

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



"Captivating... By turns edgy, moving, and hilarious, *Farm City* marks the debut of a striking new voice in American writing."—MICHAEL POLLAN, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*

FARM CITY



THE EDUCATION
OF AN URBAN FARMER
NOVELLA CARPENTER

CHAPTER ONE



I have a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto.

My back stairs are dotted with chicken turds. Bales of straw come undone in the parking area next to my apartment. I harvest lettuce in an abandoned lot. I awake in the mornings to the sounds of farm animals mingled with my neighbor's blaring car alarm.

I didn't always call this place a farm. That didn't happen until the spring of 2005, when a very special package was delivered to my apartment and changed everything. I remember standing on my deck, waiting for it. While scanning the horizon for the postal jeep, I checked the health of my bee colony. Honeybees buzzed in and out of the hive, their hind legs loaded down with yellow pollen. I caught a whiff of their honey-making on the breeze, mixed with the exhaust from the nearby freeway. I could see the highway, heavy with traffic, from the deck.

I noticed that three bees had fallen into a watering can. As their wings sent out desperate ripples along the water, I broke off a twig from a potted star jasmine and offered it to the drowning insects. One bee clambered onto the stick and clung to it as I transported her to the top of the hive. The next bee did the same—she held fast to the twig like a passenger gone overboard, clutching a lifesaver. Safe atop the hive, the two soggy bees opened their wings to the morning sunlight. Once dry and warm, they would be able to fly again.

Just to see what would happen, I lifted the final rescuee to the entrance of the hive instead of the top. A guard bee stomped out from the dark recesses of the brood box. There's always one on vigil for disturbances, armed and ready to sting. As the guard bee got closer to the wet one I braced myself for a brutal natural history lesson.

The waterlogged bee started to right herself as she waved a soggy antenna. Another guard bee joined the first, and together they probed the wet bee. She couldn't have smelled of their hive anymore, which is how most bees recognize one another. Nonetheless, the guards began to lick her dry.

"Hey! Hey!" a voice yelled.

I peered down to the end of our dead-end street.

A new car, a silver Toyota Corolla, had arrived on 28th Street the night before, probably the victim of a joyride—Corollas are notoriously easy to start without a key. Local teenagers steal them and drive around until they run out of gas. Already the car had lost one wheel. By nightfall, I predicted, it would be stripped completely.

Amid the jumble of abandoned cars and trash and the shiny Toyota Corolla, I made out the figure of the man who was yelling. He waved vigorously. Bobby.

"Morning, sir!" I called and saluted him. He saluted back.

Bobby lived in an immobilized car. He switched on his television, which was mounted on top of one of the other abandoned cars. An orange extension cord snaked from a teal-colored house at the end of the block. The perky noise of Regis and Kathie Lee joined the sound of the nearby traffic and the clattering trundle of the San Francisco Bay Area's subway, BART, which runs aboveground next to the highway.

Just then, a monk came out of the Buddhist monastery across the street from my house and brought Bobby a snack. The monks will feed anyone who is hungry. Next to the fountain in their courtyard there's a giant alabaster statue of a placid-faced lady riding a dragon: Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion. My bees loved to drink from the lotus-flower-filled fountain. I often watched their golden bodies zoom across 28th Street, at the same height as the power lines, then swoop down behind the temple's red iron gates.

The monk who handed Bobby a container of rice and vegetables was female, dressed in pale purple robes, her head shaved. Bobby took the food and shoved it into a microwave plugged in next to the television set. Nuked his breakfast.

I heard the clattering sound of a shopping cart. A can scrounger. Wearing a giant Chinese wicker hat and rubber gloves and carrying a pair of

tongs, she opened our recycling bin and started fishing around for cans. She muttered to herself in Chinese, "Ay-ya."

I watched as Bobby jogged over to her. I had never seen him run before. "Get out of here," he growled. His territory. She shook her head as if to say she didn't understand and continued fishing. Bobby butted her with his belly. "I said *get*," he yelled. She scurried away, pulling her cart after her. Bobby watched her retreat.

Then, when she was almost around the corner, as if he felt bad, Bobby put his hands to his mouth and yelled, "I'll see you at the recycling center!" Just a few blocks away, the center paid cash by the pound for metal. Chuckling to himself, Bobby glanced up at me on the deck and flashed me a mostly toothless smile.

This place, this ghetto of Oakland, California, brings out the best and the worst in us.

Bored of waiting around outside, I headed back inside my apartment. A fly strip dangled from the ceiling, and ripped feed bags piled up near the door. A black velour couch my boyfriend and I found in the street sagged in the corner.

I guess the neighborhood brings out the best and worst in me, too. Sure, my chickens lay eggs—but the flock has spawned an occasional rooster that crowed loudly and often, starting at 4 a.m. Bees do result in honey and wax and better pollination—but they have also stung people from time to time. The garden: verdant cornucopia on one hand, rodent-attracting breeding ground on the other.

I flopped onto the couch and read the chalkboard tally that hung near the door:

4 chickens

30,000 bees [approximately]

59 flies

2 monkeys [me and my boyfriend, Bill]

That tally was about to change.

A long-debunked scientific theory states that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” Basically that means that the order of development in an embryo indicates its evolutionary development—for example, a human embryo first looks like a fish because we evolved from fish. When Bill and I first moved from Seattle to Oakland, I was reminded of that theory, because somehow we ended up re-creating our old life in the exact same order as we had created it in Seattle. The first year in Oakland, we built the garden; the second year, we got the honeybees and then the chickens. In this, our third year of development, it was time to evolve to the next level.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched through the window as the postal jeep turned down our street and pulled to a stop in front of our house. A man dressed in wool shorts hopped out, holding an air-hole-riddled box in his arms. I bounded downstairs. My neighbor Mr. Nguyen, who lived one floor below me, was sitting outside on the porch, smoke and steam from his morning cigarette and Vietnamese coffee wafting up together in the crisp spring air. In his sixties, Mr. Nguyen dyed his graying hair black, wore button-down dress shirts, and was surprisingly sprightly. He set down his coffee, stubbed out his cigarette, and walked into the street with me to receive the package.

The postal worker made me sign an official-looking piece of paper before he would hand me the box. It peeped when I opened it.

It was filled with puff balls. Fuzzy yellow ducklings called out desperately with their orange bills. Long-necked goslings squawked, and fluffy multicolored chicks peeped. Three odd-looking chicks with an unattractive pimple of skin atop their heads gazed up quietly from the box.

The delivery guy shook his head in disbelief. I could tell he had questions. Were we not in the city? Wasn't downtown Oakland only ten blocks away? Who is this insane woman? Is this even legal? But years of working for the government had, perhaps, deadened his curiosity. He didn't look me in the eye. He didn't make a sound. He just jumped back into his postal jeep and drove away.

Mr. Nguyen giggled. For the last few years he had happily observed—

and participated in—my rural-urban experiments. He knew poultry when he saw it: he had been a farmer in Vietnam before enlisting to help the Americans during the war. “Oh, yes, baby chicks,” he said. “Ducks.” He pointed a cigarette-stained finger at each species. “Goose.” His finger paused at the pimpled heads. He looked at me for a hint.

“Baby turkeys?” I guessed. I had never seen a baby turkey either.

Mr. Nguyen raised his eyebrows.

“Gobble-gobble. Thanksgiving?”

“Oh, yes!” he said, remembering with a smile. Then he grimaced. “My wife make one time.”

“Was it good?” I asked. I knew that his wife, Lee, was a vegetarian; she must have made an exception for Thanksgiving.

Mr. Nguyen shook his head vigorously. “No, tough. Too tough. Very bad.” I thought he might spit.

I closed the lid, and the peeping stopped. Mr. Nguyen went back into his apartment, returning to the blare of a Vietnamese-language television show.

In the middle of 28th Street, I held the box of poultry and waterfowl. The abandoned ghetto where we lived had a distinct Wild West vibe—gunfights in the middle of the day, a general state of lawlessness, and now this: livestock.

I glanced at the invoice connected to the box: “Murray McMurray Hatchery,” it read. “1 Homesteader’s Delight.” I didn’t think about it at the time, but looking back on it, I realize that “Homesteader’s Delight” does have a rather ominous ring to it.

Every second-rate city has an identity complex. Oakland is no different. It’s always trying to be more arty, more high-tech, more clean than it is able.

O-Town is surrounded by overachievers. The famously liberal (and plush) Berkeley lies to the north. The high-tech mecca of Silicon Valley glimmers to the south. Just eight miles west via the Bay Bridge is San Francisco—so close, but the polar opposite of Oakland. SF is filled with successful, polished people; Oakland is scruffy, loud, unkempt.

I've always chosen uncool places to live. I guess it's because I was born in Idaho, rivaling only Ohio as the most disregarded state in the union. Then I lived in a logging town in Washington State whose big claim to fame was a satanic cult. By the time I moved to Seattle (living in the boring Beacon Hill neighborhood), the uncool, the unsavory, had become my niche. When I went traveling and someone warned me—speaking in low tones, a snarl to her lips—not to go to Croatia or Chiapas or Brooklyn, I tended to add the place to my itinerary immediately.

"Whatever you do, don't go to Oakland," a stocking-cap-clad guy at a Seattle barbecue told me when I confessed that I was going to check out the Bay Area on a long road trip/quest to find a new place to live. I made a mental note to check it out.

Bill and I took three months to explore the candidates. At his insistence, we brought our cat. Bill's a tough-looking guy, with shaggy hair and a strut like he's got two watermelons under his arms. His voice is Tom Waits gravel from years of smoking. He might resemble a Hells Angel, but he's really just a love sponge who spends a great deal of time cuddling with our cat. We hit all the cities we thought we might like to live in: Portland (too perfect). Austin (too in the middle of Texas). New Orleans (too hot). Brooklyn (too little recycling). Philly and Chicago (too cold).

But Oakland—Oakland was just right. The weather was lovely, a never-ending spring. There was recycling and a music scene. But what really drove me and Bill away from the clean and orderly Seattle and into the arms of Oakland was its down-and-out qualities. The faded art deco buildings. The dive bars. Its citizenry, who drove cars as old and beat-up as ours.

Because of inexperience and a housing shortage, Bill and I wound up sharing a ramshackle house in the Oakland hills with a pack of straight-edge vegan anarchists. They wore brown-black clothes, had earth names like Rotten, and liked to play violent computer games in large groups in the common room. Sober.

At first I thought it was cute that anarchists had rules. No alcohol. No dairy products. No meat. Then the paradox started to chafe.

Forced by the strict house regulations, Bill and I would have to rendezvous in our travel-worn van in order to take nips off a contraband bottle of wine, gorge ourselves on banned cheese products, and remember the good old days when we oppressed chickens in our backyard in Seattle. And we plotted our uprising.

One night I unearthed an apartment listing on Craigslist that would set us free. I found it during video game night at the house, surrounded by a pack of anarchists in our living room. While they fired imaginary guns on their computer screens, I clandestinely scanned the ad for the apartment. It was reasonably priced and in downtown Oakland. Feeling subversive, we went for a tour the next day.

The first thing we noticed when we came down from the verdant hills into the flatlands—also known as the lower bottoms—was the dearth of trees. Gray predominated. Bill drove, his coffee brown eyes nervously scanning the scene. We passed one green space huddled under a network of connecting on-ramps. A basketball court, some shrubs. It was called Marcus Garvey Park. No one was there, even on an early summer day.

What was happening was liquor stores. Captain Liquor. Brothers Market. S and N. One after another. The surrounding restaurants were mostly fast-food chains: a Taco Bell, Carl's Jr., Church's Chicken. One variety store caught my eye. Its handmade sign used no words, just images: a pair of dice, socks, eggs, toilet paper. Life's necessities. It reminded me of the little roadside *tiendas* in Mexico. It was the third world embedded in the first.

