

OF ONE STEM



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"Crime and punishment grow out of one stem."
Ralph Waldo Emerson

February 8, Monday

At the stroke of midnight, a darkly clothed figure placed the plant on the front porch, and fled. Though swaddled in a gold foil blanket, the plant shivered through the frigid night hours, but was warmed to above freezing by thoughts of revenge.

When the sun came up, the door to the house opened. A man in his late sixties, dressed in a white terry cloth robe with burgundy stripes running into the varicose veins on his legs, his eyes still heavy from sleep, squinted in the morning light and looked for his newspaper. When he bent to pick it up, he noticed the plant. It was large – about two feet tall to the top of the broad, heart-shaped leaves.

"For me?" he asked aloud, as talking to himself was a habit acquired throughout a lifetime of living alone. He read aloud the typed message on the gift card: "To Franklin P. Stone: Please accept this small token for all you've done for me." There was no signature. Franklin turned it over. The other side was blank, without even a florist's name. *Who could have sent it?* he wondered. Quite a mystery, since he had helped hundreds of persons during his forty years practicing law. He realized he was trembling from the cold, so tucked the newspaper under his arm, picked up the plant, and hurried inside the house.

"Damn thing is heavy." Franklin let the newspaper slip from under his arm to the foyer floor, then got a firmer grip on the plant. He glanced into the living room, wondering where to place it. The tall oak bookcases were filled with sets of money green, banker gray, and rich burgundy leather-bound law

books, and an encyclopedia, and the top of the oak desk was covered with neat stacks of filled file folders, each marked with the name of a company in which the retired lawyer held stock. There was no room for the plant in the bookcases or on the desk.

Franklin shifted the plant to the other hip. He dared not place it on the floor for fear the damp pot would stain the beige carpet. The only table in the house was next to the green leather reclining chair facing the television set. He placed the plant on the table and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, his backless leather slippers making flopping sounds as he walked.

The plant waited patiently to be released from its foil wrapper. The frost-bruised leaves warmed and relaxed. Some feeling had returned, but still it worried that the night spent in the cold might have shortened its precious two days of survival. Soon, it felt Franklin tearing at its foil wrapper, and was stabbed by apprehension at confronting an enemy, particularly in its present and vulnerable form. The last of the foil fell away.

"You're a strange looking plant." Franklin backed away from the table and studied his gift. The broad leaves formed a mass of uncertain pattern and, near the top, two white flowers sat next to each other. Each was tightly closed with a top petal forming a ruffled edge that looked like lashes trimming a sleeping eye.

He looks so. . . old. Through the gossamer-thin petals, the plant stared at the image looming above. Pus-yellow skin loosely covered the face and the excess hung to where the neck met the shoulders. A dome-shaped head rose to a slight point and was hairless except for yellow-gray tufts around the ears. He smelled old. The plant felt a twinge of compassion, then noticed Franklin's eyes – winter sky blue and emotionless. *He's already dead. I've just come to finish him off.*

A shiver ran through Franklin. He tightened the robe around his thin body.

Franklin. . . Franklin. While the plant tried to make a psychic connection with its prey, a young leaf at the bottom moved slowly, laboriously, downward to the soil. It touched another leaf and rustled.

"Who's there?" Franklin's pulse raced. His eyes looked sharply to the left, then to the right. No one. He spun around, knocking off a slipper. Still no one. He breathed deeply, and placed a finger on the pulse point of his wrist. "Relax. . .relax," he kept saying until the beating had slowed.

By now the young leaf had reached the bottom and was smeared with damp soil.

"Probably just a frozen branch scraping the house." Franklin took a deep breath and slid his foot back into the slipper. *It was nothing*, he told himself. He had moved into the house only last summer and didn't yet know its winter sounds.

Franklin, come here. The young leaf had returned to its original position.

The old man stepped closer to the table, reached forward, then pulled back his hands, not understanding why he felt so drawn to the plant.

Franklin, touch me. The plant sensed a psychic bond had been made.

