Chapter 6

MARGINS

In a Chicago Starbucks at 9:00 a.m., women wearing pink and lavender spandex line up with men in white shirts and ties and a crew of firefighters from the 30 East division to order their macchiatos and lattes and Americanos. Everyone has a cell phone attached to the side of their heads, chattering away as if their whole lives existed somewhere else.

Outside the large glass windows that keep us cool and clean and safe, the Cabrini-Green housing project looms like a sixteen-story prison complex, its buildings entirely enmeshed in wire, walls blackened by smoke and windows broken and boarded up. Built in the fifties to warehouse poor, unemployed, and primarily black residents, it has worked no better than similar experiments across the country and gained a national reputation for poverty, violence, and desperation.

In the shadow of Cabrini-Green, two 1-acre plots of land are protected with 10-foot-high chain-link-and-concertina fences. A closer look reveals that one of the plots boasts forty varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Striped German, Green Zebra, Black Russian, and the rest of Ken Dunn's tomato plants grow in the composted remains of apple- and cherry-pie filling, and the uneaten arugula salads and filet mignon from local high-end restaurants. Dunn has laid 1,000 tons of compost on this site over a sealer layer of clay and wood chips, just a fraction of the 15,000 tons of urban waste disposed of in this city each day. As I walk between the sweet, pungent rows, the ground springs back like a sponge, and if I closed my eyes and plugged my ears, it would feel like I was walking on the floor of a virgin forest.

The tomatoes don't seem to mind the constant noise or bad air or the poverty that surrounds their little island. The plants are tall and robust and absolutely loaded. Their world is rich in nutrients and reflected warmth and light from the pavement and surrounding buildings. They thrive on the attention of local chefs who are thrilled to tell their clientele that the tomatoes on the menu were harvested down the street, that they picked them up on the way to work.

There are no red barns or silos here, no fields crowded with corn or pastures dotted with cows or sheep. Amid tall skyscrapers, crowded sidewalks, and expansive parking lots, green life finds the margins where soil has survived. Urban farmers seize available light and space under a veil of uncertainty, never knowing when the plans for a new high-rise or retail complex will get approved and the land they farm will be buried under the next necessary or frivolous building.

Dunn's little tomato forest may exist on the edge, but it is not alone. All across this country there are little sanctuaries like this, most of them community gardens where urban residents—often immigrants from agricultural parts of the country and the world—can grow the seeds and the foods of their rural roots. On abandoned lots, between buildings, on narrow slivers of land along streets and sidewalks, every city now has elements of guerrilla gardening, where trash and rubble are traded for food and flowers.

Beyond the community-gardening movement, a handful of professional farmers like Ken Dunn have tapped into an even more compelling possibility: the idea that unused urban lands can generate jobs and serious quantities of food. These farmers are challenging the common misconception that food must be grown far from where most people live. Instead, every neighborhood in every city could have its own farm with orchards and greenhouses and a public market. These could become the new town squares, balancing the hardscape of buildings and pavement with fertile soil, lush plantings, and fresh foods. Local residents could take part during their breaks from work or at the end of the day. There could be classes and workshops on cooking and growing, as well as celebratory meals making use of the farm's yield. In this scenario, urban citizens might expand their definition of honorable work to include farmers, who, instead of laboring on the distant margins, are welcomed into the fabric of the urban tapestry.

In the meantime, Ken, like all pioneers, has to make his own welcome. He wrenched his current site from the City of Chicago, as he has two hundred other sites over the last thirty-five years. There are some 6,000 acres of vacant plots within the 200 square miles of this sprawling city. Most of them are controlled by the city's fifty aldermen, who oversee their wards like urban land barons.

Farming or gardening acts as a placeholder, something city officials or developers can point to as a benevolent gesture while they await permits for the next Nordstrom or Whole Foods Market. "If you can't buy the land to feed the city, you have to adapt," Ken says with the offhand confidence that comes from more than three decades as an urban land gypsy.

Ken was born and raised in Partridge, Kansas, in a Mennonite farming family. Growing up, he watched as his community gradually lost its respect for natural systems and got sucked into heavy machinery, big bank loans, and insecticides and fertilizers. The soil became depleted and compacted, and required more and more powerful equipment to break it up. The insecticides and fertilizers became more necessary and expensive.