The houses, though dilapidated, had clearly once been lovely homes: elaborate Victorians next to Spanish Mission bungalows, Craftsman cottages, and vintage brick apartment buildings. They were chipped, charred, unpainted, crumbling. Beautiful neglect.

As we cruised the neighborhood we took stock of our potential neighbors. A man wearing a head scarf was singing as he swept garbage out of the gutter in front of his liquor store. A group of old men sat in lawn chairs in front of their apartment building. A blond woman with scabs on her face limped along the street, pausing to ask for spare change from the young

black kids on the corner. The kids wore enormous white T-shirts and saggy pants; they counted their bills and stood in the middle of traffic, waving small plastic bags at prospective customers. Clearly a rough crowd.

All these people out on the street—they were characters I had never met in Seattle, or in our more suburban house in the Oakland hills. I was curious, and yet I had to admit it: they scared me. Could I really live here? Walk around the streets without worrying about getting mugged?

The place was a postcard of urban decay, I thought as we turned down 28th Street. Cheetos bags somersaulted across the road. An eight-story brick building on the corner was entirely abandoned and tattooed with graffiti. Living here would definitely mean getting out of my comfort zone.

We came to a stop in front of a gray 1905 Queen Anne. Like almost every other house in the Bay Area, it had been divided into apartments. The place for rent was the upstairs portion of the duplex. Bill and I surveyed the house. The paint was peeling; a bougainvillea sagged in the side yard. It was a dead-end street, stopping at what was once the grass playground of an elementary school.

Bill pointed out that a dead-end street is a quiet street. He had once lived on one in Orlando and got to know all his neighbors. It made things intimate, he said. Just then, a dazzling woman with cropped platinum hair and platform boots peeked out of her metal warehouse door and beckoned us over to her end of the street.

"My name's Lana," she said. "Anal spelled backward." Bill and I exchanged looks. She stood behind her chain-link fence, a 155-pound mas-tiff at her side. A robed Buddhist monk emerged from the house next door. He and Lana waved. He disarmed his car alarm—the danger of the 'hood trumps even karma—and drove away. Lana gazed at the retreating car and said, "The old monk used to make me bitter-melon soup when I was sick."

Lana told us, in her high, funny voice, that she had lived on "the 2-8" for fifteen years. "It's not bad now," she assured us. "A few years ago, though, I had people running over my roof, firing machine guns. Now it's like Sesame Street." She shook her head.

Lana then pointed at each of the houses and described its inhabitants: a

white family she called the Hillbillies in the teal house, a black mom with two kids in the stucco duplex, an apartment house filled with Vietnamese families who wanted to live near the temple. An abandoned building with a sometime squatter. An empty warehouse that no one knew much about. As we took leave of Lana she invited us to Blue Wednesday, a salon for artists and performers she held every week.

"She seems interesting," I said as we walked back to get our tour of the apartment. Our landlords had arrived in their gold BMW.

"We should move in," Bill said, running his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. He didn't even need to see the apartment.

Our soon-to-be landlords were an African couple with socialist tendencies. They led us upstairs for a tour of the bright little apartment. Hardwood floors. A tile-lined fireplace. A backyard. A living room with a view of a 4,500-square-foot lot filled with four-foot-tall weeds. The landlords didn't know who owned the lot, but they guessed that, whoever they were, they wouldn't mind if we gardened there. We gaped at the enormous space. It had an aspect that would guarantee full sun all day. In Seattle we tended what we thought was a big backyard vegetable garden, but this lot—it was massive by our standards. It sealed the deal.

Bill and I grinned on our way back to our hovel in the hills with the vegan anarchists, still giddy from too much California sunshine and the prospect of a new home.

A few weeks later, when we moved into our new apartment, we discovered that our neighborhood was called GhostTown, for all its long-abandoned businesses, condemned houses, and overgrown lots. The empty lot next to our house was not rare: there was one, sometimes two, on every block. And through the vacant streets rolled GhostTown tumbleweeds: the lost hair-pieces of prostitutes. Tumbleweaves.

The day we moved into GhostTown, a man was shot and killed outside a Carl's Jr. restaurant a few blocks away. We drove past the crime scene—yellow caution tape, a white sheet with a pair of bare feet poking out. We heard on the radio that Oakland had been named number one—it had the highest murder rate in the country. When we drove by later, the body was

gone and the business of selling hamburgers and soda had resumed. That night, the not-so-distant crack of gunfire kept me up.

Because of the violence, the neighborhood had a whiff of anarchy—real anarchy, not the theoretical world of my former roommates. In the flatlands, whole neighborhoods were left with the task of sorting out their problems. Except in the case of murder, the Oakland police rarely got involved. In this laissez-faire environment, I would discover as I spent more time in Ghost-Town, anything went. Spanish-speaking soccer players hosted ad hoc tournaments in the abandoned playfield. Teenagers sold bags of marijuana on the corners. The Buddhist monks made enormous vats of rice on the city sidewalk. Bill eventually began to convert our friends' cars to run on vegetable oil. And I started squat gardening on land I didn't own.

As I fiddled with the door to our apartment, the new box of fowl tucked under my arm, I recognized that I was descending deeper into the realm of the underground economy. Now that I had been in California for a few years, I felt ready for what seemed like the next logical progression, something I had never dared in the soggy Northwest.

Meat birds.

I felt a bit nuts, yes, but I also felt great. People move to California to reinvent themselves. They give themselves new names. They go to yoga. Pretty soon they take up surfing. Or Thai kickboxing. Or astral healing. Or witch camp. It's true what they say: California, the land of fruits and nuts.

In Northern California one is encouraged to raise his freak flag proudly and often. In Seattle my mostly hidden freak flag had been being a backyard chicken owner, beekeeper, and vegetable gardener. I got off on raising my own food. Not only was it more delicious and fresh; it was also essentially free.

Now I was taking it to the next level. Some might say I had been swept up by the Bay Area's mantra, repeated ad nauseam, to eat fresh, local, free-range critters. At farmer's markets here—and there is one every day—it isn't uncommon to overhear farmers chatting with consumers about how

the steer from which their steaks were “harvested” had been fed, where their stewing hens ranged, and the view from the sheep pen that housed the lamb that was now ground up and laid out on a table decorated with nasturtium blossoms. Prices correspond with the quality of the meat, and Alice Waters assures us that only the best ingredients will make the best meals. But as a poor scrounger with three low-paying jobs and no health insurance, I usually couldn’t afford the good stuff.

Since I liked eating quality meat and have always had more skill than money, I decided to take matters into my own hands. One night, after living in our GhostTown apartment for a few years, I clicked my mouse over various meat-bird packages offered by the Murray McMurray Hatchery Web site. Murray McMurray sold day-old ducks, quail, pheasants, turkeys, and geese through the mail. They also sold bargain-priced combinations: the Barnyard Combo, the Fancy Duck Package, the Turkey Assortment.

These packages, I had thought, might offer a way to eat quality meat without breaking the bank. But I had never killed anything before. Blithely ignoring this minor detail, I settled on the Homesteader’s Delight: two turkeys, ten chickens, two geese, and two ducks for \$42.

I bought my poultry package with a click of the mouse and paid for it with a credit card. It was only after the post office delivered the box that I realized one can’t just buy a farm animal like a book or CD. What I now held in my hands was going to involve a hell of a lot of hard work.

My first task was to install the birds in a brooder, a warm place where they could live without fear of catching cold or encountering predators. I carried the box o’ birds upstairs and set it next to the brooder I had hastily built the night before. “Built” might be a strong word—my brooder was a cardboard box lined with shredded paper, with a heat lamp suspended above it and a homemade waterer inside.

The hatchery advised that the chicks would be thirsty from their twenty-four-hour journey in a box. So the first order of the day was to dip the birds’ beaks into a dish of water and teach them to drink on their own.

I picked up my first victim, a little yellow chick covered in a soft, downy fuzz, and held her tiny pink beak up to the homemade waterer. It consisted

of a mason jar with tiny holes drilled into the lid; when the jar was turned upside down into a shallow dish, capillary action allowed only a bit of water to dribble out and pool in the dish. Amazingly, the chick knew just what to do. She sipped up a beakful of water, then tilted her head back to swallow. The mason-jar waterer glugged, and more water seeped out.

I released her into the cardboard-box brooder, and she wandered over for another sip of water. Then she realized she was alone. She peeped and stumbled around the shredded newspaper looking for her companions. The fowl still in the postal box, strangely silent since I'd placed it on the living room floor, suddenly went wild when they heard her peeps.

So I reached into the box for another chick and worked quickly. Without fail, each victim peeped in distress. The others then chirped in solidarity. All ten finally installed, the chicks quieted down. Exhausted from their journey and my manhandling, they mounded into a fluffy pile under the circle of warm light and took a nap.

Bill stumbled out of our bedroom wearing his boxer shorts, his hair mussed. Not a morning person, he glanced at the baby birds like they were a dream, then headed for the bathroom.

While the chicks slept, I had to educate the dim little turkey poults. They looked like the chicks but with bigger bones and that strange pucker of skin on top of their heads, which I later learned would develop into a turkey part called the snood. Their demeanor was reminiscent of chicks that had done too much acid.

It took the first turkey poult three firm dunkings before it got the hang of drinking water. The poult resisted when I put its beak into the dish, craning its head away, struggling in my hand like a hellcat. Finally, exhausted from struggling, its head went lax and drooped until it dropped into the water dish, where it discovered—surprise!—water, and drank greedily. The other two (the hatchery had sent me an extra poult and an extra duckling, probably as insurance against death by mail) were no different. After I released them, the poults poked around the brooder, gentle and cautious. Eventually they waddled over and joined the puff pile of chicks.

The downy, almost weightless ducklings and goslings drank deeply,

using their bills to slurp up large amounts of water. When I set them into the brooder, they waded their big orange feet into the water dish and splashed around. Water hit the side of the box and splattered the sleeping chicks, who awoke and began to peep in protest. Sensing that this might be a disastrous species intersection, I lugged out an aluminum washtub and set up a separate brooder with extra water, a towel, and a bright warm light for the waterfowl.

The baby birds were home, warm and safe. The chicks scratched at their yellow feed just like our big chickens out back did. Sometimes they would stop midscratch and, feeling the warmth of the brooder light, fall asleep standing up. The puffy gray goslings curled their necks around the yellow sleeping ducklings. A Hallmark card had exploded in my living room.

I called my mom. A brooder box full of fowl was something that woman could appreciate. She had once been a hippie homesteader in Idaho.

"Listen to this," I said, and held the phone near the brooder box. A hundred little peeps.

"Oh my god," she said.

"Three turkeys, three ducks, two geese, and ten chickens," I crowed. I watched the chicks and poults moving around the brooder—pooping, scratching, pooping, pecking, pooping.

"Turkeys! Do you remember Tommy Turkey?" she said.

I didn't, but the photo in our family album had stuck with me: my older sister, Riana, in a saggy cloth diaper being chased by the advancing figure of a giant white turkey. Tommy. My mom told us about Tommy every time we got out the old photo album from the ranch days.

"Well, he was mean as hell, and he would chase you guys. . . ."

I looked out the window while my mom described the smokehouse she and my dad had built. Bill had made it downstairs, where he was out front tinkering with our car. His legs peeked out from underneath our dilapidated Mercedes as he rolled around amid the street's numerous Swisher Sweet cigar butts. I had warned him about my meat-bird purchase, and he had been excited about the prospect of homegrown meat, but now that he saw the baby birds—fragile, tiny—he seemed a bit skeptical.

Tommy grew to be an enormous size, my mom said, and as back-to-the-land hippies, she and my dad had been very pleased. They didn't encounter any predator problems that year, and butchering him was a cinch. But disaster did hit: the smokehouse burned to the ground while they were smoking the turkey.

"Oh, no," I groaned.

