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## **Santa Fe's Organic Vegetables**

Santa Fe, New Mexico, 7000 feet up in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Adobe buildings are soil as habitat. Potted geraniums grow in houses, on porches, in yards and windows. Art galleries and hand craft shops downtown draw in tourists and spit out tourists.

Summer afternoons, dark clouds stack up above the mountain, crowd hot summer sunshine out of the sky, throw jagged, sharp lightning to the earth, shake the mountain with thunder. Rain falls hard and cleans the city

Our daughter, Juniper, one year old, sits on the window sill and leans out our apartment window. Rain water emerging from the high rain gutter soaks her, and she laughs with glee at the bounty given to her by the sky above her. Hens and chicks, small green and red succulents, soak up rain and multiply in the soil. Furious rain lasts 25 minutes. Then the clouds break up, and the sun shines from the blue mountain sky again.

The commune we came here to be part of, and I would be gardener for all of us, and Laura would take care of children, fell apart before it started. Laura and I moved almost downtown, to a small duplex just across the gravel and dirt parking lot from a liquor store.

Some of Santa Fe's outdoor alcoholics drink and rest under the trees at the back of the parking lot, afternoons and nights, lean against the cinder block wall that borders the lot. Some nights, they sing. Most of them, we can talk to.

One old man is aggressive in his quest for donations to buy his next bottle, stops cars on the street, reaches to shake my hand and holds on while he demands money, stops Laura and threatens her to try to get money from her. Even carrying Juniper, she is faster on her feet than he is and walks around him. We are friendly with most of them, but we avoid that one.

Our income is tight. Three years before, a drunk driver hit me as I rode a large black motorcycle down Highway 299 from the Sierra Mountains on the way to the Sacramento Valley in northern California. Injuries I received in that wreck still limit my ability to work long enough to hold a job, still limit my ability to earn money.

I signed up for New Mexico state rehab counseling, to try to

make me fit into some kind of steady job. I didn't fit into a job through that program, but the counselor, Richard, said he could use some help getting a house he had bought near our place fixed up and ready to rent. Afternoons after he got off work and Saturday mornings, I helped him repair plumbing, sand floors, varnish floors, and paint rooms.

I met Tom and Deena, who made a deal with Richard to rent the house. I made a deal with Tom and Deena to help them build a garden for a share in the garden. Richard let us use his pickup, and Tom rented a rototiller. We hauled horse manure and alfalfa hay to the garden and tilled the materials into the soil and planted seeds and watered.

Laura and Juniper and I walked downtown. Laura carried Juniper facing her, warm against her, snuggled into her. When it was my turn to carry Juniper, I carried her facing forward, her back against me, a chair of my arms, so she could see where we were going. I made up a song, "He calls me funny honey, and he tickles my toes. He calls me funny honey, and he touches my nose." She loved it. We sang that song and other songs as we walked.

Juniper walked a ways when Laura held one of her hands and I held the other. We didn't swing her off the ground between us. That might be too hard on her shoulders. If we were over cautious about her joints and muscles, that was okay. She had plenty of adventure without that one.

When we had money, sometimes we ate at restaurants. Lots of good restaurants in Santa Fe.

In our tightest time, I tried to hock my guitar. Two pawn shops, normally open, were closed. At one, the sign said "Illness in the family." The other offered no explanation. The third pawn shop, the guy would have taken my guitar, but he had taken in so many pawns, he was out of money, and he had no one to watch the store while he went to the bank. I took it as instruction from the universe, "Don't take chances with your guitar. Hold it tight." I did. Besides giving me advice, the universe gave us other ways to meet our needs.

I found a job making rammed earth bricks. The work was intermittent. When the owners of the business got orders for bricks, they called the crew. I couldn't work eight hours, but there was never eight hour's worth of bricks ordered at one time.

