

Cecile Corona

The Story Snatcher

I wanted his story. He started telling me about it while we were on line at the grocery store. First he turned to me and said, "What's for dinner?" I didn't know what was for dinner; I hadn't cooked a real meal in about three weeks. So I looked at my cart and said, "Cheese."

"Are you putting some bread between it?"

"No," I said, "this time I'm leaving the bread out."

He said that that was all right, that sometimes he had bread and left out the cheese. I probably laughed, even though that's the kind of joking that can get on my nerves when I'm in a mood. And that day I definitely was in it. But the checkout line was so long it wrapped around to aisle three. I'm not talking commercial market here, where they might add a cashier to keep the customers from storming the office. This was a food co-op, which means in exchange for cheaper food, you get people working who don't know what they're doing. They pick up a head of cabbage and stare at it for a good three minutes, then ring it up as lettuce, iceberg, and the customer gets so mad that we all have to stand around waiting for the squad leader to appear, which takes a while because she's hiding out in aisle seven, the one that's furthest from the cashiers. So you wait on line, read magazines, talk to people you wouldn't have if you didn't have all this time to kill. I hadn't had a talk with anyone in a couple of days. I needed to say something, anything, to anyone, to someone like him.

I took him for a family man, doing family shopping, which might have been one of the reasons I trusted talking to him in the first place. I thought he might have been mistaking me for a family woman myself, one of the odd city sort that can't really cook but still go to the market just to seem like the other sort, the family people who hunker down in the burbs. His own cart was stuffed to the top with food. And he had on a visor cap that would make me think "jock" on guys in high school, and now, a lot later, made me think a man with a kid, on men. He had glasses and a weak chin and I pictured two little boys climbing up his clothes when he got home so they could see what he had in the shopping bags he was clutching. It was a fun cart, with chips and ice cream along with the organic frozen chicken wings.

There was also a sack of Purina Dog Chow so I asked him about it.

"How's the dog?"

"Which one?"

“Whichever. Whichever one comes to mind when I ask.”

“Darlene. She has lymphoma.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said. And then for no reason added: “Are you serious?”

“It wouldn’t be my idea of a joke. She’s a sweet dog and the other three are watching her do the dying. They’re kind of scared and interested at the same time.”

“You can tell that from your dogs?”

“I can tell a lot from everyone. My job got me started.” He smiled at me here, as if he could tell that that, in itself, got me wondering more about him—who he was and why he wasn’t sounding family, the way he looked.

He was waiting for it, so I gave it to him to make the time go easy. “What job’s that?”

He said, “I take mug shots for the NYPD.”

And he told me the short version. About the mug shots he took and the tough talk he used to take them and the all-night hours, driving through Manhattan at four a.m., zipping end to end in fifteen minutes. I told him I’d like to zip like that, that on mornings I headed for the city it took me more than thirty minutes just to get out of Brooklyn. He asked, “Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?” I asked him if he meant did I ever ride on one, and he said, no, driven it myself, so I told him. He said, “Well, that’s one thing you have to do. You will never feel that kind of free doing anything else.”

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