"Life was like that," she said glumly. I felt sorry for her. My mom's stories usually involve some heroic hippie farm action. I hadn't heard this part of the story before, but I knew bad things had happened. My parents' marriage had dissolved on the ranch in Idaho, after all—my dad too much the mountain man, an uncompromising nonconformist; my mom isolated and bored.

Her voice brightened. "Even though the smokehouse burned down, we did manage to salvage the turkey."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We dug through the charred wood, and there it was, a perfectly cooked turkey. I brushed off all the cinders and served him for dinner." She paused and smacked her lips, a noise that was repellent to me as a teenager but now filled me with hope. "It was the best turkey I've ever had," she declared. We said our goodbyes, and I hung up the phone.

I glanced into the cozy chick brooder. The chicks slept on their mattress of shredded pages from the *New York Times*. Their fuzzy bodies slumbered on snatches of color ads for watches, a stern op-ed about pollution in China, the eyebrows of a politician. I had to remind myself that though they were cute, these baby birds would eventually become my dinner. Thanksgiving, in particular, was going to be intense. I imagined the killing scene: a butcher block, an ax, three giant Tommy turkeys I had known since poulthood. I wasn't sure if I could bring myself to do it.

But the conversation with my mom left me emboldened for my foray into killing and eating animals I had raised myself—this urge was clearly part of my cultural DNA. I wondered if this would prove that I could have it both ways: to sop up the cultural delights of the city while simultaneously raising my own food. In retrospect, though, I wonder why I thought my experience would be any less disastrous than my parents'.

The next day, following the suggestions of a homesteading book from the 1970s, I swabbed the baby birds' butts with Q-tips. The long flight in a box can cause digestion problems for the chicks—namely, pasted vents. Which is a fancy way of saying blocked buttholes. So I dutifully wetted them down, plucked dried matter from their bottoms, and felt terrible when I had to tug off whole chunks of downy feathers. I wasn't satisfied until all their parts looked pink and healthy.

After morning chicken-butt detail, I sat in my kitchen and surveyed our squat garden. All the east-facing windows of our apartment overlook the lot, which after the past few years had been transformed into a vegetable and fruit-tree garden. I could see that the collards were getting large and that the spring's lettuce harvest promised to be a good one. Even from inside, I could see some mildew forming on the pea vines.

It was going to be a remarkable year; I could sense it. If my life in Oakland was a developing embryo, with this meat-bird addition, it was as if a fishlike creature had suddenly sprouted wings.

CHAPTER TWO



The garden—squat, verdant—started small, and in fits and starts. When we moved into the apartment on 28th Street, Bill and I halfheartedly painted our walls and hung some curtains. Then we started in on the lot, the real reason we had picked the apartment. We spent days hacking back the four-foot-tall weeds that had taken over, revealing a cracked concrete foundation where a house had once been and a large, circular patch of dirt.

Before we planted anything, just to be safe, I had the soil tested by a friend with an environmental-services lab. The lot being so close to the freeway, the lead from years of gas exhaust might have drifted down. Or other toxins from the house could have leached into the ground. Our friend called with good news: the soil was, miraculously, heavy-metal free.

The day after getting the green light, I stood in the lot, trying to get my nerve up to garden. I was having a tough time getting used to the idea of cultivating land that was not my own. Cutting down weeds was one thing, but planting seeds?

As I stood immobilized, our new neighbor Lana, dressed in patent-leather combat boots and a miniskirt, stomped into the now cleared-out lot. Everything about Lana was theatrical: expressive hazel eyes, a gap-toothed smile, and a platinum crew cut that matched the color of the fallen weeds. "Look at this!" she shouted. She held two shovels in her strong arms.

"There's a patch of dirt here," I said, showing her where the yard to the house may have been. Even though she had never gardened before, Lana set to work with enthusiasm. I was glad to follow along. Her dog, Oscar, sniffed at the piles of dead weeds and did a little digging himself. Gentle for such

a large dog. We dug out a small area, unearthing rusty toy cars, submerged bricks, and glass bottles.

"Do you remember He-Man?" Lana asked, wagging an action figure in front of my face. The toy had big muscles and a bowl haircut but had been drained entirely of any color. Lana put He-Man and all the other toys she found in a small section of the garden.

I had been reading a book from the library called *Gaia's Garden*. It was a permaculture guide to gardening that promised I could create an easy-to-maintain, no-work food forest if I just followed the instructions. Plans were included for something called a keyhole garden: a series of pathways cut into a circular bed—which is what we happened to have. So Lana and I set to work.

After a few hours, we had finally cleared enough space to plant some seeds. Just before I ripped open the packet of corn, Lana alerted me to a problem. "Ah, Novella," she said, wiping sweat from her brow, "is this supposed to be in the shape of . . . ?" She trailed off.

"What?" I said, still unsure about Lana. My fingernails were caked with soil.

Lana laughed a big, booming cackle. "It's like a crop circle," she said.

Then I saw what she was talking about: following the ditzzy plan, I hadn't realized that we had built a garden in the shape of an enormous peace sign, which, viewed from the heavens, might be some kind of hippie signal to the aliens.

I was horrified.

"Oh my god," I said. "Glad you pointed that out." I erased one of the pathways with a few shovelfuls of dirt so that the peace sign became more like a Mercedes-Benz emblem. Leave the peace sign to followers of the Dead and wearers of tie dye, to my hippie parents' generation. Even though Lana and I were vegetable gardening, we wanted to be clear with each other—especially so early in our friendship—that we were *not*, in fact, hippies.

As Lana watched I tucked a few kernels of corn into the dark clay soil, feeling strangely shy. I wasn't used to being a squat-garden rebel, though

on an intellectual level the idea of squatting, of taking possession of something unused and living rent free, had always held a certain appeal for me. In college I read about the Diggers (also called the True Levellers) in seventeenth-century England, who squatted in houses and planted vegetables on public land. In 1649, a scroungy group of men gathered at a small town southwest of London to plant corn and wheat on the commons. In the declaration they submitted—mostly a bunch of Bible talk—explaining why they were “beginning to plant and manure the waste land of George-Hill,” they expressed their belief that the earth was “a Common Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor, That every one that is born in the Land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth.” Almost 350 years later, the idea of planting food crops in common areas still makes a great deal of sense.

In America, squatting dates back to the very beginning of white settlement. Seeking religious freedom, the Puritans, let's face it, squatted on Indian land. Pioneers in the 1800s continued the process by squatting on more Indian land during the Westward Expansion. In the 1980s, the tradition continued when abandoned buildings in New York City were taken over by squatters like crazy. In 1995, I was befriended by a squatter who lived in a building on Avenue B in New York. Though I was game to join and move in, in the end I wasn't deemed punk-rock enough—maybe because I didn't have tattoos or spikes on my clothing.

And then there was the famous bean sower Henry David Thoreau. He didn't own that land near Walden Pond or even rent it. “I enhanced the value of the land by squatting on it,” he wrote in *Walden*.

That was my plan, too. I took a deep breath and plunged the little yellow seeds into the ground that was not mine. I snaked the hose around from our backyard and sprinkled water onto the bare patch of soil. Lana and I stood and watched the water soak in. What I was doing reminded me a little of shoplifting, except instead of taking, I was leaving something. But I was worried. Couldn't these plants be used as evidence against me?

Within a few weeks of that first sowing, I grew more accustomed to the idea that the lot was temporarily mine. I transplanted a few tomato and

basil starts. Sowed the lettuce seeds I had carried, pioneer-like, with me from Seattle. Planted a few cucumber seeds.

It wasn't long before the vegetables grew and thrived in the blazing, all-day sun. Their success had nothing to do with my skill as a gardener—in California, it's just-add-water gardening. The cukes scrambled; the corn lumbered toward the sky.

Lana told me that the lot had been, over the fifteen years she had lived on 28th Street, first a parking lot for the monks; then a storage space for a construction company, replete with shipping containers and Bobcats; and finally, for the last five years, the weed-filled, garbage-strewn dump we found when we moved in. The garden, by comparison, did seem like an improvement. But in the back of my mind I wondered what the owner of the property would think of all the new plants.

Upstairs in the kitchen a few days after the chicks arrived, I poured myself a cup of coffee, then went to the back stairs to throw some day-old bread to the big backyard chickens (a Buff Orpington, a Black Australorp, and two Red Stars), who had come, full-grown, from a nearby feed store.

A word about my backyard: Don't entertain some bucolic fantasy. In the middle of it, Mrs. Nguyen's exercise bike sat on a bare patch of dirt. The landlord had installed a rusty metal shed at the foot of the stairs a few years earlier, and it now held all the things we and the Nguyens wished we could get rid of. A shattered mirror lay between the fence and the shed.

In the very back of the yard was the chicken coop Bill had built from pallets in what had been a large dog run made with sturdy chain-link fencing now overgrown with weeds and volunteer trees. Abutting this chicken area was an auto-repair shop/junkyard, which hosted two dogs: a pale brown pit bull and a dark-eyed Rottweiler mix. A forklift often zoomed around the repair shop, dodging rusting transmissions and barrels of god knows what. A little beyond the auto shop, you could see downtown Oakland's non-descript skyline. Not exactly a country idyll.

After feeding the backyard hens and checking (again) on the baby chicks

in their brooders, I sat down to read the paper. After a few minutes I looked up and noticed a man entering the garden, wearing a black skullcap and a leather jacket. He wandered over to one of the beds and tugged on the green top of a carrot. An orange root appeared, streaked with dirt. The carrot, I could see, was small but edible. Throwing my paper down, I rushed to the garden.

People from the neighborhood harvesting food from my garden is a common sight. There's Lou, a stooped man who helps himself to the lush crop of greens in the winter; a mute lady who carries a plastic sack into the garden and doesn't stop harvesting lettuce until that bag is swollen—or until I open the window and call down at her, "OK! That's enough! Leave some for everyone else!"

Some of the harvesters are annoying. One year, an unidentified person stopped by for what he thought was onions and picked some of my young garlic instead, then abandoned the small bulbs on the ground. In response, I made a little handwritten sign that said GARLIC, NOT ONIONS. READY IN JULY! and another, near a collard-greens patch, saying DON'T PICK ALL THE LEAVES OFF THE PLANT. These signs aren't necessarily effective. They just fade and get buried by a pile of wood chips in the fall. But I feel the need to instruct nonetheless.

A simple solution would be to snap a padlock on the gate. Then again, I'm a trespasser myself—I don't lease or rent the verdant lot, so I'd feel like a hypocrite telling others to stay away. But I did at least get approval for the garden project from the owner of the property, a man named Jack Chan. I met him when our first tomato ripened in the lot that first year. A wizened Chinese man walked into the garden. I could tell he was the property owner by the way he walked past the gate and looked at the plants—quizzically, as if they were a magic trick he couldn't quite figure out. My heart pounding, I went down to talk to him. "Garden OK," he said after we made introductions. Then he pointed to a few nongarden items that had made it onto the lot, like some old doors and a biodiesel reactor Bill had built. "Only garden." I nodded, and that was the end of our exchange.

If I was trying to be Thoreau, I liked to think of Chan as a modern-day version of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the owner of Walden Pond and its surrounding fields. My fellow squatter Thoreau *did* have permission from the landowner, but he still liked to call what he was doing—just as I did—squatting.

Once I got Jack Chan's terse seal of approval, I began enhancing the land big-time. The next year the whole lot sprawled with giant orange Rouge Vif d'Estampes pumpkins. I had a customer-service job at a plant nursery and got discounts on fruit trees, so in went an apple tree, a pineapple guava, a lemon, a fig, and an orange tree. I bought bees to pollinate the ancient plum tree that stood guard in the lot. I acquired my four egg-laying chickens and grew dinosaur kale, a crinkly, dark green variety, especially for them. I planted carrots, which this guy was now harvesting.

I pushed open the gate and called out a hello to the carrot picker. He waved, holding the carrots in his hand. I know about the pleasure of pulling up root vegetables. They are solvable mysteries. I once pulled up a carrot unlike any I had seen before. It was a deep purple variety called Dragon, and it had wound itself around a regular orange carrot, so they looked like a gaudy strand of DNA.

