1. VICTORY GARDEN

Our moving van dashes over the Williamsburg Bridge as we hurtle into Manhattan to start our Slow Year. My head is partway out the passenger window. Wind massages my scalp, the East River sparkles below, and the New York skyline swells against a metallic blue sky. The Empire State Building towers haughtily over everything until it's hidden by a cluster of approaching Alphabet City high-rises. I'm flush with excitement — *Manhattan! Our new life!* — as Jack, our overweight, chain-smoking van driver, floors it.

"Bill?" my wife, Melissa, shouts as I hoot out the window. "What happened to…*slow*?"

I reluctantly pull my head back in. Who doesn't love a bit of speed? Jack accelerates even more, and I revel. My instinctual trepidation over Manhattan — the Gordon Gecko greed, the paucity of green, the incisor-like skyscrapers — is swallowed up in the roller-coaster rush of arrival as we fly over the water. The multitasking crack of 24/7 connectedness gives me a similar rush. I'm the first to admit that twenty-first-century life triggers pleasant chemistry.

Suddenly, the Williamsburg slam-dunks us into Lower East Side gridlock. Jack slams on the brakes. "Jesus H. Christ on a popsicle stick," he mutters, taking a drag on his cigarette. Garbage bags are piled high on pedestrian-choked Canal Street sidewalks. Taxi exhaust blends with the tobacco smoke. My buzz dies as anxiety balls in my stomach.

I'm an outer-borough boy. My Irish grandparents landed at Ellis Island and raised my father and his two siblings in Queens. I grew up on Long Island. Hence, I've got a bit of *Saturday Night Fever* angst around moving to a Greenwich Village apartment, breaking caste and moving-on-up from a working-class Queens row house. I don't belong in Manhattan.

Melissa, my wife of less than half a year, is scrunched next to me in the van, her hair still wisping around her gorgeous green eyes from the blustery crossing. She cradles a lamp under each arm. Our motivations are essentially at cross-purposes: she is starting a new job as a program specialist at the United Nations that will probably mean working more, while I desire to do less. Will our attempt at Slow City living stretch the bonds of our marriage?

Here is our plan for the year: We'll live a minimalist, leisure-rich, spiritually mindful 12 x 12 life in the world's fastest city. First, we've already shed clutter by downsizing our square footage, moving to a micro-apartment that's 80 percent smaller than our former Queens home. Second, my goal is to work a maximum of only two days a week, freeing up

time to interact with the city's cultural creatives who are innovating various facets of Slow. My "five-day weekends" will also allow me time for a whole lot of absolutely nothing. For a work junkie like myself, I figure "simply being" — resisting the urge to *do* for several hours a day in order to seek equanimity — will deeply challenge me. But I reached rock bottom in Queens; I have to slow down, even if Manhattan won't. Third, despite Melissa's full-time job, we've committed ourselves to spending a lot of time on the banks of the Hudson River and in Central Park, to a regular yoga practice, and to fostering daily mindfulness of the beauty of New York, thereby finding balance and joy.

Sounds good, right? But it seems particularly ironic, even perhaps quixotic, as we sit in…traffic. Why seek slow? Slow is an interminable line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Slow is an old-fashioned rotary phone, the kind that took so long to dial that, as comedian Louis CK jokes, you kind of hated friends who had 0s and 9s in their numbers. Slow is un-American — it's inefficient, dull, and Luddite. It also feels elitist. Only the rich can afford to go slow in Manhattan.

The traffic loosens, and we pick up speed along Canal Street, smoothly turning north on Lafayette, eventually achieving what musicians call *tempo gusto*, or the right speed. We find a balance between the breakneck Williamsburg Bridge and the gridlocked Lower East Side.

My spirits rise. Carlo Petrini, the Italian founder of Slow Food, says, "If you are always slow, then you are stupid. That's not what we're aiming for. Being Slow means that you control the rhythms of your own life. You decide how fast you have to go in any given context.…What we are fighting for is the right to determine our own tempos." Slow is not Luddite. It means cultivating positive qualities — being receptive, intuitive, patient, reflective, and valuing quality over quantity — instead of the fast qualities so common today: being busy, controlling, impatient, agitated, acquisitive. Slow is about taking the necessary time to create a new economy centered on self-paced living.

