

## Tenderloin Garden

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An open Altoid tin, splayed in the dirt between the planter's neat rows of arugula, held two nickels and one dime. Nellie sighed. He'd been there again. Sun-glinted copper pennies lay half-buried, tucked into the damp dark-chocolate soil. Payment for the missing head of lettuce, now an empty hole, a gaping wound in the dirt.

A wide-brimmed straw sunhat shielded her eyes from the sun, her sunglasses like blinders against the sidewalk's debris strewn over the gray concrete. Nellie inspected the raised wooden box in the community garden. The city's Tenderloin neighborhood was not known for its ability to nourish life, be it baby lettuce or homeless young men.

Sunlight poked out of the heavy fog and warmed the morning air. Nellie inhaled the garden's musky aroma. Basil, rosemary, flowering lavender, even the whiff of manure was intoxicating. Back home in the Philippines, when she was just a girl, her mother had insisted on teaching Nellie and her younger brother Rico how to grow vegetables. Mother's lessons had been practical, no-nonsense, lessons learned from her own dirt-poor childhood.

"No matter where you live, you will know how to feed yourself. To honor God." Her children would be survivors, the dirt under their fingernails proof of her love. God's love, too. But that hadn't been enough to save Rico, once they'd moved to San Francisco in 1983. The AIDS virus had eventually snatched him, in the years when gay men were told God had justly punished their sinful acts. Nellie regretted abandoning him when he was first diagnosed. She

still included Rico in her daily prayers, still saw flashes of him in strangers, his ghost echoing her steps.

A shadow fell over the small green heads of lettuce. Nellie straightened her spine and looked up into a familiar face. Connor, the lettuce thief. His cheeks held some stubble, fine blond hair under the grime of the streets. Pale blue eyes peeked down with an almost haunted fatigue. Too young to be so world-weary, the way her brother had looked in the end.

He had a large black trash bag slung over his shoulder, his long fingers wrapped around the plastic. No backpack today. Had it been stolen during the night while he slept? Sleeping curled against the cold, in the dark entry of the tattoo shop invited trouble. Did his mother know her son slept on sidewalks? How did she sleep at night?

He'd told Nellie he'd turned seventeen the week before he'd left home just a month ago. Left his small town in Texas, the suffocating rules, the mindless work at the grocery store. Left it all because he had to. He wouldn't explain the rest. Just that he'd been drowning there, almost out of air.

"Hi, Connor. How are you?" Nellie tilted her head up to meet his eyes; he towered over her. She'd somehow shrunk, now barely five feet tall, as if the burdens she'd carried over sixty years had pressed her deeper into the earth, her skin browned from the sun and thirsty.

"I wanted to be sure you got my money." Connor glanced at his feet. "It's all I got."

"Now, don't you worry about paying me. What else have you eaten today, son?" So hard to see this boy struggle. But he had chosen this life, hadn't he? That's what people had said about Rico when he got sick. Nellie, too, at first. And then it was too late.

"I'll be okay, ma'am. The church is serving lunch later on. I can fill up there."

So polite, that Texas drawl, his voice stuck deep in his chest, the words strangled against his throat. Connor's black denim jacket and stained jeans hung on his thin frame like on an abandoned scarecrow. Definitely not okay. He didn't belong on the street. But how to help him get home? Or somewhere safe.

Those young men—boys, really-- on Polk Street who sold their bodies to buy food or drugs, just thinking about them distressed Nellie. How had their mothers failed? Connor was not going to become one of them. Not a hustler. No, she would not let that happen. If only she'd known how to keep her brother safe.

Maybe Connor could help in the garden. Nellie had a wheeled cart that worked well when she was alone, but he needed a purpose. Helping others always made a person feel better. Mother had said, "Good deeds earn points in heaven. God always knows your heart". Nellie carried this in her own heart, heard those words in her mother's soft voice. She had thanked God for Mother dying before her brother. No mother should have to see her son suffer so.

"Look, Connor. I need some help moving those bags of compost over to that new planter box. They're too heavy for me."

"Sure. I guess I have time." Connor's smile came so quick, so brief she'd have missed it if she hadn't been watching. "My schedule's pretty open today." His sense of humor not beaten down. Not yet anyway.

