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3,800 words

Market Garden

by Chad Schepp

The crops we harvested were three days late by the time I made it home to see if Ma had the truck ready for me to borrow, and except for the watermelon whose fruit had begun to burst from the heat through a crack in its skin, nothing indicated that it wasn't all still edible. Teresa's car could only fit three wax-coated boxes for beets, carrots, and lettuce, so we left the rest at the university. The Burmese families had left everything they planted in the garden, including the tomatoes, which must be too ripe by now, their juice giving the fruit weight and pulling down the stems, waiting to be harvested. The scent of moist pine straw, the lightness of the morning air, the way that dust from the gravel driveway covered a little bit of everything, made up the character of the place, I thought, and had not been changed at all by the addition of the poultry plants in town or the immigrants.

It had been six months since I'd been home, since I sold the F-150 back to Ma when I needed money for tuition. My grades fell after I stopped attending class, and I lost my scholarship; she didn't try to hide the disappointment in her voice, and there had been an argument. Her instructions were to leave the truck in the driveway, and she would wire me the money. When she didn't come outside, despite my standing in the driveway and messaging her, I called for a taxi to the bus station. She would probably end up selling it, I thought, since she had a car already and the title was in her name. I knew I would eventually stop coming home in graduate school and wondered if I would think back to this moment often, the memory blotted by shame, standing in the driveway to sell my mother a truck she couldn't afford. Then I remembered moments from my childhood that once seemed humiliations and now seemed paltry—my best friend and neighbor growing up, Teresa, once admitted to me that my mother would corner her outside sometimes to ask her questions about my behavior away from home—and I would probably forget this too.

When I was a child, I would ride my bike with Teresa up to the highway that leads to the university. It was a difficult ride, I remembered, and as we rode closer to the highway and the trees receded, I would imagine the road was connected to some higher purpose, though now it seems any connection is gone, with just the highway circumscribing the wealth of the university before it reaches our little houses and factories sitting under their panoplies of pines and oaks. When I imagined I could have been coming home from work on a farm, maybe I could have bought a place nearby if I hadn't spent money on tuition, it was hard not to feel that I had wasted years on a future I had never considered, digging in farms where no one found jobs, researching

seeds that would eventually renew themselves somewhere away from a lab. I went to classes that held no interest for me and planned for a life in cities that held no meaning.

I stayed to continue graduate studies in agriculture, even if I didn't have complete funding, while most of the friends moved to research universities or one of the cities in the so-called New South. I would probably join them eventually since my research was in seed development, but I wasn't ready to leave the town where I grew up. It was just a few miles from the university, and I wasn't ready to be farther away than that.

I didn't expect to win my department's yearly sustainable service grant: one-thousand dollars to build a market garden on the agriculture campus and help Burmese families who had recently settled in the town, mostly farmers, plant crops to sell at the local farmer's market. It was Teresa's idea. She was doing a Ph.D. in anthropology, studying the ethnic groups of Myanmar, and working with Burmese families in town, but she needed access to the agriculture campus and farms, so we completed a joint application for an independent study. Just after New Year's, we received the money. Though the Burmese families kept separate sections of the garden, they managed to plant three one-hundred-yard lines of crops in the first month. The drip irrigation lines, seeds for the crops that grow quickly, and transplants for crops that grow slowly, the hay covering the long furrows, were all paid for by the university. Still, we were responsible for harvesting and transportation each month. Thus I found myself waiting on the porch for Teresa and hoping to get the truck. For a week, I had suffered over how I would ask Ma to borrow the truck, but I ended up sending a text. It said, "Need to use the truck for crops once a week. Not sure if you saw it. I won grant money. Sent an email."

Teresa walked on the porch, and I continued to sort through the chard that had already begun wilting from too much sun. I was ashamed that the first harvest was probably ruined, and the Burmese families wouldn't be paid yet. I heard her sucking the salt from a bowl of boiled peanuts and then sitting down on the porch swing to take in the breeze that glides down from the Appalachian plateau in northern Georgia, while the chain holding the swing strained the wooden ceiling and creaked back and forth.