Ken left the family farm to study philosophy at the University of Chicago and came to the conclusion that "there are only a few great ideas, and only a few ways to implement them." The great idea that inspired him to thirty-odd years of work started with recycling and led logically to farming. All good farmers are recyclers, but for Ken, the image of a city renewing itself on its own garbage became irresistible.

His wife, Christine, joined him in 1999 after a stint as an art student at the Chicago Art Institute. After she graduated, she was looking for something to do that was socially relevant. "What does an artist do to be in the world and answer some of the wrongs of society?" she asks. "It seemed odd that someone would come to Chicago to do agriculture, but here I am."

Urban farming is inevitably homeless farming, and so Ken has developed a system of movable farms that allows him to build soil and then move it when the tenure of a site ends. The entire contents of the Dunns' current farm were hauled eighty-eight blocks, almost 10 miles from his previous farm, at 66th and Harvard. Next year, it will take sixty truckloads to move this farm and all its priceless soil to Oak and Larabee. Ken has accepted that he will have to keep moving; he knows that urban planning and development is about buildings, not about food and farms. His unwritten agreement with the city is that officials will advise him on the approximate tenure for each site and will continue to provide new sites to move to.

The key to the Dunns' movable feast is the 10,000 cubic yards of compost they produce each year from city waste at Ken's longtime recycling facility a mile and a half from the University of Chicago. By closing the nutrient loop and returning

precious waste to the soil, Ken and Christine are reclaiming at least some of the soil fertility hauled away from the nation's farmland to feed its cities and never returned. They are also building a portable annuity for themselves in the rich, recycled soil they make out of the everyday life of Chicago.

I watch as a large skip loader mixes loads of cookies and pie filling, muffin batter, truckloads of geraniums, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, melted strawberries, 2 barrels of honey, and six frozen ducks, along with manure from the local police stables and wood chips from the city's Bureau of Forestry. Fertility once destined for the landfill is now processed by the staff at the recycling center, many of whom once lived on the margins themselves, homeless or unemployed.

The compost piles stand 15 feet high and are 200 feet long. Dunn explains that some food-processing company might lose a cotter pin from one of its machines and have to dump 3 tons of cookies on the assumption that it landed in the dough. He'll receive a discarded 55-gallon drum of honey with a label that reads, "Lacks clarity." I have to wonder how the bees—who spend a lifetime generating a single teaspoonful—would feel knowing that the product of their labor lacked clarity.

Feral dogs have adopted the compost piles, Ken says. "When I arrive with raw material, they will grab an uneaten steak and head off to their dens." At Ken's gardens around the city, colonies of parakeets that multiply and build their nests in electrical transformers always attack his early pea crops. I can imagine there must always be some species ready to move in, that gardens or compost piles become havens for any urban wildness that remains.

"The root of our problem is assuming that we can make nature irrelevant," Ken says. "We just keep storming through." As he speaks, I realize it's not just Mother Nature he means, but human nature at its most elemental. How long can we ignore our need for sustainable food sources and build cities where the closest real food source is hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away?

That afternoon, Ken takes me on a tour through Chicago in a 1980 Mercedes-Benz station wagon loaded with farm tools and boxes. He wants me to see the sites where he has done his own brand of urban renewal in the marginal places most tourists never notice. He points out the tenements where he did recycling, the tiny patch of trees he culls for dried branches and leaves; he knows where every speck or remnant of nature is in this city.

Like two real estate developers scouting for their next big deal, we take turns spotting future opportunities. On busy Lafayette Avenue, he stops in front of his dream site, a 6-acre parcel surrounding a derelict three-story brick landmark, the former country estate of nineteenth-century developer and politician John Raber. Here, surrounded by towering skyscrapers, he believes he could make a more permanent mark on the life of Chicago.

“It gives you a feeling of awe and wonder when you look at the skyline of this city,” he remarks. “The engineering, the skill, the money. This whole city is built out of the topsoil of the Midwest. The traders and middlemen exploited the farmers, and, in turn, the farmers exploited the land. This huge capitalist machine scraped up the soil of the Great Plains to build this city.” From this point of view, it seems only fitting that Ken would spend a lifetime recycling the spoils of that economy back into soil.