Just as I was about to tell the carrot picker that he should come back to harvest the carrots when they were bigger, he said, "This place reminds me of my grandma." His eyes filled with tears. "Everything's so growing," he said.

In our neighborhood, there was some greenery, mostly in the form of weeds. But when you walked through the gates into what I had started calling the GhostTown Garden, it was like walking into a different world. There was a lime tree near the fence, sending out a perfume of citrus blossoms from its dark green leaves. Stalks of salvia and mint, artemesia and penstemon. The thistlelike leaves of artichokes glowed silver. Strawberry runners snaked underneath raspberry canes. Beds bristled with rows of fava beans, whose pea-

like blossoms attracted chubby black bumblebees to their plunder. An apple tree sent out girlish pink blossoms. A passionfruit vine curled and weaved through the chain-link fence that surrounded the garden.

I restrained myself from hugging the carrot picker for feeling exactly as I did about the garden, but I did get a little misty. I wanted to grab this man's arm and give him a tour, show him what's edible, what will be at its peak next week, which part of the mint to snip off for tea. Pull up a few of the French breakfast radishes. Explain that carrots are native to Afghanistan and used to be tough and yellow before the orange-loving Dutch got hold of them. Then I'd take him to the backyard and show him my four prized chickens, their straw-lined nesting boxes, the four eggs from that day—brown and still warm. Maybe I'd take him upstairs to admire the brooder box of baby chicks, the waterfowl, the turkey poults.

This, I wanted to tell him, is your birthright, too. Your grandmother, like mine, grew her own tomatoes, killed her own chickens, and felt a true connection to her food. Just because we live in the city, we don't have to give that up.

But then I remembered that most people in our neighborhood have other things on their minds than growing local organic food and starting a revival. I know because when we first started, I knocked on doors to get other people involved with the work in the garden, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed about growing vegetables. I got stock responses: "I don't have time" or "I buy my food at the grocery store."

So I was just glad to be a reminder for the carrot picker. I muttered that he should come by and harvest food anytime. He smiled, exposing a glimmering grill of gold.

"Hey, my garden's your garden," I said, and patted him on the back. He left with a small bunch of carrots stashed in the pocket of his leather jacket. I never saw him again.

I picked a handful of kale leaves for the chicks and went upstairs. I cut them into a chiffonade and watched the chaos unfold when I tossed the green strands into the brooder boxes. A pure yellow chick grabbed the biggest piece of green and carried it around while making an urgent peeping

noise. A few others gave her chase until she dropped it. Then another chick picked it up and ran and peeped. It was all about the having, not the eating. This went on for quite some time until the turkey poults, who had been watching the proceedings heavy-lidded, snatched away the greens from the chickens and gobbled them up. The ducklings and goslings, in their own brooder, inhaled the kale without hesitation. The squat garden would feed my meat birds, too.

CHAPTER THREE



Bobby!" Bill and I yelled toward the end of the dark street, not sure which car he was sleeping in that night. "We need your help!" It was Sunday, late, and we were on a gardening mission.

The door to a Chevy Colt without wheels creaked open. Bobby came out, sighing, and seemed annoyed, but I think he liked that we needed him. Two people weren't enough to push one of Bill's project cars out of the way.

Arms sprawled out, I heaved against the back of the marooned red Mercedes. Bill steered and pushed up front. Then Bobby pressed his back against the trunk of the car and leaned his weight in. That's all it took.

"You gotta use your leg muscles," he said, casually walking against the car as it rolled. It wasn't just about technique, though. Bobby was astonishingly strong. I once saw him lift the transmission of a Ford truck from the ground to his shoulder and carry it for a city block, seemingly without effort. Bobby wouldn't take money for his help; he would mutter, "Life of the Hebrews," when we offered.

We first encountered Bobby during a 2-8 squabble. We had been living in our apartment for more than a year, long enough to have permanently tuned out the sound of the traffic from the nearby highway. The sirens no longer fazed our cat. We were making friends and had sussed out the best late-night Chinese-food joints. As former Seattleites, we were amazed by and thankful for spring's sunny arrival in February.

We had also begun collecting stuff, one of our favorite hobbies. Our tables and desks were scrounged from street corners in Berkeley and Oakland. Most of our dishware came from free boxes set out on corners. There was

something captivating about making something useful again—resurrecting the abandoned.

So we were in our element in Oakland, with its mammoth piles of junk placed on curbs, clutter dropped under overpasses and, sometimes, in the middle of the street. The junk piles became so bad that at one point there were billboard ads urging people to DUMP BOYFRIENDS, NOT APPLIANCES. It was a strange campaign—stranger when half the lights on the billboard went out, leaving only the illuminated command DUMP BOYFRIENDS.

GhostTown in particular hosted some huge piles. Most appeared near the beginning of the month, when rent was due. Sagging couches, black lacquer nightstands, mattresses, all stacked up on the corner—a surprisingly intimate life-size scrapbook of someone's existence. Eventually city maintenance workers would mark the pile with a blast of orange spray paint and haul it away. If they weren't fast about it, the pile would become a sprawling, multihouse, multiblock affair.

These piles were sort of like an ecosystem—a complete community of living organisms and the nonliving materials of their surroundings. Some individuals added to the growing mass, bottom-feeders harvested from the pile, and sometimes the items broke down into dust of their own accord. In this ecosystem, Bill and I played the role of bottom-feeders.

One night, Bill spotted a blue bicycle in a pile of junk on the corner of our street. It was a vintage affair, with three speeds and only slightly messed-up back brakes. He carried it upstairs and spent the evening tinkering with it.

Out for a victory ride the next morning, Bill heard, "That's my bike!" It's a common refrain on the streets off Martin Luther King Jr. Way. But the man who yelled it, standing on the porch of his warrenlike apartment building, didn't mean it in jest. He walked toward Bill. A not quite elderly black man, only slightly grizzled, missing most of his teeth. Name: Bobby.

Seeing that this might get ugly, I walked downstairs to intervene: "Sir, you know the rules around here. If it's in a pile, it's up for grabs." Bobby didn't say anything. It was apparently a man thing, between Bill and Bobby.

"I fixed it," Bill pleaded.

Bobby put his hand on the handlebars. "Uh-uh," he said. Who is this asshole? I thought.

But Bill wasn't going to fight about it. I could tell he had second thoughts. He looked down, then up. "I'll give you \$20," Bill said, excited at the possibility of a solution. At that, Bobby took his hand off the handlebars and beamed. Bill passed him the bill. The matter concluded, Bill rode off on his bike. A beautiful friendship had—yes—blossomed.

Now Bobby helped us do things like move cars around.

"OK, stop," Bill yelled to me and Bobby. We let up. Bill jumped into the Mercedes and braked—Bobby and I had gotten a bit too zealous in our pushing. The red Mercedes barely avoided smashing into our neighbor's Honda.

Bill swung open the gates to the garden. The F-250's wheels spun as I jumped the curb and backed into the lot. Our friend Willy had loaned us his truck for the weekend, so Bill and I had spent Saturday and Sunday making runs to a horse stable fifteen miles away, up in the hills. The free rotted horse manure had been our ticket to gardening success.

Since most of the lot was under a one-foot layer of concrete, Bill came up with the idea of building raised beds. Most vegetables don't require more than a few feet of topsoil, so it's entirely possible to grow plants in large containers. We made open-topped boxes, filled them with composted horse manure, and planted the majority of our herbs and vegetables in them.

Bill, the ultimate bottom-feeder, wouldn't even buy wood to build the beds. In the early days of the lot, Bill would return home, his dark hair mussed, a crooked smile of delight on his face, the borrowed truck filled with sheets of plywood and odd chunks of lumber found along the streets of GhostTown. In the massive abandoned piles, Bill found garden-building materials.

We learned that four chunks of a two-by-four made corners for boxes and connected everything. I got good with an electric handsaw. The only things we bought were screws and an electric drill.

Now in our third spring of gardening, we were still building new beds

and topping off the existing ones. Every year, gripped by the fever of spring gardening, our mantra was always "More manure, we need more."

A series of raised beds, like coffins, scattered the lot. That weekend, we had topped off the three existing beds and begun dumping the rest into new, yawning, empty boxes. I parked near the biggest one, cut the engine, and jumped into the truck bed.

Bill was already there, sinking the shovel into the crumbly black gold. We had only one shovel, so I squatted down, facing away from the bed, and used my hands to bulldoze the manure between my knees over the edge of the truck. Bobby watched us unload the soil with a mix of curiosity and disgust.

In February, Bobby had been kicked out of his apartment. This is why he was living in a car parked in front of his old house. We never asked why he had been evicted, though he was seeming less and less lucid, so we had our suspicions. He had become the unofficial security guard of the 2-8.

That he lived in a series of cars wasn't the kind of thing that raised eyebrows on our street. One neighbor, after arguments with his girlfriend, regularly retires to his car—a cream-colored BMW with the windows knocked out and replaced with Mexican-soda cardboard boxes. When we see him shouldering a bag of clothes in one hand, headed to the BMW with a defeated slouch, Bill and I look at each other and say, "Someone's in the doghouse." So Bobby's new home seemed perfectly acceptable.

Besides becoming a squatter, Bobby became a farmer, too—only his crops were cans and metal. He hauled them via a shopping cart to the recycling center a few blocks away. Like a pack rat, he also collected other items: backpacks, light fixtures, exercise equipment. Anything that once had value (but now was stained and smelled weird) Bobby would take home with him. And home was that wheelless Chevy Colt.

"So that's horse poop?" he asked while we unloaded the rest of the manure.

"Yes," I panted, picking up a bucket and scooping out the corners of the truck bed. When I looked up into our apartment, it was dark except for a warm yellow glow in the living room—the brooder box. The chicks were getting bigger—and louder. They often woke me at dawn with their squabbling.

"And you grow vegetables in it." Bobby was wearing a pair of antennas he made out of a girl's headband and some tinfoil.

"Yes, it's really composted down, though," I assured Bobby. I stood up to stretch my back but found I couldn't stand up completely. I hunched over, my shoulders caved in, and gasped, "So there aren't any bad bacteria or whatever."

"We used chicken droppings," Bobby said. "*Whoo*, that stuff stunk. Now, this isn't too bad." He took a pinch of the manure and sniffed. Bobby had come from Arkansas as a young man. Many of the black people living in Oakland came from families who had migrated from the South in the 1920s to work as longshoremen for the port, as porters for the railroad, or in manufacturing jobs. Back then, Oakland was known as the Detroit of the West. In the 1940s, in what some historians call the second gold rush, manufacturing and military jobs attracted more immigrants from the South, and the black population grew by 227 percent. Oakland, once a monoculture of whiteness, became diverse when people like Bobby's parents moved in.

Bill and I surveyed our progress in unloading the horse manure. The truck bed was empty. The raised bed was . . . half empty. I stared at it with contempt. I was exhausted, but this was our last chance to use our friend's truck. We would have to make another run.

"Can you make sure no one parks here?" Bill asked Bobby. We needed the area in front of the lot clear so we could unload our next load of horse-shit. Bobby nodded and went to get a shopping cart to block the parking spot. He waved at our truck as we drove away, back to the hills, back to the stables.

We had to cross the county line to get our horse poo. Oakland's county, Alameda, gave way to Contra Costa County, land of rolling hills, working cattle ranches, and more recently rich folks with McMansions. Lucky for us, rich people like horses. And horses make a lot of manure. Which piles up and composts away until an enterprising gardener arrives and offers to take away this jackpot of tilth and nutrients.

The horses whinnied when they heard us drive up. I backed the truck as close as possible to the mother lode: a massive mound of composting manure

the size of a small barn. The smell—horse sweat, dirt, grass, and that unmistakable odor of cellulose breaking down—was heavenly. It reminded me of growing up on my parents' property in Idaho. Two of my favorite family photos are one of my father astride a gorgeous pinto in a snowy field and another of me riding a brown pony.

