

## BOUNTY

The food bank is busy this morning, and the deaf man sitting next to me is a motor-mouth. A moment ago, he hit me with one of his words. I jumped and scooted away. My chair screeched across the beige vinyl floor, and people looked at me. His ASL interpreter said the man was sorry, and I smiled at her, which I realized immediately was bad form, like the waitress who stares at the parents when it's the child ordering the food.

Now that I have moved about six inches to the right, I am sitting very close to a fat woman and her equally robust husband. The woman is pressed against me, or I against her, and she feels soft and supple, almost as if she has no bones. Her ample flesh puffs up around her wedding band; perhaps she had not been so heavy on her wedding day. Even so, I imagine the matrimonial effigies topping the cake as having sunk to their knees in devil's food, challenging the structural integrity of the supporting layers that had been painstakingly decorated with delicate buttercream flowers and candied violets. When her name is called, it's difficult for her to stand; the bare backs of her legs are red and creased from the long sit.

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I used to volunteer here. I recognize some of the longtime sorters and stockers, but I don't think they see me. One of my favorite professors, from whom I took Literature of the Holocaust, is moving carts filled with sliced bread; Valery, a member of the local chapter of the Belarus syndicate, works stealthily to divert bread and milk to his fellow diasporans, who idle in the alley in seventies-era Cadillacs; and then there's Pat, wearing her socks and sandals, who never smiles and who never did. I think, because I am sitting on the other side of the clipboard, answering questions about income, race, and mortgage payments, it is hard for them to pick me out of the crowd. There is neither a reunion nor an uncomfortable silence that passes between us.

When I was in elementary school, my mother applied for food stamps to help feed our family. In the seventies, cashiers didn't like having to accept them because they took longer to process than cash. People in line behind us sighed and shifted from one foot to another, as if the hold-up were my mom's fault rather than the checker's, and we quickly identified which stores were friendly to our kind of money and which were not. The store closest to us

had the worst reputation, and so we drove farther, sometimes across town, just to find a checker who would be nice. Once in a while, aid would come in on a truck filled with government commodities. My mom usually preferred to stand in these lines alone, and when she arrived home, defeat clung to her shoulders. Her bags were filled with canned goods with bold, printed labels—BEANS, BEEF, CARROTS—and a twelve-inch brick of American cheese in a white cardboard sleeve. Even then, I knew this destroyed her. She had always refused to purchase processed cheese as a point of pride. I was never allowed individually-wrapped cheese slices—along with many other things she considered nutritionally inferior, like sugar cereals and white bread—but now she was focused on calories. Someday, she said, we'd again have mild cheddar.

After sitting an hour, I plunge into a reverie. My eyes are loosely focused on the floor-sprawled children doing puzzles. The pieces are brightly colored and educational, perhaps a donation from a school or church group, and small voices squeak to parents who can't hear over the din. A few feet away from me, a family has found some adjacent seats. The father, who can't be older than twenty, sports prison tattoos, ear gauges, and a Slipknot tee, while Mom sits sloppy in her chair and holds a newborn-sized car seat close to her body. The baby isn't visible under the white flannel blanket, but its mother is rocking back and forth, and her lips are pursed, cooing. The other children, two or three by the count of feet, pile onto the floor and use their father's legs as trees and tent poles as they scramble into the recess under his chair.

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It's the second week of August, and I am standing in a breadline on a ninety-five-degree day. This pantry is near I-90 and doesn't have chairs or indoor seating like the other. The parking lot is so hot the tar is melting, and small children have left their parents' sides to sit among strangers under the shade of trees; they keep in touch by texting.

A dog is barking.

A man stands up in front of me, holding a bouquet of chamomile flowers in his fist. *They're for my daughter*, he says. At my feet, more of the same flowers are stuck to the asphalt like a green and white fractal. The woman behind me says something about the dog: *who brings a dog to a place like this?* She has an unfortunate crew cut that appears to have been done without the use of a

mirror. I smile at her. I once had a similar 'do. She asks me if this is my first time out here. I nod and say I was told they have good food.

A hundred feet in front of us, the pantry doors open. A few of us speculate as to whether or not it's cooler inside, but whatever the temperature, at least we'd be out of the sun. The line moves slowly, imperceptibly, but soon people begin to emerge from the warehouse, hauling dollies stacked with boxes, frozen chickens balanced on top. The chickens are square. The woman behind me says she's never seen a square chicken; an elderly auntie-type next to her says they're packed soft. Auntie is wearing a soft gray T-shirt with Montana wildflowers printed on it. She says she wishes she'd brought a chair. *No one tells you how long you have to stand here.* For us, it had been about an hour; for those in front, I bet they'd been in line for three.