Speaking of which, Melissa and I have worked hard to make our attempt at Slow in Manhattan financially feasible. My previous year's workaholism, combined with the strong savings ethic my father instilled in me, has generated a nest egg of savings that — along with Melissa's salary, a careful monthly budget, and living in a small apartment — makes our plan seem doable.

Jack pulls up in front of our new home: 11 Cornelia Street, between West 4th and Bleecker. The nineteenth-century building is set pleasantly back from the street behind

another apartment building. He helps us carry our boxes through a "horse entrance," the high, narrow archway through which — before the automobile — horses passed, to be fed and watered in the area that now serves as the building's little courtyard.

After stacking our boxes in a small mountain, Jack splits, leaving Melissa and me to finish the job. We stare, flummoxed, at the totality of our belongings in the courtyard. It's only a sliver of what we once possessed in Queens, but it's still a lot, especially to carry up five stories of an elevator-less building. Melissa retrieves the two lamps, I grab a box, and we lug our first load up the grungy-carpeted stairwell. I try to remember what our new place looks like. We barely got to see the apartment before signing a one-year lease. Greenwich Village real estate flips in seconds, and to get this place, we had to pay two-months' security deposit within an hour of the viewing.

We're panting when we reach the top floor. I open the door to apartment 10R and step inside.

I feel, for a moment, like there's been a big misunderstanding. The far end of the apartment is just a few steps away. It's two twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot boxes divided by the slenderest of kitchenettes, with a sidecar of a bathroom attached.

I put the carton I'm holding on the floor. Melissa steps hesitantly in, a lamp under each arm, and attempts to walk into the kitchen. She is unable to squeeze through the slim passageway, and the realization dawns: the lamps — and much of the rest of our gear — won't fit. Unable to suppress a frown, Melissa turns and trudges back down the stairs, lamps in hand.

I listen to her footfalls recede. My eyes study this thimble of an apartment. I have utterly forgotten my excitement on the Williamsburg Bridge: we left our Queens home — where we had lived for three years, a lovely place nearly five times bigger — for *this*?

In 2008, a year after my experience in a North Carolina 12 x 12, I took over my grandparents' 1938 two-story brick row house on 83rd Place in Queens. One of the first things I did was to remove the crabgrass lawn in the back, trowel in three hundred pounds of manure, and plant two dozen varieties of vegetables and herbs. My grandparents — Nana and Pop — did a similar thing in that identical spot in the 1940s. They created a "Victory Garden" to support the Allied war effort. What a thrill to unearth shards of Nana's china, along with a beet-red glass marble that I imagined belonged to my father, who used to play

beside the Victory Garden. What a thrill, too, in Asphalt USA, to daily touch dirt and watch earth fuse with seeds, rainstorms, and sun to manufacture butternut squash, whose vines overtook the driveway, and snap peas, which ascended the back-awning poles.

Inside the house, I ripped up Nana and Pop's half-century-worn, musty wall-to-wall carpeting from the living room, dining room, and bedrooms, my sweaty body powdered with mustard yellow dust, the pulverized remains of foam padding. I sliced the carpet into strips, swept, and scrubbed the oak floors until they shined a warm beige.

The next two years brought the typical old-house projects, many of which I attacked myself. Little YouTube videos taught me to caulk and grout, skim coat and apply mildew-resistant bathroom paints. Gradually, the house transformed: The roof was refurbished, the dying boiler replaced, the basement bathroom sheet-rocked, the exterior bricks repointed, the sagging front stoop brought erect. Repairing an old home and learning urban agriculture buoyed my spirits; this "re-skilling" connected me with the sorts of things our grandparents knew but our parents forgot.

