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Essay by Michele Popadich

Climbing Beyond Where You Thought You Were

James and I sat on my back porch, sipping red wine in the evening. The view from my third-floor balcony was of the alley and the backs of homes: a steamy bathroom window stamped with a female silhouette and a folded stroller perched next to rack of rusted bikes.

Across my condo's parking lot was a neighboring three-flat. Vines crawled up the side of the cream-colored building with a roof that gently caved in. When I'd first purchased my condo in late spring of 2019, the inspector took me up a rickety ladder to look at my own roof. But instead, he'd gawked at the neighbors' mismatching shingles and the large sheet of plywood stapled to the area that dipped in.

"Don't ever buy that building," he'd warned me. The inspection indicated my roof was in great condition, but still I'd

lingered up there, looking at the building across the lot. I'd liked the way the vines hugged the walls, peaked into the windows, and stretched their arms to reach the top. I'd liked how the building braced itself, as if it were barely held together but would never actually let go.

By the time I moved in, my unit had already been renovated with new kitchen appliances, crisp French doors, and a tub with jets that I couldn't figure out how to turn on. There were no creaks in the floor. No cracks in the wall. It was obviously a good investment, but the magnitude and permanency of the decision scared me. I found myself drawn to the disarray of my neighbors' yard: The weeds grew up to knee level, like a small forest huddled around a dozen modest, mismatching plastic lawn chairs and a glass table that was more decorative than functional.

It was early summer in Chicago, but James (I've changed his name) and I sipped our red wine from glasses with Santa and his reindeer on them.

"Remember our first date?" he asked, looking at me from the corner of his eye. We had met in the winter six months before, in a buzzing cocktail bar, although neither of us ordered a cocktail. I'd drunk a single white wine; he'd emptied one glass of beer. In between flirtatious glances and nervous laughter, neither of us had found the right moment to order another drink.

We'd commiserated about the early-career work grind: he was in the service industry, I was in the corporate world, but we were both artists, trying to find a balance. We'd chugged water for three hours before he walked me home and cradled the back of my head when he kissed me.

This summer night, the red wine roasted in my grip. I was parched in the humid air, but I kept on sipping as if it would hydrate me. We sat on my new porch of my new condo with my new Christmas glasses, but it seemed like we hadn't made new memories together in a while. I longed for a disheveled feeling among all this newness. I craved for it to feel a bit broken-in. It was as if he and I were positioned at the starting line of a race, held in limbo as we waited for the gun to tell us to go.

"I remember," I replied. We were doing a lot of remembering.

Inspired by the jungle across the lot, I had bought a large planter to bring color to my unit. It had big leathery leaves and pink, bell-shaped flowers. James had heaved it up three flights of stairs for me and tucked it into the corner where the bannisters met at a point. At the time, it had seemed that James would move into my unit—and into my life—the first chance he could. But I'd still been trying to embrace my own skin, navigating the dozen keys my attorney gave me on purchase of the condo. For a few, I never did find a matching lock.

Near the end of that summer, when I'd gone to the basement to test a mystery key, I spotted a young brother and sister in the yard across the lot splashing in a blown-up pool while parakeets chattered from a cage placed on a chair just a few yards away. The kids had babbled back to the birds. Their freedom had seemed musical, and I discovered the key opened a small storage unit in the basement. I used it to discard things I was too nervous to throw away.

I watered the flowers on my third-floor porch all summer long. All summer, I thought about James, but I never gave him a set of spare keys to my place. One morning in early August, I found vines bursting from the planter. These green threads reached a little farther every time I watered them, grabbing hold of anything they could: the railing, bannister, my folding chairs. Some nestled so close they braided together and hoisted each other up. Some seemed as if they would stay together indefinitely. But many untangled themselves, like a split hair feathered at the tip.

In late August, I locked myself out of my condo while throwing out trash in the alley. The entrance from my building's parking lot had snapped shut behind me. I'd left my bag and keys on top of my bike on the other side of a fence that now towered high above. With no phone, I thought of running over to James's apartment or job to use his to call the office that managed my building. Instead, I snuck into my neighbors' backyard, where the entrance from the alley was open. The fence on their side was slightly shorter, and from their yard, I could hop it into the parking lot. From there, I could get where I needed to be on my own.

I still liked the overgrown weeds in my neighbors' yard. But at ground level, it was just another home, another set of

rusted bikes and a half-inflated pool. And from down there, my own porch looked unlived-in, a stage for a performance that had yet to happen. The big leaves from my planter dangled awkwardly and precariously from the balcony.

I reached for the top of the fence, which intersected with the corner of their building. The thick iron bars separated the jungle of their backyard from our concrete parking lot. I hoisted myself on top, grabbing hold of the vines on the building. Like my planter, these vines had also tangled together, thick at the base. I gripped them like a rope and steadied myself.

But I didn't jump right away. I balanced on top of the fence, looking more closely at the vines that crawled upward. Many had begun to unwind themselves. Like the curled tip of a cursive letter at the end of a handwritten note, the tallest had shimmied away from the thick roots that birthed them, reaching farther than they ever would have before.

Art Information

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