I was only four years old when my parents' life on the ranch finally unraveled and my mom, my sister, and I moved to town. I had my first existential crisis when I realized that it was not possible to have a pony in the city. I still remember standing in my bedroom, looking out my window, and feeling the utter horror and emptiness of my horseless life in town. Eventually I got some unicorn posters, and all was healed. Or maybe not all, because I still feel a prickle of almost religious ecstasy at the smell of horseshit.

Our buckets clattering, Bill and I marched up to the edge of the pile. My method was to cradle a bucket in my arms and scrape the side of the manure hill until a mini avalanche filled the bucket. Bill used a shovel to scoop from the very bottom of the pile. Red worms came along with the black dirt, which was warm to the touch. It steamed a little in the chilly night air. Bucket after bucket until we filled the back of the truck. It was our third trip of the day, it was night, and our arms were aching from the schlepping.

We paused in our bucket filling and noticed the silence. No highway noise, no car alarms or ambulances. The hills unfolded off to the east, little farms marked by a light or two. We were truly in the country.

Driving away from the stables, the truck's suspension nearly buckling under the load, I looked back at the massive hill of manure. It looked untouched.

"Man, Willy's going to be pissed when he finds out how much manure we loaded into this thing!" I said.

"Let's not tell him," Bill suggested.

Farther down the road, a fog had rolled in and enveloped the hills that looked out over the East Bay.

"Well, we'll just give him some tomatoes or—"

"Look out!" Bill cried and grabbed the truck's Oh Shit handle.

We had almost veered over a cliff. I'm a horrible driver, once almost

launching us into the Pacific Ocean while driving along Highway 1. I braked and slowed down and started to really concentrate on the road.

"God," Bill said.

"Sorry," I muttered, and we fell silent as the truck rattled down the road. With the low visibility, everything suddenly felt treacherous. A strange loneliness filled my heart, and I thought of my mother.

The road to our ranch in Idaho had been similarly treacherous, and I remembered her story about the day I was born. It was late December, and my parents had hoped to win the New Year Baby contest put on by Les Schwab Tires in Orofino, Idaho. The parents with the first baby born on January 1, 1973, would win a pair of tires and a side of beef. My parents thought they had timed it perfectly, but I was a restless little baby and emerged instead on the snowy night of December 30.

When my mom tells the story of my birth, which has become part of the popular lore of my family, she paints a colorful picture. There was three feet of snow on the ground, and the truck barely avoided sliding off the steep ravine near the ranch. Then the truck threw a rod, destroying the engine, so they had to hitchhike to the hospital. She always tells the story with a smile, as if it had all been a great deal of fun. But now that I'm an adult, when I hear her story, it sounds dangerous, frightening, cold—distinctly unfun.

I cracked open the window of the truck to stop the condensation on the windshield and braked slowly around a hairpin turn.

The country had taken a toll on my mom. She was lonely up there on the ranch. My dad, who eventually went semiferar, would often go on weeks-long hunting trips, leaving my mom to tend to the ranch duties: milking the cow, watering the garden, and locking the duck pen at night. She missed her friends, her exciting life when she had attended be-ins in Golden Gate Park, danced at rock shows, and traveled the world.

I still regard the country as a place of isolation, full of beauty—maybe—but mostly loneliness. So when friends plan their escape to the country (after they save enough money to buy rural property), where they imagine they'll split wood, milk goats, and become one with nature, I shake my head. Don't we ever learn anything from the past? And that's probably why I avoided

rural places and chose to live in the city—but, of course, my modified, farm-animal-populated version of the city.

The fog broke once we hit the highway. Propelled by the weight of the manure, we swooped down the concrete mainline of Highway 24 back into Oakland with a fine dusting of horseshit trailing behind us. My melancholy mood was replaced by a wave of love toward my adopted city. With its late-night newsstands and rowdy bars, a city meant I would never be lonely.

When we turned down our street, Bobby was there, guarding the gates.

Bill and I met on an elevator, fell in love because of cats, and lasted because of bees.

In 1997, I was headed to a class to show David Attenborough's *The Private Life of Plants* to a group of Ecology 101 students. While finishing up my degrees in English and biology at the University of Washington, I worked as a projectionist, paid \$3.85 an hour to hit PLAY on a VCR and then sit back in the AV booth and do my homework.

Classroom Support Services, my employer, had recently hired a skinny new guy who wore an ugly red wool hat and a too-short sweatshirt. He was in the elevator when I got on, and he scrunched up against the wall and seemed extremely nervous. I gave him a smile, and he returned it with a half wave. I like nervous people, because they make me feel confident. He was cuter than I initially thought, with olive skin and warm brown eyes.

At my floor, I stepped off the elevator.

"Um, excuse me," the man stammered. He had cotton balls stuffed in his ears. Later I would find out he had problems with his ears, especially in the cold wet of Seattle. The cotton balls kept out the elements, as did the red hat.

He handed me a folded sheet of yellow paper. I glanced at it—*The Speckled Pig Zine*, it said. The doors closed, and I walked to my class.

A few minutes later, while David Attenborough's British-accented voice filled the auditorium, I looked through the zine in the booth. Some funny poems, a story about a lost dog, and a questionnaire mostly about cats. (You

see a cat. Do you, a. kiss its head? b. kiss its paws? c. kiss it on the lips?) I find men who have felines impossibly sexy.

On our first date, he gave me a ridiculous pair of rabbit-fur gloves he had found on the bus. They were turquoise with a white fur lining. I loved them. We walked around to various bookstores. It was cold, and he took my arm and leaned in to smell my hair. Later I met the cats, Speck and Sparkles, and saw Bill's tiny studio apartment.

Bill had grown up in Indiana and Florida. His mom was from West Virginia, a strapping farm girl with ten brothers and sisters who helped her mom raise chickens and pigs on their little five-acre farm. She and Bill's dad had gone into construction and built fancy houses in Florida. Bill hated Florida and had recently moved to the other end of the country.

We moved in together after our second date. We settled into a rambling house on Seattle's Beacon Hill that became known as the Hen House.

For my twenty-fifth birthday, Bill loaded me into the car and we drove toward Mount Rainier. We pulled into a U-cut Christmas-tree farm and gift shop, and I wondered why he thought I would want a Christmas tree for my birthday. Plus, it was December 30—was he not only totally off base but also incredibly cheap? Maybe I had really misjudged this guy, I thought, looking at a beeswax candle in the shape of a gnome in the store. While I pondered my bad-gift future with Bill—snow globes, kitten-statue doorstops, balloons that read *i wuv u*—I weighed the merits of our relationship. Great pillow talk. A love of reading. A similar sense of what is funny. Gift hell would have to be a concession.

After he wandered around the rustic cabinlike store, which smelled like cinnamon sticks and pine needles, Bill stopped in front of me. "Novella," he started in his soft but gravelly voice. He scooted me closer to some pine-colored boxes stacked up near the door. "I'm giving you a beekeeping kit for your birthday."

He pointed at the hive boxes and supers (boxes to add as the colony grows) I was standing next to. Only then did I understand the name of the shop: Trees 'n Bees. Elated at this sudden stroke of genius gift-giving, I hugged Bill. The rest of the kit consisted of a smoker; a veil and cap; a pair of long,

thick gloves; a hive tool; extra supers; a small book, *First Lessons in Beekeeping*; and the promise of a small wire box filled with worker bees and one queen come spring.

The bearded salesman, who reminded me of a bear, rang up our order, then showed us the observation hive on view from inside the little shop. Behind Plexiglas we could see a seething mass of bees moving along a dark-colored honeycomb. I inhaled the scent surrounding the box; it was a richly textured odor—sweet nutmeg and new wood.

I had been in love with the idea of beekeeping—danger coupled with hard work blended with sweet rewards—but figured that I could never do it in the city. My mom's friend Lowell had been a beekeeper in Idaho. I distinctly remember a trip to his farm, a land of rolling gold hills dotted with dark pine trees and white painted boxes, which my mom told me were bee houses. Lowell had wild blond hair and an unruly beard, and he had studied agriculture at Cornell before going back to the land, so he had a leg up over most of the other hapless hippies struggling to live off the land. His bees' honey came suspended in comb. The sweet golden liquid was the best thing I ever tasted. As a child, I never thought about the details. It was simple: Lowell made honey. And the idea of becoming a beekeeper myself? That seemed wildly improbable, about as attainable as becoming an astronaut.

Until Bill started to tell me about hobbyist beekeepers.

One of whom was Sylvia Plath. The daughter of a beekeeper, she and husband Ted Hughes kept bees during the happy years. Bill showed me her bee poems, and they took my breath away. "The Arrival of the Bee Box," for example:

*I ordered this, clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it. . . .
I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.*

I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.

They can be sent back.

They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. . . .

And Bill pointed out that there were beekeepers in cities like Paris and New York City. The forage, I read that winter in anticipation of receiving my bees, was better in cities because of city gardeners who keep plants that bloom year-round.

That spring, I returned for my bee package—a shoebox-sized cage with wire mesh sides so the approximately five thousand bees inside can breathe—and the bearlike man took me and a few other customers out to a field to demonstrate how to “install the hive.” I stood in the lush green grass, terrified behind my brand-new veil. The bee guy, wearing shorts, gave a rambling discourse on beekeeping while he poured the new bees into the hive. The other newbies and I stood very far back. But as he got more and more animated about beekeeping, about the order of the hive—workers, drones, and queens—we all crept closer and closer to him. Bees landed on our shoulders and veils and then flitted off. As the details of the mysterious honeybee filled the empty beekeeping section of my brain, I felt lucky and giddy, as if someone had shown me a secret door.

The Trees 'n Bees guy did make it look easy. Then I was sent home to do the same with an increasingly angry-sounding hairy herd. I experienced a glimmer of what it must feel like returning from the hospital with a baby.

As I pulled the Dodge Dart away from the forest of Christmas trees I wondered how the bearlike man could trust me with the care of this thing. What if I dropped the box? What if they grow up and decide to swarm, to abandon me? And I thought about getting stung. A lot. Mostly because I was actually choosing to get stung. It felt a bit transgressive.

It certainly seemed so to my next-door neighbor in Seattle.

“You should move to the country,” Tudy said when she saw the buzzing shoebox. She was out on her lawn, trimming the grass with a pair of scissors so that it was perfectly even. Next to her painstakingly manicured yard was

our parking-strip garden, a raised bed with tall stalks of fava beans and a chaotic jumble of lettuces and Swiss chard. She hated us.

Seattle's city code allowed for beekeeping if the distance from the hive to neighboring structures was at least fifty feet. By hosting the hive on our upstairs deck, we were complying with the code. And so I ignored our neighbor and marched upstairs, clutching the bee package as if I knew what I was doing.

Then I put on as much clothing as possible. Triple shirts, a mechanic's jumpsuit, several pairs of socks hiked up and tucked into the jumpsuit, the heavy-duty-fabric beekeeping gloves (regretting I hadn't traded up for the more expensive leather ones), and finally, my veil. Swaddled as I was, I could barely put my arms down. I grabbed the gleaming hive tool—it still had the price tag on it—and installed my hive.

The sun was going down on a rare cloudless April day. Bill watched from a safe distance. As instructed, we positioned the hive to face east so it would get early morning sun. Installing later in the day avoids confusing the bees, who should spend at least a night in their hive before venturing out. I pried the lid off the bee package and tilted the opening toward the virgin hive body, with its orderly rows of frames that the bees would fill with honey.

The bees came out like a liquid, spilling into the box without incident. The Trees 'n Bees guy had showed us how to tap the package like a ketchup bottle to get out the last of the stragglers. From fear and sheer clothing volume, I had a slick of sweat dripping down my back. My terror was unfounded: The bees were entirely docile.

