

Re-Rooting

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Growing things is written in my roots.

Grandpa Meister grew up on the sooty edge of coal-fired Cincinnati, and moved to “the country” in 1920 after he married my grandma. They started a family and a garden, taught themselves food preservation, and lived frugally. Uncle Art was a tinsmith. I don’t know whether it was Art’s or Herbert’s handiwork, but the canning kettle they brazed from sheet copper became my sister’s shiny end table decades after its first life faded.

By the time Grandpa picked me up at the bus stop, fresh from morning kindergarten, the chicken coop where my father the boy collected eggs was history, as were tales of grandma and the neighbors butchering a pig together. I learned early how not to step on the lettuce while we weeded beans, turnips, kohlrabi, and cabbage, started in cold frames Grandpa scavenged from glass doors, nestled up against the garage.

All summer, Grandma canned tomatoes on the gas laundry stove in the stone cellar, and squeezed grapes from a huge muslin sack she strung from the floor joists. How she managed to aim Catawba juice into enameled pans, set side-by-side on the oilcloth table, is beyond me now, but that competent lady had impressive forearms. Grape jelly, wine fortified with sugar (she was afraid of the bees, and wouldn’t let the grapes ripen), homemade ketchup, sauerkraut, green beans, and applesauce sustained two households through the winter.

Grandma grew flowers alongside the house, in the border between basement windows and a long driveway. My summer pastime was collecting ripened four o’clock seeds that littered the walk like shrunken black lemons. For next season’s planting, Grandpa and I stored the seeds in the left front drawer of Grandma’s dining room buffet.

At 95, Grandma promised me her Luray pastel china and her dining room furniture. When she died in the summer of 1987, I lived in an Alameda townhouse my husband and I had already furnished. The dining room set remained in Cincinnati until we moved to a larger place. One Sunday in October 1991, the angel of wildfire good and truly passed over us. Too many tallied losses of homes and photographs the week the movers placed Grandma’s buffet in my new old dining room. There, in the left front drawer, a handful of tiny four o’clock seeds took my breath away, a touchstone of safer times, embraced in the calm of Grandma and Grandpa’s Puhlman Ave. railroad flat, that chill place where kids made tents of chairs and blankets on rainy days, and a family ate bacon-laced hot slaw, too many barbecued spare ribs, and plenty of apple pie on Memorial Day.

During the final months of 1991 I prepared a back yard, long buried under concrete, for the vegetable garden of my fantasies. The ground was dust and Merritt sand, full of ants, lacking organic matter, but curiously sporting green sprouts whenever I turned my back. Pulling them repeatedly revealed enormous rhizomes. I wondered, “Daikon? Horseradish?” Whatever, it was either it or my tomatoes, and I vowed tomatoes would win. I lost. In the spring those bizarre shoots burst into spicely magenta blooms of four o’clocks that graced the entire yard in subtle perfume whose memory is the scent-branding of my seventh summer on the planet.

Sixty years hence I live in Cincinnati again. I hesitate to say, “back.” It’s a different world, I’m a different human being, and things are rarely the same over such expanse of time. We all have long histories of our own from this way-by on the journey.

With me from California, I brought Christmas ornaments collected over forty-six years of adult living. They’ve been stored off-season in boxes labelled, “DO NOT SET ANYTHING ON TOP OF THIS BOX.” Containers were consolidated for the move, and slathered, like all of us in 2020, with “FRAGILE” tape. Unlike the glass in Grandma’s fumed oak china cabinet, the ornaments survived.

Two days ago, the tree went up, a dozen light strands unwound from storage spools. Boxes emptied, I reached down to clean up the detritus. In the corner was a tiny shrunken black lemon.

This is not fiction, and I make no claims on poetry. If that four o’clock seed came from my own yard it’s thirty years old. If it came from Grandma’s, it’s sixty. Not sure whether to plant it, or frame it. But, until I decide, this gentle holdfast is tucked in the left front drawer of the buffet, where it belongs.