"Your mom's not here," Teresa said, "She said she was taking the dogs to the river. She'll be back tonight."

"She said she would be waiting with the keys."

"Don't tell her that. She's going to be happy to see you."

"Did she say that?"

"She says if you're ever lucky enough to invent a new seed, you'll be ashamed of your home and stop coming back at all."

I knew that Ma must have been worried when I stopped coming home but didn't expect her to say I was ashamed of the place. Teresa continued to swing on the porch. Though we had grown-up in the same town—her father owned several of the townhouses on the street—I felt that she belonged more to this part of the country. Her shoes with the right amount of dust, her curly hair that she wore down with the seeming absence of any sweat, even the fit of her jeans—they were all inconspicuous in the warm light of day. Someday I would have to ask her if she wore different clothes away from the university. The impression of not belonging made me feel glad Teresa was there. We had dated in high school, but then decided we should meet new

people in college. When she shared her idea for the agriculture grant, and after we eventually won, I had wondered if we would get back together, but we hadn't talked about it.

"Do you want to check on the Burmese families? We should let them know the first payment will be late."

"We need to get to the refrigerators on campus. It's going to take a while just to load the truck."

"Your mom isn't well. Have you even talked to her?"

"Not really. She's been sending me letters."

"I don't think she likes having all the immigrants on her street."

"Why do you think that?"

I tried not to sound defensive. I stepped off the porch so that I would be looking up at Teresa.

"When I'm home, I see her in the garden," Teresa said. "But she never speaks to them, and once they come outside, she'll stop gardening and go in the house. Even if it's just the kids playing outside."

I was about to point out that adults never talked to us when we played in the street as children and that, according to the community's values, the fact that the immigrant families were always together should be something positive. Still, I knew that Teresa was aware of this. She came home every week and, at this point, knew my hometown better than I did.

Naw San's family lived in an old house down the street, one that Teresa's father owned, and we knew her the best because her English was almost perfect; she told me she used to be a consultant for business in Yangon. To communicate with the rest of the families from Myanmar,

I usually asked Naw San to share a message. All of the townhouses on the street had screened-in porches, but Naw San's was flatter and more sunk into the earth behind the decking. There was a small raised-bed garden in between a group of trees next to the driveway. The first time I saw their home-garden, it had looked so constricted and cramped, with several kinds of Burmese squash sticking out of the ground like tires, so large that flowers wouldn't even grow around them. I remembered that as a child, there had been a tire-swing between those trees, and I realized they must have replaced the tire-swing to build the garden.

The siding on the house had been replaced when the old tenants moved, but the doorbell was still the same color. Fading-cream from years of use. Teresa rang the doorbell, and I could see the carpeted living room floor and stairs through the screen door. A small boy with pillow-hair eventually pulled the door open with one jolt—he was so small that it must have taken effort—and by grabbing onto our pant legs, he led us into the apartment. Two boys in pajama pants and striped sweaters sat on the carpet, but neither of them acknowledged our presence, which was itself probably a form of kindness that adults unlearn, and they continued to play with legos. They were rebuilding what looked like a town with orchards that were half destroyed. Although they were rebuilding the lego town, they handed me a lego hammer. They didn't seem to mind, however, when I set the hammer down and worked on the trees.

On the wall, hanging next to an old clock, was a calendar written with Burmese script, though I knew from Teresa that it was a separate Karen language, their ethnic minority in Myanmar. I walked past a loom for weaving and leaned on a plastic table holding bulk-sized bags of basmati rice. Naw San greeted us from the kitchen. I hadn't noticed her since the light was turned off in the kitchen behind the living room. She carried noodles and roasted potatoes on

plates to eat on the living room floor. While eating, the children continued to play, and there was a long silence, although it wasn't uncomfortable, since eating can feel like respect. I mentioned that the first harvest might not be sold at the market since we were having transportation issues.

"Don't worry," Naw San replied. "The men are at work all day, so most of us are happy just to be out of the house. Those of us with cars. The children like being outside more too."

"Those with cars?" I asked.

"Most families only have one car, and the men use it to drive to work at the chicken plants. The women carpool to the garden."