I fished the queen chamber out of the almost empty wire box. A few bees, her attendants, clung to the outside of the little box within the box. At the bottom was a plug of candy. The idea is that the workers will eventually chew the candy and release the queen. But I wanted to see her. So with the end of my hive tool, I somehow popped the candy inward, and she emerged. Her ass was enormous; she looked like some kind of exotic beetle. As I held the little box across the top of the beehive she strutted into her new home. Was it just me, or did she actually have an air of royalty? Then she

was gone, down into her chambers, where she would lay all the eggs to keep the hive going.

I received one sting on my ring finger.

We had two years of productive beekeeping in Seattle. Bill and I worked the hives together, giving the bees sugar water to get them through the winter, adding new supers during the honey flow in summer. We harvested by stealing a few frames at a time and letting the honey drizzle out into a large pan.

Over those years, Bill and I both grew a little fatter. When I first met him, Bill was a skinny poet. Over the Seattle years he went to mechanic school at a local community college, and all that wrench-turning (and my cooking) bulked him up. I gained a few pounds, too. Maybe it was all that honey harvesting, but I think it was just being in love.

When we decided to move to Oakland, we entertained for a brief instant the idea of bringing the bees with us in our van. Using our good judgment for once, we left them with our roommates at the Hen House.

It wasn't until that second spring in GhostTown, when I started to feel like the lot might be mine forever, that we got another hive of bees. I had called our roommates in Seattle, and they had told me the news: My bees had finally died. Because beekeeping equipment is expensive, I hired some movers to bring down the empty bee boxes from Seattle. Then I ordered another package of bees like the ones I got from Trees 'n Bees. Instead of picking them up at a local bee store, I got them through the mail.

I received a desperate phone call from the post office when they arrived.

"Ms. Carpenter?" the lady on the other end of the phone panted.

"Yes, speaking."

"We've got a—what do you call it?—a box of bees, and they're freaking everyone out." It was the Oakland postmistress calling from the Shattuck Avenue office. "Can you come collect them right now—before we close?" she begged.

"OK, I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I said.

"They're outside. They've attracted all kinds of bees."

When I pulled up on my bike, a few stray bees were bobbing around the

post office, undoubtedly attracted to the powerful pheromones the queen emitted from the mesh box. It was April in Northern California, arguably the best month in terms of weather. I filled out some paperwork regarding my identity, then went around to the back and picked up the humming box.

"Now, I wouldn't mind some honey next time you come by," the postmistress yelled from a safe distance. Yup, that's most people—scared of bees but drawn to honey.

The package fit perfectly in the basket mounted on the front of my bike, and I proceeded to ride down Telegraph Avenue, laughing out loud at the bees who tried to follow us amid the traffic. At stoplights I looked down at the mesh box, the bees churning around, and told them to get ready for GhostTown.

Back at home, I placed the package of bees on the deck, then got to work setting up the new hive. (The garden would have been a better location, but I worried about the reaction of the owner of the lot, Jack Chan, to a box of stinging insects.) I placed the stand and bottom board on a table, then added the bottom box with its ten empty frames. I positioned the hive facing east, toward Highway 980, the BART trains, and, farther out, the Oakland hills. Then, wearing just a T-shirt and shorts, I casually shook the bees into their new home, fished out the queen, and placed the lid on top of the hive.

The next morning, I monitored their progress from my desk in the living room. They were circling, figuring out the new coordinates of home. *The ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture* calls these "play flights"; they establish where home is in terms of the orientation of the sun and sky. As they returned for the evening the bees were like flecks of gold, backlit by the sun. One night a few days later, I went out to the box and heard strange noises—blips and buzzes, whines and hums. When I touched it, the hive was warm, like a body.

CHAPTER FOUR



A year after getting our Oakland hive, Bill and I sat in the living room and paged through the Mann Lake catalog. "The electric one is \$799!" Bill exclaimed. We were hunting for a stainless-steel, hand-cranked honey extractor. In Seattle we had used a bucket and gravity to extract the honey, but the ants in California made this impossible. Normally foes of catalog shopping, we made exceptions when it came to gardening and beekeeping supplies.

"We don't need an electric one—this hand-cranked looks good," I said, reaching over his shoulder to point to the most inexpensive model.

"Looks cheap," Bill said, his big hands curled around the catalog. He pointed out that the handle on top might break off.

I moved my foot from the couch to the floor. I heard the crunch before I felt the sharp pinch on the soft pad of my big toe. My favorite description of a bee sting comes from Maurice Maeterlinck, who writes of a sting in his hilariously dramatic *Life of the Bee* as a "kind of destroying dryness, a flame of the desert rushing over the wounded limb, as though these daughters of the sun had distilled a dazzling poison from their father's angry rays." Yes, my bee sting hurt. No one was safe in our living room. Bill had gotten stung on the head. A visitor had had a bee fly down her dress and sting her bottom.

I yelped, and Bill, knowing immediately what had happened, shook his head. I curled my foot up onto his lap, and he found the stinger. The flattened bee lay on the ground where I had stepped on her. He scratched off the stinger and showed it to me. It was black and pointed, with a clear sac connected to it. It was still pulsating.

Every night in the summer, five to ten bees would sneak into our house,

hell-bent on reaching the blazing lights on the fixture mounted on our living room ceiling. They came through a crack in the door to the deck. Once inside, they flew straight into the light fixture (which they might have mistaken for a cheaply made, four-headed sun). Then, stunned by the impact, they plunged back to earth. On the floor, they would crawl around in circles until they regained the strength to try again. Like the poor Icarus I had just stepped on. These nighttime escapades were an argument against keeping bees on the deck. But during the day, I liked watching them come and go as I worked at my desk.

I held a piece of ice on the sting. Bill, barely taking notice of the swelling on my toe, circled a midpriced stainless-steel hand-cranked extractor in the middle of the catalog. "Let's get that one," he said.

We were moving up in the urban farming world. The honey extractor would soon be ours. There's a saying: No gear, no hobby. The longer we lived in Oakland, the more garden-related gear we seemed to accumulate.

Later, with Bill's help, I hobbled over to Lana's for her weekly variety show. Lana's warehouse was dim and cold with a warm center. The exterior of the building was lined with corrugated metal painted a dusty yellow. You walked past the chain-link gate, through a thick metal front door, then squinted or felt your way along a dark concrete corridor that smelled like vermin. Lana, a vegetarian, loved all animals and refused to put out rat traps. Turning the brass knob on the second wooden door to the right, you fell into Lana's rowdy Wednesday-night speakeasy. Music blasted from the room, which was a riot of color, with half-finished art installations leaning against the walls. A collection of characters—old guys who grew up in Oakland in the 1950s, sculptors who worked for Pixar, buskers, and hustlers—sat at the long wooden bar.

A woman known as Bunny sat on the white leather couch. She was explaining to a sharply dressed man wearing a 1940s suit about her female wrestling troupe, the FFF. "It stands for whatever," she said, "fierce, fabulous fighters, maybe." Maya, Lana's guinea pig, sat in Bunny's lap. The guinea

pig had free rein in the warehouse. Tiny brown pellets rolled on the white leather.

"We'll bust through that," Bunny said, pointing at a six-foot-tall painting on paper of the silhouette of a woman warrior with "FFF" written across her chest.

"And those are her . . ." The retro man seemed embarrassed and shifted in his seat. Maya turds rolled around.

"Yeah, her lips," Bunny said, referring to the silhouette's enormous labia.

Lana popped popcorn and poured \$2 glasses of wine from behind the bar.

In the corner by the fake fireplace, Craig and Phil discussed refurbishing real wood car dashboards.

Taurean, a recent transplant from the South, explained the word "buggy" to a northerner. "You know—a shopping cart!" he exclaimed.

Bill and I sat at the bar and drank from a bottle of tequila we had brought in, with limes from our tree in the lot. We put a few dollars in the tip jar for popcorn. Everyone was smoking.

Around 11 p.m., Lana picked up her accordion. She slowly played the opening bars to a song she had learned in Spain, then she played a little faster. Cigarettes were snubbed out, drinks dashed. She played even faster as she ascended some dangerous homemade stairs, her platform boots disappearing completely. We all trailed her like rats following the Pied Piper. Maya stayed on the couch.

Upstairs Lana had set up small café tables with flickering candles and a stage with a proper curtain and a backdrop painted black. Whoever wanted to perform on this stage did.

Taurean, the southerner, who also happened to be a gay teenager, took the stage first and did some impersonations of Oakland prostitutes.

Bill and I performed a Ween-like song—he on the guitar, me singing.

The crowd hooted and yelled. They were always drunk and generous.

Another performer did a puppet show with her Barbie collection. A few country-looking people played guitar and sang folk songs. One woman wore

a pair of cowboy boots. Another had her hair in braids and wore a straw hat; she had the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

At the intermission, after Bill had already stumbled home, I approached the country people.

"So . . .," I started, using my best drawl, "where're you all from?"

"West Oakland," the woman in the cowboy hat said.

"Urban cowboys?" I said, and laughed. The country folk lived only about a mile away, on the other side of downtown Oakland.

"Urban farmers," they said, looking at one another and nodding their heads.

I hadn't heard that term before. But like I said, in California, people reinvent themselves.

"What do you mean, like milk cows and pigs?" I asked.

"No. But gardens and chickens and bees. Ducks."

I dragged them over to the lot.

"Well, here it is," I said. While they surveyed the garden beds, I noticed that the spinach looked as if it had leaf spot and that weeds had suddenly sprouted among the vegetables. I pointed up to the beehive on the deck, then showed off the crude duck pen I had made for the waterfowl.

"The chicks are still in the brooder," I said, using the word for the first time in a party setting. What I had discovered—at my various jobs, at dinner parties—was that most people didn't want to hear about my adventures in killing animals. "How can you do it?" they would ask, no doubt thinking of their pet cat or parakeet. But these people, these urban farmers, wouldn't think I was crazy.

In fact, they seemed wildly unfazed by my raising meat animals. They were doing the same thing. "We've got Muscovy ducks," said Willow, the woman with the strange blue eyes. "They're delicious!"

Willow had bought a vacant lot in 1999 and started a garden there. Eventually she founded a nonprofit called City Slicker Farm with the goal of providing healthy food at low cost to people in the neighborhood. The nonprofit sold vegetables (on a sliding scale) at a farm stand at 16th and Center

streets. Willow kept using the term "food security," which idiotically made me think of chickens behind bars.

As she assessed the health of my tomatoes I told Willow about my plan to raise a turkey and eat it for Thanksgiving. She seemed impressed. "Now, that I haven't done," she said. I beamed.

"Come check out the farm stand on Saturdays," Willow said before the urban-farming entourage left.

I went back to the speakeasy and stayed late, ecstatic to have found my people. I had never met anyone like Willow in Seattle. She had long hair and wore boots, but I wouldn't call her a hippie. She got shit done, it was obvious. Like me, she was the offspring of hippies. We weren't going to make the same mistakes our parents made, I thought, taking another shot of tequila. "Viva la granjas urbanos!" I yelled to no one in particular. Wait, was it *granjas*? Something like that. Lana clinked my glass. I was an urban farmer, too.

At 3 a.m., I heard the sounds of the monks next door. Up for morning prayers, they were making clanging noises and softly chanting. Craig and Phil finally pried themselves off their barstools and began muttering about driving home. I stumbled back across the street to our house and found Bill on the bathroom floor, fast asleep.

"Bill, Bill. Get in bed," I said.

"I'm resting here," he argued. "Comfortable." His head was propped up with a folded towel. It did look kind of comfortable.

"Did you have fun?" he asked.

"Yes, I met some urban farmers."

"Those people who sang?"

"Yes, they have a garden—well, a farm like ours—on Center Street." I heard a train off in West Oakland letting out a whistle.

Bill sat up, and I helped him to his feet. We shambled to our bed, passing the glowing brooder in the living room.

