

Greener Days Ahead

“Green is the prime color of the world, and that from which its loveliness arises.”

-Pedro Calderon De La Barca

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Sitting atop my fridge is a small fishbowl shaped container full of tightly packed clay pebbles and one small mystery plant. I had picked her up during a grocery run several years ago, intrigued by the several quirky features making her unidentifiable and the thrifty price tag that was attached to the bottom of her pot. A small cheap glass beaker created the walls for her home; useless dirt filling in the space between her roots- clearly the store didn't know what kind of plant she was either. I brought her home alongside the groceries I originally came to the store for and named her Eureka, an homage to the random choice for a pot she had been settled in.

Sometimes I can't help but feel a little ashamed at my lack of care for Eureka. At one time she was a favorite, her funky shape and bright fuschia flower making her stick out amongst the rest, but as my collection grew and I went through several moves, she quickly lost her spotlight and was tucked behind rows of large monstera and stringing pothos plants. I'm not sure if it was due to the lack of attention, but her quirky flower eventually dropped and had put all growth to a halt over the next few years. I contemplated giving up on her completely as her once succulent limbs grew hard, threatening to give away at any moment. Much to my surprise however, her color never seemed to fade, and so I chose to hold off replacing her until she gave me a true sign worth giving up.

This past August, I found myself essentially homeless for a few days between leases. Whittling down my belongings to only what could be stored in my car, I waited uneasily to receive keys for my new apartment. In the days prior, I began to detach myself from some of the pieces of my home that meant the most to me- carelessly tossing them into every last open place my small sedan would allow me to fit. I had felt myself slipping in the last few months, and this major screw-up that had momentarily left me with nowhere to go felt like just another thing to add to the list of places I have messed up over the past year -completely losing sight of the

beauty of what was to come. During this same time, I unfortunately dropped Eureka and broke her namesake pot, leaving me with more to deal with than finding a place to stay. I stood next to the pile of dirt and glass frustrated, contemplating giving up on her completely and tossing what was left of her in to the closest dumpster and moving on, but as my eyes stumbled upon the jumbled pile of roots weaved around thick shards of glass I couldn't help but feel the need to spare her and put off her garbage-themed burial for another day.

Given my emotional state and the limited resources I was left with, I settled for an odd fish bowl shaped vessel to place her in and replaced the dirt that now coated the pavement beneath me with clay beads I had bought from the plant store to experiment with a few months prior. When the time finally came to receive my keys and move all of my things in, I gently placed her atop my fridge to ensure her safety as I moved the rest of my belongings in and decided finding a true home for her would be a task for another day.

It's January now, and her fishbowl has moved by only inches, the dust rimming her glass home a symbol of my neglect. It had been at least a year since she had had any new growth, and the only sign of life left in her was her bright green hue that looked as if the store had painted it on. As I was sitting down to write this piece, I became aware of just how long it had been since I had paid any attention to her at all, and I noticed the last thing I expected to see from her.

Five stems shot out of the center of her pot, reaching and racing in every direction to soak up the sunlight, just as they had been the entire time she was under my care. In the center however, was a large new stem- a bright lime green that separated it from the rest; a foolproof signal she was still alive.

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Demeter, the olympian goddess of harvest and agriculture, was responsible for keeping all things alive and well on Earth. Despite this, Demeter also held ties to the underworld through her daughter, Persephone's, abduction by Hades, god of the underworld, who wished to marry her. As any mother would, Demeter raced to find help and search for her daughter, but ultimately could not recruit the help of any of the gods, and was forced to abandon her godly responsibilities on Earth and search for her daughter alone.

Zeus, king of the gods, quickly became furious at Demeters' lack of regard for her responsibilities as a god as resources on Earth grew scarce, and the sky lost its vibrant warm blue hue without Demeter. Despite his title as king, Zeus weighed the opinion of those on Earth over Persephones' wellbeing. After all, who would worship the gods if Demeter abandoned her responsibilities?

Back deep down in the underworld, Persephone continued her refusal to serve Hades and was left cold and alone in the land of the dead. As she wandered through the never ending grey world, she began to grow hungry. Stumbling along a bright pomegranate tree, she decided to take a bite- a decision that would leave her trapped in the underworld forever. Demeter, however, was not going to let this happen. Furious with the news of her daughter falling into a trap set by Hades, Demeter promised to abandon her responsibilities as a god completely- meaning the distinction between the underworld and living would completely dissolve. In a panic, Zeus and Hades decided to make a pact: Persephone would spend two thirds of every year in the land of the living, but for the remainder, she would stay in the land of the dead.

In the first few cycles of her absence, the dark grey sky and withered crops was an unwelcome return, leaving those on Earth with next to nothing as they awaited the day the sun would come back again. However, as time went on and the pattern became more clear, mortals began to prepare for Persephone's absence by stocking up on what they could and bundling up inside their homes. The once dreaded period of time quickly became something they no longer needed to fear, and instead just became another moment to appreciate the differences in.

Upon Persephone's return, she and her mother would celebrate by showering the earth with plants and sun, signalling that the winter was finally over and light would be brought to their lives once again. Although this myth at surface level explores the reason for seasons, there is a deeper meaning to be found in her story, there is always light within the dark - just as long as you are willing to find it (Gillespie).

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About a year ago, I received a call about a spontaneous gift from my brother, Clay, who claimed he had, "something I didn't know I needed". As I mentally scrolled through the endless list of potential Clay-coded gift ideas in my brain, I struggled to find something I could possibly have needed "so badly" and didn't already own. As I continued to attempt to formulate an idea of what it could be, my phone lit up with a picture of my prize, and it wasn't anything near what I could imagine. A large glass tank meant for reptiles stared back at me from my phone, sending me into a spiral of why I could possibly need a tank used for holding one of the scariest types of animals so badly. As I began to fear for the worst and imagine keeping a lizard in a one bedroom

apartment, my brother was at my door delivering his “epic” facebook marketplace find and explaining its “limitless potential”.