"Garden," one of the boys repeated, showing us the lego-garden he finished building.

"And can I ask," I began. "What happened to the tire swing that used to be next to the house?"

"The branch was not safe," she said. "And we're all farmers anyway. We needed a garden at home."

Teresa looked through the pile of books on the floor and found an English textbook she used with her research. She read a few of the vocabulary sets out loud and signaled that she wanted the children to repeat the words by pointing to her mouth and then signing a loop with her finger. As they repeated the exercise, I noticed that they had begun copying her intonation and pitch, not only the words themselves, as her voice role or fell on certain words, creating a kind of harmony when they pronounced several words in a row correctly and then a dissonance when they struggled to say a difficult word, as if they were singing the words.

As we were leaving, Naw San took a seed packet for Burmese squash out of her pocket. It was the third seed packet she had given me, not to mention those planted in the garden. What

had they left behind while traveling here, I wondered, first in Thai refugee camps before coming to Georgia, all while filling their bags with seeds? It wasn't even that the fruit latent in the seeds, an embryo inside a husk, would grow to be anything outside of familiar experience. But rather, I wondered if it was the emotion caused by the seeds that served some purpose. Inhibition can vanish with the sudden thought of an image, an afternoon sowing in good or rocky soil, a seed being eaten by birds, a vine curling around a fence, even if the image only lasts a moment. In any case, the seeds they brought with them must mean more than I can know.

We walked together back to Ma's house. I heard a bullfrog call from the creek behind the houses and thought about the sounds that only exist outside of campus. Teresa mentioned that there was a crawfish boil tonight at the agricultural college. We would be late, but it was right next to the garden, so it would be easy to go, once we were finished composting the old crops and saving what we could.

"How long will your mom let you keep the truck?" Teresa asked.

"We haven't talked about it, but I'm sure I can keep it tonight."

"What happened between you two?"

"We haven't talked much since the election. We argued a lot before."

"Why doesn't she just give you money instead of buying the truck and never using it?"

"She believes that after you turn eighteen, you're on your own. Something about life being full of scarcity."

Further down the street, I could see the porch light on and could already smell the citronella candles Ma kept on the porch. I could see the screen door opening and that Ma was

putting on one of the oversized cardigans she liked to wear outside. She must have seen us coming.

"I've been waiting for y'all," she said while she hugged Teresa.

"We've been with the Burmese families," I said. "We had to tell them the crops won't be ready."

"You should have told me you needed the truck sooner."

I tried to smile but couldn't. Teresa and Ma sat on the swing while I leaned on the railing.

"That's what I tell him," Teresa said. "They made us clear out the fridge last week. We can't sell the crops now, so we're finding a way to gather them all together. We can compost the majority and then save a few boxes for the families."

"I hope they're ready for work in that big university garden," Ma said.

"Why don't you talk to them more often?" I said. "They live just down the street."

"Yes, I knew you'd find a way to criticize," Ma replied. "Would either of you like tea or coffee?"

"Criticize," I repeated, looking away toward the street. "Don't you think it would be nice to know your neighbors?"

"Your Ma is letting us use the truck," Teresa said. "I think that shows she wants to help."

Ma didn't seem to hear Teresa.

"You don't know what you're accusing me of," Ma said. "And by the way, maybe you can tell those families that they should ask before destroying any more property?"

"What property? They're renting the house now." I said.

"The tire-swing,' she replied. "They tore it down without even asking."

"The branch was probably about to fall."

"Oh, nonsense. That thing mattered to me." Ma said.

"It was falling apart anyway."

"That's what you think? Even if you have no loyalty to me or this town, I used to look at that tire-swing our neighbors built and think about you as a child. How I used to laugh and watch you spend hours there swinging and talking to yourself."

"I don't think they meant any harm," Teresa said.

"How would he even know when he hasn't come home in ages?" Ma said.

She didn't raise her voice, but I recognized her sarcasm as a kind of anger.

"I know the town could do more to help the immigrants, but it's not easy," Ma said. "We don't speak their language, but we try. He'll move to a big segregated city and tell them he left a backwater town."