During this time, Melissa and I met through a mutual friend from Cochabamba, Bolivia, where she'd been living just before we'd met. As we began to fall in love, Melissa ventured into Queens — a borough she knew nothing of beyond the Nogochi art gallery in Long Island City and good Indian food in Jackson Heights — and soon she started spending the occasional night. Next, her designated drawer in my dresser grew to a whole closet, which grew to moving in. Inspired by upstate farmer Shannon Hayes's book *Radical Homemakers*, we transformed our household from a unit of consumption into a unit of production, reuse, and repair. The Victory Garden bloomed more prolifically than ever, and Melissa and I did morning yoga in the driveway, navigating pumpkin vines during sun salutations. During the warm months, we fed ourselves largely out of our garden, while also drying, freezing, and cellaring food for the winter.

For fruit, we gleaned pears from a long-forgotten pear tree atop the 83rd Place hill. The gnarled hardwood stood defiantly in a small rectangle of weed-choked earth right above the eight lanes of the Long Island Expressway (known to New Yorkers as the LIE). That ancient tree, I surmised, survived Robert Moses, who, in Urban Renewal gusto, sliced the LIE through my grandparents' neighborhood in the 1950s. As Melissa and I picked basketfuls of pears, we could see the jaws of the Manhattan skyline flickering in the distance. The ambition and greed in that nest of power made my insides clench. Sure, I rode the subway

into the city every few days to have lunch with Melissa or take in a museum, but I preferred keeping Manhattan at a distance. Leaving the skyline behind, we carried our pears home to a dining-room production line, making fruit salads and tarts and slicing up and freezing the rest for winter.

April brought the pungent scent of wild onion greens, sizzling in the pan with eggs. As I walked home from the subway, I'd harvest the onion greens from sidewalk cracks and people's lawns, shoving fistfuls into my pockets, along with dandelion greens for our salad. Fall brought the ritual abandonment of pumpkins onto the garbage curb, and I'd snatch up the ones not carved into jack-o'-lanterns. Melissa and I sliced the pumpkins for pies to gift to neighbors and blended them into pumpkin puree to freeze, the seeds salted and toasted for snacks.

Our urban archaeology stretched beyond gleaned pears and curbed pumpkins to free shopping on Tuesdays, when the city Sanitation Department picks up large items left on the curb. Last year's toaster oven? Found it. Computer chair? Got it. Blender? Naturally. Melissa and I furnished and equipped our home through free shopping, thereby consuming almost nothing new — but consuming nonetheless, as our home filled with possessions we had to clean and maintain. To evade costly home décor updates, we decorated — as blogger Tom Hodgkinson encourages in *The Idler* — in the style of previous eras immune to change. Hodgkinson selected his favorite era, the 1950s, and decorated through thrift shops. We were more eclectic, layering our neighbors' abandonments into Nana and Pop's 1940s furniture, linoleum counters, and chandeliers, along with Melissa's grandfather's landscape paintings.

One evening, the sunset blushing peach through our kitchen window, I wrapped my arms around Melissa's waist as we both looked down over our Victory Garden and the back alley's single large tree, an oak in a neighbor's back patch. The sunset aplay in its leaves, the tree shrouded the alley in a previous-era glow of community, the era of Nana and Pop, when less was usually more, and a slower pace was the norm. I asked Melissa what she was thinking. She didn't reply. I continued to hold her, gazing out at our "pet" squirrel, Mono, as she raced down from her nest along what we loverly-dubbed the SIE (Squirrel Island Expressway): this well-worn path stretched from Mono's nest-branch, down the trunk, and along neighboring fence-tops, before exiting into the Victory Garden. Mono grabbed a cherry tomato and munched. I used to throw one of Nana's silver spoons at Mono, and I even went so far as to spread fox urine along the garden's edges, but I eventually realized Mono's sharecropping

percentage was our fee for the pleasure of a wild animal in our lives. The sun was angling harder when Melissa finally spoke. “I was thinking,” she said, “about what it would be like to be a Queens mama.”

