

The Serenity Development

The clustered apartment buildings seemed to almost grow out of the forest hillside, reflecting a mass of green jungle in their windows. As I looked up, my eyes couldn't find the top ledges of the buildings. They simply faded into thick layers of forest mist, interspersed with lush treetops.

I was here with college friend Joseph, who had attended the same STEM university as I had, years ago. Now I was 33 and a scientist, and he was 36 and...I didn't know exactly what he did. But here I was at his new apartment, finally visiting.

"I can't believe they were able to integrate it into the forest so well," I said, turning to Joseph. He chuckled.

"Yeah, it's pretty amazing. They wanted it to have a very...*organic* feel. Once we set our stuff down in my room, I can take you to the roof of my building. They staggered all 13 at different heights, so the roof gardens look like...parts of the hillside terrain, almost."

He was right, as I craned my neck I could see thick layers of jungle that seemed to melt onto the roofs of the two lowest buildings.

"C'mon!" He led me onto a cement walking path into the forest. The sound of birdsong was like scratches on the strings of a violin, and the smell of cold rain filled the air as we walked deeper. The tall buildings disappeared beneath an under-layer of canopy, but we soon came to an open, paved clearing. The path branched off in multiple directions, leading the base of each of the 12 buildings. A sign near the frontmost one read, "The Serenity Development. Completed by TerraTech in 2047."

"You got a room in such a new and fancy development, but I can't even imagine the prices of something this luxurious," I laughed awkwardly. In truth, I felt uneasy. Where did the buildings' waste go? The gas lines? We were so far from the heart of the city; there was no choice but to run pipes through the soil. And yet society was supposed to be moving *away* from construction that polluted the earth.

"To be honest with you Rosemary, it wasn't actually that bad," Joseph said. "I'm friends with the owner of TerraTech. He was able to, uh...*pull some strings*, and get me a room!" He



waved to a passing neighbor as he led me along a path to the right. We crossed behind the frontmost buildings and came to one in the middle.

“Here we are, building 6. It’s the tallest, you know,” He said with utter pride.

Joseph’s top-floor apartment was clean and illuminated by massive windows that looked out onto the balcony. Joseph locked both of the bolts on the door.

“There...nice and safe,” He said. He turned to me, saying, “Take a seat!” while he gestured to a row of bar stools along his kitchen island. “I prepared some salad before I picked you up, it should still be good...” As he methodically looked through fridge drawers, I took in the feel of the place. For somewhere so expensive, you would expect a warmer, more cozy atmosphere. But the smooth countertops were ice against my arms, and the view of the other buildings’ green roofs from out the windows made me long to be back on the forest floor.

“Boy, it’s been quite a while, huh?” Joseph filled ceramic bowls with an assortment of salad greens.

“Yeah, how’ve you been? Besides the apartment?” I asked.

“Oh I’ve been great! You remember Douglass from college? He and I got together for lunch the other day, and did you know he’s married? It totally shocked me! not that I didn’t think he would ever get married, but because I just didn’t picture his girlfriend becoming his wife if you know what I mean...” As I slowly took bites of salad, Joseph droned on about old friends who became rich, stock market gains, gym memberships. I felt a twinge of guilt not listening, but I was beginning to truly realize why we grew apart over the years. Joseph just wasn’t the same down-to-earth person he used to be. His bragging made my head hurt.

Suddenly there was a loud banging on the door. Joseph jumped, instinctively clutching his salad bowl towards himself.

“Should we...see who that is?” I asked, standing up from my seat. I turned back towards him, and his face was pale as he set down his ceramic bowl. He slowly stood up and slunk behind the counter. I felt my stomach turn.

“Joseph...? What’s going on?”

There was a loud crack as the door splintered and broke. Someone behind it had kicked it down, and it fell flat onto the floor with a *wham!* A man clad in all black with an obscured, goggled face stormed into the room. He held a handgun.

There was a gunshot as Joseph’s salad bowl exploded and shattered. He shrieked and ducked behind the counter. I scrambled and dove behind the counter next to him, but there was no real way out. The armed man blocked the door and would momentarily stomp around the counter to us. A lightbulb went off in my head. I turned frantically to face the windows, and

grabbing Joseph by the wrist I dragged him towards the sliding glass doors onto the balcony. There was another gunshot and the glass shattered next to me.

We jumped out on the balcony, Joseph hyperventilating and shaking. I pulled him to the side as the armed man unleashed a barrage of gunshots. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a large potted plant on the balcony. Instinctively I climbed on top of it and onto the balcony railing, peering up at the roof of the building. The green roof had been designed to model a jungle in its array of plant life, and vines spilled over the edges and down towards our floor.

“W-what are you doing?” Joseph said.

