

Same

By Lynn Jatania

So, I'm back home with Mom again. I just couldn't face summer in the city. New York has like, twenty-five million people, but in some ways, it's such a small town. I just knew I'd be bumping into Jake around every corner, and he'd look all freshly pressed in his bigshot broker suit, and I'd probably be wearing track pants and still sleeping on Maria's couch, so yeah, not so much.

Maria said to me, *you shouldn't run, you're not the one who did anything wrong, that bastard owes you ownership of the deli at the very least*. But I told her that heading back to my mom's for a few months didn't feel as much like running *away* from something as running *to* something. Sure, Winnipeg in the summer is a mosquito infested pit of boredom, but there's a peace there too, and maybe a reset is what I needed. Ever since I left, I feel like I've been pushing, to get higher, be better, move faster. This thing with Jake just made me feel like I needed to go back to the beginning and start over. And as I told Maria, *I can be a social media manager from anywhere*.

Mom has been great, too. No pressure, although heaven knows she's busy enough with her own comings and goings; she hardly notices someone else in the house. Today she was off with her Lunch Ladies, as she calls them, twice a week for salads and wine spritzers at Segovia. I am not invited, as the Ladies have personal things to discuss. Chances are she'll come tripping home at least one sheet to the wind and with some new guy's number in her phone. When it comes to getting over cheating scumbags, Mom certainly provides plenty of inspiration, although I suppose she has had a good twenty years' head start on me.

I'm good with Mom doing Mom and me doing me. She said to me, *Evie, why don't you get out today, call up the old high school friends*, but I'm still not quite ready for that level of human interaction. So, it's jammies again today and a bit of work - Facebook promotions for the Central Park Conservancy - then maybe some Netflix this afternoon. I've been binging on Korean dramas and I think the superhero lead of *Strong Woman Bong-Soon* is about to literally kick her boyfriend to the curb, which would be awesome.



As the Bong-Soon credits rolled, I realized I hadn't seen Merlot in a while. That cat is a runner – if she can get out, she will, and she goes straight for Eugene's garden next door. You can't blame her – Eugene's a wiz with organics and heirloom species, and on top of growing the best veggies in town, I'm pretty sure he has a little patch of catnip in the back corner specifically to lure Merlot into his yard. That way, he has a great excuse to see my mother at least once or twice a week.

I rushed out into the backyard in my bare feet, PJ pants around my hips, hair gone wild and hopeless in the usual Winnipeg summertime humidity. There's a little break in the fence between our places and when I was a kid, I could slip through, and I'm still a pretty tiny person so without thinking I dove for the hole.

And that's where Devin found me, stuck halfway, in classic Winnie the Pooh fashion.

I hadn't seen him since I left for McGill, right after high school grad. We'd both been kids then, barely out of braces and still smelling of zit cream, believing that a little backseat passion was True Love. We both thought we'd make a difference in this world, but he wanted to stay, work in the community. I wanted to do bigger things in bigger places. I told him he was welcome to come along for the ride or get off the train. I dreamed of glass and steel and offices where the women wore high heels and raised millions for charity over breakfast. He couldn't see the vision and punched his ticket for the same old town we'd lived in all our lives.

He still looked awfully good, though. A few years' worth of added muscle and facial hair had been a definite plus. Which only made it worse that he was seeing me at a bit of a low point.

At least he didn't laugh out loud, although I definitely saw some smirking going on behind his hand. And despite his crisp white shirt and cool khakis, he waded through the dirt to offer me a hand up, ruining his nice banker's shoe shine. He had Merlot tucked under his other arm. I wriggled and he pulled and soon we were face to face; I had to deliberately let go of his hand and it felt like a hard choice to make.

I heard mewing out here. Was it the cat or was it you? I knew that voice, with its soft teasing tone.

I brushed off fence slivers from my tank top, and shook leaves out of my hair. My kingdom for a little lip gloss and eyeliner, I thought.

Good to see you, I suppose, I said, looking him up and down. Damn, why did he have to be so put together?

Same, he said, just like he always used to, every time I told him I was lost or lonely or excited or...in love. He stepped back, taking in the whole Evie package, and I considered crawling back into the fence hole.

He asked me what I was doing back in town and I said something dumb about a summer vacation and slumming it with the townsfolk.

Well, we appreciate you passing through, he said with a bit of sadness, but no trace of bitterness. *How's life in the big city? Big plans, changing the world, all that?*

I nodded. I mean, it's just social media work for a few charities but I'm still hoping it's a stepping stone to real change. He didn't need to know all the details.

I looked around at the garden. *It's as lovely as ever back here. At least three new vegetable boxes, and what's that in the back – raspberry canes? Is Eugene still as passionate as ever about organic stuff?*

Devin nodded. *Brings a weekly harvest basket to your Mom, I think. It gets him out and about and lets him talk about the benefits of natural fertilization, which I'm sure is a big conversational hit.*

We both laughed a little, and he said actually, all this might be gone soon, and I asked why, and he said that his Uncle Eugene had fallen last week and broken his ankle.

I'm considering closing down the garden for this year, at least.

I was horrified. I mean, Eugene's garden is an institution. I grew up on his kale and broccoli. Even now, the store-bought stuff is a distant second best, and that's being generous. I needed a project, so without even thinking it over I heard myself say, *I'll do it, I'll take care of it.*

He snorted, which made me pretty mad, and accused me of being *unable to take the heat, and the humidity, and the mosquitos... You're an indoor girl.*

Well, just call me Strong Woman Evie, ‘cause I told him I was *more than up for it*, with all the dignity I could muster, given that I had little kitten pictures all over my pyjama pants and possibly still had leaves in my ratty hair. *You can take the girl out of the Peg, but you can’t take the Peg out of the girl.*

We’ll see, he said, but he smiled.

