

# Ficus

By E.S. Strout MD

REUTERS-UPI Wire Service, June 15, 1991: Manila, P.I.

MOUNT PINATUBO GOES ACTIVE. THOUSANDS FLEE.

*Specialized satellites report thinning of the ozone layer over Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia following the unexpected volcanic eruption. Environmentalists are concerned that unobstructed gamma and x-ray bombardment may adversely affect the rain forest biosphere . . .*

1.

Huntington Beach, California. Monday, 12 April 2004

“Got just the thing for your front yard,” the Nurseryland manager assured bachelor Boeing Aircraft employee Jeffrey Stewart. *Ficus microcarpa*.

“Huh? Say again?”

“Sorry. Indian Laurel Fig tree.”

“A fruit tree?”

“Not to worry. It’s a variant, doesn’t produce figs. Strictly decorative. Insect and fungus resistant. Rapid growth, reaches twenty-five, thirty feet, plenty of shade. Birds will love it, build nests.”

“Sounds perfect. Load it in my pickup.”

“Terrific. I’ll include a couple sacks of fertilizer.”

2.

“It’ll block our view,” his next door neighbor James Russell complained. His wife Sandra nodded agreement.

“Of what, Jimmy? The 405 freeway?”

“I’m calling the mayor’s office.”

Jeff laid his shovel down and dusted his hands off. “Be my guest. This is an Indian Laurel Fig tree. It will reach sixty feet before the city council can twitch.” He slugged down a gulp of Bud Lite, then another. “Maybe higher when Slick uses my planter for a litter box.”

Russell extended a middle-finger salute. “Up yours, Jeff.”

Jeffrey fired back an ambidextrous response. “Right back at you, Jimmy. Not you, Sandy.”

The Ficus reached a height of twenty feet in six weeks with appropriate watering, nitrogen fertilizer and trimming.

### 3.

May 28th:

The dreams began as vague shifting shadows. Then stifling thicknesses of tangled branches and matted foliage. Brilliant bicolored leaves whispering in a covert language of their own. A partially built mockingbirds nest, the occupants fleeing. Stewart would awaken trembling, drenched in sweat.

One week later.

Jeff stretched out his appendages of leaves, branches and root structures. Could he attract something warm, vibrant, pulsating with life to fill his growing need?

The raucous screeching of crows awakened him.

“Flying lifeforms. Their blood . . .,” he whispered, brushing imaginary soil from his arms. “What the hell was that about?” he wondered.

Outside his window a cloud of the inky predators executed complex, swooping aerobatics, screaming corvine invective at something in the Ficus. “It’s Russell’s cat, guys. I’d be careful.”

One bird's wing stuck in a clump of leaves and it flapped frantically to get free. It disappeared in the foliage with an angry squawk, feathers flying. There was stark silence as the flock lost its collective voice.

Jeff said, "Told you not to mess with Slick."

The black-feathered squadron settled on phone landlines, Russell's rooftop and Jeff's split rail fence. They watched with subdued muttering.

"Like in that old Hitchcock flick, *The Birds*. Tippi Hedren and Rod Taylor," Stewart recalled, oddly afraid.

A bloody clump of crow feathers and a detached foot lay in the Ficus planter. The stillness was ominous, palpable. Then with a thundering of wings, the crows departed. Stewart started, then glanced around. Something had tweaked his memory.

"Why did the mockingbirds split?"

4.

Slick crouched in predatory mode, stalking an oblivious sparrow in the Ficus planter. The cat advanced on silent, precise feline tiptoes. Suddenly kitty braked to a screeching halt, hissing and spitting, back arched, tail upraised. It backed away with a low, menacing growl, gaze riveted in the murky abyss of leaves overhead.

"Scat, cat." Stewart chugged the rest of his beer, crushed the can in his fist and hurled it after the retreating feline. Some tiny brown feathers swirled away on the breeze. He stepped into the planter and peered upward into the shadowy foliage.

The sparrow was gone.

5.

That night:

Stewart sensed the warm-blooded creature. His rootlets were alert, tactile, searching for prey. The predator crept through the grass. It radiated savage feline life-force, throbbing, resonant. Larger than the others. Perfect. It was no match for the elaborate, grasping root complex that snatched it underground.

The primeval screech snapped Stewart to wakefulness. “Slick . . .” he muttered to his perspiration-soaked pillow. Jeff grimaced at the putrefactive taste in his mouth. He stumbled to the bathroom and gargled mouthwash. Couldn’t get rid of the foul taste. Like rancid, mangy fur. A bizarre dream fragment flickered through his consciousness. Russell’s cat disemboweled, screaming in agony. Lungs, liver, spleen being ripped loose, absorbed, digested.

A dream? But so lucid. So hideous in detail.

“Good God. Like I was there. *Doing it.*” He was just in time to embrace the toilet bowl. Soon all that came up was bitter bile.

## 6.

The next evening:

James Russell waited at the foot of Stewart’s driveway. “We might have a problem. Jeff.”

