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## Peculiar Plants

No Dean enjoys dealing with irate parents, but after talking to Mrs. Isleworth, Dr. Rosen felt he'd been punctured and that his deflated remains were taking up valuable space she required for other purposes. He had been unable to explain how her twenty one year old daughter had disappeared without a trace. He had been unable to convince her that summer vacation might have something to do with it. He had been unable to promise that her daughter would not be late for yet another "vital family event"--a wedding as it turned out. And when she'd demanded he find her--he had been unable to do that.

The University had its own troubles too. Professor Dibley was nowhere to be found. Nobody would have noticed until September, but the whole Isleworth event had brought it embarrassingly forward.

"Mrs. Isleworth," he had vainly protested, "I'm really not sure there's cause for concern. There were no signs of struggle and apparently Laura withdrew a hundred dollars the day before to buy camping equipment." The same was true of Professor Dibley. The Dean found himself hoping that they had truly disappeared, and that especially the media would never find them.

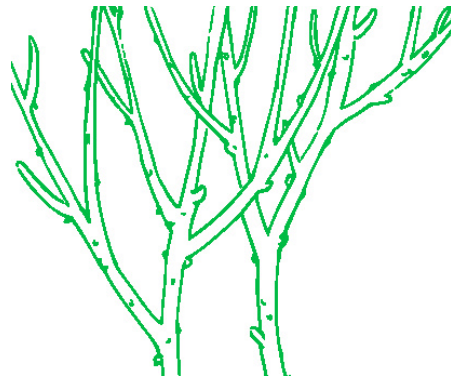
The University had called in the police. They'd called in the FBI. What more could anyone do? He was becoming increasingly certain that Isleworth junior had absconded to escape Isleworth senior, and he wondered if there was any room for deans where Laura was.

He stood up to check on the investigation in Dibley's office, largely to flee from his phone.

Professor Dibley's office was a real, old-fashioned inner sanctum. Nobody had ever been allowed in and the FBI had had to break down the door. But once inside, it was just an ordinary academic's office. Books, reprints, handouts, manuscripts, CDs, and rocks covered every surface, in-



cluding most of the floor, to a depth of one to three feet. There were plants on all the window sills and some of the shelves, but of course they weren't normal plants. Dibley was a paleobotanist, and her plants were stringy, or filmy, or slimy, but not normal. "Relatives of extinct genera!" she'd told the Dean once, as if it was some kind of triumph. It was the same with the rocks. They were not just rocks, they were fossils.



Students were peering in too, careful to leave the Dean a respectful island of personal space.

"Man, what a shame," one of them was saying. "Nobody's gonna be able to do field trips like Dibley."

The Dean had heard of those legendary field trips. For some reason she only did them in her well-subscribed freshman classes, but perhaps she considered them too frivolous for upper level students.

"Umm," he murmured noncommittally, his mind on serious matters.

"Yeah," another student piped up. "She really knew the area, really knew all the good spots. You'd hike for hours, turn a corner, and wham, there you were, in a different world. Laura'd been assisting her for years and she mighta known, but I hear she's gone too."

Good god, was nobody going to wait to make the connection? The Dean dove, decorously he hoped, into the office. He'd talk to the two FBI agents. Then he could ask the questions and demand answers.

However, like him, they had no answers.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Rosen." The senior agent shook his head. "We've disturbed most of the dust in this office and there is no sign of any criminal activity. Since they're both adults..." the FBI man trailed off.

You tell Mrs. Isleworth, the Dean wanted to say, but you didn't become Dean by saying things like that.

"Well," he said instead, "at least I can get someone to take care of her plants. Ken will probably do it." He pulled out his personal phone.

A few minutes later a typically scruffy grad student showed up.

"I brought a trolley since you said there were quite a few," he said amiably, but then his gaze froze on a stringy plant like knobby green pipe cleaners near the window. "Never been in here," he muttered, pulling a hand lens out of his pocket and peering at the plant like a Swiss watchmaker.

"Oh my god," he breathed, "Rhynia!" Feverishly, he stared at another specimen through his hand lens. "Cooksonia! And this! My God! Look at this! It's got to be Ediacaran!!!"

"Yes, well, I'm glad they're unusual," said the Dean with a touch of impatience. Scientists, he thought to himself, they're all crazy. "But perhaps you

could proceed, and allow these gentlemen to get on with their work."

The graduate student stared at him as if he were a hallucination.

"No, no," he said, "you don't understand. This is Rhynia!"

"If they're that rare," said the senior agent, his eyes narrowing, "they're probably protected under the endangered species laws. Where'd she get them?"

"Rhynia? Along the south coast of England about four hundred million years ago in the Silurian," said the grad student. "The Ediacaran one, about seven hundred million years ago in the pre-Cambrian."

The Dean's face was a careful mask. What was he going to say to Mrs. Isleworth? Under the circumstances, it might be in poor taste to tell her that for once her daughter was early.

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