Damn, if that isn’t a nice smile.



The grocery store, the garden at The Forks, the running path along the river. Everywhere I go now I seem to bump into Devin. I have to say, at first it was awkward but now when we see each other we stop and chat a bit, and we sat for coffee the other day at Tim’s. He’s easy to talk to even if he does catch me in yoga pants and a gardening smock most of the time. It’s surprising how we both still believe in change and that one person can have the power to make a difference. I think I’m convincing him that big ideas are important, but he makes a good point about small changes making an impact, too. It’s food for thought.

Maria called the other day, and I told her about the garden. She said not to get too comfortable because her couch was always waiting for me to come on back home. I told her it’s weird, I don’t think of New York as home but The Peg isn’t really home either. No place is my place, except maybe Eugene’s backyard.

She said *what good is it being a conservationist if you are only saving one garden*, and I didn’t have a good answer for that.



I have an idea.

It’s as surprising to me as it is to everyone else, but I actually love taking care of Eugene’s garden. The feel of earth between my fingers is somehow refreshing, the smell of the plants cycling through bloom and blossom and decomposition is a glorious olfactory symphony. I’ve been reading everything I can get my hands on about organic farming – natural pesticides and fallow cycles and species variation and mixing. It’s intoxicating to see a little hard work

actually result in something real, something you can hold and taste and share, instead of numbers on a report or “exposure” rankings in the digital vapour.

The garden has done so well this year that there’s produce for Eugene, and my Mom, and most of the other houses on the street, too. Henry, who lives two doors down from us, works as a manager at the Vita Health market and asked if he could have some of my – well, Eugene’s – tomatoes to sell there. And that gave me The Big Idea.

There are dozens of older folks in our suburban neighbourhood, who can barely keep up with the grass cutting, let alone do anything else with their spacious and empty backyards. So, what if I started a business setting up small organic gardens all around Winnipeg? I’d take out grass and build boxes, plant seeds from Eugene’s heirloom stock. I could conscript an army of university students, home for the summer, and we’d be a team of micro farmers. The people offering up their yards would be paid in food and the extra would be sold at the market to cover costs. It’s a small thing, but it would mean no one using a bunch of chemicals and water to feed an unnatural lawn, and instead, using the earth for something productive.

I’m excited about this.

Here’s the thing, though. I need a loan to set up the beds, get things going. Luckily, I know a small business loans officer who is interested in food and preservation and helping the community.

It’s a great idea, Devin said when I saw him at the bank, but how will you sustain the business? Are you going to be sticking around?

I didn’t know how to answer that.

Well, then, we’ll see, he said.

I thought we’d been clicking, finding our mental groove, but now that all felt wrong. I stood up and said, *Don’t put yourself out or anything. I’m just trying to cultivate something here, to nourish a seed until it bursts into life.*

Same, I heard him say as I tried to slam the bank’s glass door.



My Mom headed out to the spa today with her Lunch Ladies. She broke protocol, looking pointedly at my gardener's hands and sad, mopey face, invited me to come along for a manicure.

I don't think I'm a manicure and high heels, glass and steel girl anymore, though. I don't know what I am, but not that; I maybe never was. I sulked and said *no, thank you*.

She gave me a hug and said *oh honey, everything will be okay*, and I got a little misty-eyed.

She said, *Is it Devin?* And I didn't know what to say, it's Devin and Winnipeg and life and the earth, so I just nodded. She said, *Eugene told me you two had run into each other again and I was wondering when all that history was going to catch up with you*.

Eugene told you that, did he? I said.

She blushed. *Well, I've been reading to him in the afternoons while you're working sometimes, you know, just to help him pass the time while his ankle heals*.

Reading? Is that what we are calling it?

She gave me a little shove, picked up her handbag. *Now now, we're all adults here*, she said, but I wasn't so sure about either of us.



So, I was planning for this to be my last week home with Mom. I booked a flight back to New York for Saturday, and called Maria and asked if her couch was still free. *I thought you'd never ask*, Maria said, and I had to hang up quickly before I burst into tears. Happy or sad though, I just couldn't say.

But this morning, Devin came by. It was Saturday, and he had jeans on and gloves with him and a trowel, and said he had come to work. I wasn't sure if I wanted to see him at all but it's just about the end of the season and there are a couple big plants to dig out, so I shrugged and grabbed my gardening hat.

At Eugene's, we got to digging, and of course he waited until I was at my most sweaty and streaky before he casually brought up the business loan. It's as if he wanted to make the whole thing as uncomfortable as possible.

He said, *I think it's a really good idea*, and I could see where that was going and told him to just shut up about it. But then he said he had referred it all to his boss, because he was biased.

Because of how I feel about you, he said.

I had to swallow hard at that one.

He said, *you got it*. And I was confused for a moment, like, I got what? And then I realized he meant the loan came through. And it was going to happen, if I wanted it to. The whole dirty, earthy, wonderfully chaotic mess of gardens and earth and organic growth could actually happen.

If this place would be home for me, once again.

I want you to stay, he said.

Same, I said.

The Peg is a small town, but in a lot of ways, it can be big enough to fill your whole heart.