

Ms. Sparkly

People walk right by our stall without looking. I sit down on the curb even though Antoine, my brother, hates it when I do that. The curb is rough and the cold seeps through my jeans. I shiver despite the bright sunlight. March weather in California gives me whiplash.

A lady wearing a fur hat like a Russian monarch passes us. I can't imagine why anyone would wear stilettos to a farmer's market. She struts toward the stall across from ours. Rotisserie chickens spin there in mesmerizing circles. The smell that drifts over makes me – a vegetarian of nine years – want to commit treason.

“Hey,” Antoine says. “Get up. Doesn't look good for customers.” His deep smoker's voice adds a cloak of authority to his skinny frame. I shield my eyes and see him glaring down at me.

“What customers?” I blurt out.

He grumbles as he turns around, busying himself with the already-straight sign (Sunshine Yard Organic Fruit and Veggies Sold Here!). As if to contradict me, the woman approaches us. I try not to draw attention to myself as I stand up. She examines our produce with the intensity of a Russian gymnastics coach. I lean against the tent pole and wait for Antoine to work his magic.

“How much?” She asks, holding up two medium Hass. No Russian accent, despite her appearance and persona.

“I'll give you a deal,” Antoine says. “Four for five. Organic and good quality.” He gives this “deal” to everyone who comes.

She nods. Antoine grins at me. I get his message: “See? We do get customers.”

I shrug. She pays and struts away.

“Go on, then,” he says, in a good mood from the sale. “Tell him hi for me.” He wiggles his fingers and grins.

“Say hi to who?” I ask.

“You think I’m blind? Almost two years I see you flirt with the cheesemonger. Or whatever it is you young people do.” He looks extremely pleased with himself.

“As a thirty-three year-old, I’m not sure I qualify as ‘young people,’” I say, trying to throw him off track. I know I’m hitting below the belt. The twenty two years between us is a sore point for him.

He gives me a look like sucking on lemons, and spits the next words out like seeds. “Pahhh! What does that make me – ancient?” He glares at me again but after a moment cracks up. “Okay. I am pretty ancient.”

I give a halfhearted laugh, still reeling from his observation. Have Nolan and I really been flirting? It never felt that way. Just comfortable. Friendly.

Still chuckling, Antoine shakes his head and brushes an invisible piece of dust off our table. “Take an extra ten. Get a good flirt in.”

I give him a hug just to spite him. He pats my arm and mutters something threatening about inviting him to the wedding.

I untie my apron and leave it folded on the cooler under our table. Without the bright blue apron, I feel myself deflating. I know I look drab and tired. After Antoine’s comment, I can’t help but wonder whether Nolan finds me attractive.

I step out, exiting the tent. In my anxious reverie, I barely register the sounds of argument behind me. But it’s the same lady as before, the one who looks Russian but isn’t. Maybe there was a problem with the avocados. I turn around to watch, lingering at the back of the tent.

“You can take it,” says a beautiful woman with long dreads. She gestures toward the last carton of strawberries on the table. Antoine’s eyes bounce between the two women like a tennis match.

“No, you.”

“You can have it.”

“I insist you take it.” Again with the intensity. She watches the other woman with narrowed eyes, determined not to be outbidden in her generous assault. I have to admire her tenacity.

“I’LL TAKE IT!” Someone screams. We all jump. It’s a little girl holding her father’s hand. All her clothes, from her fedora to her ugg boots, are bedazzled with multicolored sequins. Her father gives a harried smile as if to say, Sorry, she does this all the time.

I do a quick mental calculation, the same one I always do when I see a young kid. She’s around the same age mine would have been.

“Baby, we don’t yell like that,” the non-Russian woman says, startling me. Her tone is gentler than before. Like melted honey. This must be her family. “We have to be nice to others. Ask the lady first.”

The bedazzled girl looks at her mom with wide set brown eyes. “Okay.” She turns to the other woman. “Can I take it? Please?”

“Of course.” The woman smiles at her.

“Okay, guess we have a taker,” says Antoine. The adults laugh. The bedazzled girl looks angry and asks why everyone is laughing.

“Just because, honey,” her father says. He gets his wallet out.

“What is the name of our strawberry taker?” Antoine asks. He packs the carton into a bag.

She thinks about it for a while and says “Ms. Sparkly.” The sun bounces off her sequins in a blinding rainbow.

“And how old are you, Ms. Sparkly?”

“Five,” she says proudly. “Did you know I’m going to be a big sister?”

“That’s a big responsibility,” says Antoine. He hands her the bag. “Are you going to be a good big sister?”

“Yes,” she says. She cradles the bag as carefully as a newborn. “I’m going to be the best.” Her gaze wanders and finds me. She doesn’t say anything else. Just watches me with those owl eyes.

I turn and walk away, passing the chicken place and Nolan’s stall and the lady who sells cobbles, walking until I exit the market. I don’t look back.