

SWEET HOME by Jennie Orvino

I had been a renter all my adult life until February of 2016 when I was able, through a miracle of timing and connections, to purchase the Santa Rosa house where I lived for nine years. My landladies resided on the property in their individual tiny houses for most of that time. We formed a community of three humans, one black cat with white paws named Sylvester, fruit trees (pear, apple, peach and fig), and an assortment of birds and pollinators.

I made pumpkin soup from the sugar pies Mattie raised, and invited her and Margie to summer salad lunches of fresh arugula, feta cheese and watermelon. Our first years were a time of contentment when I did my best to learn from Mattie how to be a good steward of the land. She, who was in her 70s when I moved in, built the garden beds, planted the vegetables, dug out the invasive bamboo, strung the clothes lines, and started to lay a path, one brick at a time, from her door to mine. She constructed a flashy blue chicken coop and populated it with the most entertaining “girls.” The yolks of their eggs were bright orange, like the California poppies that ran wild in the yard until I learned to confine them to a spot easily viewed from my kitchen window.

The chickens departed and their roosts were demolished after Margie moved away to live with a new love and Mattie died of cancer. Mattie was the first person I knew who allowed the disease to take its course without treatment, who made the choice to transition “before the money runs out.” The last time we talked, she held my hand and reminded me that my topless sunbathing had been her “favorite eye candy.”

I had just announced my retirement from full time employment when Margie told me that she was planning to sell. First came panic, then determination to remain in the house I’d lived in and cherished for so long. Friends introduced me to a broker who secured a loan I could manage, and I tapped my 401K for a 20% down payment. The 844 square foot, two bedroom bungalow, built in the year I was born, was mine before it was listed for sale. The remodeled former garage became a granny unit that would provide rental income to help pay the mortgage.

In July of that year, my “Spectacular 70” birthday and my late-bloomer home ownership were celebrated together. Amid a backyard array of umbrella tables and a lively stream of old and new friends, a spontaneous combo entertained with guitar, drums, accordion and flute. The solar-powered fountain bubbled, hummingbirds swooped at the feeders, and ripe Sun Gold cherry tomatoes invited all to pick and eat. At least half the attending guests enjoyed a Salsa lesson on the patio and my grandson, then eight years old, performed a break dance as his gift to me.

“Your house and garden are YOU,” someone remarked. “The way they say people come to resemble their dogs.” Taking slight offense at that characterization, I pressed for further clarification. “What I meant was: welcoming, expansive, sensual, organized, elegant and vibrant.” Right. That’s how I want my environment to be.

I probably spend fewer hours in bed than in my kitchen. I love its wood floors, the black-and-white octagonal tile counter tops, the window seat where visitors used to sip Chardonnay as I prepared clam spaghetti—following the recipe my grandmother taught me, but substituting fresh parsley and garlic from my own plantings for the dried versions Gram bought at the A&P.

At home, I am the hostess, the impresario, the boss. The mess is mine and the sparkle is mine to enjoy. Home is my unending creative project, my hideout, my comfort and rest. It’s the place I haven’t minded sheltering-in-place since March of 2020.

Even before the wildfires and coronavirus pandemic upended everything, I often found myself clicking ruby heels together and reciting Dorothy’s incantation.

Home. There’s no place like it.

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