



LAND OF PLENTY

MICHELLE CACHO-NEGRETE

FORTY DOLLARS A WEEK, MY MOTHER'S SALARY BEFORE taxes in 1954, could barely feed my brother and me. For sixty-seven cents, however, she could buy a box of fertilizer that would nourish her plants all summer. By mid-June, when the rungs of the Brooklyn fire escapes sizzled and the police had given up on keeping the hydrants closed, our fire escape exploded with color: purple African violets, scarlet geraniums, yellow and magenta pansies, waxy white begonias. My mother's plants, as perfect as silk imitations, were a testament to her hunger for beauty.

The summer I was eleven and my brother seven, the flowers were especially vibrant. They seemed a visual counterpart to the shrieking alarms from the firehouse across the alley. Tenement and station faced each other like wary adversaries. Everyone in the building hated the firemen; hated the hearty meals we glimpsed through the window; hated, in between

alarms, their late-night card games punctuated by obscenities and the loud clanging of dishes as they snacked. People complained among themselves about being kept awake, but no one complained directly to the culprits, who probably would have paid no attention anyway.

One afternoon, as my mother fussed with her flowers, a bare-chested fireman with a sagging stomach yelled to her, "Beautiful flowers." He stood with legs wide apart, with a hand shading his eyes from the glaring sun, and a wide grin that I mistrusted. My mother's eyes narrowed at this, but she shouted, "Thanks," then turned to me and shrugged. After a moment of being ignored, the fireman went indoors. My mother, at the age of forty, was an attractive woman, small and full-breasted with short auburn hair, and when I later spotted the fireman grabbing his crotch while talking to a friend, I felt certain he was speaking about her. I blushed and angrily deadheaded wilted

blossoms, throwing them over the side of the fire escape and into the alley, where they lay like soiled velvet on the litter of rotting garbage.

THOUGH THE FLOWERS THRIVED IN summer, the only survivor of each winter's sunless windows and nightly plunges into radiator heat was my mother's seven-year-old jade plant. The shine of each fat leaf after I dusted it with a damp cloth delighted me. Its solitary vigil always ended the first Saturday in May, when, at 8:30 A.M., my mother rushed my brother and me out the door and up the street to be first in line at the five-and-dime's spring plant sale. As the crowd behind us swelled and Mother pushed us closer to the big doors, my brother gazed hungrily at the photographs of tomato and cucumber plants taped to the windows and spoke of the gardens he'd one day have. There was a certain dreaminess in his expression as his imagination transported him to someplace green, far from gray tenements and gritty construction sites. My mother smiled at him, the gentler of her two children, and gripped our hands in dire prediction of rampaging plant-buyers, though the rush that might trample us never materialized.

When the bored saleswoman, who took her own sweet time, unlocked the door and swung it open, my mother flew forward, dragging us past clothes, toys, hardware, comics, cosmetics, and candy stacked in rows. My brother and I, however, were covetous only of breakfast at the luncheon counter newly decorated with pink impatiens, where elderly women settled stiffly onto stools to gossip and sip endless cups of coffee. While my mother's discriminating eye examined the tiered plant racks in search of the glossy foliage and new buds that promised longevity, we shifted from foot to foot, distracted by the greasy smell of bacon and eggs. After she finally selected the plants and placed them in the wire carriage, she bought us each a hot chocolate and a Devil Dog. As we waited on the checkout line, she indicated the plants she thought especially hardy, optimistic that at least one would survive the winter along with the jade.

MY BROTHER DUBBED THE FLOWER-LADEN FIRE ESCAPE our "English garden." This was after I'd read him a book that I'd stolen from a dusty secondhand bookstore on Bedford



ROY ARENELLA

Avenue. We sat out there after school each day, enjoying the spring warmth before the militant onslaught of humidity and heat that seemed peculiar to New York City summers. I was fascinated by the unrestrained, spiraling growth of leaf and stem, the ability to thrive on so little, as the plants shot up and widened like fans unfolding. I begged to take over the task of fertilizing and marveled at how a quarter teaspoon of fish-scented powder, along with water, could provide a meal. Once, I put a bit on the tip of my finger and sucked it. It was putrid, fit only for plants and perhaps the feral cats that meowed beneath our fire escape whenever I opened the lid and released the scent from the box.

