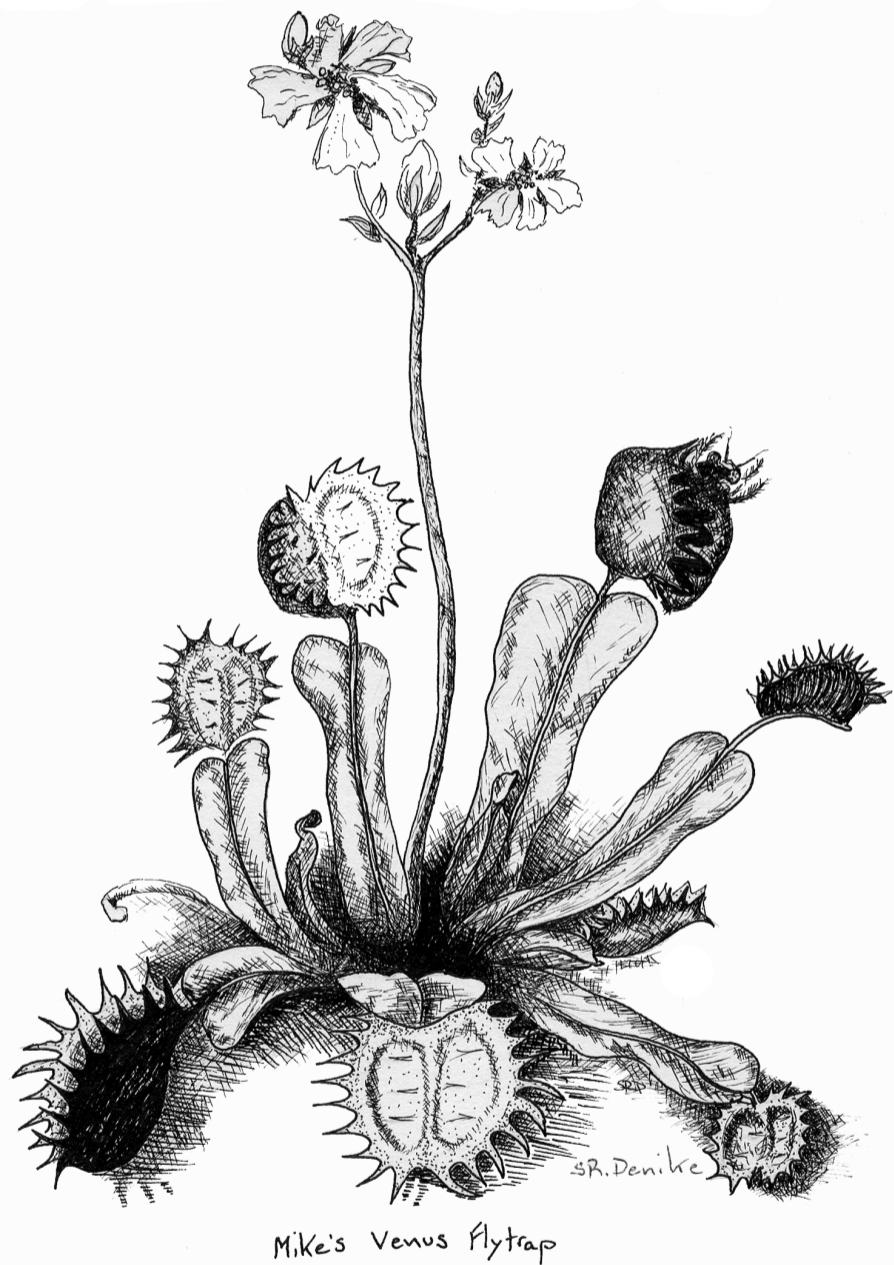


A Short Story

THE FLYTRAP

AGE 7 TO 12



STUART R. DENIKE

The Flytrap

Mike plopped himself down on the curb next to Jody.

"Hi!"

"Oh, hi," Jody said with a sigh.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. There's never anything to do around here."

"Yeah. Say, do you want to come over and see my plants?"

"Plants? Are you kidding? Talk about boring!"

"No, really. Come on."

"Seen one plant and you've seen them all."

"I bet you've never seen one that eats cheese and meat."

"Well -- no, I haven't."

"So come on."

