

FREYA & JAKOB

BRINGING STUFF TO LIFE

Freya wraps her hands around a stand of herbs. —This cilantro is ready, she says. She clips the leaves and piles them loosely in an old margarine tub. —Will you pick some of that arugula for the salad?

Jakob sets his vodka tonic down on the concrete and kneels down next to Freya, looks into the garden. —Which is the arugula?

—The one with the little sign that says *arugula*.

—Oh yeah, he says. He locates the plant and handles its leaves with a vague squeamishness. —Do I—? he begins.

—Do you what?

—Do I just pull the leaves off? Or do I just pull the whole thing up by the roots or what?

—You've really never done this before, she says.

—Not really, he says.

—Don't pull off anything you wouldn't want to eat, she says.

—OK. He makes his best guess by picking a single leaf. He holds it timidly out for her inspection. —Like this? he says.

—Perfect, she says. —Put it in the colander.

They work for a while in silence.

—Did you see I've even got some tomatoes coming in? she says. She points at the vine. —They'll be ripe in a couple of days.

—Awesome, Jakob says.

—Last year I didn't get to have a single tomato, Freya says. —They all got eaten. I think it was rats.

—Rats eat tomatoes? Jakob asks.

—Rats eat anything, Freya says. She rises out of her crouch and brushes off the knees of her overalls. Jakob rises as well, and reclaims his vodka.

—I'm going to miss this place, Freya says.

Jakob nods and says —Mmm. He sips his drink and watches a squirrel crossing over the yard on a wire. He's afraid to say anything more committal, because he feels implicated in her sorrow—she'll *miss this place* because she'll be leaving it in September so that she can move into a new apartment with him. It was basically his idea. So if she feels a sense of loss, it's hard for him not to feel like it's his *fault*. What's the appropriate response? To say *I'm sorry*?

—I'll especially miss this little garden, she says. She looks at it. It began as just a triangular corner of the back patio where years of frost heave and weeds had begun to break up the concrete. She asked her downstairs neighbors if she could use the spot as a garden and they said sure.

—It's weird, she says, —to like *look* at this stuff and think *I brought this stuff to life*. I never really thought of myself as a person who was particularly *nurturing*, you know? I mean, I've told you about the Shah. (The Shah was a mutt that belonged to one of Freya's roommates back when she first moved to Chicago. Nobody took good care of him and he developed mange and a mental disorder where he would roll compulsively in his own shit. Eventually he ran away, and no one bothered to try to find him.) —But then I look at this garden and I think *I made this*. *I took tiny seeds and I made something that I can have with my dinner*.

—Maybe when we're looking for a new place we can try to find a place where you'll be able to have another garden, Jakob says.

—Yeah, Freya says. —Yeah, I guess. But she remembers starting this garden in the spring of 2002: remembers swinging a sledge, breaking the slabs of concrete up into chunks; pulling the chunks out of the earth, along with glass and bottle caps and nails and ten million other kinds of crap. She doesn't think that she could recreate that experience and she doesn't really want to try.

—It's pretty amazing, when you think about it, she says. She leans over and picks a mint leaf. —Here, she says. —Eat this.

—What is it? Jakob says.

—Just trust me, she says, and she pushes it into his mouth.

He chews it. —Wow, he says.