"Never seen a plant like this, must be an exotic type. The leaves stick out every which way." Franklin reached his hands deep into the center. "Oh. . .no wonder it looks like that, it's a vine wrapped around a bamboo pole." He began rearranging the leaves in an orderly pattern, but soon they returned to their original disarray. He was wondering again who sent the floral gift when he noticed his coffee had stopped steaming and realized he was late in turning on the stock market report.

After taking a sip of lukewarm coffee, Franklin settled into the reclining chair and pulled the edges of the robe over his bony knees, then grabbed the remote control and aimed it at the television. As soon as the stock market report tapes were streaking across the screen, he noticed a spot of black soil on his hand. He rubbed it, spit on a finger, and rubbed again. Still

there. It must have come from the plant, maybe the soil had some sort of oily base. "I'll scrub it off later," he said, and turned back to the screen.

The plant looked beyond Franklin, through thirty feet of empty space, to a two-story-tall stone fireplace. Man, plant, table, chair, and television formed an island at one end of this great room in the area meant for dining. A brass chandelier was suspended above them from a thick chain and was the only lighting in the room, except for a small brass lamp on the desk near the stairs to the bedrooms. *His home is barren, just as he is.* The plant turned its attention back to the old lawyer.

The day went as most others had since his retirement. Franklin identified his stocks on the tapes streaking across the television screen and, when activity on a particular stock warranted a change, he phoned his broker and barked a "buy" or "sell" order. He shaved, showered, dressed in a gray sweat suit, and ate only when a brief absence from the screen would not cause him to lose money or opportunity.

This was his joy, his *raison d'être*-to manipulate his money to growth. The law practice had been the seed money-producing means to this end. Retirement was proving to be the happiest time of his life. He resented having to return to the office for even the once-a-month retired partners' meeting.

The plant fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, while Franklin spent all the daylight hours playing with his money. During the early evening news, the man ate part of a ham sandwich, and nodded off. It was dusk outside and the only light inside came from the images flickering across the television screen. The plant awoke and concentrated on Franklin as he slept.

The retired lawyer's closed eyes twitched. His hands tightened into fists and let go, tightened and let go, as his intellect slowly gave way to the mists rising up from his deepest self. A figure formed out of the dense gray vapor. Its features were undefined except for two bright green eyes. "Come with me, Franklin." It beckoned to him and backed away.

There was a tug on the old man's chest, an attraction to the form somehow familiar to him though not through appearance. "Who are you?"

"Come with me, Franklin." It opened its arms and backed farther away.

"We've met before, but where?" The old man's spirit felt drawn, light; it drifted toward the figure. His sleeping body twitched and began to sweat profusely. Suddenly his intellect resurfaced, and said slyly, "Okay, I'll come with you, but first tell me who you are." The dream figure melted away leaving only the impressions of its green eyes burning into Franklin's forehead. The retired lawyer shuddered and shook himself awake. His mouth was dry. His heart pounded with fear. *Relax... relax. . . It was just a nightmare. There's nothing to be afraid of,* he kept saying to himself, but wouldn't open his eyes.

As much as he tried to pretend the dream meant nothing, Franklin sensed he was in danger, but he had no enemies. Well . . . maybe one or two. One couldn't succeed in the legal and financial worlds for forty years without having a few confrontations. Suddenly, he thought of the brother he hadn't seen since Franklin was a young lawyer handling their deceased parents' estate.

He had advised them to place all their assets in a well-hidden trust account to avoid having their sons go through an arduous and costly probate process after their deaths. His brother lived a thousand miles away and, for expediency's sake, only Franklin's signature was needed to move assets and sign tax forms. The parents died within a year of each other, and the prospect of having all that money for himself proved too great a temptation. He destroyed the wills so there would be no record of the assets or of their wish to divide everything equally between their two sons. His brother knew Franklin had cheated him, but didn't have the money to carry on a legal battle.

That was the beginning of Franklin's fortune, and of his knowledge. In law school he had learned how to uphold the

law, and in practice he learned how to break the law without being caught. He thought of his own estate. Upon his death, the assets would be transferred to the Franklin P. Stone Memorial Trust Fund. He would live on forever through providing educations to young men who would learn to practice law as he had. Franklin felt much better. He opened his eyes.

