

# WAVERLY FITZGERALD

## FORAGING

IT'S CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT on May Eve and my daughter and I are slipping through the alleys of Seattle, armed with clippers and black plastic trash bags. We dodge dogs, splash through puddles, dash between shadows. Security lights flicker on in our wake. We know our way through these back streets. We've been doing this for years. So far we have not been caught.

We have come, as we do every year, to gather flowers for May baskets. Because we live in an apartment building without a garden, the flowers we collect are purloined. We clip purple lilacs overhanging backyard fences, snip the snowball-shaped white flowers that grow on shrubs along the sidewalk, snap twigs studded with pink petals off trees in parkways.

Back at home, we spill our take onto newspapers spread on the floor. The air fills with the sweet scent of lilac, the musty aroma of hawthorn, the spicy odor of viburnums. We arrange the flowers in cones, fashioned from colored paper twisted and stapled shut, with a ribbon for a handle. Late at night, we tiptoe through the halls of our apartment building, hanging a floral tribute on each glass doorknob. So far we have not been caught.

FORAGING. THAT'S WHAT I call this activity of gathering plants I have not planted. A broad word for a broad activity. To forage is to wander, to raid, to rummage, to strip of food. In fact, the word food comes from the same root word as forage.

Animals forage for fodder. Bees for blossoms. Birds for berries. Wildlife biologists have theories about how foraging happens, including the optimal diet model, patch selection theory and the marginal value theorem.

Eric Charnov, the scientist who came up with the Marginal Value Theorem, explains it this way: If you are collecting apples in an orchard, you will pick the most easily accessible apples from the closest tree, before moving to another tree. It would be inefficient for you to strip all the apples from one tree or to flit between trees selecting just a few choice apples from each.

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, the owner of the fruit tree has the right to all of its fruits. If your

apple tree overhangs my yard, I cannot pluck apples from the boughs or gather fallen apples from the ground. And you can come into my yard, any time you want, without asking my permission, to harvest your apples.

But in California the opposite is true. Fruit found on public property belongs to all.

A trio of artists in Los Angeles call themselves the Fallen Fruit Brigade. They publish a manifesto, urging people to plant fruit trees in parkways. "Let our streets be lined with apples and pears!" They create maps showing the location of trees in various Los Angeles neighborhoods and exhort people to "gather the fallen fruit." They envision a world where the streets are lined with fruit trees, where the boughs are loaded with ripe fruit, where no one goes hungry, where all food is truly local.

ON A TRIP TO LOS ANGELES, I foraged for fruit using a map I printed from the Fallen Fruit Brigade's website. Each tree was marked with a symbol and matched to a legend which indicated its type: banana and fig, olive and orange, peach and plum.

The area featured was Hancock Park, an old neighborhood and a wealthy one. I felt like Robin Hood, as I set out, intending to steal fruit from the rich. I strolled along the wide sidewalks, under old trees, past sprawling mansions. I passed sloping lawns, clipped boxwood hedges, topiary trees, curving brick walks.

But I did not find any fallen fruit. Trees were not where I expected them or I did not recognize the trees I was seeking. One orange tree offered only unripe green globes. Fragrance alerted me to another: a tall tree dotted with golden fruit, the lawn beneath it spattered with oranges, as ubiquitous as tennis balls on a tennis court. But a six foot iron fence with barbs at the top protected that bounty. Although I came away empty-handed, I garnered new insights about foraging.

Foraging requires an understanding of the territory, knowledge of the seasons of ripening, an intimacy with the plants that is cultivated over years of repetition, the way my daughter and I know the location of the flowers we gather on May Eve.

BACK AT HOME IN SEATTLE, I discover a similar effort to distribute fruit carried out with a uniquely Northwestern flavor. A nonprofit group called Community Harvest asks homeowners with unharvested fruit trees to call them. Volunteers come out with ladders to pick the fruit, which is donated to food banks and other charitable organizations. While admirable, this notion seems to take the fun out of foraging. For me foraging is a furtive act, one more pleasurable when it carries with it a whiff of danger.

On the first weekend in August, you will find me prowling along the thickets of blackberry brambles that line the Burke-Gilman trail. Bicyclists whiz by. Cars pass. No one stops to ask me what I'm doing. I am applying the principles of the Marginal Value Theorem, rambling from one bush to the next. I don't need a ladder; my longing leads me on. I lean into the thorns, reaching out for the farthest, darkest, plumpest berries. Warmed by the sun, they fall into my hand at a touch. I pop them into my mouth, bite down. Sweetness floods my mouth. Juices drip down my chin.