Jody had heard that Mike lived in an old, creepy house. Now he saw that it was true. The house was big, old and dark and there were trees and plants everywhere. They had to push through leaves and vines just to get to the front door. As the huge door creaked open, Jody couldn't believe what he saw. A house filled with very old furniture, antiques maybe, surrounded by a forest. The invasion of plants was complete. The heat, moisture and above all the GREEN was overwhelming. He had never seen anything like it.

"Different, isn't?" said Mike.

Jody could only nod 'yes'.

Minutes later they stood looking down into a large glass bowl. Inside were three small plants.

"The one that sparkles is a sundew. Those drops are sticky, and if an insect touches one, it's caught just like a fly on flypaper. When it struggles, those tentacles fold over, hold the insect, and finally eat it."

"Wow! What's this one, Mike?"

"That's a pitcher plant. Bugs fall into the liquid in the funnel-shaped leaves. Hundreds of small spines point downwards so the bugs can't climb back out and the liquid drowns and digests them."

"The third one looks like it has teeth," said Jody.

"The Venus flytrap is my favorite. The leaves that look like they have teeth are traps. Those leaves are hinged in the middle with three hair triggers on each half. When an insect hits two of the hairs, or one hair twice, the trap closes in half-a-second or faster."

"Come on!"

"No, really. The spines on the edges interlock so the prey can't escape. Then the trap presses the insect, which is slowly eaten in about ten days. You can feed the plants small bits of cheese, egg white or meat, but feeding too often or too big a piece can give it indigestion. And you can't fool it with something it can't eat either. Here watch," said Mike as he put a small piece of paper in one of the traps. The halves quickly snapped shut.

"It will eventually open up to reject the paper. Neat huh?"

"I'll say!" said Jody. "Wish I had one."

"No problem, pal," Mike said as he rummaged in a drawer, then handed Jody a tiny package. "The plant grows more bulbs, and all I did was divide them. Here's a bulb and some sphagnum moss. Pure sphagnum is best, but I don't have enough. You can get more at the garden center, or just mix this with some sand and peat. That works too."

"Mike, why do you have your plants in a goldfish bowl? And why the plastic wrap over the top?" asked Jody.

"The plants grow best with a lot of light and sixty-five to seventy-five degree temperatures. The most important thing, however, is high humidity. So the covered glass bowl is perfect. It not only lets in plenty of light, but also allows moisture from the soil to evaporate and condense on the top and sides. That maintains high humidity. Also, part of the top must be open so bugs can get in. Remember to keep the soil moist -- don't let it ever completely dry out."

Mike paused for a moment. "What else?" he mumbled. "Oh yeah. Don't fertilize. In fact the plant needs less care than regular house plants. And the last

thing I can think of is that usually during the winter the plant goes dormant. The traps will grow smaller or die off. Keep the temperature around fifty degrees, and let the soil dry a little between waterings. I guess that's it."

"Thanks Mike. I can't wait to plant my Venus flytrap."

"I wish you could see my brother's terrarium, but he's not home right now."

"Terrarium?"

"You know, like an aquarium, except instead of fish you have plants."

"You mean like your goldfish bowl?"

"Exactly, only his is bigger. In fact, he's got five or six of them. One has plants that don't need to grow in soil. He has a woodland one too. Come on, let's get something to eat."

Down in the kitchen, the boys each had an apple.

"You know," Mike said, "My mom grew these apples in our family room."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. She has a miniature apple tree. It's no taller than I am. Mom also grows a whole vegetable garden in a bunch of pots and tubs out in the backyard. And my sister has a miniature garden out back too. It has tiny trees, bushes and flowers and even a miniature pool."

"Can we go see?"

"Sure."

As they started out the backdoor, Mike heard his mother call: "Michael, tell your friend it's nearly dinner time, and he should head on home now. He can come back tomorrow."

"OK Mom."

At the front door, Jody thanked Mike again for his plant.

"You're welcome. Now make sure your Venus flytrap gets twelve to sixteen hours of light each day, and plenty of water. Then you should have a good cluster of traps in about four weeks or so."

"I'll do that and Mike, is it OK that I come back tomorrow?"

"Well, sure! That would be great."

"You, your brother, sister and mom sure grow a lot of plants. Does your dad too?"

"No, he's just a horticulturist, and writes books and stuff."

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