

Spike

Most people think Ed and I moved to Arizona when we retired because it was what *we* wanted. Actually, we moved to the desert because that's where Spike would have wanted to live.

We adopted Spike in 2004 when his mother was dying. For many years his mother lived in a greenhouse on the upper floor of East High School in Columbus, Indiana, where Ed taught Biology. No one took much notice of her until she produced a towering stalk from her sturdy green center. She was a "century plant", an agave that flowers only once at the end of its long life. The mother plant was waning, but she had produced countless shoots from her base to continue her lineage. When staff members could no longer accommodate the large number of agaves, they uprooted the orphans and placed them up for adoption.

I remember the day Ed brought the tiny plant home. He placed the pot on the kitchen counter along with his briefcase and lunchbox.

"Look what followed me home from school." he gushed.

I moved closer. "What is that?"

"It's an agave. The science department was giving them away. Can we keep him?"

I looked at the plant with the succulent, tapered leaves. We knew nothing of raising agaves, but I was willing to give it a try. Ed named him Spike. He became our "ugly duckling", cute but awkward, nestled among the delicate Boston ferns and graceful philodendrons in a sunny corner of our Midwestern home.

Spike loved his new home. He soon outgrew his original pot, and the next one too. The tiny points on the tips of his leaves developed into hazardous weapons as Spike

lived up to his name. When he grew too large for the living room, we moved him to a sunny corner of our bathroom. This made him angry. One day he poked me in the behind when I got out of the tub. I moved him from the bathroom to a spot under a window in our bedroom where he jabbed me when I was dusting or vacuuming. I'd had enough.

"Do something with that plant of yours." I snapped at Ed.

"What do you mean?"

"It's dangerous. It could poke out someone's eye."

He dismissed my concerns, but I no longer felt safe around Spike. I took matters into my own hands. After Ed left the house one day, I grabbed the kitchen shears and headed to the bedroom.

"Sorry, bud. It has to be done."

One by one, I snipped off the menacing spikes. I carefully disposed of the clippings, thinking Ed wouldn't notice. For a while I thought I had gotten by with it. Then, a few days later, I heard a wail coming from the bedroom.

"What did you do to Spike? You *neutered* him!"

No amount of reasoning would calm my husband down. He fumed for days.

Despite Spike's neutered state, he sprouted three babies. We named them "Son of Spike", "Sugar and Spike", and "Mr. Spike". When they were old enough to survive on their own, we gave them to friends.

Spike was never the same after the declawing episode and losing the babies. He turned pale and his leaves drooped. One warm spring day, out of desperation, we planted him outside in our herb garden. He perked up in the summer sun and held his own during the mild fall. But Indiana winters are unpredictable. He took a big hit after an unusual spell of cold, snow, and ice. In the spring he thawed out and dissolved into a heap of green-gray mush. We buried him under a pile of mulch and he became part of the garden soil. Ashes to ashes, mush to mulch.

Meanwhile, our friends were having similar growing pains with Spike's children. Mr. Spike had become especially unruly. His parents kept him in an enormous pot

outdoors and lugged him to their basement each winter. When they learned we were moving to Arizona, they begged us to take Mr. Spike. We considered it, but by then he had gotten so large that it would have been impossible to get him in the backseat without impaling ourselves. Instead, we took one of his offspring.

The move from Indiana to Arizona was monumental. Our teaching careers were ending, and our children had moved away. We were taking a chance on a new adventure. As we packed our car with the last of our belongings, we made a place for the baby agave on the floor behind the driver's seat.

New Spike is now the focal point of our garden where he stands four feet tall and four feet wide from tip to tip. I hope he lives long enough to produce a magnificent flower stalk like his great-grandmother. She would be proud.

Along with Spike, Ed and I are thriving in our new environment. The warm sunshine and blue skies agree with us. We have many visitors in the winter and early spring months when Midwesterners begin to droop and lose their color. When our friends and family comment on Spike, we tell the story of how a prickly plant led us to the desert. It's a good story. It was the right move.