We return that evening to a gathering in the Dunns’ garden beneath Cabrini-Green. We watch as chefs arrive for a personal tour, gingerly parking their SUVs on the dirt track that runs along one side of the garden. Card tables are laden with wines and cheeses and olives and the best carrot cake I have ever eaten. And, of course, tomatoes: every color, shape, and size spills across the surface of a large, makeshift table that is the gathering’s centerpiece.

Outside the towering barbed-wire-topped fence, residents from the housing project walk by, pausing long enough to look in at the strange sight of men and women in starched white jackets and checkered pants with wineglasses in hand, looking a little lost in this world of plants and soil. I overhear a woman who has been involved with the garden describe being here at night, looking out at the illuminated skyline and listening to the pop, pop, pop of guns being fired in the neighborhood.

Ken says it used to be common for a few kids to scale the fence and destroy the garden just for sport. I remember that one of Ken’s detractors pulled me aside at the farmers’ market and said he “should be growing for the community, not fencing them out.” But Ken’s perspective is simple: no fence means no product, no product means no income, no income means no garden, no garden means no jobs. “We need to get beyond this sentimental notion that we can make ourselves feel good by not putting up a fence,” he tells me. “Generosity is shown either by employing people and paying good wages or by providing quality food for them.”

I drift away from the crowd and wander to the fence. Up about six stories in one of the Cabrini-Green buildings, a young black man—maybe Aaron’s age—stands on his wire-encased balcony, fingers pushed through the mesh as he stares into space. I turn around and am facing another world, the Gold Coast skyline, the heart and center of high finance, illuminated and glittering. My attention turns back to the tomatoes that surround me. Could this small farm and those like it become the bridges between those two worlds?

At the moment, Ken’s farm, the housing project, and the city itself are simply neighbors, separate worlds that are just beginning to have a new kind of exchange. “One of the things that keep people clinging on to the old models is that they think there is no alternative,” Ken says. “But this is a living alternative.”

The next day, we meet Christine at the rear service entrance of the Frontera Grill, where she is delivering produce. Their toddler, Soren, sleeps in his car seat, completely enveloped by boxes of produce. Christine opens the back hatch and Frontera chef Tracey Vowel selects from boxes of Amish Paste, Black from Tula, and Oxheart tomatoes. While all this is going on, Ken is rummaging through a fleet of garbage cans behind the restaurant, sorting and separating salad scraps, meat trimmings, and corncobs, the majority of which will go into his compost. He is one of those people who look at garbage and see soil and food.

Tracey tells me that Ken “is relentless—he’s here every day, taking the waste away. You go over to the garden at Cabrini and see what they’ve done, and you feel like you have some hand in what they’re producing. It feels good.” Initially, Ken was hesitant to sell to restaurants. “Before we met some of the great chefs we work with now, it seemed like a lot of restaurants were being run on anger. I was afraid that our lettuce would wilt as soon as it entered some of those kitchens.”

The economics of farming in the city are such that selling to high-end restaurants is a necessity. Even at $3 a pound for tomatoes, it’s tough to make, or to pay, a living wage. There is no wage parity between farmers and other professions anywhere in this country, but in a city like Chicago, the discrepancy is extreme. “We have to make it work within the existing economy before we can develop a just economy,” Ken says. At the Dunns’ garden gate, there are a few boxes of tomatoes, both green and red. Most locals walk by and say, “Give me a tomato,” but the older folks come to buy, saying that it reminds them of Alabama or Georgia, where they came from. They can buy the same tomatoes being sold for $3 a pound to Frontera or the Ritz-Carlton for $1 a pound here. “We couldn’t sell less expensively at the gate,” Christine says, “if we weren’t selling to the restaurants.”

At 6:00 A.M. the next day, I’ve arranged to get onto the rooftop of the spotlight factory next to the garden to take photographs. The city is just beginning to wake up; the first light gilds the sleek spire of the Hancock Building. The early shift at the Starbucks across the street is just arriving to turn on the lights and warm up the cappuccino machines. Commuters swish by on elevated tracks, beating the rush to work.

In this light, the greens and rich browns of the garden beneath us are accented by dots of red and yellow, fruit hanging heavy from mother plants. Just outside the fence that separates the garden from the street, a family makes its way back home to the housing project, eating potato chips and drinking Cokes and tossing an empty can up and over the fence.