

Free Fruit For All!
(The Orchard: The Eighth Incitement)

A handful of us were at the Green Bean (RIP), the coffee shop on Fourth Street in Bloomington, Indiana, where our writing group would gather every Friday morning to go over poems. This would have been early to mid-February, 2010, and that was an especially cold February for us, as our friend, the writer Don Belton, had been murdered just over a month ago. Though Don was not officially part of this group—he was more of a solitary or private writer, far as I knew; he wasn't working his work out in groups like this—he would regularly be there in the Bean, writing in his journal or reading a book over in a corner table, and he'd not infrequently drop by to give an extemporaneous lecture. Or sometimes, though he might not've wanted to grind on his work with us, subject it to our interrogations, he did like to share, and would be unbashful doing so. The dude could write. The dude left a wound in the world.

Two of us, Chris and I, had spent a couple days putting his many, *many* books into boxes and hauling them to the English department. I had cleaned and folded his clothes, gotten his papers together with another friend for the rare books

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library, and had either recently driven or would be in the near future driving some of his stuff back to his brother, who happened to live across the street from where I grew up outside of Philadelphia. One of those things was an antique pedal car Don played with as a kid.

As we were gathering, getting our coffees—actually, at the Green Bean, the coffee was very average, but the short Americanos were very good—getting our short Americanos, catching up, bullshitting, warming up, Dave was flipping through the local newspaper. Usually, it was sports Dave would report on, but today he noticed a small article about a forthcoming meeting for a possible community orchard. It was going to happen on February 22, at city hall. I marked it down in my calendar, and for good measure tore the announcement out of the paper and stuck it in the book I was reading.

It seems worth noting that at the time I was, for all intents and purposes, about eighteen months into gardening. Though I was adamant, and enthusiastic, I was very green. I grew up in apartments and never had access to a yard or the kind of green space a garden usually requires, but when I moved to Bloomington, and was making decent money, within a year, June of 2008, I got a two-bedroom, 850-ish-square-foot house painted Kermit the Frog green. The house was cool, but just as cool, a necessity really, was that it had a big, open lawn that, in my mind, looked like a big, productive, garden. I am just remembering this, but a strong motivation for me to get a house, and maybe especially for me to get a house with a sunny, south-facing yard, was because my best friend Jay's family was soon to be moving away from the house outside

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of Philadelphia they'd lived in for almost a couple decades, which was a second home to me, and where Mr. Lau grew a beautiful garden.

In addition to the row of fruit trees—peaches, pears, Asian pears, plums—Mr. Lau dug a pond in which he grew ong choy, or water spinach, wouldn't be surprised if he had some fish in there; bitter melon dangled from the trellis he suspended from the chain-link enclosure around the pond. I'm pretty sure they used the water spinach and bitter melon at their restaurant, The Gold Fountain. He also grew goji berries, which, though you may pay a couple thousand dollars a pound at Whole Amazon Foods, are actually the easiest things on this green earth to grow. His grew all the way up the ten feet of chain-link fence, a prickly thicket of, first, lavender flowers, and then the bright red berries Mr. Lau would cook into a stew. (For the record—this is how you propagate goji: you snip a little piece of branch and stick it into the ground. Amen.). And there was a chestnut tree that was probably fifty or sixty feet tall, producing bushels of the burrish fruit, casting a lush, dappled shade over a patch of yard, at the edge of which, I didn't know any of this then, were a few stands of figs. When I slept there at Jay's, which was often, I would wake to see Mr. Lau doing his tai chi in the garden.

One of those mornings my life officially changed when there was a colander full of purple-black somethings on the table, one of which Jay took a bite from before pushing the colander toward me, saying something like, *Oh, the figs are getting ripe*. Did you have a friend whose refrigerator was always full of real and delicious food? Maybe watermelon

cut off the rind? Maybe handmade pork dumplings? A friend whose parents felt it an obligation to feed you? To share with you from their garden? To send you home sometimes with food? What do you do when your blessings are more than you can count?

