

welcome

One Lily

I HAVE ONE Casablanca lily growing in my garden, right outside the kitchen window. It is growing there because someone sent it to my office as a gift last year, and once the bloom was off, I could not bear to throw it away. I have become a one-woman rescue squad for all the office plants; late at night, after everyone has gone home, I pick up the plants left wilting, parched, shriveled, ready for the garbage pickup, and take them home to nurture them back to life. My kitchen counter is crowded with orchids sent to our design editor, who *hates* them. (I am fascinated by them, which is perverse, because they are quite finicky and I'm not the most indulgent of plants-women.) Some of these rejects find their way into my garden.

I shoved the lily into the ground in the back bed off my kitchen late last summer after its bloom sent a heady scent wafting out my office and down the hall and it had buckled under the weight of its gorgeousness. I forgot about it. After all, there are dozens of plants shoehorned into the sunny beds behind my house that are there on a wing and a prayer—my wing, their prayer. I can't remember them all. When I noticed the lily coming up this spring, I was quite excited. It rose up higher and higher every day—you could almost watch it grow. The miraculous buds set, and then they became swollen, and then, after an agonizing month, they unfurled. Naturally I missed the birth of the first blossom as I was away on a business trip. (Isn't that fitting for a working woman? Never around at the critical moment.) I returned to find one blossom browning around the edges, and the next trumpeting its fragrant arrival, and a few more above, fattening with promise.

The lily was so gorgeous that it took my breath away. I could not believe such an angelic presence could be growing in my garden. It was easily twice the size it had been when it was a potted plant in my office. I decided not to stake it. I told myself that I wanted it to learn to stand on its own; I didn't want it to grow accustomed to parental support. I was lazy, most likely.

Have you ever looked at pictures of your children when they were years younger and wanted to reach out, stroke their sweet, downy cheeks, and fall into the picture with them, into the past, into the way life once was? On my desk are many photographs of my sons in recent years; one is of my youngest in the last days of his childhood. He still has the chubby cheeks and adoring gaze of a child. What I would not give to crawl into that picture and hold him

in my arms one more time. I can feel his soft skin under my hand, I can feel the trust in his gaze, I can feel the promise of life to come, I can feel the anxiety of pain to come. I can only hope that all of us—friends and family—who have cherished him, watched over him, beamed sunny hope into his life, have put enough of a stake in his ground to keep him growing straight and tall and full of love.

One morning, when the lily was four feet tall, and the trumpets numbered close to a dozen, I left my breakfast and went out into the garden with scissors. A vicious storm was predicted, and I did not relish the idea of the stem being snapped by high winds, and those pure white trumpets being trampled into the mud. What's more, I figured, if I cut the lily and put it in a vase, I could enjoy it in the evening when I came home from work. Often (and this is the bane of the gardener who gets home after dark) I cannot see what is going on out there until the next dawn—flashlights just don't catch it all, and there is always the terrible danger of running into a raccoon or, worse, a skunk. I took out my mother's silver vase, the one with the dent in its side from having spent too many years crammed into the back of a closet. It is reserved for the special flowers.

But I could not bring myself to cut the lily. I stood in front of it, scissors in hand, for a good five minutes, arguing with myself about how silly I was being. The lily leaned, proud, long, a bit wobbly, following the path of yesterday's sun. The wind was whipping up, the sky was leaden, the lily was heavy with ripeness. I was sure it would topple. Still I could not lift my scissors.

I wanted to see what would happen if I left the lily alone in the garden, where it was meant to be. I knew that if I did not cut it, the lily would give of itself for a few more weeks—to me, and, if I were not there to see it, to the sun, to the air, to the bees—and then dying, take itself in as sustenance for next year's growth. I gaze into the eyes of my children, their generous open smiles captured by the camera in the dazzle of sunlight, and though I wish I could push my way back into their past, push my hands back into their long curls, cup their hot, chubby cheeks, I know that I am not meant to be there any longer. Nor are they. I let the lily grow on. I can only hope that it will return next year, and for years to come.



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