

A Fruity Lament

I will forever regret not giving that man a strawberry.

It was a sunny California day. We were staying with a friend of my mother's last summer and had gone to the farmer's market for breakfast. I didn't much like it there; I felt very in the way and very out of place, an unusual thing to be in Santa Monica – the previous afternoon we had gone to the beach where I saw a man in full rave-girl costume, complete with short black skirt and rainbow knee socks. Unfortunately he forgot to shave the salty stubble on his chin. I don't remember what I ate at the market that day, but I remember that there weren't enough chairs, so I sat on the curb and tried to hide from the bright sun. My mother was talking to her friend about people they used to work with together. I was done eating, but I didn't know where the garbage can was, so I just sat there on the curb.

I hate asking people for things. My mother knew this. She also knew I loved raspberries and strawberries. She asked me if I wanted some every time we passed a stand with the juicy red berries. Eventually, just as we were deciding to leave, I gave in. I quietly, childishly, clinging-to-her-armingly asked my mother for a basket of strawberries.

It was only a block or two to the echoing cement parking garage. My mother, her friend, and her friend's mother (who was staying with her for medical reasons) were all walking ahead of me, carrying bags of produce. I cradled my strawberries in my arm with a shy grin.

A disheveled man came up to us. His grin was clearly unbalanced. There was dirt caked on his hands, and the rags on his back had all faded to the same mottled grey. I don't remember what he said, if he said anything at all. Perhaps he asked for spare change, or for a cigarette. He held out a hand to me.

I had the basket of strawberries in my hand. It would have been so easy to just reach out and hand one to him. It would have been so easy to smile at him.

But I didn't.

I kept walking.

My mother was saying something about the man being dangerous. It turned my stomach. What right did she have to dismiss him? What right did I have to pass him by?

I forgot the incident by the time we headed north again that afternoon. But it still bothers me. It will always bother me.

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