ROOFTOP REBELLION

By Cate Granskog

As my second-floor window creaked open, the gritty, hot smell of newly wet pavement filled my bedroom. I was in middle school, probably in seventh grade, though the exact time frame escapes me now. It was fall, or what passed for fall in the gentle hills of California’s East Bay. The late afternoon sky was a deep grey, and the thick roof tiles started to darken as more and more water plopped onto them. As I imagined the texture of the roof under my fingertips, my desire to go out onto it grew. I moved into this bedroom when I was nine, and I’d thought about going on the roof ever since. My friend Sasha had a flat roof outside her bedroom window, and we went on it whenever we went to her house after school. Slipping my body through the window frame never got old; it gave me the same thrill in my stomach every time. Her mom had said it was okay, but my parents might not have agreed.

I pressed my face to the thin metal screen. It smelled like pennies. I thought about the germs and quickly lifted my head, opting to use my hand to press dramatically instead. Everything I did back then was an act, as it was for most middle schoolers. Every outfit I wore, every word I said, every bit of body language had to be calculated. I couldn’t afford to make a mistake. I’d already lost two friend groups in the first year of middle school alone. I had to be perfect, exactly what I thought everyone wanted. Even when I was alone. I remember tossing and turning while reading in my bed, not because I was uncomfortable, but because I wasn’t lying cute enough. Everything I did was for the benefit of other people I wasn’t sure if I even liked. They weren’t exactly nice to me, but being lonely was better than being alone, at least in middle school. So I played my part willingly.

On the other hand, in private, I was a total weirdo. When it rained I liked to go outside in a pair of shorts or hike up sweatpants and stand in the water that flowed down the hill my house rested on and into the drain. The street was steep, creating a river when the rain was heavy. I don’t know why I liked it so much. The cold water felt good against my feet, but it gave me a much deeper sense of satisfaction too. A woman walked by me one afternoon while my numbed feet sat in near freezing water, my rolled-up sweats getting drenched, and I delighted in telling her that I was just sticking my feet in. She kind of laughed to herself, as though she understood the urge, the wild instincts that seem to come with being a strange little girl.

Maybe I liked that it was weird. It wasn’t normal for someone to stick their feet in the dirty runoff and wiggle their toes with glee. I have never seen another person do it. They must exist somewhere; somewhere someone must be feeling the urge to plunge their pale soft feet into icy, fresh water and get rain in their hair. But they must not act on it. Maybe other people are more worried about parasites than I was at thirteen. There is something appealing about doing things that are abnormal but harmless. The odd thrill of walking into a grocery store still wearing your ski pants or waiting alone in the dark at school at ten o’clock to get picked up from play rehearsal. That might have been what I liked about it.

Perhaps it was because it was slightly rebellious. People might walk by, as they sometimes did. I always felt my heart leap into my throat whenever anyone “caught me,” staring at me as they walked or drove past. As if somehow, they would tell my parents or my friends at school, exposing my secret. It wasn’t as risky as removing the screen from your window and climbing out onto the roof, though. That was rebellious. My hand smelled sharply of rust from being pressed angstily against the screen. The roof and the street below were soaked as the rain started to pick up. The drip-drip of water running from the top gutter started, sending the water back onto the ground. Ooh, it was really wet. Maybe going out on the roof was a little too rebellious for today.

How did the screen even come off anyway? I examined it carefully. There were two little tabs at the bottom. If I pulled up on those, it might come up. Then I could wiggle it out of place and easily take it out of the window frame. I shouldn’t. But. I could. It would be a waste not to test it. What if there was a fire? I needed to get out quickly. Okay, I had to admit even to myself that that was some bs. I wanted to go out on the roof. I didn’t know why. The fact that I wanted it was enough, enough of an impulse to move my hands. I grabbed the metal tabs and wiggled. Just like I pictured, the screen popped out, and suddenly I was holding my window screen. I looked at it dumbly for a second. Trying not to make any noise, I pulled it through the window frame and gently propped the screen up against the chair I was crouching on. The sound of the rain hitting the street seemed different, a soft hush under the pitter-patter on the roof above and below my window. I stuck my hand through the open window. Nothing stopped it. No lightning came down from the heavens to strike it, no laser grid suddenly appeared where the screen used to be, no alarm sounded, nothing alerted my mother. I was almost disappointed. I pulled my undamaged hand back through.