I was probably in my early to mid twenties, I was carnivorous in the way a *Tyrannosaurus rex* is carnivorous, I did not abide the idea of the nonbovine vegetarian, Fuddruckers was to me a culinary apex. And though it is the same sort of ridiculing joke I make to other *fignoramuses*,¹ I myself was one and thought figs were more or less what was inside a newton. So, if you're reading this book, probably you know that when I bit into the first one, it was soft, deep purple, and probably had the slightest tear at its eye, as, after turning the fruit in my mouth, did I. A ripe fig—this cultivar we speculate is either Brown Turkey or Chicago Hardy—is like that. It will make you cry. It will change your life.

So when the Laus started talking about moving—actually Jay told me they were talking about it—I got nervous or frantic or sad and started thinking how I could bring Mr. Lau's trees to Bloomington. I know, I know. I was a gardening infant. Most of the trees were ten or fifteen years old, some of them about fifteen or twenty feet tall, and dear Mr. Lau all the same considered it with me, explaining to Jay that we'd have to get a backhoe or something to dig out the huge rootballs, and

 1 I know that's horrible, probably you know I know it's horrible, but I'm too much of a coward on this one not to be absolutely sure you know I know. You know I know it's horrible, right?

maybe hire the biggest moving truck we could, etc. In other words, it wasn't gonna happen. But figs, he said, are easier.

So early spring 2009, after I got my place, I was passing through my old neighborhood outside of Philadelphia and I stopped by the Laus' with my more modest dreams. Mr. Lau took me into the garden, carrying a pitchfork and a five-gallon bucket, where he whacked the dormant figs with the pitchfork at their bases, cutting for me well-rooted branches that he promptly tossed into the bucket. Probably he did this ten times, before taking me to the goji sprawling up the chain-link, and with pruners he pulled from his back pocket, snipping about the same number of branches. He handed me the bucket, told me to fill it up with water, and to keep the roots moist until I planted them. I put them on the floor in the back seat of the car and tried not to slosh on my way back to Bloomington.

Like most anything dormant, a dormant fig cutting looks like a stick, it looks lifeless, it looks like nothing, so when I planted them—three against the shed out back, the other seven in pots I scavenged—it felt like I was planting sticks. (I said I was green.) I checked on them a lot. With the ones out back I'd get on my knees and look for signs. The ones in the pots, which were now clustered next to my printer in front of the south-facing window, I'd turn round and round, talking to them some, asking them if they were alive and such. Those days I was probably singing a lot of Donny Hathaway to them. "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" and "A Song for You."

The Hathaway must've worked, because one day looking at the figs in pots, early May, I noticed tiny green bumps on the sticks, near the soil. I went out to the shed and, sure enough,

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noticed the same on those. In a couple weeks those bumps unfurled into leaves, tiny green hands reaching out from the sticks. In a couple more, the sticks, I guess this means they were trees, were all leafed out and growing. All ten took. And when we say a plant takes, we really mean it's going to give.

When I got to the chamber in city hall for the orchard meeting, it was bustling. There were probably a hundred or so people, some in groups, some, like me, sitting by ourselves, curious what this community orchard was going to be about. After we were all seated and had quieted down, a young woman named Amy Countryman—I recognized her from the market, where she worked at a farm stand and sometimes had a child sitting on her hip—took the floor. We learned that she was a recent graduate from Indiana University, where for her thesis project on food security, she proposed a community orchard as an intervention model for providing food. Her advisor set up a meeting with the Bloomington urban forester, who read her thesis and told her that if she could prove community support, the city would give over an acre of land, on a trial basis, to the orchard. Amy came up with what has to be one of the best catchphrases ever: *Free Fruit for All*.