The plant was staring at him. Its two flowers were open. Seafoam green pupils looked out of the white petals. Though the room was lit only by the dim flickers of light from the television screen, the eyes shown brightly, and looked upon him with loathing. *Have no fear, Franklin, for I intend your estate will be put to good use.*

A chill ran through the old man. There was something hauntingly familiar about that damned thing. "Who are you?" he asked, then realized he was talking to a plant, and began to laugh, at first with a little gurgling sound, then louder and harder until the wattle of flesh from chin to neck giggled. Tears streamed out of his eyes as he laughed and laughed.

Laugh now, Franklin, for soon you die, and I shall get away with your murder. The plant relished the thought, and patiently waited.

After his laughing subsided, the old lawyer looked deeply into the plant's eyes. "You're nothing; you're just a plant." He turned off the television, eased his way out of the reclining chair, and walked to the nearby wall to turn on the brass chandelier. The room was flooded with light.

Ohh . . . Stunned, the plant closed its eyes.

Franklin walked toward the table, intending to dispose of the plant then and there. He reached for it, then noticed his left hand was black. The whole hand was black. The small spot of plant soil had spread way past his wrist. Flesh was stretched so tightly over the bones, it felt as if he was wearing someone else's skin, and the fingernails had grown. When he moved it, the skin tightened and pulled his hand into a claw. The long nails dug into his palm.

"It's from that damn plant . . ." He lunged and grabbed a handful of leaves and vines. "I'll kill you." He crushed and twisted the leaves. "Eeeeeee..." Searing pain shot through his hand. When he let go of the plant, the pain in his hand stopped. "No, no." He screamed. "It can't be." When Franklin pinched a leaf on the plant, he felt the pressure in his blackened hand. "Yes, it is – it feels like the plant and I are becoming one." The old man rested his head in the other hand, and sobbed, at first with hoarse, dry gulps, then tears began rolling down his cheeks.

Ohhh. . . ohhh. The plant cried silently with pain, and weakened as life-giving fluids bled out of breaks and tears in its vines and drooping leaves.

Suddenly, pressure gripped the old lawyer's chest. His left arm numbed. He clutched at his heart and staggered into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, and grabbed for a pill bottle, knocking over tubes and bottles as he did. Quickly, he placed a tiny tablet under his tongue, and leaned against the sink. After the numbness receded, Franklin took a tranquilizer and returned to the living room, still carrying the bottle of nitroglycerine pills.

Ahh. . . The plant felt its pain subside. Its wounds begin to heal, but still could not open its eyes in the bright light.

"Relax. . . relax. . .," said Franklin over and over again until he had placed the bottle of pills on the table and was stretched out in the reclining chair. He dared not look at the plant or his hand until he had a plan. First he must calm down so he could think straight. Yes, he was letting his emotion rule him, a strange turn of events for the master of emotional manipulation. He could thank a woman for discovery of that talent.

They had met as students both working part-time at a campus bookstore. He wanted her from the first. She resisted. One day, they were alone in the storeroom gathering stock while the owner cared for the crowd at the register. He had kissed her neck and whispered, "I love—" Instantly, her body relaxed and molded to his. At that moment, he understood the power of

emotion and how to use it. He didn't finish his sentence, "I love...the sound of the cash register ringing." Instead he said, "I love. . .you." On their next date, the virgin succumbed.

She became pregnant. He was young, still somewhat gullible, and believed the brat was his. For several years, he helped her financially until she told him the child had a spinal defect that surgery could cure, and asked for a large sum of money. That's when he knew he'd been duped. No child of his could be imperfect. He stopped sending money and never saw them again.

Still, he could thank her for realization of his talent, which he had perfected until with a few well-chosen questions, he could determine a person's greatest need: for money, power over others, love, or whatever. He learned to probe even more deeply until he uncovered the person's greatest fear. Then Franklin was in control, and could swing the person between euphoria and despair, while taking what he could with each stroke of his pendulum.