When I was even younger, I overheard my dad joking to my mom that he couldn’t step foot in a church for a family member’s wedding or else he would catch on fire. At age 6, I didn’t understand that he was making a comment about his relationship with religion. Ever trusting, I believed that my dad would catch on fire if he went into a church, which probably meant that I would too. I was hit with that same feeling of relief but disappointment when I crossed the threshold of an old California mission’s chapel on a field trip years later, flinching in anticipation of my possible spontaneous combustion. Being able to get away with things is a unique sort of letdown. You spend so much time building something up to be a big deal in your head, and then when it turns out to be a pedestrian act on par with, I don’t know, brushing your teeth, in the anti-climax, something is lost. I spent all that time worrying for nothing? When I could have been thinking of anything else? What a waste of energy. Why hadn’t I gone on the roof sooner? Just because I was too afraid to try to take the screen off. Nobody ever specifically told me not to; it was just kind of implied. But the screen was off. I was still looking at it. I was still in my room.

How to get out of the window was the next problem. The frame was smaller than I anticipated. Again, I’d built it up in my head. Imagined myself crawling through a large picture window into a magical wonderland. Or maybe I was a grungy dystopian hero, squinting in the rain as I went from building to building in search of supplies. Or I was the star of a Taylor Swift music video. Or –

The window frame was still small. I took my socks off. Leaning out of the window, I placed my hands on the small dry patch the roof above created. Slowly, so slowly, I inched out my window. I smushed my legs underneath my body, swung them out, and suddenly I was sitting on the roof. The tiles were cool and had a rough texture to them. I didn’t move. I was exhilarated. I was on the roof. I felt rebellious, though I didn’t know what I was rebelling against. Some deep, raw wound within my soul seemed soothed by the sensation of rain hitting my bare feet and ankles as the rest of my body was shielded from the rain. I had control. Over my life, over my actions, over my space. It was a quiet, inner rebellion. Proof that not everything was terrible, irrefutable evidence that I could shove in my own face when I doubted there was anything I could feel but empty.

It occurred to me then that I couldn’t tell anyone about this. I mean, I literally could, but not in any way that mattered. They wouldn’t understand. I couldn’t talk about this feeling with my family because even though they never told me not to take my screen out and sit on the roof, I was pretty sure they wouldn’t see it the same way. My friends at school would think it was weird. They thought almost everything I did was weird. Maybe they were right. Perhaps I didn’t have to care (I wouldn’t find that out until too many years later after those friends had left too). Or, worse, they’d just say it was cool to my face and tell each other it was weird. The boys I walked home from the bus stop with wouldn’t think it was weird. And if they did, they’d tell me. More likely, they’d think it was cool and tell me that I should sneak out that way. That wasn’t the response I was looking for either. I resolved not to tell anyone. Besides, I was still scared that I’d get in trouble like somehow the universe would snitch on me.

I noticed how dirty the roof was. As symbolic as it might have been ten minutes ago, it was kind of gross, dirt and dust and ash from a summer of California wildfires running off with the rain. Besides, I had homework to do. Slightly underwhelmed, I backed myself through the window and into my room again. I struggled with the screen, sweating a little before I managed to get it back into place. I didn’t think my dad would notice if the screen was gone, not yet, but he probably would eventually. Better to figure it out before he gets home. Or before mom comes upstairs. Mom would definitely notice. I slid the window shut, and it was quiet in my room.

I didn’t know what to think. I still don’t. I washed my hands and feet and continued on as if nothing had ever happened. I did eventually tell the neighborhood boys I walked home with. They said it was “fuckin’ sick.” They said I should use it to sneak out in high school. I just rolled my eyes. They didn’t get it. Nobody did. That was okay. They didn’t need to.