“Getting out! Come on, that guy’ll be here in like a second!” I grabbed a vine and hoisted myself up, clamoring up the thick foliage towards the roof. I used the small metal ledges built into the side of the wall to push myself up. I could hear gunshots behind me as I turned back toward Joseph. He was standing on the balcony below me, staring up in shock.

“Come on, follow me up here,” I said quietly. I turned and heaved myself onto the roof. I climbed over the short fence around the edge and fell onto the lining of moss and undergrowth. It smelled moist and comforting like the jungle below, but still...*off*. My senses could tell it was beautiful, but fundamentally as fake as the building itself. I leaned down over the fence and held out a hand for Joseph to grab. I had pulled my many thin braids into a ponytail this morning, but now they were escaping the hairband and cluttering my vision. Joseph was physically strong, but still only managed to scramble onto the roof unskillfully and tumble into the floor of the jungle-garden.

I heard the gunman’s footsteps as he stormed onto the balcony below us and looked quickly from side to side. We were out of view and undetected, for a few fleeting seconds. Joseph whispered a swear before realizing he made a sound, and clapping a hand over his mouth. But the gunman’s head whipped around and he let out another few shots from the gun. I ducked down and was afraid to peer over the roof ledge, but when I did I saw him climbing onto the balcony railing and my stomach turned to knots.

“We can’t stay here,” I whispered to Joseph. I stood up and led him blindly into the thick garden foliage, emerging near the opposite side of the roof. As we were atop the tallest building, we could see the misty rooftops of the 12 others at different heights below us. I heard gunshots from across the garden behind us and frantically scanned the view for a suitable rooftop. A slightly shorter building, no more than 5 feet away from ours, was adorned with the same jungle foliage.

“We need to jump.” I said to Joseph, climbing over the railing and onto the ledge.

“What? I can’t do that! I mean, we surely can’t,”

“Why not? You’ll get killed if you stay here!”

“H-he’s only interested in me anyway, you should just go,” Joseph turned away.

“Huh? Why would he want you?”

“Rosemary...I wasn’t entirely honest earlier.” He reached into his pocket and handed me a piece of cardstock.

My curiosity begged me to read it, but my adrenaline made me turn towards the edge of the roof once more. “We’ll have time for honesty after we jump.” I turned and swallowed the pain in my throat, running forward and leaping. Branches slapped my face as I crashed onto the second roof. The mossy floor of the garden was scuffed and torn as my shoes came down on it full-force. Underneath was hard concrete. I coughed and my legs buckled as I staggered up. Joseph gasped from above me.

“Are you crazy-” Another gunshot. Joseph gave one glance behind his shoulder and jumped reluctantly, crash-landing next to me. We had bought a minute or two, if my hopes were accurate and the gunman hadn’t seen us jump roofs.

I opened my palm and read the cardstock. It was a business card from the company that designed and built the Serenity Development, TerraTech. Joseph was catching his breath next to me, as I turned slowly towards him.

“...*You’re* the CEO of TerraTech? *You* had these built?” The card read, ‘Joseph Rogers, CEO.’ along with a phone number. Joseph looked at me with conflicted eyes.

“I didn’t want to tell you. I thought you would accuse my company of destroying the forest, like everyone else does. I couldn’t let that happen. You’re my only real friend, Rosemary,” I was taken aback.

“What do you mean, ‘only friend?’”

“All that stuff I said earlier about my friends and my social life was a lie. This company has been the only thing keeping me going since we last spoke.”

I was beginning to piece things together. “So...what about the guy with the gun? He really is here for you, isn’t he? Does he want your money?”

“I’m not sure if you keep up with the news, but this development is...fairly controversial. Some people think I’m intruding on ‘protected native land,’ but they just haven’t seen my permit yet!” He scoffed.

That was all I needed to hear. I threw the business card down and stormed away into the garden. The smell of metal and fresh cement permeated my senses. My head hurt.

“Wait Rosemary! Come back!” I didn’t look back. If Joseph had an apology, he should save it for the press. He clearly didn’t care about my opinions *or* my safety. I saw the assassin jump to

our roof behind me as I emerged from the jungle-garden. My heartbeat was pounding in my ears as I lunged and leapt towards another rooftop. This one was closer; my legs felt as long as the tree trunks as I bridged the gap. I landed and grabbed onto the railing, climbing it weakly and being enveloped into another garden.

Each building would have stairs and a door leading out to its roof, I realized. I wandered through the trees quietly, making my way around the edges of the garden. My eyes found a concrete doorway, hidden between trees. I breathed a wish to the universe for it to be unlocked, and turned the knob. The door opened and a waft of chemical-smelling air hit me from inside the doorway. I heard Joseph yell and there was a distant gunshot as I turned my back on the rooftops. I went inside.

But as I descended the stairs, I knew this wasn't over. Whoever had sent the assassin clearly didn't plan on Joseph having a friend at his place, and my stomach dropped as I realized I was surely next.