Like the cats, I thought of food all the time, my hunger a constant background to everything else. My mother was paid on alternate Fridays. Each payday she'd arrive home with bags of groceries and a treat, usually poundcake with whipped cream (the Brooklyn version of a *charlotte russe*) from Stevens, the tiny bakery near the train stop on Marcy Avenue. Halfway through the week, however, despite her frugality, little food remained, and the free school lunch became our primary meal. At night, I often woke to a light in the kitchen and the sight of my mother chain-smoking at the table as she counted over and over the few dollars she had left, as though the counting could accomplish a miracle on the order of the loaves and the fishes.

The tiny, secondhand, black-and-white television she'd managed to purchase one autumn revealed a different America from ours, a blurry world where families passed heaping plates around the dinner table. At the movies my brother and I snuck into, it seemed every film featured at least one elaborate meal, a tapestry of food and romance so interwoven as to be inseparable. And then there were the magazines with feasts spread across their pages, tables set with silver, linen, glass goblets, china, and flowers, always flowers. (Flowers and food became so enmeshed in my mind that even now I insist on having flowers on our dining table.) I was furious at this land of plenty that excluded us. My brother, however, believed that we would eventually be granted access to this abundance. My mother sided with him. "Go to school," she lectured as she watered and deadheaded her plants. "Go to college. Get a good job." She shifted the pots to make the most of the sun. She was an immigrant from Eastern Europe who'd arrived in the U.S. with her parents when she was six, and she believed in the American Dream despite her experience of poverty. "I had to go to work by the sixth grade," she lectured. "Go to school. Win scholarships. Go to school."

One afternoon, as she pruned her plants, the fireman shouted to her across the alley, "You're as beautiful as your flowers." Her mouth tightened in anger. I saw him hungrily assess her body as she knelt over the geraniums. "I can't make my plants stand up straight," he shouted. "Come over and teach me how." His boldness felt threatening, and I wanted to scream, *Shut up!* My mother shook her head in disgust and said, in a tight, furious voice, "Mister, your plants don't interest me. Find another gardener." He stared at her a moment, then laughed with humorless rancor, spun round, and went back into the firehouse, slamming the door behind him like a fist against a wall. She sighed deeply and said to me, "Go to school. Earn enough to plant a real garden in a real backyard. Go to school."

School. Although my brother attended classes regularly, hoping for the future my mother insisted could be his, I wasn't much for school. I stayed for lunch and then vanished from the dilapidated gray building. I hopped the train to the big library in Manhattan, where I slaked my thirst for knowledge in the silent immensity of the reading room. I explored the Museum of Natural History and the Met, mesmerized by dinosaur skeletons, remnants of vanished civilizations, and beautiful yet

puzzling art by Pollock, Picasso, Magritte. On the way home I stopped in high-end food markets to marvel at the luscious produce and beautiful breads — and to stuff what little I could into the pockets of my denim jacket. I hopped on board the train, teeth clenched in an exhilarating combination of anger and victory.

DURING THE STIFLING MONTHS OF JULY, AUGUST, AND EVEN September, everyone dragged mattresses out onto the fire escapes to sleep — everyone except the old Lithuanian woman who gave us a nickel to carry her groceries upstairs. Given the choice between the heat that engulfed the apartments and the noise of the busy fire station, we chose the sirens. My brother and I were allowed to sleep outside only after repeated promises to be careful of the plants. The mass of blossoms gave a pretense of exotica, and we imagined ourselves in a South American jungle. The excitement of sleeping outdoors was almost enough to make us disregard our growling stomachs. In the dark, the broken glass glittering beneath us in the alley took on an almost ethereal loveliness. Humidity formed a romantic haze around the streetlights. Car horns, blaring radios, and loud conversations were replaced by the wheezing of heavy trucks, the cries of prowling cats, and the soft chatter of night-shift workers returning home. Despite my brother's restlessness, the ache in my empty gut, and the snores and groans of neighbors on surrounding fire escapes, I slept. By midsummer, I would often sleep through fire alarms. I awoke to the rising sun and the smell of a firehouse breakfast.

As the only Jewish kids in our immediate neighborhood, my brother and I were friendless, but our days were full. I read to him on the fire escape. We ate what I'd pilfered that day. We prowled for open fire hydrants. We took advantage of the air-conditioned library. I took him to the Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, where I was dazzled by the glass-domed rain forest, a hemisphere of heat and moisture with electric-colored flowers and green palms arcing overhead. I found especially compelling the ferns that clung to trees, surviving on what nourishment they plucked from the air: humidity and light and perhaps some invisible vibration.

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