was open, Mom?”

“Darling he must have got out somehow. If he’s not inside, he must be outside.”

“Mom, I saw him yesterday morning, sitting in the living room, in the usual spot, right beside the aloe plant.”

“Maybe that was some other morning?”

“No it was yesterday morning. For god’s sake I’m not an idiot!”

“I’m just trying to help, Katie. You saw him beside the aloe plant...How’s your rash, by the way.”

“It’s almost gone. Just a bit of redness. And that plant has to go, Mom.”

“You don’t like it any more.”

“It’s just big and bulky and ugly. It’s growing. Those leaves or whatever are so long they’re touching the ground, and it’s very spiky I can’t even get in to water it. Not that I want to.”

“Well it’s not the most attractive plant. I never thought...”

“Yeah you told me. Well I certainly think they’re ugly. And the floor in here is obviously sloped in some way or something because it shifted a bit.”

“You’re sure you didn’t move it yourself? Have you been rotating it for even lighting?”

“No, Mom, I haven’t been rotating it for even lighting! I can’t anymore, it’s too damn big and spiky. The floor’s uneven.”

“Well, we’ll get something solid to put it on.”

“I’m not lifting it. Anyway what am I going to do about Pudding?”

“Dear, if he’s not inside, and he likes to be outside, then I think he must somehow have got out. Could he have slipped out as you came home from school yesterday.”

“I don’t think so but I guess it’s possible. I probably would have seen him leave.”

“When did you get home?”

“Around 5:00. It wasn’t dark out.”

“Maybe the landlord entered your unit for some reason.”

“Maybe, but he shouldn’t do that without asking me.”

“Well, he may have had to access your plumbing or electrical for some reason and just hasn’t told you. That sometimes happens. Maybe he hasn’t told you yet or forgot to.”

“Well if that’s the case I’d be really pissed off because there’s no way he should be coming in here without giving me notice. Especially a single woman.”

“Yeah well it may be innocent enough. He seemed to be a good landlord.”

“I’ll call him. Anyway if Pudding did go outside and he’s gotten lost, he should know so he can keep an eye open.”

“Check into it and call me back. And Darling, if that aloe plant is bothering you, just cut it down a bit.”

“How?”

“Do you have some sharp scissors?”

“Yes.”

“Well just cut off some of the fleshy leaves, as close to the base as you can. Just be sure you don’t get any of the pulp on your hands again.”

“But those spines are pretty sharp.”

“So just put on a pair of gloves.”

“Well as long as I don’t touch any of the spines. I’ll just handle the leaves by their fleshy parts and be careful.”

“OK, and phone the landlord. And if he hasn’t been around, I would just assume the cat’s outside and go look for him.”

“Alright, Mom, thanks for your support.”

“No problem, darling. Call me any time. And cut down that ugly plant, you’ll feel better.”

“I will. Bye”

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Constable Jennings called Mrs. Wilson and asked her to come to the police station. He wouldn’t tell her anything further. A couple of days had passed and Mrs. Wilson was becoming very worried. They were supposed to go public. She’d called the constables and left messages.

Mrs. Wilson left the house with her sister who’d been staying with her. She expected the worst now. When they arrived at the station, she was escorted, alone, into a small room, and seated at a table with three chairs. Before long the door opened, and the two constables entered, looking very serious. They sat down in front of Mrs. Wilson, whose eyes immediately began to get red and swell up.

“This is bad,” she said.

“Mrs. Wilson, would you like something. Maybe a cup of coffee or tea?”

“No thank you, Constable Jennings. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Mrs. Wilson,” Anderson began, “we’re going to have to ask you where Katie got the aloe plant or where it came from.”

“The aloe plant. Are you serious?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Can you tell us?”

“From a vendor at the side of the road.”

“A vendor?”

“Yes, in the summer, before school. Some guy was selling these aloe plants.”

“Are you sure, Mrs. Wilson?”

“Yes I’m sure, why do you ask?”

“Can you describe the guy, Mrs. Wilson?”

“Um... long hair. Messy appearance. Baggy clothes. Very thin, though. Lots of facial hair. He was wearing sun glasses. It was cloudy.”

“It was a cloudy day and he was wearing sun glasses?” asked Jennings.

“Yes. And gloves, I guess so he could handle the plants.”

“So in fact you can’t describe him very well.”

“I told you, lots of facial hair. Sun glasses. Messy. That’s what I saw.”

“Would you be able to tell us exactly where he was located?”

“Sure but he’s not there any more. He was gone the next day.”

“Really? And how many plants were there?” Jennings continued.

“A whole bunch. All of them quite large, and in these huge pots. Why is the aloe plant important. I know Katie got a rash from it but she said it went away.”

“How did you get the plant into Katie’s apartment? Was it difficult?”

“Yes. It was very heavy. We both had to carry it. Can you please tell me where this is going? What does the aloe plant have to do with Katie’s disappearance?”

“We actually took the plant back to the lab, Mrs. Wilson.”

“What for?”

“Mrs. Wilson, we went over to Katie’s apartment on Friday

afternoon. Nothing seemed amiss. As you say. Untidy but that's not unusual. It didn't appear that Katie had packed anything or had left the place in a condition consistent with a planned, long-term absence."

"That's what I thought."

"But I noticed the aloe plant, Mrs. Wilson. As you say it was very large. I've kept aloe plants for a long time, and I'd never seen one so massive and fleshy, with such long, dense leaves, and grey mottling. It even seemed the pot was about to burst, what I could see of it. And the spines on the leaves seemed unusually long. You may also have noticed that two of the leaves had been severed, and that there was a pair of scissors near them."