You teach me well, as she did you. The plant drank deeply of the diminishing supply of moisture in its soil, while the young leaf at the bottom shook off much of its dirt coating. *Enjoy your euphoria – while it lasts.*

"A plan, I must have a plan." The old lawyer mumbled to himself. His eyes ached to look at his left hand. Finally, he gathered the courage. The blackness had receded to well below the wrist. "Yes, yes... it's going away." His head bobbed up and down and his neck wattle jiggled. He felt powerful again and began to plan his defense.

"Know the enemy, that's the first step." He walked to the bookcases, removed many volumes of the encyclopedia, and returned to his chair. After several minutes of looking up and cross-referencing plant types, he faced the plant and gleefully announced, "So that's what you are – a night-blooming Moonflower." He frowned and again compared the plant to the photograph in the encyclopedia. "Hmm. . .though probably some

sort of hybrid, because your flowers are less trumpet-shaped than those in the picture."

You're right about that. I'm definitely a hybrid. The plant sniggered.

"Hmmm. . .if you're a night-bloomer." Franklin looked at the plant's closed eyes as he spoke, "You must need to sleep during the day. Without rest, you will surely die away, and I'll be free of you." Franklin tugged on his wattle and became silent.

Do what you will, Franklin, but you'll never be free of me.

The old lawyer suddenly rose from his chair, went to the kitchen, and gathered what he needed, then returned to the great room. There he cut open the sides of the large, black plastic garbage bags. Taking the staple gun and one bag, he crossed the room to a window, held up the black plastic to the top of the window frame with his right hand, then threw his blackened left hand against the bag to hold it in position. "Thump." With the other hand he stapled the bag to the wooden frame. "Splat."

For the next several hours, the great room was filled with echoes of "thump, splat. . .thump, splat," as Franklin sealed all the edges of all the windows. "Thump, splat."

February 9, Tuesday

It was after midnight when Franklin finished covering the windows. He was exhausted, and walked slowly to the other end of the great room, turned on the desk lamp, and turned off the chandelier. It was as dark as dusk. He saw the plant's eyes were already beginning to open. "Soon, you'll die away, and I'll be free of you and whoever sent you." He held his breath and looked at his left hand. Only the fingers were black and the flesh on the back of the hand was pink and soft. Franklin licked his lips. He had regained control.

Don't be so sure, thought the plant, but its confidence was shaken. Every pore was raw from the hours of "thump, splat." It looked up at its foe. The darkness laid shadows in the crevices

of Franklin's face making him look like evil, disembodied eyes and lips floating in space. The plant drooped until all the leaves at the bottom rested in the barely moist soil.

A damp chill settled in Franklin's left hand, but it looked the same. He tried to shake out the stiffness. Then decided the problem was a lack of rest. "Now I shall sleep. . ." He turned to the plant. "And you will not. By the time I awaken, you'll be dead." The old lawyer smiled, which made him look even more sadistic. He thought about going to his bedroom but was too tired to climb the stairs. Instead, he took a tan cashmere overcoat from the foyer closet, settled into the reclining chair, and tucked the coat around himself.

Instantly, he fell into a fitful sleep tormented by the ghostly dream figure. Its green eyes gleamed with hate as it called to him, "Come with me, Franklin. Join me in eternity." The old lawyer broke into a sweat and opened his eyes. The figure disappeared. Franklin fell back to sleep only to have the ghost return, accompanied by images of people the old lawyer had defrauded throughout his life. He tossed and turned all night, as best he could within the confines of the reclining chair.

Thump. Franklin was awakened by the sound of the morning newspaper landing on the porch. *It must be six o'clock,* he thought. His body was stiff and sore. His head ached. *It was just a nightmare,* he told himself. *When I open my eyes, the sun will be streaming in through the windows and that damn plant will be gone.*

He opened his eyes. The room was still as dark as dusk. The old lawyer groaned, then noticed the plant. Its leaves hung weakly from the stems, and the glow had left its spiteful eyes. Franklin was elated. He was winning the battle. "Now I'll find out who sent you." *And then strike back,* he thought, and moved his stiff and sore body closer to the plant.

Oh. The plant recoiled from the smell of the old lawyer's breath – laced with the memories of his evil acts – and feared it might die before it could taste revenge. Its two days of bloom and life had already been shortened by the nonstop darkness.