After some conversation, the group decided (as I recall—I don't remember a top-down situation) to break into three groups. There was Media and Outreach, which, given my aversion to Facebook, I avoided like the plague. Next was Grants and Fundraising, which, since I'm not that interested in shaking people down, I passed on. But Site Preparation, which just sounded like gardening, I was very interested in, so

I stuck with that breakout group, where we discussed what it would require to make the one-acre site—a compacted, mown, unused field adjacent to a playground and across the parking lot from the community garden—into a hospitable ground for trees. Fairly quickly our group broke into smaller groups that would design the site, make compost, and select the cultivars. In about an hour we had made plans for our next meetings and were ready to report back to the whole group.

We returned to the main chamber and gave our rundowns. After the reports, some people realized they belonged in other groups, and some people realized they didn't quite have the time, and some people probably weren't interested. One woman, who I would learn has an amazing community garden plot where she grows hardy kiwis along a shopping-cart trellis, wondered if we might be able to communicate not only over email but also by phone. And then there were antagonists, or naysayers, of course. *Why this site? It's not going to work out. You don't know what you're doing. This is, and you are, going to fail.* That kind of thing. But most of us seemed ready to get to work. By the time we were filing out of city hall, we were a bunch of teams, definitely not committees, horizontalish, figuring it out, at the beginning of dreaming an orchard into being.

I joined the plant selection team, excited to be studying which plants thrive in our region—the heavy clay soils; the hot, humid summers; the various tree diseases floating around these parts. In this, as with every other stage of the project, there were newbies and there were wizards. There were kids and there were elders. There were people with gads of

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experience, and people with very little. And we plugged away together. Over time, with loads of research, we determined the cultivars we would be planting, which included varieties of apple, pear, peach, plum, tart cherry, pawpaw, and yes, figs.

As is often the case with projects like this, there was ebbing and flowing of the volunteers, things come up, it's called life, and within a couple months the handful or so of us most able at the time to show up became, more or less, the board. My friend Amy Roche, who would become the board chair for the first several years of the orchard, reminded me that we were sitting around a picnic table at the shelter next to the orchard when one of us said, *well, I guess we're the board, huh?* Which was pretty much what came to pass.

Though that didn't at all diminish the actual thousands of people who pitched in, whether it was voting for the orchard to receive grants, or loaning tools, or sharing books, or giving impromptu grafting lessons, or dropping off food, or delivering spent grains from the brewery, or turning compost, which, in our attempts to renovate a compacted, nutrient-deprived clay field, we were constantly doing. I don't know how many people I wrangled into spending an afternoon hauling tons of stable bedding (dookie mixed with straw) in wheelbarrows to the windrows of compost we were building, which involved layering the stable bedding with leaves gathered from the nearby forest and brewery grains. That compost came alive with maggots and stunk so bad the commissioner of the Little League across the street complained. But with our steady turning it got steamy hot before it became luscious enough to eat.

Once, pitchforking manure into those wheelbarrows, Sean, who was often there with his dad, seemed like rehabilitating their relationship, plunged the fork into the mound and pulled it back with an impaled tiny bunny squealing and motoring tiny legs in the air. We all gasped and turned away, and Sean, though he winced, held it together enough to very gently dis-impale the rabbit with his hands before carrying the baby against his body to a protected place in the nearby woods. We moved further down the mound of manure, away from the probable rabbit den, more timidly plunging our forks, but we more or less moved on, maybe macho-ly, like *nature's tough, dude*. Or at least we pretended to.

After a couple more hours shoveling shit we all left, but it was gnawing at me, the little bunny we pierced, and I went back, maybe thinking I could drive the bunny down to the wild care center on Second Street. When I got there the bunny was gone, and against all hope I hoped for that bunny a long bunny life. Not so lucky, that bunny. The next day I learned that Sean had done the same thing, returning shortly after we took off to check on his bunny a bit before me, and much to Sean's delight and surprise the bunny was alive, and hopped away quick, looking not a whole lot worse for the wear, but when bunny was bouncing through a clearing a hawk swept down, snatched bunny up, and flew away. Why tell that story? Because just like you would've, we were trying to help the bunny. That's why.

Which is a good place to mention just how goddamned inefficient and incompetent we were. The board meetings were, as I recall, weekly, though considering the various and