Mama. Implications of not only marriage but children. I suddenly pictured my Nana standing at the same window, opening it to scold, in her Irish brogue, Mono’s forebears as they snatched from her Victory Garden while my Dad shot marbles in the driveway, a beet-red one bouncing astray into the thick strawberry patch. Melissa and I hadn’t spoken much about marriage, but the question was right beneath the leaves. Our love had grown with the new-old dream we’d woven into the row house and its Victory Garden, into the extraordinary low-carbon subway and bus network that permitted carlessness, into the judiciously used broadband connection that allowed us to engage a fast culture while not becoming absorbed by commuting.

Could this be our life? This hope seduced me even as I knew that, in some ways, the dream was already eroding.

It began at Hot Bagels.

At a certain point in our Queens life we became regulars at Hot Bagels on Eliot Avenue, bringing reusable bags for our fresh bagels. “Two everythings, right in here,” I said one morning, opening a canvas bag.

“Wait a minute!” the guy behind the counter replied. “Somebody sent you.” He grinned and wagged a large finger at me.

“Actually…” I shrugged. “Nope.”

“Somebody else does that. A lady.”

“Does what?”

“*That!*” He fingered the canvas bag. Melissa had been picking up the bagels for the past week. And she’d brought…*that*.

Two weeks later, a twenty-something, gum-chewing woman behind the Hot Bagels counter, her soft brown hair in a ponytail, winked at me whilst popping my two everythings in the canvas and said: “Ya girlfriend…she took a bayeg.”

Bayeg. I translated from the Queensian: bag.

“You know what else?” she said.

I shifted feet, looked at her name tag: Dawn. Several other employees looked on through half-smirks. They were in on it. “What?”

"I ratted you out, too!" Dawn beamed.

Leaving the shop, I realized that, yes, I'd forgotten my reusable on another day, and Hot Bagels' Stasi double-agent Dawn snitched to Melissa. Humorous, sure, but how bizarre that reusable bags were novel enough to qualify as an inside joke?

The third Hot Bagels incident came several days later on a particularly bad airplane day. For about a year leading up to this, the already noisy LaGuardia Airport flight path over our neighborhood had worsened. The FAA's "NextGen" system used GPS to fly twice as many planes into LaGuardia by spacing them sixty seconds apart. Following Nana's example — my grandmother was a leader in our local civic association — I'd spent the year writing articles in the *Juniper Berry* community magazine about the flight path and starting a small, active Clean and Quiet Skies Coalition. Unfortunately, the vast majority of our Queens neighbors shrugged off our petitions with you-can't-fight-the-FAA apathy. They didn't flinch at studies linking airplane fumes to asthma and airplane noise to long-term, severe stress. Some neighbor kids actually made a game out of plane-spotting — *Delta! American! Jet Blue!* they'd cry as the corporate logos passed just over their heads.

On this particular morning, I'd been unable to concentrate on work — my noise-canceling headphones being useless against the 747s as they rattled our windows — and I'd gone out for a jog, not so much to run, but to run away from the flight path. Before leaving, I'd stuffed a plastic grocery bag in my back pocket. Sweaty after the jog, I entered Hot Bagels and pulled out my two bucks. "Just pop in those everythings, please," I said to Dawn, as I held out my crinkled bag.

Dawn was not smiling. She shook her head vigorously. "No way. That's *weird*."

I'd been up since sunrise with the planes. I was hungry and just wanted bagels. "You've outed me, Dawn," I said, forcing a smile and opening the bag wider.

But Dawn refused. "Too weird." She bit her lip.

Indignity welled up like bile. What's weird, I wanted to announce, is ten million New Yorkers throwing ten million plastic bags into incinerators each day. Weird is the fossil fuels burned to make the plastic bags and ship them here. Weird isn't curbside scavenging, it's clogging the landfills with perfectly usable items. But I didn't say any of this. Instead, I said, simply: "There's too much garbage."

"Yeah, you can say that again," a woman in line snickered, setting off most of the dozen customers behind me in laughter. A guy in a Giants cap shook his head in first-psycho-of-the-

day resignation.

Dawn, playing to an audience now, continued: "It's like, what if I were to ask you to put a bagel in this *rubber glove*?" she said, miming the action. "I mean, I might be able to push it into the glove — right? — but it'd be weird."