I had recently expanded the brooder. The waterfowl had grown too big and were too messy to keep inside, so I had put them in a pen in the lot. But as the chicks got bigger, instead of putting them outside, where I feared they

would catch a chill or get beaten up by the big chickens, I cut out more cardboard and taped on additions, until their pen took up one entire room in the house. The room filled with poultry had seemed crazy only a few hours before, but now that I had met my people—fellow urban farmers—I suddenly had a name for this thing I had been doing but couldn't quite explain. The chicks and turkey poults were still up, and zoomed around their newly expanded digs.

"How long are they staying?" Bill whispered, as if the birds were difficult houseguests. The meat-bird experiment, unlike the garden and the bees, was my exclusive domain. Bill agreed that he'd eat the birds, but the raising and the killing were up to me. I just shrugged.

At 7:30 a.m., I heard three things from my disheveled bed. One was the peeping of the chicks, who had taken to squabbling each morning the minute the sun came up. Another was the Nguyen family's morning prayers: They listened to a soothing recording of drums and chants as they burned incense. The third noise was Lana yelling in the street. I squinted at the clock and cursed tequila and Lana's speakeasy. I tucked the covers around Bill, who snored. He could sleep through violent earthquakes, the bastard.

I fed the chicks and adjusted their brooder lights. That settled them down. Then I peered out the window.

Lana was outside, causing a commotion. She looked like a comic-book character, lifting a television and heaving it at Bobby. They had never gotten along, and now that Bobby was squatting in a car just outside Lana's warehouse door, the tension had increased. Their arguments usually revolved around stuff, specifically the spoils from Bobby's demonic collecting. It was true that the end of the street was starting to resemble an open-air flea market. Bobby had mounted a corkboard sign near his home on which his friends and associates could post messages. He was a social fellow and enjoyed company. Many of his friends brought "gifts," one of which was the television currently being flung through the air.

I wandered outside to mediate.

The two were looking at a small square of earth on the curb where a tree had probably stood in the days before Oakland had gone to hell. These

days the spot was home to a cheeseweed mallow, *Malva parviflora*. Though she hadn't planted it, Lana had an inordinate love for this weed. It had little pink flowers. It also had an invasive attitude and a pernicious root system that I, as a gardener, could never love.

Bobby had dug it up and planted a cactus.

God knows where it came from, but the cactus was spiny and columnar and freshly planted.

"Morning, darling," Bobby said to me.

"Hi," I mumbled, wanting to seem unbiased.

"I'm just making some improvements," Bobby explained, then pointed to the cactus.

"There was something there already!" Lana yelled. The wilting *Malva* lay over by the abandoned playfield. Instead of ripping up the cactus—Lana couldn't hurt another living thing—she had smashed an electrical appliance. The shards of thick glass and wood littered the street.

It was a turf war between two 28th Street impresarios.

Lana had been up all night. I knew because I had left her house only a few hours before, and she looked just as she had when I waved goodbye. Her hair still looked wonderful, and her eyes were painted with theatrical curlicues of black eyeliner.

"Some people don't listen," Lana said, glaring at Bobby. He sometimes posted life lessons on his message corkboard. One of his favorites was "Learn to Listen."

"I'm just trying to help," Bobby said.

"I don't want your help!" Lana yelled. Her dog, Oscar, wandered out from the warehouse and gave a loud bark. He liked Bobby, despite Lana's hatred, because Bobby fed him snacks of old bread and bones. This further infuriated Lana.

"Some people need to learn how to relax," Bobby said, drawing out the last word.

Bobby had recently started an auto-repair/chop shop—a place to strip cars—at the end of 28th Street. It all started when a neighbor said her car was dead. Bobby opened up her hood, then rummaged around in the

back of his car, emerging with a car battery. "I went to Berkeley," he said to the woman. "Studied biology." He flipped the battery upside down so the terminals touched. Battery acid flew. Her car started. Word spread: Bobby can fix cars.

When it came to my loyalties, I sat on the fence. On one hand, I was like Bobby in that I was running what some might consider an unsanitary operation (horse manure, chicken shit) on squatted land, and Bobby guarded that land for me. On the other, I was like Lana in that I enjoyed an environment free of antifreeze spilling into the gutters and an endless collection of Ghost-Town rubbish. (Bobby once found a giant metal shed and placed it in the lot. When I protested—what would Jack Chan say if he saw that?—Bobby took it away, grumbling.)

But now, in the battle between a cactus and a weed, I knew I couldn't choose. This weed, *Malva parviflora*, was truly awful, and a dime a dozen. As for the cactus, it did require almost no water, but having a spiny plant spiking out next to a sidewalk seemed sadistic. I couldn't referee this one, and so I shrugged and said, rather lamely, that I wished we could all get along.

A few weeks after my tequila-enhanced discovery that I was indeed an urban farmer, the chicks started to develop real feathers. Worried that they weren't getting enough vitamin D—an important nutrient for healthy feathers—I took the birds on a field trip to the garden.

I gathered the birds into a cardboard box and then upended it into a garden bed. At first they seemed stunned by the out-of-doors—the shining sun, the blue sky, the dirt at their feet. When a pigeon flew by, without a sound they took cover under the crinkled leaves of a Swiss chard plant. The turkey poult ducked their heads underneath the chicks' legs, trying to hide—never mind that they were twice the size of the chicks by then. After a few minutes, the instinct to roam trumped fear. The chicks fanned out, scratched at the dirt, and ate rocks. Chickens and turkeys don't have stomachs. Instead they digest their food with a powerful muscle in their gut

called the gizzard. The birds peck up rocks, which travel into the gizzard. Once there, the pebbles are ground against one another by the gizzard's contractions, which breaks down the grains and greens and bugs.

The birds were beautiful there in the garden. The chickens ranged from dark-reddish to black to yellow-gold. The turkey poults were starting to get some color, too. One had dark black feathers; the other two were mostly white with streaks of black.

As the birds enjoyed the early summer sunshine I did some weeding and checked on my vegetable seedlings.

Not only was I growing meat birds; I had expanded to include some varieties of heirloom fruits and vegetables. I chose heirloom varieties because they are often best suited for a small home garden, because their seeds can be saved and used the following year, and frankly, because I love their names: Amish Paste tomatoes, Golden Bachau peas, Speckles lettuce, Cream of Saskatchewan watermelons. All seemed to be doing fine except for the watermelons.

In early June I had made careful mounds of composted horse manure and dusted the tops with worm casings harvested from the worm bin. Then I sank the watermelon seeds into each mound. I watered them very well, resubmerging two escapees that floated up to the surface.

I anticipated sweet melons that I would eat straight from the garden, juice dripping down my shirt. Since I had moved to California from Seattle, watermelons had held a special cachet for me. They are native to Africa and require heat to develop. The Pacific Northwest just didn't have it. In Oakland, I had so far mastered hot-weather-loving plants like tomatoes, hot peppers, and corn. This was my chance to do melons.

For a week, I had gone out every day to water and stare at the dirty black piles, to see if anything was emerging. On day three, I thought I saw some green, but it was just a piece of trapped grass. On day five, I sprinkled the mounds with fish kelp fertilizer and suppressed the urge to dig in to see exactly what was going on down there. Eight days had now passed, and I cursed the seed company, birds, bad horse manure, ants, and any other suspects who could be blamed for preventing the watermelons' germination.

I pawed through the dirt to find some potato bugs for the ducks. In four weeks, the ducks and one of the goslings had made it to full feather. (The other gosling died quietly in the brooder one night for no apparent reason.) Because they had grown so quickly and had such wet, fly-attracting turds, I had moved them outdoors much sooner than the chicks, into a pen I built out of chicken wire and milk crates. I had even made them a small pond—a washtub sunk into the dirt and filled with water.

A few feet from the pen was a chain-link fence, and behind that was a duplex—a cobbled-together adobe affair—where many people lived. My favorite residents there were a woman named Neruda and her nine-year-old daughter, Sophia. When I first put the ducks out into the yard, Sophia watched from behind the fence, too shy to say anything. After a few days, she spent more and more time lurking and watching the birds' antics. One day I invited Neruda and her daughter over.

The ducks—Pekins, a popular breed of meat duck from China—were almost fully grown by then. They had glossy white feathers and sturdy orange bills. The surviving gosling had turned into a stately gray goose. We sat in the sun and watched the ducks play. Sophia picked up one of the lily-white birds and gently set him in the “pond.” He quacked happily and bobbed his head in and out of the water.

“Is he like a pet dog?” she asked me suddenly.

I glanced at her mom. Cornered.

“Not really,” I said, feeling like a monster. While Sophia had been playing with the ducks, I had been thinking about duck confit and Christmas goose.

In fact, I had been studiously avoiding the thought of killing, focusing instead on the first few sections of *Storey's Guide to Raising Ducks*, which told me how to install a pond and what to feed the growing flock. I hadn't gotten to the butchering section of the guide yet. Nor had I yet gone to Willow's farm to find out how she killed her ducks. Next to *Storey's Guide* on my nightstand was Elizabeth David's *French Provincial Cooking*. I read with keen interest her many good ideas for cooking duck livers and making *canard rôti au four*.

But how do you tell a child you're going to cut off this adorable duck's head, pluck its white feathers, and roast it in an oven, letting its fat naturally baste the meat? Children, I've found, don't care much about haute cuisine. So I looked into Sophia's innocent chocolate-colored eyes and mumbled something about eggs and breeding. Yes, I straight-up lied.

After Sophia went home, I sat in the lot and looked at the ducks. There was an unmistakable gap in my knowledge of these creatures, right there in between the raising and the cooking. I knew how to raise them, and I knew how to cook them. How to get from a living duck to a duck ready to go in the oven—that was the trick. Not only did I not have the physical, practical know-how; I didn't know how to prepare myself mentally, either. I suspected that there wasn't a single book that could fill the gap between *Storey's Guide* and Elizabeth David.

While the chickens and turkeys foraged in the garden bed, I leaned into the pen and offered the ducks the potato bugs. They softly prodded my open hand and snarfed them up one by one. Then they looked at me for more.

I went back to the doomed watermelon area to hunt. As the ducks quacked and chortled at me and monitored my movements with great interest, I scratched the soil around the edge of the bed and found a roly-poly paradise, with bugs everywhere, in every size—from tiny ones the size of a speck of dirt to big ones the size of a cockroach.

A faint glimmer of green made me halt my potato-bug harvest. Hidden under the dirt, seedlings had been growing. They looked like most melon sprouts do: rounded, kind of veiny. My watermelons had finally germinated.

I crawled closer to the seedlings and inspected them in worshipful silence. Two were only half unfurled (the seed coat still hung on one of the leaves), another was a bit off to the side of the mound, a fourth was small and runty. One bruiser sat smack-dab in the middle of the pile. I swear I could hear it growing. Seeing the watermelon seedlings felt like finding money in the street: even though I had done the hard work to set the plant in motion, it still seemed like a miracle.

When seeds germinate, an amazing thing happens. A seed is a ripened ovule, like a hen's egg: it contains an embryo and a stored food supply. I watered the seeds every day because of a process called imbibition. When a seed soaks up water, its cells swell and mitochondria (the power stations of cells) become rehydrated and start to work. A cascade of proteins is made, the food-storage reservoirs are tapped, and slowly the cell wall softens. As cell division begins—set in motion by the rehydration process—a radicle bursts out of the seed coat and becomes the root of the plant. All this had finally happened to my Cream of Saskatchewan watermelon seeds.

After an hour outside, I shoed the chicks and poults back into the cardboard box and took them upstairs. I could see the veiny leaves of the watermelon from our living room window. The process was in motion—all I had to do was give the plants regular water, perhaps side-dress with some compost, and hope my bees were up for pollinating a watermelon flower. I would soon be the proud eater of a homegrown, rare-breed watermelon. Nature had succeeded, despite the odds, again. Even in a plot next to the highway, germination is possible.

