

The Generosity *of a Garden*

Standing near the agreed upon tree at the edge of the school lawn, a sea of children of varying ages and volumes rushing past, I wait for my ten-year-old walking companion to appear on the front steps. Gabriel and I have walked together every Monday and Wednesday for the past year following a shift in his mom's hours at work. Afoot, we make our way through our Los Angeles neighborhood that might be described as "colorful" or as "under-served" depending on which city initiative you're reading.

As we start out, Gabe is quiet. This is sometimes normal for a ten year old and sometimes not. Without children of my own, I'm still getting the hang of this. How Was Your Day and What Did You Do are not great conversation starters. I satisfy myself with pointing out what I see; conversational, but with no expectation of

reply. It's a gorgeous afternoon and everything invites comment.

By Melissa Kellogg

We sidestep lifted sidewalk and

duck wayward loquat branches. Past a Beware of Dog sign (and the Chihuahua it represents) I see a vegetable garden in a mishmash of containers, placed in sunny spots below aged fruit trees. The chard is coming along nicely. Behind one sagging chain link fence a prolific family of aloes, many generations represented, crowds inside a faded plastic pot displayed near a doorway. A renter myself, I recognize the importance of keeping one's loved ones mobile.

Further on, an entry walk with a mortared seashell edge widens for a decaying fountain set directly in the center. Succulents trail from the basin. Here, too, potted plants are grouped in areas marked by a necklace of shells. A small statue stands under arching rose canes, the earth around it swept clean. The offerings we saw there last week are gone today.

Many of these vignettes we observe regularly, so when the geranium spilling over the stone wall near the turquoise house blooms, it seems meant for us. And when the aloe vera planted in the yard of the woman keeping parakeets on her porch suddenly sports tiny red ribbons tied neatly to the tips of each of its fat green leaves, it's a secret message to us, though the meaning is a mystery. Often, Gabriel collects found objects from our walk for his mother. Foreign coins, a snowflake charm, a drawing of the moon. He has also scored cut roses, nearly ripe persimmons, one heavy avocado... shared by the people who keep these gardens.

Today, I notice, he is not finding much. His fingers grasp carelessly at overgrown crocosma planted near the sidewalk. He is thinking about something from school, or maybe avoiding thinking about it, thinking about something else altogether. My own mind works this way when in the comfort of plants, the meditative rhythm of walking.

Ahead a small woman peeks over her gate. I hear sweeping, a pause, then a peek, then more sweeping. We get closer and she swings the gate open, bells tied to it ring, its metal frame scrapes the sidewalk. She smiles and waves Gabriel over. She likes this boy, her eyes shine as he walks to her obediently. I notice he has grown again, and stands now at her same height. In animated Spanish she asks him about school, admonishes him to do well, and asks after his mother. He speaks softly, but readily answers her questions. She waves at the ripened fruit on her Kumquat tree and savors our exclamations.

Gabe begins to step back to our journey, but the woman taps his shoulder. From the pocket of her housecoat comes a small bag of fresh kumquats. She says, in English, "For your Mother." Then, choosing the largest for him, she says, "For you!", and pulls him forward to kiss his forehead. He laughs shyly and we say goodbye. She stands at the gate to watch us go. I hear the sweeping resume, a pause, then more sweeping. Gabe looks at me and laughs again. The tartness of the kumquat in his mouth makes him squint. He swings the bag he has for his mother and points out a cat that has ducked under a rosemary hedge. His pace has quickened. We'll be home very soon.

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