Three at a time worked on the crew. One shoveled dirt and concrete, mixed with water, into the ramming machine. One pulled the long lever down, put full weight on it to bring it to

the bottom of its stroke, then pulled the lever up to present the compressed brick. One took compressed earth bricks the machine presented and stacked them to dry. When we ran out of mix to ram, we worked together and put the ingredients for a new batch, dirt, cement, water, into the large tray built for that. We mixed the materials with hoes and shovels and began compressing bricks again in mountain sunshine.

The crew changed. Two young guys, Ned and Chuck, who had a band and enough paying gigs to supplement odd jobs like making rammed earth bricks worked with me for a while. Then they went on their way, and James worked. James wore a ragged bear skin as a cape and called himself Spotted Pony and said he was part of the Indian Nations, though he was white, and Ed, who had to quit because he herniated his groin, and Judy, who was 20 and strong and said, "It isn't fair that you guys get to work with your shirts off, and I don't just because I'm female."

I said, "Nobody made that rule but you. I vote go ahead," and Ed agreed, and when he left and James came along, it was already established as the way we worked. We rotated jobs, shovel into the machine, operate the lever, remove the bricks and stack them to dry. We got paid by the brick and made not a bad amount of money, but not all that good, enough to pay rent and other expenses of living.

The garden grew well in Santa Fe's mountain summer sunshine.

Tomato plants grew. Squash, corn, potatoes, cabbage, kohlrabi, carrots, pumpkins. Sunflower stalks grew higher than the roof of the house. Broccoli, lettuce, peas, beans, onions, garlic, beets. Tom built a greenhouse against the south side of their house. Many people came to see Tom and Deena. Everyone tracked in the abrasive granite soil, and new varnish Richard and I had worked so hard to put down very smoothly began to wear.

They had good smoke at that house. I smoked with all the people standing in a circle, said "I got to go home," turned around and ran into the wall. Everyone laughed. I said, "I thought the door was there." I found the door and walked out into brilliant mountain sunshine feeling a little foolish at forgetting where the door was but feeling fine in hot sunshine.

Saturday morning, Tom and I planted more corn, more carrots, yellow beets. Richard came by to see how everything was going when we were inside, taking a break. Tom invited Richard in, then offered him some smoke. Richard took a small

puff but didn't inhale. I thought of telling Richard, "It's okay to say no thanks." I thought Tom and his crowd were too relaxed. I thought of saying, "You shouldn't offer smoke to just anyone who stops by." I didn't say anything to anybody. Everyone would go on handling their own lives.

Tom filled prescriptions at a drugstore downtown. He said they had pure cocaine there for prescriptions. Everybody wanted some, but Tom said, "That's one thing I'm not about to do. That stuff goes over the counter in prescriptions, and that's the only way it goes out of the store through me. I like my job. I like my freedom. I like pure cocaine, but I don't plan to steal any of it from the store."

Tom and Deena bought tickets on an airplane and went to the ocean on vacation. I kept the garden watered. I planted more seeds, pulled weeds, spread straw and hay mulch thickly.

I met Richard at the house, and we finished projects we'd left for a time when Tom and Deena were away. I saw Richard's agony when he realized Tom and Deena weren't as careful of the house as he would have been. He asked me, "Can you tell them, have everybody take off their shoes when they come in?"

"I'll tell them." I spread mulch thickly up to the porch, up to the back door. I didn't think people would take off their shoes. Nobody felt the way about the house that Richard felt. But the mulch would help.

Richard had to work daytimes, but I cleaned the floors and polished them with hard wax. Once they were clean, they didn't look as damaged as they did when they were dirty. Wax would help protect them. If we could get people to quit walking into walls, the walls would be fine.

Richard had never owned a rental before. He was young, Mexican-American, a small, lean man. He brought his wife and small son out see the house and garden. I said, "You need to make a deal with renters. Tell them they have to renew the wax every six months. If they don't do it, you should come out and do it or hire somebody to do it. I'll do it if I'm still here. Include the cost of the work in the rent. Pharmacists make good money. Tom'll go for it."