"Perhaps you're the messenger of the two partners. Stupid men, so easy to convince that each had cheated the other." Franklin paused, stroked his wattle, and watched the plant for a reaction. He thought he saw a slight wince, so continued to talk, while rubbing his stiff left shoulder. So engrossed was he in storytelling, he failed to notice the blackness had spread up his arm to his neck. "After destroying their friendship and company, I bought the assets of their bankrupt business at five cents on the dollar." The old lawyer's eyes gleamed with greed. "Divide and conquer – that's what I did."

"Hmm." Franklin watched the plant for a while, then decided its reaction to the tale of the two partners was inconclusive, so continued to talk of his crimes, while watching it closely for an indication of the sender. The phone rang several times, but hardly caused a pause in his tales. With each sinister revelation, the old lawyer grew blacker and blacker, until the room smelled of rotting flesh.

You shrivel before my eyes, you heinous creature. The plant began to taste revenge – a sweet mixture like passion fruit and opium. It sucked and savored the taste, drawing up the ecstasy into all its cells, growing stronger and stronger.

Meanwhile, Franklin went on telling his stories. ". . . And then I realized that the *costs* of a long rehabilitation from the stroke would eat away at my inheritance, so I removed the oxygen tubes from Mother's nose. She died within minutes. Then I replaced the tubes so the medical staff would think. . . ." Suddenly, he sunk into deep despair and broke into gulping sobs. "How could I have done that?" He began to choke on his sobs and had *to* take several deep breaths until he could speak again. "My own mother. . . I killed her." He felt his bones grow cold as ice, hung his head, and said quietly, "I have hurt many people." He looked deeply into the plant's eyes. "And you? Are you the messenger of someone I harmed?" Tears were streaming down the old lawyer's cheeks.

Remember, Franklin, remember. Know me now. The plant conjured up images of the past and sent them to the old lawyer.

Franklin's forehead wrinkled as he struggled to recall their former association. "Oh. . .it's *you*." He smiled and moved closer. "The last person I would have expected." He shook his head and looked down. "I harmed you too." The old lawyer raised his head. *Appeal to its emotions*, he told himself, then spoke and moved his arms as if giving a closing statement to a jury. "But that was many years ago. Find it in your heart to forgive me and go on. We've both suffered enough. Let me go free, for if you don't, you seal your own doom."

You're right about that, thought the plant. *If you die, I die again.*

Suddenly, Franklin felt a sharp pain in his chest. He clutched at his heart. "Oh God. . ." The pain hit harder. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. "If only I had a second chance, I would right my wrongs, repay my debts." He grabbed for the bottle of nitroglycerine tablets on the table. "Please, let me go . . ."

The plant had the power to hold firm and watch Franklin perish or to break their bond, reverse the damage to his body, and let him live and make amends for his sins. It gathered the last of their conjoined strength. *Die, you bastard, die.*

February 10, Wednesday

The young lawyer from Washington sat at a hotel room desk and read the notice in the evening edition of the *Chicago Tribune*:

Last night, Franklin P. Stone was found dead, apparently of a heart attack. When he did not attend the retired partners' meeting at his law firm, Stone, Weber, and Stein, and could not be reached by phone, an associate asked the police to investigate. They entered

the home and found the deceased. Mr. Stone had no known relatives. Services will be held at . . .

"No known relatives. Ha. We'll see about that," said the young woman lawyer. She neatly folded the obituary notice, leaned on a steel cane, limped to the bed, and dropped the notice in an open briefcase. Then she picked up a file folder marked "Mother's Will," and read from a sheet of legal-sized paper:

If I should predecease your father, Franklin P. Stone, cremate my remains. Mix my ashes with an equal amount of potting soil. Place all in a clay pot and plant the seed in the envelope attached herewith. When two flower buds have formed, attach the card, also enclosed herewith. Deliver the plant to Franklin's residence. Make certain to have no personal contact with him. On the third day after delivery of the plant, consider this provision fulfilled.

After dropping the will into the briefcase, Frances Patricia Stone, civil rights attorney and champion of the rights of illegitimate children, leaned on her cane and hobbled back to the desk. She picked up a pen and began preparing her claim to her father's estate.

The End