“It’s not a tank for reptiles, stupid. It’s a tank for your plants.”

I attempted to hold in my laugh as I glanced down at the small cage he was carrying. I had complained about the cats always reaching for my plants a few weeks ago and was searching for a solution to keep them away, but this is the last direction I would’ve taken that in. Despite my hesitance, I threw a few small plants into the case. Their bright ceramic pots bumped against each other like sardines in a can before I locked them into their new home and topped the makeshift terrarium with a grow light I had tucked away in the back of my closet. As much as I would like to say his idea was stupid, this tank turned into something much bigger than I could have ever predicted.

About a month into my terrarium-adjacent experiment, I began to notice the beauty that was forming inside those four glass walls. Long tangled vines scrambled across the glass in attempts to cover every square inch of their enclosure, grabbing ahold of the plants next to them and pulling them in for a big green hug. Several mystery plants soared out against bright green pothos leaves that had taken up a majority of the cage to create a giant mess of botanic bliss. Despite its chilling former use and unassuming appearance, with a more gentle eye this glass box has made me aware of the beautiful mess that nature is.

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Chicago, a city known for its strong winds, gross pizza, and large architecture is the home to an old victorian-style conservatory that was constructed in phases from 1890 to 1895, in

replace of a small greenhouse that dates back to 1870 (Chicago Park District). Once called “a parade under glass”, the Lincoln Park Conservatory is a stark contrast to the maze of faced-paced civilians, earth polluting cars, and energy sucking buildings that cover the north side of Chicago. Although not anywhere as exhaustive as its nearby competitors, the glass dome serves as a home for thousands of plants, an enchanting oasis completely sheltered off from the overburdened city outside.

For my twentieth birthday, my boyfriend suggested we celebrate more than just going out to eat. Despite legally being an adult for two full years, I felt like the older I got, the less I knew. After taking several leaps towards independence in the past few years, I began to grow extremely comfortable in the things I knew, and weary of the things that pushed me outside of that. I had gone on several trips as a kid, but most if not all of them were planned by my mom, meaning all I had to do was pack a bag and clear my schedule. Although I love my current independence, turning twenty was just another reminder that things only seem to get harder as you grow up. After going through the options that our minimum-wage jobs and my less than four hours drive requirement would allow us, we decided to save up what we could and take a weekend trip down to Chicago. With our clothes shoved into old backpacks and a tank full of gas, we were off on our first big adventure with just the two of us.

The weekend was spent exploring the many subsections of the city, draining our bank accounts on souvenirs, and racing to bus stops. From Chinatown to Wicker Park, it felt like we had lived seven different lives in 24 hours. As the end of our trip quickly approached, we began to limit our stops to only the things we wanted to see most- the top of the list being the Lincoln Park Conservatory. After a stomach-churning drive through downtown Chicago we were dropped in front of a large glass building overlooking Lake Michigan. Inside the large glass greenhouse, it

felt like we had traveled to a completely new world. Dense, humid air surrounded us as we made our way down a cobblestone path enclosed by plants of nearly every variety. We carefully strolled through each room, ducking under sweeping palm leaves and getting lost in the cacophony of plants before having to tear ourselves away and continue down the uneven trail towards the next overcrowded room.

As we stumbled upon the second to last room, the air felt different. The early-april sunlight had concentrated on the windows and filled the glass room with warm, yellow bliss, further highlighting the beauty of the variations of ferns that filled the space. For the first time, I wasn't nervous about where we were going next, how we were going to budget the rest of the trip, or when our parking would expire; it was just me, my boyfriend, and a room full of ferns. I'm not sure if it was the extra oxygen in the air, or the heat-exhaustion from wearing a winter coat in a greenhouse, but suddenly turning twenty and doing the things that scare me didn't seem so scary after all.

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In 2015, a study was conducted by Dr. Michael Kolomiets at Texas A&M University regarding the smell of fresh cut grass, and more specifically, why that smell exists in the first place (Phillips). It has been a longtime theory that plants often communicate with each other, but there is often little known about what that might actually look like and what signs and signals can be sensed from the human eye. After being granted \$490,000 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kolomiets set out to study the same smell that attracts suburban dads and scientists from all over the world daily, and how that same signal may also impact drought tolerance.

We have seen evidence that plants use several forms of communication with one another when facing a predator, mostly through their release of different chemicals to either mask themselves as an unwanted snack or attempt to defend themselves by becoming a dangerous toy. However, there has not been a ton of research into what the plant's next move is.

Without going into too much detail on each of the molecules discovered in this experiment, Kolomiets discovered Jasmonic acid, a molecule derived from fatty acid that is known as a green leaf volatile or GLV for short. Although this may already sound like a lot of overwhelming information to explain a simple odor that is released from a plant that gets run over by lawn mowers weekly across the globe, the result of GLV compounds within plants give them another chance at survival and hope for a greener future.

Plants use every possible method to keep an eye out for each other in every situation, doing the best that a living thing that can't move, see, or speak can do. I often find inspiration in their resilience knowing they are pooling every last bit of energy stored in their leafy bodies, knowing that the sun will come once again. Plants are always doing their best to keep not only themselves but also those around them alive- knowing greener days will always be ahead.

I'd like to think that somewhere down in their cellular membrane they hold that same attention and care for us too.

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