"Great." This guy needed some food in him before he did any heavy lifting. "But first I want you to taste something. I spiced up a family recipe, added some herbs I planted last month." Nellie always cooked extra food. "Tell me if you like it."

The potting shed held a tiny makeshift kitchen. One electric burner for the teakettle. A few cups and bowls, forks and spoons from home. The previous night she'd made a large pot of kari-kari, a Filipino stew, the recipe her grandmother had cooked every Sunday for the family. Beef, eggplant, onions, garlic and peanuts. A recipe so full of memories that she often ate the stew with her eyes closed, lost in time, savoring each bite, each memory.

She spooned a cupful of stew out of the thermos into a metal bowl and carried it back to Connor with the spoon. He bent down until his rear end rested on the edge of the planter box, and held the bowl close to his chest, ready to fight off scavengers. Street Life, Rule Number One: Guard your food.

Connor shoveled the food into his mouth, wolfed down big chunks of beef and eggplant one after another without a breath in between, a ferocious hunger. This boy was starving. Nellie's eyes filled.

"What flavors do you taste?" She'd used a lot of the fresh basil and tarragon that thrived in the rich soil. Who wouldn't like those flavors?

"It's good. Tastes like this special pizza I used to get back home." Connor wiped his mouth on the cuff of his jacket's sleeve. "Guess I was hungrier than I thought."

"Well, I'm glad you like it. I have too much for me. Can I give you a little more?" She smiled and offered him the container. "Please, it would be a big help. I don't want it to go to waste."

Of course he was hungry. She wanted to shake him by the shoulders, shake some sense into him. Someone needed to, and his mother was back home in Texas. Was it up to Nellie to play that role? Who was he to her anyway? Just another young man living on the street. She couldn't save them all. But maybe just one. Just this one, with those long thin

fingers like her brother. Dear God, let me help this one. She reached out and put her hand on his bony shoulder.

“Hey.” Connor’s voice broke into her prayer. He flinched. “What are you doing? Let go of me.” The metal bowl clattered against the spoon and fell into the dirt.

Oh no. His eyes wide, a flash of fury raced across his face. Nellie pulled her hand away as if she’d just touched hot coals. Connor stood up and grabbed the large trash bag of his belongings.

“Don’t ever do that. You can’t touch me.” He hoisted the bag on his shoulder and glared at Nellie, eyes raging. Then he walked away, down the littered sidewalk towards Polk Street. The trash bag thudded against his back with every step.

Nellie’s hands clenched into fists. Why had she done that, frightened him away? He’d never trust her again. So much for helping. She’d just made everything worse.

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Three days had passed since the fiasco with Connor. No sign of him. Nellie considered walking up to Polk Street, but then what? He might be out there, poised on the sidewalk, pale bait leaning against a shop window, waiting for those older men who stalked their prey like hungry hyenas, unfazed by the young men’s unwashed bodies and stained clothing. Maybe even turned on by it.

What did she have to offer instead? Would she grab him by his sleeve and haul him back to her quiet one-bedroom apartment out in the Avenues? No way. Not even for Connor. So why did she desperately want to find him, make sure he was safe? Why did she feel responsible? Maybe this was more about Rico, still trying to save him.

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On Tuesday of that week, Nellie volunteered at the Tenderloin's neighborhood senior center. The center's director, who walked past the garden on her way to work, had suggested the weekly shift. "Come share your love of gardening with our clients." Who could resist such an invitation? Besides, she'd be too busy there to worry about Connor.

Nellie had brought small decorative tin boxes she'd found at a thrift store on Clement Street. She demonstrated, then moved among the gray-headed seniors bent over tables, showed them how to use the broken clay pot pieces as hammers, to tap small nails through the boxes' thin bottoms for drainage. Only one bruised finger, a missed hit on a wobbly nail. Then the delicate heads of baby romaine tamped into each tin's soil.

"Now you can give your friend a lovely gift of lettuce," she told the group. "So much better than flowers. An edible bouquet." If only it was that simple with Connor. How do you help someone heal from those unnamed wounds? He needed more than what the garden offered.