Jeffrey exhaled a sigh of frustration. “Tough day at work, Jim. I need a drink. What’s your problem?”

Russell held up a swatch of orange and white fur. “Slick’s gone missing. This blew across from your yard.”

“Your stupid cat chased a sparrow up my tree yesterday, Jim. You can climb up there and look. C’mon, I’ll give you a boost.”

“No, thanks,” Russell muttered.

When Stewart looked again there was more cat fur drifting down from the branches. He hugged himself to control the trembling.

Jeffrey dressed in heavy overalls and gloves, then armed himself with an axe. His throat rasped, Sahara-dry. “Outta my head, Ficus, you sonofabitch.” He stepped into the planter and raised the axe . . .

Jeff awoke sprawled in his recliner, rubbed his eyes in confusion. “What the hell happened?” Spidery Ficus limbs writhed in spectral moonlight outside his window. The overalls were folded neatly on his garage workbench, next to the axe. He massaged his temples at the insistent headache.

The sudden vision was precise. His neighbor James Russell.

7.

The following morning:

A torn fragment of Russell's shirt was all that was found. Police searched the grounds, found nothing incriminating.

"The Ficus," Stewart told police and reporters. "It's carnivorous. It ate a crow, a sparrow, a cat and now Jimmy. Inside my head," he pleaded. "It knows Russell pissed me off." Homicide detectives submitted a missing person report. They concluded Stewart was a Budweiser short of a six-pack.

8.

June 15th:

The Ficus stood thirty feet high, implacable, sinister, mocking. "What do you want?" Stewart pleaded. The vision was surreal, chilling, like trailers for a grade-B horror flick. Stewart dismembered, body parts flung to the planter below, ropes of necrotic intestines draped from the branches.

His voice was a strangled whisper. "Got it. I shut up and you won't have me for lunch."

When Russell's wife vanished, Stewart shrugged when the police questioned. A second missing person report was issued.

Tabloid reporters were intrigued by the odd occurrences. They camped on Jeff's front lawn, offering five-figures for an exclusive interview. "Goddamn press," Stewart fumed.

Ficus branches bent attentively.

The NATIONAL ENQUIRER printed an accusatory article, but sent no more reporters when their man failed to return. Police forensic experts found no trace, submitted a third missing person report.

"The Ficus," Stewart insisted with a high-pitched, demented giggle. "I cover for it, I won't be its entree."

“Have you considered psychiatric help, Mr. Stewart?” the chief investigator asked. Jeff agreed.

9.

“I’m intrigued,” the shrink said. “Why would it communicate only with you?”

“It’s adopted me. I planted it, watered, fertilized it.”

“The tree told you this?”

“Yeah. It’s invaded my consciousness, made

me a psychic partner. In my dreams I see and feel what it does.”

“Please continue.”

“It knows you’ll think I’m crazy.”

The psychiatrist’s report read: *“Mister Stewart indulges in some intricate and highly developed fantasies. These border on paranoid schizophrenia, but well controlled. Probable cause? Shock induced by the unexplained disappearance of his neighbors, Further counseling is essential.”*

Stewart failed follow-up appointments. He was billed five hundred dollars for the one visit.

10.

“*Ficus microcarpa* comes from Southeast Asia rain forests areas,” the Nurseryland manager told him. “Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, like that. Is there a problem?”

“I need to get rid of it.”

“Didn’t work out for you? Maybe a different . . .”

“Can I poison it?”

“Root system goes too deep, Mister Stewart. It’ll grow back. Maybe you could chop it down.”

“I tried that.”

11.

“You’re on your own, Ficus. I’m outta here.” Stewart said, grabbing his car keys. But he stopped cold as the tree’s threats reverberated through the vulnerable corridors of his mind. Visions of the cops finding human remains on his property convinced him.

“How about if I just get drunk?”

There was an aura of arrogant condescension.

Stewart slugged a straight shot of Smirnoff from the bottle. Then another. Another . . . Half an hour later he was an eyeblink short of paralysis. He felt a weakening, sense of alien disorientation. Distorted, meaningless visions.

“You crawlin’ around in my brain again, tree? How does it feel?”

There was ineffectual, confused psychic intrusion as Stewart fumbled a rag fuse into the uncapped gasoline can. Less when he struck his lighter. “Eat this one, Mr. Ficus.”

The makeshift Molotov Cocktail struck the trunk and exploded in a gusher of orange-red brilliance. Panicked branches clawed at the night, unable to escape.

“Gotcha!” Then he ground his fists into his scalp as the psychic death-scream slashed at his sensorium.

“Vandalism,” Stewart complained to city fire inspectors as they sifted the ashes.

12.

Two months later:

The Nelsons pointed out sickly, yellowing grass and malformed green sprouts in the soot-stained planter. Detracts from the property value, they said. Stewart accepted their lower-than-comparables offer without rebuttal.

A few weeks later the elder Nelson complained of bizarre nightmares.

Then their cat went missing.

The End