"Yes I told Katie that she should cut it down. As I said she seemed spooked by it. I saw the severed leaves too and I just assumed she started trimming it down but gave up or it was just too difficult for her. Besides her cat was missing and she was probably preoccupied with that."

"And what did you think of the plant?"

"Yes, it was huge. But I knew it was bigger than average to begin with. I wasn't really concerned about the aloe plant. I thought it was rather ugly and grotesque and I could see why Katie didn't like it anymore."

"Mrs. Wilson, after seeing the plant we decided to take it back to the lab to have it examined. One of our theories was that Katie's rash that she said the plant gave her was, well, psychosomatic, that she was basically stressed out and that the rash was all in her head. We consulted a botanist at the university and it's not possible to get a rash from the gel of an aloe plant. Maybe the plant became a focus of some kind of neurosis. This seemed consistent with her history of depression. No one had actually seen the rash. Such an intense episode of psychosis may have been related to her sudden disappearance."

"I see," Mrs. Wilson listened intently.

Jennings looked at Anderson briefly and continued.

“But when I saw the plant, Mrs. Wilson, I was so taken by it that I thought we should bring it in. Basically, we developed a new theory on the spot. The plant may be some unusual subspecies, actually poisonous or toxic. As I said it appeared distinctive and unusual. We now thought that Katie may in fact have been poisoned by the plant, that some kind of chemical maybe got in through her skin, and that it had a psychotic effect. This, again, may have put her into a state of mind which might be connected with her disappearance.”

“So my Katie may be out there, out of her mind somewhere!”

“I have to tell you, Mrs. Wilson, that as we tried to pick the plant up, I was pricked by one of its spines and became dizzy and fainted immediately.”

“Really? So it is a poisonous sub-species? Are you OK.”

“Constable Anderson got me free of the plant and called an ambulance.”

“God, so your theory was right, constable.”

“I woke up after a couple of hours, but it took me about a day or so to recover. I was very weak.”

“So what kind of aloe plant is it?”

Pause.

Now Anderson: “Mrs. Wilson, the provenance of the plant has become extremely important to us. You say you never grew aloe plants, and that you bought this one at the side of the road from a man who happened to be there one summer afternoon and never again, with no distinguishing physical characteristics except being hairy and thin. And the thing is, Katie is not here to confirm your account.”

“Where is this going?” Mrs. Wilson was looking visibly agitated. “Why are you interrogating me about this goddamn aloe plant. So it’s

a different species. Look, if Katie was pricked by one of the plant's thorns and fainted she wouldn't be missing. She would have woken up or we'd have found her."

"Well, I'm afraid it may not be that simple, Ma'am," said Anderson, "as you probably realise."

"What the Hell do you mean?"

"The next day we went in with a special team and got the plant. They wore protective clothing. The plant was very heavy. They needed a dolly to take it out. And it was very difficult to handle. The spines were very sharp."

"What did you do with it?"

"We took the plant out of its pot at the lab, to have a look. We brought the botanist in. He was amazed by it."

"Good. What did the botanist say, constable?"

"We took the aloe plant out of its pot to analyse it."

"OK."

"With special tools."

"So what about it?"

Jennings broke in.

"Mrs. Anderson, this fellow you say you found selling plants that one time by the side of the road, what else can you tell us about him? You know what, we really have to find out where the plant came from."

"He was a nice guy. Always smiling. Come to think of it, he smiled a lot. He would laugh at the smallest things. This high-pitched laugh."

"High-pitched laugh, OK. And did he say anything about where he grew the plants, or got them?" asked Anderson.

“We complimented him on how big and healthy the plants were. He said he grew them himself, and laughed.”

“Did he help you with the plant?”

“Yes, he picked it up and put it into my back seat. He also gave us a garbage bag to protect the seat. He was very nice. You know, he smiled and laughed a lot. Katie said she was getting her own apartment and he said that was great and that she would need a friend.”

The constables looked at each other.

“Anything else?”

“He asked if she had any pets, and Katie said she had a cat. He laughed and said that was great and the aloe plant would be yet another companion, and that aloe plants like cats. We laughed.”

The constables sat still. There was a long, awkward silence.

“Well, Mrs. Wilson,” Jennings resumed. “It seems we need to find this man, if he exists, and I guess anyone else who bought those plants.”

“Of course he exists. But don’t you think my daughter is a bit more of a priority right now?”

Anderson continued, anxiously. “Can you tell us anything else about him?”

“He kept smiling and chuckling. At the stupidest things. I thought he was high. And as we pulled out, he stood there, looking at us, grinning, as I remember. He kept grinning at us as we pulled away, standing at the side of the road.”

Anderson shuffled nervously.

“And you never saw him selling aloe plants there again?” asked Jennings, intently.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Had you seen him before?”

“No.”

Another pause.

“Well what’s going on?”

“Mrs. Anderson, as I said, they examined the aloe plant and tried to dissect it.”

“What do you mean dissect?”

“Did Katie own a red shirt?”

“Yes she did. Why?”

“And two rings, one silver and -”

“She had many rings, constable, where is she! You found her body!”  
Mrs. Wilson’s voice began to crack, her eyes welled up.

“Mrs. Wilson, when they dissected it...they didn’t find any...soil.”

“What did they find?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know! Where the Hell is Katie!”

Anderson hesitated.

“Mrs. Wilson...it’s not an aloe plant.”

*Finis*