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Suddenly, a woman tall as a tree inserts herself in front of me. Auntie says something about cutting in, and I remember this phrase from school. Now, as then, I don't protest. The woman's waist comes to the bottom curve of my breasts, and her tan feet are easily men's size thirteen. I want to talk with her because I have a fascination with extreme body types, but before I say anything, she turns around and asks me if I think she'll be asked to leave because her dog is barking. I tell her barking dogs aren't scarce, and she says she can't leave it in the truck on a day like this. I agree and tell her she's done the right thing to tie it outside; I am staring straight at her tits.

Children have taken an interest in the dog and are playing with its ears and giving belly scratches. The woman is visibly agitated. *Who does that,* she says. Her voice is discordant and loud, meant for whomever might be those children's parents. *Who goes up to a strange dog and just starts petting it,* she says and asks me to save her place while she tells those kids not to pet dogs that aren't theirs. Behind me, Auntie exhales and calls me a poor thing.

When the woman returns, she complains that the kids are con artists and are obviously after something; why else would they take the dog's face in their hands and make as if to kiss her? *Well, I suppose kids just like dogs,* I say, and the woman suddenly seems quite angry. She fixes me with eyes that look like empty, marker-drawn circles suspended on strings between her nose and forehead. I have the sense that I've been added to her shit list. My body tingles, and I consider dropping to the ground and rolling into a ball, the tried-and-true defense against attacking bears, but I am afraid that this might make the situation worse.

*I guess most people would say that, she says. Her jaw is so tight I can easily imagine the top half of her head flying off and hitting the warehouse behind her. People like you think you're good citizens, she says. You think you're nice, she says. But what you need to do is rise up against corruption, so people like me don't have to do it all for you. She pauses a moment and I dare to blink, but before I can muster the courage to actually look away, she barks *wake up* and then turns her back on me. Auntie and the woman with the crew cut are close behind. I thought she was going to clean my clock, I say. Auntie shakes her head: *we'd've had your back.**

Ahead of us all, a girl of about ten balances her little sister on her hip. She's looking at a piece of lined paper and asking a woman next to her if she thinks the people who work here would let her get food even if all she has is a note from her mother. The woman asks where her parents are. The girl tells her they're at work, but her mom is available by phone.

My second trip to the food bank is easier. I am prepared for the crowd and the wait, and I remember to give thanks for the chairs and the cool interior. After the clipboard, I get my laminated card that lists what I am allowed to take, based on my family size. It's the dry goods that are precious here. I am allowed one bag of beans and one of rice, one package of pasta and a bag of cereal, two cans of vegetables or two of fruit, one bag of flour and one bag of sugar. I take only the beans.

After dry goods come fresh fruit and vegetables, and we are allowed as many of these as we want because they are near spoiling. Today there are Roma tomatoes, stacks of them, but nothing else. I put two containers in my basket, and the woman behind me says to take more. I get two more containers, look back, and finally end up with eight containers of about ten tomatoes each. They'll freeze well when they're blanched, peeled, and sliced into bags. The only thing wrong with them is their moldy stems. The luck of having scored so much produce leaves me shaking like I stole something. I choose a few loaves of bread and am reminded of the story I learned in grade school about men who were hanged for stealing food for their children. I pass by the milk and cheese; adults don't need those things. I pass by the meat. Last are the cakes. The air around them smells like sugar. Most of them say *Happy Birthday*, and they are critiqued by erstwhile shoppers, hoping to find one whose frosting is intact.

At the end of the line, the boxers remind me that I can get milk and meat, and I tell them I don't want any. *You can have more bread*, they say, as if they're worried I haven't taken enough to get me through the month to my next allowed visit. I tell them I have a small freezer. They smile and hoist my box into the bright orange cart donated by a defunct local grocery chain, the same chain my mother avoided when we had food stamps. I am allowed to take the cart all the way to my truck if I bring it back, so I maneuver it out the door and drop it off the curb into the street. There's a bakery across the way, one of my favorites as far back as high school. We used to buy a loaf of soft Italian bread and eat it by fingerfuls as we wandered along the taut autumn sidewalks toward home. When the bakery was on my way to work, I'd stop for a croissant and a paper cup of coffee to go that would inevitably splash in my lap because my truck lacks power steering, an automatic transmission, and a cup holder.

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Today, I have a few dollars in my pocket that I've pilfered from my husband's dresser, and I want to buy a croissant, but the orange cart is noisy and large, and, because it's a nice day, I can already see that I've drawn some attention from the book-reading roll-eaters on the brick patio and a few of their dogs. Whether or not I can pay is beside the point. Among them, a buff-colored mutt in a green bandana stretches to meet its owner's hand as she offers the last bite of muffin. The dog takes it gently and waits for more, while at its feet, quick little sparrows pick and hop, pick and hop, skimming the crumbs the dog let fall. The woman turns a page of her book, licks her fingers, and rubs them on her jeans. The dog remains fixed, refusing to believe she's eaten it all.