Maybe Richard would say something to Tom and Deena. He seemed to swallow his voice that would declare loudly what he wanted down into his nervous stomach. If he wanted to hang onto his pride in a very nice house, neatly kept, he'd learn to stop swallowing his voice. He'd learn to charge enough rent to cover damage renters might do to the house.

Tom and Deena rode the big airplane again and came back from vacation. Tom went back to work filling prescriptions downtown.

The sun rose into the blue sky. I walked up to the garden at Tom and Deena's place. I harvested lettuce, radishes, summer squash, tiny carrots to thin the bed of carrots and to have crisp, tender, flavorful bites. Tom was at the drugstore. Deena came out of the house and looked shocked at my harvest. The demon of possession had eaten her soul. She owned the garden. I could see it in her eyes, working toward words.

I said, "While you and Tom played in the ocean and ate expensive meals in restaurants, I watered, raked, planted seeds, pulled weeds, spread mulch, took complete care of this garden we all worked together to start. Did you know that? Sharing in a garden means I get some of the harvest besides doing a lot of the work."

She blinked in sunlight, paused, as if she had trouble restructuring her thoughts, but she strained and put her thoughts more in order. She said, "I didn't really think about that. I guess you did work when we were gone, or the garden would have died."

I got down on my knees, picked squash blossoms and put them in my basket.

Deena asked, "But why pick blossoms?"

"I'll take these blossoms home, dip them in beaten eggs and seasoning and fry them in a hot pan. Laura and Juniper and I will eat them for dinner. They're good."

"But if you pick the blossoms, there won't be any squash."

"Look at these squash plants. They beg us to thin the blossoms. They'll bear an abundance of squash. Mid summer, you'll give squash to everyone you know and tell them to take more. You'll stop strangers on the street and ask them if they like squash. You'll harvest so many squash, you'll never want to see another one."

She reached into the basket and picked up a blossom. Her eyes said she was stoned. She might be having trouble hanging onto thoughts. She might be running into walls when she means to walk through doors. She turns the blossom toward me.

"Look. It's female. It's waiting for the male, for the pollen. It needs the male, the pollen to fertilize it." She looks intensely into my eyes. She says, "I've been getting a tan in the greenhouse. You can't see into the greenhouse, but it's hot and sunny. It's a beautiful place to lie naked against the earth."

She still wants something for the vegetables from her

garden that I've put into my basket to carry home, for the lettuce, radishes, summer squash, tiny carrots, for the squash blossoms, for the female blossoms that wait in hot sunshine for the male pollen to come into them. She has stepped closer to me than I want her to be, so that if I stand up where I am, I will be closer to her than I want to be, but backing away before I stand up would mean crawling into the squash bush, so I stand up, so close to her that I feel her heat radiating to me, and I feel her wanting something from me. I laugh and step to the side, putting one step between us, then another. I say "Try it. Pick several blossoms, not all from the same place, spread them out, so you don't leave any vine bare of blossoms."

I laugh again, and Deena looks confused. She doesn't understand what I'm laughing at. I say, "I'm not laughing with you. I'm laughing at you. Beat some eggs. Salt, but go easy on the salt. You want the flavor of the blossoms. Dip the blossoms in the egg and then fry them in a hot pan, briefly, just long enough to be hot through. When Tom comes home. For dinner."

I turn and walk down the dirt road toward home, but I turn my head and shoulders back toward her and say, "You'll like them. See you tomorrow. Tell me what you think of them."

Deena's mad at me, but she's confused. She isn't sure what she's mad about. Several things, she thinks, but she keeps thinking I'm right. I did work in the garden, with them and when they were gone on vacation. That's real. I don't just share in the work, I share in the harvest. That's fair. That's what we all agreed on. She's nearly settled in her emotions. She has the confusion in her mind almost clear by the time I disappear from her sight, on my way home, whistling the song, "He calls me funny honey, and he tickles my toes. He calls me funny honey, and he brings me a rose. He calls me funny honey, and he touches my nose."

Deena turns to walk back into her house. She carries one squash blossom through Santa Fe's intense summer sunshine.