

SHORT STORY • ANDREW WINGFIELD

AN INTIMATE OPERATION

For us, you were a living link to another kind of place: a working landscape where fruit ripens on the briars and trees, and where leafy vegetables grow in the rich soil.

HOW WE MISSED you at the market this morning. The space where your table belongs was just a gap today. Everything else was in order: under the canopy to the left, the two soft-spoken women selling grass-fed beef; under the canopy to the right, the couple from Strasburg, their yellow dog sleeping beneath the bus-stop tree while they peddled their flowers, pumpkins and gourds. But your spot between them was empty – painfully so, like a tooth newly missing from a friend’s smile.

“Tate?” my boy kept saying. “Tate?” Who can blame him for being distressed? Yours was one of the essential faces of his first full summer. One morning in June, you reached forward across your table, the first blackberry he’d ever seen balanced on the tips of your forefinger and thumb. “Taste,” you said. No question in your tone, not even any coaxing. An instruction, rather. Go ahead: taste.

Another day, you offered a blueberry. Raspberries followed, then peeled bits of apricot, cherry, peach and plum.

Yours was an intimate operation. At quiet moments in my week I’d think of you and your man harvesting those fruits from the bushes and briars and trees around your place, out in the country, not so far from the city where we live – not in miles, anyway. I’d think of you nestling what you’d picked into baskets, packing the baskets in crates, stacking the crates in the bed of your pickup. I’d see you by yourself in that pickup, hauling your good freight down the dark highway towards the nation’s capital five mornings a week, each morning a different neighbourhood.

This boy always begins vocalising before dawn. Most days, his squeals, clucks and trills start up much too early for me. But on Saturdays, all summer and early fall, it was a pleasure to pluck him from his crib before his chatter could wake his brother and mom. I’d strap him into my pack and set out to walk the neighbourhood hills, knowing we’d arrive at the market just as you finished laying out your vivid stock. Or you’d be done already and leaning against your table, sipping coffee with the grass-fed-beef women.

None of my neighbours would have arrived yet to buy. So there was time for you to tell me about the week’s rainfall, its heat and fogs and pests, and for me to sing the praises of the greens you’d sold me the Saturday before – the velvety butter lettuces, the snappy arugula and the thick-veined chard.

And time, of course, for you to feed my boy. Your strong arm reaching forward, a tender raspberry poised on the cracked tips of your fingers. Your steady voice: “Taste.”

He’s a beauty, this boy. Nut-brown eyes, luxuriant lashes, and such a softness of dark blond fuzz on his head. He excited a smile in every vendor as we shopped our way around the market today, but all season long a different energy lit the smiles you gave: something more complex than gladness, conveying a message I all but missed.

THAT I NEGLECTED to wonder what we might mean to you only shows how invested I was in what you meant to us. The greens, the berries, the stone fruits – these were only a portion of what you brought us from the country. There was also your thickset body, strong from turning compost and hoisting crates. The worn denim shorts that hugged your muscular thighs, and the spaghetti straps bright on your brown shoulders. The sand-coloured fringe that ran roughshod across your forehead, while the hair on the sides and at the back grew long, feathers and beads decorating the thin braids hanging here and there. Your honest crooked teeth. And your eyes that surprising colour of green, like the patina on copper.

For us, you were a living link to another kind of place: a working landscape where fruit ripens on the briars and trees, where leafy vegetables grow in rich soil while the offices of agriculture sculpt bodies like yours. You maybe can’t know how much my neighbours and I need a connection to such places, we who spin continually in an atmosphere of groundless power. It’s possible for us to go for days without confronting how close to the storm’s eye we dwell. Then the traffic grinds to a halt as a convoy of black SUVs



ILLUSTRATION: JAY LUTTMAN-JOHNSON

*There was time for you to tell me about the week's
rainfall, its heat and fogs and pests, and for me to
sing the praises of the greens you'd sold me the
Saturday before.*

shoulders past in a blaze of flashing lights and bulletproof mirror windows. The afternoon quiet dissolves under the thumping rhythm of a chopper carrying someone too important to travel the roads. On September 11th, we smelled the Pentagon burning.

The smoke has long since cleared, but the odour from that direction has only increased, building by now to an imperial stink. The best antidote I know lives inside what you and your man grew, what you picked and packed and hauled down the dark highway before dawn. What you fed my boy those early Saturday mornings, what I bought for the family to eat all week. So believe me when I tell you how tough it was, for both of us, to find you missing from the market today, even though you warned me last Satur-

day that you wouldn't be coming back. You've known for months that your man's health was failing, that he might not survive the winter. You never told me until your last day.

"I can't do this without him," you said, and the way you said it added gravity to what I already knew – yours was an intimate operation.

No wonder your green eyes held fast to my fuzzy-headed boy as you told me about your dying man. No wonder your smiles were richer than the rest. No wonder you wanted him to taste. 🍷

Andrew Wingfield writes and eats in Alexandria, Virginia, across the river from Washington, DC. He teaches at George Mason University.