I glanced at the sad, sweaty plastic bag in my hand. Dawn was correct. I was weird.

"Will you move your ass, buddy?" said a thick-necked guy in a shirt and tie. "Just take the friggin' bag."

I took the friggin' bag.

Feeling, as the locals say, like a total douchebag, I left with head lowered, further rebuked by the sonic boom of an airplane. I recalled something one of my *realpolitik* grad school professors once said to me, cynically, or so I thought at the time: "Bill, I know you're an idealist, and I admire that. But remember this one rock-solid law of life: You don't change an institution or a culture. The institution, the culture…they change you."

Melissa and I had created a Queens culture with precisely two members. That culture had an ideology (*Radical Homemaking*), practices (urban permaculture, re-skilling), and a history (the Golden Age of Nana and Pop). We'd ignited a bottle rocket that blazed its tiny bright trail skyward, but would it only fizzle out as it plunged?

After our "Queens mama" reverie, Melissa and I grew more serious about planning our life together, even as Queens itself became less appealing. She worked at the United Nations as a consultant — not in one of the widely coveted "permanent" positions that are essentially tenured — using the grassroots development skills she'd honed in Bolivia in a UN program to increase women's political participation globally. But her hours grew longer, she telecommuted less, and she returned after dinner many nights, exhausted. As a result, I found it harder, without her companionship and help, to push myself to organize civic association meetings, tend beans, and do yoga amid pumpkin vines. Instead, increasingly over the next year, I did what everyone else did. I worked more.

I wrote more articles for the *Washington Post* and *Atlantic*, sometimes tapping at the keyboard until 2 AM, plagued by airplane-insomnia. I responded to emails at all hours on the smartphone in order to stay in a loop that never seemed to close. I contributed to the flight path above our house by flying off to give lectures and perform consultancies. As a writer, speaker, and international development specialist, I enjoyed the flow of checks arriving in the mail that increased our savings, but I felt increasingly hollow even as my external "success"

increased.

Melissa and I were getting caught up in the prevailing turbo-capitalist ethos. In fact, the rush to work was the real reason for the impatience in the morning line at Hot Bagel. Americans work longer hours than the citizens of any other country — fourteen more hours per week than an average European — and on average we leave unused, and so waste, 30 percent of our vacation time. I'd taken on so many work commitments, mostly subconsciously, to fit in and feel valued within this system. I overworked, eating quick meals at the laptop or between flight connections. Even as Melissa and I married, in a small ceremony with family and close friends, our overworking led us to join the disquieting "uni-moon" trend. Instead of a honeymoon trip together in the busy weeks after our wedding, we each took separate, individual vacations without each other — uni-moons, or what amounted to a few days of free time at the end of separate work trips. She took hers in the Dominican Republic after a UN capacity-building workshop; I took mine in Paris on a forty-eight-hour stopover after a community forestry consultancy in Liberia, West Africa.

Strolling, alone, in Montmartre that first evening, I found myself on the smartphone, checking work emails. Looking up from my phone, I was jolted aware that the Eiffel Tower and all of Paris were stretched out before me in all their beauty. I thought back to my North Carolina 12 x 12 and wondered what had happened to one of the big lessons I learned there: the need to balance my constant *doing* with the joy of simply *being* — a kind of Leisure Ethic. I dialed Melissa, but she couldn't talk. "Heading into a meeting, babe," she said.

When I returned to Queens, we began to dream of getting out. Before we met, we'd each worked for several years in Bolivia, and we enjoyed the relaxed and little-commercialized culture there. Also, my beautiful daughter, Amaya, lives in Bolivia. Amaya's mom is Bolivian, and it's difficult for me not to live near my daughter, who at the time was seven years old, even though I support her financially and pay regular visits. Perhaps, Melissa and I both agreed, it was time to admit defeat and leave New York. We couldn't live our ideals here.

Then, two months after our wedding and uni-moons, Melissa was offered a killer promotion.

She'd make more money in this permanent position, sit in a nice private office, and help even more women around the globe. I wanted to support Melissa, but I needed out of New York. "Maybe it's *Queens*," Melissa suggested. "What if we moved into Manhattan?"