"We just need the truck, Ma."

"Exactly," Ma said. "Just keep asking me for help. Keep asking for help."

Ma handed the keys to Teresa and went inside. I could see the light turn on in the kitchen and knew that she would be sitting alone at the table. Teresa and I put most of the old crops in a trash bag for composting and put the rest of the boxes in the truck bed. Teresa drove separately in her car, and I took the truck, past the Burmese families; some of the children were playing soccer outside, and we drove to the agricultural campus.

After picking up beer on the way, we realized that it was after ten, and most of the food would be eaten if anyone was still there. Nonetheless, we could see lights on and picnic tables still outside the lab building, and so we parked inside the metal gates that were left open for the

crawfish boil. As we walked together, I was glad I hadn't put my arm around her or reached for her hand. I decided that if she wanted something with me, then she would find a way to let me know.

The crawfish, a brighter red than I remembered, had already been taken out of the metal vats and spread on the vinyl tablecloths with potatoes and corn cobs. I recognized the fried okra from the previous week's harvest. There was one small bag of crawfish uncooked on the table, and I noticed that a few of them were trying to break out of the red fishing net's gaunt lining. I thought of Ma making me wear gloves while picking okra to protect my skin from the barbs, despite the Georgia heat, or showing me how to take the crawfish apart and pull out the entrails as a child, and though I didn't like the taste, the ritual of the shells added to a sense of spectacle.

Most of the department had already eaten and was now touring the plots for berry bushes that would take several years to produce fruit. Still holding the unopened beer, Teresa and I introduced ourselves to a graduate student we didn't know and apologized for being so late. He asked if we were both from Atlanta. Teresa seemed uninterested in talking but managed to inform him that there were small towns around the university and even people who lived there. As Teresa was speaking, I realized by her way of looking at him, confident, and familiar though she had never met him, that it must have been a joke for me. He laughed and admitted that, embarrassingly, he hadn't met anyone from the rural areas around the university. He seemed annoyed and walked away from us. We didn't think anyone else had noticed our presence, and Teresa suggested we leave and walk with the beers to the market garden down the road.

One of the families must have left the wheelbarrow and the tiller out next to the Burmese crops, and so we put everything back and started mixing the rotting vegetables with the

composting. The night was warm, and Teresa's arms were bare since she had removed her jacket. I told her she would be cold, but she said she wasn't, and instead, she felt like working. The squash were almost overgrown, and to prevent them from stymying the new fruit, we took pruners and gloves and, with a bucket in the furrow between us, began to prune and harvest. The light on the rows of squash blossoms was beautiful, and there were moments when I wanted to kiss Teresa or take her home, but she only met my eyes, and I couldn't decide what she was thinking. We finished, I think it must have been around an hour later, and we packed the squash in crates and made room in the industrial fridge next to the other crops we had salvaged. We noticed that the gate had been shut, and everyone had left. They must not have seen the truck since we had parked away from the lights. We took the rest of the beers out of the fridge and sat on the hay, covering a row of transplants. I was hungry and wished we had taken some food with us, but I was equally tired. Teresa laid her head on my chest, and then we slept.

In the morning, covered in hay, I woke up to a text message from Ma. "I don't like how you spoke to me yesterday, but I'm sorry that happened in front of Teresa," it said. "Please bring the truck back today. Love, Ma."

Without light, the previous evening, Teresa and I left several hand pruners and buckets out, which would rust if we didn't clean them, and I began to search for a rag in the old shed. Teresa told me she would make sure things were better organized for transporting the harvest next month, even if she had to rent a truck herself. She suggested we get coffee on campus, but I told her I wanted some time alone in the garden. I wasn't tired. I wanted to tell Ma about the fried okra and the crawfish. The truck was Ma's gift to me when I started at the university, and it was difficult to imagine that it now was causing conflict between us. Nothing else needed to be

planted, but I found the packet of Burmese squash in my pocket and carried them to a row the families had tilled but only half planted. We thought there wouldn't be much demand for Burmese squash at the market. I put my hands into the cold earth, with ease I had learned from gardening as a child, and buried each seed.