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Another week passed with no Connor sightings. Nellie scanned the planter boxes every morning in hopes of finding a few scattered coins or even missing vegetables. But the empty Altoid tin stayed untouched, mocking her. He was gone. Maybe just a few blocks away from the garden, maybe holed up in a sleazy apartment with an older guy who fed him McDonald's burgers and soggy fries. Gave him pot and a little speed in exchange for small favors. Nellie's heart ached. Maybe he'd gone back to Texas. Maybe his life there looked better now. Or maybe not.

By the third week, Connor stalked her dreams. Images of him, alone and frightened, awakened Nellie, left her coated in sweat, out of breath. Sometimes Rico's face stared back,

his dark features juxtaposed onto Connor's thin torso. She had to look for him, no matter what she'd find. The not knowing was killing her. He had disrupted her quiet life, the routines of daily mass, the garden hours, the senior center, the cocoon of her small apartment, and now those disturbing dreams. Again.

She rode the 38 Geary bus down from the Avenues and got off at Polk Street. Her canvas tote bag bulged with several plastic containers she'd filled with non-perishable food. Cashews in one, beef jerky, peanut butter, some tangerines. If she found Connor, she'd hand him all this, a peace offering, an apology for having stepped over the line. For trying too hard to save him.

The tattoo shop sat shuttered; no one needed a new tattoo at 8 am. No sleeping bags curled on the sidewalk in front. Nellie shifted the tote bag straps to her shoulder and headed up Polk to the coffee shop, the only place open so early. A group of ragged young men huddled outside the entrance, smoking, sipping from steaming paper cups. She smelled strong coffee and something like musk. Connor was one of them. He raised his eyebrows, wide-eyed.

"Hey, Connor. I've been looking for you." Nellie studied him. His stubble had grown into a wispy blonde beard, some crumbs nestled in the hairs.

One of the other guys poked Connor in the arm.

"What the hell, man? Is she your mom? Or your grandma?" He laughed and took a long hit off his cigarette. Oh, Nellie knew that smell. They were all smoking pot, Connor too.

Connor shook his head, his mouth pulled tight.

"Are you stalking me or something?" he said. He walked away from the group and turned to face Nellie. "What are you doing here?" His pupils were dilated, huge.

Nellie's cheeks flushed.

"I was worried about you, Connor. I thought maybe you were dead." Speaking those words out loud in the cool morning air sounded ridiculous. He didn't want to hear about her dreams, the dark fantasies she couldn't shake, Rico's ravaged body those last few weeks, memories not softened by time.

"I'm fine." Connor took a hit off his joint. He looked back at the group. "I found some guys to hang with, been sleeping at the youth shelter."

"Oh, good." At least he'd been off the street. "I brought you some food. Not from the garden. Just snacks, so you don't go hungry."

She pulled the tote bag's weight off her shoulder and handed the straps to Connor. He shrugged and took the bag, looked inside.

"Sure. Not gonna turn down food." He flashed that quick smile. "But, hey. I'm doing what I want. Don't worry about me, okay?" He put the straps on his shoulder and turned. "I gotta go."

Nellie held her breath. Connor didn't want to be saved, didn't need her to fight for his life. But could she accept that? She'd failed Rico, hadn't saved him, yet here she was still trying to save someone, this young man with slender fingers and his own secrets.

"Bye." Connor nodded at her and walked back to his friends.

Nellie let out her breath. Maybe he would be okay, maybe not. Her arms ached to hug him, hold him close like a child, like her brother as he lay dying. But instead she pressed her hand against her chest, felt her heart's steady beat under her fingers. God had given her this chance to heal, to even forgive herself. The guilt she carried on her back, the suffering she'd



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imposed as penance for failing her brother, for judging him instead of comforting him while he had wasted away, was it time to let it all go? Was this God's plan for her?

A weight lifted from her thin shoulders.

“Hey, Connor, maybe stop by the garden sometime. You know, say hi.”

He looked at her, shrugged and turned back to his friends.

Nellie sighed and headed down the street towards her garden. Her mind drifted to the freshly composted vegetable box, the new growth to be planted. She could smell the basil a few blocks away, felt the moist dirt between her fingers, the many possibilities.

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