She talked about Slow Foodies, LEED architects, and Occupiers. About inspiring spiritual masters and musicians. “Your professor’s dictum,” she said, “about the culture changing you….It doesn’t apply in Manhattan because that’s where they shape the trends that others follow.”

That sounded nice, but the thought of advancing suicidally *toward* the beast only made me depressed. Increasingly, I found myself visiting my grandparents’ joint grave at St. John’s Cemetery, a ten-block walk from the house. It was one of the few peaceful green spaces around. I’d place a small rock atop their headstone and touch the intricate Celtic cross engraved above their names. Then I’d eat a silent lunch under the big oak above their grave, a tree literally containing something of them.

One day, while I was removing squash beetle pests by hand in the Victory Garden, a truck pulled up and some workers began digging up a neighbor’s crabgrass lawn. *Eureka!* I thought, maybe the Victory Garden idea was spreading! But that afternoon, under the roar of 747s, a truck arrived and poured asphalt into the dug-out space, creating a Garden of Defeat.

Finally, rumors surfaced about the big tree in our alley. It could fall on our homes, some said. And it was festering with squirrels.

“They’re mocking me,” a neighbor told Melissa and me. “The friggin’ squirrels in *that* tree!”

“I love that tree,” Melissa said.

“Think of the shade it gives on hot summer days,” I tried, watching Mono — our happy pet — cruising the SIE.

“They chatter and hiss at me when I come out to my car,” he said.

Melissa spotted the tree-removal truck while I was still in bed. She ran out and argued with the home’s owner but came back crying. I went out and gave the owner our best arguments. Surprisingly, she agreed with me. “I love that tree, too. But the neighbors are relentless.”

“It’s your property,” I said. “This is on you.”

She looked up into the branches, over at the men with chainsaws, and then back at me. I could see she *did* love the tree. She said: “I can live with that.”

This wasn’t sarcasm. It was resignation. *I can live with that*. I can live with airplanes and asthma. I can live without trees and animals. I can live to work.

I can’t live with that.

I walked away. And then I ran.

I ran to the only place with a lot of trees: the cemetery. There, I felt a strange urge to climb the tree above Nana and Pop's grave, so I struggled my way up into the branches. Perched on a high limb, I frowned out at the sharp tips of Manhattan's distant skyscrapers. They pierced the foliage, wanting blood.

Time passed. I heard a voice from below: "Hey."

I looked down. Melissa.

"Hey," I echoed.

"Why don't you come back down?"

I thought, *Come back down to what?*

"Come up," I said.

She squinted at me, arms akimbo. Seeing the intelligent gleam in her eyes, I felt absurd. I was being oversensitive and acting badly, asking her to climb to me. I remembered something a friend said to me from a Lakota Indian elder: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, when all the time I am carried on great wings across the sky."

Melissa climbed up.

She'd learned mountaineering in the Bolivian Andes. Hold to hold, in no time she was sitting adjacent to me, two primates, unspeaking, on a thick bough.

We sat in the tree for a long time. We touched hands, touched bark. The tree, rooted into Nana and Pop, held us. The top of Manhattan glinted through the leaves. Melissa broke the silence. "Bill, I know you love your grandparents. But you can't go back to a slow past. Maybe, together, we can look for a slow future."

Our eyes locked, almost genetically, like fertilization. Then she unlocked and gazed out toward the skyscraper tips, leading my glance, and in this wordless way I knew what she was saying: You build strength not through taking the easy path, but by facing what you most fear. Instead of shuddering at those jaws from a distance, I needed to inhabit the mouth.

We climbed down the tree to the foot of my grandparents' grave. I placed a stone and said good-bye, knowing that it was for good this time. I'd return, but not as a kid on the block. I needed to support Melissa's dream. And I needed to resist the temptation to run away to the equivalent of a 12 x 12 in the forest. Instead, with my wife, I would struggle to somehow create *our* 12 x 12 in the most difficult place on the planet — the hot core of global capitalism, Manhattan.