



## THAT OLD WEED ON THE BOULEVARD

*"...a Brooklyn story about roots, resilience, and belonging in America..."*

*by Joe "Kirsch" Curcio*

Those are my late mother-in-law's live forever's. To be exact their botanical name is *Hylotelephium telephium* - but they definitely weren't ever called that in Brooklyn. Other than calling them "live-fa-ev-uhs," that whole *Hylotella*-ooh-gots-whatever thing had way too many consonants for this neighborhood.

They were planted in the late 1970s in her "airy-way" - that's Greenpoint for areaway - by Pete, the old Italian guy from down the block.

Not only did Pete have the Italian green-thumb touch, but he also had some really big tamayta's - both literally and figuratively.

The small, forgotten patch of dirt where he planted those live forever's sat directly in front of her house on McGuinness Boulevard - one of the busiest commercial corridors in North Brooklyn and, arguably, the street-soot-generating capital of the world. Even inside the house with the windows closed, you had to feather-dust the feather duster.

Not long after Pete's wife passed away, we had a backyard Independence Day barbecue where we filled a watermelon with vodka - yet another classic back-in-the-day Greenpoint tradition.

Pete, aware that we'd invited the two "mature bachelorette" neighbors - affectionately known as the ladies next door - arrived with tamayta's in hand and marinated in an unmistakable aura of Mennen Skin Bracer.

As the ladies enthusiastically requested, "Ooh, just a little sliver more, please" - they continued their journey well past half-in-the-bag territory - that's Greenpoint for drunk!

Old Pete responded with his best Don Ameche-style gentlemanly charm, pencil mustache and all, and gladly provided the slicing service - even helping remove the seeds.

Presumably so the sisters could increase their rate of consumption and accelerate their descent deeper into the bag.

But to the contrary at the end of the evening the gals - after several more slivers, although a bit giggly - remained perfectly coherent enjoying a cup of tea along with the cannoli and "svoo-ya-dell" pastries Pete had brought.

Pete's evening, on the other hand unfortunately ended with me holding him under the arm and steering him down McGuinness Boulevard just a few beats shy of him serenading the neighborhood with a medley of Jerry Vale songs.

The next few years passed quickly.

Pete had died, then the sisters were gone, and sadly one day in the fall, Mom also passed away.

Right before the house was sold, each of the five siblings took a patch of the live forever. It felt like a way to preserve a small piece of the life that had existed on the Boulevard - from a house where life always seemed to flourish, even when the world outside was anything but lush.

Most of us still lived in or around the neighborhood, so we knew the plants would be "happy" staying close to home.

My wife, the eldest sibling, thought it might also be nice to bring one of them out to our weekend house in the Poconos. Like a special retreat to live out the rest of their life in a more natural environment.

There it sat in a decorative pot on the back porch - surrounded by manicured grass, clean air, and the crisp mountain breeze of Pennsylvania.

You could almost hear it cooing a contented "ahhh." But if you listened closely, it was really screaming, "Hey! Get me the hell outta here!"

Less than a week later, we realized this Brooklyn-born-and-raised weed wanted absolutely no part of that sanitized, suburban "more natural environment"

It started to die.

This wasn't some carefully cultivated ornamental plant being misted with artisanal rainwater. This was a weed that grew up in a patch of dirt made up of 40% cigarette butts. It adapted and thrived on brake dust, diesel exhaust, and the soot and scream of the BQE.

It needed to be back home in Greenpoint - where it belonged.

Now, as I sit in my backyard just a few blocks from that patch of dirt on the Boulevard - watering my tamaytas and watching those live forevers thrive once again - I realize I'm a lot like that old weed.

I stood tough.

I adapted.

I survived difficult conditions.

Maybe that's what belonging has always meant in America. People arrive from somewhere else, put down roots in whatever patch of dirt they can find, adapt to impossible conditions, and eventually call that place home.

And just like Pete, and the sisters, and my mother-in-law, and the few others who stayed in Greenpoint, I discovered something.

We didn't just survive here.

We flourished.

Because, just like that old weed, this is where we belong.