The next morning, I stood in my lot and yelped. I threw the hose off to the side—I had been watering—and examined the crime scene. Half my watermelon seedlings were now stubs. My eyes trailed a jellyfish-like slime that ended at what was left of the baby melon plants. Chewed by slugs.

Searching for the culprits in the sunlight, I dug around the moist areas where soil came in contact with wood, a slug's favorite hiding spot. I found a few small ones. They looked—and felt—like pieces of gray snot. Now that I had them, I weighed my options. Some people suggest tossing slugs; that is, you just hurl them as far away from your garden as possible. I had my doubts that the greedy mollusks deserved a second chance, however slim, to slowly creep back from the street, dodging cars and boots, and snack once again on my delicate watermelon seedlings. Other people suggest drowning them in beer moats crafted out of tunafish cans. The slugs would fall into the moat and die a drunken, Janis Joplin-esque death. This seemed suspiciously close

to buying the slugs a beer, which was more generous than I felt. So I dispatched them between my thumb and index finger. I offered their corpses to the ducks and the goose, but they didn't seem interested.

I knew there were more slugs—bigger slugs, the mothers and fathers of these babies I had just murdered—and I knew when to catch them. Later in the day, as the sun set, I drank a strong cup of tea and strapped on my headlamp. Prepared for hand-to-hand combat, I went slug hunting.

I found them, lit up by the strange blue light of my energy-saving headlamp. Lolling around in the dirt, they approached the supple green shoots of my remaining melon plants with their little horns (which are, in fact, eyes) up. Some people think the horn-eyes are endearing, but if the slugs had their way, I would have exactly zero watermelons. These dirt-inhabiting scum balls are the clear-cutters of the mollusk world. They will leave nothing in their wake. If they exercised restraint, they could have a food source for months instead of hours. But this isn't how slugs operate. And so I committed slug mass murder in order to save a fruit.

I ripped them in two; then, just to be sure, I squished them between boards. When it was done, I tossed the grotesque, loogie-like pile of dead slugs into the garbage can.

As I scrubbed my murderous hands I wondered if Lana would refuse to eat one of my watermelons if she knew what I had done. No one is really pure, except maybe the Jains, that sect in India whose members sweep a peacock feather on the ground in front of them as they walk in order to prevent injury to, say, an ant. They do drink water, I'm told, and I wonder how they come to terms with eating all the organisms that live in it.

It took me a full five minutes of scrubbing to remove all the slug slime from my hands. Like a low-stakes Lady Macbeth, I couldn't shake the sensation that they were still soiled. But I wasn't conflicted: I felt great. I killed so that others might live. Death is all around us, even in an innocent watermelon. You just have to know where to look.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



In October, well after all the pork was salted away and I had stopped visiting the restaurant, a sign went up in front of the squat garden. **FOR SALE**, it read. There was a phone number, and I called it. They would like to sell it for \$488,000, the agent told me. I laughed at this price and told her it was a lot in the middle of the ghetto. I didn't tell her who I was.

"Well, that area is in transition," she said.

It was true. I had just the other day spotted a team of ultimate-Frisbee players in the abandoned schoolyard. A group of artists had moved into Lana's warehouse and turned it into an art gallery. And a Whole Foods had just gone up a few blocks away.

"It's zoned commercial," she told me. "You can put condos up." Assuring her that I didn't have that kind of money, and if I did, I wouldn't build condos, I hung up, shaken.

By the winter solstice, the sign still hung in front of the lot. Someone—not me—had knocked it halfway down. To celebrate another year almost over, I threw a party. I served the salami and lardo that I had made with Chris, and the wine I had left from the winemaking party with Jennifer and Willow.

There's a Portuguese saying: The happiest times in life are the first year of marriage and the week after you butcher a pig. The bounty had been overwhelming, and the happiness extended to months. There were sixteen salamis, four pancettas, two coppas, four lardos, and two prosciuttos hanging in the walk-in at the restaurant.

As they were ready I would take them home to eat—and distribute. My

prosciutto, Chris agreed, could stay at the restaurant until it was ready. In our own freezer were the American cuts: pork chops, ground pork, spareribs, and pork back fat. We had another side of pork belly to make bacon with, and another ham—the first one had been outrageous. We had hosted six dinner parties over the past few months, one featuring a banana-leaf-wrapped pork loin, another with pork tacos from slow-roasted spareribs. We had even hosted a sausage-making party.

This was the party where we would debut the salami and the lardo, which had taken three months to cure in Chris's meat room. He had devoted a special section of the meat cave to my meats. I even made a special tag for it: a purple N highlighted by yellow marker.

I had sent my mom, for the solstice, a fennel-spiked salami. She sent me an e-mail raving about it. "I'm slowly slicing off pieces, savoring it," she wrote. I gave Mr. Nguyen a slab of pork ribs. I sent my sister the most quintessential American product: leaf lard. I had rendered pieces of back fat over one day, slowly draining off the fat, which melted on a low flame. It was pure white, like porcelain. I was thankful for sharing, for redistributing the pork. Otherwise, I was going to balloon up just like one of the pigs.

For the party plate, I sliced everything as thin as possible. Whispers of salami, slivers of lardo. The guests packed into our cramped kitchen and snarfed up the food. I couldn't decide what made me happier: having seen the pigs eat so happily, months ago, or watching my friends do so now. My salami, I thought, was as good as Chris's—the fennel seeds shined through and blended with the meat flavor perfectly. Little cracks of pepper and hot paprika in the other dazzled our palates. The lardo—cool, salty, sweet—soothed the heat.

A few guests wanted to hear how I killed rabbits on my farm, and so I narrated their death. I also told the story of how I met Chris for the hundredth time and, like my mother, never grew tired of the telling. We poured the homemade wine and offered guests tastes of the fall honey harvest. I felt slightly embarrassed at the riches in our larder.

By midnight, almost everyone had gone home. A few late-nighters drank the last of the wine and considered our couch.

I walked outside to feed the rabbits, my usual ritual before turning in. The deck quivered with activity. I tossed some bok choy salvaged from the Dumpster from a bucket. The rabbits pounced and nibbled on the greens. Going to the Dumpster now, postpig, was a rather sad exercise. We left so much more than we could take.

I was a little drunk and felt a bit melancholy. At one point the deck had been a hangout for humans. Then it hosted bees and a container garden. At the moment, it was a rabbitry. I loved this place because from here I could view our whole street—the hustlers and the artists, the families with their struggles.

A neighbor turned the corner holding a black bag filled with beer. Joe and Peggy were taking their dog out for a walk. The monks had been preparing a feast all day. The garden was pensive this winter. Someone had set up a table covered with stuffed animals and baby clothing marked with a FREE sign just off MLK, right next to the battered FOR SALE sign.

These past few years had been strange ones, perhaps, for a place known as GhostTown. All of us—the Vietnamese families, the African American teenagers, the Yemeni storekeepers, the Latino soccer players, and, yes, the urban farmers—had somehow found a way to live together. To share and discover our heritage with one another. But now I could feel that an end, or a change, was afoot in this almost new year.

People will come and go. Animals will be birthed and die. Food and flowers will be plucked from the earth, friendships made. Bullets will be fired. Houses will be boarded up, then sold to be fixed up. Innumerable sodas and malt liquors will be purchased from Brother's Market, and many of them will be consumed in the street. Weeds will feed animals that will then feed humans. Dice will be thrown. Children will grow up and move a few blocks away from their parents' house. Incense will be burned, fireworks set off, trash hurled from a moving car. A man will start a new life in a van he can call home. A grandmother will sell dinners of fish she caught and cooked herself. Looking back on it, we in this neighborhood were all aberrations of a sort. No one would have bet on any of us.

I was playing the part of an undertaker again. The body before me was

that of an urban farm. Before long, I imagined, I would leave it, with more nutrients, more plants in the soil for the bulldozers to unearth. But in leaving it, I would take it with me, too. Not just in my body, which had ingested its riches and grown strong in the working of the farm, but in my spirit—all the things I had learned, my singing heart, my smile lines, my aching bones. I hadn't truly owned any of this place. It had owned me.

And now I was just one of the many ghosts in GhostTown. I sprang up here only because it was the perfect intersection of time and place, and, like a seedling, I took advantage, sucked up the nutrients that I could find, forged relationships with others in order to grow, bathed in the sunlight of the moment.

I had been lucky during these past years. Somehow, all the forces had aligned to make my life full and abundant. I had arrived at a time when an abandoned lot could be taken over, a backyard turned into a place to keep animals, connections between humans made. This time had now passed.

My farm will eventually be bulldozed and condos will be built. Bill and I will move somewhere else. Where, undoubtedly, we will first build the garden. Then set up a beehive. Then chickens . . . Being part of nature connected us to the past, the present, and the future.

And who knows, maybe a few neighborhood kids like Dante will pass by the units and tell someone who doesn't care, "There used to be a farm here." Maybe the peach trees planted in the parking strip will remain, and a hungry urban forager will cherish the ripe peaches someday. The soil here will be uncommonly abundant, and maybe someday a strange-looking vegetable will sprout here again, when the moment is ripe.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



One of Willow's chickens turned out to be a rooster. We had distributed most of the chickens to her backyard-garden people, but I still had a few, including the rooster. He was beautiful, with red glossy chest feathers and giant bobbing green tail feathers. At first I enjoyed the crowing, but then I noticed it was happening around 3:30, 4 a.m. It was never just one crow, either—it was over and over again.

In any case, it was extremely annoying. And dangerous. If my neighbors complained, who knows, maybe animal control would come and take my chickens and rabbits. Thinking about my options, I rode my bike past Brother's Market.

"Hey-hey," Mosed the shopkeeper yelled.

I slowed down and peeked in.

"Where's my honey?" he asked.

"I've got some for you—I've just been busy," I answered. We had harvested a boatload in the fall. "Want a rooster?"

He came outside. His dyed red hair sparkled in the weak December sun. He nodded. Tomorrow, I told him, I'd bring him the rooster and some honey.

The rooster slept outside the henhouse, protecting his ladies, I guess. I nabbed him in the morning, tossed him in a cage, and walked half a block to Mosed's market. The rooster had already put in a few crows before 8 a.m.

Inside the store, filled with malt liquor and chips, a woman wearing a head scarf sat on a chair peeling an orange. When she saw me, she let out a torrent of words. The customer in line did a double take at the rooster, then gathered his black plastic bag of beer and left.

I set the cage on the ground. Mosed came around to look at the rooster. I handed him the jar of honey. He smiled. "How much?" he asked.

"Ten dollars for the rooster. The honey's a gift."

Mosed went back around to the cash register and opened the till. His wife shouted a few words, ate a slice of orange.

"She thinks that's too much, huh?" I said. A woman's displeasure is apparent in any language.

"Yes, but don't worry about it," he said. To make her feel better, Mosed showed her the honey. He waved the jar in front of her until she took it out of his hands.

I looked down at the rooster. I was sure Mosed would do a better job dispatching this guy than I would.

Then I was walking home in the cold December air, the sun suddenly bright, a well-worn GhostTown ten-dollar bill in my pants pocket. I wanted to tell Mosed that I had finally figured out who I was, who my people were: they were folks who love and respect animals, who learn from them, draw sustenance from them directly.

Although my holding was small—and temporary—I had come to realize that urban farming wasn't about one farm, just as a beehive isn't about an individual bee. I thought of Jennifer's beehive and garden. Of Willow's backyard farms that dot the city of Oakland. Urban farms have to be added together in order to make a farm. So when I say that I'm an urban "farmer," I'm depending on other urban farmers, too. It's only with them that our backyards and squatted gardens add up to something significant. And if one of ours goes down, another will spring up.

Now facing eviction and change, which is always part of our shifting city life, this time it was my farm that would go under. It was sad, yes, but I knew that wherever I went I would continue to grow my own food, raise animals, love and nurture life in places people thought were dead. And if anyone asked, I could say: I am a farmer.